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PLAYING POKER WITH PASCAL:  
THEOLOGY IN THE AMERICAN CASINO

Saturday night ... Memories of this night are extremely hazy. All I have, for guide-pages, is a pocketful of keno cards and cocktail napkins, all covered with scribbled notes. Here is one: "Get the Ford man, demand a Bronco for race-observation purposes ... photos? ... Lacerda / call ... why not a helicopter? ... Get on the phone, *lean* on the fuckers ... heavy yelling."

Another says: "Sign on Paradise Boulevard—'Stopless and Topless' ... bush-league sex compared to L.A.; pasties here—total naked public humping in L.A. ... Las Vegas is a society of armed masturbators / gambling is the kicker here / sex is extra / weird trip for high rollers ... house whores for winners, hand jobs for the bad luck crowd."<sup>1</sup>

**T**HIS IS A STORY OF BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS, of desert places, and, particularly, the games we play in such places where beginnings are indeterminate and endings are more profound than the final word on the page or the last breath on the lips. Such a story's "ending" can only ever be but its beginning, one whose beginning is, as so much of classic modern literature has taught us, rooted in the necessity of its ending. Like a roulette wheel, we are spinning again and again and again, around and around and around: "There's nothing between you and the wheel. There never was. There never will be"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Strange Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ventura, "Las Vegas: The Odds on Anything" in *Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing About America's Most Fabulous City*, ed. by Mike Tronnes (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 194.

## 1. The Secret of Pascal

Though dead at the age of thirty-nine,<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal would probably agree that his ending was before even his birth, some time closer to a familiar “In the beginning.” Consumed as he was by a tragic vision of the human condition that owed much to his Calvinistic sympathies, Pascal plumbed the depths of Adam’s Fall. That is to say, he sought to explore the primordial mark, the inescapable stain, of sin, the trace of that which is felt both within and without. “This religion,” he insists, “consists in believing that man has fallen from a state of glory and communion with God into a state of gloom, penitence and estrangement from God.”<sup>4</sup>

“This religion” is a bind, not unlike the binding together of Pascal’s notoriously scattered *pensées*.<sup>5</sup> Though he had classified many of his fragmented thoughts into twenty-eight *liasses*, nearly a third of them remained displaced after he died because he had cut up with scissors various sections of the text, in hopes of categorizing them accordingly at a later date. This is an issue to which we shall return later, but for now it is important simply to note the notorious problems the reality (materiality) of his text has caused in the formation of an “authoritative” edition of *Pensées* that attempts, but always fails, to fuse a beginning to an ending (§47).

What if, however, the fusion, or subsuming, is between/of depth and height, flesh and spirit, humanity and God? Such is the question of contemporary postmodern theology, which follows a path well worn by the likes of medieval Christian mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius, post-Kantian philosophers like Georg Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard, as well as the suspicious, often shifty, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. And yet, perhaps like most well trodden paths, there is also another way, a secret detour.

To trace the logic of the secret, however, is tricky and not a little frustrating,

<sup>3</sup> Pascal (1623-1662), like Friedrich Nietzsche, experienced physical pain for most of his adult life. He had always been in delicate health as a child, suffering from migraine and dyspepsia, and from the age of eighteen onwards he never spent a day without pain, quite possibly suffering from motor neuropathy. See the discussion of Pascal’s physical ailments in Donald Adamson, *Blaise Pascal: Mathematician, Physicist, and Thinker About God* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, rev. ed., ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1996), §281. All quotations from *Pensées* are from A. J. Krailsheimer’s Penguin translation (1996), and are cited by the appropriate fragment number. The numbering in Krailsheimer’s translation follows that of Louis Lafuma’s edition (Paris: Éditions du Luxembourg, 1952). For other numbering systems see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées sur la Religion: Et sur Quelques Autres Sujets*, 3rd ed., ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Delmans, 1960); *Pensées*, trans. John Warrington, Everyman 874 (London: Dent, 1960); and *Pensées*, 3 vols., ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Hachette, 1904).

riddled, as it were, with questions we cannot, but nevertheless must, attempt to answer: namely, how does a secret stay a secret? Or, more precisely, how might one tell a secret in such a way that it remains secret? A secret does not remain one as such if it is untold; and yet, in the words of the deconstructionists, this same condition of its own possibility, the telling of the secret, undermines its secrecy. If secret agents like Mark C. Taylor and Jacques Derrida are to be believed, all of this leaves us confounded and confused, profoundly so, by a secret that cannot, and yet must, be told, a saying that unsays all saying by rendering all spaces empty and all words hollow.<sup>6</sup> However, when we dare tread the path Pascal blazes for us here, this haunted hollowing may not be too different from a hesitated hallowing. Should we follow?

“Shhhhhhh...” whispers our most moody of Frenchman. His is a desert detour whose path is one of shifting sand, a non-path; a surface that, like the secret, never completely *is* or *is not*. This nomadic path, often windswept and void, leads nowhere in particular, which is certainly not to say *to* nowhere in particular or definite. The undecideability of the path does not soften the ethical bind it places on and around its traveler, for although he empathizes with our perplexed, peripatetic exasperation, Pascal pains to insist that it is our only, indeed our inevitable, choice. Perhaps to our shock, our path is neither well worn nor secret.<sup>7</sup> We, in fact, find ourselves passing, as though it somehow emerged from nothing at all, from the desert floor perhaps, along a path of light and excess, darkness and emptiness. Looking around, we find we are not alone, simply anonymous -- on this path of millions of tourists, young and old going nowhere, and the fastest growing population in the United States. Did we take a wrong turn? Perhaps. Like it or not, today we tread the trespass of the Strip: Las Vegas, Nevada.

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<sup>5</sup> For more, Sarah E. Melzer, *Discourses of the Fall: A Study of Pascal's Pensées* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 128-135.

