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PLAYING FOR SAFETY

BY PROFESSOR J. B. BURY, Litt.D., LL.D.

I ONCE heard a Rationalist, old in unbelief and of courageous temper, say, half in earnest: "Suppose we were to wake up and find it was all true—the Christian scheme of the universe." It is not fanciful to surmise that some unbelievers are occasionally haunted by this disconcerting thought of the bare possibility of its all being true after all. If it did turn out to be true, we should, of course, look extremely foolish. And we should also be ruined. Our mistake would be irretrievable, and I am afraid there would be little comfort in feeling that we had conscientiously followed our lights.

When we say in this connection "the Christian scheme of the universe," we mean the full-flavoured orthodox theology—not any modern decoction of low gravity; we mean the theology of which hell is one of the foundation-stones. Take away hell, and the central doctrine of Redemption loses all its meaning. And if hell existed, it would be the most important fact in the world. There is nothing to be said in favour of hell, except perhaps that it inspired the imagination of Dante; but if you firmly believe in its existence there is everything to be said for insisting upon it. I was recently reading Mr. Brendon's novel, *The Bonfire*. The author deprecates the emphasis laid on eternal punishment in the Jesuit school, of which he gives such a vivid description. But, from the point of view of convinced Catholics, the Jesuits were surely right. Father Furniss may be blamed for laying on lurid colours somewhat too lavishly in his notorious book. But we may be indulgent to the zest of one who knows his Hell thoroughly, and surely he was erring on the right side. Were hell a doom that could be escaped by none, it might be well to veil it so that the brief period of earthly life might not be overshadowed by the certainty of a crowning horror; but, if there are means of escape, it is difficult to maintain that the danger can be emphasized too strongly or at too early an age.

It is probable that this simple but ingenious doctrine has made many pause and hesitate when they were making up their minds to renounce a faith which their reason frankly discredited, and has caused to others who had definitely renounced it some quiverings of uncertainty in haunted hours. They might tell themselves: "There is no evidence in favour of the Christian scheme, and there are objections to it which appear to our intellect to be insuperable. Yet, while it is in the highest degree improbable, how can we prove that it is absolutely impossible? And if a bare possibility of its truth exists, might it not be as unwise to reject it, or rather unwise, than it would be for a man to risk his life on a bet though the chance of his losing were only one against the highest number we choose to name?"

This is the notorious argument which occurs in the *Pensées* of Pascal, who warned infidels that if there is any chance, however small, that Christianity is true, it is plain common sense to accept it. Grant the existence of the Christian God to be ever so improbable, yet it is well worth while to hypnotize the intellect and exercise the will to believe; for should it turn out, as they expect, not to be true, they will not be a penny the worse for having accepted it; whereas, if it should turn out to be true and they have rejected it, their destiny will be deplorable. Nor will it do to remain neutral; Agnosticism is equivalent to Atheism. It would be desperately foolish to run any risk on the ground that the reasonable rule of life is to follow what is probable rather than what is barely possible. In this particular case probability is not the safest guide.

Hard words have been used about this argument. It has been said that, even if there were something in it, it is morally contemptible, and only a coward would act on it. This criticism seems to me to be unreasonable. For hell is a proposition in the face of which our moral standard ceases to be relevant. What I mean is this. Men who have gone to the stake or endured terrifying tortures, men who have defied powerful tyrants, we praise as heroic and wonderful, whether we agree with their principles or not. We admire their courage if they have sacrificed themselves to benefit others directly or for the sake of an idea which they are convinced will improve or enlighten the world; or even if their motive was to purchase their own eternal happiness by bearing temporary pain. But they must have acted from some motive of this kind; they

must have chosen to suffer for the sake of gaining something very valuable either for themselves or for others; otherwise we should not admire their fortitude. The emotion aroused in us by a man who should allow himself to be killed or tortured for the sake of an idea which he knows cannot possibly be realized would not be admiration. "To defy power that seems omnipotent" is splendid, but only because you feel that there is some chance that there is a weak point in the "omnipotence" which your defiance may pierce. To defy power that you know is omnipotent would be as much the act of a fool as to hurl yourself from a tower in order to defy the tyrannical law of gravitation.

