

# A Critique of Pascal's Wager Argument against Natural Theology

Douglas Groothuis

---

In this paper we will consider Pascal's objection that natural theology is doomed because the concept of God's infinity renders theistic proofs logically impossible.

## The Role of Infinity in the Wager Argument

In the prologue to the wager argument, Pascal argues for the rational unknowability and undemonstrability of God by virtue of divine infinity. The overall strategy of the wager proper, which we will not flesh out, is essentially to render the existence of God unknowable through reason in order to set up a prudential calculation which favors belief over unbelief. Because "the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness" so "it is with our mind before God."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 418/233.

Before continuing with Pascal's argument, this phrase "the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite" demands scrutiny. Pascal seems to mean that since the infinite is without limit it infinitely transcends or eclipses anything finite, no matter how great the finite might be. So, the finite when compared to the infinite becomes "pure nothingness." Pascal might want to say that it is comparatively "pure nothingness" because of the greatness of what it is being compared. But he cannot mean this "pure nothingness" literally, though, because something finite is still some (finite) thing, however disproportionate it might be with the infinite. It exists, and what exists is not nothing. Pascal could say that the distance or the discrepancy between the finite and the infinite is unlimited because of the nature of the infinite, but this still leaves the finite as more than "pure nothingness." In fact, ascribing the adjective "pure" to nothingness seems redundant or even wrongheaded. If the finite is "pure nothingness" when compared with the infinite, then what is the nonexistent when compared with the finite or with the infinite? Would it be an even "purer nothingness"? If so, nonsense is being multiplied. Nothingness is, it seems, an all-or-nothing concept that does not admit of degrees; neither can anything finite be nothingness, pure or otherwise.

---

Pascal goes on to say that we may know that the infinite exists, but we cannot know the nature of that which is infinite. This is shown by the example of an infinite number. Pascal says:

We know that the infinite exists without knowing its nature, just as we know that it is untrue that numbers are finite. Thus it is true that there is an infinite number, but we do not know what it is. It is untrue that it is even, untrue that it is odd, for by adding a unit it does not change its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is even or odd.<sup>2</sup>

Although Pascal doesn't develop the point, he seems to be saying that if we can form some concept of an infinite number—even though we can't say what it is—we can conceive of its existence; an infinite number is, then, logically possible, though mysterious. (We will take this up below after further developing his argument.) Elsewhere he says that "everything that is incomprehensible does not cease to exist."<sup>3</sup>

God, says Pascal, is "infinitely beyond our comprehension, since being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we are "incapable of knowing either what he is or

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 149/430.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 418/233.

whether he is. That being so, who would dare to attempt an answer to the question? Certainly not we, who bear no relation to him"<sup>5</sup> Pascal means we are incapable of knowing God except by faith apart from reason. His tack is to reject proofs because they are conceptually impossible given the nature of their object. If we cannot conceptualize the infinite we cannot prove the infinite because we have no idea what we are proving. The finite cannot ascend by reason to the knowledge of the infinite because the disproportion between the finite and the infinite is too great.

But even though God is infinitely beyond our comprehension, Pascal still wants to affirm that an infinite God, like an infinite number, is not impossible to conceptualize in the most minimal manner—even if reason can neither fathom its nature nor prove its existence. Either God is, or he is not; but "reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong."<sup>6</sup> Like the infinite number, we can conceive of its existence because it is not logically impossible, but we are unable to fathom it. Unlike the infinite number, which presumably (but mysteriously) exists, we are unable to prove or disprove God's existence. But Pascal, nevertheless, thinks we can believe in God's existence even if it is beyond proof because what is incomprehensible may still exist. His

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

elaboration of divine infinity is meant to preclude proof, not render belief impossible. This concomitant dismissal of proof and retaining of belief will be disputed in a few pages after we further develop his argument.

Pascal then defends Christians who claim that reason cannot establish the existence or nature of God, because he believes such proof is impossible given the very notion of God's infinity. Nevertheless, the coin falls only one of two ways; God either exists or he does not.

