

Pascal's wager

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Section/# A Losing Bet Pascal's infamous wager regards weighing the benefits of belief versus disbelief in the presence of an almighty power. As such, the wager specifically states with regards to the cost-benefit analysis of belief versus disbelief, "If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing". This wager has been referenced by scholars, philosophers and theologians ever since Pascal first introduced this particular logic. As such, this particular essay will work to analyze Pascal's wager from a rational point of view to determine if it is a sound belief system or whether it should be disregarded entirely. It should be noted that it is not the intent of this paper to judge Pascal's wager in an attempt to evoke an overall belief or disbelief in god; rather, the purpose of this analysis is to weight Pascal's wager on the scales of rational and philosophical thought. On the surface, Pascal's wager includes the very elements of simplicity that those considering philosophical questions crave. However, as is often the case, such simplicity belies the fact that there are many underlying fallacies that are accepted when one chooses to so utterly simplify the question of the existence of a higher power to such Boolean algebraic equations (Nemoianu 31). In short, although it is convenient, such complex questions should necessarily not be reduced to their most basic form based purely on the desire to create simplicity of understanding. The first question that the reader must ask is with regards to whether Pascal's wager is a persuasive one. From the point of view of this author the answer to this question is a resounding no. The reason for this lack of respect for Pascal's wager is based on the philosophical grounds that relates back to the very belief and rational for believing or disbelieving in a superior being. If one believes Pascal's wager then they are of the mind that they are better off believing in a higher power (whether or not he/she exists)

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due to the fact that the possibility exists that they may exist; therefore, as a way to hedge the bets of a would-be disbeliever, one is encouraged to believe (Monton 643). Firstly, such a system of logical progression flies in the face of what any and all world religions teach. A shallow self serving belief in a higher power is quite possibly even worse in the eyes of the proposed higher power than is outright disbelief. Likewise, almost all of the world's religions speak to the type of believers that exist on their periphery that claim to believe but do not exhibit the works or the fruits of those that are true believers. Although there are a few world religions in which a statement of belief is sufficient to merit eternal salvation; these are the exception to the rule and not the norm. In this way, claiming belief from a purely self-interested standpoint is a pitifully weak exercise that would doubtless be seen as insufficient to merit any type of reward and/or afterlife from a supreme being when and if a judgment did occur. In this way, the wager loses a great deal of its merit. A secondary issue surrounds the fact that belief alone is not sufficient in most religious traditions to merit salvation. As such, what does it profit anyone to employ Pascal's wager to merely "believe" in a higher authority if by the religious traditions of almost all of the world's dominant religions, belief alone is not sufficient. A tertiary issue is then brought to the forefront with relation to the god that Pascal would have us believe in. Naturally Pascal was writing during a time in Europe that was primarily dominated by a belief in a Judeo-Christian God. However, if an individual finds himself/herself wavering between belief and disbelief, there is no clear preference between which of the pantheon of gods that exists in the world religions this person should attempt to believe in. If they therefore opt to believe in the idea of god, this leads back to the primary issue that

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was stated in the beginning of this analysis regarding the fact that belief alone is not enough to guarantee salvation (Nemoianu 516). Concurrently, the wager also calls to mind a common quote regarding wagers that speaks specifically to the vapidness of Pascal's logic with regards to this particular question. The saying goes " Nothing ventured – nothing gained". With respect to Pascal's wager the fact of the matter is that there is indeed nothing wagered as the subject who chooses to pursue a hollow belief in a supreme being is only doing so out of a self-interested belief that he/she may obtain some net positive from a empty commitment of belief. However, due to the fact that the wager itself is betting nothing against everything, the logical merit upon which it rests is called into severe question. Likewise, it is the belief of this author that Pascal's wager does not stand up to intellectual scrutiny once it is examined under the microscope of practicality, the likely nature of a supreme being, the multi-faceted and non-one dimensional nature of god(s), and the self serving nature of the wager itself. Furthermore, a simplistic understanding by even the most rudimentary of theological scholars would be quick to point out that a hollow/shallow belief in a higher power for a self-serving purpose of perceived self-betterment in an afterlife is of little importance as such a display would likely not win salvation for the individual in the first place. For these reasons, the complex yet simplistic question of whether a person believes in God is not able to be reduced to such a simplistic answer as Pascal puts forward to the reader.

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