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PH203 Philosophy of God
Insufficient Approaches to God in Philosophy: Descartes to Pascal

As with many aspects of religious inquiry and, indeed, most human interaction, philosophical approaches to God, especially in the modern age, have tended to operate on a pendulum. That is to say, a radically nominalist or empiricist approach to God, as was proposed by René Descartes, deists, and some modern evangelical atheists, creates a response of an essentially fideistic approach to religion as can be seen in Blaise Pascal and modern fundamentalist Protestants. There is even a movement among some contemporary Catholics to this approach. The orthodox Catholic understanding of God must always be understood to be between these poles. This discussion will present a brief view of the groundwork of the deists and the response of Pascal on behalf of religion. It will then discuss the practical results, applications, and implications of Pascal's approach as it can be seen in religion today. Finally, the discussion will identify the principle shortcomings that prevent Pascal's approach from being accepted as a full solution to the problem of finding God through Philosophy.

For Descartes, God was not the idea of the Act of Existence as was proposed by Aquinas. He was not even the Prime Mover of Aristotle. Instead, God was merely the one who gives trustworthy innate ideas. In other words, God's only purpose was to preserve the reliability of math and science and an understanding of the material world. Taking Descartes as their starting point, the deists, most notably Spinoza and

Leibniz, further degenerated God into a philosophical principle unrecognizable as God. This movement realizes that God is just a step in the philosophical argument for science and the world, and, rather than look to him as God, they embrace the idea of God as nothing more than that philosophical notion as a part of their larger argument. As noted above, some modern evangelical atheists take up the same notion, but, rather than leave God in the equation, they assert that he is no longer necessary, but instead the laws of science themselves provide their authority. Others assert that this belief in God is practical atheism when they apply American Pragmatic definitions of beliefs, so they simply claim Descartes as among the first modern atheists.

In the seventeenth century, Pascal reacted to the growth of Deism in his *Pensees* in which he set down a greater emphasis on the role of faith in religion. Pascal asserted that the God of the philosophers of his time was not, in fact, God, but substantially less. Pascal sought to show that God is not contrary to reason, inspiring of respect, and, perhaps most important to his overall image of God, that which can be loved.

In brief, Pascal's arguments for the first two are found in what is commonly known as Pascal's Wager. That is the proposition that, since God either exists or does not exist and the only possible human response is belief or disbelief, the only logical course of action as a wager is to believe in him since that is the only option that will yield a positive return rather than one that is negative or nil. By this approach, Pascal made belief in God at least reasonable. Furthermore, by showing it as profitable, he made God desirable. Finally, Pascal pointed out that this knowledge

of God is insufficient in itself; this is just a philosophical principle of God, still, so it is merely the god of the philosophers that Pascal asserts is not, in fact, God. The next step for Pascal must be for God to live in the heart; he must transform the life of a believer. This is, unfortunately, just fideism. This same approach is often rebranded by modern fundamentalist Protestants and some fundamentalist Catholics as their own deep faith relationship with God.

On its surface, this approach is appealing to both modern-day Christians and some of those from Pascal's day. First of all, the need for a personal transformative intimate relationship with God through Grace speaks to an intuitive human knowledge of a need of something in life more than simple reason. While Pascal's Wager could lead a person to assert a belief in God, this would be little more than what C.S. Lewis refers to as "commercial speculation."¹ Pascal's approach that a final and meaningful belief in God comes only from the heart's "reasons, which reason does not know" is an easy approach to fill on top of that basic starting point, and it is, to be sure, enough for those to whom sufficient mental acuity has not been granted, but it would be a misuse of the mind to any person to whom any level of reason is accessible.

Pascal's Wager also seems to be a common refuge to prove the existence of God to nonbelievers without having to go through some of the more rigorous steps taken by Aquinas or even Anselm. Instead of demonstrating that God exists or probably exists, Pascal's Wager simply posits that it is more likely to be profitable to

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: a Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality*, 1st HarperCollins ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 148.

err on the side of assuming his existence than not. As a rule, this is not enough to convert one who rejects the belief in God, and it, as Pascal even acknowledged, fails to draw a person to anything more than the very Deism that Pascal was writing to show as incorrect.

In the lives of the faithful, this sort of approach can be seen in many areas. First, some of the growing spirituality movements in the Church that call for little more than an emotional tie to God and no need to truly learn about him. Many of these approaches already seem to be losing popularity as the faithful find they want something more substantial in their faith life. However, it could be said that these approaches can also be seen to lead to the growing number of people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” That approach to religion is, in many cases, an expression that a person does not feel that they need to know God in order to love him, but rather just to have a relationship with him. If there is no grounding in knowledge beyond God’s existence, there are no tools for a person to avoid such a pitfall or reject false notions of God when they are proffered.

The main shortcomings of Pascal’s approach fall into two groups: nominalism, that is, a poor metaphysics, and over-simplicity. While Pascal may have possessed a greater metaphysical understanding than his approach implies, it is not present in his argument. For Pascal, God’s existence is simply “commercial speculation,”² even though an entirely arational response to him is necessary for salvation. Had Pascal used a better-defined metaphysics as had been provided by earlier Christian thinkers like Aquinas, then Pascal could have offered a link

² Ibid.

between step one, profitability of belief, and step two, life changing love of God. Instead, in what this discussion is considering an oversimplification, Pascal leaves the world of reason and enters into a leap of faith with no basis in reason, but that has only been shown to be not opposed to reason.

In the end, Pascal's approach is only truly useful to the person who already believes; to the nonbeliever, it only gets him as far as Deism, which, it will be recalled, was the very approach that Pascal was attempting to reject as insufficient or incorrect. Pascal's discussion of the need for transformation of life is, indeed, accurate, but he provides no reasons for accepting it that can be considered persuasive to the philosopher. With that failure in mind, it seems prudent to look to other thinkers in the Christian Tradition to find a more full philosophical understanding of God.

Bibliography

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity: a Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality*. 1st HarperCollins ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001.