

The Argument from Pascal's Wager



Most philosophers think Pascal's Wager is the weakest of all arguments for believing in the existence of God. Pascal thought it was the strongest. After finishing the argument in his *Pensées*, he wrote, "This is conclusive, and if men are capable of any truth, this is it." That is the only time Pascal ever wrote a sentence like that, for he was one of the most sceptical philosophers who ever wrote.

Suppose someone terribly precious to you lay dying, and the doctor offered to try a new "miracle drug" that he could not guarantee but that seemed to have a 50-50 chance of saving your beloved friend's life. Would it be reasonable to try it, even if it cost a little money? And suppose it were free—wouldn't it be utterly reasonable to try it and unreasonable not to?

Suppose you hear reports that your house is on fire and your children are inside. You do not know whether the reports are true or false. What is the reasonable thing to do—to ignore them or to take the time to run home or at least phone home just in case the reports are true?

Suppose a winning sweepstakes ticket is worth a million dollars, and there are only two tickets left. You know that one of them is the winning ticket, while the other is worth nothing, and you are allowed to buy only one of the two tickets, at random. Would it be a good investment to spend a dollar on the good chance of winning a million?

No reasonable person can be or ever is in doubt in such cases. But deciding whether to believe in God is a case like these, argues Pascal. It is therefore the height of folly not to "bet" on God, even if you have no certainty, no proof, no guarantee that your bet will win.

To understand Pascal's Wager you have to understand the background of the argument. Pascal lived in a time of great scepticism. Medieval philosophy was dead, and medieval theology was being ignored or sneered at by the new intellectuals of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Montaigne, the great sceptical essayist, was the most popular writer of the day. The classic arguments for the existence of God were no longer popularly believed. What could the Christian apologist say to the sceptical mind of this age? Suppose such a typical mind lacked both the gift of faith and the confidence in reason to prove God's existence; could there be a third ladder out of the pit of unbelief into the light of belief?

Atheism is a terrible bet. It gives you no chance of winning the prize.

Pascal's Wager claims to be that third ladder. Pascal well knew that it was a low ladder. If you believe in God only as a bet, that is certainly not a deep, mature, or adequate faith. But it is something, it is a start, it is enough to dam the tide of atheism. The Wager appeals not to a high ideal, like faith, hope, love, or proof,

but to a low one: the instinct for self-preservation, the desire to be happy and not unhappy. But on that low natural level, it has tremendous force. Thus Pascal prefaces his argument with the words, "Let us now speak according to our natural lights."

Imagine you are playing a game for two prizes. You wager blue chips to win blue prizes and red chips to win red prizes. The blue chips are your mind, your reason, and the blue prize is the truth about God's existence. The red chips are your will, your desires, and the red prize is heavenly happiness. Everyone wants both prizes, truth and happiness. Now suppose there is no way of calculating how to play the blue chips. Suppose your reason cannot win you the truth. In that case, you can still calculate how to play the red chips. Believe in God not because your reason can prove with certainty that it is true that God exists but because your will seeks happiness, and God is your only chance of attaining happiness eternally.

Pascal says, "Either God is, or he is not. But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. [Remember that Pascal's Wager is an argument for sceptics.] Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance [death] a coin is being spun that will come down heads [God] or tails [no God]. How will you wager?"

The most powerful part of Pascal's argument comes next. It is not his refutation of atheism as a foolish wager (that comes last) but his refutation of agnosticism as impossible. Agnosticism, not-knowing, maintaining a sceptical, uncommitted attitude, seems to be the most reasonable option. The agnostic says, "The right thing is not to wager at all." Pascal replies, "But you must wager. There is no choice. You are already committed [embarked]." We are not outside observers of life, but participants. We are like ships that need to get home, sailing past a port that has signs on it proclaiming that it is our true home and our true happiness. The ships are our own lives and the signs on the port say "God". The agnostic says he will neither put in at that port (believe) nor turn away from it (disbelieve) but stay anchored a reasonable distance away until the weather clears and he can see better whether this is the true port or a fake (for there are a lot of fakes around). Why is this attitude unreasonable, even impossible? Because we are moving. The ship of life is moving along the waters of time, and there comes a point of no return, when our fuel runs out, when it is too late. The Wager works because of the fact of death.