### **Infinity and the Impossibility of Proof**

Pascal's infinity argument implies a terminal epistemic agnosticism. The logical choice is a simple case of exclusive disjunction: either God exists or God does not exist. The coin has only two sides. But no evidence can be adduced on either side. We are at an absolute impasse. Pascal may have wanted to entice the most hardened religious skeptic here, one who would not find any theistic argument compelling or even suggestive. In this case, Pascal would have been granting for the sake of argument a premise which he himself did not hold. We cannot explore this in relation to the wager, but the a priori exclusion of natural theology on account of divine infinity is worth exploring in its own right.

Pascal's essential argument, then, runs as follows:

1. God is infinite.
2. Finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite through reason.
3. We cannot prove what we cannot comprehend.
4. Therefore, we can neither prove nor disprove the infinite God's existence or know God's nature through reason.
5. Because of 4, Christians are not epistemically disadvantaged by the dearth of proofs; they could not be expected to prove the existence of an infinite God.

The natural theologian would be especially offended by this maneuver because conclusion 5 attempts to make the absence of proofs an epistemic virtue instead of a vice. But Pascal's argument, as stated above in lines 1-4, is valid whether or not the natural theologian would be satisfied with the epistemic implications of the conclusion. Should Pascal's argument succeed it would be a powerful a priori prohibition of natural theology because it eliminates any imperative to attempt theistic proofs. Premise 3 is not directly affirmed by Pascal, but seems to be assumed in his argument. We will grant premise 3 to Pascal for the time being (although we will later claim that it entails a problem) and pursue

the truth of premise 2 in order to determine whether his argument is sound.

### **Comprehending an Infinite Number**

Pascal uses the example of an infinite number to establish two points: First, he wants to say that finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite because of its mysterious properties. Second, he wants to argue nonetheless that one can at least formulate the concept of an infinite number—and so believe in its existence—even if one cannot comprehend it. He seems to be saying that something may be mysterious and opaque to reason, but still be logically possible. But Pascal's argument breaks down if the very idea of an infinite number dissolves upon closer inspection.

We have some notion of infinitude or limitlessness and we have some understanding of number. But less than a fruitful union occurs when the two are conjoined. Any possible number—say a positive integer—is always one integer less than a still higher integer; and that integer is one less than a still higher integer; ad infinitum. The process of progressive addition is infinite (hence ad infinitum) because it allows of an unlimited increase. But it is a confusion to speak of an infinite number (singular) because any specifiable integer is always a limitation or a demarcation in a series of which it is only a finite part. Therefore, there doesn't seem to be

an infinite number because the series doesn't allow an upper or maximal limit occupied by only one integer. We might be permitted to say that the set of positive integers is infinite, but any given number can never be infinite because it is always a limitation. Infinite series of numbers is one thing; an infinite number is another thing entirely—and something not philosophically helpful. Samuel Johnson made just this point in a slightly different but illuminating manner:

Numeration is certainly infinite, for eternity might be employed in adding unit to unit, but every number is in itself finite, as the possibility of doubling it easily proves: besides, stop at what point you will, you find yourself as far from infinitude as ever.<sup>7</sup>

When Johnson speaks of "numeration" he is describing what I've called the process of progressive addition. He captures the finitude of any number not by specifying their place in a series as I've done, but by the interesting fact that they can be doubled and that any number is equally distance from infinitude.

If these reflections are correct, Pascal cannot use the mysterious properties of an infinite number as an analogy for the

---

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Johnson as quoted in D. Elton Trueblood, *A Philosopher's Way* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1978), 77.

mysterious properties of an infinite God. We cannot comprehend the end of a limitless series of numbers simply because it has no end. But we can comprehend the idea of the limitless series itself. And any given number can be comprehended.

The incoherence of Pascal's idea of an infinite number, it seems, does little to elucidate the meaning or bare possibility of an infinite God. He claims that it is an example of what we can believe in without comprehending. Yet if the concept of an infinite number is (as argued) itself a muddle, and there is no such thing, the example must fail. Of course, Pascal's entire argument does not rest on the comparison of God to an infinite number. But even if these criticisms fail to undermine Pascal's comparison, he still faces other stiff challenges.

