

Pascal's Wager
September 26, 2005

I. Recap

Does God exist?

Rational theism (Anselm): we can prove that God exists with the ontological argument.

Irrational theism: belief in God despite compelling evidence that God doesn't exist.

Arational theism: we cannot prove that God exists; compelling *evidence* is not available, but we can provide *pragmatic grounds* for belief in God.

II. Kinds of Reasons

It may have occurred to you that we are going about considering the existence of God in a misguided way. Few people believe in a Supreme Being because they were forced to this conclusion by powerful arguments. For many, part of the religious attitude is that to believe in God is to put yourself at *risk*, trusting that you will not be let down in the end. This at any rate is Pascal's view:

Who will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly [to prove it], and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. (RR 115)

So the whole approach in terms of proof and evidence is arguably beside the point. What we have before us is not a *theoretical* question about what is or is not likely to be true, but a *practical* question about how to act: granted that God is not supported by the evidence, shall we accept God or shan't we?

But if the question is not a theoretical one but a practical one, we have to approach it in a whole different way. To find out what is likely to be true, we look for evidence. To find out which of two possible actions to perform, we ask, which action is likely to confer the greater benefit? To continue along these lines, we need to further complicate the distinction drawn in the first lecture. Remember we distinguished: *motivating reasons* v. *justifying reasons*. I wanted to distinguish motivating reasons from justifying reasons because I wanted us to focus not on what *causes* us to believe something (I might be caused to believe something by even a bump on the head!), but one's *basis* for believing it, i.e., the reasons that seem to justify the claim in question.

Normally when we consider whether to believe something, what matters is the evidence we have for it and the likelihood of its truth. But coming to believe something can also be regarded as a kind of action that may or may not be *practically* justified. This suggests a further distinction among justifying reasons:

- evidential reasons (reasons giving evidence that the claim in question is true);
- practical reasons (reasons for action, and for belief when belief is considered as a kind of action).

For example, let "vegetarianism" be the belief that it is wrong to eat meat. Contrast:
I accept vegetarianism because as a teenager it was a way for me to rebel against my father.
(motivating/generating reason)

I accept vegetarianism because causing unnecessary pain and suffering to animals is wrong and eating meat causes such pain and suffering. (evidential reason)

I accept vegetarianism because it helps me stay healthy. (practical reason)

Just to get the hang of this, suppose that you are facing a decision “under conditions of uncertainty”: suppose the question is whether to take an umbrella or not, on a day when the chance of rain is one half. Since the value of taking as opposed to leaving the umbrella will be different depending on whether or not it rains, we might start out by listing all the possible scenarios, and how well things work out for us in all of them. There are four: taking and rain, taking and dry, leaving and rain, and leaving and dry. How should we decide? Here’s a proposal:

Practical Rationality Principle: The practically rational thing to do is the thing with the highest expected value, where the expected value (x) = the sum of the values of the various possible outcomes that x could give rise to, weighted according to their probabilities.

Should I take an umbrella along to class on a day when the chance of rain is 50%?

probabilities:		.50	.50	
poss. circumstances:		<u>Rain</u>	<u>Dry</u>	<u>Expected Value=</u>
options:	TAKE	10	-4	3 <<
	LEAVE	-20	2	-9

EV(TAKE)

= value of taking if rain x chance of rain + value of taking if dry x chance of dry

$$= 10 \times .50 + -4 \times .50 = 3$$

EV(LEAVE)

= value of leaving if rain x chance of rain + value of leaving if dry x chance of dry

$$= -20 \times .50 + 2 \times .50 = -9.$$

This suggests you should take the umbrella. But if the probability of rain is different, (or the values you assign to the possible outcomes) you could reach a different result. E.g., if the probability of rain is only 10%:

$$EV(TAKE) = 1 + -3.6 = -2.6$$

$$EV(LEAVE) = -2 + 1.8 = -.2 \quad \ll$$

III. The Wager

Suppose now that we apply this procedure to theism. Let's start by being as neutral as possible about the chances of God's existence. If we don't have evidence either way, suppose that the probability of God's existence is 50%. Assuming that God exists, believers are rewarded with eternal joy and happiness as a result of being united with their Lord in heaven. Eternal bliss is infinitely valuable so the first box gets filled like this: ∞ . Disbelievers, let’s assume, are punished with eternal damnation and torment, in a place where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. This is infinitely horrible so the second box gets filled like this: $-\infty$. Now what if God does not exist? Then the believer, let’s assume, suffers some inconvenience as a function of his/her observant lifestyle, and the nonbeliever, let’s assume enjoys an equal amount of pleasure. Then we have:

probabilities:		.50	.50	
poss. circumstances:		<u>God exists</u>	<u>No God</u>	<u>Expected Value=</u>
options:	BEL	∞	-20	∞
	DON'T BEL	$-\infty$	20	$-\infty$

EV(BEL)

$$\begin{aligned}
&= \text{value of BEL if God exists} \times \text{prob. God exists} + \text{value of DON'T BEL if no God} \times \text{prob. no God} \\
&= \infty \times .5 + -20 \times .5 \\
&= \infty
\end{aligned}$$

EV(DON'T BEL)

$$\begin{aligned}
&= \text{value of DON'T BEL if God exists} \times \text{prob. God exists} + \text{value of DON'T BEL if no God} \times \text{prob. no God.} \\
&= -\infty \times .50 + 20 \times .50 \\
&= -\infty
\end{aligned}$$

It looks like there's a clear, indeed an infinitely large, advantage to believing! So that's what we should do. In short:

1. Whether to believe in God is not a theoretical decision but a practical one: how should I live my life?
2. The practically rational thing to do is the thing with the highest expected utility. (Practical Rationality Principle)
3. The expected value of theism is higher than that of atheism.
4. Therefore, I should believe in God.

