Pascal’s Wager: A Pragmatic Argument for Belief in God

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Should you believe there’s a God?

To answer this, we might examine arguments for theism—like first-cause and design arguments—and arguments against atheism—like arguments from evil. These arguments offer evidence for and against God’s existence.[1]

_Pascal’s wager_, originally proposed by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), takes a more pragmatic approach. Pascal thought that evidence cannot settle the question of whether God exists, so he proposes that you should bet, or wager, on God because of what’s at stake: _you have lots to gain and not much to lose._[2]

This article explains Pascal’s wager and considers three objections.

1. The Basic Argument

The basic form of the wager goes like this:

If God exists and I believe in God, I’ll go to heaven, which is infinitely good. If God exists and I don’t believe in God, I may go to hell, which is infinitely bad. If God does not exist, then whether I believe in God or not, whatever I’d gain or lose would be finite. So, I should believe in God.

The argument depends on the _expected value_ of believing in God, which we use to make a decision if we’re not certain whether God exists.[3] This _decision matrix_ illustrates the argument:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options:</th>
<th>God exists</th>
<th>God does not exist</th>
<th>Expected value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe in God</td>
<td>Infinite reward</td>
<td>Finite outcome</td>
<td><em>Ininitely good</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe in God</td>
<td>Infinite punishment</td>
<td>Finite outcome</td>
<td><em>Ininitely bad</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Basic decision matrix for Pascal’s Wager.

Even if the chance of God existing is small, as long as it is greater than zero, the expected value of believing is infinite. Combining the chart’s values with the assumption that we should pick the action with the highest expected value yields Pascal’s Wager.

While the Wager has its advocates, there are many objections. Let’s review some of the most important.

2. The Many-Gods Objection

An initial objection is that Pascal’s wager is too simplistic. There are many religions, and believing in the God of one religion might prevent gaining the infinite rewards of another religion.

To see this, let’s consider just adding two religions—Christianity and Islam—to our decision matrix.

Assuming the probabilities of Christianity, Islam, and atheism are greater than zero, we get confusing expected values. This is called the “many-gods” objection, illustrated by this decision matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options:</th>
<th>Christian God exists</th>
<th>Muslim God exists</th>
<th>God does not exist</th>
<th>Expected Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe in Christian God</td>
<td>Infinite reward</td>
<td>Infinite punishment</td>
<td>Finite outcome</td>
<td>(infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe in Muslim God</td>
<td>Infinite punishment</td>
<td>Infinite reward</td>
<td>Finite outcome</td>
<td>(infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe in God</td>
<td>Infinite punishment</td>
<td>Infinite punishment</td>
<td>Finite outcome</td>
<td>(infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decision matrix for the “Many Gods” objection.

Apparently, Pascal’s wager doesn’t give us a reason to pick one religion over another, since Christianity and Islam both have the same expected value.

You might think the decision matrix tells us that believing either religion is a better bet than believing atheism. However, there’s a possibility—even if unlikely—that atheists go to heaven and theists go to hell. As long as we don’t assign this probability 0, then atheism isn’t a worse bet than believing a religion. Thus, all options seem to have the same expected value.[4]

A common response to the many-gods objection can be summarized in two words: _probability matters_. It matters even when dealing with infinite values.

To see why, imagine you’re given the choice between a 90% chance at an infinite good or a 10% chance at the same good. You should clearly take the 90% chance. When we apply this to Pascal’s wager, the result is that you should wager for the religion you think is most likely to be true. Christianity and Islam
actually do not have the same expected value—
wagering on the more probable religion gives you a
higher chance at an infinite good, and so has a higher
expected value. Further, since it’s unlikely that
atheists and agnostics (agnostic suspend judgment
on whether God exists) go to heaven and theists go to
hell, Pascal’s wager implies it’s irrational to be an
atheist or agnostic.[5]

3. The Impossibility Objection

A second objection is that wagering is impossible,
because we can’t form beliefs simply for their
benefits: if I offer you $1,000,000 to believe that
1+1=3, you probably still can’t believe it. Most
philosophers reject doxastic voluntarism, the view
that we can directly control our beliefs.[6]

In response, whether God exists isn’t obviously true
or false (unlike 1+1=3), so some argue that you have
more control over your religious beliefs. This might be indirect control, like the control you could exercise
over your political beliefs by changing the news
sources you read.

