

### Blaise Pascal 1623 - 1662

- Born in Montferrand France
- Suffered from very poor health all of his life
- Educated at home by his father in mathematics: Not trained in theology or philosophy
- Works
  - Developed a calculating machine
  - Most of his published works were in mathematics and science
  - *Pensées* - Collection of Began ideas and to draft notes for a book in defense of the Catholic faith
    - Published as a note book after his death
    - One of the most extensive and famous note - Paragraph 233 contained "Pascal's Wager"
- 1654 - a dreamlike or ecstatic experience he interpreted as a religious conversion
- After 1654 terminated the mathematical discussions
- Final period of his live was dominated by religious controversy, continual illness and loneliness

### Basic Philosophical Tenets

- Nature and Grace
  - Recovery from the "fallen" state of human nature was a gift of God. This divine gift included religious faith itself
  - Faith provides Christians with a means to transcend the limits of what is intelligible and to accept as true even matters that they cannot understand
  - Committed to the exclusive truth of Catholicism
- Theory of Knowledge
  - Did not publish an explicit theory of knowledge or philosophy of science in any single text – inferred from his other writings
  - Identified "experience and reason" as the only ways of acquiring knowledge of the natural world
  - Analysis of arguments that originated from hypotheses – concept seems to be borrowed from mathematics
  - Argued that there are three types of hypothesis
    - True hypotheses (their negation implies an absurd consequence)
    - False hypotheses (their affirmation implies an absurdity)
    - Those from which no valid conclusion about its truth can be drawn
  - Reason was completely inadequate to the task of proving a transcendent divinity, and the only way to god was by faith

### Pascal's Wager

- Argument for believing in God – not intended as a proof of God existence

- Purports to show **only that** those who have accepted divine grace and believed in God have made a wager that is not unreasonable
- Probability theory and decision theory – used for almost the first time in history

### Pascal's Three Arguments

#### 1. The Argument from *Superdominance*

- We are incapable of knowing whether God exists or not, yet we must “wager” one way or the other
- Wagering for God *superdominates* wagering against God: the worst outcome associated with wagering for God (status quo) is at least as good as the best outcome associated with wagering against god

	<i>God exists</i>	<i>God does not exist</i>
<i>Wager for God</i>	Gain all	Status quo
<i>Wager against God</i>	Misery	Status quo

#### 2. The Argument for Expectation

- Pascal has now made two assumptions:
  - The Probability of God’s existence is  $\frac{1}{2}$
  - Wagering for God brings *infinite* reward if God exists

#### 3. The Argument from generalized Expectations “Pascal’s Wager”

- The point is rather that if God exists, then wagering for God results in infinite *utility* (benefits)
- “misery” = negative infinity

### Objections to Pascal’s Wager

- Premise 1: The Decision Matrix
  - Different matrices for different people
  - The *utility* of salvation must be finite
  - There should be more than one infinity in the matrix
    - It might be thought that a forgiving God would bestow infinite utility upon “wagers for” and “wagers against” alike
    - Wagering against an existent God results in *negative* infinite utility
  - The matrix should have more rows
    - More than one way to wager for God and the rewards that God bestows
    - God might not reward infinitely those who only strive to believe in Him
  - The matrix should have more columns: the many Gods objection
- Premise 2: The Probability Assigned to God’s Existence
  - Undefined probably for God’s existence
  - Zero probability for God’s existence
- Premise 3: Rationality Requires Maximizing Expected Utility
  - Maximizing expectation can lead one to perform intuitively sub-optimal actions
  - Practical rationality vs theoretical rationality