Pascal's Wager

Pascal's Wager is named after Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. Pascal lived in the 17th century, which was a time of great skepticism (agnosticism) in Europe (this era is usually referred to as “The Enlightenment”). Knowing that the classical arguments for God's existence rarely ever worked with people so skeptical, Pascal decided to try a different tactic:

The Wager
Pascal's Wager

God doesn't exist | God exists
---|---
RESULT: | RESULT:
I was wrong | I was right!
GAIN/LOSS: | GAIN/LOSS:
NOTHING | ETERNAL HAPPINESS
(Woohoo!)

I believe in God | I don't believe in God
---|---
RESULT: | RESULT:
I was right! | I was wrong
GAIN/LOSS: | GAIN/LOSS:
NOTHING | ETERNAL SADNESS
(Life without God in Hell)

ME | IDK | Not an option!
Quadrants 2 & 3: If God doesn’t exist, then, as some atheists describe it, all you are is a “soulless bag of chemicals” that will cease to exist after death. Without God, there is no real reward to gain or lose after death. Not only that, but without God life on earth becomes meaningless.

Quadrant 1: If God exists and you choose to live your life in accordance with God, then you can win BIG: Eternal happiness in Heaven AND a life of purpose, peace, and joy on earth (“The saints went to Heaven before they went to Heaven”).

Quadrant 4: If God exists and you choose NOT to live your life in accordance with God, then you could fail EPICALLY.
3 Main Things Pascal’s Wager Does

1. It reminds skeptics/agnostics that they must, at some point, make a choice. And yes, deciding to not choose is, in fact, a choice. If Romeo proposes to Juliet and Juliet keeps responding, “I don’t know” or “Come back tomorrow” her answer will, in effect, become “No”.

Juliet, will you marry me?

IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK + IDK = No
2. It encourages people to give Christianity a try. Similar to telling a picky eater to try a bite of delicious food they’ve never experienced before, Pascal knows some people need to be double-dog dare to give their lives to God. And of course, Pascal knows that once they try it, they’ll like it! In other words, “Living the Faith can be a way of getting the Faith” (Peter Kreeft).

https://youtu.be/-crgQGdpZR0

http://youtu.be/Aw_MqUxDlik
3. It can stick with you and haunt you for the rest of your life (or at least until you finally make a choice for God): “Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe God DOES exist and I’m on my way to losing this bet…”

An atheist visited the great Jewish rabbi and philosopher Martin Buber and demanded that he prove the existence of God to him. Martin refused, and the atheist got up to leave in anger. As he left, Martin called after him, "But can you be sure there is no God?"

That atheist wrote, forty years later, "I am still an atheist. But Martin’s question has haunted me every day of my life."

The Wager has just that haunting power.

(Peter Kreeft)
CONCLUSION

If you do not know whether God exists or not, then the most reasonable thing to do is to bet on God. If you win, you win everything. If you lose, you lose nothing.

*Note 1: Pascal would be the first to tell you that The Wager is not an argument that really proves God’s existence. Instead, it is a creative tactic to shatter a person’s agnosticism and move them in the direction of belief.
*Note 2:
The Catholic Church does NOT teach that all atheists and agnostics will go to **Hell**. An atheist or agnostic (or Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, etc.) who has never had a chance to accept or reject Jesus but continues to seek the **truth** and do what they know to be **right** (and avoid what they know to be **wrong**) may still end up in Heaven (see CCC 847). On the flip side, the Catholic Church also does not teach that all **Catholics** will go to Heaven. Just saying, “I believe in God” or going through the motions (Mass on Sunday, not killing anyone, etc.) doesn’t guarantee eternal life in Heaven, either. In short, we will be judged by what we **knew** and how we tried to **live** our lives based on this knowledge.