

The Gamble of Unknowing

by

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Confronting gambling in its multiple manifestations, dissecting its constituent parts and inventorying its conditions of possibility, would require an endless digression on the totality of human existence. No nook or cranny of earthly activity resides outside the sphere of chance and speculation. The omnipresence of the unfathomable that I must traverse on a regular basis, an existential situation that places certainty itself at risk, stems from the necessary temporal gap between present and future, between what I think I know and the event offering itself up to be known. To get directly to the point: gambling concerns knowledge, and the interwoven nature of knowledge and risk has something to do with the stakes of reflecting on gambling in an institution of higher learning, of knowledge valorized as theory. Along with knowing, with the relationship between knowing and the real, I would like to think about the only wager that truly seems worthy of the name, the wager of putting one's life on the line, of submitting oneself to one's destiny - or, better, to one's fate -, to a roll of the dice.

In modernity, "destiny" has not had a happy fate, for it has gradually become ground into historical debris by the emergence and even hegemony of voluntarism. Destiny has become a mere gamble whose results lie in my power; I have to prepare for my future, choose the proper career, and so on. If only I hadn't done that, then this wouldn't have happened, I would still have all of my fingers or toes, I would be rich and living in New York. My destiny, however, the destiny that I live out despite my most valiant attempts to avoid it, to go in another direction, has nothing to do with my willpower or my belief that I control my own fate. In other words, in order to exist as a thinkable mode of existence, destiny requires a nod to some force of transcendence, whether it be personified or not. This necessary nonhistorical point of reference has undoubtedly contributed to the notion's demise, for a lived itinerary powered by a transcendent wind creates an unbearable conundrum for the concept of the sovereign subject. In the fiction of modernity, the closest I can come to believing in destiny is in relegating what occurs to me as a chance series of circumstances.

In this general configuration of issues, I would like to explore the gap between knowing and risking all or nothing, between knowing and placing my life at stake. In sum, I want to consider a very specific literary representation, an evangelical story that can scarcely be separated from the history of its material and idealized transmission. Prior to being buried in the catacombs of religious institutions, the fundamental thrust of this story concerns the relationship between an earthling, whatever his claims to divinity, whether real or merely of a literary nature, and his celestial origin, between transcendence and terrestrial immanence. This ancient story, which literally founds the concept of universalism that will prevail in global modernity, when the planet and its inhabitants stands face-to-face with the rest of the universe, takes the form of an earthly appeal to the primogenitor, a dialogue in which the son invokes the father. I am referring to the account of Jesus's sacrificing his life, an account which has little to do with its

multiple appropriations in the history following its transcription. But I'm interested in only one moment of this unfolding sequence of events, a moment that bears on the gamble of knowledge, of foreknowledge in this instance. This pause in the *mise en scène* of the upcoming crucifixion traditionally goes under the name of "Agony in the Garden." In fact, the scene in the garden of Gethsemane represents a turning point in the drama; what follows in its wake manifests itself under the sign of *déjà-vu*, of *déjà-vécu*. There, the Jesus figure, which embodies a specific understanding of the human being face to face with universal transcendence, undergoes a mental and spiritual torture in contemplating the prescience of his certain death as well of his agony. In this rendering of the story (recorded first in the Gospel of Mark in approximately 70 a.d.), the agony derives precisely from foreknowledge of the sacrificial death to come. That is, it results in the decision to accept the paternal and divine will, which is, in the end, his own. Here is the central segment in the book of Mark:

And they came to a place which was named Gethsemane: and he saith to his disciples, Sit ye here, while I shall pray. And he taketh with him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy; And he saith unto them, My soul is exceedingly sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch. And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will but what thou wilt.¹

In his colloquy with transcendence, personified here as his "father" (even as his "dad" or "papa" [the aramaic *Abba*]), the anguish of Jesus is palpable; he requests a reprieve, an absolute difference between what he knows as his destiny, his future, and what he will ultimately live (as when he expresses the desire that "the hour might pass from him"). His suffering comes from his knowing in advance that he will die, that it's just a question of time, of earthly time. In a very real sense, as a textual representation the story ends there, in that protected haven of calm before the storm; solely at that moment does the Jesus figure speak as a flailing, suffering human before the divine, only at that instant do his words gratuitously stress his humanity. While the transcendent utters no answer, the response is clear, for Jesus concludes that "the hour is come" (14:41), and the desired disparity between his knowledge and its object, his future trials and tribulations, does not come to be. He fully inhabits his story, his history.