For instance, it should be inquired whether it is possible to even believe in the existence of what is incomprehensible. Belief, if it is to make sense, requires a purported and comprehensible subject of that belief—otherwise nothing intelligible is signified by the belief itself. No one can believe that "green ideas sleep furiously" because that sentence is incomprehensible, despite its grammatical form; it is meaningless because it fails to single out a comprehensible subject available for assent. Pascal seems to have inadvertently perched himself on the horns of a dilemma. If he affirms that God is incomprehensible (in order to eliminate proof or disproof), this excludes belief itself; but this is just what he wants to

preserve—belief without proof. If he permits God to be comprehensible, this allows for belief but also introduces the possibility of proof and disproof, something Pascal earnestly wants to disallow.

### **The Theological Sense of Divine Infinity**

Premise 2 states that finite knowers cannot comprehend the infinite through reason. This has been questioned by our discussion of infinity with respect to numbers. But Pascal also thinks that God's infinity, which is even more mysterious than that of numbers, renders God infinitely beyond our rational comprehension. Yet if divine infinity can be legitimately construed as more comprehensible than Pascal granted, it may not follow that finite knowers would be incapable of knowing God's nature and therefore incapable of either proving or disproving God's existence.

Since Pascal ultimately wanted to defend the biblical idea of God and not the "God of the philosophers," it seems out of character for him to appeal to such an abstruse notion of infinity in order to preclude proofs and commence his prudential wager argument. Pascal may be wanting to stress the uniqueness and transcendence of God such that the skeptic realizes that the epistemic procedures or requirements applied to other aspects of knowledge do not apply to

God. God, after all, is not an item of everyday experience as are material objects.

Nevertheless, a case could be made that the introduction of the term "infinite" in the manner proposed by Pascal tends to create a pseudo-problem because the God of the Bible is not presented as being infinite in the manner alluded to in Pascal's discussion of "infinite number." Pascal's own words should guide us here: "Anyone who wishes to give the meaning of Scripture without taking it from Scripture is the enemy of Scripture. St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* [III-27]."<sup>8</sup> In other words, let the Scriptures give the meaning of the word "God," not mathematical or philosophical speculation.

Pascal might respond that this fragment was meant to apply to believers engaged in biblical exegesis, and not to apply the task of persuading skeptics to wager on God. Further, a Christian philosopher is advised to use nontheological language to communicate Christianity to those outside its ranks. It is true that if one desires to communicate with those outside the religious ranks it would be appropriate to translate theological terms in ways that reach a secular audience. Believing philosophers of religion routinely do this. But if Pascal wants to present the idea of God to the skeptic in a secular manner, he should not misrepresent his own

---

<sup>8</sup> Pascal, *Ibid.*, 251/900.

tradition's theology. The project of translation should not end in self-subversion. This is the concern to which I will now attend.

The New International Version of the Bible never translates any Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word as "infinity" or "infinite," although many passages speak of God's perfections and incomparability. The King James Version uses the word "infinite" only once to refer to God: "Great is the Lord. . . his understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5). The significance is that God's knowledge is comprehensive and transcends what any human or every human could know. But Salomon Bochner notes that "the Old Testament exulted in the omnipotence of the Creator, but it did not initiate problems about the unboundedness of His power."<sup>9</sup> (This is also true of the New Testament.) For instance, when King David reflects on God's knowledge he says: "You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (Psalm 139:4). He also says, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them they would outnumber the grains of sand" (Psalm 139:17, 18).

---

<sup>9</sup> Salomon Bochner, "Infinity," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Philip P. Wiener, editor (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 4 vols. 2: 604.

To put it philosophically, for David, God knows all true propositions to be true. Put another way, he knows all that is logically possible to know. But, for David, this has nothing to do with God having no relation to us because of divine infinity. Rather, God's knowledge is without restrictions; ours is limited. David confesses that "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain," but far from lapsing into epistemological despair, he says that God's thoughts (at least the ones he can fathom) are "precious" to him. No philosophically troublesome notion intrudes on David's reflection on God's supremacy in the area of divine knowledge.

