



# Pascal's Wager: a Reason to Hesitate

Amos Wollen<sup>1</sup>

Received: 25 March 2022 / Revised: 27 April 2022 / Accepted: 1 June 2022  
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

## Abstract

One version of Pascal's Wager says we should commit to, or cultivate belief in, whatever religion we think is most likely to bring us eternal joy. I pose a *reductio* for this version of the Wager. After exploring some ways the Pascalian might respond, the verdict is that it provides some reason to suspect that somewhere, somehow, the Wager goes wrong.

**Keywords** Pascal's Wager · Reductio

One version Pascal's Wager says we should commit to, or cultivate belief in, whichever religion we think is most likely to bring us eternal joy<sup>1</sup>.

To see why, consider Jenny. Jenny is an atheist. Jenny doesn't pray, attend religious services, study sacred scriptures, or partake in any organized religion. But Jenny is only human. And, being only human, Jenny knows her limits. More precisely, Jenny knows she could be wrong about God. Suppose Jenny is pretty sure there is no God (97% sure, or somewhere in that neighbourhood). Even so, Jenny realises, there is still a 3% margin of error.

Now, suppose Jenny is right. There is no God, and all theistic religions are in error. As a result of not practicing a theistic religion, Jenny might gain some finite utility – the time saved by not repenting, praying, and listening to worship radio; the joy of living in harmony with her beliefs, the pleasure of committing her favourite sins, and so on.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jackson and Rogers (2019). Also, a note on terminology: I'm using 'religion' here in an unusually broad way. It could – the way I'm using it – include belief in a Godless universe that sends atheists to heaven and theists to hell (Cf. Mougin and Sober (1994), 385).

---

✉ Amos Wollen  
amoswollen@outlook.com

<sup>1</sup> Berkshire, UK

But suppose Jenny is wrong. By failing to convert, Jenny has forfeited an eternal fellowship with God – a fellowship with an infinite utility, in that it’s good and it goes on forever. But an infinite utility is a funny thing; it’s so big that it can swamp any finite expected utility you put beside it. Thus, even if Jenny is 97% sure that atheism is true, she still ought to bet against it, since the finite expected utility of living as an atheist is swamped by the infinite expected utility of converting.

That’s the gist of it anyway<sup>2</sup>. Now, the *reductio*:

Consider Lenny. Lenny was born and raised in a little-known religious cult called Irrationalism. Irrationalism says that all human suffering can be traced back to one thing: critical thinking. It also says that there’s a deity, Lord Dum Dum, who prizes irrationality above all else. Any follower of Lord Dum Dum who knowingly engages in critical thinking – even once – will be cast into a boiling oven for all eternity after they die.

Fortunately for Lenny, Lord Dum Dum also hates, *hates*, religious indoctrination. Followers of Lord Dum Dum must convert of their own volition, and on the basis of reason. Paradoxically, if anybody converts to Irrationalism on an irrational basis, the everlasting oven awaits them.

There’s a catch, however. The moment a prospective believer has rationally assented to the conclusion that she ought to convert, she must do so immediately, devolving into irrationality without a second’s delay. ‘For he who hesitates, the oven awaits’, as all good Irrationalist children know.

Lenny never believed in Irrationalism, or Lord Dum Dum, or any of it. Growing up, he found the whole thing a bit insane (though he politely held his tongue when his parents were devoutly smearing mashed potato inside their gauzy slippers, or piously banging their heads against the fridge). Still, he wasn’t *totally* unconvinced. Once, when he was eight, he and his village came together to prayerfully clang pots around a bronze statue of the Emptyheaded Lord. As the clanging and shrieking reached unneighbourly volumes, Lenny – with the others – witnessed bright green flames spurting from the statue’s nostrils.

While he’d long been pretty sure that the ‘miracle’ was really just a hoax perpetrated by Collin, a local trickster, he wasn’t certain. And one time, when Lenny watched his mother reverently slotting que tips between her toes, he contemplated the image of Lord Dum Dum’s flaming snout and seemed to undergo something not unlike a mild religious experience.

