

WHAT DOES JACQUES LACAN SEE IN BLAISE PASCAL?

Cormac Gallagher*

Pascals Wager ... to which, from my Rome report on, I indicated that instead of a thousand other futile occupations, psychoanalysts should turn their gaze.¹

Introduction

Putting the title in this way is meant to reflect two things. First, that Jacques Lacan is unequivocal in his assertion that the work of Blaise Pascal, and in particular his *Wager*, is of 'inestimable value'² for the psychoanalyst. And second, that it is not at all clear - not to me and not to anyone I have read - why he thinks that the seventeenth century genius should have so much to offer to a praxis that saw the light of day almost 250 years after his death. In fact, as he presents the *Wager*, Lacan feels the need to protest that it is not out of date, that he is not lending his support to a piece of religious obscurantism, but is restoring to its proper place one of the most extraordinary intellectual feats that has ever been undertaken.

A striking aspect of Lacan's teaching is his use of major historical turning points in the subjectivity of Western man as a way of understanding the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. For example: transference love is illuminated by Plato's *Symposium*; the *o-object* by the look in Velasquez's *Las Meninas*; the tragedy of desire by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But to none of these creative moments did he accord the explicit

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¹ J. Lacan. *The object of psychoanalysis. Seminar XIII. 1965-66*. Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher. Session of February 9th 1966.

² J. Lacan. *Ecrits*. Trans. A. Sheridan. London, Tavistock, p. 108.

importance that he gave to Pascal's *Wager* and this paper - by a non-specialist, it should be stressed - is an attempt to offer some of the background required for a serious reading of his commentary on it.

Despite his high opinion of the *Wager* Lacan spoke and wrote relatively little about it. In February 1966, just before the publication of the *Ecrits*, it occupied two sessions of his seminar and a further five in 1969 - which I have discussed in my review of the seminar *From an Other to the other*.³ He also gave Pascal a small but significant place in the Rome report of 1953 and took care to re-emphasise his importance when this text was published in the *Ecrits*. The timing of these remarks and commentaries is particularly interesting for practising analysts in that they come at a period when Lacan was giving his explicit attention to the nature of the psychoanalytic act and to the way in which the members of his School could legitimately assume the position and title of psychoanalyst. The questions that concern us are why he thinks that the *Wager* has such a vital place in his enterprise and why his statements on this matter have been so completely ignored even by his close followers.

The answer to both questions may lie in Lacan's¹ interest in Jansenism, an interest he took good care to hide:

I will not say anything more about my relationship to it, it would be too good an opportunity for you to precipitate yourselves into the historical and biographical determinations of my interests.⁴

However, an anecdote by an American scholar lifts the veil a little. Jan Miel was, he says, the first to propose translating a text of Lacan's into English and as a result had been invited to lunch in his country house in Guirrancourt, not far from Paris. After the meal during a stroll in the

³ C. Gallagher. 'From an Other to the other: an overview' in *THE LETTER*, issue 21, Spring, 2001, pp. 1-27.

⁴J. Lacan. 'From an Other to the other. Seminar XVI. 1968-69. Session of January 22nd 1969. Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher, p. 2.

garden Lacan turned to him and said: 'You are neither an analyst nor an analysand, so why are you interested in my teaching?'. Miel found it difficult to answer because, he admits, he really did not know what he found so fascinating in Lacan¹'s work, so he eventually stammered: 'Well, my main interest is in PascaV'. To which Lacan replied, 'Ah, I understand' and led him back to his library where he showed him a quite substantial collection of Jansenist books.⁵ So if reading Lacan leads to Pascal, it appears that reading Pascal may also lead to Lacan. And if Pascalian scholars find a fruitful echo in psychoanalysis, who knows where that interest may lead?

But in fact not many analysts appear to have followed Lacan in his studies of Jansenism and few have found Pascal worthy of their interest and so we are led to ask who this man was and whether he is someone who deserves our time and attention when there are so many other theoretical and practical issues pressing in.

Who is Blaise Pascal?

