



Article Prudential Versus Probative Arguments for Religious Faith: Descartes and Pascal on Reason and Faith

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Received: 12 May 2017; Accepted: 28 July 2017; Published: 31 July 2017

Abstract: In this article, I show that Pascal's prudential agenda, centered on the Wager, more successfully overcomes the restrictions of Pyrrhonic skepticism expressed by Montaigne than Descartes' probative philosophy, which was based on his "ontological argument" for God's existence. Descartes' attempt to base natural science on the metaphysical certainty of a non-deceiving God fails because he cannot prove that a non-deceiving Perfect Being is a "clear and distinct" idea. Pascal's attempt to base the knowledge of God upon the "reasons of the heart" accepts the epistemological restrictions of skepticism but provides a reason to develop passionate faith, thereby overcoming skepticism. I also show that Descartes and Pascal had different assumptions about the workings of the mind; Descartes relied on a model of the mind as a "theater," which hindered his agenda, and Pascal upon a "holistic" model, which enabled him to make a prudential argument which was cognitively convincing.

Keywords: Pascal; Descartes; knowledge of God; prudential reasoning

My primary aim is to show that Pascal's reactions to the revival of Pyrrhonic skepticism in 17th century France illustrate a more successful way to relate reason and religious belief than Descartes' response to the same skepticism. The overall apologetic agenda of Pascal's *Pensées* more consistently uses and overcomes the claims of Pyrrhonic skepticism by appealing to the prudential knowledge gained by the "reasons of the heart" than Descartes' probative argument for God's existence based on his meditative method of the *cogito*.

A probative argument typically is comprised of three steps. Firstly, it presents as its main premise an objective claim as primary evidence. Secondly, it then seeks to consistently derive the minor premises from the main premise. Thirdly, it infers a conclusion from the premises. Descartes followed such an argument; its main evidentiary premise is that the knowledge of God as a Perfect Being is a "clear and distinct idea," hence indubitable. From this claim, it maintains that a Perfect Being would not deceive us about the reality of the world, and, hence we can overcome epistemological skepticism and establish a certain basis for religious belief and for scientific knowledge. I will show that this argument fails.

A prudential argument is also typically comprised of three steps. Firstly, it clarifies an overriding and fulfilling purpose for life or a particular endeavor. Secondly, it derives practical ways to realize that purpose. Thirdly, it describes a prudential life, reflective of its overriding purpose. Pascal followed such an argument; its main premise is that people naturally seek to formulate an ultimate concern about an ultimate reality. Next, it maintains that the recognition of our dialectical nature (that is, our greatness experienced from our wretchedness), the "reasons of the heart", and the seriousness of the Wager can inform us about a wisely lived life in a passionate faith towards God, thereby overcoming skepticism.

1. 17th Century Skepticism

Even though earlier figures as Gian Francesco Pico and Rabelias had introduced the skepticism of Pyrrho to Europe, it was Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) who exposed it to a wider audience,

especially through his *Apology of Raymond Sebond*. Pyrrhonic skepticism as expressed by Sextus Empiricus (d. 210) and picked up in the 16th century made four primary claims; the first two on humanity's cognitive limitations, and the second two on the proper sapient goals:

- 1. The problem of relativism: there are conflicting opinions about reality and each is somewhat rationally defensible, dogmatism about reality is untenable since its ends up begging the question and, particularly, pleading its claim;
- 2. The problem of foundations: any evidence given to support a dogmatic conclusion about reality also needs evidence, and that evidence needs evidence, and ad infinitum; knowledge cannot be about reality in itself, only appearances;
- 3. The goal of disbelief: as a consequence of numbers 1 and 2, we should suspend judgments about reality;
- 4. The goal of tranquility: as a consequence of numbers 1–3, we find wisdom through *ataraxy* (the general disinvestment of all ultimate concerns) and thereby gain an inner tranquility.¹

Montaigne's mammoth work, *Essays*, was standard reading in French society, with twenty editions appearing from 1600 to 1662. He was not dismissive of religious faith but was skeptical about any demonstrable certainty of science, metaphysics, and religion. For this reason, he favored Pyrrhonism over the rationalism of Stoicism. "We have no communication with being," Montaigne asserted, because "of the uncertainty and weakness of our senses" and because "there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects." (De Montaigne 2003, pp. 542, 553). We cannot believe with epistemological certainty that the form of our ideas accurately matches the form of objects in the world.

Montaigne felt that it was blasphemous to attempt to reason about God by analogies and logical categories, and, for this reason, he claimed that the empirical and metaphysical skepticism of Pyrrhonism would be the best philosophy to promote the Christian belief that God's grace (not metaphysics or science) gives us true divine knowledge. Although initially influenced by Pyrrhonic skepticism as a way to refute the dogmatists of his day, he moved away from its pessimism about human wisdom and sought to articulate (based on a wide range of interests from education, piety, to sex) useful and wise knowledge.²

In general, Montaigne had two primary goals: to show the epistemological limitations of knowledge, and to present a pragmatic approach to living wisely. Skepticism's four claims fit easily within Montaigne's overall goals: to offer a wise way of living within human epistemic limitations.³

2. Descartes' Probative Argument for God's Existence and Scientific Knowledge

Descartes was enough of a modernist to think skepticism had to be affirmed, but he also was enough of a mathematician and natural scientist to think there had to be a type of knowledge that skepticism could not undermine. Descartes promoted the Copernicanist view of a mechanistic nature operating by laws. Such a view exemplified his metaphysical claim that all matter is actually "extension governed by force." Matter ineluctably follows mechanistic laws and thus can be scientifically explained; because Copernicus had correctly discerned these laws, his view of the solar system

¹ Pyrrhonism refers to Pyrrho of Elea, a fourth-century B.C.E. philosopher, whom we know about mostly from Sextus Empiricus, a Greek physician from the second-century C.E. in his "Outlines of Pyrrhonism." The four claims summarize a variety of points Sextus Empiricus made.

