

PASCAL'S WAGER

Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662) was a French philosopher, scientist, and also one of the most influential mathematicians of all time. He was home schooled by his father, but for some reason the subject of mathematics was omitted. Perhaps this is one reason why mathematics became such an obsession to him. At the age of 12 he began exploring geometry on his own. Finally his father permitted him to read the works of Euclid, an ancient Greek mathematician. Soon this gifted young genius blossomed into a scholar whose discoveries amazed the world. At the tender age of 16 he presented a number of his remarkable theorems at the Mersenne's Academy in Paris and amazed some of the premier mathematicians of his time.

Pascal's many contributions to mathematics are still taught in math classes today. For example, "Pascal's Triangle" is still used to illustrate the expansion of binomial coefficients. Pascal fashioned his own computer and is also distinguished for his theory of probabilities. This theory involved gambling, and was used to project winning odds based on projections from incomplete data. Pascal, for your information, was the man who invented the "roulette wheel".

As a mathematician projecting winning odds, Pascal developed a "wager" about God. Michael Rota wrote about this "Ultimate Wager" it in the May 2016 issue of Christianity Today. Rota summed up this wager in a single sentence: "*For those who choose the way of Jesus there is much to gain, and comparatively little to lose*". The following quotes are adapted from that article. Here is the wager in Pascal's own words" "*What harm will come to you from taking this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will win thereby in this life*"

Voltaire considered this wager to be "indecent and childish". G. E. Moore, the English philosopher, considered it "absolutely wicked". Atheist Richard Dawkins asked if God might not respect a courageous skeptic "far more than he would respect Pascal for his cowardly bet-hedging". None of these critics, however, are famous for accurate mathematical projections into the future as Pascal was. Harold Koenig and his colleagues of Duke University have shown that those actively practicing a religion tend to have stable families, higher self-esteem, a richer social life, greater optimism and hope, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose. Harvard's Robert Putnam and University of Wisconsin's Cheyoon Lim note that the "association between religion and subjective well-being is substantial". It seems that Pascal's wager makes sense, at least to some.

Rota believes that critics are right to reject versions of Pascal's wager that gamble on God without examining the evidence. He is confident, however, that for those who consider the facts, there is ample evidence to make a rational commitment to Christ. He states: "*You can't force yourself to believe something you don't really believe . . .*" Rota said that his father is a loving and affectionate man but he never goes to church. When challenged about preparation for the next life, he said: "*I'll worry about that when I get there!*" Such a man should never go to a casino.

Some critics ask if Pascal's wager would work for other religions as well as Christianity? Rota is convinced that there is strong evidence in favor of Christianity. Since a religion is best known by its fruit, most thinkers prefer to live in countries where Christ is preached.

There is a sense in which every one of us are forced to stand before the roulette wheel of life and gamble. We didn't ask to be born, but we were. We may not want to die, but we will. We cannot prove with certainty what happens after we die, and are therefore forced to gamble. Since we are being forced to gamble one way or the other, I am committed that the best gamble is to consider the evidence, join with Pascal, and bet our lives on Jesus! What about you?