

Pascal's Wager

Pascal, excerpt from *Pensees*

Agnosticism

- Atheists provide an argument (a reason to believe or a justification or evidence) that God does not exist – that they know God does not exist.
- Theists provide an argument (a reason to believe or a justification or evidence) that God does exist
- So, if we are not satisfied with either side, we don't have a reason to believe either view – in other words, we are agnostic – we don't know whether God exists.

- Suppose we don't think there is any proof for or against God's existence.
- What should we believe now?
- **Response 1:** suspend belief i.e. don't believe that God exists and don't act on that assumption (Clifford)
- **Response 2:** believe in God anyway (Pascal)

Practical reasons

- Some beliefs might be in my interest to hold even though we don't have epistemic reasons to believe them.
- **Example 1:** suppose that I have an unknown illness, it might be in my interest to believe I will get better — optimism may actually improve my chances of recovery.
- **Example 2:** suppose that I am playing on a basketball team that isn't very good – say they have lost the last 20 games. Even though it is likely that the team will lose the next game, thinking so actually increases the chances of loosing – but if I believe that I will win, even if it is highly unlikely, it improves chances of winning. So, I have a practical reason to think I will win, even though I know that a loss is likely.
- Pascal: we only have practical reasons to believe in God

- Two kinds of reasons: Epistemic and Practical
- Epistemic reasons to believe are related to truth.
 - If I believe there is a God because I think the evidence supports this belief, then my belief is epistemically justified. I believe because I think its likely to be true.
 - The ontological argument, the argument from design, and the argument from contingency try to provide an epistemic reason to believe that there is a God
- Practical reason:
 - one that you should believe, whether or not you know the outcome
 - Practical reasons are self-interested entirely.
 - Pascal offers a practical reason to believe in God, despite the fact that we don't know whether God exists.

She loves me, she loves me not

- The table provides an estimate of value for each possible outcome (e.g. if you ask this person out, and they don't love, then you might feel down, and so the estimate is loss of value -2, but if they do love you then outcome is valued at +10).
- What should you do?
 - If you ask the person out, the total utility is $10-2=8$
 - But, if you don't: the utility = 0
 - Because of the significantly higher utility of asking her out, you have a practical reason to ask her out, even though you don't know whether she loves you or not

	she loves me	she doesn't
Ask out	+10	-2
Don't ask out	0	0

A Practical Reason to Believe in God

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Believe in God	Infinite (Heaven)	-5
Don't believe	Neg. Infinite (Hell) or at best - 10	+10

- Value of believing in God = $\text{inf } -5 = \text{infinite value}$
- Value of not believing in God = $-\text{inf } +10 = - \text{infinite value}$
 - If you think God won't punish people for not believing in him, then you might adjust the calculation: $-5+10 = 5$ value
- Whichever way you interpret the values for not believing in God, you still get a far worse outcome compared to believing in god; in fact, the later outcome is infinitely better.
- So, Pascal says, you have a very good practical reason to believe in God, even though you don't know (have an epistemic reason) that God exists

Objection 1:

- Disingenuous or egotistical to believe in God for personal benefit. It is the wrong reason to believe in God. Will God reward someone who believed in God simply for person benefit?
- We will have to side step this theological issue.

Objection 2: We can't choose to believe

- I can't choose to believe in the way I can choose to raise my arm
 - Exercise: try not believing that the sun will rise tomorrow – it just seems that this cannot be chosen even if we tried.
- If you have concluded that there is no evidence for the believe that God exists, then it seems psychologically difficult, if not impossible, to force yourself to believe in God.
- Issue: can we “psych” ourselves up to believe in God even though we are fully aware that there is no evidence for his existence?

Objection 3:

- Does the wager accurately reflect all possibilities?
- The table assigns values according to the Christian conception of God, i.e. God sends believers to heaven, and non-believers do not receive these awards.
- But, how can Pascal assign these values if he doesn't know that God exists? If he truly does not know this fact, then he can't rule out other possibilities. It is possible that a Christian God does not exist, but an evil God does. The evil God condemns believers of God to hell, and rewards non-believers. This possibility would alter the values entirely. It becomes infinitely better not to believe in God.
- Since we don't know what in fact is true (i.e. whether the Christian God exists or an Evil God), we can't accurately assign values for the outcomes – and so we cannot come up with a practical reason to believe in God