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is one of the makers of the modern era, a contemporary, or near contemporary, of such figures as Descartes, Galileo, Leibniz, Newton, Shakespeare and Velasquez. He is little known in the English-speaking world and although taught to French secondary school pupils as a master of style - he is regarded by many as the greatest of French prose artists - it is not easy, outside specialised bookshops, to find anything but basic texts and popular biographies. A trawl among the *bouquinists* along the Seine for an out-of-print commentary on the *Wager (Pari)*, recommended by Lacan led to the almost universal response that there was no guide to Paris written by a Pascal! But he has his devotees, and a major study published in 2000 claims that more than 100 websites world-wide are dedicated to him.⁶

⁵ J. Miel. 'Unconscient dans les Pensees de PascaV in *Pascal: thematique des Pensees*. Eds. L.M. HeUer and I.M. Richmond. Paris, Vrin, 1988. pp. 105-114.

⁶ J. Attali. *Blaise Pascal oule genie frangais*. Paris, Fayard, 2000.

If there had been a psychoanalytic interest in Pascal before Lacan it would surely have been directed to his bizarre celibate life and his curious pathologies. Freud does in fact make one brief mention of him in an early text where he remarks that Pascal's obsession about seeing a void on his left-hand side had a traumatic origin since his carriage had once almost tipped over into the Seine.⁷ Lacan also makes a few comments on the reminiscences of his sister about Pascal not being able to tolerate the sight of his parents embracing. It threw him into convulsions. And then there is the story of his incestuous love for another sister, Jacqueline, almost as much a prodigy as Blaise, who became a confidante of the Queen and succeeded, with her dazzling poetic gifts in seducing Cardinal Richelieu into promoting her tax-collector father. Her departure for the convent of Port-Royal, after her father's death, again had a devastating effect on Pascal's physical and mental health.

But this kind of psycho-biography is not what interests Lacan. We will see later that his focus is not on Pascal's personality but on the way that he articulates the enigmas about subjectivity that have dogged Western man since the introduction of modern science. Here is how he announces his project:

I think I will be able to make you sense that it is around this uncertainty, *does T exist*, that Pascal's wager is played out.⁸

The man and his work

All agree that Pascal was a rare genius but opinion is divided on the use he made of his gifts.

Per Lonning, a Norwegian theologian, who also served for 20 years in his country's Parliament, reckons that few texts in world literature have provoked as much reaction as the Wager and that its study provides an

⁷ S.Freud. *Obsessions and Phobias*. S.E.,111, p. 74.

⁸ J. Lacan. op. cit. (1968-69). Session of January 8th 1969. p. 15.

outstanding introduction to 2000 years of Western spiritual history.⁹ Voltaire in his diatribes against the Church - *Ecrasez Vinfdme* - wrote of Pascal as his only worthy enemy, while Jacques Attali, a brilliant and controversial politician who is his most recent biographer, holds that he is the most representative figure of France's intellectual tradition, a universal genius who did for his country what Shakespeare, Dante and Cervantes had done for theirs. In fact, Attali claims his genius was even more all-encompassing. Pascal not only established the norms for the written French of modern times, but was also an outstanding mathematician admired by Fermat and Leibniz; a scientist who laid the bases for experimental physics; a technologist who built the first calculating machine; a capitalist who initiated the notion of public transport in cities; not forgetting his main claim to fame as a religious philosopher and theologian who penned some of the most memorable lines ever to describe the '*thinking reed*' whose '*heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing*'. All this before his death at 39 after a life of almost continuous mental and physical suffering.¹⁰

But for other authors, Pascal is one of the great 'might-have-beens' of history.¹¹ An infant prodigy and brilliant dilettante, he is most admired for having discovered, or re-discovered, a number of proofs in areas of mathematics that centuries later turned out to be of great use in the development of projective geometry, calculus and games' theory. But even this fairly modest contribution is obscured by the fact that, in his maturity, he turned his back on science and mathematics in favour of mysticism and a brilliant but virulent defence of Jansenism, a particularly rigorous and intolerant form of Christianity. William James is perhaps the best known of his English speaking critics and his account of the *Wager* borders on the contemptuous: if Pascal had known a little more science he would have had greater respect for his readers' intelligence and refrained

⁹ P. Lonning. *Cet effrayant -pari*. Paris, Vrin, 1980. p. 7.

¹⁰ J. Attali, op. cit.