<sup>6</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42; see also Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 168. Derrida, taking his cue from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, has been particularly interested in secrecy in his more recent essays. For important examples, see “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, trans. Ken Friden, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 73-142, and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> A sentiment echoed by another Frenchman, some three centuries later: “There is no secret as such; I deny it. And this is what I confide to whomever allies himself to me” (Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking,’ 95).

## 2. A Desert(ed) Path

The modern phenomenon of Las Vegas has been long coming. There may have even been a “Vegas vibe,” as Michael Ventura describes it, out in the desert drawing the Spanish Conquistadors four hundred years previous:

They were *sure* that somewhere to the north and west across the great deserts, would be a city of gold and light, incredible riches, eternal youth, exquisite pleasures---an intoxicating city of riches and dreams. Expedition after expedition failed to find it, yet they were sure. They just *felt* it out there. Many of them staked everything on their certainty that a city very like Las Vegas already existed. And they would never know how right they were---right that there was such a city, right that it lay in the great western desert. They were just wrong about when. The place itself was generating Vegas-vibe, and they felt it and were called by it; but the place would need 400 more years to generate an actual Las Vegas (Ventura, 181).

And generate it has; notwithstanding the complaints by some that doing so has been nothing short of degenerate. Exploding from 4,500 settlers in 1945 to a city of over one and a half million people in the 2002, Las Vegas’s growth does not appear to be slowing. In fact, its population has doubled in less than ten years, with nearly 70,000 people arriving each year throughout the 1990s, and a net gain of more than 100,000 in 2000 alone.<sup>8</sup> During this same time, the city has also overtaken Disney World as America’s most popular tourist destination. This desert Nowhere has seemingly taken hold of Everywhere. When thirty percent of Americans in 1995 were said to have visited, many sanctimonious souls, beside themselves with shock and dismay, could gasp, “Well, not me.” In 1999, when Las Vegas hosted more visitors than Mecca, they likely could be found, with dice and Long Island Iced Tea, two thousand dollars down on the floor of the MGM Grand. All roads, it seems, lead to the desert: “Las Vegas is the terminus of western history, the end of the trail. As an overpowering cultural artefact ... the brightest star in the neon firmament of postmodernism.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 237. The growth of Las Vegas since 1945 has been one of the most remarkable stories of post-war America. Its population of 8,000 in 1940 grew, by 1970, to 270,000, and then to more than 740,000 by 1990. If the city continues to grow as it did during the 1990s, and most forecasters believe it will, the city is expected to double once again over the next decade, adding another million residents in just a few years (cf., Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America* [New York: Vintage, 2001], 7). For a good assessment of the city’s growth, the politico-cultural environment in which it emerged, and its effects see Eugene Moehring, “Growth, Services, and the Political Economy of Gambling in Las Vegas, 1970-2000,” in *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas*, eds. Hal K. Rothman and Mike Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 73-98.

<sup>9</sup> Hal Rothman, *Reopening the American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 54. This sentiment is in line with Mark C. Taylor’s boldly over-determined assertion that “you cannot

Though it was not entirely his vision, Bugsy Siegel can be credited for finally unearthing the desert gold that had been sought by the American desert's European explorers. The Los Angeles representative of the Chicago mob, Siegel was the first to realize the true drawing power of a desert gambling oasis. He was not the first person to open a casino in Vegas, nor to introduce the city to vice, but Siegel certainly was the first to wed Hollywood glitz with gambling. He opened his casino, the Flamingo, on Christmas day in 1946. When the federal government began its crackdown on illegal gambling in California soon thereafter, the rest of Siegel's mob "family" was quick to latch onto his vision of Vegas, where it would reign supreme until the late-1960s.<sup>10</sup>

In 1960, with Las Vegas's reputation already preceding it, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover deployed dozens of agents to Vegas combat the growing corruption.<sup>11</sup> This heightened hostility to the mob, however, brought an unanticipated problem to city officials, who recognized and appreciated the boon of the casinos' gambling revenue: who would be willing to buy and run the casinos? The answer came in 1966, in the form of a fifty-one-year old billionaire named Howard Hughes, who, with his own mob of Mormon advisors, took over the entire ninth floor of luxury penthouses at the Desert Inn. Having recently sold the airline TWA for a half-billion dollars, Hughes had decided to relocate to Vegas in order to be, as one of his advisors later recounted, "a big fish in a small pond" (Earley, 62). His food, as it turned out, was casinos and hotels.

A few weeks after Hughes's arrival, upon being told by the hotel's management that he must either gamble or leave, he bought the Desert Inn for \$13.2 million. In rapid succession he then purchased the formerly mob-controlled Sands (\$14.6 million) and the Frontier (\$14 million) casinos, financed the construction of the Landmark Hotel (\$17 million), and, for good measure, scooped up several other small casinos along and just off Las Vegas Boulevard. His appetite whetted, Hughes also purchased a television station, another airline, one hundred residential lots at the Desert Inn Country Club, and thousands of acres of undeveloped desert land -- twenty thousand acres of which Hughes received from the U.S. government, in exchange for a guided missile base (Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 20). Understandably, the Nevada state government was increasingly

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understand America today unless you understand Las Vegas." In fact, much of what follows in this paper springs from Taylor's conclusion, "and if you cannot understand America, you cannot comprehend contemporary culture and the future it opens and/or closes" ("Betting on Vegas," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 229).

<sup>10</sup> For many older residents today, the mob-rule of Vegas had its advantages: "We had two police forces in those days. The regular cops and the boys. The boys were a lot more effective" (Rothman, *Neon Metropolis*, 139).

uneasy about Hughes's burgeoning, unbalanced statewide influence,<sup>12</sup> going so far, in fact, as to bluff that they might charge him with violating antitrust laws when he made a bid for the mob-backed Stardust casino.

Nevertheless, after spending more than \$300 million, Hughes left in 1969 as quietly as he had arrived three years earlier. His lasting influence was not merely financial,<sup>13</sup> but symbolic of the shift of power in Vegas from the mob families to the corporate investors. The shift has literally changed the city's terrain, with the latter now invoking the memory of Bugsy Siegel and looking to Hollywood to make gambling more attractive to a broader spectrum of people than might ordinarily gamble. To this day, over thirty years after Howard Hughes left, his version of the "Vegas vibe" is not only felt, it has been embodied.

