

Pascal's Wager

Excerpts from Alan Hajek of Cal Tech, 1998, 2001
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>

1. Intro...

It is important to contrast Pascal's argument with various putative 'proofs' of the existence of God that had come before it. Anselm's ontological argument, Aquinas' 'five ways', Descartes' ontological and cosmological arguments, and so on, purport to give *a priori* demonstrations that God exists. Pascal is apparently unimpressed by such attempted justifications of theism: "Endeavour ... to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God..." Indeed, he concedes that "we do not know if He is ...". Pascal's project, then, is radically different: he seeks to provide *prudential* reasons for believing in God. To put it crudely, we should wager that God exists because it is the *best bet*.

2. The Argument from Superdominance

Pascal maintains that we are incapable of knowing whether God exists or not, yet we must "wager" one way or the other. Reason cannot settle which way we should incline, but a consideration of the relevant outcomes supposedly can. Here is the first key passage:

"God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up... Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. 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 shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose... But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is... If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

There are exegetical problems already here, partly because Pascal appears to contradict himself. He speaks of "the true" as something that you can "lose", and "error" as something "to shun". Yet he goes on to claim that if you lose the wager that God is, then "you lose nothing". Surely in that case you "lose the true", which is just to say that you have made an error. Pascal believes, of course, that the existence of God is "the true"---but *that* is not something that he can appeal to in this argument. Moreover, it is not because "you must of necessity choose" that "your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other". Rather, by Pascal's own account, it is because "[r]eason can decide nothing here". (If it could, then it might well be shocked - namely, if you chose in a way contrary to it.)

Following McClennen 1994, Pascal's argument seems to be best captured as presenting the following decision matrix:

	<i>God exists</i>	<i>God does not exist</i>
<i>Wager for God</i>	Gain all	Status quo
<i>Wager against God</i>	Misery	Status quo

Wagering for God superdominates wagering against God: the worst outcome associated with wagering for God (status quo) is at least as good as the best outcome associated with wagering against God (status quo); and if God exists, the result of wagering for God is strictly better than

the result of wagering against God. (The fact that the result is *much* better does not matter yet.) Pascal draws the conclusion at this point that rationality requires you to wager for God.