

Blaise Pascal, Pensées

The Wager

Let us then examine this point, and say, “God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline?

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

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much...” But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all.

Note. Pascal asks his interlocutor to compare the expected value of belief in God against the expected value of non-belief. The expected value of an event is the probability of its occurrence multiplied by the value of the event if it occurs. Can you explain Pascal’s argument for belief in mathematical terms? Do you see a flaw in the argument?