

Pascal's Wager

1. Reason and Belief: Pascal thinks that, because God is supposedly infinite, He would have to be incomprehensible to us. Thus, it is IMPOSSIBLE to give a proof for the existence or non-existence of God.

Nevertheless, we must either believe or not. Even if one says, "In the absence of evidence, the best thing to do is remain totally agnostic, not siding with theism OR atheism," then Pascal merely replies that indecision is impossible. Either one believes in God or one does not. Agnosticism, then, is just atheism. So, given that we MUST make a decision about God's existence, what should we decide?

2. The Wager: Pascal begins by asking what we stand to gain or lose by each decision. He notes that these two different choices (between theism and atheism) can only affect (1) The truth of our beliefs, and (2) Our happiness.

Since we have no way of knowing which of the two beliefs is true, they don't really affect our reason, or knowledge. However, these beliefs DO have the potential to have a radical effect on our happiness. How so?

Consider: If God exists, and rewards those who believe in Him with an eternity in heaven, then believers stand to gain an infinite amount of happiness by believing. Likewise, if God exists, and punishes those who do NOT believe in Him with an eternity in hell, then non-believers stand to suffer an infinite amount of pain by not believing.

So, we may either (1) Believe, or (2) Not believe in God. Furthermore, either (a) God exists, or (b) God does not exist. The following chart represents what we stand to gain or lose by belief or disbelief, according to Pascal:

| | God Exists | God Does Not Exist |
|----------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Believe in God | + ∞ | - 100 |
| Don't Believe in God | - ∞ | 0 |

3. Theism: The Best Bet: Pascal thinks that theism is obviously the best bet.

In order to determine what is the best bet, one must calculate the expected value of each choice. Expected value is determined by the following formula:

$$\mathbf{E.V. = (probability\ of\ option\ 1)(what\ you\ stand\ to\ gain\ or\ lose\ if\ option\ 1\ is\ true/occurs) + (probability\ of\ option\ 2)(what\ you\ stand\ to\ gain\ or\ lose\ if\ option\ 2\ is\ true/occurs)}$$

Whether you know it or not, you perform this calculation easily all the time. Imagine that I told you, "Let's play a game. I'll flip a coin. You call 'heads' or 'tails.' If you guess right, I'll give you \$1. If you guess wrong, you'll give me \$5." Would you play? Probably not. It would be a bad idea to play this game. Why? Because the expected value of playing is negative. Betting on the coin is a **bad bet**.

Let's calculate the expected value of playing this game:

$$\mathbf{E.V. = (0.5)(\$1) + (0.5)(-\$5) = \$0.50 - \$2.50 = -\$2.00}$$

The expected value of playing this game is $-\$2.00$. The expected value of not playing this game is zero. It is a good idea to do whichever action has the greatest expected value—in this case, that means not playing the game.

Now, let's calculate the expected value of belief or disbelief in God:

$$\mathbf{E.V. (belief) = (0.5)(+\infty) + (0.5)(-100) = +\infty - 50 = +\infty}$$

$$\mathbf{E.V. (disbelief) = (0.5)(-\infty) + (0.5)(0) = -\infty + 0 = -\infty}$$

The expected value of belief in God is infinite value. This is infinitely greater than the alternative (disbelief), which has an infinite DIS-value.¹

Conclusion: So, belief in God is the best sort of bet one can make. Note that this is not a PROOF for God's existence, but rather a argument that one should believe in God for PRAGMATIC reasons. That is, if you are looking out for your own best interests, you will choose to believe in God.

¹ Why did the equation have these values? For belief: We set the gain if God exists at infinity, because one stands to gain an infinite amount of happiness by believing in God (in heaven). We set the loss if God does not exist at -100 (as opposed to zero if one does NOT believe in God and God does NOT exist), because many think that there is some (finite) loss of happiness associated with going to church, reading the Bible, giving up a sinful life, etc. For disbelief: We set the gain if God exists at negative infinity, because one stands to gain an infinite amount of pain for not believing (in hell). For both: We set the probabilities at 50%, because Pascal thinks that theism is JUST as likely as atheism; i.e., there is a 50 – 50 chance that God exists.

4. Objections: There are a few objections to this argument.

- (a) God is not 50% likely: Pascal sets the probabilities at 50% for God's existence or non-existence, as if it is EQUALLY as likely that He exists as not. But, that seems false. Most atheists think it is EXTREMELY unlikely that God exists. The likelihood that God does not exist should therefore be set at something like 99.9%

Reply: Notice that it does not matter what the probabilities are. No matter what, belief in God is the best bet. To illustrate, let's change the values in the way that the atheist suggests:

$$\text{E.V. (belief)} = (0.001)(+\infty) + (0.999)(-100) = +\infty - 99.9 = +\infty$$

$$\text{E.V. (disbelief)} = (0.001)(-\infty) + (0.999)(0) = -\infty + 0 = -\infty$$

The expected value of believing in God is STILL infinite. The only way that changing the probabilities would affect the outcome would be if there was a ZERO percent chance that God exists. But, in order to establish THAT, we would have to have ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY that God does not exist. But, is such certainty possible? Can we know that God doesn't exist as surely as we know that $2+2=4$? Surely not.

- (b) I can't CHOOSE to believe: The atheist, understandably, might reply, "But, I can't just CHOOSE to believe in God. I think the idea of God is absurd. I can't just MAKE myself believe in things that I think are absurd and unlikely."

Reply: Pascal replies that such a person should just start going to church, and reading the Bible, and giving up sin. If they act AS IF they are a Christian for long enough, then eventually they will really start to believe it.

- (c) Other gods: But, if the Christian God is possible, surely OTHER gods are possible as well? In that case, we must assign probabilities to them as well. If any of these promise eternal happiness, then we will ALSO have infinite expected value for believing in THAT god. So, which one do we choose? Furthermore, surely there is some—however small—non-zero probability that a god exists who will reward us with eternal happiness in heaven for NOT believing in him. So, in that case, there is an infinite expected value for NOT believing in God. What do we do?

Reply: This is not actually an objection that Pascal considers. What might he say in response to this?