² For a full discussion of Montaigne's on-and-off relationship with Pyrrhonism, see Donald M. Frame (Frame 1965, pp. 162–80). A representative quote is, "If (human knowledge) cannot be perfect, our knowledge can be useful. And this is what matters to Montaigne" (p. 177).

³ It is risky to summarize the *Essays* into two primary goals. It consists of three books and 117 chapters written from 1572 to 1588. It is a compendium of names (the index of names is 21 pages), local cultural events, small direct arguments, and advice. Nonetheless, throughout Montaigne's work, he has a certain descriptive anthropology, which highlights humanity's weaknesses of will and mind but which also suggests people can live a meaningful life.

must be correct. For Descartes, much was at stake in defending Copernicus; that is, his metaphysical insights derived from his methodological *cogito*.

Moreover, his defense of religious orthodoxy was also at stake. The same rational certainty that secures natural science also epistemologically secures the Church's teaching of God's existence and the immortality of the soul. Natural science and religious belief are based on the same metaphysical claim; that is, the reality of the mind as a "thinking thing," capable of knowing the reality of matter and God through its "clear and distinct ideas."⁴ The certainty of natural science is built on a metaphysical claim about the certainty of matter, which is built on the certainty of the self as a "thinking thing." In fact, Albert William Levi is correct when he says, "Cartesian self-contained 'metaphysics,' was intended simply as the indispensable methodological propaedeutic leading up to a defense of mathematical physics." (Levi, p. 169) Descartes believed he had constructed a metaphysical system cogent enough to the human experience of thought itself to undergird the growing confidence in Copernican science; to do so, he needed evidence on which to build a justification for scientific knowledge and theology. However, to complete this agenda—that is, to think truthfully about the physical world—skepticism had to be refuted.

2.1. The Methodological Doubt of the Meditations

Descartes believed he was taking skepticism down a different path than Montaigne had taken it. It was, ironically, his hyperbolic doubt hypothesized in the thought experiment of the *malin genie* that gave him the method, he felt, to overcome skepticism at its own game. Once doubt is unleashed, it allows for expanding powers of questioning, to the point that once we consider the greatest possible doubt—that is, we may be deceived by a demon even about our own self-consciousness—we also realize in that aspect of thinking that generates a "clear and distinct idea"—a particular idea about which we cannot be deceived, even by a *malin genie*—that is, God's existence as a Perfect Being. It is a counterintuitive claim; even though we are certain of ourselves as thinking things, we cannot be absolutely certain, due to hyperbolic doubt, that we exist; but even in that uncertainty, we can be absolutely certain that God exists as a result of the particular notion of God as a Perfect Being. A Perfect Being—God—would not deceive us about the "clear and distinct idea" that we exist as "thinking things" and that matter exists as an "extended thing." The world must not only exist independently of our knowledge of it but also must be knowable. The metaphysical solution of God's existence as a Perfect Being therefore solves the epistemological problem of hyperbolic doubt, thus providing an epistemological foundation for natural science.

The following is a more detailed explanation of the claims in the preceding paragraph. Descartes' methodological doubt has seven levels, each logically built on the previous.⁵

- 1. We can doubt our senses and philosophical propositions because there are conflicting sense experiences and dogmatic claims;
- 2. We cannot doubt that we are the doubters about such matters, leading us to realize with more certainty than what we know through our sense experiences and in propositional claims that we are "thinking things" ("Cogito ergo sum");

⁴ For the background to this period in which Descartes tried to reconcile science and the Church, see Stephen Gaukroger (Gaukroger 1995, pp. 336–46).

⁵ These seven levels summarize Descartes' use of doubt in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. They are also on a whole expressed in the *Discourse on Method*, published in French four years earlier in 1637 and in which he described his famous "stove-heated room" experience near Ulm of 19 November 1619. The differences between the books are more about emphasis than basic agenda. In *Meditations*, he responded to two serious objections to the previous book about the nature of the self as a "thinking thing" and the conclusion that God exists from the idea of a Perfect Being. It is more precisely analytical about the two concerns and thus is more focused as a book of metaphysics, whereas the *Discourse* is a philosophical autobiography, replete with personal pronouns and stories. The *Discourse* tells of Descartes' discovery of how substantial reality mirrors the working of the mind at its most foundational level.

- 3. Yet doubt persists in the form of the *malin genie* who may deceive us of our thoughts (even of ourselves as "thinking things") at this moment by putting them into our minds;
- 4. Even if we grant that we may be deceived in thinking, we nonetheless can still think of God as the Perfect Being;
- 5. The idea of God as the Perfect Being cannot come from experience or an authority; it is an innate idea, clear and distinct in itself; our knowledge of it is a flash of intuitive insight, and because it is as certain in its meaning to us as is the clarity of the idea to our thinking, we must conclude that neither ourselves nor a *malin genie* could have caused the idea of God in our minds; it had to come from God;
- 6. With the innate idea of God as a Perfect Being, we have an epistemological connection to an extra-mental reality not eviscerated by skeptical doubt; there is a certain knowledge even greater than our knowledge of ourselves as "thinking things", because, until we think of God, we have a lack of certainty that we are not deceived about ourselves; knowledge may start with thinking but it is secured upon the knowledge of God;
- 7. Since our most certain knowledge is of God as a Perfect Being, we are assured that God would not deceive us about the world's existence; science needs a link to reality and, because skepticism (according to Pyrrhonism) refutes the effort to base the link upon empirical experiences or even mathematical ideas, science gains the needed connection though the innate idea of God as a Perfect Being.