A second response—which Pascal himself favored—
frames the wager in terms of action, rather than
belief. The wager gives you a reason to commit to
God—by going to church, praying, and immersing
yourself in a religious community—rather than
trying to directly believe in God.[7]

4. The Irrationality Objection

Even if it’s possible to take Pascal’s wager, that
doesn’t guarantee that the beliefs formed from
wagering would be rational, at least from an
evidential point of view. It seems like forming a belief
on the basis of a wager would violate evidentialism,
the view that we should proportion our beliefs to the
evidence. We should believe because of evidence, not
because a belief is beneficial.[8]

In response, if your evidence for theism
is permissive—meaning you could be rational as a
theist, atheist, or agnostic—you can take Pascal’s
wager and still respect evidentialism. This is because
more than one belief-attitude fits your evidence.[9]

Also, we can again make the wager about a
commitment to God, rather than about belief. Since
evidentialism applies to belief and not action, you
could then take the wager without violating
evidentialism.

5. Conclusion

We’ve discussed the basic version of Pascal’s wager
and examined three objections. The wager is unique
because it leads us to consider many kinds of reasons
for belief, including evidence, arguments, risks, and
rewards. More specifically, even if the arguments that
God exists aren’t successful, it’s interesting to
consider whether we’d have a reason to believe in
God anyway.[10]

Notes

[1] For an introduction to some of these arguments
see Leibniz’s Principle of Sufficient Reason by Marc
Bobro, The Fine-Tuning Argument for the Existence
of God by Thomas Metcalf and The Problem of Evil by
Thomas Metcalf, as well as other arguments for and
against the existence of God in the Philosophy of
Religion essay category. There are also
other potential sources of evidence for God that don’t
come in the form of arguments, e.g. evidence from
religious experiences.

Pascal’s Wager differs from these approaches.
Instead of focusing on whether it is true or false that
God exists, the wager concerns whether belief in God
is beneficial, or pragmatic, for the believer. Thus, the
Wager is called a “pragmatic” argument, in contrast
to what might be called an “evidential” argument.

[2] For the original version of the wager, see Pascal
(1662). Pascal’s Wager generally presumes a
common concept of God that is reviewed
in Attributes of God by Bailie Peterson.

[3] Generally, we appeal to the expected value of
actions when we don’t have certainty about the
relevant probabilities. If we had certainty, we could
calculate the actual value of each action; this
approach tells us how to act rationally in the face of
uncertainty. Therefore, Pascal’s expected value
reasoning applies to anyone who is not 100% certain
that God exists or 100% certain that God doesn’t
exist. For an application of the concept of expected
value to voting, see Ethics and the Expected
Consequences of Voting by Thomas Metcalf.

[4] For more on this objection, see Mougin and Sober
(1994).

[5] See Jackson and Rogers (2019) for development of
this argument.

voluntarism.

[7] See Rota (2016) for a contemporary version of the
wager that focuses on making a commitment to God.
For more on permissivism, the view that one more than attitude can be rational, given a body of evidence, see Titelbaum and Kopec (2016). Permissivism doesn’t mean that more than one attitude fits your evidence in every case. Sometimes attitudes (like believing $1+1=2$) are rationally required by our evidence; however, our evidence for some matters (like God’s existence) is harder to assess. See James (1896) for a pragmatic argument for belief in God that appeals to permissivism.

For more on Pascal’s Wager, see Hájek (2018).

References


For Further Exploration

Jackson, Liz (video), “Answering the Most Challenging Objections to Pascal’s Wager”.

Jackson, Liz (video), “Philosophers on Pascal’s Wager”.


Related Essays
Attributes of God by Bailie Peterson
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