The same situation applies to references concerning God's omnipotence and omnipresence. Jeremiah reflects on God as the Creator and exclaims: "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:7). If God can create the universe, nothing can resist his power. Similarly, no place is foreign to the presence of God. Solomon exclaims, "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I built!" (1 Kings 8:27). For the Apostle Paul, God's status as Creator also insures his noncontingency or aseity:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by

hands. And he is not served by anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:24-25).

Paul is explaining that since God created all things and transcends the human environment ("doesn't live in temples built by hands"), he requires no external assistance in any respect ("is not served by human hands"); on the contrary, he uniquely imparts life and existence to all creation. Although Paul doesn't use the philosophical term, he surely has noncontingency in mind, as opposed to the ontological status of the finite gods of Greek fascination.

The canonical writers marvel over God's supremacy but never take this to imply an absolute barrier between God and human knowledge of God. They do not worry over any philosophical implications of infinity (as employed by Pascal in a mathematical sense of an infinite number) because the concept itself is alien to their thinking. The whole prospect of comparing God to an abstract mathematical concept seems wrongheaded in principle and is nowhere suggested by the biblical writers, nor does it seem to be implied by any of their statements.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> This differs from cases where biblical writers describe God in nonphilosophical ways that, nevertheless, can be translated into philosophical terms or that have philosophical implications.

Mathematical infinities, whatever they may be, have to do (roughly) with numerical series. They concern numerical quantities. Yet when we are speaking of a personal being, we are not speaking of a numerical units in a set. Instead of speaking of mathematical quantities we are speaking of a divine person with a determinate character. Thus the kinds of problems and paradoxes attending mathematical infinities seem to have little or no effect on the infinitude of God.<sup>11</sup> But in what manner could God rightly be considered infinite?

### **Divine Infinity: Adverbial Predication**

It is often claimed that whether or not the biblical writers bring up philosophical problems associated with the knowledge of God, the knowledge of God would be impossible or unreliable given the supposed ontological discrepancy between God and humans. God is uncreated, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, etc., while humans have no such status. Yet we will argue

---

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that philosophers haven't puzzled over supposed paradoxes resulting from a reflection on God's attributes, such as the paradox of the stone (can God make a stone too heavy for God to lift?). My point is that Pascal's invocation of the mathematically infinite at this point is illegitimate.

below that God's transcendence, when properly elaborated, need not exclude meaningful predication.

Many of the problems envisaged by Pascal and others seem to stem from their use of "infinite" as an imprecise adjective to modify God. To say that "God is infinite" is a very general and abstract description because we have not qualified or specified to what the infinity refers (beside God). The word "infinite" can be applied in any number of ways. We have already questioned Pascal's use of the term for God which trades on a dubious mathematical analogy. In light of our previous discussion, it makes more sense and is more consonant with Judeo-Christian theism to use "infinite" adverbially, rather than adjectivally. We can say that God is infinitely powerful, infinitely just, infinitely loving, etc. Construed in this way, "infinite" does not denote an attribute simpliciter but qualifies all the divine attributes. Similarly, if we referred to someone as "an amazing person" we would know little about that person because we could not determine in what sense he was amazing. Is he amazingly strong, amazingly beautiful, amazingly weak, etc.? But if he is amazingly intelligent we begin to understand something of the person. The generic adjective when applied without qualification directly to the noun God is

descriptively inadequate; the adverbial qualification of the adjective gives the determinative meaning to the noun in question.<sup>12</sup>

I will henceforth use "adverbially infinite" to mean a particular specification of divine attributes; but it is granted that this meaning could also be rendered adjectivally by saying that "God's mercy is infinite" or "God's power is infinite" because these two sentences express, respectively, the same propositions expressed in the following two sentences: "God is infinitely merciful" and "God is infinitely powerful." What we want to rule out is simply an unqualified adjectival reference of the noun God as in: "God is infinite."<sup>13</sup> To this end, and for convenience sake, we will speak of adverbial infinity to refer to what was discussed above.

