Is it rational to choose to believe in God?

PASCAL’S WAGER

Pascal’s Wager doesn’t claim that we have good evidence for God’s existence, so it isn’t theoretically or cognitively rational to believe in God. Rather, it argues, we have good practical reason to believe in God, because we stand to benefit greatly from such a belief. It is an attempt to justify belief in God quite independently of any attempt to prove God’s existence. Here is Pascal’s argument (Pensées, § 233), though the format and numbering is mine:

1. ‘God is, or He is not.’ But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here… Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least.
2. 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.
3. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose…
4. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is…
5. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing…

That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much.

6. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain…you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain.
7. But there is an eternity of life and happiness… there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite…
8. wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain…you must give all…

Pascal says (1) we cannot use reason to prove that God exists nor that God does not exist. But we must believe one or the other. In this sort of case, it is perfectly acceptable to decide your belief on practical grounds. The pros and cons can be summarized in a decision matrix (a table of the benefits and losses of each possible decision):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>God exists</th>
<th>God does not exist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wager for God</td>
<td>Infinite gain</td>
<td>Finite loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wager against God</td>
<td>Finite or infinite loss</td>
<td>Finite gain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The potential gain of wagering for God and being right is infinite. As long as there is some chance that God exists, i.e. the probability that God exists is not zero, this outweighs any finite gain that may come from wagering against God and any finite loss that may come from being wrong. It is irrational, therefore, not to wager for God. For now, we will treat ‘wager for God’ to include ‘believe in God’; but we’ll return to this point in the last objection to Pascal’s argument.
Two inconsistencies
Pascal first says (2) that what is at stake is ‘the true and the good’. We want to avoid error and believe what is true; but we also want to secure our happiness. He then claims (5) that if we believe in God, but God does not exist, we lose nothing.

This seems wrong on two counts: first, we have believed a falsehood, so we have ‘lost’ truth. However, by (3) – that reason is indifferent to which way we wager – this might be counted as no personal loss; we have not violated or undermined our rational capacities. But the second loss could be to our happiness: belief in God is usually thought to carry certain burdens of piety and morality. Pascal doesn’t provide any argument to suggest that we will be as happy believing in God as not believing in God. But it turns out that it doesn’t matter if belief in God carries a loss, because it will be finite. Against the infinite possible gain, this carries no force.

The second inconsistency relates to the probability of God’s existence. For the argument to work, Pascal must suppose the probability is not zero. Absolutely no chance of an infinite gain is no incentive! But he says (6) there is an equal chance of loss and gain. This is unwarranted – by his earlier assertion that (1) ‘reason can decide nothing here’, we cannot know that the probability of God’s existence is 0.5. Worse, (1) also questions whether we can know that the probability of God’s existence is not zero.

But Pascal’s assertion in (1) could be taken as an assertion that we cannot know God does not exist. We cannot establish what the objective probability of God’s existence is; subjectively, then, the probability of God’s existence cannot be zero. We must assign some positive probability to God’s existence; this much reason can decide, even if it cannot establish what that probability should be.

But why shouldn’t we refuse to assign any figure of probability to God’s existence? If we do this, then the wager does not work. As Pascal notes in (7) there must be a chance of gain; if we cannot say whether there is such a chance or not, there is no decision we are rationally obliged to make.

Analysis of the argument
The main argument comes in 6-8. In (6), Pascal explains the rationality of gambling. (He measures utility in terms of ‘lives’, perhaps intending to capture the contrast between this one life and eternal (infinite) life.) If there is an equal chance of winning or losing, it is rational to bet 1 to gain 3. If we are betting money, then

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Win £3</th>
<th>Lose</th>
<th>Expected utility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bet £1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>(0.5x3) + (0.5x-1) = 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t bet</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since 0.5 > 0, it is rational to bet if the chances are 50:50 and the gain is 3 times the stake.

In wagering for God, Pascal cannot claim that the chances are 50:50. We don’t know what the chance is of God’s existing. However, (7) the gain is infinite, while the stake remains finite. So no matter how small the chance of God’s existence, ∞ x any finite chance = ∞. Therefore (8) infinite gain is the choice to wager for.
OBJECTIONS
Philosophers have raised four types of objection to the argument. First, the decision matrix is wrong: if there are more options than Pascal allows for or the weightings are different, the argument doesn’t work:

1. The utility of eternal life can’t be infinite, either because infinite utility makes no sense or because infinite utility couldn’t be appreciated by finite beings like us. Whether we should wager for God depends on (how large the potential gain is) x (the probability of God’s existence). Since we don’t know either, we aren’t rationally compelled to wager for God.
2. Why think that God bestows infinite utility on all and only those who wager for him? Perhaps all are saved. Or perhaps only the Predestined are. Or perhaps God bestows different utilities on different people, depending on other factors.
3. Which God should we believe in? If Pascal’s wager works, doesn’t it work for any god? So we should believe in Roman, Greek and Hindu gods as well? But we can’t be rationally required to hold inconsistent beliefs.

