An alternative wager

The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal put forward an argument for why we should believe in a god.

Either god exists or doesn't exist.

- If god **exists** and we **believe**, we will be rewarded with infinite happiness (an infinite gain)
- If god **exists** and we **don't believe**, we will be punished with infinite pain (an infinite loss)
- If god **does not exist** and we **believe**, we may miss out on some small pleasures (a finite loss)
- If god **does not exist** and we **don't believe**, we may gain some small pleasures (a finite gain)

	God exists	God does not exist
Believe in god	Eternal happiness	A small loss
Don't believe in god	Eternal punishment	A small gain

The rational choice, according to Pascal, was therefore to believe in god. If you are right you gain a lot, and if you are wrong you lose little.

Pascal's wager is, however, open to a number of criticisms:

1) Different religions propose different gods. What if we believe in the wrong one?
2) Would a god be happy that our belief was based on a calculation or a gamble?
3) We can't simply choose to believe in something if we don't. We can't switch our beliefs on or off. Would a god be happy if we simply faked a belief?
4) The argument only explores whether we should believe or not – it says nothing about whether a god actually exists.

The Roman Emperor and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius proposed an alternative gamble:

'Live a good life. If there are gods and they are good, they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you because of the values you have lived by. If there are gods that are not good, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods at all, then you will be gone, but you will have lived a noble life that will continue in the memories of your loved ones. I am not afraid.'

For Marcus Aurelius, and for many humanists today, the important thing is not what you believe but how you live.

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