### **Anselmian Infinity: Maximal Greatness**

---

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that philosophers haven't puzzled over supposed paradoxes resulting from a reflection on God's attributes, such as the paradox of the stone: Can God make a stone too heavy for God to lift? My point is that Pascal's invocation of the mathematically infinite at this point is illegitimate.

<sup>13</sup> See D. W. D. Shaw, *Who is God?* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 60f; quoted in Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-82) 1: 232.

If we can give some determinate meaning to God's infinity without metaphysically enervating the classical understanding of the divine attributes, then the idea of God as infinite need not rule out a proof for his existence. This counters premise 2 of Pascal's argument. We have already tried to give a more determinative meaning to the divine infinity through adverbial predication, but more work needs to be done.

God has been traditionally understood by those reflecting on the biblical materials, especially in the Anselmian tradition, as infinite in the sense of being the superlative or maximal Being who possesses the sum of all perfections, moral and metaphysical, to the highest degree logically possible. In Anselm's famous words from the *Proslogion*, God is a being "greater than which cannot be conceived."<sup>14</sup>

When Anselm is explaining the concept "greater than which cannot be conceived" he doesn't directly refer to God's infinity, although he uses the word elsewhere when he speaks of being "overwhelmed by [God's] infinity" and by the "largeness of the [divine] light."<sup>15</sup> In these cases he is certainly speaking of a being "greater than which cannot be conceived," that is, the greatest

---

<sup>14</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. II in Saint Anselm: *Basic Writings*, translated by S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1966), 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. XVI, 22.

possible being, a being Anselm believes must exist given the very concept of God. How does Anselm, then, combine the notion of infinity and what can be called maximal greatness? Although Anselm doesn't specifically articulate this relationship, his reflections suggest a likely and credible construal. For God to be the greatest conceivable or possible being God must be adverbially infinite in all the dimensions discussed above. If a being was anything less than infinitely good, powerful, or knowledgeable, we could easily conceive of a being of greater power; that is, one who possessed adverbial infinity in every possible dimension. But then the former being would be metaphysically and theologically disadvantaged with respect to the latter and could not be considered the greatest conceivable being. This *reductio ad absurdum* argument eliminates anything less than the possession of adverbial infinity in every divine aspect.

Therefore, for Anselm (and other classical theists) God's infinity means that: God knows all truths (it is inconceivable to know more); is able to perform any logically possible action (it is inconceivable to be stronger); is dependent on no other being for his existence or continuation or execution of his plans (it is inconceivable to be more independent); is everywhere present (it is inconceivable to be more available or able to act at any given point at any given time); and is totally and supremely good (it is inconceivable to be morally superior). I will be assuming that the

Anselmian tradition is fundamentally correct in its conception of God as the greatest possible being.<sup>16</sup>

### **Divine Actions as Expressions of Adverbial Infinity**

To illustrate these maximal properties or attributes, the Scriptures give accounts of God acting in extraordinary ways. God reveals through his prophets and apostles what is normally unknowable by mere humans (expressing omniscience); he performs actions impossible for humans such as parting the Red Sea to insure his people's release from unjust bondage (expressing omnipotence and perfect goodness). I say that these actions "express" (rather than "demonstrate") omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness because in these kinds of examples the accounts of divine action underdetermine the attributes in question. But this is only to be expected. Neither omniscience nor omnipotence can be infallibly inferred from any finite set of observations because omniscience means unlimited knowledge and omnipotence means unlimited power. A mere human could never observe everything an unlimited God might do (to establish omnipotence) or discover everything that an unlimited God might know (to establish omniscience). Human

---

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the employment of Anselm's maximality categories doesn't demand that the ontological argument itself succeeds (although I think it does, in both of its formulations).

finitude in the face of unlimited knowledge or power eliminates this outright. Nor does the account of God delivering his people from Egypt or any other account in Israel's history prove that God is perfectly good. But these scriptural accounts are understood by the writers as examples of the actions of an almighty God. Because God achieves what no other being could achieve and because God declares himself to be Almighty, the biblical writers present God as the "Almighty" and interpret his great deeds as actions performed by omnipotence. For this reason they do not present God's actions as those of a very powerful being who falls something short of being all-powerful.

