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Intro to Philosophy

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Term Paper (Prompt #5)

Wagering on Eternity:

A Critical Discussion of Pascal’s Wager Argument for the Belief in God

Pascal’s wager argument for the rationality of belief in God does not provide enough substantial evidence or reason to warrant a belief in God. The simplicity of the argument makes it appealing for many, but the premises are all too conditional and are not valid under many circumstances. Gambling on a game of cards is one thing, but gambling on an eternal future is a different matter entirely.

Before analyzing the reasons why Pascal’s wager fails to provide evidence for the belief in God, it is important to understand the basics of the argument. First, Pascal notes that there are two choices, to believe in God or to not believe in God. This decision can shape one’s life regardless of what the true answer is. Let us assume Pascal’s supreme deity exists. By believing in such a deity and following their supposed commands, one can spend an eternity in heaven. They may have to sacrifice a few worldly pleasures, but infinite bliss seems worthwhile in such a situation. Still assuming Pascal’s God exists, by not believing one is sentenced to an eternity in hell. Not having to follow a religious structure may provide for a more exciting life on earth, but eternal damnation is certainly not an ideal situation.

The previous two situations both assume God exists, but as Pascal notes, there is also the possibility he does not exist. In this case, neither the belief in God nor the lack thereof have infinite circumstances. Rather, one’s decision solely affects their life on earth. Following religion, or at least the religious framework Pascal refers to, usually leads to a wholesome life, filled with goodness but lacking pleasure. On the other hand, not having to follow religion will usually entail a pleasure filled life lacking in substantial value or goodness.

Under these circumstances, one has two options to choose from with four possible outcomes. Obviously it is rational to choose the option that is bound to bring the most good and least bad. Should God not exist, both outcomes are finite. This is to say that whether or not one believes, there are no consequences after death. Rather, the outcome is restricted to one’s time on earth. If this is the case, then the most happiness can be gained from not believing in God as one cannot be restricted or punished for doing certain things. However, should God exist, both outcomes are infinite. In this situation the decision maker could either have a finite amount of less pleasure on earth and an infinite amount of more pleasure in heaven or a finite amount of more pleasure on earth and an infinite amount of suffering in hell.

By analyzing these four possible outcomes, the conclusion of Pascal’s argument becomes clear. He describes the best decision as a dominant strategy, or in other words the best of all possible choices in the face of uncertainty. Pascal explains that to believe in God is a dominant strategy for a few reasons. Infinite pleasure is clearly much more desirable than infinite suffering, and any wise person would give up petty worldly pleasures for such a reward. Following these premises, Pascal concludes it is practically rational to believe in God.

These premises are based around a serious assumption that weakens the argument to the point of invalidity. Pascal assumes that the only God it is possible to believe in is a strict Christian God who would punish non-believers and reward followers, where in fact this argument does not apply for many of the deities believed in around the world. Consider a God, for example, who frowns upon the failure to maximize pleasure while alive. In this situation, one would be infinitely punished for following the Christian model and restricting themselves while on earth. Another possible situation would include a God who did not reward or punish humans with a heaven or hell. With the infinite outcomes out of the question, it becomes much harder to come to the conclusion that belief in God is a dominant strategy. Pascal’s wager only functions properly under the condition that the supreme deity is a Christian God. And yet, it is possible to argue that this condition is in itself a dominant strategy. It is rational to pick an option that more people choose, especially when the outcome is unknown. This puts one’s eternal soul up to the decisions of others, and for that reason it is not acceptable to simply believe the true God is a Christian God.

One must also consider the fact that not everything has a dominant strategy or correct belief. For example, someone deciding whether or not to attend college in order to get a job may struggle with the same dilemma. If they go to college and get a job, then the expected value is high, but they will still have to pay off student loans. If they don’t go to college and they get a job, then the expected value is higher because they wont have to pay off student loans. Should they go to college and not get a job then the expected value is much lower than if they do not go to college because again of having to pay off student loans, this time without a job. The best possible outcome with the highest expected value is an unlikely circumstance. The same can be said for Pascal’s wager. Out of an infinite possible number of supreme deities, the chance that the Christian God exists and punishes non-believers is fairly unlikely.

Pascal was right about a few things, but in the end his argument just does not hold up. It is practically rational to pick the best possible option when faced with uncertainty, but under the premises he lays out, it is nearly impossible to determine which choice has the highest expected value. This is because each premise relies on certain beliefs he never proved.

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