

PASCAL'S WAGER

We can know things without knowing their nature:

- Infinite *numbers*

We know of infinite numbers and finite numbers and bodies all in the same way.

We do not know of God in the same way:

- Knowledge of existence—by faith
- Knowledge of nature/essence—“in glory”

Consider “belief in god” as a “natural” question

What are the reasons (epistemic justification) a theist can give for belief?

- None

What is the justification for each belief:

- God is
- God is not

Pascal’s Answer: Neither is epistemically (rationally) defensible.

We must make a choice.

- Law of Excluded Middle
 - Decided rationally and of necessity for both
 - Deciding is a rational wager
- Error and misery
- At stake
 - Reason & knowledge
 - Will & happiness
- Potential loses
 - Truth
 - Goodness

The Wager*		
<i>Possible Choices</i>	<i>God is</i>	<i>God is not</i>
Believe	$+\infty$	$+ (< \infty)$
Not Believe	$< \infty$	$- (< \infty)$

“ $< \infty$ ” means “finite”

*Wager under uncertainty, not risk

- The rational choice is to believe—“to act as if one believes: taking holy water, having mass said, etc.”
- Acting as if one believes will eventually “make one faithful, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury....”
- Certain finite (immoral) pleasures are traded for uncertain infinite pleasures (derived morally).

The Wager only yields pragmatic conclusions, not epistemic conclusions.

Criticisms:

1. Infinity is a concept, not a value; i.e., cannot assign infinite values to costs/benefits, gains/loses.
2. Necessity of epistemically choosing is irrelevant for pragmatic purposes without assuming a risk as well. We can (and maybe should) withhold epistemic judgment (rational decision):
 - A. Reasons for "needing" to decide are logical, not pragmatic.
 - B. Truth values of propositions are not like coin tosses—the pink elephant. Is the "epistemic probability" of either being true really 50%?
 - C. Russell's Tea Pot
3. Overly simplified
 - A. Hidden assumptions favor Christianity over other religions; assumes an exclusivist Christian deity.
4. Theistic criticism: Acting as if one believes is insufficient for gaining the infinite goods. ("For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Ephesians 2:89. Other relevant verses to Pascal's Wager: Romans 3:28, 5:1; James 2:14- 26)
5. Trading epistemic truth for pragmatic gains is too much to wager. (Clifford)
6. It is not clear that believing, where god may not exist, is better than not believing.
7. A. Prison population, John Geoghan and Pope Benedict XVI, Larry Langford, Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson, Prosperity theologians, Bill O'Reilly.

B. Is it possible to be a non-theist and be a moral person? (See examples below)

C. Even if the moral claim were true, becoming a better person morally does not provide *evidence for or against* epistemic belief.

Further consideration:

- When added to pure Consequentialist ethics (and converted to a risk avoidance wager) yields immoral results
- A. [Persecutor's Wager](#)

Appendix: 1997 Federal Bureau of Prisons from Denise Golumbaski, as formatted in Rice/Swift

Note that in this version, the names of a couple of religious groups remain non-standardized, and self-identified "Atheist" remains separate from "Unknown/None."

Response	Number	%
Catholic	29267	39.164%
Protestant	26162	35.008%
Muslim	5435	7.273%
American Indian Nation	2408	3.222%
Rasta	1734	2.320%
Jewish	1485	1.987%
Church of Christ	1325	1.773%
Pentecostal	1303	1.744%
Moorish	1093	1.463%
Buddhist	1066	1.426%
Jehovah Witness	882	1.180%
Adventist	665	0.890%
Orthodox	621	0.831%
Mormon	375	0.502%
Scientology	298	0.399%
Atheist	190	0.254%
Hindu	156	0.209%
Santeria	119	0.159%
Sikh	117	0.157%
Bahai	14	0.019%
Krishna	9	0.012%
Krishna	7	0.009%

Total Known Responses	74731	100.001% (rounding to 3 digits does this)

Unknown/No Answer	18381	

Total Convicted	93112	80.259% (74731) prisoners' religion is known.

Held in Custody	3856	(not surveyed due to temporary custody)

Total In Prisons	96968	

Non-theists who are moral persons

1. Jeremy Bentham – first philosopher to argue in favor of animal rights
2. Andrei Sakharov - physicist and human rights activist
3. Gloria Steinem - feminist activist
4. Brock Chisholm - physician and first Director-General of the WHO (World Health Organization)
5. Betty Friedan - feminist activist
6. Julian Huxley - philosopher and first Director-General of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization)
7. A. Philip Randolph – African-American human rights activist
8. Susan B. Anthony – leader of the Women’s Suffrage Movement
9. Bill & Melinda Gates – founders of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
10. Warren Buffet – Philanthropist (has donated over \$37 billion dollars to charities)
11. George Soros – Billionaire philanthropist and human rights activist