

Michael Rota. *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. 249 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

Jeff Jordan
University of Delaware

In his 1896 essay, "The Will to Believe," William James asserted that, "Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith...complete."¹ Michael Rota agrees as a version of Pascal's wager is the focus of much of his new book, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life*. The wager however is not the sole focus of Rota's book as a version of the cosmological argument, the fine-tuning argument, and an inference to the best explanation concerning the historicity of the resurrection also play prominent roles in Rota's case for Christian theism.

Rota does not write with professional philosophers or theologians in mind, but aims for a more general audience, especially those deciding whether to embrace the Christian way of life. Rota's book is also appropriate for Christians seeking a greater appreciation of the intellectual foundations of their faith, or who seek the resources for the apologetic task of providing a reason for the hope that is found within. Professional nuance and pedantic detail give way to accessibility and readability, as Rota hopes to reach a wider audience by making his arguments accessible to those with little exposure to philosophy and even less tolerance for the technical jargon employed by academics. Keeping the intended audience in mind, this is an informative book that's enjoyable to read – assuming that you enjoy reading philosophy of religion stuff!

Rota's version of the wager is offered as a tie-breaker, the decisive consideration which should rationally nudge a person into the Christian fold since there is, Rota argues in the second part of his book, at least as much evidence supporting Christian belief as there is against. Additionally, although Rota does not make much of this Jamesian point – it is important to realize that wagering is forced, since refusing to wager, for or against, is tantamount to wagering on a particular alternative. A decision is forced whenever refusing to decide is equivalent in practical effect to choosing one of the alternatives. With a forced decision, the alternatives are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of the feasible or real possibilities. Rota's main contention is that the evidence for Christianity is at least as good as the evidence against, and, with the wager looming, one must either wager for God existing by

¹ See, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1896; repr., New York: Dover, 1956), 11.

embracing a Christian commitment, or against God by standing pat. The decision is unavoidable.

The book consists of three parts. The first part introduces Pascal's wager and situates it in decision theory. While there are several versions of the wager available – Pascal himself offered at least four – Rota presents a wager which employs a premise asserting that the epistemic probability of Christianity is at least as likely as not. And, if Christianity is true, and one has committed to God, then the outcome for the believer is, well, impressive. Far better than the outcome associated with failing to commit if God should exist.

Although part one involves the wager, the logic of Rota's overall argument has the wager following the presentation of the evidence supporting Christianity, which is found in part two. Throughout his presentation of the wager, Rota constructs it as involving the God of Christianity in particular rather than the "generic" God of theism. This is opposite the route which Pascal trod, as Pascal arguably intended his wagers to make the case for the rational dominance of theism over atheism, followed by arguments in support of Christianity over its theistic rivals of Judaism or Islam. Pascal's arguments in support of Christianity as the true religion were based, primarily, on miracles and fulfilled prophecies.

The second part of Rota's book examines several arguments, pro and con, concerning the truth of Christianity. It is here that Rota lays the basis for the claim that the evidence for and against Christianity is at least balanced. A cosmological argument something like that offered by Leibniz plays a lead role in the cumulative case that Rota constructs in the second part. This sort of cosmological argument standardly features the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), which asserts that all facts admit of a sufficient reason. Even if we restrict the PSR to just contingent facts, it has proven a fat target having drawn the fire of several philosophers in the recent past (James Ross, William Rowe, and Peter van Inwagen, for example). Rota however does not employ the PSR, but rather a causal principle which asserts that "no contingent thing exists without having had some source or cause. In other words, every contingent being has a causal explanation" (88). Rota's principle is not intended to cover contingent facts as does the PSR, it covers the existence of contingent beings. A contingent being is an existing thing which might not have existed. A contingent fact is any fact which might not have been a fact. For any contingent being you might pick – a house, a person, a dog, or a tree – there is a true causal account which fully explains why that particular being exists if Rota's principle is true. Rota's principle is weaker than the PSR as it does not require that contingent facts have a sufficient explanation, it requires only a causal explanation for the existence of any contingent being. Consider a particular human. Rota's principle requires that there is a causal explanation why that person exists. It does not require an explanation for the fact that there are humans. Indeed, if Rota's principle is true, it is possible that there are causal explanations for each and every contingent thing which exists, but there is no explanation for the fact that there are contingent things. Leibniz's PSR would require an answer to the question why are there contingent beings? Rota's principle does not.

Rota's argument asks us to consider the group consisting of every contingent being which exists now or in the past (call it "BG" for the "big group"). BG contains

every existing contingent being, and BG seems contingent since if any of its members had not existed, it would not have been. So, Rota concludes, BG is contingent. But what would be the causal explanation of BG? Rota argues that the causal explanation of BG requires the existence of a necessary being – a being dependent on no other being for its existence – as there are no contingent beings external to BG available for the task.

