

merely inconceivable and the impossible, we must take the former. So, no, we cannot really grasp the idea that God could make or could have made triangles have four sides; but given His unlimited power we ought not to say that He could *not*.

RELATED CHAPTERS

10 Saadia, 20 Aquinas, 22 Aquinas, 69 Hartshorne, 74 Frankfurt.

Blaise Pascal (1623–62)

You bet your life

You can't prove that God exists, but you can prove that you should act as if He does

Pascal holds (as many do) that we cannot truly grasp the infinite nature of God. But he goes further than many in holding that that nature so transcends our cognitive capacities that we cannot even hope to offer rational proofs of God's existence. But even if our reason cannot definitively resolve the question of God's existence, it may still be useful in leading us towards faith in Him.

For we might consider the matter as a wager, not concerning which proposition is true – “God exists” or “God does not exist” – but rather concerning which is the more prudent one around which to design your life. Some might immediately protest that given our reason's inability to demonstrate either side it makes no sense to wager at all. But it's too late: in essence you are wagering on this question no matter what you do, every minute of every day, for you are either living a life in accordance with religious prescriptions or not. So you might as well do it after some proper deliberation.

Suppose, first, that you are living the religious life: you are generally good and kind, you give charity, you attend a church, etc. Now there are two possibilities: either God exists or He

does not. If He does exist then you have hit the jackpot. For you are living the life that merits an eternal life in heaven, an infinite payout. But if God does not exist, then what have you suffered? You've lost some time, perhaps, and you've guided your life by a false belief (that God exists). Yes, that is a loss, but a very small one all considered, and one that is immediately balanced by the fact that your life of being faithful, kind, honest, etc. is clearly a good life by any measure. And, in any case, who wouldn't risk such a small loss for the possibility of an infinite reward?

Now suppose you choose the opposite life: you don't merely avoid church but you're nasty and mean and do many terrible and selfish things. Well, either God exists or He does not. If He does not exist then you may well have gained something, a little more money, some free time on Sundays – assuming that you don't get caught and punished for your many terrible deeds. But if God does exist, you're in trouble. For you shall receive the infinite punishment of eternal damnation. Surely no reasonable person would risk an infinite punishment for the sake of a small possible gain, particularly when that gain itself comes with its own immediate natural risks?

So if you choose the religious life you risk a small waste of time, itself balanced by other natural goods, in order to gain an infinite reward; and if you choose the unreligious life you risk infinite punishment in order to gain a finite reward, itself balanced by other natural risks. Clearly, choosing the religious life is the right and rational, and most of all prudent, way to go.

This doesn't prove that God exists, of course, as no reasoning can; it merely proves that it is most reasonable to behave as *if* He does. And while the belief that He does may not come to

you immediately, there's perhaps no better way to obtain it than to go ahead and live that life.

So act as if you believe – go to church, do the good deeds – and in time you *will* believe.

RELATED CHAPTERS

65 Russell, 68 Wittgenstein.