¹¹ S. Hollingdale. *Makers of Mathematics*. Penguin, London, 1989. pp. 155-166.

from producing a facile argument for God's existence based on the gaming table!¹²

A more serious question over Pascal is Alexandre Koyre's contention he may never have performed the experiments on which his reputation as a physicist is based or at the very least failed to describe them accurately and completely. Koyre, who is frequently quoted by Lacan as a sound guide to the history of science, points out that Pascal, in the experiments he arranged on the weight of air on the Puy-de-Dome, outside his native Clermont-Ferrand, fails to mention the boiling that occurs when water vapour is formed in the vacuum at the top of a sealed tube. Not only that: when an attempt was made in 1950 to reproduce Pascal's experiments, the technology of the twentieth century was unable to construct the forty-six foot tubes of glass and the fifty-foot siphons that Pascal claimed were carried to the mountain top in September 1648 in order to prove that a true vacuum did exist. His conclusion is that these experiments were probably not carried out and that Pascal's scientific accomplishments were based more on brilliant conjecture than on laborious trials.¹³ This appears to be a major blow to Pascal's scientific integrity and by extension might appear to cast suspicion on all his other work. But it is hard to know from where Koyre gets his measurements. The letter from his brother-in-law who actually carried out the experiment for Pascal¹⁴ and the presentation of the experiment at the Musee du Ranquet in Clermont-Ferrand both suggest a quickly taken decision on a fine Saturday morning to climb the treacherous Puy-de-Dome carrying much smaller glass tubes with a minimal amount of mercury. So perhaps at this stage of the debate we can continue to respect Pascal's reputation as an experimentalist.

¹² W. James. *The Will to Believe* in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Dover, New York, 1956. pp. 5-6.

¹³ A. Koyre. *Etudes d'histoire de la pensee scientifique*. Paris, Gallimard. 1973. pp. 382-385.

¹⁴ B. Pascal. **Recti de la grande experience**, in *Oeuvres Completes*, I, Paris, Pleiade, Gallimard, 1998. pp. 430-435.

The Wager

However it is not Pascal's physics that are our major concern here but rather his *Wager* and to this we will now turn. I will consider in turn the *text* of the wager, its *argument* and the *relevance* Lacan finds in it for psychoanalysis.

A. *The text*

Most English-speaking analysts will be reading Pascal in translation and apart from the obvious problems involved in translating a master stylist and a prolific inventor of new technical terms, there is also the difficulty that the very excellence of a translation tends to mask serious issues that concern the text itself.

It would seem that it should be possible to give a reasonably concise account of an argument that was first developed by a man renowned for his clarity of expression and which has been the subject of innumerable scholarly studies since it was discovered among his papers shortly after his death in 1662. However, apart from the nature of the argument itself, which we will shortly address, there are two main obstacles to concision and clarity in presenting it.

Today, the *Wager* occupies four to six pages, depending on the edition, of a much larger text, Pascal's famous collection of 'thoughts', his *Pensees*.¹⁵ This text is made up of almost a thousand separately numbered fragments, varying in length from a single line to several pages. These are notes that Pascal jotted down when a thought occurred to him but were never properly organised by him into the major apologia for Christianity that he had intended to write. They were first assembled and published by his Jansenist friends in Port-Royal in 1670 with many omissions and corrections, and several more or less accurate editions have appeared throughout the centuries. Earlier critics of Pascal, such as Voltaire and William James were usually working with seriously incomplete and

¹⁵ B. Pascal. *Pensees*. Trans. A.J. Krailsheimer. London. Penguin. 1995.

604/la 425

Handwritten text in a cursive script, possibly a manuscript or a collection of notes. The text is written on a page that has been folded or is part of a bound volume, as indicated by the vertical crease and the page number '604/la 425' written vertically on the left side. The handwriting is dense and fills most of the page. There are some markings and annotations, including a small '98' near the top left and a large 'X' or similar symbol at the bottom right. The text appears to be in a historical or scholarly context, possibly related to a specific subject or event.

