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Pascal's Wager: A Pragmatic Argument for Belief in God

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Should you believe there's a God?

To answer this, we might examine arguments for theism—like first-cause and design arguments—and arguments for atheism—like arguments from evil. These arguments offer evidence for and against God's existence.^[1]

Pascal's wager, originally proposed by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), takes a more pragmatic approach. Pascal thought that evidence cannot settle the question of whether God exists, so he proposes that you should bet, or *wager*, on God because of what's at stake: *you have lots to gain and not much to lose*.^[2]

This article explains Pascal's wager and considers three objections.

1. The Basic Argument

The basic form of the wager goes like this:

If God exists and I believe in God, I'll go to heaven, which is infinitely good. If God exists and I don't believe in God, I may go to hell, which is infinitely bad. If God does not exist, then whether I believe in God or not, whatever I'd gain or lose would be finite. So, I should believe in God.

The argument depends on the *expected value* of believing in God, which we use to make a decision if we're not certain whether God exists.^[3] This *decision matrix* illustrates the argument:

Options:	God exists	God does not exist	Expected value
Believe in God	Infinite reward	Finite outcome	Infinitely good
Don't believe in God	Infinite punishment	Finite outcome	Infinitely bad

Basic decision matrix for Pascal's Wager.

Even if the chance of God existing is small, as long as it is greater than zero, the expected value of believing is infinite. Combining the chart's values with the assumption that we should pick the action with the highest expected value yields Pascal's Wager.

While the Wager has its advocates, there are many objections. Let's review some of the most important.

2. The Many-Gods Objection

An initial objection is that Pascal's wager is too simplistic. There are many religions, and believing in the God of one religion might prevent gaining the infinite rewards of another religion.

To see this, let's consider just adding two religions—Christianity and Islam—to our decision matrix. Assuming the probabilities of Christianity, Islam, and atheism are greater than zero, we get confusing expected values. This is called the "many-gods" objection, illustrated by this decision matrix:

Options:	Christian God exists	Muslim God exists	God does not exist	Expected Value
Believe in Christian God	Infinite reward	Infinite punishment	Finite outcome	(infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)
Believe in Muslim God	Infinite punishment	Infinite reward	Finite outcome	(infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)
Don't believe in God	Infinite punishment	Infinite punishment	Finite outcome	(-infinite) + (-infinite) + (finite)

Decision matrix for the "Many Gods" objection.

Apparently, Pascal's wager doesn't give us a reason to pick one religion over another, since Christianity and Islam both have the same expected value.

You might think the decision matrix tells us that believing either religion is a better bet than believing atheism. However, there's a possibility—even if unlikely—that atheists go to heaven and theists go to hell. As long as we don't assign this probability 0, then atheism isn't a worse bet than believing a religion. Thus, all options seem to have the same expected value.^[4]

A common response to the many-gods objection can be summarized in two words: *probability matters*. It matters even when dealing with infinite values.

To see why, imagine you're given the choice between a 90% chance at an infinite good or a 10% chance at the same good. You should clearly take the 90% chance. When we apply this to Pascal's wager, the result is that *you should wager for the religion you think is most likely to be true*. Christianity and Islam

actually do not have the same expected value—wagering on the more probable religion gives you a higher chance at an infinite good, and so has a higher expected value. Further, since it's unlikely that atheists and agnostics (agnostics suspend judgment on whether God exists) go to heaven and theists go to hell, Pascal's wager implies it's irrational to be an atheist or agnostic.^[5]

3. The Impossibility Objection

A second objection is that wagering is impossible, because we can't form beliefs simply for their benefits: if I offer you \$1,000,000 to believe that $1+1=3$, you probably still can't believe it. Most philosophers reject *doxastic voluntarism*, the view that we can directly control our beliefs.^[6]

In response, whether God exists isn't obviously true or false (unlike $1+1=3$), so some argue that you have more control over your religious beliefs. This might be *indirect* control, like the control you could exercise over your political beliefs by changing the news sources you read.

A second response—which Pascal himself favored—frames the wager in terms of *action*, rather than belief. The wager gives you a reason to *commit* to God—by going to church, praying, and immersing yourself in a religious community—rather than trying to directly believe in God.^[7]

4. The Irrationality Objection

Even if it's *possible* to take Pascal's wager, that doesn't guarantee that the beliefs formed from wagering would be *rational*, at least from an evidential point of view. It seems like forming a belief on the basis of a wager would violate *evidentialism*, the view that we should proportion our beliefs to the evidence. We should believe because of evidence, not because a belief is beneficial.^[8]

In response, if your evidence for theism is *permissive*—meaning you could be rational as a theist, atheist, or agnostic—you can take Pascal's wager and still respect evidentialism. This is because more than one belief-attitude fits your evidence.^[9]

Also, we can again make the wager about a commitment to God, rather than about belief. Since evidentialism applies to belief and not action, you could then take the wager without violating evidentialism.

5. Conclusion

We've discussed the basic version of Pascal's wager and examined three objections. The wager is unique because it leads us to consider many kinds of reasons for belief, including evidence, arguments, risks, and rewards. More specifically, even if the arguments that God exists aren't successful, it's interesting to consider whether we'd have a reason to believe in God anyway.^[10]

Notes

[1] For an introduction to some of these arguments see [Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason](#) by Marc Bobro, [The Fine-Tuning Argument for the Existence of God](#) by Thomas Metcalf and [The Problem of Evil](#) by Thomas Metcalf, as well as other arguments for and against the existence of God in the [Philosophy of Religion](#) essay category. There are also other potential sources of evidence for God that don't come in the form of arguments, e.g. evidence from religious experiences.

Pascal's Wager differs from these approaches. Instead of focusing on whether it is true or false that God exists, the wager concerns whether belief in God is beneficial, or *pragmatic*, for the believer. Thus, the Wager is called a "pragmatic" argument, in contrast to what might be called an "evidential" argument.

[2] For the original version of the wager, see Pascal (1662). Pascal's Wager generally presumes a common concept of God that is reviewed in [Attributes of God](#) by Bailie Peterson.

[3] Generally, we appeal to the expected value of actions when we don't have certainty about the relevant probabilities. If we had certainty, we could calculate the *actual* value of each action; this approach tells us how to act rationally in the face of uncertainty. Therefore, Pascal's expected value reasoning applies to anyone who is not 100% certain that God exists or 100% certain that God doesn't exist. For an application of the concept of expected value to voting, see [Ethics and the Expected Consequences of Voting](#) by Thomas Metcalf.

[4] For more on this objection, see Mougin and Sober (1994).

[5] See Jackson and Rogers (2019) for development of this argument.

[6] See Alston (1988) for an argument against doxastic voluntarism.

[7] See Rota (2016) for a contemporary version of the wager that focuses on making a commitment to God.

[8] See Conee and Feldman (2004) for an explanation and defense of evidentialism.

[9] For more on permissivism, the view that one more than attitude can be rational, given a body of evidence, see Titelbaum and Kopec (2016). Permissivism doesn't mean that more than one attitude fits your evidence in every case. Sometimes attitudes (like *believing* $1+1=2$) are rationally required by our evidence; however, our evidence for some matters (like God's existence) is harder to assess. See James (1896) for a pragmatic argument for belief in God that appeals to permissivism.

[10] For more on Pascal's Wager, see Hájek (2018).

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For Further Exploration

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Jackson, Liz (video), "Answering the Most Challenging Objections to Pascal's Wager".

Jackson, Liz (video), "Philosophers on Pascal's Wager".

Jackson, Liz (video), "Evidentialism: What Should We Believe?".

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