

# PASCAL'S WAGER FOR CHRISTIANITY

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**ABSTRACT:** Pascal's wager is unique among theistic arguments. It does not aim to establish that God exists but instead concludes that you ought to believe in, or wager on, God. In this chapter, I provide an overview of Pascal's wager and discuss different approaches to the wager. Then, I consider how to motivate a wager for Christianity in particular. I also address common Christian objections to the wager. Finally, I cover the practical importance of Pascal's wager for both Christians and non-Christians.

**KEYWORDS:** Pascal's Wager; Christianity; Decision Theory; Expected Value; Religious Commitment; Infinity; Heaven and Hell; Practical Rationality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most traditional theistic arguments are for the conclusion that God exists. These arguments, such as the ontological argument, cosmological argument, or design argument, provide evidence that there is a God (see many of the other chapters in this book). Pascal's wager is unique among theistic arguments in that it doesn't aim to provide evidence for God's existence. While it fails as an argument for the existence of God, to classify it as such is to misunderstand its aims. Instead of concluding that God exists, the wager concludes that you ought to believe in, or wager on, God. Pascal's wager is not an argument that God exists, but it is a broadly theistic argument.

How does the argument go; why ought you to wager on God? In very general terms, you should wager because there is much to gain if you wager on God and God exists, and perhaps much to lose if you don't wager on God and God exists. If God does not exist, whether you wager or not, the stakes are much lower. Given such a cost-benefit analysis, wagering on God is your best bet. Even if there's little evidence for God's existence, wagering on God may nonetheless be appropriate.

This chapter provides an overview of the wager and discusses its importance for Christians, both in their own lives and in dialogue with non-Christians. In **Section 2**, I provide an overview of Pascal's wager and survey different versions of the argument. In **Section 3**, I discuss and motivate a wager for Christianity. In **Section 4**, I cover Christian objections to the wager: that is, worries that Christians in particular tend to have about Pascal's argument. In **Section 5**, I provide some thoughts on the practical role that the wager can play, for both Christians and for non-Christians. I conclude in **Section 6**.

## 2. WHAT IS PASCAL'S WAGER?

### 2.1 Background and Terminology

This section provides background on the concepts and terminology that play a key role in the wager. Pascal's wager is normally understood in terms of *expected value*, which is the value of an action, given uncertainty about some relevant facts. In a position of uncertainty, the action with the highest expected value is most likely to lead to the best outcome, so it's widely thought that rationality requires picking

the action with the highest expected value, i.e. you should *maximize expected value*. (More on this soon.) A second relevant term is *credence*, which is essentially the confidence you have in the truth of some proposition, measured on a scale from 0 to 1. 0 represents certainty that a proposition is false and 1 represents certainty that it is true. For example, my credence that  $1+1=2$  is very close to 1; my credence that a fair coin will land heads is 0.5.

Let's consider an example of how to maximize expected value. Suppose I offer you a bet. If you accept my bet, I will flip a coin. I will pay you a hundred dollars if the coin lands heads, but you must pay me a dollar if it lands tails. This is illustrated in **Table 1**.

	Heads (cr = 0.5)	Tails (cr = 0.5)	EV
Take the Bet	100	-1	49.5
Don't Take the Bet	0	0	0

**Table 1: The Bet**

To calculate the expected value (or EV) of each action (take the bet, don't take the bet), you multiply your credence (cr) in each state (heads, tails) by the value that corresponds to each action. Then you add these products across each row to calculate the expected value of each action. You *multiply down, add across*. We can calculate the expected value of taking the bet (assuming you value money linearly):

$$\text{Take the bet: } (0.5 \times 100) + (0.5 \times -1) = 50 - 0.5 = \mathbf{49.5}$$

Compare that to the expected value of not taking the bet:

$$\text{Don't take the bet: } (0.5 \times 0) + (0.5 \times 0) = \mathbf{0}$$

Then, the expected value of taking the bet is 49.5, and the expected value of not taking it is 0. Given that you should maximize expected value, and since 49.5 is greater than 0, you should take this bet. This is true even though, due to the uncertainty of the coin toss, there's a chance you could lose money. Nonetheless, taking the bet maximizes expected value. Put another way, if you were offered this same bet over and over again, you'd make money in the long run (i.e. in the limit).