THE TEXT

inaccurate versions of the text. In the last fifty years or so scholars claim to have produced critical editions that faithfully reflect Pascal's intentions, but there is still disagreement about the arrangement and the numbering of the fragments. For example, the *Wager* is numbered 418 in Lafuma's edition and 233 in Sellier's and is still differently placed in the two other major editions of Brunschvicg and Le Guern.¹⁶

The actual physical condition of this fragment has been the object of endless investigations. It is written on a quarto page folded over twice and covered with Pascal's atrocious scribbling, often in shorthand. At a recent exhibition of authors' manuscripts in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris a visitor next to me looked through the glass at the page of Pascal's work that was being presented and growled: *'Il ecrit comme un cochon'* Between the lines and in the margins of what is supposed to be the first burst, there are additions and corrections that are impossible to place with any certainty, so that, for example, the transcript of the text made by Georges Brunet in a 1956 book warmly commended by Lacan¹⁷ is hotly disputed by other scholars - such as the Norwegian author quoted above.

The purpose of these remarks is not to blind the reader with the fruits of second-hand Pascalian research but to say why the argument of the *Wager* sometimes appears obscure even in a contemporary, well-edited English translation. The uncertainties of scholars about the very ordering of the text and the debates about what should be put in or left out, also questions the dogmatism with which Lacan puts forward his reflections on it and the degree to which he may simply be using Pascal as a front for his own ideas.

B. *The argument*

Everybody agrees that at first sight the purpose of the *Wager* is to provide a metaphor for human existence in terms of a game of chance. There is no novelty in this as some of our commonest expressions bear witness: *'You have to play the hand you've been dealt! Life is a gamble. If we*

¹⁶ A. Koyre. op.cit.

¹⁷ G. Brunet. *Le Pari de Pascal* Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1956. pp. 131-140.

were only to act out of certain knowledge we would do nothing at all, because the events of life are contingent in their essence. This may explain the attraction of Pascal for politicians like Attali and LOnning - 'I *can't sit back and close my eyes*', snapped an Irish Minister being needled about her decisions on a national airline, 'I *have to do something*'.

It may also explain psychoanalysts' lack of interest in the *Wager*. They can, and do, invoke the rule of analytic neutrality to justify their inaction. Their failure to make decisions, especially in connection with the events of May 1968 is mocked by Lacan and ridiculed by committed intellectuals like Foucault and Deleuze. What they must come to see is the place of their discourse among the other discourses that dominate our lives and they need to be reminded that an armchair may not be the best vantage point for understanding what is going on in the world!

Chance then is an integral part not just of the sea voyages and battles evoked by Pascal but of every decision in our professional and personal lives. But one of his main contentions is that making such decisions is not simply a matter of having the courage to face difficulties and willpower to carry things through, but that they can be illuminated by intelligence:

When we work for tomorrow and take chances we are behaving reasonably because we ought to work for what is uncertain according to *the rule of probability* which has been proved.¹⁸

The notion of having to take a chance is as old as human history:

St Augustine saw that we work for what is uncertain at sea, in battle, etc - but he did not see *the rule of probability* which proves that we ought to.¹⁹

¹⁸ B. Pascal, op. cit. pp. 196-7.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

The rule of probability' used in the most readily available English translation, is a completely misleading translation for a term which is absolutely crucial in Pascal's discovery of games' theory. The double reference here is to the *regie des partis* which introduces us to the core of what is new in Pascal's treatment of all human decision making and ultimately of the decision to be made in the *Wager* on whether or not to behave as if God existed.

'The rule of probability' is how this *regie* has commonly been translated and in my own unpublished translation of the relevant Lacan seminars I went for 'the rules of gaming'. I now feel that both of these translations are inaccurate and lead to serious misunderstandings and since this is such a key concept in Pascal's argumentation I will try to clarify my current understanding of it and for the moment vary the translation between 'the rule for fair distribution', 'for equitable distribution', 'for a fair division'.

(i) 'The rule for fair distribution'

Popular histories of mathematics take pleasure in recalling the disreputable origins of the mathematical theory of probability. It dates from the day in July 1654 when the Chevalier de Mere, an expert gambler, approached the 'pious' Pascal with some problems met with in games of cards and dice. In fact this was quite a worldly phase of Pascal's life - his father had died and he was trying to recover from the loss of his sister to Port Royal - and he was himself no stranger to the amusements practised by his aristocratic acquaintances. De Mere was a friend who had devised his own very successful systems of betting but according to Pascal he was no geometer. So what Pascal set out to do was to construct a 'geometry of chance' starting from the particular problem set him by his friend: *How can the stake be divided fairly between two players if their game is interrupted prematurely?*

This is the '*probleme des partis*' and so '*parti*' does not refer to probability nor to gaming in general but to a divvying up, a just

distribution of a stake or a pot. For example, if in a game of flipping a coin it is agreed at the beginning that the first player to get ten heads is the winner, what happens if the game is interrupted when one player has thrown five heads and the other three? Can a mathematical rule be devised for a fair division of the pot?

