PASCAL'S WAGER

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A. Pascal's statement of his wager argument is couched in terms of the theory of probability and the theory of games, and the exposition is unclear and unnecessarily complicated. The following is a 'creative' reformulation of the argument designed to avoid some of the objections which have been or might be raised against the original.

B. Premises:
1. 'If there is a God, we are incapable of knowing either what he is, or whether he exists' (Pascal). And further, we have no way of knowing that God does not exist.
2. If you perform religious rites with enthusiasm, and never question the claims of some religion, you will come to be devoutly religious. 'Go then and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples' (William James' version of a remark by Pascal).
3. If you are devoutly religious—Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu, polytheist, etc.—and there is a God, then he will send you to heaven when you die.

Conclusion: Solely on grounds of rational self-interest, you should participate in religious rites, refrain from sceptical thoughts, etc.

Proof: Consider the following case: A very rich man who is fond of jazz promises that in two years, he is going to toss an unbiased coin. If it lands heads, he will give each devoted jazz fan a million dollars. If it lands tails, he won't do anything. Every Sunday for the next two years, a one-hour jazz concert is scheduled. It is known to be highly likely that if you attend these concerts religiously, and avoid listening to classical music, you will become a devoted jazz fan.

This case is clearly analogous to the situation of the man who is reflecting as to whether or not he should take up religious observances. And in either case the answer is obvious: you had better start listening uncritically to a lot of jazz. You may return to classical music as a millionaire, and you may get to heaven and not have to listen to sermons any more.

2Georges Brunet, in Le Pari de Pascal, pp. 62-3, points out that Pascal was not the originator of the wager argument. Other writings on the background of Pascal's argument are Le Pari de Pascal, by A. Ducas, and 'Le Fragment Infini-Rien et ses Sources', by M. J. Orcibal, in Blaise Pascal, L'Homme et L'Oeuvre, section V.
3William James, The Will to Believe, pp. 5-6.
believers of this pattern from their infinite reward’. It seems that James is overlooking the fact that ‘believers of this pattern’ are going to be just the same as other believers. Their belief isn’t sustained by the argument, nor is it acquired by simply deciding to believe—James rightly regards the idea of ‘believing by our volition’ as ‘simply silly’—rather, their faith is acquired as a result of actions which they were persuaded by the argument to perform. Once belief comes, the believer may genuinely despise his old sceptical self and shudder to think that such considerations as self-interest ever moved him. He may sincerely perform acts of faith, with no thought of his ultimate reward. A cynic may decide that the most convenient arrangement is a death-bed conversion; but if he is really converted, no one will despise this cynicism more than he.

Since James says that he is presenting Pascal’s words ‘translated freely’ it seems fair to protest against his representing Pascal as saying that ‘any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain’. Pascal’s exposition is unclear, but he doesn’t make such a mistake as this. James also presents the choice as one between belief and unbelief, which is probably one reason why he considers the argument immoral. But Pascal doesn’t put it as a choice between belief and unbelief. He speaks obscurely of ‘risking your life’, where he seems to be asking, not that you believe, but that you observe religious rites and abstain from criticism in the hope of being led to belief.

James also presents Pascal’s argument as starting with the claim that human reason can’t tell us what to do and ending with the claim that a certain course is obviously the reasonable one. This is especially reprehensible when presented as a translation. Jean Mesnard makes the same mistake in paraphrasing Pascal’s argument, apparently with approval, as starting with the claim that ‘reason cannot determine our choice’ and ending with ‘Our reason therefore commands us to bet on the existence of God’. Pascal actually starts by saying that reason cannot settle the question as to whether or not there is a God, and concludes by saying that reason does clearly advise us to ‘bet’ that there is a God—which for Pascal means being religious or sincerely trying to become so.

D. Various presentations of the wager argument defend it against the charge that it is an immoral argument. But no presentation I know of notices that the argument, which is presented as an appeal to a self-interested, rational sceptic who is completely uncommitted,

2See Bibliography.
3M. L. Goldmann (‘Le Pari, est-il Écrit “Pour le Libertin”?’ in Blaise Pascal,

is simply invalid, because no such person could accept the premises. Premise 1 might not be acceptable to an agnostic because it considers only the possibility of a transcendent God. The agnostic might think that investigation of occult phenomena could answer the God question, though of course only an affirmative answer would be so obtainable. Still, the sceptic would certainly admit that the God question is pretty much up in the air. So with ‘could not know’ changed to ‘do not know’, premise 1 would be acceptable to a sceptic.