Offering a figure of this agony, the cup, which the Jesus protagonist will drink to the dregs, contains his destiny, but only his foreknowledge of that destiny, of coming death, renders possible, necessary, his decision to drain it. This knowledge weighs on him; the contents of his knowing constitutes additional suffering. The figure of this future that he must swallow appears in all of the canonic Gospels each time Jesus is placed before his destiny.² To say it differently, more appropriately in the context of a reflection on chance, the narrative of Jesus's death, of Jesus's destiny that involves his

¹ Mark 14: 32-36. This and subsequent translations follow the King James Version.

² Through its translation into Latin as *calix*, the cup, *to poterion*, becomes institutionalized in yet another way in the eucharistic ritual.

unavoidable sacrifice, suggests not even the slightest inkling of gambling. In his mind, it was an absolute certainty. His agony, his human suffering stems solely from his unshakable awareness of what must happen and from his momentary weakness in the face of the inevitable. His awareness has nothing of the prophetic, of a foreboding. In the text - which is in fact the only trace of this legacy - the certainty displayed infinitely surpasses faith, a more human sentiment that has its vagaries and shadows, that can perhaps persist in the face of contradiction, contrary to all appearances. Here, there is total agreement between what he knows and what will occur.

As in the thought experiments of the physicists, in which they tell themselves a succinct story to dramatize, to think, what they cannot see, this account of Jesus in the garden serves as an anchoring fiction of human or semi-human omniscience. This narrative, deeply buried in the Western tradition, permits the human to think omniscience with no hope of possessing it. Omniscience, even as a fiction, obliterates gambling, cancels out the chance deriving from a fundamental unknowing, a temporal lag between what I assume, desire, predict, and what could take place. The fiction of allknowingness constitutes the horizon against which the human mind, with its truncated historical understanding of the future, views the nature of its ongoing lottery. I want to emphasize that my evocation of this transcendental garden story is no more haphazard than my repeated references - to chance, gamble, bet, wager, lottery and so on - that read like entries in a thesaurus. Pascal, in a fragment seemingly unrelated to his well-known transcendental wager demythologizing the thought of God for modernity, reflects on this very scene of agony in the face of predetermined and foreknown destiny:

In his passion, Jesus suffers the torments that men inflict on him, but in his agony, he suffers the torments that he gives to himself. *Turbare semetipsum*. It's a torture [*supplice*] from an inhuman but all-powerful hand, and it's necessary to be all-powerful to bear it.

Jesus is alone on earth, not only in feeling and sharing his pain, but in knowing it. He and the Sky [*le Ciel*] are alone in that knowledge.³

This solitary fragment from the collection of loose papers put together after the death of their author manifests the same concern running through the *Pensées* generally: it grapples with the relationship between transcendence and immanence, between human and divine, striving to grasp the operation of the human mind and human expression within the constraints of earthly finitude. This fragment exhibits a fundamental logic: the agony that Jesus experiences takes the form of self-torment because it stems from apprehension about his corporeal, physical - that is, human - suffering that he *knows* is to come. Despite his existence in the flesh, as the divinity, he is taking no risk, no gambling whatsoever is at stake. That, for Pascal, constitutes Jesus's solitude: only he and the sky can know that pain, for their complicity

³ Pascal, *Pensées*, vol. 2 of *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Le Guern, (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 2000), 855-56. Fragment ¶717. All citations from Pascal refer to this edition; this and other translations from the *Pensées* are mine.

- a union of celestial transcendence and, in the humanity of the Jesus figure, terrestrial immanence - resides in their shared knowledge of the future.

Like gambling itself, whether it be stock investments, spinning the roulette, or risking one's life for immaterial gain, the issue is a historical one or, rather, a question of time. Pascal's meditations on Jesus's sorrow signal this historical aspect; as he writes, "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world" (§717). For Pascal - and maybe even for Mel Gibson - the presence of this agony underscores the enormity of the divine sacrifice. Rather than deriving from a lack of future knowledge, the possibility of agony depends on allknowingness. When Pascal remarks on "Jésus dans l'ennui," I would be tempted to render it as describing "Jesus bored to death." A reasonable, less risky, and more traditional rendering of this passage would rather take some form of "Jesus in a state of despair." Since God knows all, in his eyes, whatever is human and terrestrial becomes just a relentless unfolding of the already known. If risk-taking is the spice of life, God has none.

