

PRAGMATIC ARGUMENTS FOR THEISM

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For *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*
(Edited by John Greco, Tyler McNabb, & Jonathan Fuqua)

ABSTRACT: Traditional theistic arguments conclude that God exists. Pragmatic theistic arguments, by contrast, conclude that you ought to believe in God. The two most famous pragmatic theistic arguments are put forth by Blaise Pascal (1662) and William James (1896). Pragmatic arguments for theism can be summarized as follows: believing in God has significant benefits, and these benefits aren't available for the unbeliever. Thus, you should believe in, or 'wager on', God. This article distinguishes between various kinds of theistic wagers, including finite vs. infinite wagers, premortem vs. postmortem wagers, and doxastic vs. acceptance wagers. Then, we'll turn to the epistemic-pragmatic distinction, and discusses the nuances of James' argument, and how views like epistemic permissivism and epistemic consequentialism provide unique "hybrid" wagers. Finally, we'll cover outstanding objections and responses.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arguments for theism fall into two main categories. *Epistemic* arguments, like the cosmological, ontological, and fine-tuning arguments, conclude that God exists. *Pragmatic* arguments, by contrast, conclude that you ought to believe in God, where 'ought' is the ought of practical rationality. Two of the most famous pragmatic arguments for theism are put forth by Blaise Pascal (1662) and William James (1896).¹ In the most basic form, pragmatic arguments for theism go like this: believing in God has significant benefits, and these benefits aren't available for the unbeliever. Thus, you should believe in, or 'wager on', God.

This article discusses different types of pragmatic arguments for theism and surveys their costs and benefits. **Section 2** focuses first on Pascal's wager and discusses different types of wagers. These wagers differ on issues such as the benefits of wagering, the probability threshold required for wagering, and the actions involved in wagering. **Section 3** turns to the epistemic-pragmatic distinction, and discusses the nuances of James' argument, and how views like epistemic permissivism and epistemic consequentialism provide unique "hybrid-wagers." **Section 4** covers outstanding issues and objections and suggests some ways that the defenders of pragmatic arguments might respond. **Section 5** concludes.

2. TYPES OF THEISTIC WAGERS

Let's begin by clarifying some terminology. It is natural to understand Pascal's wager in terms of *expected value*, which is the value of an action, given uncertainty about some of the relevant facts. A common rule is that you should pick the action with the highest expected value; in a position of uncertainty, the action with the highest expected value is most likely to lead to the best outcome. For example, if I offer you a hundred dollars if a coin lands heads, but you have to pay me a dollar if it lands tails, it maximizes expected value for you to take my bet, even though there's a chance you could lose money. Put differently, if you were offered this bet over and over again, you'd make

¹ See Jordan (2007) and Duncan (2013) for comparisons between the Jamesian and Pascalian wagers, and Rota (2017) and Hájek (2018) for useful summaries of pragmatic theistic arguments. Also note that the Muslim philosopher and theologian Al-Ghazālī (12th century/1991) also proposed a version of the wager, and Al-Ghazālī's actually dates earlier than Pascal's.

money in the long run (i.e. in the limit). A second relevant term is *credence*, which is a measure of subjective probability—the confidence you have in the truth of some proposition, measured on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represents certainty 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.

This leads us to the most basic form of Pascal’s wager; the reasoning is as follows. There are two actions you can take—believe in God, or not believe in God—and two ways the world might be—God exists, or God does not exist. If you believe in God and God exists, you’ll go to heaven, which is infinitely good. If God exists and you don’t believe in God, you may go to hell, which is infinitely bad. If God does not exist, then whether you believe in God or not, whatever you gain or lose would be finite. Believing in God, then, has a higher expected value than not believing. Thus, unless your credence that God exists is 0, you should believe in 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” (1662: fragments 233–241). This basic form of Pascal’s wager is represented by **Table 1**: *cr* stands for credence, ω and $-\omega$ represent negative and positive infinity, $f1$ and $f2$ are finite values, and *EV* indicates the expected value of each action.

