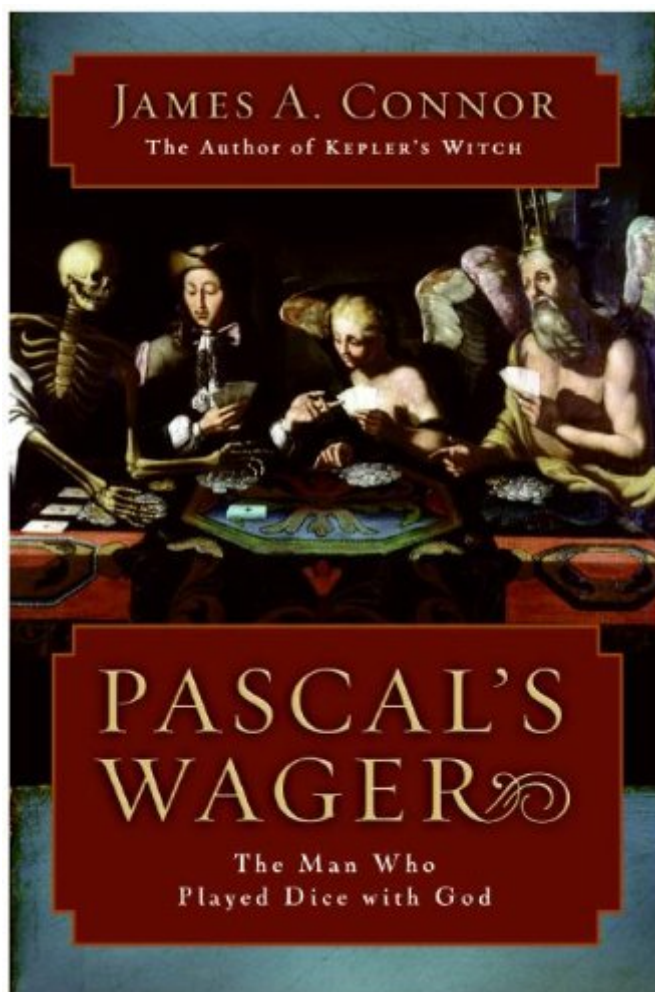


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Pascal's Wager: The Man Who Played Dice With God



Synopsis

In a major biography of Blaise Pascal, James Connor explores both the intellectual giant whose theory of probability paved the way for modernity and the devout religious mystic who dared apply probability to faith.

Book Information

File Size: 641 KB

Print Length: 240 pages

Publisher: HarperOne; annotated edition edition (October 21, 2009)

Publication Date: November 10, 2009

Sold by: Amazon HarperCollins Publishers

Language: English

ASIN: B002TS780Q

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #74,480 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #17

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > France #45

in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > France #120 in Books > History > Europe > France

Customer Reviews

“The medieval universe was fading away, and the old divine certainties were losing ground. The scientists and philosophers of France were busy casting about for something new to bet their souls on, a new ground of order, a new way to make the universe spin properly, and for most of them, that something was mathematics. Connor provides more than a biography of Pascal. This is more a biography of the French world that influenced Pascal and his intellectual impact in return. Excellent presentation of the new fascination with mathematics. . . “Everyone in France used it; it was the latest, hottest thing. Those in the inner circles of thought passed around treatises on geometry like junk novels at the beach, while merchants sought new ways to turn their business dealings into numbers. Even the philosophers

and theologians turned to mathematics for insight. The great French gardens were finger exercises in geometry; the vast, ostentatious hÃ¢tels of the high aristocracy were designed and built according to mathematical principles. Metaphysics, before and after Descartes, was gradually becoming a creature of mathematical logic. The pinnacle of reality was the pinnacle of order, and mathematics was the measure of that order.

How influence religion? "In their deepest hearts, French intellectuals thought that God was the ultimate mathematician, and now Pascal's own son had proved himself to be an adept at reading God's mind, a mathematical prodigy, a child who was born to geometry just as Mozart, 150 years in the future, would be born to music.

(614) Pascal is among the top mathematicians of all time. Yet. . . "He was neither a neurotic nor a saint. A faithful Catholic, he spent his adult life deeply involved with a heretical group that caused no end of trouble and that in fact so weakened the church through constant nattering argument that it was nearly powerless in the face of the French Revolution. As a scientist, he argued ferociously against the Aristotelian orthodoxy of his day, and many historians would hold that his arguments laid the foundation for some of the most important concepts of empirical science. So, how do we reconcile the scientist and the mystic? I don't think we can, and that is what makes Pascal so interesting.

(329) Well. . . maybe. . . more than just interesting. . . fascinating!