A second objection is that rationality does not require us to maximize expected utility. Beliefs are a matter of theoretical rationality, while maximizing utility is a criterion of practical rationality if it is a criterion of rationality at all. Theoretical rationality doesn’t apply here (by (1)), but that is no reason to assume that the criterion of practical rationality takes over. We could instead argue that there is no belief it is rational to adopt.

Third, we might argue that it is immoral to wager for God. To form beliefs by wagering, rather than by evidence, is to corrupt oneself (Pascal is wrong to think we do not corrupt reason). Or again, if God condemned all those who do not wager for Him, including honest non-believers, God is immoral. Or the entire matter of ‘wagering’ is simply unworthy of such a grave issue as belief in God.

Finally, we can object that Pascal’s wager wrongly assumes belief in God can be a matter of will. We discuss this in the next section.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN WE ‘CHOOSE’ WHAT TO BELIEVE?
Try to believe that there is an elephant standing in front of you. Try really hard. Why can’t you succeed?

Belief by its nature aims at truth:

1. We can evaluate a belief as true or false – this is not true of other kinds of mental states, such as fear, hope, or desire.
2. To believe that p (some proposition) is to believe that p is true. To believe ‘God exists’ is to believe that it is true that ‘God exists’. So if you recognise that ‘God exists’ is false, you abandon your belief that God exists.
3. To say ‘I believe that God exists’ implies that ‘God exists’ is true. For instance, it is paradoxical to say ‘I believe that God exists, but ‘God exists’ is false’.

The nature of belief suggests that forming beliefs can’t be voluntary. If we could choose what to believe, then we could form a belief without any regard to the truth of the proposition we believe. Furthermore, having consciously chosen to have the belief, we would know that we formed it irrespective of its truth. But to believe that God exists, is
to believe that ‘God exists’ is a true statement. But I cannot choose what is true. (Of course, you can choose whether to say that you believe that God exists. But this is not the same as believing that God exists – because we can be insincere.)

However, this is no objection to Pascal, as he does not claim that we can choose to believe in God in this way. Instead, he says that to ‘wager for God’ is to take steps to cultivate a belief in God, e.g. by adopting a religious lifestyle, attending worship, observing rituals. These are things we can choose to do, and over time, they will bring about belief. But how can what we choose to do affect our beliefs, and does this show that beliefs can be voluntary?

First, what people want to be true does tend to affect what they believe, in various ways. For instance, we only pay attention to evidence that confirms what we want to believe, and ignore evidence that undermines it. For instance, we might believe that our family and friends are nicer people than, in fact, they are by noticing when they are kind and ignoring when they are not. But this only shows that belief is not voluntary, but formed in relation to evidence. Someone cannot believe that their friends are kind while also believing that the only reason they have that belief is because they want to have it. The same applies to believing that God exists.

We might object: surely people form and hold on to all sorts of ethical and religious beliefs without any real attempt to discover the truth. They believe what they do for all sorts of individual and social factors, but their beliefs are simply prejudices, and no form of evidence or argument changes their minds. Doesn’t this show that beliefs can be voluntary?

Even in these cases, the idea that someone can believe that there is no evidence for their belief while still holding on to their belief is peculiar. (Most people assert that there is evidence, even if they can’t say what it is!) And certainly, their beliefs are not rational – but Pascal wants to establish that belief is God is not a mere prejudice.

However, even if we want God to exist, this is not the way in which Pascal suggests we acquire belief in God. So, a second connection between the will and belief is that we can voluntarily undertake some action that will lead to us coming to have the belief that $p$. For instance, I could go to a hypnotist and ask him to cause me to have the belief that $p$. My belief, though, is not voluntary – I am caused to have it, though in this case by hypnotism rather than evidence. The case of coming to believe in God through adopting a religious lifestyle is analogous, not with hypnotism (!), but in that we can choose to act as if we believe in God. Over time, says Pascal, a genuine belief in God will form.

For this to happen, we cannot think that the only reason we believe in God is because we adopted a religious lifestyle. In retrospect, we may see this as a cause of our belief; but through our new lifestyle, Pascal thinks, we will become sensitive to experiences that justify our new belief. These experiences are not available to anyone, but only someone who has set themselves on the path to belief. That does not make them less genuine, only restricted to those who sincerely seek God.