2.2. The Argument for God's Existence as a Perfect Being

Descartes particular argument for God's existence reveals why he believed the affirmation of God as a Perfect Being provides the needed basis for science to overcome skepticism. In Descartes' view, for us to understand how an idea can be true (both in the sense of being logically consistent with itself and of having a reality outside of the thought of it), we must structure ideas as representations of reality. A true idea is therefore internally consistent and also accurately represents the meaning of what it represents. This aspect of the representational character of an idea is the basis of Descartes' proof for God's existence. As he said in the Third Meditation,

"For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas—or at least the first and most important one—by *their* very nature If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exist (i.e., God)." ⁶ (Descartes 1984, p. 29)

That is, because of the formal and objective realities of the idea of God as the Perfect Being, God must exist.⁷

It is a subtle description aimed to show that, due to the representational makeup of the idea of God as a Perfect Being, the idea of God must be true. The description has six features:

1. The formal reality refers to the idea's inherent reality as an act of thought; that is, we cannot doubt that we can think the thought of God;

⁶ In the First Set of Replies to the First Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Descartes further explained the representational characteristics of idea, especially the formal and objective mode of beings; see pp. 74f, ibid.

⁷ In the "Synopsis" of the beginning of *Meditations*, Descartes repeated his argument used in *Discourse* that God causes our idea of God; because we are imperfect and all our knowledge of the world is imperfect, we could not have thought of a Perfect Being unless the Perfect Being influenced us to think of the Perfect Being. He does not explain how God causes us to think this way. The assumption is: "what else could make us think this way other than God." In the *Meditations*, Descartes did not emphasize this argument, having found a more analytically precise way to make the argument by explaining the representational characteristic of ideas having objective and formal realities.

- 2. The objective reality is the distinction of what is clearly represented in the idea of God as a Perfect Being; that is, the thought of God is not confused with other thoughts because of its particular content;
- 3. Ideas represent realities when the objective reality has at least as much clarity and distinctiveness as the formal reality; that is, with God, the certainty of the representation of God is as clear and distinct to us as is the act of thinking of God;
- 4. Because of skepticism, we can doubt the correspondence between ideas and reality; the representational structure of ideas makes our ideas about the world uncertain;
- 5. Only the idea of God can actually and most certainly represent God, because, in brief, only a perfect reality can be represented by the idea of a perfect reality; in other words, the certainty of having such a unique idea indicates there must have been a Perfect Being to cause the idea;
- 6. Only in the idea of God do we know this certainty, and this is so because, as a Perfect Being, God would not deceive us of the thought of God; an imperfect being cannot be represented by the idea of perfection and it is a necessary characteristic of perfection not to deceive and cause an imperfect idea.

Consequently, according to Descartes, if we think of God but not as a Perfect Being, we could not have enough objective reality for the idea to convince us that the formal reality is indeed of God. It is not just the thought of God's existence that assures us that God causes the idea; it is the thought of God as a non-deceiving, Perfect Being, because only by this clearly distinct idea of a non-deceiving God can we clearly distinguish the idea of God as a Perfect Being from other ideas. Therefore, in Descartes' view, God causes the idea of God as the Perfect Being, because only a Perfect Being, not just any thought of any necessary truth (for example, a deductive logic truth), can cause such an idea. In the Cartesian scheme of metaphysics, these steps are assumed to follow necessarily; but, in fact, they do not. Steps 5 and 6 halt the process. The representational reality of God presupposes the knowledge of the content or essence of God as a non-deceiving Perfect Being; however, the content of the idea of a non-deceiving Perfect Being is a synthetic claim, not an immediate flash of intuition. Non-deception is not a self-evident characteristic of perfection, because we can think of instances when it would be moral to deceive someone to prevent a great evil. Hence, we do not have a "clear and distinct idea" of non-deception. It is a derived idea from the notions of deception and its negative. Rather, "non-deception" serves as a predicate, inferring that the subject of God as a Perfect Being is open to hyperbolic doubt. As a complex idea, it cannot therefore intuitively be self-evident. In the proposition "God is a Perfect Being," we logically assume both an understanding of perfection and of God as a distinct being, and then we make the next move in the thought process to link the predicate of perfection to the subject of God. This process means that to think of God is thus a different cognitive process than the *cogito*, because the awareness of the self in thinking is an immediate intuition, but the thought of God as a Perfect Being is an act of the synthesizing work of understanding. Richard Watson makes the same observation,

Again, to intuit [through the *cogito*] God's necessary existence, Descartes must equate His perfection with His existence. Then if the idea of His perfection includes any content other than that He exists—for example, that He is not a deceiver—the idea of God would be complex and thus dubitable because of possible confusions of reason. (Watson 1987, p. 198)

However, it is still possible say that the thought of God per se is not necessarily incoherent, because it is logical to maintain that if we think of God as a Perfect Being, then it would be consistent to maintain that, since it is more perfect to exist than not, God must exist.

Yet Descartes wanted more. He wanted to overcome, with metaphysical certainty, the prevalent skepticism of his day. Descartes was critical of Galileo, who maintained that we should ignore questions about foundations. Such avoidance makes science too susceptible to doubt. To this point Desmond Clarke adds, "He assumed that we can, and ought, to construct our metaphysics first, and that we should subsequently consider physical theories which are consistent with our metaphysical

foundation." (Clarke 1992, p. 272) This is so because we need to secure our knowledge to reality, and Descartes thought he found this evidence in the idea of God as a non-deceiving, Perfect Being. He needed the same epistemic certainty as the *cogito*, but with the predicative claim that God is perfect and hence not deceiving. However, the idea that God is a non-deceiving Perfect Being is not self-evident, because it assumes that the predicate (i.e., perfection entailing not deceiving) contributes information to the awareness of God's existence. Hence, it is vulnerable to methodological doubt.

Jean-Marie Beyssade makes the point that the idea of supreme perfection is an induction from our experiences of describing things as perfect to their function. He says, "What is available instead, is induction: I pass in a lateral fashion from one attribute to another. This inductive process operates within me when I pass from one finite perfection to another ...; and it operates analogously to God." (Beyssade 1992, p. 195) Analogies are not "clear and distinct" and self-evident. Certainly, the *cogito* is a self-evident intuition and the idea of the existence of God per se may also be a self-evident intuition, but to claim that the attribute of supreme perfection entails not deceiving is in fact to predicate information to the subject, making the assertion that God is a Perfect Being who would not deceive to be a complex idea, not a "clear and distinct" idea.⁸ His use of the meaning of God as a Perfect Being requires it to be a complex idea and hence is open to the skepticism of hyperbolic doubt explained in the First Meditation.

