



A Gambling Man

"Pascal's Wager" is an argument posed by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal that the existence of God cannot be determined through reason, but that a person should "bet on God" because the rewards of being correct are great, and the consequences of being wrong are none.

Pascal claims in his profound work, Pensées, that "God is, or He is not." He says that according to reason, neither possibility can be convincingly defended, but we must all choose one belief or the other. Remaining undecided is not an option: "You must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked... Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is... If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."

Pascal admits that a religious life may be less fun and less rewarding on Earth (IEA acknowledges this is not always the case), but insists that when everyone is forced to wager and the potential gain is actually infinite life, it would be acting "stupidly" not to wager that God exists.

The Longshot

IEA doubts that God would be very flattered by disciples who "go through the motions" for personal gain. We also reject many of the premises of Pascal's argument. We don't believe that one must choose sides. We respect those that admit the complexity of such questions and refrain from choosing until arguments that can withstand the scrutiny of reason emerge. Also, Pascal's Wager does not address the dilemma of choosing which God to believe in, and what traditions to worship him in! "Betting on the odds" is a great strategic move, but since most religions teach that theirs is the "one true religion", choosing the wrong religion is just as bad as choosing no religion (worse if you choose a strict, deprecating, denomination).

Sam Harris points out in his article "The Empty Wager", that there are also some problems with the "nothing to lose" assumption made by Pascal. Many people pay a terrible price for their religious faith. Whether it's child molestation, genital mutilation, suicide bombing, genocide driven by religious doctrine, discrimination of minority groups, the deprecation of women, or the psychological costs imposed by religion's anxiety about sex, countless incidents of bloodshed and injustice are driven by religious ideology. A religious life does not merely have the potential to be uncomfortable- it can be excruciating.

In his article, Harris adds "If the wager were valid, it could be used to justify any belief system (no matter how ludicrous) as a "good bet." Muslims could use it to support the claim that Jesus was not divine (the Koran states that anyone who believes in the divinity of Jesus will wind up in hell); Buddhists could use it to support the doctrine of karma and rebirth; and the editors of TIME could

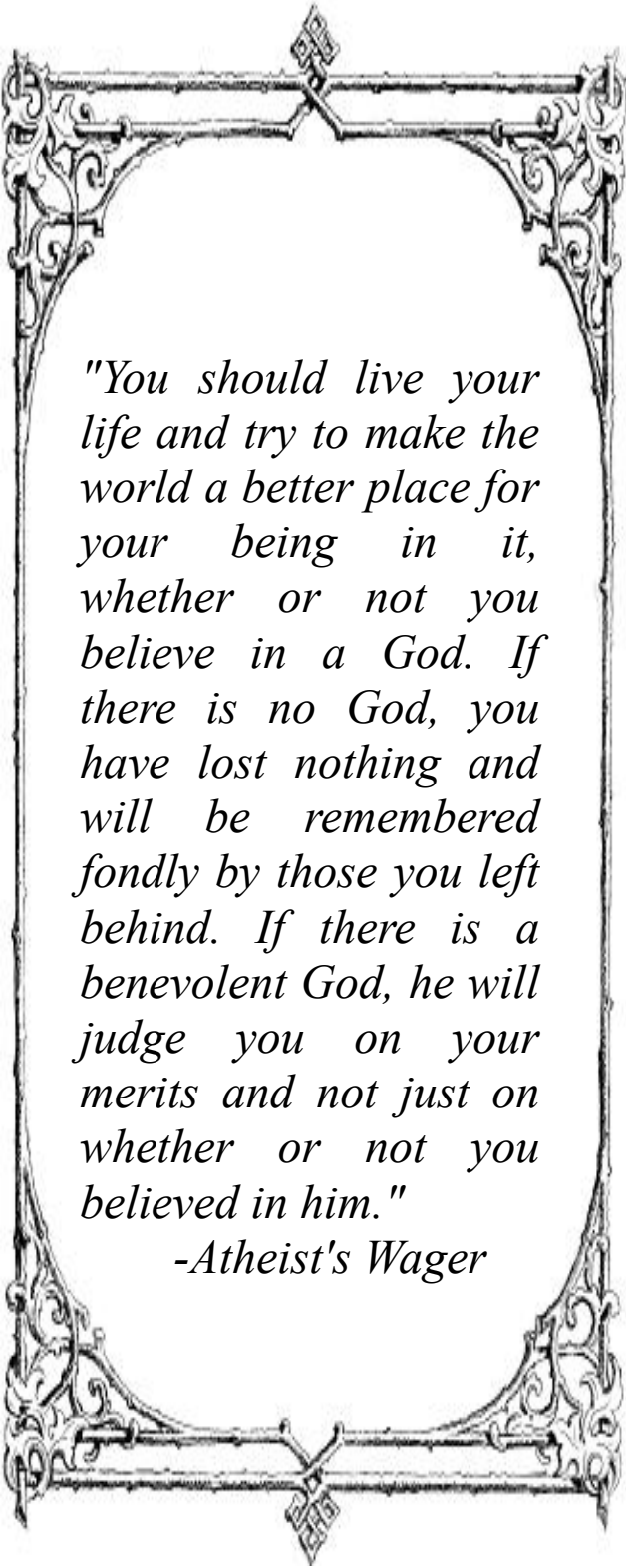
use it to persuade the world that anyone who reads Newsweek is destined for a fiery damnation."

Perhaps the most concerning part of the argument, however, is that it relies on the suggestion that a rational person can intentionally make themselves believe something for which they have no evidence. A person has the right to believe whatever they choose, of course, but to really believe something, they must also believe that the belief under consideration is true. Pascal suggests that the truth of a claim is unimportant when deciding whether to believe it or not!

For obvious reasons, IEA disapproves of such arguments. We believe reason, critical thinking, and scientific inquiry are the most reliable tools to build a world view. If these tools lead you to believe in God, we respect that, and encourage you to be a positive influence in your religious organization. Promote tolerance and peace, and encourage friends and family to critically examine their faith. Either their faith will be lost, or it will be reinforced, but at least they will be able to say that they believe for the right reasons. If, like most of us, you find you have more questions than the church has answers for, visit us at our website, read our message board, join us at an event, or email one of our organizers with questions.

References:

"The Empty Wager" by Sam Harris
"Pascal's Wager" - Wikipedia



"You should live your life and try to make the world a better place for your being in it, whether or not you believe in a God. If there is no God, you have lost nothing and will be remembered fondly by those you left behind. If there is a benevolent God, he will judge you on your merits and not just on whether or not you believed in him."

-Atheist's Wager

Pascal's Wager

*Food for thought,
from your friendly
neighborhood
atheists*