	God exists ($cr = n$)	God doesn’t exist ($cr = 1-n$)	EV
Believe in God	ω	$f1$	ω
Don’t believe in God	$-\omega$	$f2$	$-\omega$

Table 1: The Most Basic Wager

That said, most wagers defended by philosophers—including the wager proposed by Pascal himself—are more complex than this simple gloss. This section outlines some of these different types of wagers for theism. While our focus is on Pascal’s wager, some of the distinctions also apply to the Jamesian wager, discussed in the next section.

2.1 Finite and Infinite Values

The first distinction is between wagers that involve infinite values compared to wagers that merely involve finite values. Our initial gloss framed the wager in terms of infinite values, for at least two reasons. A natural benefit of theistic belief involves the afterlife, and heaven is plausibly infinitely good (and hell is plausibly infinitely bad). Second, wagers that appeal to infinite values only require your credence in theism to be non-zero and non-infinitesimal. (*Infinitesimal* credences are those that are infinitely close to zero, such as $1/\infty$.) So infinite wagers get a strong result: even if your credence in theism is quite low, e.g. 0.0001, you should wager, because of the infinite values involved.

However, infinities also create problems. One of the biggest problems involving infinities is the many gods objection. Defenders of the many-gods objection point out that many religions posit infinite gains (and infinite losses), and, if you choose the wrong religion, believing in the God of that religion might prevent gaining the infinite goods of another religion (see Mougin and Sober 1994). So simply believing in God doesn’t guarantee an infinite good. Given this, it’s not clear how to choose between religions, since all religions with infinite afterlives would seem to have the same, infinite, expected value. So infinities put us as a standstill when trying to choose between religions.

Some have responded to this problem by keeping infinities in the wager but changing the way expected values are calculated (Bartha 2007; Jackson and Rogers 2019; Chen and Rubio 2020). The gist of the fix relies on the idea that not all infinities are created equal. For example, you should

prefer a 90% shot at an infinite good to a 10% shot at the same good. This strategy provides the result that, all else equal, you should wager on the religion that you assign the highest credence. However, comparing infinities in this way gets technical and complex (especially when other things aren't equal).

Others instead propose that we move away from infinite values altogether. Instead, the outcome on which you believe in God and God exists is modeled with a very large, finite value. This is a simpler way to avoid the result that all religions have the same expected value (Jordan 2006; Rota 2016-a, 2016-b). While this provides a solution to the many gods objection, it also weakens the argument's conclusion. You should wager only if your credence that a religion is true is sufficiently high, since there's no infinite values to trump the finite values involved if God does not exist. What counts as "sufficiently high" depends on the value of belief in God if God exists. Michael Rota (2016-a, 2016-b), for example, argues that you should wager on Christianity if your credence in Christianity is at least 0.5. The threshold need not be this high, though, especially if we utilize very large finite values.²

2.2 *Premortem and Postmortem Benefits*

Not all pragmatic arguments for theism appeal to the afterlife. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of benefits associated with taking the wager: premortem benefits and postmortem benefits. While traditionally, Pascal's wager appeals to postmortem benefits (e.g. heaven and hell), Justin McBrayer (2014) proposes a version of the wager that appeals to the premortem benefits of being a theist. He cites studies and empirical evidence that "theists do better in terms of happiness, health, longevity, interpersonal relationships, and charitable giving" (p. 130). On this version of the wager, even if universalism is true (i.e. everyone goes to heaven), or there is no afterlife, you still have a reason to be a theist.

Note two things about premortem wagers. First, since wagers that appeal to premortem values are finite wagers, your credence in theism (or in a religion) plays a larger role. Whether you should wager will depend on your credences in both theism and atheism and how much better it is to be a theist rather than an atheist. Second, one worry for such arguments is that, on the teachings of several major religions, the religious person shouldn't expect their premortem life to be completely happy or without suffering, much less perfect. For example, in Christianity, the Bible teaches that "[you] must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22) and "in this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Judaism teaches that you cannot engage in idolatry, even to the point of death. Religious saints often live lives of poverty and significant sacrifice, and are even martyred for their faith. Those appealing to premortem benefits should be wary of the "prosperity gospel", the position that once you become religious you will become happy, healthy, and protected from serious suffering (see Crummett 2022).