Beginning with the opening of Steve Wynn's Mirage hotel-casino in 1989, followed one year later by the Excalibur, the four-mile-long Strip now has seventeen of the twenty largest hotels in the world. A *faux* Manhattan skyline adorns the entrance of the New York, New York hotel-casino. Opened in 1997, its "skyline" consists of twelve New York skyscrapers approximately one-third the size of the originals, as well as the Brooklyn Bridge and a 150-foot-tall Statue of Liberty. Across the street is the MGM Grand (1993). With 5,005 guest rooms, a 171,500-square-foot casino, a fifteen-store shopping mall, a one-mile long monorail, ninety-three elevators, a 15,000-seat boxing arena, a 1,700-seat theater, and a 33-acre amusement park, all built within a 112-acre compound, it is the largest resort in the world. One-mile north is the \$2.1 billion Bellagio (1998). With its massive thirty-by-seventy foot chandelier hanging in the front lobby, an art gallery filled with \$350 million worth of masterpiece art by Picasso, Mirós, Rubens, Warhol, Degas, Monet, and Van Gogh, amongst others, and an 8.5-acre man-made lake containing the 1,400 hidden fountains that accompany the crowd-stopping water, light, and music show every fifteen minutes, the Bellagio upped the ante even further. Surpassing even the Bellagio, in the cost of construction if not in overall luxury, is the Venetian (1999), complete with canals, gondola rides and fake rainstorms. With painstaking detail, the Venetian has sought to recreate many features of the city of Venice such as St. Mark's Square, Campanile Tower, Doge's Palace, the Grand Canal and the Rialto Bridge. Of course, in the midst of this historical, yet delightfully kitschy detail the shopping has not been neglected: this being America, the Venetian also houses its own 500,000 square-foot shopping center.

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<sup>11</sup> There had been none just three years earlier (Pete Earley, *Super Casino: Inside the "New" Las Vegas* [New York: Bantam, 2000], 55).

<sup>12</sup> A whopping 17 percent of the state's tax revenue was coming from his casinos alone (Earley, 64).

<sup>13</sup> The Landmark, his only original construction, actually lost \$2 million in its first year of business.

### 3. A Semiological Striptease

What I want to suggest here is that it should not surprise us that Pascal, our tour guide, out of place and time though he may seem, is well acquainted with the desert and this desert town. He tells us that since the Fall, God has become *Deus absconditus* -- "men are in darkness and remote from God" because "he has hidden himself from their understanding" (§427). Upon this, Pascal is left moaning a new hymn of the desert(ed), filling each silent step with his loud, abrasive voice: "I survey the whole universe ... and man left to himself with no light." He can but count his being cast into an infinite (Dionysian) void, from which he cannot either be a part (and remain *himself*) or be finally released, as nothing but loss, and is thus at last "moved to terror" (§198) -- he has been swallowed by the sea and engulfed as a "facet of the infinite."<sup>14</sup> This, appropriately, brings us back to Las Vegas.

The Vegas Strip, if nothing else, takes the form of a necessary avoidance or diversion. Now that there is

no safety, no security, no sense that the future will be worth waiting for--Vegas seems more and more safe. In a U.S. of A. that now stands for United States of Anything, the way Vegas does Anything is comparatively well-ordered. Not like the Anything at home, unadmitted and repressed and ricocheting off the headlines, from the TV, out of your kids' eyes, and out of the way you hate your job but have to say you love your life or you're not a good American. No, now you can come to Vegas to get away from all that. Here the sex, the danger and stealing and phoniness and chintz are completely up front, not repressed at all. You don't have to wonder about them or be afraid they'll ambush you. You can pick and choose among them. Vegas is the shopping mall of Anything. The American Way to Play (Ventura, 194).

None of Vegas's sights, shows, or sounds are real, and yet none necessarily fake either. One's attention, however, is forever being diverted from the gravity of this dilemma by the necessarily frivolous act of betting. You don't bet money here, but rather the colored chips of this kingdom's currency.<sup>15</sup> "When a gambler

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie Armour, *"Infini Rien": Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 9. Cf., "When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity that comes before and after ... the small space I occupy which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this time and place allotted to me?" (§68)

<sup>15</sup> A \$1 chip is white (a "penny"); \$5 is red (a "nickel"); \$25 is green (a "quarter"); and \$100 is black. \$500 and \$1000 chips are different colors in different casinos.

arranges a line of credit with a casino, he takes the money in chips. You tip with them, pay for meals and drink and sex with them. ... The better adjusted to them you become, *the further reality recedes*."<sup>16</sup> The hypnotic intoxication induced by each casino's apparent sameness, each game's repetition, and each free drink only further emphasizes the rampant dematerialization already at work. "Money means nothing," an anonymous high-stakes gambler explains. "If you really cared about it, you wouldn't be able to sit down at a poker table and bluff off fifty thousand dollars. If I thought what that could buy me, I could not be a good player. Money is just the yardstick by which you measure" (Alvarez, 77). Counterintuitive though it may be, money is not what is at stake in Vegas. The *act* of the wager is all that matters.

Pascal, too, is a betting man – maybe even a high roller – afflicted by the ambivalent poles of his own doubt and desire. He cannot help but question whether winning is even possible. Consider, for instance, his infamous Wager, in which, by virtue of simply being in the world, he contends that one must bet one's life on whether there is or is not a god. If you bet on God and believe, there are two possible outcomes: God exists, and you enjoy eternal bliss; or, alternatively, God does not exist, and, upon death, you lose "only" the biological actuality of life-consciousness. If you bet against God and disbelieve, there are also two possible outcomes: either God does not exist, which means you win very little, save for the notion of being right (though you cannot consciously celebrate the vindication), or God does exist and you suffer the horrifically damning consequences of your disbelief. Interestingly, the ethical and philosophical pitfalls and praises of this argument have followed a similarly circuitous path to the one that Pascal describes and enacts throughout the *Pensées*.