It may be that we can understand God's existence entirely *via negativa*, only an intuition of mere existence. That is, because the idea is immediately intuited, we should not describe the idea in any positive way. If Descartes had meant an idea of God *via negativa*, then his system of self, matter, and God could perhaps have stood the test of coherency; that is, each idea would be evident in relation to each other. Since we know according to the *Meditations* that the notions of matter as extension and mind as thinking refer to distinct realities not identical with each other, we could therefore not account for their realities completely by *via negativa*, as one might God's existence.

It is important to note that, in the *Meditations*, we discover the idea of God in our thinking. We do not deduce or induce it. It is innate, and thus constitutive with all thinking, alluding to a theocentric mysticism permeating Descartes' metaphysics and philosophy of science. It may have been possible for Descartes to construct a philosophy of nature upon this mysticism (perhaps in the manner of Franciscan spirituality). However, this was not Descartes' plan. His interests were not only to construct an internally consistent and coherent system of ideas, he wanted to overcome skepticism with a coherent and consistent metaphysical system and thus provide a foundation for science, and to do this he had to show a connection with reality; to show this he needed probative evidence, and that evidence was the self-evident idea of God as a non-deceiving Perfect Being. Yet, because the idea is actually a complex idea (thus inconsistent with a "clear and distinct idea"), it is not self-evident and thus made dubious by hyperbolic doubt.⁹

"The breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics," as Richard Watson calls it, has been evident since the early criticisms raised by Simon Foucher (1644–1699) about Descartes' inadequate accounts of how the mind and body interact and how our ideas represent external realties. Watson is right to emphasize that the breakdown illustrates the possible fate of any probative, demonstrative system that tries to assure metaphysical certainty based upon premises assumedly immune from the challenges of skepticism. "Descartes goal is certainty but his lot is doubt." (Watson 1987, p. 203). The lesson is that if

⁸ Stephen Gaukroger also makes the point the Descartes tried to demonstrate the Church's two main teachings and the new science metaphysically: "Descartes' project is ultimately directed towards metaphysical legitimization of his natural philosophy, which is resolutely Copernican. For this metaphysical legitimization to be successful, it was necessary to show that it was in line with the teachings of the Church that it did not involve or lead to any theological unorthodoxy. Generally speaking, Descartes steers clear of theological questions, restricting his attention to showing that there is no incompatibility between his metaphysics and theological orthodoxy" (Gaukroger 1995, pp. 355–56). Because Descartes would rather base his theological claims upon a metaphysic, which also gives cognitive confidence in natural science than support a metaphysic upon theological dogma, he is a modern and not a scholastic thinker.

⁹ For a parallel critique, see Davidon's critique of the "myth of the subjective." (Davidson 2001, p. 52).

we seek to establish a systematic account of how we know ourselves, God, and the world, we need a way that both recognizes the limits of our knowledge and also compels us to invest our intellectual and moral confidence in that method.

3. Pascal's Prudential Argument for Faith

Pascal was as much a modernist as Descartes, as equally inspired by the new sciences and challenged by the renewed Pyrrhonic skepticism. Although Pascal mentioned Descartes in *The Provincial Letters, The Geometrical Mind and the Art of Persuasion,* and *Pensées*,¹⁰ he never thoroughly wrote about Descartes' system.¹¹ He knew a demonstrable, probative method to secure an epistemic connection between an idea and reality would fail. If skepticism were to be overcome, the route would have to be different.

Pascal thought he had found a successful route by taking skepticism's first two tenets seriously, and by showing that the last two tenets contradict human nature. Pascal rejected the Pyrrhonic claim that, because we are epistemologically uncertain of our knowledge of the world, we should therefore "suspend judgments" about values and ultimate concerns and find happiness in being indifferent about all moral, religious, and existential claims. For him, the last two tenants do not follow from the first two. We can recognize the limitations and fallibility of our knowledge of the world and still make informative ultimate commitments.

Montaigne's dismissal of passionate faith troubled Pascal above all. "Nothing is so important to man as his state: nothing more fearful than eternity. Thus the fact that there exist men who are indifferent to the loss of their being and the peril of an eternity of wretchedness is against nature" (*Pensées* #427). Montaigne's indifference to the seriousness of religious faith contradicts the heart's desire for eternal happiness. Pascal concurred with Montaigne's fallibilism but rejected his dispassionate orientation.

3.1. Knowledge of the Heart

The whole of Pascal's prudential argument for faith rests on whether the heart can produce knowledge that is as certain to living wisely as mathematics is to knowing the world. The heart's passionate desire to know eternal happiness results from a particular dialectical feature of life: our greatest insights and convictions about ultimate reality and a wisely-ordered life follow from our epistemological limitations and the weaknesses of our wills (i.e., our wretchedness).

The Provincial Letters were eighteen pseudonymous polemics against the Jesuits of France and a defense of the Jansenist position of divine grace and sovereignty against the Molinist position of human free will argued by the Jesuits.¹² Pascal knew what was at stake in the issue between Molinism and Jansenism was not only a particular understanding of divine grace or who was more theologically orthodox or Augustinian; the deeper issue was about human nature. He knew that Molinism could not withstand the critique of Pyrrhonic skepticism because it put too much confidence in humanity's ability to know God in the same way science knows the world. Grace, the basis of the true knowledge of God, comes only to those who realize grace is a gift from God, not a conclusion to demonstrable reasoning.

¹⁰ I am following the Lafuma edition rather than the Brunschvicg edition. For an interesting telling of the formation of the Lafuma edition, with Nazis and all, see *Pascal: Selections* (Pasca 1989, pp. 10–15).