2.3 *Belief and Action*

Third, wagers differ on what wagering amounts to. Note that we originally framed the wager in terms of whether you should believe that God exists. Let's call this the *doxastic wager*. While it may seem natural at first blush to understand the wager in terms of belief, this raises two key objections. First is the *impossibility objection*: do you have the right kind of control over your beliefs in order to

² These fixes also answer the mixed strategies objection to Pascal's wager, raised by Duff (1986) and Hájek (2003). For discussion, see Jackson and Rogers (2019: sec. 4.4). Other responses to the many-gods objection include Martin (1975), Lycan & Schlesinger (1989), Jordan (1991), Bartha (2012), Lebens (2020).

wager?³ Second is the *irrationality objection*: even if you can wager, is forming a belief for pragmatic reasons rational?⁴

In response to these objections, some have suggested we instead frame the wager in terms of action. Maybe Pascal's wager instead provides a reason to accept, or act as if, God exists (Rota 2016-a, 2016-b). Let's call this action-based wager the *acceptance wager*. This provides a way out of the impossibility and irrationality objections. First, you have control over whether you accept God's existence, as you can voluntarily engage in actions like going to church, praying, reading Scripture, and immersing yourself in a religious community. So the impossibility objection doesn't apply to the acceptance wager. Second, standard theories of rational action appeal to pragmatic reasons, so it's rational to accept that God exists for pragmatic reasons. Thus, the irrationality objection also does not apply.

Choosing between the doxastic wager and the acceptance wager partially depends on what God desires of us. At least on certain religious traditions, God does not desire mere belief, but something more like commitment. This again lends itself to the acceptance wager. However, even if insufficient, belief may be *necessary* for salvation, or weaker, an important aspect of a religious commitment, perhaps one that is necessary in particular circumstances. Maybe wagering involves both belief and acceptance. If beliefs are involved in our wagering at all, however, then the irrationality and impossibility objections again crop up. We'll consider a second response to both objections in the next section.

3. EPISTEMIC AND PRAGMATIC REASONS

This section addresses the distinction between epistemic and pragmatic reasons in light of pragmatic arguments for theism. *Epistemic* reasons are reasons connected to truth. The most common epistemic reason is evidence. *Pragmatic* reasons are reasons connected to our goals and/or our flourishing. You might have a pragmatic reason, but not an epistemic reason, to believe you're smarter than average. You have a pragmatic reason to believe this because it raises your self-esteem, but you don't have an epistemic reason to, assuming the belief is not supported by your evidence.

We'll cover three main topics in this section. First, we'll discuss a view called *epistemic permissivism*, and how permissivism provides a response to the irrationality and impossibility objections to the doxastic wager. Second, we'll cover two "hybrid" wagers—so-called because they appeal to a combination of both pragmatic and epistemic reasons. The first involves a theory called epistemic consequentialism, and the second involves combining the wager with epistemic arguments for theism.

3.1 *Permissivism and the Jamesian Wager*

There are several differences between Blaise Pascal's wager and William James' wager. First, James appeals to finite values, whereas Pascal appeals to infinite values. Second, James argues that we should wager in cases where there is a "forced choice"—meaning we cannot remain neutral. Third, on a common interpretation, Pascal argues that wagering on God is rationally *required*, while James argues that wagering on God is rationally *permissible*. James is responding to Clifford's (1877) claim

³ Those who discuss the impossibility objection include Mackie (1982: 201), Duff (1986: 108), Jones (1998: 173), Jordan (1998: 173, 2006: 38).

⁴ Those who discuss the irrationality objection include Clifford (1877), Flew (1976), Mackie (1982), Oppy (1991: 167), Schroeder (2012: 266).

that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁵ Fourth, Pascal is more focused on the acceptance wager (or the acceptance wager as a means to the doxastic wager) as he suggests one should wager by taking holy water and attending mass, whereas James is more focused on the doxastic wager. Finally, and most important for our purposes, James argues that we should wager in cases where “reason cannot decide” (1869). He argued that if a matter cannot be settled by the evidence, we can exercise our will to believe and even do so “lawfully”, i.e. without compromising epistemic rationality (see Adler 2002: 59–63).