The sceptic might doubt that he is the sort of person of whom the factual claim of premise 2 is true. But he would probably admit that there are measures sufficient to bring him into a religious frame of mind, even if the measures required were somewhat more severe than are needed by the average man. So he might accept premise 2 while still preserving his title as a sceptic or agnostic.

However, no self-respecting sceptic could accept premise 3. For one thing, if he accepts premise 1 as stated, that is, accepts that if there is a God, then ‘we are incapable of knowing what he is’, then he cannot consistently agree with premise 3 that one thing we can be sure of about the possible owner-operator of the universe is that he is the sort of being who will send religious people to heaven. And premise 1 apart, why should not the neutral sceptic think it just as likely that God will save atheists and agnostics as that he will save believers? He might hope that it is more likely, either purely for his own sake, or on moral grounds.

The fact that, say, Christianity or Mohammedanism promise their adherents an infinite reward, and, while, say, dialectical materialism does not, cannot be produced as a good reason for a neutral adopting one of the former positions rather than the latter. The argument, ‘If you become devoutly religious, and religion is right about there being a God, then you will get an infinite reward’, is just invalid. It would be all right to argue ‘If you become devoutly religious, and religion is right about there being a God and religion is right about one claim it makes about his character, then you will get an infinite reward’. But with these premises, there are no longer just the two possibilities, ‘Religion is right about there being a God or it isn’t right about there being a God’. There are three possibilities: Religion is right about there being a God and right about his character; or religion is right about there being a God and wrong.

L’Homme et L’Oeuvre, section IV) argues that the argument is not for the sceptic who is satisfied with this world, but is rather for the man who is conscious of the miserable human condition. It is certainly consistent for a self-interested, rational sceptic to feel unhappy with man’s lot. But even if he has the appropriate human longings, the rational sceptic must find Pascal’s argument invalid.
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about his character, or religion is wrong about there being a God. E. However, an attempt might be made to reinstate the wager argument in spite of the observations in D, as follows:

Either (a) there is a god who will send only religious people to heaven or (b) there is not. To be religious is to wager for (a). To fail to be religious is to wager for (b). We can’t settle the question whether (a) or (b) is the case, at least not at present. But (a) is clearly vastly better than (b). With (a), infinite bliss is guaranteed, while with (b) we are still in the miserable human condition of facing death with no assurance as to what lies beyond. So (a) is clearly the best wager.

This arrangement does indeed appeal to a self-interested, uncommitted sceptic—it does not presuppose anything about the nature of god—the assumption about the nature of god is explicit in the argument. A sceptic might accept this argument and still deserve the title of ‘sceptic’, but he would not deserve the title of ‘clear thinker’.

The argument just presented is formally similar to the following:

Either (a) there is a god who will send you to heaven only if you commit a painful ritual suicide within an hour of first reading this, or (b) there is not. We cannot settle the question whether (a) or (b) is the case or it is at least not settled yet. But (a) is vastly preferable to (b), since in situation (a) infinite bliss is guaranteed, while in (b) we are left in the usual miserable human condition. So we should wager for (a) by performing the suicidal ritual.

It might be objected that we can be sure that there is not a god who will send us to heaven only if we commit suicide but we can’t be sure that there is not a god who will send us to heaven only if we are religious. However, a sceptic would demand proof for this.

Both the foregoing arguments might gain plausibility through confusing possibility with probability. Certainly Pascal’s application of probability theory could be severely criticised. However, my purpose has not been to criticise this aspect of the argument, but only to point out that the argument cannot stand as an appeal to someone who subscribes to no religious presuppositions.

F. Though my criticism of Pascal’s argument has not been based on attacking his use of probability theory, it may be worth noting that if his use of probability theory were right, probability theory would be in a bad way.

Pascal uses a certain method from probability theory for calculating whether a given bet is a good one, to support his argument. The method is as follows: given a bet on whether or not an event E will happen, you multiply the probability of E by the odds offered (with the largest number in the odds, if there is one, in the numerator). If this product exceeds one, and you are getting the high end of the

odds, then the bet is a good one for you no matter how low the probability of E may be.