¹¹ The two references in *Pensées* are #79, "Even if [Descartes' system] were true we do not think that the whole of philosophy would be worth an hour's effort" and #887, "Descartes useless and uncertain." Henry Phillips maintains that Pascal's approach to religious apologetics differs significantly from Descartes' "ahistorical concept of the status of knowledge," and "Pascal's response to such an overwhelmingly optimistic view of the capacities of the human mind is firm and uncompromising, especially in relation to Descartes' apologetic claims, to which the *Pensées* as a whole stand as a monumental objection. Reason as an instrument in understanding faith is acceptable, but faith in reason is not," in "Pascal's Reading and the Inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes," (Hammond 2003, pp. 33–34).

¹² See Marvin R. O'Connell (O'Connell 1997), Chapters 2 ("The Ghost of Augustine") and 3 ("Port-Royal") for a thorough discussion of Pascal's role in the controversy associated with Port-Royal.

Pascal's "Memorial" experience¹³ convinced him of the importance of the reasons of the heart. The Christian faith is known and appreciated only with great passion (the earnest desire to recognize and engage with that which requires an ultimate concern). The Pensées tries to explain this kind of passion and offers an apology based upon its prudential appeal for the Christian faith. This approach was his way to take skepticism seriously and to overcome it at the same time, as well as to show the correctness of Jansenism and the wrong-headedness of Molinism. He sought to accomplish this two-fold victory by stressing the dialectical view of human greatness experienced in knowing humanity's wretchedness. The dialectical characterization of the wretchedness and greatness of human nature represents a fundamental fact about humanity, and, for Pascal, indicates why the "reasons of the heart" influence our lives more that the reasons of natural science. We know the world in two ways: with the head and the heart, so to speak. "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally So is it by reason that you love yourself?" (Pensées # 423). "Reason" and the heart are interested in different kinds of evidence and the ways conclusions are inferred from them. By "reason", Pascal refers to that which mathematics, geometry, and logic can demonstrably prove through necessary inferences. People who reason in probative ways do not have to invest their personal value and hopes for a meaningful life in the conclusions. However, the heart reasons too, but according to what affects our sense of personal value and the hope for a meaningful life. The heart searches for a reality that can only be known by a passionate concern about its existence, what Pascal calls the Universal Being, the reality that requires people's ultimate concern, the yearning for greater awareness and engagement with eternal meaning.

For Pascal, the reasoning of the heart is not irrational. It would be irrational if it did not produce knowledge, but according to Pascal, it produces knowledge: how rightly to order one's life aimed towards a Universal Being. This rationality, obviously, is different from probative reasoning. The heart's reasons appeal to the whole person, to a comprehensive perspective about one's identity and worth within a physical cosmos that does not determine or settle the question of the meaningfulness of human identity and worth. Nicholas Rescher calls this compelling aspect of the heart's reasoning the "heart's journey toward belief."

And [Pascal's Wager] insists on the need to recognize that some juncture will always be reached in the rational conduct of human affairs where probative rationality must yield way to normative rationality, where considerations of interest supplement considerations of evidence, and the questions 'What sort of people do we want to be?' and 'What do we want to make of ourselves?' become paramount. (Rescher 1985, p. 125)

Intuitive reasoning is prudential, because it is, as Rescher says above, a journey in which people make practical decisions about not only what will work best but what is most fulfilling to the human drives for fulfillment, the kind of drives which propel people to look away from what can be demonstrated through probative reasoning towards what concerns the quest for Universal Being.

Pascal did not dismiss probative reasoning outright. Although the distinction between reasoning of head and of the heart runs throughout Pascal's later writings, he addressed it directly in *Pensées* #512 and the small tract titled, "The Geometrical Mind and the Act of Persuasion." The two methods have different starting principles. The mathematical mind starts with logically coherent principles. Providing that the reasoning process follows definitions and axioms, mathematics and mathematically demonstrable types of reasoning give precise and incontrovertible conclusions. Such thinking is of an exact mind, which knows how to give evidence in a demonstrable method. Yet, this exact mind suffers

¹³ On November 23, 1654, Pascal experienced an intense religious conversion on the Pont-Neuf of Paris, about which he wrote two similar versions, one on paper and the other on parchment, which were found by a servant shown in his doublet: "FIRE, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned ... " See O'Connell, ibid., pp. 95–103.

a kind of blindness. It does not see the ordinary: "they do not see what is before them" (#512). Although exact and probative, the mathematical mind's manner of reasoning cannot recognize and address the kinds of decisions forced upon people who seek an ultimate concern, a concern that requires one to live life as successfully as possible.

The intuitive mind sees the serious and consequential life-events "at once, at one glance, and not by a process of reasoning" (#512). The intuitive mind tries to see how one's heart is positioned in relation to the forceful events of life that make for human flourishing or defeat. Everyone is faced with the confrontation to live wisely or foolishly. We confuse and ignore the confrontation by accounting for it in terms of a syllogism or a set of definitions, axioms, and necessarily inferred conclusions or an objective, scientific approach to life.

In that the confrontation occurs in the life-events that demand an ultimate seriousness, intuition is hence not an esoteric knowledge or mystical dimension; it is about the choice to recognize and carry out our deepest yearnings to live a meaningful life, about how to arrange wisely one's deepest convictions about faith, hope, and love into a life lived to the fullest extent. Because these convictions come from the heart, we cannot be scientifically dogmatic about our opinions on morality and religious belief, and, equally so, because of the heart's need to align the whole person towards the Ultimate Being, we should resist a skepticism that dismisses the truth and value of morality and religious belief.

3.2. The Wager

Pascal's famous Wager (*Pensées* #418) must be seen within Pascal's use of the "reasons of the heart." The Wager is primarily a prudential appeal to make a choice about what beliefs and life orientations best bring fulfillment to the human desire for ultimately fulfilling personal relationships.