When Lenny packed off to college, one of his professors introduced him to Pascal’s Wager. Amused yet intrigued, Lenny went off and studied it by himself. To his surprise, the Wager convinced. Though his level of credence in Irrationalism hovered around 3%, levels of credence in other religious traditions that promised him eternal joy were even lower. Flipping through the *Pensées*, Lenny stopped and read the immortal words of Pascal: “Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist” (Pascal, 1995, 123). I won’t tell you what Lenny did next, but, suffice it to say, the librarian was not impressed.

<sup>2</sup> I say “that’s the gist” because there are some technical difficulties involved with putting infinite utilities into a decision matrix. (But for a proposed way of scooting around these difficulties, again see Jackson and Rogers (2019)).

Lenny's story is troubling. In paradigm cases of the Wager, wagerers will pick the religion they think is most likely to be true (Judaism, say) and convert to whatever degree they are able. But, even when they've converted to Judaism, they're still free to consider other religions (Islam, say, or Jansenism) and to commit to one of those, instead.

But Lenny's story is different. Once he has placed his chips on Lord Dum Dum, Lenny cannot then change religions, since doing so would require engaging a different religious perspective, which would require critical thinking, which, by Lord Dum Dum's lights, would merit an eternal grilling.

Having wagered on Lord Dum Dum, it is never rationally permissible for Lenny to un-wager; to change his mind, go back, and wager on something else. Having drunk the decision-theoretic Kool Aid, Lenny must, for Pascalian reasons, carry on in a never-ending cycle of rational irrationality until the day he dies.

But this seems like the wrong result. Lenny *shouldn't* convert to Irrationalism, Lenny *shouldn't* worship Lord Dum Dum, and, for the love of mercy, Lenny *shouldn't* do what he did to that biography of Prince Philip. But he does. And, moreover, according to Pascalian reasoning, it seems that he should have, that he'd be unreasonable not to.

The most obvious solution to this would be to abandon the reasoning that led us here in the first place. No Pascal, no problem. I suspect this is the option that will appeal to most, since, I imagine, most find Pascal's Wager unappealing.

It will not appeal to everyone, however. I doubt many of Pascal's wagerers will be moved by this *reductio*. To avoid being moved, wagerers have a few options: first and foremost, they can deny that Lenny did the right thing. At some point along the way, Lenny failed to do the Wager properly. But how? Lenny, it seems, is a model Pascalian: he took the religion for which he had the highest credence, and, in pursuit of eternal joy, made the leap and converted. It just so happened that practicing global irrationality is part and parcel of what it means to convert to Irrationalism.

*Possible rejoinder.* Converting to Irrationalism is impossible. Try doing it and you'll see. You might be able to rid your mind of reason for thirty seconds or so, or even a whole minute. But eventually you'll snap out of it. And if you snap out of it, even for a second or two, then, according to the Irrationalist soteriology as I explained it earlier, you'll be locked in a boiling oven for all eternity after you die. But if converting to Irrationalism is humanly impossible, then Lenny shouldn't convert to it, since the chances that he'll succeed are astronomically low. Instead, Lenny should convert to his second choice; the next best religion on his credence list, one to which conversion is a likelier prospect. For, according to the version of the wager we're considering, "[i]n addition to multiplying by the credence that the worldview is true, which is already part of the calculation, one ought to also multiply by *the probability that attempting to convert will be successful*" (Jackson and Rogers 2019, 74; italics theirs). If this objection holds, Lenny shouldn't have converted to Irrationalism of Pascalian grounds. He should've converted to something else.

Does this objection hold? Yes and no. *Yes*, if we leave the story as is, but *no* if I do some stipulating. It's my thought experiment, after all, so I can stipulate what I want. And I stipulate the following: Lord Dum Dum, if he exists, doesn't punish unintentional lapses into critical thinking. Those are only natural. No, Lord Dum Dum only

punishes those lapses which are *conscious*, *intentional*, and *prolonged*. If Lenny were to notice himself slipping into a coherent frame of mind, and then, say, devised clever Wordle strategies (instead of, say, yelling ‘FREE THE JAFFA CAKES!’ and attempting to do a bottle-flip with a dead pigeon), then, and *only* then, would Lord Dum Dum lay his wrath upon him. Plausibly, this tiny amendment to the story does nothing to weaken its absurdity. Lenny’s irrationality would still be rationally inescapable, since, presumably, a two-to-three-second lapse into reason is nowhere near enough time to be persuaded out of one religion and into another.

