

Fear, Loathing, and Pascal in Las Vegas

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Figure 1: Las Vegas NE, USA, and The Pink Cadillac Convertible Meme

During July 2023 I drove through Las Vegas twice: once going west, once going east.— Yes, of course, that’s me directly above, standing beside my pink Cadillac convertible. Actually, and seriously folks, I didn’t stop there to pose beside a pink Cadillac convertible, for gambling, or even for gas. It was 110+ degrees Fahrenheit in the shade both times and I was heading for a cooler place, any cooler place. Nevertheless, driving through Vegas in either direction set me to thinking about fear-&-loathing, human folly (for example, Johnny Depp’s lifestyle habits), and evil, especially after the mass shooting there in October 2017 (see, for example, Wikipedia 2024). Similarly, the bad news cycles from 2017 to 2024 have been unrelenting (Bad News, 2024). So it’s a depressing but self-evident fact, that natural evil and moral evil exist pervasively in this thoroughly nonideal, actual world.

Recently, this depressing but self-evident fact inspired me to revisit the classical *problem of evil* and to sketch and defend a non-theistic, non-atheistic response to it, that I call *radical agnosticism*. Bounded in a nutshell, radical agnosticism says this:

By its very nature, [an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, aka *a 3-O*] God, simply by virtue of Its/His/Her very nature as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, falls beyond all possible human perception, imagination, conceptualization, and theory. Therefore, just by knowing the inherent limitations of all human perception, imagination, conceptualization, and theory, we do know this fact with a priori certainty: *that we cannot know what's God's nature is, nor can we prove whether God exists or does not exist*. Let's call this doctrine, *radical agnosticism*.

If radical agnosticism is true, then not only The Metaphysical Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil, but also Theodicy, as well as The Evidential Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil, are equally humanly unprovable. Indeed, if Radical Agnosticism is true, then God's existence and God's non-existence are equally humanly unprovable: for, as a "human, all-too-human" animal, given the inherent limitations of your cognitive powers, then you cannot rationally justify a belief in God's existence and you cannot rationally justify a belief in God's non-existence. So if Radical Agnosticism is true, then theism and atheism alike are equally rationally unjustifiable.

These radically agnostic facts, in turn, put The Problem of Evil in a completely new light. For if natural evil and moral evil both exist, and there is evil of both kinds at all times and everywhere in this world, but God's nature is humanly unknowable and God's existence and non-existence are equally humanly unprovable, then there's an intolerable tension in us between belief and disbelief, and although apathy and quietism are possible, the tension is dynamic and must be resolved, hence we find that *we can't just do nothing about natural and moral evil*.

On the contrary, we find that *we've got to deal with them*. Therefore, natural evil and moral evil are entirely up to us to deal with *collectively* and *individually*, that is, *they're sociopolitical and existential problems*. We and we alone, collectively and individually, must deal with natural evil and moral evil, as best we can, in nature, society, and ourselves, by protecting, cleaning up, or fixing up the natural world when it is threatened or breaks down, and by responding effectively and with compassion and courage to even the most horrific and monstrous moral evils, whether in ourselves or others, and above all by trying wholeheartedly to treat everyone with sufficient respect for their human dignity in this thoroughly nonideal actual natural and social world ... as a lifelong sociopolitical and existential task.

We can look at it this way. *Either* God does *not* exist, and then we're dealing with natural and moral evil for our own sake, all on our own. *Or else* God *does* exist, natural and moral evil are both parts of God's plan for the world, we must do God's work, under God's

jurisdiction, and then we're dealing with moral and natural evil for God's sake. If radical agnosticism is true, however, then we know with a priori certainty that we cannot know either way. Nevertheless, either way, given the dynamic tension between belief and disbelief, we must do *something*, and dealing with natural and moral evil is a lifelong sociopolitical and existential task. Therefore, collectively and individually, *let's leap!*, and *wholeheartedly try to do something constructive* about natural and moral evil. Correspondingly, let's call this *the radically agnostic leap of faith*. But since this is a short essay, I'll leave the comparisons and contrasts between the radically agnostic leap of faith, [and] Pascal's Wager ... as a much longer story for another day. (Hanna, 2024: pp. 3-4).

The present essay is that other day. More precisely, here I want to explore some fundamental parallels between the radically agnostic leap of faith and Blaise Pascal's so-called "Wager," as described in his *Pensées* (Pascal, 1958).

How does Pascal's "Wager" argument unfold? Let's look at that, step-by-step, plus a few evocative images, supplemented by my informal and sometimes irreverent commentary, interspersed with Pascal's own text indented and in 11-point format.



Figure 2: Las Vegas NE, USA, and The Jewel of the Desert Meme

Infinite – nothing.—Our soul is cast into a body, where it finds number, time, dimension. Thereupon it reasons, and calls this nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else.

So, we're essentially embodied rational human animals—"human, all too human," i.e., finite, fallible, and thoroughly normatively imperfect in every other way too—ineluctably embedded in space and time, both of them mathematically structured. Indeed, just look at how pathetic and puny we are, even just in comparison to The Jewel of the Desert.