Yes, but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least *interest*. You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reasons is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your *happiness* (italics added)? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist". (#418)

The argument appeals to two aspects: the wager itself, and our "interests" and "happiness." The French word Pascal used for happiness in #418 is *béatitudee*. It means more than good and contented feelings; it is a state of human fulfillment, of being blessed in a particular activity. Our fulfillment as desirous humans of an ultimate concern, of an Ultimate Being, is at stake in the Wager. The Wager is compelling and obligatory upon us because we are interested in our happiness, in a fulfilled life encompassing not only our bodily needs and social necessities but our quests for ultimate fulfillment. It is compelling because the wager is about what ultimately interests us. It is obligatory because our *béatitude*, our quest for happiness, is involved. If our interests are satisfied in orienting our aims and actions toward ultimate reality, we experience *béatitude*, but if we choose for the "least interest," then we thwart our desires to find what can possibly bring us the greatest fulfillment.

It is possible to assess the overall purpose of the Wager in three ways¹⁴: (1) a life insurance policy guaranteeing eternal life; (2) a game-theory indicating reasonable risks; and (3) a recognition of humanity's relentless search for happiness. The first one seems clearly wrong. The Wager does not guarantee anything and does not try to demonstrate an ontological certainty about the object for which

¹⁴ My purpose here is not to engage the well-known criticisms of the Wager that deal with its possible "self-corruption" and "credulity" (W. K. Clifford), and "complicity" (Terrence Penelhum), but to understand its coherence within Pascal's overall apologetic agenda. For a summary and reply to these three criticisms of the Wager, see Philip L. Quinn (Quinn 1994, chp. 6).

we wager. Instead of guaranteeing an answer to the question of whether we should believe or not, the Wager makes the risk of faith poignant.

The Wager as game theory emphasizes the risk dimension of the argument. Pascal was familiar with gaming-theory, and the Wager does rely upon a sense of the "expected value" of a bet.¹⁵ Yet, to determine the Wager's merit only as a game-theory example is to isolate it from Pascal's overall apologetic agenda. The Wager is not intended to force one only to take a calculated gamble to maximize our interests. Rather, it highlights a certain kind of interest: whether eternal happiness is possible. Hence, it is not merely a bet; it is about making a decision about being the kind of person who seeks to realize within one's own thought processes a way to overcome the perpetually thwarting effects of one's own wretchedness in the search to find a sense of meaningfully place (a place where one can say "I understand") within the world.

The third purpose best explains the connection of the Wager to Pascal's apologetic agenda. The Wager forces an issue that one must settle; the question "am I living consistently with my passional nature?".¹⁶ The Wager presents a question directed not to guarantee a percentage risk but to what is consistent with human nature. In Pascal's mind, our minds are capable and are at their best when they are infinitely passionate about an object to which the heart can find a reciprocal relationship. Just as in any loving relationship, there is risk and passion. Also, with the relationship to God, there is risk and passion, because it is a relationship of eternal significance to our self-identity.

The Wager's merit is whether it highlights what is needed for a personal relationship with an eternal object of love. To this point Thomas Morris says,

[Pascal's] argument attempts to show that, in light of the ultimate questions, we ought to adopt a certain kind of strategy for living, with the aim in view of coming to know, and attaining the proper relation to the highest Truth. We all employ life strategies, and we all gamble with those strategies. Pascal devised an argument to show us that we all ought to bet our lives on God.¹⁷

In fact, the Wager is congruent with other passionate commitments we make in life. We take risks on personal relationships proportional to the hoped-for fulfillment of our emotional yearning for completion. With the Wager, Pascal attempted to focus on this emotional yearning, and the Wager is compelling as an argument if it clarifies what is needed to relate our primary life orientation and to risk our possible eternal happiness with an eternal object known only in an emotional, intimate relationship.

For the Wager to reach its goal, two questions must be satisfactorily answered. Firstly, could the Wager lead to a passionate commitment? Although the Wager relies on gaming theory, its aim is not to create a demonstrable knowledge. It avoids claiming to connect a belief with God's reality logically. Rather, there is a prudential connection between the Wager and God's existence. The Wager assumes that an ultimate concern about the truth of an ultimate wager is consistent with human passional nature. If there is not such a nature, then the Wager is not compelling, because the Wager relies on this human characteristic to take risks relative to the value and possible fulfilling reward of the object. However, if we have the ability and desire to form relationships which fulfill our emotional makeup

¹⁵ A way to render the sense of "expected value" of a bet is that the expected value equals the probability of it winning times the payoff of the winning minus the cost of the bet, (Probability X Payoff) – Cost = Expected Value. For a discussion on the "expected value" angle of the Wager see Thomas V. Morris (Morris 1992, pp. 111–27).

¹⁶ Pascal does not use the phrase "passional nature" in the Wager. The phrase is from William James, who uses it to build his "will to believe" prudential argument for religious faith. For James in the *Will to Believe* our passional nature refers to the willing nature in which people have the moral obligation to establish and keep their personal integrity. "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth," (James 1956, p. 11).

¹⁷ Morris, ibid., p. 110.

through personal involvement with others, then the Wager asks of us to act in a way consistent with the ways we make emotional relationships which fulfill the human longing for intimate connections with others.¹⁸

The second question is: "could the Wager lead to a commitment relative to a relationship with God?" The Wager would fail if it requires only the level of personal involvement relative to, for example, a pet dog, but it would succeed if it provokes a commitment indicative of an encounter with God as Ultimate Being. The Wager's risk focuses on the infinite. An infinite and holy God can be known by the heart (by the profound longing for happiness) only if there is an infinite and personal risk to the relationship. If God were only a cosmic ordering principle or a projection of our wishes or hopes, then an ultimate concern would not be needed to know such a God. A cosmological theory or therapeutic psychology could fulfil the same role.

However, if God is infinite and loving, eternal and emotional, then the way we know God must correspond to the nature of the relationship. Personal relationships require investment of our self-identity before we know that they might bring happiness. However, just as in all emotional, intimate relationships, we assume the existence of the other without demonstrably or logically proving it. The connection formed occurs through an emotional investment. God's reality is assumed, and the connection between the person and God forms through the passionate commitment. By appealing to choose an infinite reality, the Wager solicits the potential believer to make a particular kind of passionate commitment.