Another way to argue that Lenny failed to do the Wager properly would be to say that he should’ve done more to factor the costs of converting to Irrationalism into his decision-making. More precisely, the objection is that Lenny should have taken the cost of permanently forfeiting the freedom to hedge his bets on other religions a bit more seriously than he did. As Jackson and Rogers point out in their paper, “[o]ther factors, such as the degree to which certain religions allow you to hedge your bets while still receiving eternal rewards, can be factored into the matrix in a similar way” (Jackson and Rogers (2019), 74). By way of analogy: suppose you’re investing in stocks, and you have to choose between Stock A or Stock B. Stock A is expected to have a really high value. But there’s a downside: investing in it means agreeing to be locked in for twenty years (meaning that if you invest, you can’t take your money out until those years are up). On the other hand, Stock B doesn’t have any kind of a lock-in rule – that said, its projections are only half as good. On a basic expected value calculation, you should invest in A. But that seems wrong – or, at least, not obviously right. Why? The reason is that, as well as calculating the expected values of A and B, you should also factor in the opportunity cost of being tied down on a single investment. And when you take *that* into consideration, the case for choosing A over B starts to look much less promising. In the same way, the objection goes, Lenny should have assigned a higher value to his freedom to explore other religions. If he did that he might’ve been able to ignore Irrationalism and go with the next highest religion on his credence list.

The most round-about way of responding to this, I think, is to go with another ad hoc stipulation: Irrationalists, bless them, are not the world’s best educators. As a result, Lenny learned little to nothing about other world religions. And the modern university system, overcome with scientism and secularism and green hair and who-knows-what-else, didn’t help Lenny to learn much in that regard, either. The result, of course, is that Lenny’s near total ignorance of other religions ensured his credences in them were low enough that whatever value Lenny assigned to bet hedging was outweighed by Lord Dum Dum’s demand for Lenny to convert immediately<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> An anonymous referee suggests a different stock example: “Suppose you are, for some reason, extremely confident that stock A will do extremely well, and for whatever reason, you haven’t really considered investing in stocks B-Z, so your credence that B-Z will do well is extremely low. However, stock A locks in your money for 20 years. Decision theory might give the result that, given your current credences, you ought to put your money in A, which might seem like a weird result, if B-Z offer much more liquidity (and especially if they are likely enough to do well—even though your credences do not reflect this).” Intuitions may differ, but this doesn’t seem weird to me. Once this additional fact about your knowledge of stocks B-Z has been stipulated, it no longer seems weird to think that (given what you know) investing in A is the right choice. By contrast, even when the additional fact about Lenny’s religious ignorance has been stipulated, it still strikes me as highly counter-intuitive that Lenny should’ve converted to Irrationalism.

Finally, one could argue – with an anonymous referee from this journal – that the reason Lenny’s conversion was irrational is that it was irrational for him to assign Irrationalism a 3% likelihood in the first place. His actual credence should be much, *much* lower. Granted, Lenny has *some* evidence for Irrationalism (the mild religious experience, the miracle of the statue); but this, the objection goes, isn’t nearly enough to outweigh the ridiculously low prior probability that Lenny (supposing he were rational) would’ve assigned to this religion. Thus, Lenny’s credence in Irrationalism ought to have been so low as to knock it out of the running completely, and, thus, he should’ve converted to something else – “even a generic ‘there is some sort of higher power and it wants me to try to live a moral and responsible life’.”