## 2.2 The Most Basic Wager

The intuitive reasoning behind the most basic wager is as follows. There are two actions you can take: wager on God or not wager on God (we'll discuss "wagering" more in the next subsection), and two ways the world might be: God exists or God does not exist. If you wager on God and God exists, you'll go to heaven, which is infinitely good. If God exists and you don't wager on God, you may go to hell, which is infinitely bad. If God does not exist, then whether you wager on God or not, whatever you gain or lose would be finite. Wagering on God is your best bet.

We can represent the wager more formally using expected value reasoning. See **Table 2**: cr stands for credence,  $\infty$  and  $-\infty$  represent negative and positive infinity,  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are finite values, and EV indicates the expected value of each action. Note that, as indicated by the chart below, the wagerer's credence that God exists,  $n$ , must be greater than 0 for the argument to work.

	God exists (cr = n > 0)	God doesn't exist (cr = 1-n)	EV
Wager on God	$\infty$	f1	$\infty$
Don't wager on God	$-\infty$	f2	$-\infty$

**Table 2: The Most Basic Wager**

The expected values for each action are calculated as follows:

$$\text{Wager on God: } (n \times \infty) + ((1-n) \times f1) = \infty \text{ (since } n > 0).$$

$$\text{Don't wager on God: } (n \times -\infty) + ((1-n) \times f2) = -\infty$$

Since  $\infty > -\infty$ , unless your credence that God exists is 0, you should wager on God. As Pascal said, “Wager, then, without hesitation that [God] is,” because “there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain,” and “what you stake is finite” (1670: fragments 233–241). That said, most wagers defended by philosophers—including the wager proposed by Pascal himself—are more complex than this simple gloss. In the next subsection, we’ll consider some different varieties of Pascal’s wager.

**2.3 Approaches to the Wager**

There are various approaches to Pascal’s wager; this section covers four different choice points. The first involves methodology: historical or contemporary? The second concerns what wagering on God is exactly and the third concerns the specific motives to take the wager. The fourth concerns the values involved in wagering: are they infinite or finite?

Some authors take a more historical approach to Pascal’s wager. That is, they are interested in the interpretative question of what exactly Pascal proposed in the *Pensées* when he made the famous wager. What kind of argument did Pascal intend to make? Which interpretation of Pascal’s writings is most charitable and faithful to the text? This involves a close reading of the *Pensées* (ideally in French), reading Pascal’s other work, studying Pascal’s historical context, and the like (see e.g. Hammond 2003, Hunter 2013).

Other authors prefer to look at the wager from a more ideas-focused or contemporary perspective. On this approach, while some inspiration is of course taken from Pascal’s argument in the *Pensées*, the main goal is to pinpoint the version of the wager that is most plausible and decide, ultimately, if we ought to wager on God. Authors who take this approach are less concerned with the exact argument Pascal himself made and are willing to adjust the wager as needed to account for various objections or problems (see e.g. Mougin and Sober 1994, Rota 2016, Jackson and Rogers 2019, Jackson 2023-a. Hájek 2003 is a nice example of a paper that combines both approaches). Of course, if many substantial adjustments to Pascal’s argument are made, at some point, the argument might be too different to be considered a version of Pascal’s wager. It’s nonetheless reasonable to take “Pascal’s wager” to refer to a family of arguments, some of which are closer to Pascal’s original argument and others that are more distinct. While both approaches to the wager are valuable research programs, I will primarily take the contemporary approach. That is, I am less concerned with Pascal’s original intentions and more concerned about the best version of Pascal’s wager and the practical role that the wager might play for Christians.

Second, I intentionally framed the action in the previous subsection vaguely, as “wagering.” This raises the question: what is wagering? Is it just believing in God? There are two general answers to this

question (see Jackson 2023-b: 36). The first is the *doxastic wager*. This version of the wager centrally involves belief; doxastic "wagering" is either choosing to believe in God or taking steps to come to believe (see Jackson 2023-a). The second is the *acceptance wager*. This version of the wager involves accepting, or acting as if, God exists, e.g. going to church, praying, reading Scripture, immersing oneself in a religious community, and the like. The acceptance-wagerer makes an action-oriented commitment to God (see Rota 2016). You could also have a version of the wager that involves both belief and action. Here, I won't take a stand on which interpretation of "wagering" is preferable; ultimately, both the doxastic wager and the acceptance wager have a philosophical and practical role to play.

