



ARMOUR, Leslie, « *Infini Rien* » : *Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox*

James Thomas

Volume 54, Number 1, février 1998

Éthique et corps souffrant

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/401143ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/401143ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Thomas, J. (1998). Review of [ARMOUR, Leslie, « *Infini Rien* » : *Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox*]. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 54(1), 195–195. <https://doi.org/10.7202/401143ar>

◆ recensions

Leslie ARMOUR, « *Infini Rien* » : *Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox*. Southern Illinois University Press (coll. « *Journal of the History of Philosophy* », *Monograph Series*), 1993, XVIII-116 pages.

This study finds the key to understanding Pascal's wager, and much else in Pascal's thought, in his doctrine of three orders — those of reason, physical bodies and the moral life. With this doctrine, one understands Pascal's attitude toward the new science, skepticism, various strands of Neoplatonism, and the Jesuits. The new science provides a knowledge of the order of bodies but not of the subject of knowledge, and the skepticism of the period provides grounds for rejecting pure reason, grounds that have their origin in reason's own infinite capacity for speculation. While we can know the order of bodies, it is from the point of view of theological interest, nothing, and the proofs that pure reason offer of God, freedom and immortality give us an idea of God that is abstract by comparison with Abraham's God. This is why Pascal rejected the rational mysticism of Pierre de Bérulle and Martin de Barcos, along with the arguments of Descartes, the Neoplatonism of Pierre de Crosaz and the Jesuits Yves-Marie André and René Rapin.

This is also why the wager cannot be seen as a mere probabilistic inference or as an argument based on rational self-interest. Pascal in effect rejected both empirical science and pure reason, while giving limited roles to each. However, the order of the moral life is infected by each of these others, and it is in these respects both infinite and nothing.

Consequently, a wager is an appropriate approach to God, because our involvement in the order of bodies makes us unable to know the divine order of being, while our involvement in the order of reason only makes us aware of infinite possibilities, such as the existence of a theistic God. The implicit conclusion of this work on Pascal is that he recognized the necessary existence of God but held that reason only gives us an abstract idea of God. The wager is thus not about the existence of God but about bringing God into one's moral life, through one's commitment to a concrete idea of God. To be committed to this idea is to be committed to actualizing the order of charity in our moral lives, and this is to treat everyone as if they were saved, because this again is something we cannot know except through the wager.

The ostensible conclusion is that there is a better wager in betting on the God that Malebranche identified in the form of an infinite principle, as this takes account of a greater range of possibilities. One must, then, ask whether Pascal had this idea in mind in rejecting the abstract ideas of the intellect. Is there a conception of God that both satisfies reason and that is concrete enough to meet Pascal's objections ?

James THOMAS
University of Ottawa