Pascal's Wager: Rejecting Atheism

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally rendered, Pascal's Wager from his *Penseés* calls on one to find faith in the Divine regardless of the truth behind the existence of God. This pragmatic argument for faith takes an eye to probability and expected utility. In this paper, I rework the decision matrix created by Pascal in order to avoid the mathematical problems that arise due to his use of infinity. Considering these modifications, I will demonstrate that a rational actor should not, as the Wager is regularly interpreted, blindly look for faith in God, but instead merely keep themselves open to his existence. Pascal's Wager should not be regarded as a manifesto for finding faith, but instead as a strong rebuff of atheism as an irrational and no-win belief system.

Pascal's Wager: Rejecting Atheism

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PASCAL: REJECTING ATHEISM[2]

Does God exist? Should I believe in God? Should I open myself to the possibility of God? These are all distinctly different questions. One does not need to irrefutably know of God's existence in order to have faith nor does one need to believe in order to perform ritual practice, rendering themselves open to the Divine. Blaise Pascal, in his *Pensées*, brings forward these distinctions in his pragmatic argument for faith. Knowledge of God's existence is not necessary for faith to be prudential. The outline of his argument runs as follows:

1. "God is, or He is not"

2. Irrefutable knowledge of God's existence or inexistence is an impossibility
    a. Therefore, the probability of God's existence is a non-zero number

3. One must pick between belief or disbelief
    a. Belief, disbelief, and ambivalence or openness are the three possible options
    b. Time passes on and death is an inevitability
    c. Lifelong openness to belief is akin to disbelief at death— belief never actualized
    d. Thus, eventually belief or disbelief are the only two options
4. Belief in God results in either infinite reward (God is real) or a loss of nothing

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5. Disbelief in God results in finite gain or loss
    a. (4) and (5) describe this faith matrix where f_1, f_2, and f_3 are finite numbers

	God	No God
Belief	∞	f_2
Disbelief	f_1	f_3

6. Rationality dictates one will select the option with the highest expected utility

7. Thus, because the probability of God's existence is higher than a non-zero chance (1), one is forced to decide between belief or disbelief (3), and belief in God has the highest expected utility, then one should choose to believe in God.[3]

Interestingly, Pascal does not ultimately hold that this logic is sufficient to bring one to faith. Belief in God requires more. Instead, Pascal's intent with the argument is to demonstrate the rationality of faith and religious practice, inspiring folk to follow the way of past religious believers in hopes of finding God.

Criticisms of Pascal's Wager are plentiful. Most notably, critiques center around Pascal's faulty use of infinity in probability theory, the decision matrix created by premises (4) & (5), and his forced decision argument in premise (3). In this paper, after outlining these complaints surrounding Pascal's Wager, I will defend and modify Pascal's argument, ultimately concluding that the Wager should not be understood as a rational push towards faith, but instead as a rejection of the rationality of atheism. First, in establishing new parameters for the Wager, I will remove the need to invoke infinity or to consider probability. Finally, during a discussion of rationality I will concede that Pascal's Wager, even modified to solve the problems raised by premises (3), (4), and (5), provides no evidence for

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[3] Pascal, Blaise. "The Wager." *Philosophy of Religion*, Faith and Reason III.

faith, but instead is a persuasive argument against closing oneself off to God.

CRITICISM

Pascal's invocation of infinity as reward for belief in God in a world with the Divine is objected to on both theological and mathematical accounts. The theological dispute questions infinite reward as the result of belief: heaven (Pascal's assumption) may not exist, or belief may not be sufficient grounds to arrive in heaven, or heaven may not be a realm of infinite reward. Mathematically, infinity presents itself as an infections concern, potentially creating a jarring disunity between Pascal's math and reality. Infinite reward for faith can bleed out and infect all parts of life that can lead one to faith. Almost all actions can then be assigned infinite utility. For example, if eating cereal nourishes Valentina's body and allows her to realize the supremacy of God this simple action can be imbued with infinite utility. However, *Fruit Loops* are just *Fruit Loops*, not a transcendent experience.

Criticisms surrounding the decision matrix call for recognition of potential gods beyond Pascal's Catholic God. This expansion is known as the "many gods" refute. There are many different ways to conceive of God or religion in general, none of which seem to have clear supremacy. This worry poses a problem for Pascal's Wager by decreasing the expected utility of each individual "belief" option in the decision matrix by lowering the probability of each one, especially if infinite utility is removed as the reward for each of the God situations. The more Gods or religious options, the lower the probability of each of the options in the matrix.

DOMINANT STRATEGY AND PARAMETERS

Game theory in Pascal's Wager hinges upon an infinite-finite distinction. In order to guarantee that the expected utility, $utility \cdot probability = expected\ utility$, of faith remains higher than the other options in the decision matrix, Pascal ascribes belief with infinite utility when God exist and all other options with finite utility. This finite-infinite matrix guarantees no matter how low the probability of God's existence or how high the utility of belief, faith retains its position as the option with the highest expected utility. In this manner, Pascal sidesteps the need to provide any evidence for God's existence in order to articulate a practical argument for faith. No matter how low the probability of God's existence the expected utility will be infinite—much higher than the finite options. Belief always has the highest expected utility.

	A	**B**
α	Aα	Bα
β	Aβ	Bβ
γ	Aγ	Bγ

Pascal's dominant strategy can function upon another distinction. Instead of wagering on a dubious infinite reward over finite results, the Wager can be established as one for positive over negative utility. The positive-negative dominant strategy like the infinite-finite strategy also avoids the need to evoke probability; the expected utility of the positive option will always be higher than that of the negative or zero option. Irrefutable, positive numbers are larger than their counterparts, even with diminishing (but positive) multipliers or coefficients. If all options under **A** are positive and all options under **B** are zero or negative, then **A** is the clear

dominant strategy. Regardless of the probabilities of A_α, A_β, and A_γ occurring they not only have higher expected utility, but also the only chance of gain—if you select option **B** you are selecting no reward at best and negative utility at worst. In applying this to Pascal's Wager, **A** represents faith and **B** represents disbelief.