Third, there are different reasons one might be motivated to take Pascal's wager. In the gloss from the previous subsection, we primarily focused on heaven on the "positive" end, and hell on the "negative" end. However, this isn't the only way to frame the wager. First, note that the argument's conclusion—that wagering on God maximizes expected value—only needs heaven OR hell, since  $\infty$  is greater than any finite value and  $-\infty$  is less than any finite value.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, if you wager and God exists, this might lead to goods other than heaven, including a relationship with God, union with God, premortem goods such as the benefits of living a religious life (see McBrayer 2014), or even moral goods (see Rota 2016). Appeals to heaven (and/or hell) aren't the only way to argue that wagering on God maximizes expected value. Thus, heaven and hell don't need to be the only or even the primary motivations for taking the wager.

This brings us to a final, related choice point. We framed the wager in terms of infinite values. It's natural to think an eternal afterlife would be infinitely good, and even a close connection to an infinite being like God might rightfully be assigned an infinite value. However, infinities also cause technical problems.<sup>2</sup> Some have responded to these problems by keeping infinities in the wager but changing the way expected values are calculated (see Bartha 2007, Jackson and Rogers 2019, Chen and Rubio 2020; we'll discuss this more in the next section). Others instead propose that we move away from infinite values altogether. Instead, the outcome on which you wager on God and God exists is modeled with a very large finite value (and if one's wager involves hell, it could similarly be modeled with a large, negative, and finite value; see Jordan 2006, Rota 2016, Hájek 2018). There's a tradeoff here: infinities do make the argument more complex and require technical machinery; there's something simple and easy about doing all the calculations with finite values. At the same time, infinities provide a powerful trumping mechanism and seem to more accurately represent the value of an eternal heaven or union with God. While I prefer infinite wagers, and I will continue to reference infinite values in what follows, most everything in this paper is perfectly consistent with using finite values in the wager instead.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Pascal's original wager may have excluded an infinite hell; Pascal writes: "The justice of God must be vast like His compassion. Now justice to the outcast is *less vast*...than mercy towards the elect" (1670: section III, my emphasis). Thanks to Alan Hájek for pointing this out to me.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the problems infinities cause include violation of the continuity axiom (Savage 1954), the mixed strategies objection (Duff 1986, Hájek 2003), and the many gods objection (Mougin and Sober 1994). Note also that classic formulations of expected value theory don't allow for infinities (e.g. Jeffrey 1983: 150).

### 3. WHY THE CHRISTIAN WAGER?

One of the most common objections to Pascal's wager is known as the many gods objection. Recall that the basic wager in section 2.2 considers only two actions: wager on God and do not wager on God. You might think that this is overly simplistic since there are a variety of different religions, and wagering on the God of one religion might look drastically different than wagering on the God of another religion. In fact, wagering on one religion's God might exclude you from the good outcome associated with another religion; for example, Islam does not necessarily teach that all Christians will go to heaven (and vice versa). Once you introduce multiple religions into the decision matrix, the simplicity of the original argument is lost, since there are many mutually exclusive paths to wagering on God, and it's not clear how we ought to pick between them. Why should we choose the Christian God rather than the Muslim God, the Jewish God, or many of the other religions out there?

The most common (and in my view, most plausible) response to the many gods objection is that *probability matters*, even for decisions involving infinite values. Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose you're offered a chance at getting something infinitely good. A 6-sided die will be rolled. You then are offered a choice: if you push the red button, you get the infinite good if and only if the die lands on *anything but* a 6. If you push the green button, you get the infinite good if and only if the die lands a 6. You might, at first blush, calculate the expected values as follows:

$$\text{Push the red button: } (5/6 \times \infty) + (1/6 \times 0) = \infty$$

$$\text{Push the green button: } (1/6 \times \infty) + (5/6 \times 0) = \infty$$

This calculation suggests you should be indifferent between the 1/6 chance at the infinite good at the 5/6 chance at the infinite good, and if I pay you \$1 to push the green button, you should push it. But clearly, this is wrong; you should push the red button that gives you the 5/6 chance at the infinite good. The lesson is that we shouldn't ignore the probabilities of various options, even when infinite goods are at stake.