And so if you say "I choose to run the risk of going to hell rather than save myself from that risk by sacrificing my intellect," or if you say "Better the risk of hell than the risk of enjoying happiness as a gift from a Being who could create and administer such an institution," it sounds heroic and wonderful; but, on the Christian hypothesis that the Being who condemns you is completely and invincibly almighty and has no weak joints in the armour of his omnipotence, your *beau geste* has no object; it could effect nothing whatever. It could not abolish hell, it could not mitigate the sufferings of others. It would be of no value, and therefore it would not be admirable or praiseworthy. And it is sheer nonsense to say that the choice of never-ending torment, for the sake of benefiting nobody, would not, after the first momentary exaltation of having been sublimely loyal to a principle, be regretted eternally with gnashing of teeth.

We may then dismiss the criticism that Pascal's argument is morally base, because if we were up against hell our moral standards would not apply. If we go on to examine its logical value,* the first question is, Can it be shown that there is a chance, capable of being expressed as a finite ratio, that hell exists, and may be avoided by embracing the Christian faith? An infinitesimal chance will not do, for $\frac{1}{\text{an infinite number}}$ is equivalent to zero. Two lines of argument might be employed to establish the existence of a definite chance.

It may be contended that, if any proposition in an obscure field of inquiry is accepted by some persons of superior

* I remember reading a good many years ago a paper of the late Mr. Benn on Pascal's wager, but I have forgotten how he dealt with it, and it is not accessible to me as I write.

intelligence who have examined the subject, it cannot be set down as incredible, however decisively it may be rejected by a larger number of persons of equal intelligence; and therefore it may possibly be true. And the chance of its being true might be estimated if we had the necessary statistical data. For instance, let the highest brain capacity possessed by any human being be represented by 100, and suppose that there are a million people, with a brain power lying, say, between 90 and 100, who have carefully and impartially weighed all the difficulties raised by Christian theology. In this million it can hardly be questioned that there will be some who honestly accept that theology. The ratio of their number to a million may be taken as representing the chance that Christianity is true. The statistical data are of course inaccessible. But it is not necessary for the present purpose to evaluate the chance; it is sufficient to show that there is a definite chance, which, if we had certain data, might be evaluated.

Whatever be said of the major premiss of the argument, the minor premiss is extremely doubtful. For it is not certain or probable that any of those who have accepted the orthodox Christian creed had tested the evidence with the same unbiassed coolness as they would test a scientific hypothesis like the atomic theory, or a historical problem like the date of Sargon of Akkad. It is, on the contrary, probable that they have all been unconsciously prejudiced by the associations of childhood and the atmosphere in which they have lived and other irrelevancies. A simple consideration will show this. It may confidently be said that if Christianity had not been "revealed" till the nineteenth century the men of superior intelligence who now accept it would look upon it as so incredible that they would hardly think it worth their while to refute it. It is therefore impossible to establish a chance on the lines of the foregoing argument, because it would be impossible to be sure that there is a single case in which the proposition in question is accepted on its merits without the influence of sub-conscious prejudice.

It may be questioned, too, whether the major premiss is defensible. For to argue that a proposition is credible because it has been accepted by a certain class of persons is perhaps only a particular form of the discredited argument that a proposition is probable because it has been asserted or

endorsed by eminent authorities—your father, or your pedagogue, or Plato, or Newton, or St. Augustine. But the question would require a special discussion, and need only be noted here.

Another line of reasoning to establish the existence of a definite chance may appear more promising. If, in what follows, the calculation is formulated with a certain air of precision, this is merely for the sake of clearness. Say that possible theories of the universe fall under one or other of the four general classes—monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, and atheistic.* We might then say that the chance of monotheism being true is one in four.

Given an omnipotent personal God, responsible for the order and character of the universe,† we know one thing at least about him: we know that he has made a world full of suffering and injustice. We are entitled to infer that he is capable of making a worse place than the terrestrial world. And, as there is no reason for assigning any particular limit to the badness of the places which he is capable of making, there is no reason for supposing that he is incapable of making hell. It is therefore credible that hell may be part of his scheme; and in any enumeration of the possible destinies of man hell must be included.

