

Pascal's Wager

"If you believe in God and turn out to be incorrect, you have lost nothing -- but if you don't believe in God and turn out to be incorrect, you will go to hell. Therefore it is foolish to be an atheist."

A more formal statement of the argument would be:

1. One does not know whether God exists.
2. Not believing in God is bad for one's eternal soul if God does exist.
3. Believing in God is of no consequence if God does not exist.
4. Therefore it is in one's interest to believe in God.

Objections:

1. The argument does not indicate which religion to follow. If a person is a follower of one religion, he may end up in another religion's version of hell (or perhaps be reincarnated in a miserable state).
2. Even if we assume that there's *a* God, that doesn't imply that there's one unique God. Which one should we believe in? If we believe in all of them, how will we decide which commandments to follow?

3. The statement that "If you believe in God and turn out to be incorrect, you have lost nothing" is not true. Suppose you believe in the wrong God -- the true God might punish you for your foolishness.

Consider also the deaths or sufferings that have resulted from people rejecting medicine in favor of prayer.

Consider also the possible pain or harm to others who may be horrified by your embrace of this God if they consider this God to be false or unworthy of worship. You may be a heretic in their eyes. To lose the love and society of such people cannot be considered as nothing at all.

4. The argument is based on the assumption that the two possibilities are equally likely -- or at least, that they are of comparable likelihood. If the probability of there being a God is close to zero, the argument becomes much less persuasive.

5. Also, many feel that, for intellectually honest people, belief is based on evidence. Believing is not a matter of will or cost-benefit analysis. Is making a wager based on calculated risk the same as really believing something?

There are two approaches to the argument. The first is to view Statement 1 as an assumption, and Statement 2 as a consequence of it. The problem with this approach is that statement 2 doesn't seem to logically follow from Statement 1.

The alternative approach is to claim that Statements 1 and 2 are both assumptions. The problem with this approach is that Statement 2 is then basically an assumption which states a specific Christian version of theism. Some other religions (e.g. some Jews and some Muslims) may agree with this assumption.

But only they and certain Christians will agree with that assumption. The argument thus collapses to "If you are a Christian (Jew, Muslim...), it is in your interests to believe in God" -- a mere tautology, and not the way Pascal intended the argument to be viewed.

Also, if assume that we don't know that God exists, why should we take Statement 2 over some similar assumption? Isn't it just as likely that God would be angry at people who chose to believe (or bet on his existence) for personal gain? If God is omniscient, he will certainly know who really believes and who has made a calculated wager. How can we discount that possibility that He will spurn those who merely "place their bets"?

Notice also that there is another, unstated, assumption in the argument. It assumes that God actually cares at all whether people truly believe in him. This proposition is asserted by some theistic traditions but not by all.

Some have suggested that the person who chooses to believe based on making Pascal's Wager, can then somehow make the transition to truly believing. Many people don't find it possible to make that leap.

The argument seems to assume that believing is under the direct control of the will. But this seems to be false if it is supposed that everyone can directly control **any** and **all** their beliefs.

It may be said that everyone has the power to at least make themselves believe that God exists, even if they lack the power to make themselves believe other things. It is hard to know whether there are some people who can do this but it seems to be not the case that everyone can make themselves believe that God exists just by deciding to do so. How could the wager be rational for them?

However, taking certain actions that you believe will eventually induce you to believe in God may be fully voluntary (e.g. forcing yourself to go through the motions of prayer, participating in ceremonies, studying holy books, attending sermons or lectures, etc.).

Some of these attempts at making oneself believe that God exists (prayer, worship) seem to be hypocritical actions. Is it safe to assume that God (assuming He exists) will forgive such hypocrisy?

Other actions like studying and listening to sermons may not be hypocritical but which scriptures or sermons are the right ones, the ones that will insure that one is making a rational bet?

Consider that this hypothetical God may require more than simple belief. For example, almost all Christians believe that the Christian God requires trust and obedience from his followers. Yet the wager states that the only thing you risk by believing is being mistaken. Many theists assert that mere belief, without trust, commitment and obedience is not enough to save one's soul. Even devils believe that God exists! So, the argument may rest on inaccurate assumptions about the saving power of mere belief.

Finally, if this God is a fair and just God, surely he will judge people on their actions in life, not just on whether they happen to believe He exists. A God who sends good and kind people to hell simply because they lack belief in His existence is not one that everyone would seriously consider worshipping.