

The Belief Game Between God and Man

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Abstract

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I thank xxx.

1. Introduction

Brams has a game. He didn't do it right. His game has believe/don't believe. Is that voluntary?

Also, what he really means is "believe only if there is evidence", which is irrational.

Also, as he says, the choice is really theist, atheist, agnostic.

2. A second version is *really* believe/don't believe. Then you go with your priors. This is perhaps what God wants.

3. A third version is Investigate/Don't Investigate. If you aren't going to investigate, God will not provide the evidence.

I had better thoughts, I think, but I can't remember them now.

Table 1 is Figure 2.1 from Brams.

Table 1: The Brams Revelation Game

		Man	
		Believe	Don't Believe
God	Reveal	3,4	1,1
	Conceal	4,2	2,3

Payoffs to: (God, Man). 4 is best, 1 is worst.

Craig Duncan distinguishes between two kinds of agnosticism. One kind of agnostic believes that the existence or nonexistence of God cannot be known, neither now nor in the future. Another kind believes that the existence or nonexistence of God cannot be known on present evidence, but does not rule out the possibility that new evidence will arise.

Whether one can choose to believe is a question that comes up in Pascal's Wager too, which has a philosophical literature.

Table 1 has two flaws. One is that a person cannot choose between belief and disbelief if he is rational. All he can do is decide what actions to take based on his beliefs. We say in daily life that somebody decides to believe in something, but we just mean that they understand the facts and theory in a certain way. Once they do, they have no choice but to believe. Or, perhaps they can purposely choose to believe what they currently believe is false, by crippling their minds somehow. We will return to that with the idea of the Belief Pill below. That is not in game theory, though.

The second flaw is that it is a very strange payoff function to have someone believe only if he observes evidence, even if rationally he should believe even without new evidence. If someone has a good theoretical reason to believe that God exists, and he knows that God wants to remain concealed, he should not expect to see any evidence, and he should believe anyway.

No: a better decision for the Man is whether to Obey or Sin. His payoffs from these things depend on whether God exists or not.

Table 2: The Hard Decision Payoff Matrix

		Man	
		Obey	Sin
God	Exists	4	1
	Fictional	2	3

Payoff to Man. 4 is best, 1 is worst.

In Table 2, I am not assuming that Christian salvation comes from obedience to God. That is Pelagianism, a heresy. Rather, I am assuming that the punishment of someone who has not achieved salvation depends on the degree of their sin. There are circles of Hell, as in Dante, and although someone whom God has not granted salvation goes to Hell, if he has led a typical life he will not suffer as much as someone who steals, murders, and blasphemes.

I am also putting aside sins such as excessive drinking or habitual lying that are not just displeasing to God, but stupid even for an atheist.

“Obey” refers only to laws whose validity depends on God’s existence (and, of course, His caring about them).

This allows us to escape Pascal’s Wager, by an outlet even Pascal must grant us.

Whether the man will obey or sin depends on his beliefs about God. In the example above, he will choose Obey if puts the probability of God’s existence at greater than xxx. The threshold depends crucially on the size of the payoffs now. If we replace 1 with -100, more appropriate to Pascal’s Wager, then the threshold drops to xxx.

We now return to Brams’s Game. We will put it in the following form, where p denotes the Man’s prior subjective probability that God exists.

Table 3: The Hard Decision Payoff Matrix

		Man	
		Obey	Sin
God	Reveal	3,4	1,1
	Conceal	4,2*p	2,3*p

Expected Payoffs to: (God, Man). 4 is best, 1 is worst.

These payoffs are the result of Bayes’s Rule. (Explain it here.)

Since God has a dominant strategy of *Conceal*, the man knows that he will not observe any evidence that God exists. He must base his decision entirely on his prior probability p .

Thus, the outcome depends on the prior probability. If this is given by God, then it would be a way to explain how God can choose whether some people obey and some do not— but indirectly. Whether the people retain ‘free will in such a situation depends on how one defines “free will”.

Now let us return to the question of whether one can choose to believe. In Table 3, the decision was made despite lack of complete confidence by

the Man. Instead, his decision could be whether to take a “Belief Pill” or an “Unbelief Pill”. These pills would give him complete confidence in his belief. His value for p would go to either 0 or 1.

Table 3: The Belief Pill Game

		Man	
		Take Belief Pill	Don't Take
God	Reveal	3,2	-1,3
	Conceal	-1,1	0,0

Payoffs to: (God, Man). 4 is best, 1 is worst.

In this simple setting, the Belief Pill makes no difference. The Man can obey either with or without certainty. If he is subject to weakness of will, akrasia, maybe the Belief Pill will help— a sort of “Dutch courage” (as a swig of whisky before a fight has been called). On the other hand, if new information comes up— if, say, God does decide to reveal Himself after all, or conclusive evidence turns up that the Bible was forged— then having removed one’s ability to change one’s mind is a disadvantage.

Finally, let us look at a rather different game, involving the question as to whether to inquire further into the evidence for God’s existence. This is another way to alter one’s beliefs, a rational way.

Table 4: The Seeker’s Game: God Wishes to Save

		Man	
		Inquire	Ignore
God	Reveal	3,2	-1,3
	Conceal	-1,1	0,0

Payoffs to: (God, Man). 4 is best, 1 is worst.

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