In practical terms this dominant strategy would not have universal applicability; it would only apply to those living under conditions such that there are available religious options with net-positive utilities[4] and disbelief in general provides no special utility. The probability for truth of beliefs, no matter how low, becomes irrelevant with these parameters. I would argue that there are many regions of the world like this today. In a suburb of Los Angeles, for example, buy-in and defection costs from religious communities may be low and adherence to atheism could offer no special benefits.[5] You risk nothing by Wagering on faith, you only open yourself up to gain. I have shifted Pascal's argument from a discussion of finite and infinite to positive and negative utility. The selection of faith remains the clear dominant strategy. Moreover, this shift to discussing positive and negative utility, abandoning the need to consider probability of outcomes, dismisses the many Gods objections to Pascal's Wager. I do not argue for Pascal's Catholic faith nor do I argue for the Protestant faith of my neighbor. My Wager argues for any faith with a net-positive gain. It differentiates between faiths only in that those with net-positive utility are considered. Additions to the faith matrix lower the probability of each outcome, but this is irrelevant. Faith is the only option available with positive utility. Faith is the better option.

The problem that remains I will nickname the malevolent/benevolent God. The malevolent God punishes believers for selecting faith and the

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[4] The new Wager would only be for faiths with net-positive utility. Those with net-negative utility would not be a dominant strategy and are not considered here.
[5] This argument rests largely on these conditions; the secular costs and benefits of staunch atheism cannot significantly outweigh those of religious adherence.

benevolent God rewards believers and non-believers alike. Neither of these Gods concern me: the malevolent God does not appear to be a Being worthy of worship. One should not concern themselves with pleasing a malevolent God. The benevolent God on the other hand is currently a popular conception of the Divine; however, this does not pose a problem to this argument. If the benevolent God treats believers and non-believers the same then he should not be considered on a pragmatic matrix about belief. The matrix is about picking between different possible outcomes.

RATIONALITY

Rationalism does not go hand in hand with maximum utility. A rationally held belief is not necessarily the belief that will potentially deliver one to the best possible future. Even if genuinely believing that I am the son of a unicorn makes me much happier day after day and gives me more utility than the belief that I am the son of two humans, belief in my unicorn ancestry would still not be a rational belief. Pascal himself saw this dilemma while writing his *Pensées*. After reviewing the modified Wager, one still should not be delivered to faith in God. Faith may maximize utility, but utility does not track with reality. Rational belief is belief founded on logic, founded on decent certainty. Individuals cannot be said to have rational faith in God without reason and logic, outside of Pascal's argument, guiding them to faith.

The Wager still holds value and meaning. If one was sitting in a room with two ajar doors—door R, religion, and door A, atheism—Pascal's argument does not offer a rational reason to enter into the religious door. Without outside evidence for God's existence one cannot rationally find the faith which would enable them to enter door R. But, the modified Wager offers a convincing case for those whose lives and situations parody the parameters established to never select door A. Atheism would never accrue benefits for its followers. The rational choice is to sit waiting for a

reason to enter door R, waiting to gain utility. One can sit in the room, wait and hope a reason to enter the door to faith becomes evident. Living day to day life does not require a forced decision on faith, however, rationally one should not close themselves off to faith.[6] It would be irrational to shut oneself off from potential gain. Openness to faith is a cost-free action. Moreover, as little evidence one may have for the truth of religion(s), irrefutable proof against faith does not exist. The probability of faith turning out to be veridical is non-zero, therefore openness to faith is not irrational. The Wager may not push one into entering the door to religion, but it does demonstrate that entering into atheism would be irrational.

Premise (3) of Pascal's argument rejects the metaphor of a room with two doors. In Pascal's estimation, faith and disbelief have no intermediate. We have "embarked" on our journeys in life and cannot pause, wait, sit in the room. We must select belief or disbelief because death will come. Death will come and "openness" will become disbelief. After waiting in the metaphorical room, one will have never entered the threshold into belief. Pascal would hold that there is a room with one door. You start in the room of disbelief and may enter into the world of religion. In this situation, if disbelief as shown by the Wager is irrational, then there is only one option left. Belief. The rational option.

Death is inevitable, but Pascal is incorrect in assuming that this creates a forced decision. Pascal envisions life having two stages: embarking and disembarking. This creates a forced decision. But there is a third stage to life: life itself. Moreover, Pascal's Wager talks about a way to live, not a way to die. Pascal original argument talks of a life of faith, yet it then ignores that life itself. Pascal only thinks of heaven, the afterlife, the hypothetical reward. But, for the bulk of one's life there is no forced

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[6] I am assuming the parameters for faith as outlined above in my new decision matrix (net-positive religious experiences).

decision. Tomorrow will always come. Every day of man's life, besides one, he can sit undecided on faith and a tomorrow will come where he can make the decision. My modified Wager talks about these days. Each and every one should be spent open to God, never is it rational for one to turn to atheism if their situation parodies the parameters set in my Wager. One day death will come. The decision becomes forced at the end and potentially wagering on faith soon before death may not be enough—one may have needed to have lived an entire life of faith to receive the reward Pascal discusses. This, however, is not the concern of Pascal's Wager. My modified Wager talks of rationality in life, not the rationality of death. On a day to day basis, Pascal's Wager tells man to reject atheism, to hope for a revelation of faith. The modified Wager informs us how to live.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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