

LE PARI DE PASCAL - PASCAL'S WAGER

Claude Landeman

By Way of an Introduction ...

*The text given here of Claude Landeman's contribution to APPI's annual congress retains the conversational tone in which it was delivered. Claude Landeman spoke on the day via Cormac Gallagher's (almost!) simultaneous translation and we owe this present text to his efforts on that occasion and to those of the diligent note-takers in the audience. This work is an edited version of the compilation of their combined efforts.**

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To give you a definition of a 'wake-up call', Pascal's wager is just such a wake-up call. *Se reveiller, rêver*, - the function of waking up goes against our most beloved function, our dearest wish, which is to dream, to sleep. You all know that Freud said that the ultimate desire of the dream is the desire to go on sleeping.

This goes some way to explain why in relation to Pascal's wager there has only been misunderstanding, only failure to understand and disinterest from everyone who studied him, starting from the publication of the *Pensées*, in which the wager is prefaced by a little note to the reader explaining that this wager was only addressed to Libertines, or unbelievers. Things have gone on just like that - Pascal the French genius who reduces the wager to a matter of self-suggestion.

We don't want to be woken up. We want to be left in peace and go on dreaming about what our ideal life could be. In this sense people have said life is a dream on the same line tackled by Lacan in his seminar. It

* Thanks in particular to Denise Brett, Sandra Carroll and Cariosa Walsh. The Editor takes responsibility for any errors arising from this roundabout way of conveying what occurred on the day, which she considers worth the risks despite all possible shortcomings. (Ed).

would be no harm to try to situate the position of freedom of thought that Lacan defines as Utopia, meaning it occurs nowhere.

At one time, I was interested in the works of Thomas Moore and Frances Bacon and all of those who have contributed to the literature on Utopia. And it is very edifying if one considers what this literature, in a sense, puts on the stage or produces in its notion of contesting what is considered normal or the law.

Pascal was a subject who was awake. He lived his life in a waking state and he worked even if the seal of sublimation marked this life. All of his biographers have noted that, in effect, from his earliest years and up to the end of his life he was interested in absolutely everything. And perhaps we could ask the question of whether the function of waking has not got something to do with being a genius, because it would perhaps be a way of getting out of the idea of genius if we just said they were awake. At least we can say that Lacan was a genius and certainly someone who was wide-awake.

In fact, waking up is in a sense a function that belongs to the real. As Lacan says, when you find it the real is what wakes you up. What was it then that woke Pascal up?

Even though Lacan warns us of the pitfalls of biography when talking about Pascal in the seminar. It is crucial that psychoanalysis takes note of something. The young Pascal as a one-year-old produced a very serious anorexia with convulsions to such a severe degree that his family thought he was going to die of them. What is interesting and what Lacan points out is that Pascal's father had noted what the reasons were for these effects. (One did not talk about causes at this time). What produced the convulsions or 'black rages' of this child? There were two reasons, the first being the continuous flowing of water. The second reason Lacan considered as interesting: while he could tolerate his parents coming into his room one by one, and kissing him, he could not tolerate when they came to see him together nor could he tolerate them showing any sign of tenderness in front of him.

Perhaps we can see in this a pre-figuring or a reference to the flaw

or gap that exists in the big Other, that Lacan defined, at least at that time - not yet as a lack of sexual relation (*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*) - but a lack of sexual signifiers or the sexual signifier.

So now for the wager! We won't go over the argument already heard this morning.¹

Just let us remember that the bet in this wager is your life - *a life worth nothing* - and that the stake is an infinity of lives that are infinitely happy. Furthermore, as Lacan notes, as in gaming the bet is lost from the outset.

So he identified this lost bet, he identified it to the little *o object* (*l'objet petit a*)², the lost object, and to the loss of additional or surplus or extra enjoyment '*plus-de-jouir*'.

It is in this seminar that Lacan baptizes the surplus enjoying - surplus value to the *o object*. He gives it an extra or different name (Supplemental) - surplus enjoying, which has a parallel in the notion of surplus value introduced by Marx (as talked about earlier in the presentation by Patricia McCarthy).³

So then in this wager we are committed or engaged as Pascal says, we are starting off, we are *en route*. There is no way - despite the objections of any interlocutor in the wager - there is no way of not betting. And we should note that the interlocutor in question in this part of the *Pensées* is Pascal himself; it is not at all some Libertine that he is supposed to be addressing.