Pascal was not the first mathematician to tackle the problem but his predecessors had fallen back on arbitrary solutions such as returning their initial stake to each of the players (as if the game could be completely annulled or as if it had not started) or awarding the pot to whoever was winning at the moment of the interruption (as if the future was bound to be a strict reproduction of the past).²⁰

Pascal wrote to Pierre de Fermat with his ideas on the solution to the problem and the eight letters they exchanged on the subject are generally seen as marking the birth of games' theory which affects so many areas - from the planning of military campaigns to the setting of life insurance premiums - in our contemporary world. Pascal talked of having put a 'halter on chance', of having made a historical breakthrough by using a mathematical tool to deal with a strictly unknowable future.

Commentators argue that the real stroke of genius lay in the way he framed the question. In order to get a flavour of this let us look at the first paragraph of the brief treatise in which he put forward his solution to de Mere's problem:

To understand the rules of equitable distribution, the first thing to be considered is that the money the players have bet no longer belongs to them because they have surrendered their ownership of it; but they have received in return the right to expect what chance may bring them, according to the conditions that they have agreed on at the beginning.²¹

²⁰ B. Pascal. *'Usage du triangle arithmetique pour determiner les -partis qu'on doit faire entre deux joueur'* in *Oeuvres Completes*, I, op.cit. pp. 304-305.

²¹ *ibid.*

As we shall see later, this first point is one that Lacan sees as of decisive importance in the analogy between psychoanalysis and a game of chance. To enter into the world of language it is also necessary for each of us to surrender something essential of our being and all we can hope for in return is that the combinatorial system in which we have become engaged will offer us some rewards for our sacrifice.

But let us return to Pascal: Just as the game began with an agreement it can also be interrupted by agreement and in that case '*each one gives up what he might have expected from chance, and re-enters into possession of something*'. That something is what is to be determined by the rule of fair distribution.

Pascal outlines two principles to govern this. First, if one player has already won a certain sum not subject to the future vagaries of chance, he holds onto it and no division of it is made. Second, if each of the players has an equal chance of winning in any future throws, then if the game is interrupted what remains in the pot is divided equally between them.

(ii) The arithmetical triangle

He then proceeds to a series of corollaries that show the consequences of these principles in a variety of different cases. We will not go through these but we cannot avoid dealing with one particular mathematical instrument which he had earlier developed and which he now finds can further illuminate the choices to be made when confronted with an unknowable future. This is the 'arithmetical triangle' whose uncanny properties he had extensively explored and which he would now propose to Fermat as a way of generalising the *regie des partis*.

The triangle had supposedly been known to earlier mathematicians in Europe and China but is now universally known as *Pascals Triangle*. It is extremely easy to construct since it is simply a triangular array of integers with 1 at the apex as illustrated by the diagram:

				1				
				1	1			
			1	2	1			
		1	3	3	1			
	1	4	6	4	1			
	1	5	10	10	5	1		
1	6	15	20	15	6	1		
1	7	21	35	35	21	7	1	

Pascal actually presents it lying on its side, as it were, and this has advantages when its properties are being more fully explored. For the moment, however, let us be content with this simpler version. In it we can see that each number in the triangle is simply the sum of the two numbers above it in the preceding row, and clearly it can be developed indefinitely.

One striking property that Pascal had already identified is that the numbers in each row are the coefficients of successive terms in a binomial expansion. To take the simplest example $(a + b)^2 = (a^2 + 2ab + b^2)$, so that the coefficients are 1, 2 and 1 which is given by the third row of the triangle.