For this objection to work, we’d need good reasons to think that Lenny was unreasonably generous in giving Irrationalism a credence of 3%. The reviewer suggests four. First, they argue that “there’s something internally inconsistent” about Irrationalism: “In order to rationally convert, one needs to engage in critical thinking, but then one is supposed to ditch critical thinking after that.” I disagree. If there were something internally inconsistent about telling someone to use rational steps in order to ditch one’s rationality, then there’d be something internally inconsistent about telling someone to drive their car to a wrecking yard in order to get rid of it, or in telling someone to work really hard now so that they can stop working in the future. Irrationalism’s instructions may be ironic, or “paradoxical” in the loosest sense of the word. But they aren’t *inconsistent*.

Second, “Irrationalism appears to have nothing to say about why there is something rather than nothing, why the universe is apt for the development of life, why human beings exist, why consciousness emerges from matter, etc.” Granted, when I explained what Irrationalism was earlier, I didn’t include a list of its philosophical commitments. But it doesn’t follow from that that it couldn’t have any. (For the record, Irrationalism is a panpsychist worldview that is skeptical of fine-tuning and counts the universe as a brute fact). Second, even if Irrationalism failed to provide *ultima facie* plausible answers to the big questions, it’s not obvious that Lenny couldn’t be rational in assigning it a 3% likelihood: plausibly, plenty of people in the real world are justified in assigning their religion a *fifty-one-plus-percent* credence, even though many of these people likely don’t know what the underlying metaphysical commitments of their religions *are*, let alone their theoretical plausibility.

Third, the reviewer objects that “[t]he core belief of Irrationalism (“that all human suffering can be traced back to one thing: critical thinking”) is on the face of it extremely implausible”. I don’t disagree, but I don’t see that it’s necessarily *so* implausible that Lenny couldn’t be justified in giving Irrationalism a credence of 3%. It’s hard to deny that a tremendous amount of human suffering has stemmed at least in part from critical thinking: to incite mob violence, the fiery rhetoric has to be well-crafted; the atom bomb was invented by scientists, and someone clearly put a lot of thought into the invention of thumbscrews. Non-climate-change-related natural evils are harder to explain in this way, but there’s no reason to think that an Irrationalist explanation couldn’t be proffered. Maybe natural evils are down to critical thinking, but cognitive limitations prevent human from seeing how, exactly, this is the case. Or maybe natural evils stem from the critical thinking of non-human intelligences, like

simulators, or angels and demons<sup>4</sup>. In any case, its not obvious to me that Irrationalism's core claim is so, so, *so* absurd that Lenny couldn't be justified in assigning it the credence he did.

Finally, the reviewer objects that "living morally sometimes requires critical thinking, so Irrationalism stands in tension with the idea that we should strive for moral goodness, and this counts as evidence against Irrationalism." I'll given them this. Intuitively, flouting reason is morally irresponsible and contrary to virtue. This is evidence that Irrationalism is false. Still, it's a hard sell that – just because Irrationalism has a counter-intuitive moral implication – Lenny *couldn't* nevertheless be justified in assigning Irrationalism a credence of 3%.

(Clarification: obviously, there's some possible world in which Lenny could be rational in assigning Irrationalism a credence of 3%. Nobody would deny that. The question for our purposes is this: if we described one of these rare (but possible!) scenarios in which Lenny is justified in having a 3% credence in Irrationalism, would it still be wildly counter-intuitive to think that Lenny is rationally obligated to scale Nelson's Column dressed in bubble wrap? If so, then my objection to Pascal's wager has teeth. If not, then it doesn't.)

Another type of response would be to bite the bullet, lean into the dirty feeling, and move on. This option has more to recommend it. Reasonable people of all persuasions will accept that there is at least some *prima facie* evidence against even their most firmly held views. The unpalatable consequence of the *reductio* seems to provide Pascalians with some such evidence, even if it turns out not to be compelling evidence all things considered.

A final option would be to deny that there's even a problem here. This seems implausible to me, but I can see the attraction. When I started writing this paper, the conclusion that Lenny is rationally obligated to sprinkle Tide Pods on his cereal seemed like the most implausible thing in the world. Now I'm nearing the end, the bite of this intuition has, ever so slightly, receded. Maybe this is because devolving into perpetual delusion is the right thing for Lenny to do after all. Or, maybe, it's just because running through a thought experiment over and over again in one's head can make it lose some of its force, like how repeating a word over and over can make it lose its meaning. But, whatever the reason, the primordial ick hasn't gone away completely. It still seems bananas.