Is there a difference between gaming and a wager? Undoubtedly there is: a game or gaming consists in betting, in other words accepting from the start the loss of the stake (which Lacan here sees as the *o object*)

¹ This is a reference to Cormac Gallagher's discussion of the wager in his overview of Lacan's seminar *From an Other to the other*. This is contained in this issue of THE LETTER. The paper was given during the morning session of the APPI congress (when we were just waking up!). ED.

² Claude Landeman used the expressions '*objet petit a*' and '*objet a*' throughout. These were translated by 'little *o object*' and '*o object*'.

³ Patricia McCarthy's contribution to the congress is to be found in this issue of THE LETTER.

and then awaiting something, a return, from the Other (a big Other, the rules of the game, a system of signifiers). So if the gambler wins he gets whatever he has staked back, or at least that. So the fantasy of the gambler is that the little *o* object might not be lost. This is not at all the same as with Pascal's wager. For Pascal what you have bet is always lost and is never recouped. What you have to do is renounce the pleasures of life.

I am going to come now to the difficult part of what I want to tell you today in regard to Pascal's wager, concerning what Lacan speaks of in his seminar of 22nd January '69 - the *Nom du Père*. The Name-of-the-Father takes on a very particular nuance here that I will ask you to look at in terms of the wager.

The Name-of-the-Father! What is Name-of-the-Father? It's amazing to see it here. What is it doing here? The point is to discover how a Pascal would have formulated it.

I would say he would have done it in the singular form that falls under the heading of the little bit of paper that Pascal's sister found in his jacket after he had died. This singular form is what I would call the Absolute Real. This is what announces/presents itself as '*Heads or Tails*'.

I would like you to reflect on the fact that if it is conceivable that we should arrive at some point at the final stages of a science in the modern sense of the word, namely in terms of 'a measure', it can only be precisely at the point that one can say 'it is *Heads or Tails*'; it is *that* or it is *not that*.

This concerns the question of whether or not God exists or, as Lacan put it, whether I (Je/Jeux) exist or not. It is the OR of *or not* that interests us here. And I would like to point out in this OR - at least, this is my interpretation here - this OR is the bar on the big Other. Does He exist or does He not exist? - SØ.

If there is not this *absolute real* nothing says to us that, there is no way of knowing whether, we are not just measuring our own measure. In other words it would not be a God, meaning the Real, but simply one answering our own measure.

A little bit further on when talking with regard to the state of the bet that is lost, Lacan says that what is involved is to measure the effect of

this object which is lost, in so far as we designate it the *o object* - to measure this loss at this place without which it could not be produced, in other words the locus of the signifier that produces this loss. What interests Pascal and then Lacan is to measure the return effects of this loss on the big Other. This seems to me to be an absolutely decisive point.

So what can we say now on this point of the promise and promises and infinity and infinitely happy lives and times? Should we not evoke here what is Pascal's myth, what is the myth of an absolute enjoyment or absolute *jouissance*.

This Absolute *jouissance* can be found in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. The father of the primal horde enjoys all the women - and you know that the murder of this primal father brings about the myth of Oedipus for Freud, as a failed repetition of this primordial murder.

Well, for Lacan there is no myth; this is where the difficulty lies. As regards *jouissance*, for Lacan there is only a signifier that represents it, which is the symbolic phallus - which does not represent the subject but rather *jouissance* as forbidden. And it is this that opens the way to the law and to desire.

So here we are at this point of the signifier of $S\emptyset$. And Lacan says it is problematic to equate it with the Freudian myth of the murdered Father. So it is at the crossroads of the signifier of \emptyset that Lacan is going to locate the function of the *o object*, namely, at the point where the subject is going to disappear, in other words, $S\emptyset$.

Nothing is going to be able to say anything as concerns his sexuality or sex or in regard to his contingency of being, so it is the little *o object* and not the myth of the dead father that is going to allow the subject to situate himself in desire.

