

Pascals wager essay example

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



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Blaise Pascal formulated the Pascal's wager in the seventeenth century. The mathematician and philosopher presented his thoughts in his *Pensées*. Pascal made his arguments based on probability theory and game theory. He tried to explain the reason why people should believe in the existence of God despite the fact that this cannot be proved or disproved rationally. The wager attempts to justify people's belief in God with an appeal to self-interest rather than an evidence-based argument. The argument thus suggests that it is rational for people to believe in God because it is in our best interest to do so. The argument offers a pragmatic reason to believe in God even though there is a possibility that God does not exist. He argues that since we do not know whether God exists or not, we should put ourselves on the safe side by believing in him.

In his argument, Pascal uses the possible consequences of belief and disbelief in God in order to drive his point home. The decision to believe or not to believe has its own consequences. He argues that if we believe in God, then we will get an indefinite heavenly reward if he exists. However, if he does not exist, we lose nothing (or very little if any). On the other hand, if we choose not to believe in God, we risk receiving an indefinite punishment in

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hell if he actually exists. If he doesn't, then we would have gained nothing (or very little if any). An analysis of the two sides of the coin finds a better balance in believing in God. Rationally, the outcomes of believing in god are much better than those of not believing in him.

The above arguments can be summarized in the table below

Pascal uses the word 'belief' to mean recognition and acknowledgement of the existence of God. He suggests that believing in God is a matter of choice. People choose to believe or not to believe in God depending on their self-interests. In addition, he admits that there is no decisive evidence for or against the existence of God. However, he argues that there are strong pragmatic reasons to believe in God and attempts to explain the practical utility of religious belief.

Evidential reason is the concept that the strength to which one holds a particular proposition must be directly proportional to the evidence available to support its truth. It therefore rules out any decisions to believe in God made on the basis of utility rather than the truth of the beliefs. According to evidential reason, one cannot believe in God merely because of choice. Instead, the decision should be made on the basis of evidence that has been presented to prove the existence of God.

On the other hand, prudential reason maintains the standpoint that people make decisions to believe or not to believe in terms of the benefits expected. According to this concept, beliefs are not only justified by the available evidence but also by the benefits expected from the beliefs. Even though there is no conclusive evidence to prove God's existence, we are justified to believe in him because of the positive consequences it brings to their lives.

The wager assumes that human beings believe in God out of will. Pascal assumes that people's beliefs are sincere and genuine. These beliefs are involuntary in the sense that they are developed out of will. In addition, beliefs are based on things that people believe to be true. It is difficult to believe things that we know are untrue.

Also, since we have the freedom to worship, it follows that one is free to worship God without believing. The assumption in this wager is therefore that God doesn't mind if a person 'fakes' the belief.

In addition, Pascal assumes that a person would only care about maximizing personal gain through his or her belief. He also assumes that God will be impressed when people worship him just for the purpose of avoiding hell.

In my opinion, these assumptions are not correct. I think God is more concerned with the inward show and personal relationship with a person as opposed to outward show of belief. However, I think the assumption that we worship God out of will is true. Anyone is free to worship. What matters is how sincere and genuine we are.

Objections and counter-arguments

Entrance criteria for heaven - The wager assumes a Christian view of the admission to heaven criteria. It assumes that the rewards and punishments will be distributed on the basis of belief or disbelief in the Christian god.

However, it has been argued that the rewards and punishment might also be distributed in other ways such as good deeds, belief in the Muslim God among others.

The existence of God is unlikely - Others have raised objections that the probability that God exists and hence the probability of receiving infinite

rewards or punishments is very low. Thus, the choice is between gaining little or nothing and losing little or nothing at all.

We cannot choose our beliefs - Other people have argued that we form beliefs on the basis of available evidence and not due to prudential reasons. However, Pascal makes it clear that he is not trying to prove the existence of God but rather, he is advocating that we pick the ' best bet'.

Special pleading – By considering the dichotomy of belief and disbelief in only one god, Pascal invokes special pleading to use the argument only on a specific religion's god. Belief in one god implies disbelief in another. In addition, the wager makes a wrong assumption that the only options available are Christianity and atheism. This is not the case in reality.

One of the objections raised by Sober to this wager is that the wager presents reasons for action or choice to be the reasons for belief. Pascal suggests that it is more beneficial to believe than to believe. However, Sober thinks that these prudential reasons help us in choosing our actions and not in choosing our beliefs. Beliefs are formed on the basis of evidence.

Pascal's response is that actions make us develop beliefs.

Sober also raised an objection that the ' payment schedule' cannot be known to Pascal. He raises questions on how Pascal knew whether people should adopt Pascal's wager or an Islamic wager. He goes on to list things that Pascal cannot know such as the deity intentions. He then concludes that Pascal cannot know what consequences are for belief or disbelief in God.

Sigmund Freud

According to Freud, religious beliefs are just illusions. They are a fulfillment of the strongest wishes of mankind. According to him, those who believe in

God would eventually stop relying on their illusions and rely on scientifically proven facts. In relation to Pascal's wager, Freud's explanation of belief supports the use of evidence to develop beliefs as opposed to prudential reasons.

In conclusion, I think Pascal's argument offers a good reason to believe in God despite the numerous objections it has received. In my opinion, we do not need evidence of God's existence in order to believe in him. We can decide to believe in God based on prudential reasons as long as this is not misused. When a person decides to believe in God, he or she should do so sincerely and genuinely. Faith should be the guiding factor in such a decision.

References

Amico, R. Pascal's wager revisited, *International Studies in Philosophy* (1994)