It is at this very point that Pascal has been most misunderstood. Philosophers such as Ian Hacking<sup>17</sup> and Stephen D. Schwarz,<sup>18</sup> themselves merely representative of the conventional reading of the Wager fragment, find Pascal arguing for what he has undergone great pains to avoid: the legitimacy of proofs, specifically probability theory. In seeking to defend, amend, or debunk Pascal's Wager, these readers of Pascal seem to miss that there are very good reasons *not* to take the wager at face value.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Laurent Thirouin argues that the mathematical (probability) aspects of the "Wager Fragment" actually illustrate their invalidity

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<sup>16</sup> A. Alvarez, "The Biggest Game in Town," in *Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing About America's Most Fabulous City*, ed. Mike Tronnes (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 79 (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Hacking, "The Logic of Pascal's Wager," in *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager*, ed. Jeff Jordan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 21-29.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen D. Schwarz, "Faith, Doubt and Pascal's Wager," *Center Journal* (Summer 1984): 29-58.

<sup>19</sup> Holyer, 433.

in religious persuasion, and this is not surprising considering the *Pensées* as a whole. They are, he insists, “the proof that proofs have no worth.”<sup>20</sup>

With regard to the Wager, the most important aspect to note is that the notion of winning is a seemingly moot point. As he gloomily glances at his cards, Pascal can, in fact, be heard muttering: “If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, being indivisible and without limits, *he bears no relation to us*” (§418; cf. §135, 199, 272, 420, 500, 682). Because he is as sly as he is, it is easy to miss the fact that Pascal begins his wager – that of the text, as well as (apparently) that of his own faith – with very little hope of coming out on top. As he tosses his black chips onto the green felt table, oblivious of nothing, we ought not miss the vague, unpunctuated sigh that prefaces his Wager: “Infinity nothing” (*infini rien*). For Pascal, humanity’s fallen finitude creates a necessarily infinite distance between it and God. This renders God completely unintelligible to a humanity wrecked by its own utter wretchedness (§114).<sup>21</sup>

Neither should we fail to notice here the contingency of God’s otherness. Pascal, it would seem, has led us to a casino, God’s casino, where the house rises and falls on a bet. “You must wager,” he insists. As he guides us through the door he holds open, the regulars at the slot machines nod in ambivalent recognition. This place seems rather familiar, as though we have always already been here. “There is no choice,” we hear in a whisper, “you are already committed” (§418). The necessity rests, of course, on God’s *wager* – which simultaneously denotes his game, which we must certainly play, and His own act of betting. Here, the house, God himself, has always already laid down its ante. That is to say, in the economy triggered by the Fall (from Elysian, Absolute Freedom) that plagues Pascal, God has wagered His self-knowledge; which is not too far from saying God has always already wagered Himself.<sup>22</sup> (*This particular wager, we will see, can only be performed in the liminal possibility of both.*) High-limit gambling at

<sup>20</sup> Laurent Thirouin, *Le Hasard et les règles: Le Modèle du jeu dans la pensée de Pascal* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991), 181.

<sup>21</sup> Pascal offers a half-hearted consolation to this woeful state: “Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched. ... [I]t is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched” (§114).

<sup>22</sup> As Mark C. Taylor has helpfully noted, economic exchange itself has always been sacrificial in some sense, with temples often serving as mints and public treasuries. Paper money, for example, was first used in China in a sacrificial ritual in which participants offered pieces of paper adorned with images of the gods to deities, spirits, or dead ancestors. Etymologically, the parallels are also striking: the German designation for money, *geld*, implies sacrifice; the Greek *drachma* often signified a handful of sacrificial meat; the Latin root of “pecuniary,” *pecunia*, is a derivative of *pecus*, or cattle. Moreover, in ancient Rome, it was not uncommon for pieces of sacrificial bull’s flesh to serve as a legal tender (roast). Not soon thereafter, coins were minted with the imprint of the sacred animal to replace the use of flesh. See Taylor, *About Religion*, 150-51; cf. Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990): 91.

this casino would appear to know no limit.

With this uncanny ante, following Slavoj Žižek's sense of simulation and Virtual Reality, reality has become illusion and illusion reality. "Virtual reality doesn't imitate reality," he explains, "it *simulates* it by way of generating its semblance." He continues:

In other words, imitation imitates a preexisting real-life model, whereas simulation generates the semblance of a nonexisting reality – it simulates something that doesn't exist. ... In contrast to imitation, which sustains belief in preexisting 'organic' reality, simulation retroactively 'denaturalizes' reality itself by way of disclosing the mechanism responsible for its generation. In other words, the 'ontological wager' of simulation is that there is no ultimate difference between nature and its artificial reproduction."<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, high rollers admit that the higher the stakes, the more fractured their sense of what is real:

When I play poker for hundreds of thousands of dollars a day what do I care if a Popsicle costs ten cents here and twelve cents there? Big-limits poker is a separate world, and makes it hard to relate to other aspects of what's going on. Hundred-dollar bills in Vegas are like one-dollar-bills anywhere else. I don't even carry dollar bills except to tip the cocktail waitresses, and I can't remember the last time I had coins in my pockets (Alvarez, 77).