James’ idea that, on certain matters, “reason cannot decide”, suggests that our evidence is limited in certain ways. Of course, in some cases, our evidence clearly supports a certain proposition. For most of us, our evidence requires us to believe that $1+1=2$, and disbelieve that it is 75 degrees in Antarctica right now. However, some matters are more complicated. Consider highly controversial and complex issues in philosophy, politics, religion, or ethics: Should abortion be legalized? How much are we morally required to give to charity? What is the nature of epistemic justification? What political party is best for our nation? Does God exist? On matters like these, the evidence is complex and difficult to assess. These cases might be ones where, as James puts it, “reason cannot decide.” On matters like these, you might rationally believe p and I might rationally believe not- p , even if we are aware of the same evidence and arguments.

This suggests a view in epistemology called *epistemic permissivism* is correct. Permissivism is the view that there are evidential situations that rationally permit more than one attitude toward a proposition. For example, epistemically rational paleontologists might share evidence but disagree about what killed the dinosaurs; epistemically rational jurors might share evidence but disagree about who committed a crime. Or consider a single juror: if she faces inconclusive evidence, then both belief that Smith is guilty and disbelief that Smith is guilty might be rationally available to her.

Plausibly, if permissivism is true, then many bodies of evidence are permissive regarding theism. Debates about God’s existence have a long history, with powerful evidence on both sides. There is widespread disagreement about God’s existence, and many atheists, agnostics, and theists appear to be epistemically rational, even when they are aware of the same (or similar) evidence that bears on God’s existence.

If permissivism is true about theism, this provides an answer to both the impossibility objection and the irrationality objection (at least for those in permissive cases regarding theism, which I argue is a lot of us; see Jackson forthcoming). And this answer doesn’t require us to move from belief to acceptance. First, consider the impossibility objection: because doxastic involuntarism is true, you don’t have the right kind of control over our beliefs to wager at all. Here, note that many of the cases used to motivate doxastic involuntarism involve propositions that are either clearly true or false, given the evidence. Alston (1998), for example, considers offering you a large sum of money to believe that the US is still a colony of Great Britain. This seems extremely difficult, if not impossible to do, even if you want the money more than the true belief.

But consider instead a case where you’re torn about whether theism is true, and where you know there are good arguments for and against, such that you could be rational to be a theist, atheist, or agnostic. It’s much less clear that, in that case, you have no control over whether you believe in God. For example, in Peter van Inwagen’s conversion story, he discusses how, during his conversion, he could both see the world as uncreated and see the world as created by God. He notes that “there was a period of transition, a period during which I could move back and forth *at will*, in the ‘duck-rabbit’ fashion” (1994: 35, emphasis mine). You have a more robust kind of

⁵ Thanks to Mark Satta.

doxastic control when your evidence is ambiguous about some matter, such that you are torn between two good explanations of your evidence. And for many, the evidence for theism is ambiguous in this way.

Permissivism also provides an answer to the irrationality objection. Suppose your evidence permits both theism and agnosticism, i.e., either attitude is epistemically rational, given your evidence. Suppose you believe that God exists for a practical reason. It's not at all clear that this would compromise the epistemic rationality of your belief that God exists. By stipulation, theism is a rational response to your evidence! While these two responses are only briefly sketched here, I hope to have said enough to convince the reader that the advocate of the doxastic wager has a reason to take the Jamesian commitment to permissivism on board. (These arguments are further developed in Jackson forthcoming.) Thus, combining pragmatic arguments for theism with certain views in epistemology (e.g. permissivism) makes the wager more plausible.

3.2 Hybrid Arguments

Now, we'll turn to two "hybrid-arguments"—arguments for theism involve a combination of epistemic and pragmatic considerations. First, you might argue for the wager in conjunction with arguments that raise the probability of theism or of a particular religion. This style of argument often involves a "pragmatic" premise—a premise about what is practically rational (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).

Pascal himself (1662) arguably takes a route like this. Before Pascal presents the wager in the *Pensées*, Pascal provides arguments for Christianity. 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.

More recently, Rota (2016-b) also presents a hybrid argument. His argument can be summarized as follows (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.