Time Lines

Introduction: The Man Who Played Dice with God 1625: The Witch 1626 1631: A Dangerous World 1631 1635: A Thinking Reed 1635: Blaise Among the Geometers 1585 1642: Un BÃ¢tard Magnifique 1631 1638: Madame Saintot's Salon The 1640s: Le Libertin 1638: Charming the Cardinal 1639 1640: Conic Sections 1642: The Arithmetic Machine 1638: The Jansenists 1614 1646: The Void 1646: Pascal Breaks His Hip January and February 1647: The Showman 1647 1652: Jacqueline's Vocation September 19, 1648: The Great Experiment 1647: A Skirmish with the Devil 1608: Port-Royal and the Clan Arnauld 1643: The Great Arnauld 1643, 1648 1653: The Fronde of the Parlement 1648 1654: Adrift in the World 1652: The Feud 1653 1654: The Gambler's Ruin 1654: Letters to Fermat 1654: The Night of Fire 1656: So Jolly a Penitent 1655 1661: The Jesuit Menace 1656 1657: The Jesuit Menace, Part 2 1656: The Miracle of the Holy Thorn 1658 1662: Pascal's Wager

1660:Port-Royal Agonistes 1658:May God Never Abandon Me Epilogue: Oracles, Dicing, and Schrödinger's Cat Conner includes numerous details that add flavor, even humor. For instance, "They would drink wine, not coffee (for coffee was a Calvinist drink, a Huguenot drink for the rising bourgeoisie, promoted by the Protestants as a way to awaken humanity from its Catholic alcoholic stupor to a new world of activity and industry). Really? Coffee religion? Conner does not shy away from the intellectual/religious debate that dominated Pascal's later years. What is well done is Conner's effort to present both sides. Hits the problem right on. "Change was everywhere. Doubt was everywhere. And in times of such uncertainty, some people fling off their clothes and run around proclaiming wild new beliefs and wild new freedoms, while others wall themselves into the fortresses of their beliefs and hunker down. These were the two types who were gathering their forces all across France, first in the Jansenist debate over free will, and then later in the bourgeois revolution that swept aside all their society." (751) Conner contrasts the Jesuits as supporters of free-will (Catholic) and Jansenist belief in predestination (Calvinism). This is a notoriously difficult concept. Conner does a fair job, even if he is more sympathetic to the Catholic side.

This is the best biography of Pascal on the market. Blaise Pascal was a deeply conflicted man who seemed almost constantly to be at war with himself. James Connor does a good job of giving the reader both sides of this conflict. On the one hand, Pascal was a mathematical prodigy with a brilliant and curious mind about the world. Connor does a fine job of explaining his work on probability, his experiments on the existence of the vacuum, and his invention of what is basically the first computing machine, the "Pascaline." On the other hand, Pascal desperately needed the security and comfort of the severe form of Catholicism called Jansenism which told him that his worldly interests were prideful and a block to salvation. Everyone has conflicts to some extent but Pascal's ran to the root of who he was. When he was enjoying his mental and creative work in math and science, part of him was telling him he was deeply wrong in pursuing the work. When he was observing his strictly Jansenist life style, his active mind would not let him rest. While Pascal's contradictions are well-known to history, Connor fleshes out both sides of the man and the theme of self-conflict is a common thread throughout the book. My only problem with the book is the tendency for Connor at times to overdramatize events. For example, when Blaise's sister Jacqueline left for Port Royal, the Jansenist convent, Connor says, "The next morning, Jacqueline stood in the corridor

of the Pascal home, waiting for the carriage to be brought around to take her to the convent. Gilberte (her sister) saw her and turned away, unable to say good-bye for fear of weeping." The author begins another chapter by saying, "By this time, Port Royal had begun to smell like a cult." For me this and similar passages in which Connor gives a clear dramatic "angle" to events took away from the power of the events themselves. Pascal's life was filled with inner tension and drama and Connor does a fine job spelling that out. The story did not need the dramatic flourishes which tend to put the author too much in the picture. The book also has no index which would be invaluable for researching a man with such different facets to his life. Despite my misgivings, I recommend the book. For anyone who knows only the general outline of Pascal's achievements and struggles, this biography will provide invaluable new information for understanding one of the most brilliant but tormented people in the history of science.

I was so impressed with this book, it is so well written - really lovely language besides showing the subject important. It is a very good book for getting some feel for the period of science in its infancy, a successful infancy in this case. I also recommend George H. Daniels American Science in the Age of Jackson for his comments on the writing of science histories. Genius is not predictable and does not come out of a natural progression of scientific knowledge. So many other factors influence a person, let alone a society, to either embrace or obstruct the advancement of knowledge. It takes a certain amount of luck, providence, connections and charm, too, never hurts. I also recommend the novel The Cry and the Covenant by Morton Thompson about the obstruction of the simple idea of sepsis, for the case of an unlucky example.

I knew about "Pascal's wager" before reading this book: the calculated risk of believing in God---or not believing. What I hadn't known was that this arose from Pascal's experiences with gambling, science, and God. He wrestled to bring math and God together in a lucid way, and yet he embraced Jansenism (a Calvinistic branch of Catholicism that ultimately was condemned as heretical). He was sick and in pain much of the time, and yet he loved life. I can't imagine a more qualified author for "Pascal's Wager". Connor is a former Jesuit priest who also holds degrees in science, philosophy, and literature. I highly recommend this book.

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