Closing thought: the trouble with *reductio* arguments is that they rarely diagnose the problem with the position they're built to attack. While the worry raised by Lenny's story is by no means fatal, it should give Wagerers a reason to worry that somewhere, somehow, some mistake has been made.

## 1 Appendix

Here is another problem Lenny's story introduces. Assume the following: one, Irrationalism is false; two, some other religion *R* is true.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Dougherty (2022), Crummett (2021), and Boyd (2001).

Now, suppose Lenny dies, and that when he does he is offered a choice: commit to a relationship with the *R*-God and spend eternity with him in a good place called Heaven, or be separated from the *R*-God for all eternity in a bad place called Hell. If we think that Lenny can carry his Pascalian commitments from this life to the next, then, it seems, Lenny would be *rational* in failing to accept the *R*-God's offer to spend eternity with him in Heaven. But this conclusion may strike some as theologically undesirable – unacceptable, even. How can it ever be rational *not* to choose to go to Heaven?

Here are a few possibilities. First, maybe the *R*-God can reveal himself to Lenny in such a way that Lenny cannot help but assign the truth of *R* and the existence of the *R*-God a credence of one, thereby dislodging his prior Pascalian commitments. (Potential problem: it's doubtful whether this is possible, even for God).

Second, maybe the *R*-God can seize the reins of Lenny's mind, take control of his cognitive faculties, and steer them in such a way that he has no choice but to alter his credences. (Potential problem: it's likely that, if theism is true, the desire to reject God and live in sin is itself irrational. But if that's the case, the Pascalian who believes that sinners send themselves to Hell through their rejection of God should think carefully before using this response. It might lead to some uncomfortable questions down the line. If God is both able and willing to force Lenny to be rational, why wouldn't he do the same for everyone? This worry afflicts the previous solution as well).

Third, perhaps Lenny's story is impossible in a theistic universe; it is an intrinsically impermissible evil, one a good God couldn't possibly allow. (Potential problem: our common-sense modal intuitions say otherwise, so anyone who wants to use this response has the burden of providing a reason to doubt them).<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, maybe there's a possible world in which it is rational for Lenny not to accept the *R*-God's offer, but the *R*-God has made it such that, in the actual world, no situation like Lenny's will ever come to pass. (Potential problem: this might not fit well with all accounts of God's providence; open theists and modal collapsers beware).

I doubt this second problem (let alone the first) will bother many people; but it's fun to think about all the same.

## References

- Boyd, G. (2001). *Satan and the Problem of Evil*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press
- Crummett, D. (2021). The Real Advantages of the Simulation Solution to the Problem of Natural Evil. *Religious Studies*, 28(4), 618–633

<sup>5</sup> Here's one way to do that: Schellenberg (1993) has famously argued that if a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever inculpably in a state of non-belief. Since Lenny's situation entails that, to be rational, he must *always* be in a state of inculpable non-belief, it might turn out that it's metaphysically impossible for God to allow Lenny to get himself into the muddle I described. (However: even if this response works for the second problem, it won't get us out of the first. Pascal's Wager is meant to work independently of whether theism is true. So even if the Pascalian is a theist who thinks Lenny's story is metaphysically impossible, it would be dialectically inappropriate to appeal to this view as a means of vindicating Pascal's Wager).

- 
- Dougherty, T. (2022). “Skeptical Theism”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 edition). Edwin N. Zalta (ed.). Online at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/skeptical-theism/>
- Mougin, G. and Sober Elliott (1994). Betting Against Pascal’s Wager. *Noûs*, 28, 382–395
- Jackson, E. (2019). Salvaging Pascal’s Wager. *Philosophia Christi*, 21(1), 59–84
- Pascal, B. (1995). *Pensées*. London: Penguin Books
- Schellenberg, J. L. (1993). *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. New York: Cornell University Press

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.