If you want to keep infinite values in the wager, you need to calculate the expected values in such a way that infinities don't "absorb" the various probabilities. Put differently, we should deny that infinities are *reflexive under multiplication* (see Hájek and Jackson forthcoming: section 3.1). For formal ways to calculate infinities without washing out probabilities (involving utility ratios, limits and ratios, and surreal numbers) see Bartha (2007), Jackson and Rogers (2019), and Chen and Rubio (2020). As discussed above, a mathematically simpler option is to substitute the infinite values for very large finite values.

The bottom line is that, even in wagers involving infinite values, probability matters. This provides the simplest route to the Christian wager: argue that the probability of Christianity is higher than all other religions. This will involve the traditional, evidential arguments that attempt to boost the probability of theism/Christianity. Some might wonder: what's the point of Pascal's wager, then? It seems to just come down to the question of which religion has the highest probability, which involves the traditional, epistemic arguments for Christianity. What is the wager adding?

Even if we embrace this response to the many gods objection and use probability to choose between religions, the wager still has a key role to play. First, assuming that *at least one traditional religion is true* is more likely than *atheists go to heaven and theists go to hell*, this wager has the result that you shouldn't be

(or wager on, or live as) an atheist or agnostic. This is a staggering and extremely controversial result: atheism and agnosticism are irrational. Put another way, the wager establishes that you ought to practice some religion—the religion you take to be most probable—rather than be an atheist or agnostic.

Second, one reason the wager is powerful is because of the nature of its conclusion. Wager-like arguments conclude that we should *do* something. This is a different kind of claim than traditional theistic arguments that merely conclude that God exists. Of course, a plausible argument that God exists is significant and notable, but it's a step from that to the claim that we ought to make a theistic or Christian commitment. Part of what the wager adds is a *prescriptive* conclusion—about what we ought to do—rather than merely a *descriptive* claim about the way that the world is. (As a sidenote, I suspect that this stronger normative conclusion is part of why Pascal's wager seems to get special hate, especially in certain popular anti-religious circles.)

Third, if we combine Pascal's wager with “epistemic” arguments that sufficiently raise the probability of Christianity, then we can establish a uniquely Christian wager. Not only so, but the bar for what the epistemic arguments need to establish is much lower. To have a successful Christian wager, we only need to argue that the probability of Christianity is higher than the probability of other religions; we needn't argue that its probability is high in absolute terms, or even that it's greater than 0.5 (see Swinburne 1969). This route is interesting, especially for those skeptical of the epistemic value of natural theology and/or arguments for Christianity; although, as the reader of this volume will see, there are many interesting arguments for theism and Christianity. However, they are also quite controversial and, at least in philosophical and academic circles, there is little consensus on whether they are successful.

What, more specifically, might such combined or “hybrid” arguments look like? This style of argument often involves a “pragmatic” premise—a premise about what is practically rational, often appealing to expected-value style reasoning (e.g. you should wager on the religion that is most likely to be true; or: you should wager on theism if it is at least 50% likely to be true) and an “epistemic” premise—a premise about truth or likelihood (e.g. religion X is most likely to be true; or: theism is at least 50% likely to be true). (For more on hybrid wagers, see Jackson 2023-c: sec. 3.2.)

Pascal himself (1670) arguably takes a route like this. Before Pascal presents the wager in the *Pensées*, Pascal provides arguments for Christianity (from considerations such as fulfilled prophesy). Pascal takes these arguments to be strong enough to establish that, among religions, Christianity is the only “live” possibility. This is the epistemic step. He then, in the famous wager, uses pragmatic considerations to establish that one should wager for Christianity rather than atheism—the pragmatic step.

In the contemporary literature, Michael Rota (2016) also presents a hybrid argument. He summarizes it this way (p. 13):

1. If Christianity has at least a 50% chance of being true, then it is rational to commit to living a Christian life.
2. Christianity does have at least a 50% chance of being true.
3. Thus, it is rational to commit to living a Christian life.

Premise 1 is the pragmatic premise—that Rota defends in the first half of his book, appealing to a modified version of Pascal's wager—and premise 2 is the epistemic premise—that Rota defends in the second half of the book, appealing to a version of the fine-tuning argument and the resurrection argument for Christianity, among other things.

