

The Many Faults of Pascal's Wager

Most theologians and religious philosophers of seventeenth century Europe used either faith or fear to inspire belief in the Christian God. They either argued that faith in Christ is a precondition for salvation or that lack of faith will lead to dire consequences (i.e., the Inquisition). Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was one of the first Christian scientists to attempt to use *reason* to argue for the existence of God. *Pascal's Wager*, as the argument came to be known, became accepted among many scientists of his century as a sound argument for belief in the Christian God. Today, however, few scientists who believe in God subscribe to Pascal's Wager, and few philosophers continue to find the argument sound. In this paper, I will examine what I believe are the main faults with Pascal's argument, and suggest possible ways Pascal would have attempted to respond to them.

The logical basis behind Pascal's Wager may be understood by considering a rational skeptic who is trying to decide whether or not to believe in God. The skeptic has only two possible choices: to believe in God or not to believe in God. Pascal then asks, "What are the consequences to the skeptic as a result of either of those two beliefs?" Pascal claims that if the skeptic chooses to believe in God, and thus follows God's Word, he or she will be rewarded with eternal bliss in Heaven. And if the skeptic chooses to disbelieve in God, then he or she may save a few hours a week by not praying, etc., but will suffer the consequences of God's Wrath (i.e., eternal suffering in hell, etc.) Pascal argues since the reward for believing in God (eternal bliss) far outweighs the cost (praying a few hours per week) justifies belief in God. Pascal's argument may be summarized in logical form as follows:

1. Two choices for the skeptic: belief or disbelief (Aristotle's Law of the Excluded Middle)
2. If skeptic believes, then he or she will have to pray a few hours per week.
 - a. If God exists, He will reward the skeptic with eternal bliss.
 - b. If God does not exist, there is no benefit to the skeptic.
3. If skeptic disbelieves, then he or she will not pray.
 - a. If God exists, He will punish the skeptic with eternal hellfire.
 - b. If God does not exist, the skeptic will save a few hours per week over a whole lifetime.
4. Since the benefits of belief (2-a) far outweigh the costs of belief (2-b), and since the costs of disbelief (3-a) far outweigh the benefits of disbelief (3-b), the skeptic should believe in God.

I will now examine *four* major philosophical faults with Pascal's argument, and how he might have responded to them.

The first major problem with this argument falls into the broader category of the *egocentric fallacy*: believing that one is in the center of the intellectual universe. Notice how Pascal cleverly bypasses the question of whether or not God exists and instead focuses on the question of the *skeptic's beliefs*. Pascal has simply replaced reality with belief by arguing that whatever is best to believe must be the truth. Instead of demonstrating that God exists (which is a much harder proposition), Pascal demonstrates that the skeptic would want to believe in God. This is fallacious because there are many things people would *like* to believe and may even benefit from believing, even though those things are *false*. This is similar to a toddler who believes his or her parents are

omnipotent because this belief helps the child feel safe and secure enough to explore the environment. Just as in the child's case, simply benefiting from a belief does not make it true. One way Pascal could reply is that the rational skeptic's beliefs – by assumption – conform to reality. This is however a weak rebuttal to this fault, for even if the rational skeptic believed all true propositions, Pascal's Wager may still deceive the skeptic into believing this particular false proposition. Further, just because the skeptic is rational does not mean he or she may not be deceived into believing a false proposition based on unsound reasoning. This fault undermines the whole basis of Pascal's Wager; however for the sake of argument, we will grant a perfect skeptic whose beliefs match reality in order to examine the other faults with Pascal's approach.

The second major fault in Pascal's argument is found in the first premise, which stems from Aristotle's Law of the Excluded Middle. While it first appears like there are only two choices for the skeptic (belief and disbelief), in fact there is a whole middle area of options. After all, the Christian God is only one of many possible gods in whom a person may believe in – the Muslim god Allah, the Hindu god Krishna, the Greek god Aphrodite, and/or the pagan tree god. By excluding from consideration those gods and hundreds of others, Pascal has unfairly left the skeptic with only two options. Pascal may reply that he is referring to a "Generic, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent Being." The first problem is that such a being is so vague that any argumentation over Him would be fruitless. The second problem with this reply is that it still leaves a large middle ground of beliefs the skeptic may rationally choose from: for example, should the skeptic believe in Two Generic Beings, or just One?

Even accepting the limited options posited by Pascal, one might find fault with Pascal's factual claims about his version of God in premises 2 and 3. Since Pascal's god is omnipotent, He always has the power to be entirely arbitrary. For example, how does Pascal *know* that God would require the skeptic to pray a few hours per week? Perhaps God only requires His subjects to sing a song once in their lifetimes, or conversely, perhaps He requires the skeptic to abandon his materialist lifestyle and spend his or her days on a mountainous retreat in Antarctica in order to gain admission into Heaven. Worse yet, Pascal's God may arbitrarily change his mind *after the fact*, and either forgives the skeptic who disbelieves or punishes the skeptic who believes. Since Pascal has not ruled out random acts of salvation or predetermined damnation, the whole basis for his argument collapses. Pascal may argue that the Holy Bible tells the skeptic about what God requires for entrance into Heaven and that God is Just in His ways. However, this simply begs the question of the original argument since it simply transfers the burden of proof from God's existence to the validity of the Bible. Here Pascal can give nothing more in argument over the egocentric fallacy: "I live in 17th-century Europe, so the Christian Bible must be true."

Lastly, although Blasé Pascal was a brilliant mathematician for his era, his cost-benefit analysis in premise 4 also fails for technical reasons. Pascal makes the problematic assumption that something with infinite reward (eternal bliss) will always outweigh any probability, no matter how small, attached to it. Unfortunately, this is only true for strictly non-zero probabilities – only if the probability of God existing is strictly greater than zero does it follow that infinite reward will always outweigh all other costs. However, Pascal fails to suggest any reason to believe that the probability of God's

existence is strictly non-zero, and to assume so would simply beg the question. If based on other arguments or considerations, the skeptic has good reason to believe that the probability of God's existence is in fact *zero*, then of course the cost-benefit analysis now favors disbelief. Further, even if the probability of God's existence is strictly non-zero (infinitesimal) and the rewards for belief are infinite, the cost-benefit analysis may still favor disbelief. This is true because the product of an infinite reward with an infinitesimal probability could be any value ranging from zero to infinity depending on the relative sizes of the infinities. Pascal could not have known this fact since the infinitesimal calculus on which it is based was not yet invented in his time.

In this paper, I have outlined four major objections to Pascal's Wager, any one of which would be fatal to his argument. The first prevents the argument from even getting off the ground, the second introduces more middle options to the skeptic, the third challenges the factual claims implied by Pascal about God, and the fourth introduces a technicality in the cost-benefit analysis which may tilt the equation in favor of disbelief. Of the four, the first fault – a type of egocentric fallacy – is the most damaging since it confuses reality with the skeptic's beliefs about reality. This is a common strategy among theologians who try to use reason to convince (or con) unsuspecting listeners into belief in their god. It is ironic that the man that introduced reason into theological discourse simultaneously opened an entire Pandora's Box of fallacious arguments based on the egocentric fallacy. In closing, it is important to remember that in this paper I did not prove or disprove the existence of God, but simply showed the problems with using Pascal's Wager as a justification for belief in God. For religious dogma, it is better to stick to faith and perhaps fear.