Such is the beauty and horror, the grotesque, of gambling in Vegas. In his seminal volume *Learning From Las Vegas* (1977; 1998), Robert Ventura demonstrates how the city's architecture exemplifies the subsuming of reality and illusion: Vegas as an empty playfulness along the ever-shifting desert sands; but this is, in fact, just as apparent in Vegas's gambling economy. The casino is a place of magic, or at least of trickery, typified in many respects by its very currency. "The guy who invented gambling was bright," it has been suggested, "but the guy who invented the chip was a genius" (Alvarez, 79). Trite, cheap wisdom, it may be, it is borne out strikingly in the ever-increasing number of people who would never normally consider betting a fifty-dollar-bill but who do not think twice about laying down two green chips.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Abyss of Freedom," Introduction to *The Ages of the World*, by F. W. J. von Schelling (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> Gamblers in the United States lose nearly \$16 billion a year in America's casinos, making it six times more lucrative a business than all spectator sports, films, and all other forms of mass entertainment combined. Some \$6 billion a year is lost gambling in Las Vegas alone. Add that to the \$6 billion paid by tourists for accommodations, meals, and entertainment, and its casinos collect around \$27 billion per annum – \$11 billion more than had been lost by gamblers ten years earlier. On a global scale, by 2000, global legalized gambling was estimated to total \$1 trillion.

In the casino, things are not as they appear, and it is this apparent duplicity that troubles Pascal the most: "I look around in every direction and all I see is darkness" (§429). The problematic consequence of this is that even a grounded, all-too-obvious statement like "things here are not as they appear" necessarily folds in upon and betrays itself. It is in this sense that God's wager has rendered reason incapable of apprehending transcendent truth. And yet, for the very same reason, neither can doubt be absolute.<sup>25</sup> There is, in fact, "no rule ... to which there is no exception, nor any truth so general that it does not present some defective aspect" (§574).

The upshot of this is, for Pascal, that defection and deception are natural parasites of human discourse. As a result, he cannot help but to dwell continually upon the negative impact of the Fall on/of human language and, thus, in human knowledge of self and other, subject and object.<sup>26</sup> That is to say, just as Adam sought to usurp the supposed centrality of God, language has effectively taken "itself as its own center, thus widening the gap between itself and thought."<sup>27</sup> The naked truth, one might say, has become nothing but a (Strip)tease.

#### 4. High Stakes at God's Casino

This play of differences is something of a game, a card game even.<sup>28</sup> Shuffled and reshuffled, each hand is intertwined. Fifty-two cards, four of each kind, but also two *jokers* – two cards. The joker is "neither king nor jack," but rather a "floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 93). Maybe even a drunk joker: "Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is, what his identity -- if he has one -- might be, what his name is, what his father's name is. He repeats the same thing every time he is questioned on the street corner" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 144). A drunk, nomadic joker: "Uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country, this almost insignificant signifier is at everyone's disposal" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 144). What else

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<sup>25</sup> "[W]henever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally from us. Nothing stands still for us" (§199).

<sup>26</sup> Pascal would undoubtedly agree with Nicholas Hammond: "Language belongs to man in his fallen state and can only operate within the context of his corruption" (*Playing With Truth: Language and the Human Condition in Pascal's Pensées* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 19-20).

<sup>27</sup> Melzer, 27. Cf., "everything tends toward itself. ... The bias towards self is the beginning of all disorder" (§421).

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is a "game of differences" See Louis Marin, *La Critique du discours: Sur "Logique de Port-Royal" et les "Pensées" de Pascal* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), 379.

should one expect to find in the desert, especially in Las Vegas, where, if you look long enough, Nietzsche, too, can be found fingering the rim of his gin and thinking aloud while bluffing off a pair of twos? “Are we not erring,” he wonders, with a wink at Pascal across the table, “as through an *infinite nothing*” [*unendliches Nichts*].<sup>29</sup>

The fundamental weakness of reason, then, is its vain, recurring conviction that one’s perspective promises truth. “Nothing,” however, shows “the truth, everything deceives” (§45). The only response available is that of any addict, be it to gambling, or alcohol, or truth: admit you have a problem. Pascal is well on his way to a twelve-step program when he confesses, “Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that” (§188).

In this case deception lies not simply in the words, for “different arrangements of words make different meanings, and different arrangements of meanings produce different effects” (§784). Because the body is “as much automation as mind” (§821), Pascal feels imprisoned within the semiological codes – themselves products of chance or custom considered natural and necessary – that condition normative discourse.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the most effective Christian proof, he concludes, is that of habit.<sup>31</sup> In the closing lines of his Wager, Pascal admonishes the unbeliever who wishes to believe to undertake a religious lifestyle, in order that she might then cultivate a religious perspective. In so doing, the unbeliever acknowledges the inherent epistemological deception that is the human condition – i.e., in the “finding” of that which she seeks. As such, Pascal’s Wager is an illustration of the decision – that is, the bet – one must make between an atextual (mystical) faith that transcends or exceeds, or maybe overwhelms, language and a perspective of gross uncertainty (bordering on a blanket denial)

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 159.

<sup>30</sup> My argument here follows a similar trajectory to that of Sarah Melzer’s regarding “Pascal’s discourse on the body” (cf., *Discourses of the Fall*, 57-74). Cf., “The habit of seeing kings in the company of guards, drums, officers, and all the things that prompt automatic responses of respect and fear has the result that, when kings are sometimes alone and unaccompanied, their bare features are enough to strike respect and fear into their subjects, because we make no mental distinction between their persons and the retinue with which they are normally seen to be associated. And the world, which does not know that this association is the effect of habit, believes it to derive from some natural force” (§25).

<sup>31</sup> E.g., “If we dreamed the same thing every night, it would affect us as much as the objects we see every day. And if an artisan was sure of dreaming for twelve hours every night that he was a king, I believe he would be almost as happy as a king who dreamed for twelve hours every night that he was an artisan. ... But because dreams are all different, and there is variety even within each one, what we see in them affects us much less than what we see when we are awake, because of the continuity. This, however, is not so continuous and even that it does not change too” (§803). Pascal’s concern for habituation (coutume) for belief is outlined in Robert Hoyler, “Pascal on Belief and the Religious Life,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35.5 (October 1982): 431-45.

that any transcendent truth or God exists to experience in any such way. In other words, the Wager is an illustration of how one chooses to live in light of the human condition. True to the play of the game Pascal seems to resist being pinned to one decision over the other. The uncertainty of this decision renders his telling silence, driven by a holy desire for the secret, one of deathly exhaustion.