Rota's argument is notable, but these “hybrid” arguments can work even if the probability of Christianity is less than 50%. I've argued in past work that you should wager on the religion (that posits infinite goods) that is most likely to be true (Jackson and Rogers 2019). Then, we'd only need a much weaker claim: Christianity is the most probable of the religions that posit infinite goods. The probability of Christianity in absolute terms could nonetheless be quite low. And, while this is an empirical question, I wouldn't be surprised if many modern atheists and agnostics, especially in the West, would assign probabilities in this way. That is, they give all religions a quite low probability, and think it's most likely that God doesn't exist, but admit that, if a religion were true, it would be Christianity. You wouldn't even have to give this person arguments for Christianity to get to the conclusion that they ought to wager on God; this simply falls out of their credences combined with the expected value framework we've discussed above.

I sum up this section with two points. First, even if we take on board the importance of probability to the wager, the power of the wager is not lost—pragmatic considerations still make a notable difference to the argument. Second, we can use this route to motivate a distinctly Christian wager. Specifically, there are two ways to motivate a wager for Christianity. One—the route I've focused on—is to argue that the probability of Christianity is higher than other religions. Two, one could also argue that there's more to gain (or lose) if Christianity is true; this is part of why the only real “competitors” in the hybrid arguments are other religions that maintain that infinite goods are on the line, as Christianity does.

#### 4. CHRISTIAN OBJECTIONS TO THE WAGER

While we've seen there's a plausible route to establish a uniquely Christian wager, not all Christians will be happy to hear this. In fact, some Christians dislike Pascal's wager. This section presents some of the most common objections to Pascal's wager that I hear from Christians, along with responses.<sup>3</sup>

##### 4.1 The Gambling Objection

Some Christians maintain that gambling is practically irrational or even morally problematic. You might think that taking Pascal's wager is essentially gambling, and not just with a small amount of money, but a more extreme gamble that involves your beliefs and core commitments. This suggests that taking Pascal's wager is practically irrational or even morally problematic, and perhaps even more so than regular gambling, since so much is at stake.

I have two points in response. First, risk-taking is a part of our daily lives and an indispensable feature of our decision-making, since we must make decisions every single day in the face of incomplete information. Suppose I decide to try to new restaurant instead of going to my regular place. There's a sense in which I'm “gambling”—taking a risk—and I might end up paying money for food I dislike.

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<sup>3</sup> For responses to other objections to the wager, see Jackson (2016: sec. 4), Jackson and Rogers (2019: sec. 5), and Jackson (2023-c: sec. 4).

Nonetheless, there's nothing wrong with reasonable risk-taking; it's an unavoidable part of life. Trying new things, at least in some circumstances, is surely not morally problematic, and is often practically rational as well. This raises the question: what separates rational, responsible risk-taking from irresponsible, irrational risk-taking?

This brings me to my second point. One of the powerful features of expected value reasoning is that it tells us when risk-taking is rational and when it should be avoided. Gambling, especially things like buying lottery tickets or playing games at casinos, will almost always fail to maximize expected value (especially if value is understood in terms of dollars); this is how casinos ensure they come out ahead. Of course, in some circumstances, some people get more money out of casinos than they put in. But in the long run, the casinos always win. (This is one reason why people who do things at casinos that maximize expected value, like count cards, are kicked out if caught.)

However, as we've seen, wagering on God maximizes expected value, unlike gambling, so it is practically rational. Thus, even if there is something problematic or irrational about gambling, there is a clear difference between gambling and taking Pascal's wager.

## 4.2 The Selfish Objection

A second objection I tend to hear from Christians is that Pascal's wager is problematic because taking the wager is selfish. The wagerer is primarily considering their own needs and desires, and perhaps because of wanting the bliss of heaven (or to avoid hell), they make a religious commitment. The motivation to take the wager is self-centered, and thus we shouldn't be promoting the wager or encouraging people to wager on God.

In response, first note that philosophers distinguish between a *self-interested* action and a *selfish* action. A self-interested action is any action that aligns with our goals, desires, or preferences, which is almost everything we do, including brushing our teeth, drinking water, going to work, going to the gym, making dinner, and saving for retirement. Even altruistic actions that involve helping other people are sometimes partially self-interested (when we help others because we don't enjoy seeing them suffer, or helping them makes us feel good, or has another result we desire). Some philosophers even question whether it's possible to act without some self-interest.

