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1.

Pascal argues that, even though we do not know whether God exists or not, it is still reasonable to believe in God on pragmatic grounds.

First, he thinks that we do not have concrete evidence for or against God’s existence and reason can not help us obtain the answer. Therefore, Pascal assumes that there is an equal probability, or chance, of whether God exists or not.

Second, Pascal assumes that there are only two options: to believe in God, or not to believe, i.e. “you must wager”. In the meantime, although he does not explicitly make this point, one underlying assumption Pascal is making is that there could only be one God, and that would be the Christian God. In other words, he essentially considers agnosticism as not believe in God, and excludes the probability of multitheism and other monotheism religions.

Third, he assumes that the way we should make our decisions in case of uncertain results, is to consider the expected outcome, which is, in some sense, the outcome multiplying the probability, and choose the one option with the highest expected outcome.

Finally, Pascal assumes that, if God exists, those who believe in God will get infinite utility, and, although he is not explicit on this, those who do not believe in God will suffer infinite loss, and if God does not exist, believers will lose a finite amount of utility, and non-believers will gain a finite amount of utility. Therefore, he deduces, from the aforementioned assumption and premises, that it is practically beneficial to believe in God.

2.

For those who wish to believe in God, but claim that they are unable to do so, Pascal suggests that acting as if believed could cure of unbelief. Pascal thinks that what keeps one from believing in God is what he calls “passion”, which is essentially some unreasonable human emotion. Therefore, one trying to believe in God should diminish this passion. He makes an analogy between disease and unbelief, and points out that to cure this unbelief, one should follow those who have been cured, and act as if one did believe by participating in religious actions and rituals. Moreover, Pascal again states that it only incurs a finite and insignificant loss for believing in God, and probably doing as the God or the religion requires.

3.

Whether it is possible to believe in something that one does not have any direct evidence for largely depends on the specific situation and various other conditions. Nonetheless, on the matter of convincing oneself to believe in God, it’s not as simple and straightforward as Pascal suggests.

If we consider someone a believer whenever he/she consistently claims that he/she believes in God, then it is trivially true that we can easily convert ourselves to believe in God. Therefore, we will regard believe as sincerely believe something to be true. Some examples of this kind of believing is: to believe I’m not dead, to believe earth is round. In contrast, (for an ordinary sane person) to think I’m definitely going to win a lottery, to think I’m in the Matrix, do not count as believing.

Next we discuss what direct evidence means and how everyday life analogies apply to believing in God. Strictly speaking, no evidence is direct. As pointed out by various cognitive science theories, what we experience is merely a simulation of the reality, and therefore everything is indirect. Therefore, we can probably claim that, to some extent, we constantly believe things without any direct evidence. However, most people would probably agree that the evidence for the existence of the real world is much more direct than the evidence for the existence of God, if there exists any, and therefore to believe in the real world is much easier than to believe in God.

Another example is believing that earth is round, which I assume most properly educated people will agree. Only a very few people have seen the actual shape of the earth from outer space, the others’ belief is not supported by direct evidence. However, at least we have trustworthy second hand evidence, numerous pictures and videos.

Nonetheless, even before the advent of satellite and space travelling, most of educated people believed that earth is round. It’s true that some people accomplished circumnavigation, but there could be other explanations. Many scientists believed in the spherical earth model since it explained many facts that other models cannot explain. From this point of view, it would be difficult to believe in God since theism generally lacks such strong explanatory power compared to the spherical earth model, and many other scientific theories that people believe in without direct evidence.

One possible response to this argument would be that many people without any background knowledge in geography or physics also believe in spherical earth. Nonetheless, they do believe in science, and spherical earth, for them, is a proved truth by science. The same logic applies to quantum mechanics and relativistic theory, which are widely accepted and taken as true, and are even farther away from ordinary people. The reason why ordinary people believe in science varies. Some of them include education, conformity to the mainstream, experience with science, and etc. In such case, a person with a religious education background, a living environment with theists, and experience with religion, who has seen the great influence brought by religion, is probably inclined to believe in God. Indeed, less and less people satisfy such standard.

One point worth mentioning is that some people, when facing unknown objects or facts, seem to cling to previously known facts, and when certain contradiction between those facts appear, they genuinely believe in the old ones without evidence. For example, some people in China not only refuses to take so called western medicine but also genuinely believes that traditional Chinese medicine is better. I’m not sure about the causes of such phenomenon. However, if such phenomenon indeed applies to matters of belief, it will only make it more difficult for believers to abandon their religion, but will not make non-believers convert to certain religion.

4.

No.

Pascal’s argument relies on many unstated or implicitly stated assumptions, and many of them are questionable.

First, the idea of infinity is ambiguous, and therefore the claimed infinite gain or loss is questionable. Infinity is imaginary, since none of us has experienced infinity in any form, and it is often used as an exaggeration. Moreover, it seems that we cannot even have a proper definition for infinity in real world. One possible way to define infinity is an unbounded amount or arbitrary amount. Applying this definition to Pascal’s Wager, we could probably say that infinity happiness means whenever you think you are as happy as it’s possible, something really good happens and you become happier. This is indeed not possible in our finite limited real world and I’m not sure if this is attainable or even imaginable. Usually happiness occurs when a need is satisfied, but in an infinitely happy world, would there still be need at all? The same argument applies to suffering. If that infinity happiness or suffering is understandable by human, then it would not be infinite; if that is not understandable, how do you know it’s happiness or suffering?

Second, how Pascal knows the consequences of believing or not believing in God is not clear. Pascal states that God is beyond our understanding and reason cannot tell us the existence of God. Then he cannot possibly know what God will do to believers and non-believers. If there is any evidence or proof of such consequences, then it has to be also the proof of existence of God. Therefore, a person necessarily either believes or does not believe in the consequences and God’s existence at the same time. Furthermore, if we are uncertain about the consequences, then it’s not reasonable to believe in God. For example, if God awards or punishes everyone, then it does not make a huge difference whether we believe or not, and non-believers can probably enjoy a better life without religious constraints. If God indeed punishes believers and award non-believers, then the practically rational choice would be not to believe in God.

Third, Pascal’s Judeo-Christian bias kept him from considering other religions. His argument applies to all monotheistic religions with the same claimed consequences for believers/non-believers. In that case, to choose to believe in any God is justified. One possible response would be that then one still has to choose one to believe. Still, Christianity in particular is not justified. Furthermore, if we add all possible religious options to the wager, then for every possible God, there would possibly be an anti-God with completely opposite consequences for believers/non-believers. Then the rational choice would be atheism.