The biblical reports are logically compatible with God's adverbial infinity because an omnipotent or infinitely powerful God should be expected to be able to divide vast bodies of water, among other things. However, the reports fail to prove God's adverbial infinity. Similarly, the confession that God created the world and is therefore "almighty" provides a vivid sense of divine power as the universe-maker, but does not prove the point philosophically. The biblical writers assume that God created all things and understand this to be an indication of his unlimited power. They do not argue that God's creation of the world proves omnipotence.

The biblical idea of unlimited power is illustrated or indicated in an account from Genesis. God appears to a ninety-nine year old Abraham and declares, "I am God Almighty; walk before

me and be blameless. I will confirm by covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your number" (Gen. 17:1-2). God declares, as it were, his infinite power by calling himself "God Almighty," but this power is to be expressed through making the aged Abraham the father of many nations and his wife Sarah a new mother at the age of ninety. After Sarah laughs at the idea of conceiving in her dotage, God rhetorically inquires, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" The event illustrates just what it means for God to be almighty: two senior citizens will be miraculously enlisted to propagate (literally) God's purposes.

The faithful hear the declaration that God is almighty and then witness what they are told to take as an expression of almightiness. The assertion by God that he is almighty becomes their interpretive principle for viewing and understanding the following abnormal or extraordinary events. The believers are not inferring that God is almighty from these mighty acts because all that could be inferred would be that God possessed the power requisite for these acts. An almighty power which exceeds the power needed for these events would not have been demonstrated.

These observations show, I think, that an infinite God need not be understood as having no intelligible or coherent relation to finite beings. Biblically understood, God, the infinite being, reveals himself as one who transcends the powers of finite humans, and this revelation expresses (even if it does not prove) God's infinity. The

examples of divine action given above show that one can speak meaningfully about God's infinity through references to God's actions in the world as they are explained in Scripture. Nothing in what has been said commits one to admit the truth of these biblical accounts. They are enlisted to clarify the theological notion of divine infinity. The issue of truth surfaces later in the chapter when we address the matter of theistic proofs.

Yet if, as Pascal claims, an infinite God bears no logical relation to finite humans, we have not a clue how to describe God at all. No divine predicates are appropriate if God is infinitely beyond our comprehension. Or we might just as easily say that any predicate is as good as any other (except for the predicate "finite"). As mentioned earlier, if this is the case it is difficult to make sense out of even believing in God. We need some intelligible description in order to understand precisely what it is we are believing. Pascal's fascination with the mathematically infinite with respect to an infinite number seems here to imply an impermeable epistemic barrier between humans and God--and one that he, as a Christian philosopher, ought not labor to build.

If God's nature is in principle unknowable by reason, then no proof for God's existence is possible, simply because we can never know what we are trying to prove in the first place, let alone whether the proof is successful. An argument with no intelligible conclusion is no argument. The argument could never begin, just as

Alice in Wonderland could never successfully hunt the wild snark because she was never told what to look for (besides the fact that it was called a "snark").

### **Divine Infinity and the Exclusion of Attributes**

The orthodox predicates of God also exclude attributes not fitting a superlative being. This exclusionary function is, in fact, a requirement of intelligible assertion. Coherent statements need to pick their referents out of the crowd and so exclude nonreferents. If I say that Babe Ruth was primarily a great homerun hitter, this excludes him from being predominantly a singles hitter like Pete Rose. In the case of God, being omniscient (infinitely knowledgeable) excludes ignorance; being omnipotent (infinitely powerful) excludes impotence; being omnipresent (infinitely available to act at any given place—an entailment of omnipotence) excludes being out of touch with any aspect of creation; being omnibenevolent (infinitely good) excludes evil. The adverbial use of infinity eliminates attributes which contradict the adjectives they modify.