Selfish actions, on the other hand, occur when we prioritize our desires over the desires of others. For example, suppose we are both famished and there are two pieces of pizza. If I eat both pieces, that's selfish, as I'm prioritizing my desires over yours. In contrast, brushing my teeth or going to the gym isn't selfish.

Many versions of Pascal's wager appeal to self-interest—that is, you should take the wager because it is in your best interest. But this doesn't mean that taking Pascal's wager is selfish; for this, you'd have to argue that taking the wager would involve prioritizing your desires over the desires of others. In fact, taking the wager will probably make you less selfish, as practicing Christianity (and many other religions) requires actions like being kind to others, loving your enemies, giving to charity, helping the poor, and the like. Finally, recall that we saw that taking Pascal's wager doesn't have to be framed merely in terms of going to heaven or avoiding hell, but one might be motivated to wager out of a desire for a deep relationship with God, union with God, or even for moral reasons. Thus, some versions of the wager are neither selfish nor self-interested.



### 4.3 The Bad Motives Objection

Even if Pascal's wager isn't selfish *per se*, it might still generally be a bad reason to make a religious commitment. William James (1896/1956: 6) explains: "We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward." There are different ways of cashing this out, but the idea is that we shouldn't make a commitment to God based on a cold, expected value calculation. Generally, the motives involved in wagering don't seem to underlie a genuine theistic commitment. Furthermore, as James suggests, God wouldn't be pleased with someone who takes Pascal's wager if doing so is associated with these bad motives.

First, a concessive response: it's impossible to argue that every person who commits to God because of something resembling Pascal's wager has perfect, pure motives. Humans are complicated and often act for a multitude of reasons, some better than others. However, even if someone takes Pascal's wager with bad motives, motives often change over time. It's possible that a badly motivated, coldly calculated wager can turn into a deep and authentic religious commitment. We don't need to verify that one's motives are 100% pure and perfect before encouraging them to pursue a religious commitment or a relationship with God.

Furthermore, there is a well-motivated way of taking Pascal's wager. This wagerer reasons as follows (see Jackson 2023-b: 37):

If God exists and I commit to God, that would be a very good thing. God (if God exists) is a powerful, good being who created the universe, and that is someone I would want to pursue and commit to. Thus, even the possibility that God exists provides a strong reason to pursue a relationship with God, because knowing such a being would be so incredibly valuable.

This wagerer sees that committing to God if God exists would lead to a positive outcome—a relationship with God—and this is the primary reason that they wager. Elsewhere, I argue that making such a wager demonstrates either virtuous faith or virtuous hope in God (see Jackson 2023-b for more). Thus, while it's possible to wager with bad motives, poor motives aren't a necessary feature of the wager, and there's a natural way of wagering that is authentic and genuine.

### 4.4 Paul vs. Pascal: The 1 Corinthians 15 Objection

1 Corinthians 15:14–19 (ESV) reads:

<sup>14</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup>Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul seems to be arguing that if Christianity is false (because Christ did not rise from the dead), then Christians are in a very bad position and that Christian faith is futile if Christ hasn't been raised. This suggests that, contra Pascal, it doesn't make sense to wager on Christianity in the face of strong evidence that Christianity is false.<sup>4</sup>

Note first that Paul's main point here is about the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith—if Christ wasn't raised, Christianity isn't true. That's not a problem for the wager; that's merely specifying conditions under which Christianity is true. Suppose someone has misleading evidence that suggests that Christianity is false; the point of Pascal's wager is that, even in such a circumstance, it could be rational to commit to Christianity because there's so much to gain if Christianity is true and Christ *has* been raised. The centrality of the resurrection poses no problem for Pascal's wager.

What about if you commit to Christianity and Christianity is false? Paul might be right that in some sense, this is a bad outcome, as our faith is in vain: we've dedicated our lives to a false belief. However, even if things are bad if you commit to Christianity and it turns out to be false, that can be swamped by the enormous values involved if you commit to Christianity and it turns out to be true. Considering this, Paul would likely agree the wagerer makes the right decision.

Finally, even considering what he writes to the Corinthians, Paul could agree that there are significant benefits of being religious, whether or not Christianity is true (see McBrayer 2014). This is consistent with there being a loss associated with dedicating one's life to a system that turns out to be false. The wager is perfectly consistent with the idea that there are serious downsides to committing to Christianity if Christianity is false. But because of how good it would be if one commits to Christianity and Christianity is true, Pascal's reasoning is sound.