IV. Objections

A. "Minor" Objections:

- i. Belief is not under our control. We don't choose whether or not to believe things.
- ii. The Wager is cynical and God would not reward a theist whose belief is based on it.
- iii. The probability of God is much smaller than 50%.
- iv. One's life will be based on a lie if one accepts the Wager and God doesn't exist.

B. "Major" Objection: Problem of Too Many Gods

So far, following Pascal, we have assumed a very specific sort of God, call him or her the God of Abraham, i.e., the God that many would argue is common to Christianity, Judaism and Islam. But what about the gods of Hinduism and other polytheistic religions? What about the gods worshipped by any of hundreds of different religions around the world? What for that matter about possible gods not worshipped by any religion? Why not an *AntiGod* who is just like the God of Abraham except in being absolutely evil? Why not an *Jealous God* who will reward you for believing in him but has an infinitely horrible fate in store for you if you so much as *think* of believing in the God of Abraham? Or a *Shy God* who gives you everlasting life provided you *don't* believe in him or indeed in any Gods, and rains infinite terror on you if you do believe?

The trouble is that as far as Pascal's actual reasoning goes, it would seem that we have just as good an argument for believing in many of these other Gods (or, in the case of the Jealous and Shy Gods, disbelieving) as we do for believing in the God of Abraham. Yet to believe in *all of them at once* makes no practical or theoretical sense. It makes no *practical* sense because some of these Gods will rain infinite punishment on you if you believe in the others. It makes no *theoretical* sense because these various Gods actually contradict each other. The Christian God by definition is greater than any other thing, so it logically cannot coexist with the AntiGod. This makes a belief in all the Gods like a belief that it's raining and not raining: a literal contradiction. But how is one to choose which God to believe in?

i. First Answer: All Gods aren't equally probable

Granted that none of these Gods can be ruled out, they aren't all equally probable. Contrary to what Pascal suggests, we do have at least *some* evidence about these matters. There are various kinds of holy writings (the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, etc.) that are at least partially checkable. Also the very fact that a religion has managed to attract and sustain adherents over thousands of years is a mark in its favor, for one explanation of how this happens is that the religion's God is helping out. So, the proposal is, since the expected utilities of belief in any of these Gods is the same (infinity), believe in the God that the empirical evidence favors.

Problem: Even granting that the empirical evidence does *some* work here, surely it doesn't zero in on a *unique* God. How to choose between the Gods of the great religions? Can't easily say they're all the *same*. And even if they were, still the *conduct* required by these religions is greatly different. How do we decide whether to give our children bar mitzvahs, for example, or rather confirmations? Also, isn't there a problem with believing in the God of Abraham if there's even a tiny chance of a God who will send me to hell if I do?

ii. Second Answer: Choose simplest hypothesis.

When the data doesn't determine a single answer, what is the rational way to proceed? The scientists will tell us that we should pick the *simplest* hypothesis of those available. Here it seems that the OOG God, or the particular version of that God advanced by Anselm, has a real advantage. According to Anselm, God is simply an absolutely perfect being. Everything else true of the OOG God, follows from his absolute perfection.

Problem: The idea that everything about the OOG God follows from its absolute perfection is doubtful. Does perfection tell us whether God is in time or out of it? More important, does perfection tell us how God wants to be worshipped? This is the kind of thing we need to know if we are to make the decision with the best long term benefits.

C. REAL MANY GODS PROBLEM:

All of this is relatively minor, however, compared to the real problem. Let's agree that the rational agent should perform the action with the highest expected value. It has appeared thus far that *lots* of God hypotheses have *infinite* expected value; the issue is how do we choose between them? Actually though, *no* God hypothesis has infinite expected value. This can be seen if we take another look at the chart:

probabilities:		.50	.50
poss. circumstances:		<u>God exists</u>	<u>No God</u>
options:	BEL	∞	-20
	DON'T BEL	$-\infty$	20

But once the possibility of alternative Gods is thrown into the hopper, the figures in the right hand column become questionable to say the least. Is it really clear that if you believe, and God doesn't exist, then you lose only 20? Because remember, there are *various* ways it can happen that the God of Abraham doesn't exist. One way is that no God exists; another one way is that the Anti-Abrahamic God exists, and puts you through eternal hell if you believe in the God of Abraham. That's certainly worse than -20!! So we need a new chart: (GA=God of Abraham, AG=Anti-Abrahamic God)

probabilities ??:		.50	.10	.40
poss. circumstances:		<u>GA exists</u>	<u>AA exists</u>	<u>No God exists</u>
options:	BEL GA	∞	$-\infty$	-20

Whatever nonzero probabilities you assign, believing no longer has an advantage over disbelieving. So, let GA have probability .50, AA have probability .10, and no God have probability .40. Then the expected value of believing is

$$EV(\text{BEL GA}) = \infty \times .50 + -\infty \times .10 + -20 \times .40 = \infty + -\infty + -8$$

And the expected value of disbelieving is

$$EV(\text{DON'T BEL GA}) = -\infty \times .50 + \infty \times .10 + 20 \times .40 = -\infty + \infty + 8$$

The *immediate* problem here is that mathematically there is no well-defined way to calculate the result, because while infinite numbers can be added there's no well-defined way to subtract them. This suggests that the very project of calculating EV in the context of infinite expected payoffs is misguided.

But suppose we bracket that concern. It would certainly seem that here the expected value calculation favors, *if anything*, disbelieving in GA, since you don't have to pay the cost of religious practice. The advantage of believing in GA over disbelieving has entirely dissipated. Alternatively, one might argue that no God is favored; with these infinite values around, the finite ones can be ignored, hence we get the *same* result in both cases. But in any case, there is no basis for saying that belief in the God of Abraham is warranted on the basis of the Wager.