

PASCAL'S WAGER

This essay will analyze in three sections Blaise Pascal's pragmatic argument¹ for the utility of belief in God. First, we will try to steel man Pascal's argument by reconstructing it as thoroughly and accurately as possible. Second, we will do our best to find flaws in the argument. Third, we will evaluate how convincing Pascal was at promoting a pragmatic reason to believe in God.

RECONSTRUCTING THE ARGUMENT

Pascal believes that "reason can decide nothing"² when it comes to deciding whether to believe in God or not. He justifies his belief that reason is an insufficient tool by saying that: "If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is."³ Any attempt to understand God from our fallible human rationality is doomed to fail. For this reason, Pascal believes that natural theology is counterproductive and instead advocates for an approach based on probability theory and real-world results. He thinks that we should approach our choice beliefs as we would place a bet at casino, hence the name of his essay: "The Wager". We ought to bet on the option that will provide the greatest expected value.

Pragmatic arguments differ from rational ones in the sense that we ought to pick the best option available to us regardless of it makes sense or not. Pascal argues that there are only two metaphysical options for God's existence. It's either that "God is, or He is not."⁴ Furthermore, we have two options when it comes to believing in God. We can either believe or not believe.

¹ Michael Peterson and Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 96-97.

² Ibid, 96.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Suspending belief is not an option: “you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked.”⁵ The best way to summarize Pascal’s wager options is to summarize them in the table below.

Table 1 – Summary of Pascal’s wager pragmatic argument

		God Exists?	
		Yes	No
Belief in God?	Yes	Heaven (Infinite reward)	Nothing (Neutral)
	No	Hell (Infinite punishment)	Nothing (Neutral)

Reading across the first row of Table 1, we see that belief in God results in infinite gain and nothing to lose. If you don’t believe in God, then you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Suspending belief would put you in the second row.

We can also use Table 1 to compute the expected values for someone who believes in God versus someone who doesn’t. we can calculate the long-term value of a certain bet with two outcomes with the following formula: $EV = p \times (P) + q \times (Q)$. In our case, p is the probability that God exists, P is the outcome associated with God’s existence given belief or disbelief, $q = 1 - p$ is the probability that God does not exist, and Q is the outcome if God does not exist. An expected value of zero is said to be neutral while any expected value above zero indicates that we should make the bet to win in the long-term. Using the values in the table above, we get:

$$EV_{belief} = p \times (\infty) + q \times (0) = p \cdot \infty$$

$$EV_{disbelief} = p \times (-\infty) + q \times (0) = -p \cdot \infty$$

⁵ Michael Peterson and Blaise Pascal, “The Wager,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 96-97, 97.

The only way that the two expected values are equal is if the probability that God is zero (i.e., $p = 0 \implies EV_{belief} = 0 \ \& \ EV_{disbelief} = 0$). Otherwise, no matter how small p is, we get that the expected values are infinitely different. If there is a chance that God exists, then it is infinitely better to bet on God's existence by believing. Thus, from Pascal's mathematical perspective, it would be foolish not to believe in God even though we may not have rational reasons to do so.

OBJECTIONS

On the surface, Pascal's argument appears robust given the mathematics supporting his argument. However, taking a closer look at Table 1 reveals many flaws. Let's start by questioning the validity of having only two metaphysical options for the existence of God. This is a narrow view of the panoply of options for the kinds and numbers of gods in all religions. Many other columns would need to be added for polytheistic religions.

Another criticism can be found by questioning the exhaustivity of the rows of Table 1. Summarizing belief in God in two rows seems to be a false dichotomy. There are all kinds of levels of belief and disbelief in God. It isn't clear what Pascal means by belief in God. Does belief need to be accompanied by practice? It seems like a spectrum may be a more accurate model of people's beliefs. Given this objection, it doesn't seem just that an omnibenevolent God would give the same infinite rewards and punishments to people with varying degrees of belief and practice.

Furthermore, we can question the validity of the four outcomes of Table 1. Not all religions have the same notion of heaven and hell as infinite rewards and infinite punishment. Removing the infinity symbols would drastically alter the calculus. Pascal assumes neutral outcomes if God did not exist. No one knows what happens in the after life if there is no God. It could be that the lights simply go out or it is feasible that something else happens.

Lastly, Pascal's analysis only considers what happens in the afterlife given the disproportionate effect of infinity compared to the all too finite nature of human life. Belief in God certainly affects people during their lifetime. It seems unlikely that religion would be so widely practiced purely for the potential of a better afterlife.

WEIGHTING THE EVIDENCE

On balance, Pascal's wager argument is too simplistic and limited in scope to justify a pragmatic belief in God. I am sympathetic to his sentiment that rational arguments have, for the most part, failed to be persuasive. I've never heard an ex-atheist say that they were convinced that God exists by a rational argument like Descartes' ontological argument. In practice, we likely inherit and form our beliefs culturally. It appears that the utility of religious beliefs could be tested empirically. We could investigate whether certain schools of thought lead to longer and happier lives. Another issue with pragmatic arguments is that there isn't a consensus on the metric worth optimizing. Some practices and beliefs may increase the lifespan of its worshippers while decreasing their overall wellbeing. Evolution on the other hand seems to be selecting for systems of beliefs that optimize the fitness of genes to their given environment. Although there are too many issues that undermine Pascal's argument, I think it would be naive to throw out the argument entirely. The ability to question the utility of certain beliefs was surely a revolutionary idea and still is to some extent. Most of us fail to update our beliefs as new evidence comes in to tune the probabilities of our expected value models. Ultimately, I agree with Pascal that we must wager and that the stakes are high. We just don't see eye-to-eye on the aspect of infinite rewards and that the outcome is obviously neutral if God doesn't exist.

Bibliography

Frankel, Melissa. “Philosophy of Religion Course Lectures”, Carleton University, Brightspace, winter semester 2022.

Peterson, Michael, and Blaise Pascal. “The Wager.” Essay. In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed., 96–97. Oxford University Press, 2010.