

Grace and Gambling

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The paper up-dates for contemporary American times the sort of theological analysis Pascal offered 17th century France: an account of gambling in theological terms. The paper will first discuss the general features of Pascal's project on the assumption that something like it could be extended to contemporary America. At its most general, Pascal's project meant putting grace and gambling together in a single field of discourse: they are both viewed, in short, as games of chance. A bit more specifically, the analysis that results from reading the two together is double pronged: Underlying the attraction of gambling as a diversion, Pascal thought, one finds the sort of fundamental problems of human life that grace must address; if grace is to address them, it must be unpacked in much the same terms, as itself a kind of gamble, though a quite peculiar one--for example, one with highly unusual stakes and no real risks. It is in this way that theology enters into the cultural fray over what to make of gambling—without moralistic objection, with respect, that is, for the human impulses and needs that fund gambling, but at the same time so as to offer a radically unexpected, bizarrely off-kilter alternative to them.

With greater attention than Pascal to the historically specific character of the problems and tensions of human life, I'll try to develop both sympathetically and critically the meaning of gambling as a common pursuit in contemporary America. Gambling, I'll suggest (utilizing historical analyses like those of Jackson Lears) is a form of 'deep play' (as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz would put it), an apparent diversion, interest in which reveals the tensions of American life around matters of greatest concern—in this case money (rather than social status or reputation as in the Balinese case of cock fighting that Geertz studied): how it is gained and lost, and its significance for so much else. A critical perspective on gambling therefore brings with it not a criticism of individuals who gamble but of the society in which they live, a society they in great part appropriately gauge.

I'll then discuss grace in the same general terms, bringing out the unusual features of it as a kind of gamble. (Because of the differences in historical context, among other things, my account here will diverge rather markedly from the one given by Pascal, who will remain, however, a dialogue partner.) The gift of grace is like gambling because, for example, it too holds out hope of something for nothing--an enormous payout in exchange for the moral equivalent of a mere quarter in a slot machine—in ways that diverge from ordinary social norms of compensatory reward for effort expended. (These are not the features of ordinary gambling that Pascal was interested in; they are the ones the American context I think particularly plays up.) The gamble

suggest, pace Pascal and with greater appreciation for the goods of everyday life, that grace is without risk because here, rather than giving up the goods of ordinary life, one only receives them (along with every other good) more abundantly. (2) Contrary to both Pascal, who was a believer in double predestination (God's favor is only valuable if some people don't receive it), and what happens in ordinary gambling, grace is a gamble without losers. Here if some people gain, everyone else in principle should gain too; mutual benefit is thought to be the logical implication of what it means here to get something for nothing. And so on.

Finally, I hope to develop the critique of modern American society implicit in this odd spin on gambling given by grace, by looking at similar criticisms of gambling and American life at the turn of the last century, particularly among members of the Social Gospel movement.