### 5. Wagering Death

A wager as such cannot be one-sided. To play at a casino table, the gambler must "call" the house's ante, possibly even increasing the original bet if she is so inclined. The ante, however, has always already been on the table; it is, after all, what initiates the game. If knowledge of God (or God Himself) is the ante, what else can humanity bet but (knowledge of) itself as well? Unlike other casinos, though, there is no choice *not* to play. Humanity's call of God's originary/primordial ante is as through a mirror: it, too, is always already in play. Just as Bugsy Siegel's personal vision of Vegas ended in a flurry of machine gun bullets riddling his body while he read his morning newspaper, or as a concealed case of syphilis silently killed Howard Hughes from within, Pascal is (dis)embodied by the same wager that has made him so famous. He has, in a sense, become the French Pasc(h)al,<sup>32</sup> devoured by textuality, translation, and commentary. For Freud, the latter represent a "distortion [*Enstellung*] of a text [that] is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in the doing away with the traces [*Spuren*]." <sup>33</sup> If the Wager is indeed an illustration of how one chooses to live in light of the human condition, it remains an incomplete illustration without the (impossible) depiction of one's own death. Vegas's body count did not end with the mob. With humanity wandering aimlessly, like a nomad through the Nietzschean "cemetery of perception,"<sup>34</sup> Pascal's Wager, to put it provocatively, is the gamble of how to live one's life in the cemetery (or, in

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche seems to agree: "So searchingly do these writings of the Jewish Pascal [i.e., Paul] lay bare the origins of Christianity ['a little Jewish sect, the founder of which dies on the Cross'], just as the French Pascal let us see its destiny and show how it will ultimately perish" (The Dawn of the Day, trans. J. M. Kennedy, vol. 9 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Oscar Levy [New York: Macmillan, 1911], 61).

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism, trans. Katherine Jones, The International Psycho-Analytic Library 33 (London: Hogarth, and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1951), 70. Are the deconstructionists right after all? Are my own hands, too, bloodstained as I type these words, having participated in the slaughter of yet another author, while I (my-Self) have already been slain by you, the reader? What are the ethics of this killing spree, wherein we are all authors and readers, murdered murderers?

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Falsity in the Ultramoral Sense," trans. Maximilian Mügge, vol. 2 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 187.

the case of Vegas, the desert) of God and Self.

To stretch the metaphor further, the sacrifice of (the) Pasc(h)al evokes a communal meal in which one necessarily eats the body and drinks the blood of multiple voices, perspectives and surfaces – i.e., “I have used old words” (§696) – the exact elements Pascal professes to have written down “as they come and in a perhaps not aimless confusion.” Of the *Pensées*, he insists: “This is the true order and it will always show my aim by its very disorder” (§532). In so doing, he argues, the chaotic nature of his subject is highlighted and the mechanical and conventional nature of discourse demonstrated, by explicitly going against discursive convention. Pascal hopes that his subversion will, accordingly, ignite his reader’s desire *for a faith* that, seeing the vanity and blindness of language, transcends it; although, he hastens to add once again that this is by no means an assurance that there is anything to which one might transcend. If Pascal is to be believed, the uncertainty of the latter always renders the former, desire, necessarily endless. Like the game that knows no beginning, desire must know no end (§639).

## 6. The Difference Between Playing and Being Played

What, then, is there to lose? As early as there has been gambling as sport, and there is good reason to believe that the earliest forms of dice date back as early as 6000 to 3500 BCE, there has been cheating. In fact, there is nothing in this very same archaeological evidence to prevent us from suggesting that prehistoric cheaters did not invent gambling simply for fun and games but rather as a deceptive means of getting something from someone. Some of the earliest types of primitive dice found in Egyptian, Oriental, and prehistoric North and South American tombs and graves are, after all, *crooked dice*.<sup>35</sup> Somehow, without understanding the laws of physics or probability, these gamblers had learned the fine art of the “edge.” In this case, they had learned that shaving a die on one side limits the blind chance involved in each roll’s result. A visit to a casino today suggests that things have not changed very much. An important thing to remember when you’re at Vegas, or any casino for that matter is that the house always has the advantage, no matter the game. Pete Earley explains the situation: “Players depend on luck. Casinos depend on math. That is why casinos always

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Sifakis, *Encyclopedia of Gambling* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), vii.

win."<sup>36</sup>

Though every effort is made by the casino to make you forget it, the gambler remains in a tightly controlled environment. Through the lens of the "eyes in the sky," as the thousands of cameras operating in all the larger casinos are called, each move by the dealer and bettor is observed for any sort of impropriety. Although (and perhaps because) they are never seen nor heard, the eyes in the sky silently and distantly represent the casino's natural posture of power over every aspect of the games being played. It is a virtual prison, we might venture, not at all unlike that envisioned by Jeremy Bentham in the late-eighteenth century. Popularized for a new generation by Michel Foucault's classic *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the hub of Bentham's hypothetical prison was the centralized tower surrounded by, but invisible to, the isolated, individual cells of the incarcerated. Bentham's hypothesis, of course, was that the prisoners would thus rehabilitate themselves, inasmuch that they must act as if they are always being watched. Importantly, the prison's power would not operate from without as ("necessary") force, but from within as ("free") self-scrutiny, for the constant surveillance would eventually be taken for granted and/or forgotten. Glancing around at the gray heads at the slot machines and newlyweds playing craps, a fidgety Michel Foucault abandons his poker face for only a moment:

When you have thus formed the chains of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters. A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, the casinos of Las Vegas did not get where they are today simply by probability alone, but by their ability to maintain strict, necessary control while all the same conjuring fantastical illusions of personal freedom and entitlement.