Notice that premise 1 is the pragmatic premise—that Rota defends in the first half of his book, appealing to practical considerations—and premise 2 is the epistemic premise—that Rota defends in the second half of the book, appealing to, among other things, a version of the fine-tuning argument and the resurrection argument for Christianity. Of course, such hybrid arguments are not limited to Christianity in particular. Jackson and Rogers (2019), for example, provide arguments for a slightly different pragmatic premise—that you should wager for the religion (with an infinite afterlife) that is most likely to be true. (Note that it need not surpass the 50% threshold.) You could combine this with arguments that a particular religion is most likely to be true. Then, if it has an infinite afterlife, you should wager for that religion.

Note that, when compared to non-pragmatic arguments for theism, the epistemic step of these hybrid arguments relies on a much weaker premise. In Rota's argument, one would only need to establish Christianity's being 50% likely—but without the pragmatic premise, this likely won't

convince you to wager on Christianity. For Jackson and Rogers, you simply need to identify the most probable religion with an infinite afterlife; then, you ought to wager on that religion, even if it is nonetheless unlikely in absolute terms. This is a particular strength of hybrid arguments: the pragmatic considerations take the burden off of the epistemic considerations. At the same time, the epistemic considerations block objections such as the many gods worry and make the wager more widely applicable (the arguments don't merely apply to those with, e.g. antecedently sufficiently high credences in theism).

A second hybrid argument worth mentioning involves *epistemic consequentialism*. Epistemic consequentialism is the view that epistemic goodness is more fundamental than epistemic rightness, so “rationality” and “justification” should be understood in terms of conduciveness to epistemic goods (Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn 2018: 2). Therefore, what makes a belief rational is the extent to which it causally contributes to future epistemic goods. Suppose that believing in God raises the probability that you go to heaven. But consider: the epistemic benefits of heaven are substantial. Imagine you had an unlimited amount of time to ask an omniscient being anything you wanted. The potential epistemic benefits would be enormous, if not infinite: endless pieces of significant knowledge / true belief / justified belief. Considerations like these point to an *epistemic* version of Pascal's wager. In other words: if epistemic consequentialism is true, then the epistemic benefits of heaven make theistic belief epistemically rational. This is a hybrid argument (rather than an epistemic one) because it appeals to the epistemic consequences of theistic belief, which is significantly different than, say, providing evidence or arguments for theism. On the other hand, epistemic considerations nonetheless have an important role to play in this non-traditional wager—and in fact, this wager doesn't aim to establish that theism is practically rational, but rather that theism is *epistemically* rational. (See Jackson 2022 for further development of this argument.)

4. OUTSTANDING OBJECTIONS

Let's take stock. First, we've considered different types of wagers that have been proposed, that differ on issues such as the benefits of wagering, the probability threshold required for wagering, and the actions involved in wagering. Then, we turned to the epistemic-pragmatic distinction, and discussed the nuances of James' argument, and how views like epistemic permissivism and epistemic consequentialism provide unique “hybrid-wagers.” Along the way, we've touched on several objections to pragmatic arguments for theism, including the many gods objection, the impossibility objection, and the irrationality objection.

In this section, we'll discuss some other objections to pragmatic arguments for theism. For the sake of covering new ground, I'll consider objections not addressed in my previous work.⁶ After explaining each objection, I'll suggest some ways that the defender of the theistic pragmatic arguments might respond. My responses, however, should not be taken as the final word on the matter; defenders of pragmatic arguments for theism should take these objections seriously.⁷

4.1 *Should I take a non-religious path to infinite utility?*

⁶ For responses to many objections to the wager, including objections concerning many gods, mixed strategies, impossibility, irrationality, infinite number of religions, bet-hedging, Pascal's mugging, the problem of hell, temporal discounting, and transformative experiences, see Jackson and Rogers (2019). For a response to the worry that taking Pascal's wager involves poor motives, see Jackson (2023).

⁷ Thanks to Amanda Askill for discussion of these objections and potential responses. See Askill (2012) for additional objections to Pascal's wager and replies.

An initial objection to pragmatic arguments for theism involves secular paths to infinite utility. Perhaps religions offer possible infinite utility, but religion isn't the only game in town. Consider *the singularity*, a potential point in the future of permanent and uncontainable technological growth. Artificial intelligence might develop the ability to improve on itself, and as it improves, it learns how to improve better and more quickly, causing an explosion in both computer intelligence and technological progress (Shanahan 2015). Technological advances such as these open up various possibilities for infinite utility, e.g. uploading your consciousness to a computer so that you can live forever. Even if this is unlikely, the objector may consider most religions unlikely. Then, it's not clear that one should wager on God rather than spending their time and resources supporting technological developments and advances in AI.

