

An Analysis and Evaluation on *Pascal's Wager*

Argument Analysis

Even today, debates over the details of higher beings and the afterlife are quasi-omnipresent. However, the Early Modern period and Scientific Revolution helped birth this train of thought; simply put, disagreement became a pinnacle of discourse. Blaise Pascal tackles this intricate yet blurred line between philosophy and theology by utilizing the branches of logic and metaphysics in an excerpt from his book, *Pensées*.

His argument encompasses many fronts but boils down to, and can most easily be understood as, believing in God, the afterlife, and generally living spiritually in the Christian sense is the most logical and rewarding way of life than one that lacks religious practice/belief. (It is important to note that the God in which he and I will be referring to is that one exclusionary of religious ideologies other than Christianity.) He almost makes the reader believe that no conclusion can be made, but it only conveys the extent of his energy regarding this subject. The way in which he arrives at the conclusion stated above is through logical and metaphysical analysis, wavering through philosophy and theology: he starts with describing the philosophical form and nature of God, emphasizing the lack of evidence to prove or disprove the connection between God's abstract entity and His relationship to the natural realm in which we as human beings dwell. Pascal firstly highlights the contradictory and truly paradoxical essence that lies beneath the concrete surface of the question, "Is God real?" By doing so, giving credence to the human's inability to comprehend such a question by ___ the infinite versus finite, truth versus perceived truth, nature versus the supernatural, he leaves room for an argument based not on some previous metaphysical study, but rather the use of logic as the center. This is not to say that metaphysics played no role in his argument; in fact, his appreciation for the confinements of the field permits him to move on to logic.

To Pascal, Christians lose either way: they either argue for the veracity of God's existence and that of His created afterlife, being seen as pulling from thin air. Whereas, if they don't advocate, they ignore the possibilities beyond what is currently proven, in addition to looking like cowards to their peers. It is at its core a lose-lose situation, according to Pascal. This example is vital as it sets up his metaphor of the 'wager;' this is honestly the foundation from where his argument is buttressed.

How one thoroughly examines this question of God and the afterlife and comes to a conclusion such as Pascal did is through a series of steps that Pascal highlights. First, one comes upon the idea which they hope to answer: it seems to be a binary question. Then, one analyzes what has been studied regarding this subject; what have others said? With the question of religious philosophy, the answer is, to Pascal, too simple to answer based only on individual morals and subjective instinct. Only logic will do. Though he finds that wagering

is too risky of a game, he says that it must be done as the next step under the umbrella of logical thinking. He thus establishes wagers as a form of logical analysis, even raising the questions: what does it mean to be logical? How is chance involved in making a wager?

“Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is,” Pascal writes, instigating his almost mathematical cognition, speaking of gain and loss. He leaves a simplified look at two religious beliefs that correlate with two other reality outcomes leaving four combinations: 1) one believes in God but God does not exist; 2) one believes in God and God does exist; 3) one does not believe in God but God exists; 4) one does not believe in God and God does not exist. What one finds when delving deeper into these options is that they are ridden with gains, losses, risks, and rewards. For the first combination, nothing happens other than some energy input in addition to what Pascal sees as positive attributes — a slight gain; the second leads to being able to enjoy eternal salvation — a definite gain; the third involves eternal damnation — a definite loss; the fourth is basically neutral in Pascal’s eyes.

Therefore, Pascal deduced that a life spent believing in God has a better chance of outcomes that are favorable to the individual. By considering the scope of possibilities in a highly logical manner, he allows for a conclusion to be found regarding a question for which rarely a reason-based answer is given.

Argument Evaluation

I found that the more I read over *Pascal’s Wager*, I have come to realize that the basis of his argument is extremely strong; after all, it is quite challenging to argue with logical processes, especially when done with such dedication. Pascal takes into account an almost Nihilistic approach to evaluating the role of religion in one’s life. One of my favorite quotes from this excerpt is: “I say then we must do nothing at all, for nothing is certain.” I completely agree with this statement, and it makes his conclusion so much stronger as he continuously points out what holds the facade of counterpoints to his claim. He states that even though we are oblivious to the reality, existence, and accurate weight of everything involved with our universe, we cannot simply do nothing. Some action must be taken, so we will do what we can to make the best decision for the resources allotted to us, even if it is not the perfect one.

Before diving into the specifics of Pascal’s final conclusion, I find it crucial to point out that Pascal’s manner of decision-making was inherently thorough and impressively thought-through. However, I believe it is just as relevant to address any qualms or inconsistencies I may have found or simply feel.

To begin, I come from a household of agnostics, carrying blood rich with religious and even spiritual skepticism, so one would think that my immediate response would be in

aversion to Pascal's final conclusion. However, this is not the case. Pascal's description of this wager truly has awoken within me a novel way of viewing how I establish my religious/spiritual beliefs. More importantly, however, this piece is so persuading that it lights a fire beneath me to lend more weight to the significance of quasi-mathematical logic in decision-making and general debate instead of relying solely on the pathos approach to which we are so accustomed. After recently finding Daoism as a way of life and spiritual path, I realize now (with Pascal's use of the wager) how much more comfortable I am believing in energies more complex than the human mind can comprehend.

Regardless, I would be remiss if I did not call attention to possible flaws in Pascal's processes in wagering religion. There are stimuli and forces outside of what Pascal describes in his piece that can and arguably should affect one's view on the existence of God and the afterlife. Take climate change leaving someone overwhelmingly doubtful, childhood trauma causing the denial of a powerful being that could have helped, or even a nun who questions the faith to which she dedicated her entire life, just because she believes a racist and misogynistic fascist would never have been placed in the White House by God, for instance. In other words, it is not all about eternal damnation/pleasure to which Pascal alludes.

Not to go down a rabbit hole, but Pascal's aversion to ethics in his argument, though it helps simplify his explanation, does not allow for an utterly wholesome approach. One could easily be bought off to follow a specific secular or nonsecular lifestyle; society is plagued with capitalistic and egotistical drivers.

Both examples of an impressionable troubled adolescent or greedy businessman fall under another existential question of whether humans have free will or if all is predetermined for them. The reader must assume that Pascal is on the side of free will in order for his argument to work, in which case these 'holes' above only complicate the argument he so craftily designs for more facile consumption.

Nevertheless, *Pascal's Wager* proves that logic can substantially foster a more amicable environment when decisions must be made. Altogether, without analyzing the intricacies of chance and truth, we essentially do nothing at all — or to him, we should thus do nothing at all.