Unity joined to infinity adds nothing to it, no more than one foot to an infinite measure. The finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite, and becomes a pure nothing. So our spirit before God, so our justice before divine justice. There is not so great a disproportion between our justice and that of God, as between unity and infinity.

So, as rational human animals, we're finite beings in the face of the infinite, in comparison to which we're reduced to virtual nothingness. A 3-0 God too is infinite; but our disproportion to God's moral nature, as the highest good, as the meaning of rational human life, is not as vast as the disproportion between the number one and infinity, since we're endowed with rational capacities.

We know that there is an infinite, and are ignorant of its nature. As we know it to be false that numbers are finite, it is therefore true that there is an infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. It is false that it is even, it is false that it is odd; for the addition of a unit can make no change in its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is odd or even (this is certainly true of every finite number). So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is. Is there not one substantial truth, seeing there are so many things which are not the truth itself?

We know then the existence and nature of the finite, because we also are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite, and are ignorant of its nature, because it has extension like us, but not limits like us. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know His existence; in glory we shall know His nature. Now, I have already shown that we may well know the existence of a thing, without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to natural lights.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits,

He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is.

This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.

So, we know *that* the infinite exists, because we know that there is no greatest finite number. Yet we do know not *what* the nature of the infinite is, given the limitations of our “human, all-too-human” minds. But in the case of God, we are ignorant not only of *what* God’s nature is, but also we are ignorant of *whether* God exists or does not exist, because God is a non-spatial, non-temporal, non-finite being — the highest good, and the meaning of rational human life, incarnate. We’re *radically ignorant*.

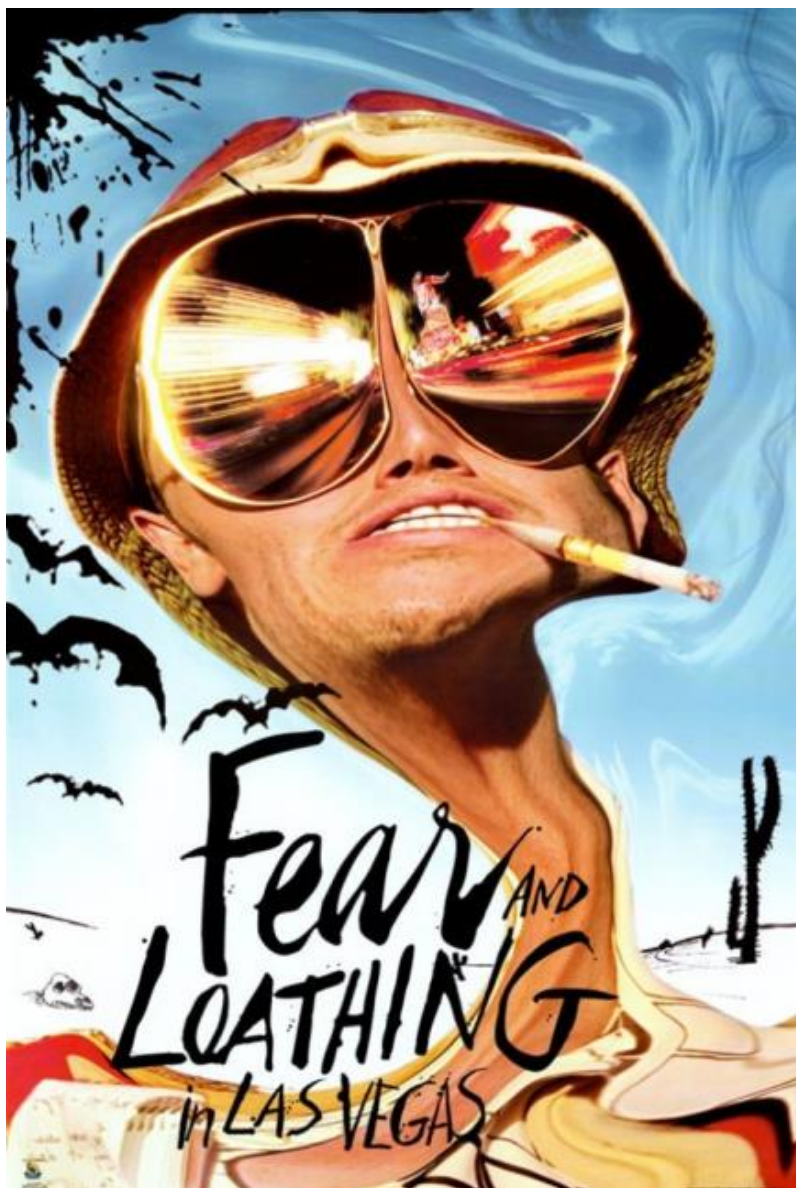


Figure 3: (Gilliam, 1998)

Still, even if we cannot know that God exists or that God does not exist, we can still have faith in God, that is, believe in God, that is, believe in a highest good, the meaning of rational human life, without a sufficient reason that would logically justify a claim to knowledge.

Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness, stultitiam; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their word; it is in lacking proofs, that they are not lacking in sense. "Yes, but although this excuses those who offer it as such, and takes away from them the blame of putting it forward without reason, it does not excuse those who receive it." Let us then examine this point, and say, "God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Do not then reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. "No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all."

Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see.

So, as far as our knowledge of God's existence or non-existence is concerned, we must be *radically agnostic*: we know with a priori certainty that we cannot know, one way or the other. Yet our need for faith and belief in a highest good, and our need for rational human existence to have meaning, drives us inexorably to the question: does God exist or not exist, is there a highest good in this world or not, does rational human life have meaning or not, heads or tails?

It's as if we were forced to gamble literally everything that matters to us as rational human animals on a single coin toss, when all that we know is that we cannot know what the outcome of our wager will be. Far far better, then, not to gamble at all.



Figure 4: Las Vegas NE, USA, and The Gambling Meme

So, rational human existence in this thoroughly non-ideal natural and social world is *not* a mere game that you can *decline* to play. On the contrary, we're *always already embarked*: the question of faith or belief in God, aka the highest good, aka the meaning of rational human life, or the rejection of all such, existential and moral nihilism, and the intense anxiety and dynamic tension that accompanies our need to resolve this question, necessarily drive us to choose one way or the other.

Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. 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 shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. — “That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much.” — Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in

wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

For it is no use to say it is uncertain if we will gain, and it is certain that we risk, and that the infinite distance between the **certainty** of what is staked and the **uncertainty** of what will be gained, equals the finite good which is certainly staked against the uncertain infinite. It is not so, as every player stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty, and yet he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, without transgressing against reason.

There is not an infinite distance between the certainty staked and the uncertainty of the gain; that is untrue. In truth, there is an infinity between the certainty of gain and the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of the gain is proportioned to the certainty of the stake according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss. Hence it comes that, if there are as many risks on one side as on the other, the course is to play even; and then the certainty of the stake is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far is it from fact that there is an infinite distance between them. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one.

“I confess it, I admit it. But, still, is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?” — Yes, Scripture and the rest, etc. “Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed; I am forced to wager, and am not free. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?”

So, at this point, you might be tempted to try to apply probabilistic, self-interested reasoning — rational decision-theory — to this issue. But this is one of the many ways that oh-so-clever people hyper-intellectualize Pascal’s argument, while also completely misunderstanding his actual point. Correspondingly, they have generated mountains of mathematical and decision-theoretic bullshit to try to prove that we must have faith or belief in something of which we are completely ignorant, both as to its nature and as to its existence or non-existence. Pascal’s actual point, then, is that it would be absolutely absurd and fundamentally self-stultifying for me to try to calculate whether it would be more in my rational self-interest to choose to have faith or belief in, or not — after all, *it is the eternal salvation of my soul and the difference between (i) a world with a highest good,*

morality, and purposive meaning, in it, and (ii) existential and moral nihilism, that is at issue, a choice *that has essentially nothing to do with rational self-interest and calculation*. What the fuck are these professional or amateur rational decision-theorists all talking about?



Figure 5: (Gilliam, 1998)

True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. — “But this is what I am afraid of.” — And why? What have you to lose?

But to show you that this leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling-blocks.

The end of this discourse. — Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.



Figure 6: (Gilliam, 1998)

So finally, here is the bottom line. Given radical agnosticism, and in the face of the manifest failure of any attempt to apply probabilistic, self-interested reasoning to the most important question about your rational human existence — as if Pascal’s so-called “Wager” were nothing but a Wacked-Out Weekend in Las Vegas in *The Sky, With Diamonds*, created by Hunter S. Thompson and converted to film by Terry Gilliam— and in the face of your intense anxiety about the question of God, aka the highest good, aka the meaning of rational human life, and add to that the problem of evil (Hanna, 2024), the only alternative is *to act as if* you had belief or faith in a 3-O God, highest good, and the meaning of rational human life. For to act in this way is precisely to demonstrate, by your religiously, morally, and existentially faithful actions, that which cannot be logically proved one way or the other. I’ve called this “the radically agnostic leap of faith.” But whatever you do, don’t think this means that it’s an *irrational* choice: on the contrary, it’s the only *rational* thing to do, given your actual rational “human, all-too-human” condition.

“Ah! This discourse transports me, charms me,” etc.

If this discourse pleases you and seems impressive, know that it is made by a man who has knelt, both before and after it, in prayer to that Being, infinite and without parts, before whom he lays all he has, for you also to lay before Him all you have for your own good and for His glory, that so strength may be given to lowliness.

Dreaming of a Las Vegas in the Sky, With Diamonds, modern readers have badly misnamed Pascal's argument "Pascal's Wager." But to give it an alternative and far more accurate name, let's call it "Pascal's No-Vegas-In-The-Sky Argument." For this argument *alone*, Pascal should be beatified and then canonized (Le Monde, 2017).

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