

Pascal's wager

[Religion](#), [God](#)



In his infamous “Wager” argument, Pascal argues that we have no way of knowing whether God exists and, as such, we should play it safe and believe in God rather than risk being sorry. The validity of the argument, which may be considered one of the first uses of game theory in history, is up for debate, especially with the new information we have today, in the 20th century. It is harder than ever to decide whether it is a rational choice for non-believers to take the wager. The wager is essentially divided in to two main parts.

In the first part, Pascal advocates the notion that both the nature and the existence of God are beyond the grasp of the human mind. “We know that there is an infinite, but do not know its nature...know that there is a God without knowing what he is.” (AW 95) Pascal then goes on to claim that God is “infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, he bears no relation to us.” (AW 95) Such arguments are fundamental to Pascal's theories, as they provide a foundation to part two, where he offers to those who do not believe in God a wager.

Since God is “unknowable” and “unverifiable” by any means, except by faith, Pascal seeks to do something radically different. He aims to seek utility in belief: in other words, he seeks to provide non-believers with practical reasons for believing in God. Furthermore, he claims that we must wager one way or another: “Yes, but you must water, it is not optional. You are committed.” (AW 95) Reason alone cannot settle which decision a given person should make, but knowing the costs and benefits of the relevant outcomes purportedly can.

By adopting the decision matrix theory, Pascal demonstrates that it is most beneficial to be a believer. If a God does in fact exist, he states, the believer will go to heaven, while the non-believer will suffer eternal damnation, while if there is no God, neither party either wins or suffers. To Pascal, the chance at avoiding eternal damnation is a chance worth taking, because non-belief holds no possible benefits. At first glance, Pascal's arguments are logical and reasonable.

Descartes' previous attempts in his ontological and cosmological arguments to give a priori demonstrations that God exists were somewhat unconvincing, but Pascal provides a more logical formulation of his reasoning — the argument that it is more rational to believe that God exists and “ a procedure for believing it: Behave as if he does. ” (AW 94) However, upon deeper scrutiny, there are significant problems inherent in Pascal's arguments. One of the wager's problems lies in the intellectual framing of the debate: is belief a matter of choice?

Quite simply put, we cannot believe what we choose to believe. If I offer to pay someone \$10, 000 for believing that the sky will turn green tomorrow, could that that person sincerely adopt this new belief, even if he truly wanted to claim the monetary prize? Likewise, we cannot believe in God simply because we will be “ better off” than atheists. It does not matter how fantastic the reward is for believing in something if it is impossible to do so.

Pascal objects to this argument by stating that “ reason cannot determine [anything]” (AW 95), and one should act like a believer and by doing so one would eventually find oneself believing in God. It is ironic that Pascal openly

states that “ you must renounce reason to preserve life” (AW 96), as it is indeed an unreasonable thing to ask a person to act like a believer. After all, assuming God exists, he would likely be unhappy to know that his believers were only pretending to believe in order to gain eternal happiness.

Another objection to the wager is only possible in today's multicultural world, where it is possible to know about many diverse religions. Pascal's wager is based on decision theory, and as such, it cannot decide among the various religions practiced in the world. Pascal's logic cannot decide between belief in the Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or even Taoist or Buddhist beliefs. If Allah indeed is the real God – a proposition believed by many people in the world – then Pascal's “ better off” decision matrix fails for those who made the wager with the Christian God instead.

All those who thought they would be better off taking part in the “ wager” will in fact be condemned in the future as they have believed in the wrong deity. Suddenly, the game being wagered upon has changed – instead of betting on red or black alone, the player has a wide variety of options, and is more likely than ever to lose, regardless of which he chooses. Finally, the argument also ignores the real benefits of being a non-believer. Pascal claims that the non-believer reaps no benefits regardless of whether or not a God exists, yet belief structures for the Christian God – particularly in Pascal's time – were fairly rigid.

Belief alone was not considered enough to merit eternal reward. Perhaps the ability to refrain from church attendance, or to keep money instead of tithing it to a church, pale in comparison to the prospect of eternal damnation, but

there are legitimate, tangible benefits to a lack of faith. Once these benefits have been calculated, perhaps the better way to examine the wager would include both the probabilities of God's existence, based on all data, multiplied with the relative amount of value gained or lost from each belief.

In its current form, though, the idea that a lack of faith cannot be in any way beneficial is not entirely convincing. Having examined these objections, Pascal's wager looks less and less persuasive in today's world. Religion is not today, and has never been, a utilitarian or practical matter. Very few people consciously choose to be among the faithful or the unfaithful, and Pascal's rather cold and utilitarian look at belief demeans the processes by which we come to believe or not believe in a deity. Pascal's outlook, centuries ago, was also considerably narrower.

In a Christian Europe, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for him to have chosen to examine the question of other religions, which creates a major flaw in his reasoning. Pascal's idea that lack of belief brought no tangible benefits is also slightly misleading, and ignores the rigid belief and rule structure of most organized religions. None of these objections indicate that Pascal was less than a genius – however, they do indicate that his arguments do not hold up in a wider world with more choices than he could have imagined.