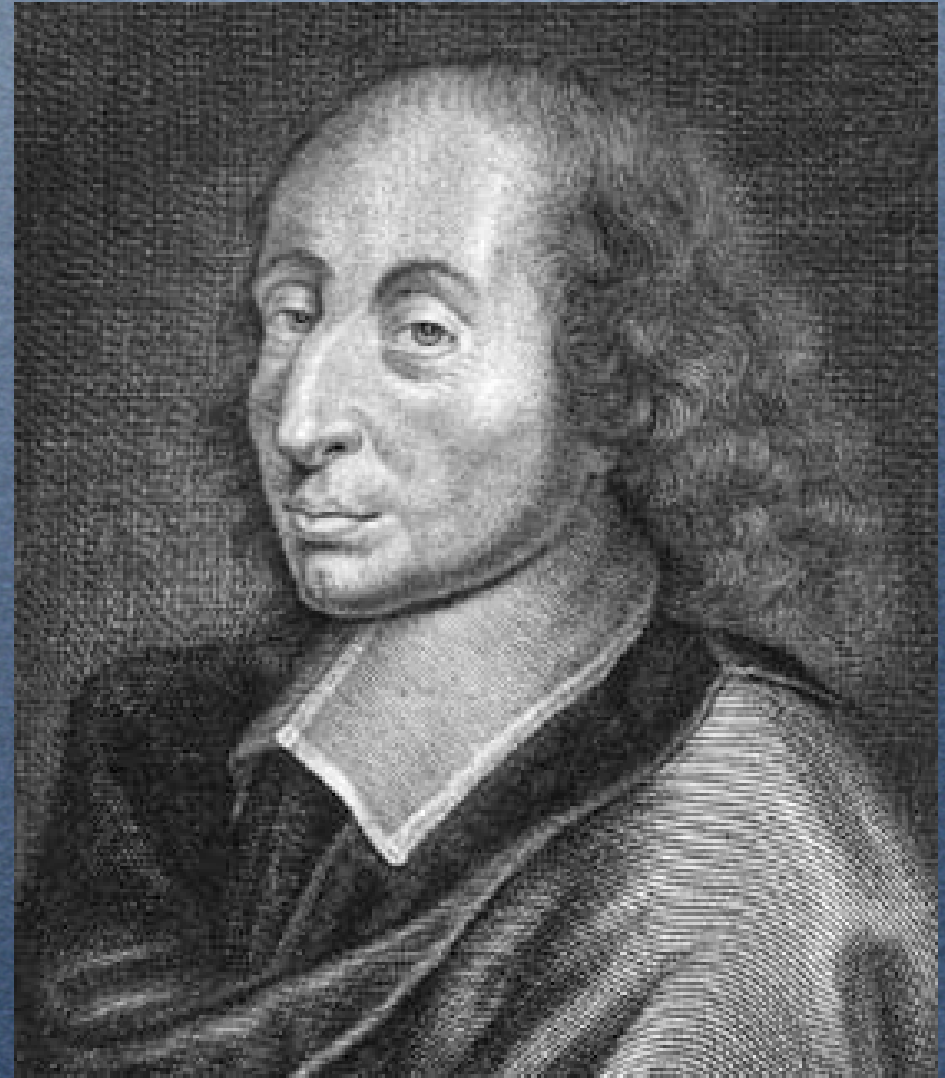# Pascal's Wager

☐ The Penseés

☐ Understanding Pascal's Wager

☐ Disputing Pascal's Wager

☐ Defending Pascal's Wager

The *Penseés*

- ☐ Written 1656 – 1658 while Pascal associates with the Jansenists.

- ☐ Pascal dies in 1662.

- ☐ Penseés collected and published after his death.

- ☐ Conceived as an apologetic work: Attempts to convince people to convert to Christianity.

The *Penseés*

"As we knew of the plan that Pascal had for writing about religion, we took very great care, after his death, to gather all his writings on this subject. We found them all pinned together in different bundles, but without any order, without any coherence ... These were only the first drafts of his thoughts that he wrote on little scraps of paper as they came to mind. And they were all so unfinished and so badly written that we had the greatest difficulty in the world deciphering them."

Étienne Périer (1670)

Understanding the Wager

1. You must Wager

"Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then?"

Understanding the Wager

2. The Evidence Is Inconclusive

"According to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions."

Understanding the Wager

3. The Wager

Bet: God Exists

    Possible Loss: Living pious life for no reason

    Possible Gain: Eternal happiness

Bet: God Does Not Exist

    Possible Loss: Eternal damnation

    Possible Gain: Happiness in this life

Understanding the Wager

3. The Expectation

Bet: God Exists

P(God Does not exist)*(Negative cost of living pious life)
+ P(God Does exist)*(Positive gain of eternal happiness)

Bet: God Does Not Exist

P(God Does not exist)*(Positive gain of happiness in this life)
+

P(God Does exist)*(Negative Cost of eternal damnation)

Understanding the Wager

3. The Expectation

Conclude: The expected value of believing in God is greater than the expected value of not believing in God.

Understanding the Wager

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Conclude: The expected value of believing in God is greater than the expected value of not believing in God.

Q: How does this change if the probabilities or payouts change?

Understanding the Wager

3. The Action

Conclude: To maximize your expected value, believe in God.

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Objection: I am incapable of believing in God

Response: If you act as though you believe in God, you are likely to actually start believing in Him.

Understanding the Wager

"But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavour, then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions…"

Understanding the Wager

Premises

☐ You must wager

☐ The probability that God exists is non-zero

☐ The payoff from believing that God exists, if God does exist is infinite

☐ In the absence of other considerations, one should act so as to maximize expected value.

Conclusion

☐ Act as if God exists.

Disputing the Wager

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☐ "Many Gods": the dichotomy between not believing in God and believing in the (Christian) God is false.

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☐ It is immoral to use the wager as a reason to (act as though you) believe in God.

Disputing the Wager

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Response 1:
All that is required for the wager to be logically valid is that the payoff from believing in God, if God exists, is greater than the other terms in the expected value computation.

Disputing the Wager

☐ The notion of infinite gain does not make sense.

Response 1:
All that is required for the wager to be logically valid is that the payoff from believing in God, if God exists, is greater than the other terms in the expected value computation.

Response 2:
What kind of mathematical theory do you have if it can't handle infinity?

Disputing the Wager

☐ It is immoral to use the wager as a reason to (act as though you) believe in God.

Disputing the Wager

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Response:
Decision Theory often suggests that *in the absence of other considerations* one should often act to maximize one's expected value.

Furthermore, it is a premise of the Wager that the evidence is not helpful in deciding the question.

Disputing the Wager

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Response 1:
Pascal elsewhere in the book eliminates the other possibilities.

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Response 1:
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Response 2:
The argument only needs to worry about possibilities with non-zero probability and (positive or negative) gain.

Disputing the Wager

☐ "Many Gods": the dichotomy between not believing in God and believing in the (Christian) God is false.

Objection:
What if we have two religions with non-zero probability of being right and each with infinite payoff? Then Pascal's Wager cannot help decide between them.

For Further Reading

Gambling with God
edited by Jordan.