Now, he and Fermat discover that the probabilities of the different outcomes in a game of chance are also linked to a binomial expansion. For example, if we throw two dice there are 36 equally likely results. There will be one case of two sixes, ten of one six, and twenty-five with no six. This can be expressed as $1/36, 10/36$ and $25/36$, the three terms in the expansion of the binomial expression $(1/6 + 5/6)^2$.

This provides the link between Pascal's triangle and the probable outcome of equally likely possibilities in a game of chance to which Lacan devotes a long, complicated discussion especially in the seminar *From an Other to the other*.

Let us now return to the division of the pot in a game that has been interrupted. The triangle is seen to be intimately linked with the rule for a fair distribution which must take into account what the outcome of the

game would have been if it had continued and it gets a handle on this through the binomial expansion.

(iii) **Application of the rule of equitable distribution to the *Wager***

We finally come to the explicit application of these considerations to what might appear to be the traditional argument about the existence or otherwise of God and the afterlife. But this is precisely *not* what is at stake in the *Pensees*. Pascal brushes aside centuries of philosophical and theological reasoning - Aquinas' five proofs, Anselm's ontological argument - by positing right at the beginning that God cannot be an object of knowledge. If we depend on our natural powers as opposed to being inspired by the gift of Faith:

We do not know either the existence or the nature of God. Either God is or he is not, but to which side shall we lean. Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. A game is being played out at the far end of this infinite distance and the result will be heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either. Reason cannot prove either wrong.²²

I agree, says his interlocutor, and that is precisely why I have no intention of making a decision on the matter. Without having some rational knowledge, it would be wrong to make a choice and so the most honest thing is to live one's life in a decent way and if God exists then he will be content with that - a response immortalised in song by Georges Brassens. Those who opt for his existence and those who opt against are both wrong. *The right thing is not to wager at all.*

But Pascal has no intention of being put off. His rhetorical style as Phillipe Sellier puts it, is not designed to please his audience or instruct

²² B. Pascal. *Pensees*, p. 122.

them - it is to bend their will to his own. He uses his intelligence and his mastery of science, mathematics and logic to confuse and bamboozle, so that his adversaries - as do Lacan's - often find themselves like children in a game of blind-man's-buff, pushed about and spun around so that they no longer know which side is up. So in reply to the desire to opt out he resorts to a *coup de force*, strong-arm tactics. 'Yes, but you must wager. This is not a voluntary matter. You are already embarked. So what side are you going to take?'. For Lacan this is a crucial moment in the argument. You may prefer neutrality but it is not an option. You are already on board and there is no way off the ship - so choose your side, yea or nay!

Really, for Pascal there is an overwhelming reasonableness in betting on God's existence:

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.²³

For some commentators this marks the end of the *Wager* proper but Pascal now proceeds to mathematicise the argument. The title he had given to the fragment known as the *Wager* was in fact '*Infinity-nothing*' and this can obviously be cast in mathematical terms. One way in which Pascal approached infinity was through the notion of infinite series which tend towards a limit. A simple example is the series $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 + \dots$ which can be continued on indefinitely and which tends towards 1 as limit. Pascal's argument is that what is at stake is not Eternal Life, as it is has usually been put in Christian teaching, but an infinity of infinitely happy lives:

That leaves no choice: wherever there is infinity, and where there are not infinite chances of losing against that of

²³ *ibid*, p. 123.

winning, there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything. And thus, since you are obliged to play, you must be renouncing reason if you hoard your life rather than risk it for an infinite gain, just as likely to occur as a loss amounting to nothing.²⁴

The phrase I have italicised is once again a misleading translation because it omits the key word *parti*. Pascal's phrase is *'Cela ote tout partV*, a clear allusion to the *regie des partis*, which as we have seen relates to the division or distribution of the pot. The sense here is obscure, but the context seems to suggest that Pascal is asserting that there is no room for holding anything back and that, not in the name of traditional Christian self-denial but, in the enlightened self-interest of a sophisticated gambler guided by the rules of his newly discovered games' theory.

Lacan has a long, complicated discussion of the mathematics involved and its relevance to psychoanalysis in the seminar *From an Other to the other*. While it contains some very striking observations, some of which we will mention below, to me these seminars seem to be confused and confusing. Their main benefit, as is often the case with Lacan's teaching, is that they mobilise your desire and set you off on your own personal search for the pearl of truth that they conceal and also send you back to the original text of Pascal.