The limitations of this method are well known and Pascal’s application of it creates a situation somewhat like the Petersburg Paradox. But I think we need not go as far as the Petersburg Paradox to criticise Pascal’s application of this method. It is enough to observe that in applying the method, Pascal takes for granted that the hypothesis that there is a God has some non-zero probability.

The only support Pascal could have for this is the so-called ‘Principle of Indifference’, the fallaciousness of which is well known. Pascal assumes that if a proposition is logically possible and not known to be false, then it has some non-zero probability. But the propositional function ‘There exists a God who prefers contemplating the real number x more than any other activity’ provides us with a set of mutually incompatible propositions, each of which is logically and epistemically possible, such that there could not be a non-zero probability for each member of the set. Even if this ‘propositional function’ is rejected as nonsense, such a function as ‘There are n rabbits in the universe’ would provide a set of mutually incompatible propositions infinitely many of which would be both logically and epistemically possible. They could all be assigned probability numbers, e.g. from the series ½, ¼, ⅛, …, but such an assignment would be absurd.

G. Of course, there remains the argument that if you become devoutly religious (and not a Calvinist!) you will think that you are going to get an infinite reward, and this is pleasanter than not thinking so. Whether Pascal would have stooped to this is a question outside the scope of the present essay.

H. It must be emphasised that my criticisms have not been intended to suggest that religious belief is unreasonable. It is one thing to hold that reason directs us to be religious, quite another to hold that it is (perfectly) reasonable to be religious.

Even in this connection, it is not the belief in an infinite gain which makes it reasonable to be religious. I may get the idea into my head that setting fire to the bus station will get me into heaven, but this belief does not make it reasonable for me to perform this religious act. How I got the belief would be crucial in determining whether the religious act of setting fire to the bus station is reasonable.

For example, if someone were dressed as an angel in a very convincing way, and lowered by an invisible wire to hang in front of me as I was climbing a cliff where I had every reason to think no one


else was present, and this ‘angel’ told me to burn the bus station, and I did, and the judge found out about the prank, and found out how diabolically convincing it had been, he might well dismiss my case, calling my action reasonable. Or again, if a heavenly host actually appeared to me and to all mankind, and promised us all eternal bliss if I burn down the bus station, my fellow men might consider me irrational to refuse.

On the other hand, if I were talked into burning the bus station by some sleazy prophet, my religious observance might well be called irrational.

I. There remains one way of reconstruing the wager argument so as to make the preceding criticisms inapplicable. It might be observed that many professed sceptics have lingering tendencies to believe in some religion, and that proposing a wager is an effective way to exploit these tendencies to bring them back into the fold.

Thus a lapsed Christian might feel that there is a 1/100 chance that Christianity is right, while assigning no likelihood at all to the claims of other religions. Furthermore, he may be sure that if Christianity is right, then however ordinary sinners and believers in other religions may fare, hard-boiled atheists will fare very badly indeed. For such a person as this, the wager might be thought to exert a powerful attraction to return to active Christianity.

However, this doesn’t seem to be true in actual practice, and there are good reasons why this should be so. For one thing, if someone is a hard-boiled atheist, he won’t assign any positive probability to Christian claims about God. And if he isn’t a hard-boiled atheist and does assign a positive probability to Christian claims, he is likely to imagine the Christian God as too nice to be stingy with rewards for people in his category, so the wager won’t lead him to change his schedule.

Furthermore, lingering religiosity is not in itself enough to make the wager appetising. It has to be lingering religiosity which the agent will express in a positive probability estimate, or otherwise the wager won’t get started. And many people who have superstitious tendencies would still not attach any positive probability to these superstitions.

And finally, even when someone does attach a positive probability to some religion’s god-claims (and to no other’s) the wager argument is not sure to bind him. Let us very roughly distinguish between objective and subjective theories of probability by noting that on an objective theory, it is not necessary that someone’s judgment of a probability have any connection with his wagering behaviour; while on a subjective view, given the person’s value scheme, his wagering behaviour is essential to determining his probability judgments.

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Then on the objective view, even given a positive probability estimate for some religion and a definite preference for heaven, being willing to make the wager doesn’t follow and it is even a vexed question (at least) to show that wager-reluctance in such circumstances would even be less than reasonable. And on the subjective view, the probability estimate won’t be of much use in persuading the agent to wager, considering that willingness to wager was an essential feature in determining the probability estimate.

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