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The existence of God has long been the subject of philosophical study. The question inspires argument from thinkers on both sides of the debate, and has inspired a range of scholarship and thought experiments to support their perspectives. In the midst of flying spaghetti monsters and intelligent design, Blaise Pascal takes a unique approach, focusing not on the existence of God, but the outcomes of one’s belief. Pascal’s wager presents a stance rooted in logic and pragmatism, using secular terminology to address a divine issue. By assessing the work of Pascal and the counterarguments it inspired, one can conclude that it does not adequately satisfy the problem, and needs better structure to accommodate its concerns.

Pascal’s wager – as the name suggests – operates on gambler’s logic: whatever bet is the safest is the one that should be made. This is a unique approach to philosophy, and though it may not follow the traditional path, it does provide a compelling argument. The philosopher implores readers to believe in God, as it reaps the most beneficial outcomes regardless of its truth. On the other hand, disbelief in God can potentially result in eternal damnation, and it would be unwise to choose this option. Laid flatly, the wager offers a no-nonsense approach to believing in a higher power, and makes the task relatively simple for those who choose to follow it.

Despite its straightforwardness, Pascal’s wager maintains objectors. One of the strongest arguments against his own originates from Voltaire, described as the moral objection (Anderson, *Notes and Selections*). William James applies the criticism to Pascal in his essay “The Will to Believe”. In this counterargument, James points out a problem with the application of the wager. As explained by Anderson, “The concern here is whether the unbeliever who accepts the wager has genuine faith” (Anderson, *Notes and Selections*, p. 4). Even if one is to agree with the logic proposed by Pascal, it doesn’t equate to genuine belief.

Based on these arguments, the latter provides a stronger argument. Though the wager may not be inherently wrong, it doesn’t provide a strong enough conviction that the outcome will truly be the most beneficial. Though it attempts to appeal to a simple logic, the reality of the problem is that God’s existence is complex. While it may be appealing to find the easiest solution to the question, it is not always the most satisfactory. The philosopher addresses the moral objection in *Pascal’s Pensees* in saying, “Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions” (Pascal et al., 1958, p. 68). To some extent, the author is saying to abandon reason and condition themselves to believe. If this logic were to be applied to other more dangerous problems, the results could be problematic.

One contemporary example can be seen in an example with physical repercussions. Regardless of one’s religious beliefs (or lack thereof), there should be certain moral foundations for every human being. If a religion emerged that showed immediate physical consequences for those that did not obey its teachings, Pascal’s law would point to joining that religion. There must be solid reasoning in one’s commitment to any cause, and though there may be some long-term benefit to engaging with a particular belief system, one’s personal satisfaction and happiness cannot be sacrificed for the unknown.

The biggest failure of Pascal’s wager is the philosopher’s refusal to acknowledge the loose ends of his argument. Though the central logic may be sound, there is an obvious issue with its application. A person may have the intention to believe in God, but one cannot will themselves into genuine faith. To propose self-conditioning as a viable option is absurd, and gives way to problems when applying the logic to other matters. Though some eternal benefit may be reached, one’s experiences in their time on Earth cannot be discounted. Until a viable counterargument to this problem is produced, it remains weak.

References

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