It would be more accurate to say 'real' rather than 'truth' because here once again it is a question of closing in on the *o-object*. Many commentators have rebelled against Pascal's notion that in surrendering the pleasures of this life and by becoming docile servants of God and the Church you lose nothing. What Lacan appears to be saying is that what has to be surrendered is not your narcissistic ego with all its selfish pretensions, but precisely this core of your being which for him is expressed as the cause of desire - the *o*, which is indeed no-thing in the sense that it is unrepresented and unrepresentable.

²⁴ *ibid.*

If there is an activity whose starting point is grounded on the assumption of loss, it is indeed [psychoanalysis] because what is at stake when you approach any rule, any signifying concatenation, is an effect of loss, which is very precisely what I have been trying to dot the i's of from the beginning. Because, of course, our experience, as they say, in analysis confronts us at every instant with this effect of loss.²⁵

C. Summary and conclusion: the relevance of the wager to psychoanalysis

To end, let me attempt to summarise my understanding of the value Lacan sees for analysis in Pascal's *Wager* in just three points:

1. Pascal stresses the irreducible limitations of knowledge. It comes to a halt at the real in this case exemplified by God. In the final analysis a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. On the other hand God is not seen, as he traditionally had been - and as the science of Descartes, Newton and Einstein continued to see him - as the one who knows. The stress is rather on the God who speaks and desires and who is even playing some cosmic game with his creatures, who cannot know whether he exists and, therefore, have to bet. And it can be argued that the arbitrary behaviour of Yahweh in the Bible shows that chaos and contingency rule our history rather than an ordered Divine plan that is inexorably unfolding.

It is scarcely necessary to say how Lacan sees this as an anticipation of psychoanalysis and in particular his own contribution to the subversion of the subject-supposed-to-know which undermines the supremacy of knowledge and privileges that of desire both on the side on the analyst and the analysand. In addition his emphasis on the fact that desire is the desire of the Other can be heard, as he says, as a '*What do you want?*'¹ and a '*Thy will be done*'¹ in which Pascal sees the proper attitude of the subject

²⁵J. Lacan. op. cit. (1968-69). Session of January 22nd 1969. p. 7.

who wants to bring his will and emotions into line with the intellectual decision forced on him by the inflexible logic of the *Wager*.

2. As we have seen, the '*You are embarked*' refuses an opting out of the game of life just as the first proposition of the rule for equitable distribution stresses that once you have entered the game you have lost your initial bet.

In the *Urverdrangung*, the primary repression which Lacan saw as inseparable from the entry in language, something essential of the being of the subject has to be sacrificed, something around which his endless repetitions will ceaselessly circle and for which Lacan invented the name *o-object*. Far from sneering at the idea of bringing the activities of the gambler into the sacred arena of our most fundamental decisions, he argues that the passion of the gambler, exercised within the strictest of rules, is a prime example of our confrontation with the symbolic order into which we are born. '*Nothing isolates in a purer way what is involved in our relationships to the signified.*'²⁶

3. Finally, theology seems the most unlikely domain into which to introduce the laws of mathematics. Yet Pascal became a mathematical theologian, undermining the traditional rationality of the approach to the existence of God with a new geometry of chance. In particular the arithmetical triangle showed the extraordinary numerical results in terms of combinations and repetitions obtained by following a very simple rule of addition - almost as if the numbers, like our unconscious signifiers, had their own logic which went beyond the mental constructs of mathematicians.

His use of mathematics to formalise psychoanalysis is one of the persistent criticisms addressed to Lacan by those who see it as an empathic psychotherapy of human emotions. His early application of the findings of contemporary linguistics to the speech and language which are the material of psychoanalysis, showed that the mathematical patterns discovered by linguists in their material could explain how signifiers

²⁶ *ibid*, Session of January 15*1969. p. 12.

marked every aspect of the existence of our subjects. Now he discovers that Pascal by 'putting a halter on chance' with his invention of games' theory offers us a precious example of a meditation on human subjectivity in terms of an ineluctable structure within which Grace alone offers us the possibility of some little freedom.

*Address for correspondence: School of Psychotherapy
St Vincent's Hospital
Elm Park
Dublin 4
Ireland*