Is there enough evidence available in our lives to make a wager on a relationship with God? Something becomes evidence (whether as a proposition, testimony, sensory, a priori, etc.) when used to reach a conclusion. The logical issue therefore becomes whether one correctly uses the kind of evidence in a way fitting to the argument's purpose. Prudential arguments, like probative arguments, require evidence, but they do not have to use evidence in the same way that probative arguments use evidence. For example, one has to know enough of a lover to take the chance to form a relationship with the lover, not whether the evidence guarantees the success of the relationship; the same goes for religious faith. It would be an inappropriate fit to this kind of evidence to expect demonstrable certainty from the evidence, but it would not be unfitting to believe the evidence compels a person to take a risk on the relationship. The particularities of the relationship determine how to use the evidence in a wise way to fulfill the aims of the relationship.

Furthermore, Pascal's agenda and Wager do not entitle a person to place a wager on any claim. We need indications that a passionate commitment to God is not delusional. We could not (and hence should not) actually make the Wager on an idol, for instance, because an idol cannot in any imaginable way give infinite reward and loss. Also, for us to consider a Wager on an eternal reality, we would need to have experienced enough indications in life that a passionate relationship with an eternal reality is a possibility. These experiences in life could be aesthetic, moral, or the ineffable encounters with the sublime in nature, the kinds of experiences that indicate that it is possible for us to be aware, appreciative, and in awe of realities that cannot be reduced to what can be demonstrated only by natural science. As Pascal said, "We feel it in a thousand things" (*Pensées* #423). By taking the Wager, the believer does not demonstrably prove God's existence but indicates a reality that can only be known by the heart, and hence it follows that if there are no reasons of the heart, then the Wager is incoherent as an argument for religious faith. However, for Pascal, nothing is more constitutive to being human than having reasons of the heart.

How do we know this? Pascal's use of gaming theory to set up the Wager relies upon a shared understanding of taking a risk relative to the value of the outcome. The appeal is not to necessary

¹⁸ William Wood uses the phrase "attentiveness to the dynamics of rapport" to account for the aspect of human nature to which Pascal appeals in the Wager and throughout the *Pensées*, (William C. Wood (Wood 2004)). Wood's point is that the word rapport is more than a relationship; it is a fitting and appropriate value. The Wager indicates an orientation to faith, which is fitting and appropriate for human nature.

inferences, which it does not make, but to its intuitive accounting of human experience relative to obtaining fulfilling happiness. However, this knowledge assumes that the sympathizer to the Wager shares such gaming experiences, and that he or she understands the propositions that express the value of such beliefs. The one who wagers hence shares the semantic persuasiveness of the prudential judgments learned from a tradition of people who have sought to fulfill the passional nature's desire for happiness.

We acquire prudence through a continual engagement with other seekers who share a language designed to form semantic sharings. The greater the relationships formed through semantic sharings, the more compelling the knowledge. This is so because the evocative power of reason comes from mutual seekers attempting to establish the best prudential way to explain and orient the human desire for happiness and well-being. The fact that others agree with us does not make the knowledge more certain. We can be wrong.

The fact that others are as compelled as we are to use similar judgments to answer the same questions about human fulfillment indicates that we affirm, for our own self-understanding, the shared wisdom our community has learned through its history of how people attempt, and possibly experience, a sense of fulfillment in the quest for the Ultimate Being. Pascal's method of reasoning, rather than being the musing of a solitary person on what wager may be the most ingratiating bet, combines the individual's aims towards happiness with the shared lessons of others about what has contributed to those aims. They are shared because people have found common propositions to respond to objective experiences. Now, a single mind may make arbitrary claims, but a community of minds cannot, because the formation of semantically common propositions results from the give and take among people ascertaining which propositions best articulate the experience.

His Wager is hence an expression of a common human experience, utilizing a method of reasoning proven to force the reader to make an appropriate judgment about one's beliefs toward a reality (God) that would fulfill the passional nature.

At this point, it is appropriate to raise this question: even if the "reasons of the heart" accentuated by the existential seriousness of the Wager pragmatically conforms to the human search for happiness, what makes the religious assertions (that is, God exists and is good) true? This is Richard Foley's concern about Pascal's agenda.

To show that pragmatic considerations make it rational for us to believe in God, Pascal needs to defend a number of supporting theses that are none too easy to defend. For example, he needs to argue that there is a nontrivial probability that God exists; that there is a nontrivial probably that God is prepared, under the appropriate conditions, to bestow infinitely great rewards; So, even once we grant that pragmatic considerations can in principle make a belief rational, Pascalians have a difficult task confronting them. (Foley 1994, p. 4)

After describing how Pascal shows that the practical benefits of certain beliefs (in particular those that aim at eternal happiness) can make them rational, Foley raises the issue of the epistemic duty of having credible evidence for the beliefs. Until such a duty is met, the pragmatic value of beliefs is only half-convincing, and though Foley does not critique in detail Pascal concerning these epistemic duties, he thinks it is a needed requirement and one which Pascal may not be able to deliver.

However, Thomas Morris maintains that evidence can be found in the Pascalian Wager. "Pascal believed that there is a body of evidence that in this life a person seeking to live in a genuinely religious way is richly rewarded." (Thomas V. Morris, "Wagering and the Evidence," (Morris 1994, p. 59)). Morris bases this claim on the common experience that our behavior can generate certain kinds of emotions that shape our perceptions about objective situations. Pertaining to the Wager, by acting on it, we gain greater clarity about the reality behind that Wager and what makes it compelling for a person to consider. We realize that what compels us to make the Wager is not just the choice for happiness but for a particular reality that can create that kind of happiness. Hence, the Wager not only describes the

pragmatic benefits of a life of faith in God, it also assumes and acknowledges, in its ultimate concern on the wager, an objective reality assuring those benefits.