An illustration of this paradox is most apparent in the casinos' distribution of "comps" (i.e., complementary services or goods), wherein their mathematical advantage and constant surveillance coalesce into an astonishingly efficient mechanism of desire. The premise is simple and increasingly popular. First, the gambler's "theoreticals" are electronically calculated, based on her average time spent gambling and average bet. If a gambler's average bet is \$100 per hand of blackjack, for example, her theoreticals would project that she will give the casino \$6,000 in gambling action per hour while playing blackjack. Based on its 2

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<sup>36</sup> Pete Earley, 2. Every game is designed to give the house a mathematical advantage, called the "edge." Roulette has one of the highest edges -- a 5.26 percent statistical advantage for the house. Blackjack has one of the lowest -- 2.10 percent if played perfectly.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 103.

percent edge at this particular game, the casino expects to win at least \$120 per hour from her. In return, the gambler's account is credited with \$48 of comps, or forty percent of her expected losses.<sup>38</sup> Comps are not usually paid out in cash; instead, they are given as meals, rooms, airline tickets, or admission to shows or nightclubs, all of which are intended, of course, to keep the gambler in the casino longer or to lure her back again.

Both the casino and the gambler alike, then, thrive on the desire provoked by their (supposed) constitutive lack, i.e., their need for one another. Apropos to the distribution and accumulation of "comps," Slavoj Žižek argues: "Desire is historical and subjectified, always and by definition unsatisfied, metonymical, shifting from one object to another since I do not actually desire what I want. What I actually desire is to sustain desire itself, to postpone the dreaded moment of its satisfaction."<sup>39</sup> Neither the casino nor the gambler reaches its fill in this relationship; each remains desirous of the other. Indeed, in addition to displaying how much the player has won or lost and the duration of play, the gambler's "theoreticals" also include volunteered personal information, such as one's full name, address, credit limit, birthday, and wedding anniversary (in order that the casino might send their congratulations). One gambles, then, not only out of desire, but also in order that one might yet remain (or become) the desired one. Furthermore, and of even greater significance for our present context, the codependent relationship is not simply that of balanced codetermination (i.e., no casino without gambler, vice versa). At its root, rather, is a desire fraught with inherent undecidability:

Two characteristics of this paradoxical causality should be retained: a cause is inherently undecidable – it can enhance the feature it stands for or its opposite; and above all, there is no 'proper measure' in the relationship between a cause and its effect – the effect is always in excess of its cause, either in the guise of the upward spiral (aggressivity leads to more and more aggressivity) or in the guise of the counteraction (awareness of aggressivity brings forth a fear of 'overreacting' that deprives the subject of the 'normal' measure of aggressive self-assertion) (Žižek, 20-21).

The relationship between casino and gambler, as such, is tenuous and marked by the fundamental uncertainty of any given "countereffect."

All this is to say, something may very well be afoot here in Pascal's Wager. Whose eyes are these in the sky? Who is this "I" behind the house's hidden face?

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<sup>38</sup> Earley, 255-56. For an excellent first-person narrative of Las Vegas gambling and its system of comps, see Andrés Martínez, *24/7: Living It Up and Doubling Down in the New Las Vegas* (New York: Dell, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, "The Abyss of Freedom," 80.

Might the game be fixed; and if so, by whom? A bet is “fixed” when there is an unfair advantage afforded either side of the exchange, often when an economic return is virtually guaranteed through subterfuge. When God is the master of the house, is the deception one of theological proportions? This would not be at all surprising if God is, as Steven Brams suggests, “a superlative strategist. Always suspicious and very touchy.”<sup>40</sup> If so, God, along with his acolytes, those witting and unwitting, conscious and unconscious, may not be quite so willing to allow the game to be fair and square.

Following one of the more common readings of Hegel’s reflective logic, on the far side of a “No,” when it is doubled, is there not a “Yes”? Is not self-identity the (self-caused) product of this double-negation, the saying of “No” to “No”? If there remains an affirmation of presence behind this negation, transcendent or otherwise, all of God’s chips may not be on the table. Indeed, God, as the master strategist, might be even craftier, hiding himself “beyond the opposition between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short between true and false.”<sup>41</sup> In this economy, a “de-nomination” of God is in order, much like that attempted by early Christian mystics and contemporarily by Jean-Luc Marion, in which what is named is also unnamed.<sup>42</sup> Marion contends that to remain holy, or “wholly other,” this other, God, must remain outside comprehension. The thought of God, in this perspective, is a necessarily impossible thought not because of an originary lack or primordial wager of presence à la deconstruction but because of an excessive *givenness* that “neither concept, signification, nor intention can foresee, organize or contain” (Marion, 40). Because His self-giving is beyond conceptuality, God is beyond concept and is not, as such, “present.” For God to be “given” but “not present” is to say, with the mystics (and, for that matter, many a phenomenologist!), that the transcendent God of theology (and desire), as the inexorable Other, is beyond human perspective and articulation.

Or, to be blunt, God cannot lose. Which is to say, we no longer play a game, but are being played. Is it unfair to regard the mystic’s theological as economy something akin to a willful acceptance of a confidence game? Is playing along (i.e., being played), then, not the best strategy for a greater payoff in the end? Is there really “nothing to lose” in having faith in an incomprehensible God who

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen J. Brams, *Biblical Games: A Strategic Analysis of Stories in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980), 170.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, “In The Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology,’” 26.