In sum, Paul's main point is about the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian story, which is perfectly consistent with Pascal's argument. And even if there are downsides in committing to Christianity if Christianity is false, the wager can still be successful.

## 5. THE PRACTICAL ROLE OF THE WAGER

To recap, we've discussed the wager and its different varieties. We've also considered how to motivate a wager for Christianity and covered four Christian objections to the wager. In this section, we'll see how the wager has a role to play in both the lives of non-Christians and Christians. This section considers each in turn. The wager has practical relevance for everyone.

### 5.1 For Non-Christians

The wager has a unique practical role for the non-Christian. Here, we'll specifically look at the role the wager might play for the non-Christian who is considering whether to make a Christian commitment.

First, in some ways like the ontological argument, all that is epistemically required to accept the wager's conclusion is that there is a non-zero (and non-infinitesimal) chance that Christianity is true. Then, even if you are quite confident that there is no God, you can nonetheless be moved by the wager to make a religious commitment. Then, the wager casts a wide net, and—as we saw above—shows that

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Parker Settecase for raising this objection.

the atheist or agnostic doesn't have to become convinced that Christianity is true before rationality committing to Christianity.

Things are a bit trickier when it comes to the theist who is practicing another religion. In this case, the Christian wager would be convincing for two reasons. The first is the more traditional route: via arguments that raise the probability of Christianity. These could be used as a part of a hybrid argument discussed in section 3. The second is more uniquely Pascalian: they might wager on Christianity if they become convinced that more is at stake if Christianity is true. That is, if the non-Christian theist sees that there is more to gain (or lose) if Christianity is true, they might be motivated to make a Christian commitment even apart from probability-raising arguments.

For both groups: the atheist/agnostic or the person committed to another religion, the wager also has the unique role of being prescriptive: it tells you to change your beliefs (the doxastic wager), your actions (the acceptance wager) or perhaps both. Either way, Pascal tells you to make new commitments. Other theistic arguments are less practical; if successful, they'd establish that God exists, but they wouldn't make prescriptions without additional premises.

That said, many conversions to Christianity don't happen at all once. Of course, some do (like St. Paul's) but many conversions are more of a process that takes place over a longer period, involving many intermediaries. Insofar as we want to convince others to believe or commit to Christianity, it may make sense to focus on some of these intermediate steps. Some of these steps—not necessarily in this order—include the non-Christian acknowledging that:

1. It's *possible* that Christianity is true
2. Christianity's being true would be valuable, so they *want* it to be true
3. Christian belief/commitment can be *rational*

A step that often occurs later, but is a live option for the person not yet convinced of Christianity, but wanting to "try it on" and see what Christianity is like from the "inside" is:

4. *Accepting* that Christianity is true (acting as if Christianity is true)

Note that Pascal's wager involves and emphasizes many of these intermediate steps. On (1), as we've seen, acknowledging that it's possible that Christianity is true (or having a non-zero credence in Christianity) is a pre-requisite for the conclusion that wagering maximizes expected value, so the wager emphasizes and encourages people to take the possibility of Christianity seriously. Both considering and acknowledging the possibility that Christianity is true is a small but important first step.

On (2), the wager considers the value of Christianity: how good would it be if you committed to Christianity and Christianity were true? How valuable would it be if there was a God so loving that God was willing to become a human and die for our sins? And if you could have a relationship with a loving God who is watching out for you and eventual union with God in an eternal afterlife? Even if this all seems unlikely, many will nonetheless admit that if this were true, that would be good and valuable. Because of the way Pascal's wager emphasizes the benefits/costs of outcomes, it's conducive to helping people see the value of Christianity and desire Christianity to be true.

On (3), because the wager is prescriptive, it brings questions about the rationality of Christian belief and Christian commitment front and center. Suppose, for whatever reason, a non-Christian isn't

personally ready to take the wager yet. However, they could admit, at the same time, that the reasoning behind the wager makes Christian belief/commitment rationality for many people. So even if it doesn't cause someone to make a full-on religious commitment, it could convince someone that a Christian commitment can be rational.