God's adverbial infinity cannot be understood as the possession of all possible attributes, but rather the possession of all the attributes of divinity as stipulated in the biblical accounts and as articulated in orthodox theology. This distances the Judeo-Christian

view from that of Spinoza who affirmed a pantheistic deity who possessed an infinite number of attributes, of which only two are knowable: thought and extension.<sup>17</sup> This is antithetical to the biblical view that God has a determinate character which excludes certain attributes such as spatial extension.

God's adverbial infinity, as traditionally conceived, need not entail an infinite epistemic chasm between God and humanity if infinity is understood as the possession of divine moral and metaphysical attributes that are expressed and explained through the biblical accounts. God should not be understood as being a part of the creation or as being ignorant, weak, or immoral—all adjectives of deficiency. Any being possessing any of these attributes is not God, however exalted it may be in other respects.

In this sense, God's infinity (adverbially conceived) has its "limits." But here the word "limits" really means demarcation or definition, not deficiency or diminution in any respect. That God is personal as opposed to being impersonal is not a limitation; rather, being personal simply excludes being impersonal. God's attributes circumscribe or delineate what is meant by "God." (To say that Michael Jordan never played three bad basketball games in a row is not a limitation; it is rather a specification of athletic excellence.)

---

<sup>17</sup> See Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), 31.

While surpassing human knowledge in many ways, the God of revelation is presented as having a determinate and describable character.

### **First- and Second-Order Assertions about God**

Perhaps we can better understand intelligible statements about an infinite being by invoking the idea of first-order and second-order assertions. I can make a number of intelligible first-order assertions about the constitution and functions of a commercial jet aircraft. I know the number of engines mounted on a Boeing 747, that the pilot sometimes uses the automatic pilot, and that the loud sound before landing is the landing gear being engaged. Nevertheless, I know little about the actual workings of a jet aircraft. About these mysteries I can assert "I know there are four engines" (first-order), but I don't know how they work (second-order); I know when the landing gear is engaged (first-order), but I don't know how it works (second-order); etc. The second-order assertions exhibit my ignorance, but in the context of my knowledge. In other words, although I acknowledge the limitations of my understanding of a jet aircraft, I do nothing to thereby abdicate all claims to having any understanding of a jet aircraft.

Second-order assertions may also be understood as excluding certain things. My (second-order) assertion of ignorance about

certain aspects of X, Y, and Z does not mean that concerning those aspects I believe anything is possible. Some statements are excluded. I know that the engine of a 747 works, although I do not know how; but I do know that the engine is not run by a team of pygmies on treadmills. That is ruled out. With respect to God, I can understand what it means for God to be noncontingent and omniscient without knowing how this could be (besides knowing that only a divine being has these attributes); and I can understand that God's noncontingency rules out all ontological dependence on any other beings. I also understand that omniscience rules out all ignorance of any sort.

A theist can say that revelation discloses certain attributes of God which are intelligible (because expressed in the scriptural accounts), but that God still remains incomprehensible in many ways to a finite mind. I can't know precisely what I don't comprehend about God, but I can know that there are some things I don't comprehend. By being partial, my knowledge can encompass mysteries. The Old and New Testaments affirm that God is a personal agent who is like a father, a warrior, a shepherd, a friend, a counselor, etc. If we want to understand what it means for God to be like a father, we can refer to passages that speak of his care and provision for Israel and refer to his actions which exemplify this. If we want to understand what God's adverbial infinity or supremacy means to the biblical writers we can examine the conceptual

framework in which God expresses what is understood to be his unmatched (or infinite) attributes. The theological meaning of God as infinite is found in the biblical treatment, not in Pascal's very suspect mathematical analogy.<sup>18</sup>

### **Inconceivable and Conceivable Infinity**

We can summarize the intelligibility of the divine infinity by comparing two somewhat similar, but crucially different, statements about God's transcendence. Pascal is eager to defend God's transcendence to the degree that proofs are impossible: they cannot reach their object because of its exalted state as infinite.<sup>19</sup>

Metaphysically, he seems to be saying:

M: God is completely dissimilar to anything finite because he is infinite.