Human knowledge remains in its essence partial and uncertain; stories of omniscience may allow us to conceive what we are not, but they do not transform humans into God. In fact, the concept of omniscience exists only to furnish a transcendent backdrop for thinking the rather draconian restrictions to human knowing. Pascal's own famous fragment detailing why it's a good idea to bet on the existence of God has little to do with God and stresses the workings of human reason. As Pascal frames the issue:

God is or he is not; but which side do we lean toward [*de quel côté pencherons-nous*]? Reason cannot determine anything about that. There's an infinite abyss [*chaos*] separating us. A game is played at the far end of that infinite distance that will come up heads or tails. Which would you wager? By reasoning you cannot decide between them; by reasoning, you can defend neither of the two. (§397)

The numerous paragraphs of this fragment have received more commentaries than any other of Pascal's jottings, and entire conferences have been devoted to deciphering it, reinscribing it into new intellectual understandings. Thousands of pages have been written on this passage, and I don't envisage resolving any of the infinite problems of interpretation it has generated. I would like to make just one minor observation. While Pascal is undeniably addressing the existence of God, initially reducing the problem to a binary decision of human mind, his careful elaboration simultaneously proposes a rigorous framework for characterizing the finitude of human thought constantly in the throes of negotiating the unknown and even the unknowable. Thinking that finitude, thinking from within finitude, takes the form of a gamble, a series of presuppositions enabling the further elaboration of thought. Ultimately, Pascal's affirmation of a sort of spiritual or mental gamble represents his own wager about human thinking and the knowledge deriving from it.

In these brief reflections, I want to discuss a very different fragment from Pascal's notes that, in

the form transmitted to posterity, does not seem to concern God at all. But it's the only other passage in all of the *Pensées* where one finds a reference to *parier* [*to gamble*] or *gager* [*to wager*], to gambling in the strict sense as opposed to just some form of gaming. These two rather laconic paragraphs, which bear on mental gaming in an entirely earthly context, relate to a number of other themes and topics of reflection sprinkled throughout these loose papers, as well as in some of his other writings, particularly those on language and geometry. However, the central thrust of the passage deals with what I might best qualify as "regimes of understanding." The text makes the observation that two persons using the same word for an object would seem to suggest that they have the same idea of that object. For Pascal, this conjecture is not entirely convincing, "although there is enough here to wager in the affirmative, for we know that we often draw the same conclusions from different presuppositions" (§100). The fragment then concludes:

The Academicians would have wagered, but that renders the dogmatists pale and troubled, to the glory of the Pyrrhonian cabal that consists in this ambiguous ambiguity and in a certain doubtful obscurity from which our doubts cannot take away all the clarity nor our natural lights chase away all the darkness. (§100)

No matter how far Pascal's concerns seem to stray from from the divine, from the miserable incertitude of humans in relation to the presumed absolute knowledge of godly intelligence, transcendence hovers over all of Pascal's writings. Even this passage ostensibly about human knowledge, about categories of human knowing, originally ended with two additional sentences that Pascal scratched out: "The least thing is of that nature. God is the beginning and the end." God is the end-all and be-all of terrestrial existence, lurks in the recesses of human understanding. In a very real sense, though, the existence or nonexistence of God is not at all the issue. God or supra-sensible intelligence stands as a necessary referent for human understanding, allowing for the projection of knowledge still to come, that will one day come to be. In other words, transcendence, divine or not, holds out both the possibility and the impossibility of human certitude; it refers to the hidden or merely unacknowledged question that all knowing addresses to its own possibility. This fragment's three modes of comprehension - the doubters (or Pyrrhonians), the dogmatists, and the Academicians - which Pascal repeatedly refers to in his discussions of knowing, whether transcendental or immanent, represent the range of human understanding in a world in which reason is no longer reduced to being the faculty for passively deciphering manifestations of divine will. The entwinement and distinctions of these traditions involve three different economies of understanding or models of thinking. Moreover, no one can escape the grasp of one of these three modes, which summarize the fundamental presuppositions of all human understanding.

