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Essay One Rewrite

Action and Uncertainty in Pascal's Wager and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Pascal and Hamlet both struggle with the question of how to act under circumstances of constant uncertainty. Hamlet deeply desires conviction *before* he acts, while Pascal argues that our actions will lead to belief. And, since we can never be absolutely certain, only the highest in a set of probabilities should dictate our actions. Though they try to weigh finite probabilities against the infinite, both Hamlet and Pascal recognize that the human condition limits our ability to know the infinite consequences of our actions and choices. To understand these probabilities, Pascal reasons through rigid, calculable steps. His process contrasts sharply with Shakespeare's representation of temperamental human logic in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's distorted reasoning highlights our mortal tendency to fixate on even the smallest risks in the shadow of vast gain. As Shakespeare writes, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all¹" (3.1.83).

Hamlet's cowardice and self-analysis constantly cause him to falter, leading to indecision, inaction, and uncertainty – the pervasive themes in *Hamlet*. The play is littered with conflicts that arise out of the indeterminable nature of motivation, consequence, and the afterlife. When Hamlet meets the ghost of his father, he is incensed by the account of the murder and determined to exact revenge. However, doubt gradually settles on him. How can he be certain of the ghost's origin? How can anyone know the truth in a crime with no witnesses? Hamlet must satisfy his need for greater certainty before taking action:

... The spirit that I have seen

May be a devil, and the devil hath power

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this... (2.2.533-542).

To humans, ghosts are an inherently uncertain state of being. No mortal can offer tenable evidence of a spiritual limbo or universally understand that reality. But the ghost assumes Hamlet's trust and calls for action in an already uncertain situation, adding another layer of obscurity. Hamlet recognizes the risks in acting impulsively on the unsustainable testimony of a dubious being, and so he invents a more objective way to test Claudius' conscience. Hamlet has the players act out a scene similar to the murder of King Hamlet, and gauges his uncle's reaction.

Hamlet's plan, however, creates a new dimension of uncertainty. Can Hamlet really know the guilt of his uncle's or any man's conscience by reading his behavior? After all, Hamlet himself spends most of the play pretending to be genuinely insane when he's not, and in the first act indicates there is more to a man than how he seems: "...These indeed seem/For they are actions that a man might play,/But I have that within which passes show-" (1.2.83-85). Hamlet shows that he views action and sincerity as two separate elements that only truly come together if one has the sincerity *first*. Pascal, on the other hand, claims that the only way to become faithful is to act as a believer first and let belief follow. Pascal would have argued, "So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs...but on diminishing your passions."² (Pascal 155). In releasing expectations and following the way of those who do believe wholeheartedly, the natural effect will be faith even in the ones who thought they were incapable of

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

true belief. Regardless of the strength or weakness of one's conviction, acting with confidence (even if insincere at first) creates a stronger, genuine belief. Uncertainty, according to Pascal, can be overcome through action and outward show.

Conversely, Hamlet is immobilized by uncertainty. Unlike Pascal, Hamlet needs to believe in his choice of action before he can perform it. He is thoughtful to the point of obsession, and constantly puts off action for the sake of having a more solid reason to do it. Hamlet recognizes his own hesitancy, and often berates himself for not being as passionate and resolved as the actor is in relation to the fictional Hecuba, or as Fortinbras' soldier is over an inconsequential piece of land. All the while that he, Hamlet, has the strongest reason to act – his father's wrongful death and his mother's disgraceful marriage – all he does is complain:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A stallion! Fie upon't, foh! About, my brains. (2.2.521-6).

Hamlet is ashamed that he replaces action with angry words. He curses himself, thinking he lacks the passion that should move him, considering the sins against his family. Actually, he lacks rational proof. Though Hamlet has what seem like compelling reasons to attack his uncle, he is still uncertain of those reasons, and the consequences of his actions could be severe. If he had a firmer basis to believe the ghost's accusations, he could act without delay. Claudius' response to the play gives Hamlet exactly the motivation he needs.

Seeing Claudius' outrage at the murder scene, Hamlet tells Horatio, "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?" (3.2.281-2). The ghost's once dubious story becomes a good bet in light of Claudius' angry reaction. At a thousand pounds, the truth of the murder is likely enough that Hamlet is willing to take action. Pascal would have appreciated Hamlet treating complicated possibilities as finite, calculable probability. On the most complicated topic, God's very existence, Pascal managed to simplify it thus: "God is, or is not... There is an infinite chaos separating us. At the far end of this infinite distance a game is being played and the coin will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?" (Pascal 153). Pascal had a mathematician's unique ability to make a convoluted problem seem elementary through straightforward logic. Hamlet uses similar, though less mathematically articulate logic to consider his own question, "To be, or not to be..." (3.1.56).

