No Good Arguments? Then Wager!

The Rationality of Religious Belief

Is religious belief rational – or can it be?

1. **Positivism** (cf. Ayer, vs. Swinburne): no; it is in fact meaningless
2. **Clifford**: a belief is only rational if there is sufficient evidence for it; there is no such for God's existence.

What if you disagree with Clifford?

- Maybe there *is* sufficient evidence for God's existence
  - ontological argument?
  - cosmological argument?
  - others?

- **James**: We can just *choose* what to believe if the choice involves *genuine* options (living, forced, momentous)

- **Pascal**: James is partly right; the question is not whether God exists but what we *ought* to believe even if we don't know.

Blaise Pascal

- 1623–1662, French mathematician
- contemporary of Descartes
- probability theory, conic sections, mechanical calculator, etc.; correspondance with Fermat

What We *Ought to* Believe

Arguments for God's existence are misguided. The question is not whether God exists; it is whether we ought to believe that God exists, even if we don't have sufficient evidence.

- prudential reasons, not evidential reasons
- 'whether to believe S' is a decision problem: we can assign utilities to each of the outcomes, and probabilities to S and $\neg S$.
- Sometimes we know the probabilities of the outcomes; sometimes we don't.
- We can model these decisions in a decision-table; the rational choice is whatever maximises the expected utility.

The Rational Wager

Which of these bets are rational for you to take?

Favored outcome	Gain if ✔	Loss if ✘
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 1
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 2
Dice: 6	$ 120	$ 120
Dice: 6	$ 180	$ 30
I'm younger than 33	$ 10,000	$ 1
There are fairies	$ ∞	$1

Which of these bets are rational for you to take?

Favored outcome	Gain if ✔	Loss if ✘	P	$\sim P$
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 1	0.5	0.5
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 2	0.5	0.5
Dice: 6	$ 120	$ 120	1/6	5/6
Dice: 6	$ 150	$ 30	1/6	5/6
I'm younger than 33	$ 10,000	$ 1	?	?
There are fairies	$ ∞	$1	?	?

A bet is rational iff:

$$P \times [gain\checkmark] \geq \sim P \times [loss\times]$$

What We *Ought to* Believe

Pascal's Wager (*Pensées*, §233)

"But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly... by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. 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...."

What We *Ought to* Believe

The argument:

1. Either God exists or God does not exist, and you can either wager for God or wager against God. The utilities of the relevant possible outcomes (f_1, f_2, f_3) are finite but otherwise unknown.

	God exists (p)	**God does not exist** $(1 - p)$
Wager for God	∞	f_1
Wager against God	f_2	f_3

2. It is rational to suppose that $p(God\_exist) > 0$.
3. You ought to perform the act of maximum expected utility if there is one.
   - E(wager for God) $= \infty \times p + f_1 \times (1 - p) = \infty$
   - E(wager against God) $= f_2 \times p + f_3 \times (1 - p)$, which is finite.
4. Therefore, you ought to wager for God.

The Wager

Some considerations:

- *Must we* wager? (Or, is this a forced choice in Jamesian terms?) – Pascal thinks so. ("You must wager. It is not optional" (P.§233).)
- Are there more than these two options?
  - frequent criticism: yes, and Pascal should have considered them.
  - But perhaps: we only need to consider the options that are *live* to us (in the Jamesian sense).
- Is this a good reason to be religious? Does it really lead to faith? (Pascal: decision → practice → faith)