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Introduction to Philosophy

Reading Questions for November 19

These questions cover an excerpt by Blaise Pascal from his book *Pensees*. The answers do not have to be turned in. You will probably have to do the reading more than once to get the answers.

Note: this excerpt is super-hard to understand. I don't expect you to find answering these questions to be at all easy.

Background:

Pascal was a French philosopher and mathematician from the 1600's. In this passage Pascal makes clear that he doesn't think you can demonstrate via argument that God exists. Nonetheless, he still thinks you should try to believe in the existence of God and offers some reasons as to why.

Questions:

1. Pascal compares choosing to believe in God to deciding whether to bet that a coin is going to come up heads or tails. On the left-hand side of page 365 he says that reason cannot decide whether or not there is a God. So one might think that Pascal would say one should be agnostic. Does he end up saying this? Why or why not? (Hint: see the first three sentences of the paragraph on the right-hand side of the page starting "–Yes.")

2. On the right-hand side of page 365, in the second full paragraph, in the line starting "Which will you choose then; let us see" and ending "that He is" Pascal gives an argument that you should believe in God. What is this argument? Does this argument seem like a good argument?

3. Pascal states a new argument in the next paragraph which starts: "Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss ..." Here he seems to be saying that there is an equal chance that God exists and God doesn't. Before, he had said that reason couldn't decide whether or

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not God exists. So he seems to be assuming the following principle: if you have no reasons for or against the existence of something, then you should assign an equal chance to its existence and non-existence. Does this seem like a good assumption to you? And can you figure out/guess what this second argument is?

4. Pascal goes on to give a third and final argument for why you should believe in God. This new argument doesn't seem to assume the principle stated in the second argument. But it does seems to assume that if you believe in God and God does exist, your reward is infinite. Can you figure out/guess how this new argument is supposed to go?