**We are like ships
that need to get home.**

Suppose Romeo proposes to Juliet and Juliet says, "Give me some time to make up my mind." Suppose Romeo keeps coming back day after day, and Juliet keeps saying the same thing day after day: "Perhaps tomorrow." In the words of a small, female, red-haired American philosopher, "Tomorrow is always a day away. And there comes a time when there are no more tomorrows. Then "maybe" becomes "no". Romeo will die. Corpses do not marry. Christianity is God's marriage proposal to the soul. Saying "maybe" and "perhaps tomorrow" cannot continue indefinitely because life does not continue indefinitely. The weather will never clear enough for the agnostic navigator to be sure whether the port is true home or false just by looking at it through binoculars from a distance. He has to take a chance, on this port or some other, or he will never get home.

Once it is decided that we must wager; once it is decided that there are only two options, theism and atheism, not three, theism, atheism, and agnosticism; then the rest of the argument is simple. Atheism is a terrible bet. It gives you no chance of winning the red prize. Pascal states the argument this way:

You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything: if you lose, you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then: wager that he does exist.

If God does not exist, it does not matter how you wager, for there is nothing to win after death and nothing to lose after death. But if God does exist, your only chance of winning eternal happiness is to believe, and your only chance of losing it is to refuse to believe. As Pascal says, "I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true." If you believe too much, you neither win nor lose eternal happiness. But if you believe too little, you risk losing everything.

But is it worth the price? What must be given up to wager that God exists? Whatever it is, it is only finite, and it is most reasonable to wager something finite on the chance of winning an infinite prize. Perhaps you must give up autonomy or illicit pleasures, but you will gain infinite happiness in eternity, and "I tell you that you will gain even in this life"—purpose, peace, hope, joy, the things that put smiles on the lips of martyrs.

Lest we take this argument with less seriousness than Pascal meant it, he concludes: "If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after."

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To the high-minded objector who refuses to believe for the low motive of saving the eternal skin of his own soul, we may reply that the Wager works quite as well if we change the motive. Let us say we want to give God his due if there is a God. Now if there is a God, justice demands total faith, hope, love, obedience, and worship. If there is a God and we refuse to give him these things, we sin maximally against the truth. But the only chance of doing infinite justice is if God exists and we believe, while the only chance of doing infinite injustice is if God exists and we do not believe. If God does not exist, there is no one there to do infinite justice or infinite injustice to. So the motive of doing justice moves the Wager just as well as the motive of seeking happiness. Pascal used the more selfish motive because we all have that all the time, while only some are motivated by justice, and only some of the time.

Because the whole argument moves on the practical rather than the theoretical level, it is fitting that Pascal next imagines the listener offering the practical objection that he just cannot bring himself to believe. Pascal then answers the objection with stunningly practical psychology, with the suggestion that the prospective convert "act into" his belief if he cannot yet "act out" of it.

If you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions since reason impels you to believe and yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith, and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief, and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. . . . They behaved just as if they did believe.

This is the same advice Dostoevsky's guru, Father Zossima, gives to the "woman of little faith" in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The behavior Pascal mentions is "taking holy water, having Masses said, and so on". The behavior Father Zossima counsels to the same end is "active and indefatigable love of your neighbor." In both cases, living the Faith can be a way of getting the Faith. As Pascal says: "That will make you believe quite naturally and will make you more docile." "But that is what I am afraid of." "But why? What have you to lose?"

An atheist visited the great rabbi and philosopher Martin Buber and demanded that Buber prove the existence of God to him. Buber refused, and the atheist got up to leave in anger. As he left, Buber called after him, "But can you be *sure* there is no God?" That atheist wrote, forty years later, "I am still an atheist. But Buber's question has haunted me every day of my life." The Wager has just that haunting power.