In response, note that non-religious paths to infinite utility are only a problem for pragmatic arguments for theism insofar as pursuing them is inconsistent with being religious. But you can be religious and also devote time and resources to support technological advances and progress toward the singularity. Pursuing AI research is consistent with believing in God and/or living a devoted religious life. Thus, let a thousand flowers bloom. Convert and support AI research!

If, for whatever reason, you have to choose between a secular path to infinite utility and a religious path, you ought to pick the one that is most likely to get you infinite utility. Even then, this wouldn't automatically mean you should reject the religious option. (However, this might be an advantage of infinite versions of the wager, as finite religious wagers mutually exclusive with secular infinite wagers would be trumped.) But I'm skeptical that, in most cases, you'd have to choose the first place.

4.2 Do infinite values always trump finite values?

Infinite wagers normally rely on the idea that infinite expected values trump finite ones. This is part of what gives the wager its power and delivers the result that you should wager on a religion, even if your credence that it is true is quite low.

However, the idea that infinite expected values always trump finite ones seems subject to counterexample. Suppose someone offers you a 0.000001% chance at an infinite good if you are willing to be tortured for a trillion years. It seems like you should not take that bet, even though the former has a positive infinite expected value which should outweigh the finite negative expected value of being tortured. Oppy (2006: 255) provides a similar counterexample: "If there is a 1000-ticket lottery for which the payout is positive infinite, and I already hold 900 of the tickets, what grounds are there for insisting that I should be prepared to betray all of my friends and family in order to obtain another ticket?"⁸ These counterexamples suggest that infinite expected values may not always swamp finite considerations.

We'll consider three responses to this objection. The first bites the bullet, but provides an error theory for our intuitions about the counterexamples. There is ample psychological evidence that we are terrible at reasoning with large numbers. For example, Kahneman (2011: 93) discusses the following study:

⁸ Oppy's counterexample also raises the complex questions about the *social* aspects of pragmatic arguments for theism (and expected value reasoning in general). E.g. Should you wager on God if it has good consequences for you, but negative consequences for others (or vice versa)? Do the pragmatic should and the moral should come apart? If so, how do we adjudicate between them? While there isn't space to address these questions here, note that some, such as Rota (2016-b), have proposed *moral* versions of the wager, appealing to the well-being of close friends and family, or even considerations about what God would desire or require, if God exists. In principle, the positive consequences associated with wagering can be either practical or moral. Thanks to Mark Satta for helpful discussion.

“Participants in one of the numerous experiments that were... asked their willingness to pay for nets to cover oil ponds in which migratory birds often drown. Different groups of participants stated their willingness to pay to save 2,000, 20,000 or 200,000 birds. If saving birds is an economic good it should be a sum-like variable: saving 200,000 birds should be worth much more than saving 2,000 birds. In fact, the average contributions of the three groups were \$80, \$78 and \$88 respectively. The number of birds made very little difference. What the participants reacted to, in all three groups, was a prototype—the awful image of a helpless bird drowning, its feathers soaked in thick oil. The almost complete neglect of quantity in such emotional contexts has been confirmed many times.”

The numbers involved in this study were not even that large—ranging from 2,000 to 200,000. Yet people’s estimates for the value of saving these birds were an emotional reaction to pictures of oil-covered drowning birds, and insensitive to the increase in numbers. In the same way, an emotional reaction to the badness of torture might skew our intuitions in the finite/infinite tradeoff case, but we vastly underestimate the value of infinity. So maybe infinite expected values should always trump finite ones, and we should trust the mathematical principles over our intuitions about particular cases.

Some will find this response too much to swallow; we shouldn’t be prepared to give up any finite good for a minuscule chance at an infinite one. An alternative response involves restricting the principles used in the infinite wager. So, perhaps, instead of the idea that infinite expected values always trump finite ones, maybe infinite expected values only trump finite ones when the chance at receiving the infinite good is sufficiently probable. Or maybe infinite goods don’t trump finite ones if the finite ones involve doing something morally wrong (like betraying one’s loved ones.) While we don’t have space to consider and refine various principles here, there are ways to have an interesting and strong version of the wager without committing to the idea that one should prefer infinite values to finite ones, *no matter what*. (This strategy may also help with other objections to the wager, such as Pascal’s mugging; see Bostrom 2009.)

