Pascals Wager Essay, Research Paper

“Who is God? Where is God? Does God really exist? Should I believe in God?” These are some of the questions which are asked by millions of people each and every day who are desperately trying to find some meaning in their life. Blaise Pascal tried to help society, as well as himself, to find the best solution to these problems. Pascal attempted to determine if it was worth it to bet on God’s existence. Were the atheists right in not wasting their time concerning the existence of God? Have the true believers all been hoaxed into one big illusion? Although a person will not actually be able to find out the truth until they are dead, Pascal compared the gains and losses of believing there is a God during your finite life.

Before one is aloud to critique Pascal’s Wager, one must first answer the question, “What is Pascal’s Wager?”.Though Reason alone cannot lead us to God, Pascal states an ingenious argument that is rational, on prudential grounds, to behave as god exists.(Cottingham, 1997, p. 256) Due to the lack of conclusive rational grounds for belief, we must wager or bet on his existence. (Cottingham, 1997, p. 256) Pascal says “the prize here is an infinite or infinitely happy life, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing…. This leaves only one choice open, in any game that involves infinity, where there is not an infinite number of chances of losing to set against the chances of winning. There is nothing to ponder- you must stake everything”( Pascal,1995, no.418) His wager can basically be summed up as:

If God REALLY exists, and we believe (= bet that God exists), we have an infinite gain (heaven).

If God REALLY exists, and we don’t believe that, then we have the potential of an infinite loss (hell, or at least eternal separation from God).

If God really does NOT EXIST, and we believe that God exists, we essentially lose nothing.

If God really does NOT EXIST, and we believe that God doesn’t exist, we essentially gain nothing.

Therefore, it is better to believe in the existence of God.(www.saintmarys.edu)

Obviously Pascal is trying to defend the belief in god using this proof. It’s important always to remember Pascal’s project of trying to provide a defense of Christianity. Part of the crowd that Pascal hung around with before his conversion did all the things he later identified as diversion: hunting, partying, but especially gambling. Pascal himself is often credited with inventing roulette. So it’s not surprising that he uses the device of a wager to try to convince people, who are already gambling, to take a chance on God. That is, if you want to make a point to a gambler, put it in the form of a bet. That’ll at least get their attention and disturb their indifference.(www.concentric.net) As one can see, a choice between the two must be made. An individual cannot believe in god, yet really be an atheist. Otherwise, that person is a hypocrite. As you notice, every person must play this “game” which Pascal has displayed before us. Even though a person might not think they have gone one way, they already have.

Although this proof can be criticized, an argument which was raised by Pascal himself can be seen. “Perhaps I am betting too much; in other words, there is a price to be paid in accepting the bet, namely forgoing the unbelievers life of “luxury and glory” for the sake of an afterlife that may never be realized, if death is indeed the final end.” (Pascal 1995 no418) Here we see that there is a price to be paid. If one’s life is permanent than the belief in God may lose the only one chance of luxury. Of course, Pascal is assuming that the majority of the world has a “tainted” view and is self-indulgent.

Pascal did not claim this wager to determine if God exists. He merely, is explaining that in the situation we as society are in, it is the best bet to believe in God. He clearly states this in Pensees not trying to convince people that there is a God but to explain why they should believe there is one. In addition, Pascal is coming from a more pragmatic view of the situation, even though this wager was made in thought of the Catholic Church. People can also think of this wager as a precautionary measure just in case God does really exist.(Brown, 1984 pg.20)

Another flaw which sets against Pascal’s proof is that if this God does exist, how do we know it is not an evil person who sends its followers to hell regardless of their love for it. After all, he did leave us on the earth with so much suffering and death in the world. Believing in God may in fact cause people to be harmed and unhappy for eternity.(Flew,1960 pg. 70) Moreover, Pascal also states that even if one does not believe in God than he should pretend to, just to reap the benefits. Although, there is one problem with this statement. If God is all powerful, wouldn’t he know who is lying and who is not? Wouldn’t he have the power to see through our hearts and tell if we are true believers or not? For if God is not all powerful and cannot do this, than why is he a God?(Duff, 1986, pg. 40)

Many flaws have been brought up because of the simplistic comments Pascal has made. Another flaw is the belief in different Gods. Suppose there is a God yet a person may be worshiping the wrong God, and the true God punishes him or her for this. How is one to know if they are worshiping the right God? Does it matter which God we Worship?

I do agree that betting on the existence of God is the most prudent option, but not for the same reasons as Pascal. I believe that it is better to believe in God to give people hope and have something for them to look forward to. I could not imagine a world where God did not exist. There would be too much evil and greed in the world. I also believe God is what keeps people in line, or helps them to stay on track regardless if there is a reward or not. I am ashamed to think that we as people are purely being good for the sake of a reward. Isn’t that greed itself. There is no difference between that or wanting all the money in the world. Pascal sees the belief in God as an advantage but not as a source of willingness to do good. Furthermore, I consider God to be more of an Idea than an actual being. There is more value of believing that there is something greater and far more awesome than the human race, than believing there is a super being who controls the world. I truly do hope there is something greater than us and greater than what we have achieved for the sake of the human race, because if there is no God and this is all we have done with the world I am disappointed, and I am sure many others are too.

In conclusion, Pascal’s wager proves in a simplistic view that it is “the best bet” to believe in God simply for the benefits of infinite happiness. Personally, I see this view as a greedy self-indulgent one, yet who in this world is not thinking in the same frame of mind as Blaise Pascal? Although his proof has many flaws, an intelligent person should study this view to see all aspects of this topic. It is definite that one should gather all information from all sides before making a decision. Pascal’s wager is one of them.

Bibliography

Brown, G. (1984). A Defence of Pascal’s Wager. Religious Studies

Cottingham, J. (1997). Western Philosophy. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Duff, A. (1986). Pascal’s Wager and Infinite Utilities. Analysis pg.46: 107-9.

Flew, A. (1960). Is Pascal’s Wager the Only Safe Bet?. The Rationalist Annual pg.76: 21-25.

Pascal, B. (1995). Pensees (Translated) . USA: Penguin Classics Publishers

Pascal’s Wager. (1998). [Online]. Available: www.saintmarys.edu/ incandel/pascalswager.html

A differnet view of Pascal’s Wager. (1997). [Online]. Available: http://www.concentric.net/ logician/pascal.html