Finally, (4) is likely a step that will come later in the conversion process. If you are ready to try Christianity, but have some reservations/doubts/objections, the wager could encourage you to accept, or act as if, Christianity is true, even if you aren't at the place yet where you have the evidence to believe Christianity is true. As Pascal suggested, you could take holy water or go to mass; in addition, you could pray, participate in a religious community, engage in religious rituals and practices, and do the acts commanded by the religion (e.g. giving to the poor). Relatedly, William James (1896/1956) argued that it's hard to evaluate a religion from the "outside." Even epistemically, those outside religion might lack access to certain evidence that is inaccessible until they take a "leap of faith" and make a religious commitment. Faith *reveals* evidence you wouldn't have had otherwise. The wager, partially in anticipation of the possible evidence that could be revealed, could motivate you to accept Christianity, even if you remain unconvinced by the arguments that Christianity is true.

## 5.2 For Christians

Pascal's reasoning is also relevant and important for Christians, especially Christians having doubts or reservations about their faith. One thing we learn from Pascal is that a Christian commitment can be rational in a large variety of evidential situations. Even if you experience serious doubts so that your credence that Christianity is true is below 0.5, even significantly below 0.5, if it's not zero, you can rationally continue in your Christian commitment. Relatedly, I've argued in prior work that, as your credences change with changing evidence, sometimes in radical ways, you can continue to remain steadfast in your Christian beliefs (Jackson 2019). And even if the counterevidence is so severe that you must give up your beliefs, you could perhaps still have faith that Christianity is true and could also continue in your Christian commitment via accepting that Christianity is true. On this last possibility, if your credence in Christianity is significantly below 0.5, you can still hope that Christianity is true. Hope can underlie a substantial and rationality Christian commitment, for several reasons, including Pascalian considerations (see Jackson 2021 and Jackson 2023-b).

There are three important upshots of this for Christians. First, contra what is suggested in many contemporary popular Christian circles, *certainty* that Christianity is true is not required for a genuine or mature religious commitment. Belief doesn't require certainty, faith doesn't require certainty, and Christian commitment doesn't require certainty. Furthermore, Pascal teaches us that Christian commitment needn't be based solely on one's strength of evidence. It's not the case that the stronger one's evidence, the firmer and less wavering one's Christian commitment. Many with strong evidence for Christianity have weak Christian commitments (because they don't act on their commitments or because their desires are misaligned) and many who lack certainty nonetheless have strong, model Christian commitments (including the father from Mark 9 who says "I believe; help my unbelief", Mother Theresa who experienced many doubts as a result of a dark night of the soul but was unwavering in her dedication to God, and many others). Christians should stop upholding certainty as the ideal or central feature of Christian commitment.

Second, for a Christian *with* serious doubts, even substantial counterevidence doesn't require giving up their Christian commitment. As we saw, belief, faith, hope, and acceptance can all underlie such a commitment. Furthermore, such a Christian can wager "from the inside": they have much to gain if

Christianity is true and they continue in their commitment, perhaps much to lose if they don't continue, and the stakes are much lower in many other possible scenarios, especially if there is no God. As long as the doubting Christian takes Christianity to be more probable than other religions, the wager implies that it's rational for them to continue in their Christian commitment.

Third and finally, for a Christian *without* serious doubts, but afraid they'd encounter doubts or leave Christianity if they investigated certain things, Pascal's reasoning provides the freedom to explore evidence with an open mind, because Christian commitment can be rational even in the face of serious counterevidence. Because Christian commitments can be steadfast in the face of changing evidence, Christians can freely explore and inquire without worrying about being forced to relinquish their Christian commitment.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Pascal's wager is an argument that you should wager on God because you have much to gain if you wager on God and God exists, and much less to lose (or gain) if God doesn't exist. We covered the most basic version of the wager and different variations of the wager argument that have been made since Pascal. We then saw what might motivate a wager for Christianity in particular, and covered objections that Christians sometimes raise to the wager. Finally, we saw that and how the wager is practically relevant for both non-Christians—in lowering the bar to rationally commit to Christianity—and for Christians—in providing a non-epistemic basis for faith and showing how Christian commitment can rationally withstand counterevidence and doubts.

The influence of Pascal's argument is vast, in philosophy of religion and beyond. But it also has a specific and practical role to play in the lives of Christians. I conclude that Pascal's wager is both helpful and deeply important for Christians, both in understanding and maintaining their religious commitments and in sharing the value of Christian commitment with others.

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