These remarks about modes of knowing go beyond mere historical quibbling or the personal quirkiness of Pascal's meditations on the divine. They concern the necessity of carving out a human domain of knowing that neither dispenses with transcendence nor places human reason on a

transcendent plane, thereby imputing to the terrestrial mind all the powers previously emanating from divine understanding. Redefining the place of humanity in the face of God implies an existential anguish, a lingering urgency that refuses any definitive solution, even if one thinks that questions of God and transcendence are simply outmoded vestiges of superstition. At bottom, the projection of a divine realm always concerns knowing and human certitude, its lack as well as its probability. For his part, Pascal envisages augmenting the powers of human reason in the production of new - and, particularly, scientific - knowledge.

Delineating the presuppositions of thinking, tracing its contours more precisely, entails a sharper reformulation. In Pascal's terms, rendering the stakes visible means underscoring the opposition between blindly taking up a position and blatantly refusing to adopt any position at all. Human understanding oscillates between two infinities, between infinity and nothing, and this no man's land of knowing stresses the troubling horror of existence and the intrinsic inability to step outside of its constraints:

What sort of chimera, then, is the human being [*homme*]? What novelty, what monster, what chaos, what subject of contradiction, what prodigy? Judge of all things, feeble-minded worm of the earth, depositary of truth, cesspool of uncertainty and error, glory and garbage of the universe.

Who will unravel this tangle? That surely goes beyond dogmatism and pyrrhonism and all human philosophy. The human being goes beyond the human being [*L'homme passe l'homme*]. (§ 122)

This confining picture of the earthly human imposes an unavoidable modesty that keeps the human being from occupying the transcendent place wrested from God in subsequent moments of self-proclaimed modernity (for instance, in Kant's vision of the relationship between knowing and history). On the contrary, for Pascal, this bounded existence situates the point of departure for elaborating a new vision of human understanding that incorporates the divine without effacing its difference. The human stretches itself out to both extremes, running from glory to garbage, from discriminating judgment to wholesale idiocy. As in his theory of figural language, Pascal's theory of knowing spins itself out on the basis of binaries that undo themselves. Yet here the contraries of the earthly mind, of human potential of reason cannot be reduced to a figural offering.

This real situation, the necessary instability of the human mind, creates the conditions for the deployment of human reasoning. Reasoning seizes its path in the context of ongoing strife, against the backdrop of violence:

So there is outright war among human beings, in which each individual must take a part and

necessarily side either with dogmatism or pyrrhonism. Because whoever thinks to remain neutral will be a pyrrhonian par excellence. Such neutrality is the essence of the cabal.

War requires taking sides, and there is no middle ground; those pretending to stand on the sidelines support the status quo, the product of forces they care not to engage, calmly witnessing the slaughtering and the subterfuge. In this regard, the *Pensées* display an absolute coherence in condemning both dogmatists and the Pyrrhonists, two versions of an inescapable conservatism giving short shrift even to limited human autonomy and its unavoidable – even if unacknowledged - effects, to the critical reasoning expressing that autonomy vis-à-vis both history and nature. As for the dogmatists, the condemnation has an obvious logic; being dogmatic in the face of events that run counter to the dogma means ignoring reason altogether. In the same vein, Pyrrhonist thinking manifests itself as the irresistible urge to suspend judgment, as sort of perpetual wishy-washiness, an inability to take a stand intellectually, à *prendre parti*, to take a gamble on knowing. Either way, these two modes of confronting human finitude place the emphasis on intellectual impotence that, for Pascal and for the modernity following in his wake, denies the specificity of human reasoning, however unstable its certainties.

This conflict of the faculties of judgment does not, however, originate with Pascal, who gives a provocative edge to an ongoing confrontation spanning millenia. Pyrrhonism, an intellectual stance historically deriving from an ancient Greek school of philosophy (articulated by Pyrrho, thus the name), enters into modern philosophy in the *Essais* of Montaigne, who is Pascal's imaginary interlocutor in this context and the object of his diatribes against Pyrrhonism or scepticism in general. In fact, the major characteristics of the three modes of knowing derive largely from Montaigne's "Apologie de Raimond Sebond," even if Pascal's own concerns reconfigure the relative merits of each vision. Like Pascal, Montaigne in this book-length essay, which occupies a central place in his thought, examines the tension between faith, reason, and the authority of tradition. He also discards the dogmatic engagement of the world, presenting a picture of dogmatism that Pascal wholly endorses:

Is it not better to remain in suspense rather than getting entangled in all the errors produced by human imagination [*fantaisie*]? Is it not better to suspend beliefs [*persuasion*] than to get mixed up with seditious and quarrelsome divisions? What will I choose? Whatever pleases you, provided that you choose. There's a stupid answer that is nonetheless the endpoint of all dogmatism that does not allow us not to know what we don't know. Take the best-known side [*prenez le plus fameux party*], and it will never be so sure that, to defend it, you'll have to attack and combat hundreds of opposing sides [*cent et cent contraires partis*]. Is it not better to keep out of this mess?⁴

⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Les essais*, ed. Villey-Saulnier, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, p. 504. My translation.