James Peters helps explain the kind of evidence the Wager offers. He calls Pascal's apologetics a "dialectical defense of faith." Comparing Pascal's approach to Aristotle's appeal to the first principles of reason (that is, the three laws of thought), Peters says, "Pascal justifies our holding these basic beliefs in natural first principles not by basing them on other beliefs that provide evidence for them, but by showing how they serve as the necessary presuppositions for our natural reasoning about evidence in the first place." (Peters 2009, pp. 169–70). We know first principles (for example, the world is constructed in a way that it is possible to be happy and to experience beauty and wonder in it) in the reasons of the heart. Even though, as Pascal would say, "man is only a reed," stricken with the inherent contradiction of knowing both infinity and nothingness, the first principles compel our fundamental intuitive orientation towards the world to take the Wager, to believe that the truth of our existence and the world will be made evident to us by living a "life-style wager" in which we commit ourselves to the love of God, the neighbor, and the world. In this life of love, we realize that it is not merely our love alone that procures our happiness; it is the reality implicated in our awareness of the first principle experienced in the life of love that procures our happiness.

Although we speak of a variety of kinds of evidence (for example, propositional, testimonial, and empirical), we can in a general way say there are two categories of evidence relative to their relationship to the logic of the argument in which they are used—external to the argument and internal to the argument.¹⁹ The former establishes an argument on claims derived independently of the meaning of the conclusion (for example, using genetic information to conclude certain species are in the same genre); the latter establishes evidence through the clarification of the necessary assumptions that make the argument explain the meaning of the conclusion (for example, asserting the intelligibility of nature based upon the successful scientific explanations of nature). Internal evidence is objective, in that the appeal of the evidence represents an independent reality to that of the belief in it, and in that, though the belief does not make the first principles real, it manifests through the argument's rationality their objective reality. Peter's analysis of the Wager clarifies how the Wager provides evidence by showing that the first principles of the argument become more certain the more one believes that the Wager accentuates what a person must to do gain infinite happiness. To Foley's concern that Pascal may not be able to claim the truth of the religious beliefs upon which the Wager depends (that is, God is good), it is reasonable in light of Peters' analysis of the structure of Pascal's argument to claim that warranted evidence for the Wager emerges from recognizing the truth of the first principles in the ultimate concern about their reality.

4. Conclusions

Even though modern philosophy starts with Descartes because of his emphasis on natural science and epistemology, the collapse of Cartesian metaphysics exemplifies the fact that any probative approach will always struggle with the epistemological problem of knowing indubitably that an idea corresponds to a non-ideational object. One way to account for our ideas is to say they are mental constructs; some are the *a priori* collection of sense impressions, while some are abstract from any sense experience (e.g., math and deductive logic). Nonetheless, a "gap" seems obvious between the world of objects and our ideas. Moreover, we should not treat ideas as though they are pictures in our minds (a metaphor always implicit in Cartesianism), the logic of which leads to impossible conclusions (that is, "is there really an image in my mind?"). Moreover, we can say ideas are semantic currency within a community of people using language to interpret the world together. In such a view, an idea can be true about the world without assuming we need to overcome the "gap." The struggle

¹⁹ The issue of evidence and its warrant for an argument is complex. The distinction I make is gleaned from Alvin Plantinga's discussion of evidence and warrant in *Warrant and Proper Function* (Plantinga 1993, pp. 185–93).

to understand our ideas does not necessarily prevent us from having confidence in the effectiveness and universality of scientific laws, but it does caution us away from ignoring the problems of relating ideas to reality in any "clear and distinct" way, especially if they have been set up as Descartes did by creating an epistemological gap between the two substances of mind and matter.

In spite of the collapse of the Cartesian system, Descartes remains an influential philosopher due to the clarity of his writings, the probing nature of his analysis, his serious effort to integrate consistently and coherently reason, God, and our knowledge of the world, and for showing the pitfall of a probative argument that attempts to provide this integration.

Pascal's prudential approach also provides us with a lesson. It is not pressed to answer the problems of relativism and foundationalism raised by Pyrrhonic skepticism; it seeks reasonableness, not rational certainty.²⁰ It is more concerned in finding the right assertions that cohere with the way humanity has tried to fulfill the passional nature of people's desires for happiness. Not just any assertion will work, however; the prudential argument yields knowledge only if it indeed reflects a reality that can fulfill the passional nature for what Pascal says is the Ultimate Being. Since it is a matter of what actually fulfills human nature, it is never a solitary or individualistic move.

The prudential argument reflects the shared experiences of others seeking God. This is because the pragmatic force of an assertion about human happiness comes from its semantic persuasiveness, and that involves learning what responses to life have satisfied those who share these semantic occurrences. This is a question of truth, but not as a correspondence of an idea with an object. It is a question of the consensus of people who learn to answer their questions about reality in terms of prudential judgments. These judgments arise from the interaction of people with the world, and from the need for this interaction to create a meaningfully shared language; people assume truthful responses to the world, but not in terms of picturing it. A shared language of prudence arises because people require the language to express what it intends. In a sense, there is not a world to picture with prudential reasoning, and hence it is not burdened to secure a correspondence between an idea and the world. However, there are encounters with compelling experiences in the world in which we must orient our hearts, and we reason most truthfully when we articulate arguments aimed to complete the longings of the heart within such encounters.

The most consequential appeal to a prudential argument such as Pascal's is that it appeals to the epistemological-force expressed in the narrative of people who, over their life-times, have endeavored rightly to wager their lives according to what compels them to follow their hearts. The more these arguments are shared, the more objective they become. Finally, if these experiences inform us of ways to fulfill the "logic of the heart," then the main premise of the prudential argument is true (that is, people naturally seek to formulate an ultimate concern about an ultimate reality), and consequently the conclusion (a wisely lived life in a passionate faith towards God) would follow.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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²⁰ Stephen Toulmin has influenced me in making this distinction between rational certainty and reasonableness. He claims that Descartes and modernity emphasized rational certainty and promoted the "myth of the stable," and consequently ignored how we gain knowledge through prudential, reasonable arguments; see Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin 2001, pp. 204–14).

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