This metaphysical affirmation certainly does defend the radical transcendence of God, but at the expense of meaningful predication about God--since we are left only with utterly inadequate finite

---

<sup>18</sup> The above discussion was prompted in part by Ninian Smart, *The Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970), 51f.

<sup>19</sup> The general impetus for the following distinctions between metaphysics and epistemology in relation to God comes from Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 19-21; although I have adapted it for my purposes.

concepts. Given his understanding of infinity the following epistemological statement would follow:

E: God is infinitely beyond our rational comprehension.

We can call this position inconceivable infinity. When it is endorsed, we can grant that such a being could neither be proved nor even believed in, as we argued above.

But another way of defending transcendence entails no such expense in meaningful predication. As opposed to M, consider this metaphysical statement:

M-1: God is not completely similar to anything finite because he is adverbially infinite in the ways specified in Scripture.

This affirmation preserves the transcendence of God because it maintains that God is distinct from any finite creation. From this affirmation the following epistemological statement is entailed which differs significantly from E:

E-1: God, who is adverbially infinite, is not beyond our rational comprehension, although certain divine attributes are beyond our imagination.

E-1 follows because, as argued above, God's adverbial infinity is intelligible through the biblical accounts. Furthermore, the concept of adverbial infinity with respect to divine power or divine

knowledge is not incomprehensible, even though finite knowers could never imagine or picture such powers. This is why: While I can easily visualize a triangle, square or pentagon, I cannot visualize a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure). Nevertheless, I can form a perfectly intelligible concept of a chiliagon because I understand what it means for a figure to have sides and I understand what is meant by a thousand. If I want to visualize to aid my understanding I can simply multiply the four sides of a square that I can visualize by 250 (or by some similar procedure combining visualization and multiplication). The same procedure holds true with respect to infinite power. I cannot picture omnipotence but I do know what power is and can picture actions performed by exercising power--say, the muscle power used by a man raking leaves. I can then multiply the notion of power by infinity in order to comprehend (but not imagine) omnipotence. The same kind of methodology is available for conceptualizing omniscience by applying the concept of infinity to knowledge. It can be argued that one cannot picture or visualize anything without limit because the imagination always frames or limits its pictures; but this hardly rules out the coherent and intelligible concept of infinite knowledge or power.

We can call the position so far outlined conceivable infinity. Isaiah speaks of God's transcendence in ways compatible with E-1: "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One" (Isa. 40:25). Nothing in creation is God's equal; nothing

created is infinitely good, wise, or powerful. Yet this statement also preserves the possibility of finding some similarities between God and creation. It is also assumed that we can conceptualize God as unique. Earlier in Isaiah chapter forty-five this is affirmed of the unequaled one: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isa. 45:11). Since something is known of finite goodness, wisdom, and power (as with a strong and caring shepherd) which serves as a basis of comparison with the infinite God. We then take those known qualities and multiply them, as it were, by infinity in order to comprehend the concept of God's adverbial infinity.

Therefore, Pascal is not warranted in precluding theistic proofs because the theological and biblical understanding of divine infinity as articulated above--which, we have argued, he himself as a Christian ought to have faithfully represented--is a good deal more precise and comprehensible than his mathematical presentation would have it. On this basis, then, we can successfully reinterpret divine infinity such that premise 1 of Pascal's argument is understood as not contaminating the idea of divine infinitude as unintelligible (premise 2) and therefore incapable of proof (premise 3 and conclusion 4). If we can speak intelligibly about the character of God, a proof for God's existence is not thereby ruled out on the basis that we must remain ignorant of what we have set out to prove. If we can have some understanding of what an infinite being might

be like, and what actions would express that being at work, this eliminates one significant refutation of the possibility of theistic proofs (although other challenges are possible). This is not to sweep aside the many challenges to the coherence of religious language, but it is to show that the notion of God's infinity, when suitably qualified, need not arrest the kind of meaningful predication which itself is a prerequisite for the possibility of proving God's existence.