These possibilities might be arranged in three general classes; (1) annihilation; (2) immortality; (3) limited forms of immortality, a life or series of lives, but not lasting for ever. In the second class we might arrange the possibilities in five general classes, two of which assume the existence of hell and three its non-existence: (1) Hell for some and heaven for others; (2) hell for all; (3) heaven for all; (4) a life or series of lives with vicissitudes and varieties of pain and pleasure similar to those of the present life, however differing in degree; (5) a life or series of lives, educative or purgatorial,

* Some might prefer to make the number of capital classes larger. Polytheism, for instance, may be held in very different forms, as a syndicate of harmoniously co-operating deities, or as a world in which there are hostile factions, with opposite interests and working for different purposes. It may be said that the former type of polytheism is more allied to monotheism than it is to the second type, and therefore that the two types should be considered distinct capital classes. Again, some of the sub-divisions of pantheism might claim to be regarded as capital classes. But this would not affect the point of the argument; it would only diminish the chance of monotheism being true.

† This is probably what is generally meant by monotheism, omnipotence being the power to do anything that does not violate the law of contradiction and consequently has a meaning.

with ultimate happiness for all. Probably these possibilities might be increased; but the point is that they can be enumerated. To fix our ideas, we will suppose that they are five.

We should then have the chance of hell for some and heaven for others (on the monotheistic hypothesis)* = $\frac{1}{5}$. For the chance that monotheism is a true theory, being $\frac{1}{5}$, the chance that perpetual immortality is part of the scheme of the universe is $\frac{1}{5} \times \frac{1}{5} = \frac{1}{25}$, and the chance of any one of the five forms of immortality is $\frac{1}{5} \times \frac{1}{5} = \frac{1}{25}$.

It remains to consider the possible principles on which the award of heaven and hell might be made. The criterion might be a man's conduct, or his religion, or his energy, or something else, or various combinations of such qualifications. His conduct might be judged by many standards, and, if religion is the decisive criterion, there are many religions to take into account as well as Christianity. Or our fates might be determined by a lottery, or by pure caprice. There are evidently a great many possibilities, but probably they could be arranged in classes that are not infinite in number, and of which one would be belief in Christianity. Suppose this number is n . Then the chance of our going to hell if we reject Christianity will be $\frac{1}{5n}$.

Suppose that such a calculation of chances were correct, would it justify Pascal's contention that the safe course is to accept Christianity? I am afraid not. It would certainly prove that if you do not accept Christianity there is a definite chance that you may some day find yourself writhing in hell. But it would also prove something else. It would prove that if you do accept Christianity there is equally a definite chance that you may be condemned to eternal torment just because you have accepted it. For one of the n possibilities is that Rationalism will be the ticket to secure entrance into heaven. This chance cancels Pascal's chance. The same argument which aims at proving to an Agnostic that the only safe thing is to be a Christian can be used to prove to a Christian that the only safe thing is to be an Agnostic. What it really proves is that playing for safety is useless, because the only way of being safe would consist in holding a number of

* Clearly the five forms of immortality considered are also consistent with the hypothesis of polytheism, so that the chance of any one of them being true, on any theory of the universe, would be $\frac{1}{5}$.

mutually exclusive beliefs at the same time. Pascal's fallacy lay in the assumption that, if you accept Christianity and it should turn out not to be true, there is no chance that you will be worse off than if you had rejected it. Whereas a chance that you will go to hell because you are a Christian may be just as considerable as the chance that you will go to hell because you are an infidel. He excluded from his view the possibility of the existence of a God actuated by totally different motives and principles from those which are ascribed to the Christian God, and therefore his argument is vitiated at the start.

If it is said that this kind of reasoning is unreal and even trifling, the criticism is probably just. It is unreal and trifling because such a proposition as Pascal's is unreal and trifling; and the appeal of his argument to those who think there may be something in it can only be met by showing that when it is fully developed it annihilates itself.

There is nothing for it but to trust the light of our reason. Its candle power may be low, but it is the only light we have.