During his most famous speech, Hamlet seriously contemplates suicide. He views killing himself as the active path, as opposed to passively allowing himself to live, and therefore suffer. It seems clear at first that the best choice is to stop the pain, anguish, and despair of his life. But again, uncertainty trumps all his logic:

... Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than to fly to others that we know not of? (3.1.76-82).

Here, Hamlet weighs the unknown possibility of infinite suffering in death to be a greater trial than the finite suffering he knows in life. This argument reverses Pascal's consideration of finite pleasure versus infinite salvation in his wager on God's existence. For Hamlet, introspection and uncertainty cause *inaction*, *not* taking his own life.

In contrast, Pascal's conclusion is to act confidently, after examining the risks of uncertainty:

I tell you that you will win thereby in this life, and that at every step you take along this path, you will see so much certainty of winning and so negligible a risk, that you will realize in the end that you have wagered on something certain and infinite, for which you have paid nothing (Pascal 156).

For Pascal, rationality comes in the form of systematic, logical steps. Mathematical processes can be applied to any conflict, as he shows in his wager on God's existence. It is reasonable, he suggests, to choose from among the conclusions of one's analysis whatever action leads to the most favorable (or *least unfavorable*) outcome. He reasons that there is always some certain risk for uncertain gain, but even the possibility of infinite gain *always* outweighs finite risk: "And thus, as you are forced to gamble, you have to have discarded reason if you cling on to your life, rather than risk it for the infinite prize which is just as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness" (Pascal 154-155). Life is a small unit, while salvation is infinity. Pascal explains that just as any small unit compared to infinity is effectively nothing, what you might lose when compared to the infinity you could gain is effectively nothing. Pascal's rationality is as exact and rigid as mathematics.

On the other hand, Shakespeare shows that rationality is as unpredictable and irresolute as a man's temper, especially Hamlet's. Shakespeare mimics Pascal's argument of action before

belief in the sincerity and passion of the actor and the soldier, while Hamlet – who is constantly searching for belief first – fails. Pascal and Shakespeare seem to agree on a most basic level that reason is reached through logical argument. But where Pascal’s steps are structured and mathematical, Shakespeare presents Hamlet’s mental logic as much more convoluted – the result of a logic cluttered with human emotions and impulses. Hamlet’s soliloquies throughout the play are disclosures of his logic. He decides the play is a rational way to discover Claudius’ guilt, and then that it is rational to believe the ghost; he concludes that not taking his life is a rational way to avoid infinite suffering, and that as much as he stalls, he has rational motivation to kill his uncle. For example, the steps in his reasoning when he first tries to kill his uncle are quite clear:

Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying,
And now I’ll do’t. And so a goes to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.

Why, this is [hire and salary] no revenge (3.3.73-79).

Hamlet sums the courage to attack his uncle, but finds him in prayer. It was generally considered that if a man died in the middle of his prayers, he went straight to heaven. Hamlet pauses to consider the inequality here. After all, Claudius murdered his father “...grossly, full of bread,/ With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May” (3.3.80-81). King Hamlet died morally unprepared, without penance, and with his (many) sins still weighing on his soul. Infact because of Claudius, the late King may never have salvation. Hamlet concludes it would be very

unjust indeed to avenge his father's wrongful death by sending the murderer straight to blissful eternity. Instead, Hamlet vows to wait until his uncle is passed out drunk, or in a rage, or with the queen in their incestuous bed – effectively anytime when Claudius is sure to go straight to hell. And so Hamlet's protracted decision-making process leads him to his usual conclusion – hesitate.

Pascal, on the other hand, is able to take advantage of a mathematician's clarity that the melancholy Hamlet is repeatedly unable to attain. Through concise, explicit connections, Pascal comes to a definite conclusion based on infinite gain with negligible risk. Hamlet showcases the part of the human condition that causes us to focus so intensely on the negligible risk instead of the possibility of infinite gain. The slightest uncertainty causes great distress, and he stumbles on indecision. Most interestingly, after all his analysis and logic, only on an impulse in the most extreme circumstances at the very end of his life is Hamlet able to avenge his father's murder – to finally perform one certain act.