<sup>42</sup> “God cannot be seen [Exod. 33.23; John 1.18], not only because nothing finite can bear the glory without perishing, but above all because a God that could be conceptually comprehended would no longer bear the title “God.” It is not much to say that God remains God even if one is ignorant of his essence, his concept, and his presence -- he remains God only on condition that his ignorance be established and admitted definitively. Every thing in the world gains by being known -- but God, who is not of the world, gains, by not being known conceptually” (Marion, 34)

renders all loss of self – His, yours and mine – as an ultimate (albeit, unspeakable) gain? It would seem otherwise: “Such negations are good investments whose yield is infinite,” John Caputo points out ironically, “ways of forgoing the coins of finite conceptual comprehension in order to save God’s incomprehensibility and thereby receive an infinite reward.”<sup>43</sup> In His house, as it were, God would appear to have played the game that has no losers.<sup>44</sup>

Is Pascal not doing something radically similar when he exhorts the unbeliever to “weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. ... [I]f you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist” (§418)? Is not this “nothing” that allegedly cannot be lost, in fact, everything? Was Pascal aware of this own ostensible duplicity as he scribbled: “Nothing shows him [humanity] the truth, everything deceives” (§45)? Read one way, the clauses are merely parallel statements emphasizing inevitable deceit. Read another way, though, *Nothing* (the *via negativa*) is the harbinger of truth, and *Everything* the deceiver. In the latter reading, to lose “nothing” is to lose the truth that, for the immaterialist mystic, stands on the far side of rational conceptuality; and thus, a loss that for Pascal, his ambiguity notwithstanding, would mean absolutely everything. In such a reading, truth takes on a difficult (but not impossible or irreconcilable) tone, for the a-rational truth of God is *nothing*, but not necessarily or absolutely naught.

## 7. Learning How to Lose

In the end, I think it is unavoidable but to conclude that Pascal’s wager is hedged: that is to say, an apophatic affirmation lingers within Pascal’s rhetorical negativity. In the “hypergivenness” of mysticism, that of a Marion or a Meister Eckhart, neither God nor we are lost at all.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, as long as we are losing nothing, anything and everything is possible. To wager it all in the bet of faith, that most necessarily impossible avoidance, though, leads us to something far more radical: *thinking the thought of the unthinkable Other*. It is for this reason that

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<sup>43</sup> John D. Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 197.

<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, this follows very closely to the “the pathology of hope” Robert Goodman sees at work in legalized gambling. In its “schizophrenia of trying to both regulate and promote gambling,” governments (and theologies) are “preying on people’s [healthy] ability to dream and hope,” and offering them a disingenuous, dangerous means “to dream of paying off their debts” (137).

<sup>45</sup> Cf., Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 90; “Save the Name,” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., 58, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35-85.

Derrida can faithfully prophesy, while playing roulette (his game of choice, it seems), “Go [*Rends-toi*] there where you cannot go, to the impossible, that is at bottom the only way of going or coming. To go there where it is possible, that is not to surrender [*se rendre*], rather, it is to be there already and to be paralysed in the in-decision of the non-event” (Derrida, “Save the Name”, 74-75).

When every other is wholly other, experience is only experience when it is of the impossible, of the Other; and faith is only faith when it, too, is impossible.

Importantly, this is also what ultimately separates a contemporary Pascalian gambler like Žižek from Derrida, the most eloquent evangelist of non-metaphysical alterity, whose “messianic” gospel find unspeakable promise in the Other’s structural impossibility, the very condition of necessary, unrequited desire for full presence.<sup>46</sup> Žižek insists, on the contrary, that the impossible *does*, in fact, happen; that, indeed, otherness (“the Real”) is “the inherent, not external, limitation of reality.”<sup>47</sup> His is not a return to metaphysics, but a swallowing of the nothing/the void/the impossible for which deconstruction can but long because it can only ever remain “out there,” “not mine.” Žižek’s vision is radical: “From ‘impossible TO HAPPEN’ we thus pass to ‘the impossible HAPPENS’ -- this, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult thing to accept” (Žižek, *On Belief*, 84). He himself likens the difference to that between love and desire:

And love is to be opposed here to desire: desire is always caught in the logic of “this is not that,” it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love FULLY ACCEPTS that “this IS that” – that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I conditionally love; that Christ, this wretched man, IS the living God. Again, to avoid a fatal misunderstanding: the point is not that we should “renounce transcendence” and fully accept the limited human person as our love object, since “this is all there is”: transcendence is not abolished, but rendered ACCESSIBLE—it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love. (Žižek, *On Belief*, 90)

Similarly, if anything is possible in the casino, as those of Las Vegas pride themselves, *nothing* must be impossible. The impossible, the wholly Other, is

<sup>46</sup> For an excellent assessment of Derrida’s sense of otherness, see Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 68-70, 106-08, 197-200, 208-211.

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 89. Outside of interpreting Lacan for a new generation, Žižek’s thought continues to trace the trajectory of the most early of 19th-century Idealists, Johann Fichte, whose notion of the self-assertive subject was dependent on “the presence, within the I itself, of a realm of irreducible otherness, of absolute contingency and incomprehensibility” (Daniel Breazeale, “Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self,” in *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], 100).

what cannot be, what never has been, nor never will be; and yet, it remains, paradoxically, the inherent Reality of all that is. The subject of God, and thus also that of humanity, is thus marked by a constitutive wager, on account of which neither are fully themselves. The final pages of Friedrich Schelling's scandalously overlooked text *The Ages of the World* [Weltalter] illustrate this best. He is here writing about the "primordial [groundless] deed," or "decision," from which individual, contingent consciousness emerges from the non-subjective, Dionysian void and indifference of Absolute Freedom; but he just as well could be writing about the very wager of which Pascal dares not speak:

That primordial deed which makes a man genuinely himself precedes all individual actions; but immediately after it is put into exuberant freedom, this deed sinks into the night of unconsciousness. ... For man to know of this deed, consciousness itself would have to return into nothing, into boundless freedom, and would cease to be consciousness. ... Likewise that will, posited once at the beginning and then led to the outside, must immediately sink into unconsciousness. Only in this way is a beginning possible, a beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning. For here as well, it is true that the beginning cannot know itself. That deed once done, it is done for all eternity. ... If, in making a decision, somebody retains the right to reexamine his choice, he will never make a beginning at all." (Schelling, 181-82)

This is to say, that which is impossible – the unconscious void, the primordial abyss of freedom – is what makes all else possible.

Grounded as it is in the seemingly groundless desert sands of the American West, gambling Vegas-style may very well bear the secret, *which is no secret at all*, of the most barren, desert impossibility of them all. Gambling in and on the desert becomes then a lesson in how to lose.

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