Let me sketch three possible problems for Rota's cosmological argument. I will say enough to make clear why they may be possible problems, but I will not develop the detail necessary for dropping the qualifier of "possible". First, one could argue that the question why BG exists is properly understood as the question why are there contingent beings? Or, if you prefer, why is the property of being contingent exemplified? While the PSR requires a sufficient reason for there being contingent beings, Rota's principle does not. By employing a principle weaker than the PSR, Rota has no right to demand explanations for contingent facts, even if he may do so with contingent beings.

Second, Rota's argument may require that we treat groups or collections of beings as themselves beings. And, if BG is a standard contingent being then, with Rota's principle in hand, one may demand a causal explanation for BG's existence. Rota argues that we must look toward a necessary being if we are to find the answer. But, borrowing a point from Bill Rowe, perhaps invoking a necessary being is too quick. Perhaps, for all we know, it is necessarily true that there are contingent beings, even if the existence of any particular contingent being itself is not necessary. Just as it is not necessary that any particular horse win today's derby, it could still be that some horse must win. Every race must have a winner, even if no particular horse is necessarily the winner. Likewise, perhaps for all we know, every possible world contains contingent beings.² So perhaps the reason for there being contingent beings does not involve a causal explanation as required by Rota's principle.

A third possible problem has to do with the idea of a causal explanation. A causal explanation of X is a proposition asserting the true causal account of the existence of X. The cause of X, arguably, is a state of affairs or an event or an activity which resulted in X existing. How did a particular person come to be? A full causal explanation would not just list the person's biological parents; it would also list a particular activity. Activities, however, are not in any ordinary sense beings. An activity or an event or a state of affairs may involve beings, but they are not themselves beings. If this right, then even if BG contains every contingent being, it would not contain every state of affairs, or every event, or every activity. The full causal explanation of BG then may not be part of BG, even if it involves contingent beings. BG contains every contingent being; it does not contain every contingent fact, event, activity, or state of affairs. So, again the recourse to a necessary being may be premature, as there may be a contingent fact, or a state of affairs not found within BG which explains BG.

The moral of this long story is not that the cosmological argument is unsound, but that it must make do with either a suitably restricted version of the principle of

² See William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (NY: Fordham UP, 1998), xv.

sufficient reason, or with a principle asserting something like: for any being *f*, if *f* began to exist, then *f* admits of a sufficient explanation.

The second part also includes a short discussion of the problem of suffering, including a robust and meticulous account of providence in which humans enjoy significant free will and yet every instance of suffering is allowed by God only if it benefits the person who suffers (see 150-3). It is far from clear that this account is even possible, let alone plausible, as suffering caused by moral agents who enjoy significant (incompatibilist) freedom does not always result from wrongful choices or actions. There may be moral evils not caused by the immoral actions or bad choices of moral agents – one could decide to *x*, and have the moral right to *x*, as doing *x* is morally permitted, and yet, doing *x* could cause someone to suffer. Jones decides to marry Smith. Greene wishes to marry Jones but now cannot. Greene suffers great disappointment and anguish and sadness because of Jones' decision. Yet, Jones has done nothing wrong, even though her decision brings Greene great suffering. Could God, perhaps via a Molinist arrangement of circumstances, ensure that every case of suffering adequately benefits the sufferer, including those which result from actions and decisions and omissions which he cannot control? Perhaps, but at what cost? If one sees another suffering, the normal and proper attitude is that the suffering should cease or should diminish as suffering is not always deserved. But now add in the belief that the suffering in fact benefits the sufferer. Is the attitude that the suffering should cease or diminish no longer proper, since few desire to separate others from what benefits them? For example, no one stages a rescue of children visiting the dentist. But these are vexing issues best postponed for another time.

One more noteworthy point found in Rota's book is that a world-view must meet practical as well as theoretical demands if it is to have a legitimate claim on our allegiance. In chapter 9, and throughout part three of the book, a case is made that the Christian story makes sense of human existence by suggesting that there is a depth to life which extends well below the surface where the philosophical naturalist insists that we must pointlessly dwell, swayed by the ebb and flow of chance events and processes. In contrast, according to the Christian story, "our lives have transcendent meaning and an objective purpose [that] resonates with something deep within the human heart" (142). Not surprisingly, most philosophical discussion concerns the logic of arguments and not the grammar of the heart. And though we must be careful here, human existence and experience is more complex than contemporary philosophy at times assumes, and Rota's chapters on the practical consequences of a Christian commitment have a welcome place. To quote William James again, "... pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds" (opt. cit., 11).

Michael Rota's *Taking Pascal's Wager* is a successful case of popular philosophy in which certain complicated philosophical arguments are moved from their specialist context to a wider context in which those interested in the plausibility of the Christian claim can think about and appreciate those arguments.