The dogmatist enters into the muddle of the world, makes choices and stands by them, come what may. For Montaigne and for the modernity following in his wake, taking position without proper grounds, in the face of what does not offer itself up to be known, is akin to lunacy. There are things that we do not and cannot know, and arguing over the arbitrary seems futile if not dimwitted. It should be emphasized that Montaigne's tirade against dogmatism derives from an intellectual perspective on the possibility of knowing, creating new knowledge, and transforming established knowledge.

As the rhetoric of this passage makes exceedingly clear, Montaigne is arguing - despite his apparent disdain for the art of persuasion - against taking sides, a stand, against the act of *prendre parti*. This intellectual modus operandi ultimately involves the ability of the mind to question the real, to imagine another framework, a set of abstractions that might have other consequences. His critique of the imagination, of "fantaisie," bears on the mental possibility to run counter to the epistemological status quo, which is also political, as the passage's reference to "sedition" suggest. Montaigne's own position - if I may call it that, in light of his own comments - means taking no position in matters in which certainty cannot be established. Standing clear of this agonistic situation, of this necessary antagonism of thinking, constitutes the essence of skepticism, of Montaigne's "Pyrrhonism":

Their ways of speaking are: I establish nothing; it's no more like this than that; I don't grasp it at all; appearances are equivalent overall; the possibility of speaking for or against is the same. Nothing appears true that cannot appear false. Their sacred word is *eJpevcw* - that is, I hold steady, I do not budge. Those are their refrains, with others of similar tenor. Their consequence is an entirely pure and very complete abeyance and suspension of judgment. They use their reason for inquiring and debating: but not for concluding [*arrêter*] and choosing. Whoever will imagine a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgment that is balanced and having no inclination one way or the other, regardless of the occasion, conceives Pyrrhonism.⁵

Along with the Greek *hepekho*, most of the aphorisms opening this passage belong to the well-known sentences painted on the beams of Montaigne's library.⁶ This suspension of judgment stood as Montaigne's ideal, constituted the basis of his real and symbolic retreat from the world, as well as the necessary condition for his written examination of himself, of the possibility of knowledge, and of his own literary imaginary. Every time he sat down to write, he could glance up and see these sentences that faced in various directions so that he could always reflect on their meaning even when pacing back and forth, away from his desk. In the context of uncertainty, which describes the very foundation of thinking, the mind observes, turning over what it sees without, however, becoming fixed, without taking up a position that brings the oscillation to a halt. But reason operates at full tilt, mulling over the character of

⁵ éd. Villey-Saulnier, p. 505.

⁶ These sentences and their translations are included in the Villey-Saulnier edition of the *Essais* (see pages lxxvii-lxxxii), and the editor notes their presence in the passage cited (p. 505n).

uncertainty, the potentialities, parameters and implications, of taking up a particular position. Moreover, for Montaigne, that is the nature of the essay itself, which weighs and calculates, creates networks of relationships, without ever coming to a hard and fast conclusion.

The skeptic, following in the steps of Pyrrho, resists what draws him on, what seeks to pull him in, countering whatever inner feeling or inclination might propulse him into a particular stance, into fully assuming a specific judgment. Over against dogma, which follows a preconceived vision in the face of contradicting reality, skepticism engages the world without resulting in a concluding act. As a model of thinking, perpetual doubt and unknowing - the refusal to know above and beyond what is visible in the light of certainty - reinforces the status quo and possesses a built-in conservatism. Full-scale doubt reigns only when values, beliefs, and institutions are so well ensconced that they are literally beyond question. The tranquility of mind, despite its ongoing reflection, should not be interrupted by any inclination whatsoever, by any tendency to choose or decide, to take up a position in order to think further. This openness to inclination, somewhat akin to a hunch or intuition in the name of gambling, constitutes the tragic flaw in what Montaigne first dubs the Academicians:

The Academicians received some inclination for judging and found it too crude to say that it was not more probable for snow to be white than black, and that we're not more certain of the movement of a stone leaving our hand than of that of the eighth sphere. And to avoid this difficulty and this strangeness, which in truth can scarcely find a place in our imagination, however much they establish that we are in no way capable of knowing and that the truth is engulfed in deep abysses where human sight cannot penetrate: they avowed that some things were more probable than others, receiving in their judgment this faculty of letting themselves be swayed by one appearance as opposed to another, thereby allowing their propensity while refusing it all decision. (561)

In Montaigne's characterization of the Academicians, truth, absolute truth, presents no mode of access for those in the realm of immanence. As terrestrial humans, we are always negotiating the world with our senses, which are deceptive, and with our thinking, which cannot be divested of its capacity to misunderstand, misinterpret, and be mistaken. Rather than taking the world at face value, either in a state of absolute doubt (as the skeptic) or in a sort of commonsense acceptance of things as they are or appear to be, the Academician grants an important place to inclinations, to intuition or to a sense of transcendence, to what resides outside or beyond our immediacy. Fundamentally, the world is one of verisimilitude, of probability that requires a decision, a wager that could be a losing hand, wholly wrong. In essence, the reasoning of the Academicians deals with abstractions: knowing - never absolute, never certain - is inevitably a gamble played out on the basis of certain intuitions (or inclinations and propensities, an openness to being drawn in unforeseen directions) and the presuppositions they entail.

In his haste to sacrifice this view to his assertions of undecidability, Montaigne refrains from

delving into the implications of postulating one perception over another. On the other hand, Pascal, horrified by the paralysis of skeptical uncertainty yet unable to take the world's appearances or even the existence of God for granted, elaborated an abstract understanding of human thought, of the tenuousness of its determinations that resembles nothing more than a throw of the dice. In referring to these three modes of thinking drawn from Montaigne's essay, Pascal remarks, in a sentence he subsequently scratched out, that "in seeking truth by means of reason, one cannot avoid one of these three sects" (§122), referring to dogmatists, skeptics, and so-called Academicians. In searching for a way out of this quagmire that simultaneously involved faith, knowledge and existential Angst, Pascal's reasoning reveals itself in accumulated layers. In the same fragment, another deleted sentence follows: "One cannot be a Pyrrhonien without stifling nature, one cannot be a dogmatist without renouncing reason." In addition, in its initial formulation, the sentence included also a critique of the Academicians, which were condemned alongside the skeptics: "One cannot be a Pyrrhonian nor an Academician without stifling nature..." Specifically, therefore, Pascal first lumped the Academicians with the skeptics, then eliminated the reference before, at a later point, erasing the entire sentence. In the following paragraph, which the author did not cross out, mention of the Academicians is also excised: "Nature confuses the Pyrrhonians [1st version: 'and the Academicians'] and reason confuses the dogmatists. What will you then become, oh human being, searching for your true condition by means of natural reason?" In other words, as the editor of Pascal's *Pensées* points out, the author either collapses the two "sects" together, condemning both with the same phrase, or saves this abstract, transcendent vision of human reason from his devastating critique.⁷ What is the nature of Pascal's gamble, and what are the stakes?

The Academician, exemplifying the only mode of thinking involving the wager of knowledge, technically refers to the philosophy of Plato, that is, to the *Acadêmos* being where his teaching took place. This word appears rarely in the *Pensées* (three times, in fact), and, as this passage and the above-cited passage on the Academician's wager (§100) indicate, Pascal seemingly follows Montaigne's lead in distinguishing it from scepticism with which it could superficially be confused because of its fundamental uncertainty. For Pascal, the Academicians place their bets in the face of contradictory, undecidable and even unknowable outcomes. The vast chasm separating reason from its object takes the form of an abyss, an untraversable chaos, that belongs to thinking itself. In short, this vision of human knowledge - which will become the motor of modern abstract thought - requires taking up a position, making an epistemological wager on the basis of presuppositions that cannot be definitively proven. Rather than proclaiming the death of God, the wager inherent in affirmative human thinking merely embeds the divine more deeply in the human psyche. It entails a historical gamble, views thinking as a wager unable to rake in its winnings, incapable of knowing in advance the historical moment when winners and losers

⁷ page 1355, n2.

are relegated to their respective places. Knowing remains a shot in the dark, a gamble on a transcendence whose known consequences merely unveil the immanence of thinking.