A third and final response involves relying on a version of the wager that only appeals to finite values. Finite wagers don’t appeal to any principles—restricted or unrestricted—that involve infinite values swamping finite ones, so this worry would not arise in the first place.

4.3 *Should I commit to a super-religion?*

Call a *super-religion* a religion that purports to have a much better heaven and/or worse hell than traditional religions. It seems easy to imagine or create super-religions. Of course, most of us will have a low credence in super-religions. But this low credence could easily be swamped by the fact that a religion has a significantly better heaven or much worse hell than other religions. After all, Pascal’s wager teaches that what is lost in credence can be made up for in utility. Thus, it seems like pragmatic arguments for theism imply that you should commit to a super-religion.

In response, it may not be as easy to imagine or create a super-religion as you might think. Traditional religions normally don’t assign numerical values to heaven or hell. Of course, they are generally thought to be “infinitely good” or “infinitely bad”, but the specific infinite cardinal or ordinal value is unspecified. For this reason, it may not be possible to create a super-religion: for any value one uses the model a super-religion’s afterlife, the afterlife of traditional religions can accurately be modeled with the same value.

Second, there may be grounds to assign infinitesimal credences to super-religions, especially if they are intentionally created to make a problem for Pascal's wager. As their claims about the afterlife become more fantastical (e.g. better heavens, worse hells) then your credence that such a super-religion is true should lower in proportion. Given this mathematical framework, there may be no reason to commit to a super-religion in the first place.

4.4 Should I follow the most exclusive religion?

A final objection to pragmatic arguments for theism involves the extent to which you should hedge your bets when it comes to choosing which religion to practice. Suppose you become convinced that Christianity is true. Now you face another choice: convert to a mainstream denomination of Christianity, or convert to an extremely conservative strand of Christianity. Suppose the latter teaches that if you drink alcohol, if women wear pants, or if you send your children to public school, you will not go to heaven. It seems like you should hedge your bets and follow the rules of the more exclusive strand of Christianity, despite your low credence that strand is true, since mainstream versions of Christianity don't prohibit teetotaling, private school, or wearing only skirts and dresses. This reasoning suggests that you should follow the strictest and most exclusive denominations of the highest-probability religion, as this maximizes your chance at infinite utility in the afterlife.

In response, it's not clear that following the strictest and most exclusive denominations would maximize expected value, all things considered. This is because joining such denominations has costs, which are also potentially infinite. Consider: if you joined a religion so strict that you could no longer wear pants, drink alcohol, or watch Netflix, this religion would be very burdensome and difficult to follow. This experience may raise the probability that you leave religion altogether. While your credence that this experience will cause permanent de-conversion may be low, your credence in the exclusive strand of Christianity is likely also quite low. For many people, the former credence is high enough to wash out the latter credence, so it will not maximize expected value to convert to the strict, exclusive denominations of a religion. Furthermore, other factors might give exclusive, rules-oriented denominations a bump down in expected value, including the fact that some religions warn against becoming rules-obsessed, as it leads to pride and judgment of others.⁹ Thus, it's not clear that exclusivity wins out in expected value, all things considered.

5. CONCLUSION

We've surveyed different types of pragmatic arguments for theism and noted their costs and benefits. We focused first on Pascal's wager. We discussed different types of wagers that differ on issues such as the benefits of wagering, the probability threshold required for wagering, and the actions involved in wagering. Next, we turned to the epistemic-pragmatic distinction and discussed the nuances of James' argument. We also looked at two "hybrid-wagers." Finally, we discussed objections to pragmatic arguments for theism and ways that the defenders of pragmatic arguments might respond.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Mark Satta, Brian Ballard, Anthony Rowden, Amanda Askell, Kyle Vollmar, John Greco, Jonathan Fuqua, and Tyler McNabb for helpful comments and discussion.

⁹ See Matthew 23.

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