So it is the writing of this *o object* that is going to allow Lacan to explore the field of *jouissance*. ... This seminar is decisive.

So I am going to come back to the point that taught me once, the one that woke me up! - and which I hope hasn't put you all to sleep! - the effects of writing the little *o object* on the big Other, the big O which is the law or laws of the signifier and which is what organizes our life, our social

existence, our bonds.

Is it the case that the end of analysis is to be seen in terms of what would be involved in getting out of neuroses - and not necessarily an individual neurosis, but at the level of a community, even a small community, what is involved in getting out of this? Could we expect the effect produced could be one of writing of the *o object* on the big Other?

Could the modality of our *jouissance* undergo a displacement, a shift or modification?

This question is what gives its value to Lacan's teaching in the seminar *From an Other to the other* and if we are perhaps the richer it is certainly not because of the law of the marketplace but by accepting, if you like, that we submit to the teaching and to the little writings of Lacan.

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Questions followed from the floor:

Rob Weatherill: Why is the Bet lost in advance?

Claude Landeman: You're right. It is not obvious - but as said this morning, the only way to divide up the pot when the game has stopped (if there is a pot) is to share it out. Pascal formulated the means for doing this speedily in his rules for gaming. Pascal constructed a triangle (Pascal's Triangle), which allowed there to be a fair distribution between players at the moment when the game stopped in terms of gains and losses of all the particular players. Everyone takes back a proportion of what he has bet in order to settle in three minutes what everyone owns. Pascal worked out in a mathematical way that the only way this could operate would be if the bet were lost from the start.

Lacan thinks that what the wager is trying to get at is knowledge about the *o object*. What is it that animates our lives? The bet or the wager is not a sacrifice. Why should one commit one's life to activities without any possible gain or reward! Lacan looking at what it means for

psychoanalysis, thinks that what a subject should know is who he was, in other words what *o object* he was. Lacan could not be, except from a logical point of view, in agreement with Pascal's wager. However, he drew out its great consequence for psychoanalysis.

Olga Cox Cameron: Could you say a little more about what you mean regarding the writing of the *o object* on the big O?

Claude Landeman: Whereas Freud went along the notion of a myth to account for *jouissance*, to account for absolute *jouissance* via the myth of the murder of the father of the primal horde, Lacan tried to free himself from that, to carry the question of *jouissance* further with the help of logic and, therefore, he expected a lot from the writing of the *o object* - just from the fact of being written - that is, the Rationalist position, even if he was aware of the fact that this could produce a foreclosure of the truth. As a rationalist he measured that in our epoch, writing - mathematical and logical - has the greatest effects on our Real, on our lives.

As we were saying this morning, these machines or writings go ahead without worrying about our embarrassments or subjective difficulties. Lacan tried to produce writings of his mathemes - overwriting the place of the subject. This Seminar among others is an example of that - it is not easy.

We are all neurotic. The problem for the neurotic is that he actually enjoys this symptom. The neurotic is happy in his misery. To heal or cure this symptom is not really the goal of analysis - that comes as an extra. As Lacan says in the seminar on coalescence, if there is coalescence between the structure and the subject who is supposed to know, the neurotic's problem is fundamentally that he thinks there is this subject who knows. For the obsessional there is a Master-subject who knows; the hysteric thinks it is the woman who knows.

In effect both are hindered in their desire because for the master and for the woman, if they *do know* that means that *they desire*. Desiring does not mean exploring or locating your desire. So the neurotic always

comes back to the signifier SØ, to his own desire, so he comes back to SØ, namely, meaning or explanation.

A desire can't be explained. You desire!

Tom de Belies: Since we're speaking of wagers could you say something about the compulsive gambler?

Claude Landeman: Gambling is a way of defending yourself against the loss of the object, of balancing the loss. In gambling the little *o object* is unleashed. The gambler wants to recuperate this; he does not accept losing. The gambler creates a different kind of Other, not the Other of language, rather it is a certain sort of combinatorial Other.

There is always the possibility of getting back, for example, 5 or 10 times what was lost. In reality the problem is one of giving up this fantasy of holding on to the *o object* in order to be able to desire. Gambling is the attempt at defending against the Other of language. It is a protection against castration.

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