

# Pascal's Wager

*Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God*

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# Introduction

## The Castaway's Fire

A castaway builds a fire hoping to catch the attention of any ship or plane that might be passing nearby. Even with no evidence that a plane or ship is nearby, he still gathers driftwood and lights a fire, enhancing the possibility of rescue. The castaway's reasoning is pragmatic. The benefit associated with fire building exceeds that of not building, and, clearly, no one questions the wisdom of the action.

Of course, the castaway's building of the fire does not require that the castaway believes that it will be seen. It requires only a belief that it might be seen. Now consider the question of God. What if there is no strong evidence that God exists? May one believe, justifiably, that God exists? Or is belief in the absence of strong supporting evidence illegitimate and improper? Pragmatic arguments for theism are designed to motivate and support belief even in the absence of strong evidential support. These arguments seek to show that theistic belief is permissible, even if one does not think that it is likely that God exists.<sup>1</sup> *Theism* is the proposition that *God exists*. *God* we will understand as that individual, if any, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. A *theist* is anyone who believes that God exists.

Pragmatic arguments employ prudential reasons on behalf of their conclusions. A prudential reason for a proposition is a reason to think that believing that proposition would be beneficial. Other theistic arguments—the Ontological proof or the Cosmological argument, for example—provide epistemic reasons in support of theism. An epistemic reason for a certain proposition is a reason to think that that proposition is true or likely. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal

<sup>1</sup> Some versions of the Wager are intended to persuade, even if it is extremely unlikely that God exists.

(1623–62) is famous, in part, for his contention that, if the evidence is inconclusive, one can properly consult prudence: ‘your reason suffers no more violence in choosing one rather than the other ... but what about your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss involved by Wagering that God exists’ (L. 153–6). According to Pascal, theistic belief, because of its prudential benefits, defeats its doxastic rivals of atheism and agnosticism. Pascal’s contention is encapsulated in what is famously known as Pascal’s Wager.

Pascal’s Wager is the most prominent member of the family of pragmatic arguments in support of theism. Another prominent member of the family is found in the 1896 essay ‘The Will to Believe’, written by the American philosopher William James (1842–1910). James’s argument, as we will see, is concerned in large part with the immediate benefits of cultivating theistic belief, rather than any alleged benefit in the hereafter. This world is the primary concern, not the world to come.

Pragmatic theistic arguments are the focus of this study, with most of our attention directed toward Pascal’s Wager. Devoting a majority of our study to the Wager is natural enough, since issues in epistemology, the ethics of belief, and decision theory, as well as theology, all intersect at the Wager. But the Wager is not the exclusive focus of our study. William James’s argument in support of theistic belief receives much attention. As will a largely unknown pragmatic argument authored by the English philosopher J. S. Mill (1806–73), published posthumously, which supports the propriety of hoping that quasi-theism is true. These arguments contend that certain positive attitudes—whether belief, or acceptance, or hope—are properly attached to theism, because the benefits associated with those positive attitudes exceed those associated with disbelief or the suspension of belief.

## 1. A PREVIEW

Chapter 1 is an in-depth look at Pascal’s Wager. The logic involved in the Wager is discussed, as is the basic topography of decision theory, the systematic study of rational decision making. Seven different versions of the Wager are identified, each corresponding to a significant landmark of decision theory. Two versions of Pascal’s Wager will be earmarked for close examination. One version is a favorite of philosophers, and so it might be called the *Canonical* version of Pascal’s Wager. In short, the Canonical Wager contends that, since there is everything to gain and

very little to lose, the expected utility of forming theistic beliefs exceeds that of not forming theistic beliefs, as long as it is logically possible that God exists.<sup>2</sup> This version of the Wager enjoys favored status not because philosophers believe it is sound. They generally do not. It is a favorite among philosophers because it is such an audacious challenge to the idea that, as David Hume might put it, a rational person conforms her beliefs to the evidence. The Canonical Wager, I argue, falls prey to various objections. The other version of the Wager, however—what I shall call the *Jamesian Wager*—survives the gauntlet of challenges and objections explored in Chapters 2–5. The Jamesian Wager, as we shall see, can serve as a tie-breaker, such that anyone who has as much evidence for atheism as she has for theism has, compliments of the Jamesian Wager, a rational way of moving beyond that evidential impasse toward the cultivation of theistic belief.

Theistic pragmatic arguments are controversial; some even find them scandalous. In general, the objections to theistic pragmatic arguments can be classified into three broad kinds: moral, methodological, and theological. Moral objections to theistic pragmatic arguments are not complaints that are particularly virtuous, but are complaints concerning the virtue of pragmatic reasoning with regard to belief formation. Most prominent are objections that pragmatic arguments violate an ethic of belief—that it is immoral to form or maintain beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons, rather than the evidence. The moral person, it is alleged, cultivates her beliefs only with evidence. Another version of a moral objection is that Pascal's Wager exploits cupidity and selfishness. In effect, moral objections allege that Pascalian Wagers, and pragmatic arguments generally, entangle one in a morally problematic situation. It is immoral, put simply, to generate beliefs on the basis of pragmatic arguments. In Chapters 2 and 5, I argue that moral objections to pragmatic reasoning generally, and to Pascal's Wager specially, fail. For one thing, it is possible that one could have a moral duty to engage in pragmatic reasoning, to form and maintain a belief on the basis of a pragmatic reason and in the absence of adequate evidence (indeed, even in the face of contrary evidence). For another thing, as we will see, the Wager can be formulated so as to appeal not to selfish greed, but to a concern for others.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 for the details on the Canonical Wager, and the concept of maximizing expected utility.

Methodological objections are the most perplexing for the friend of the pragmatic. This kind of objection is a complaint about validity, or, perhaps more precisely, a complaint arguing invalidity. Put simply, methodological objections allege that pragmatic arguments contain an argumentative flaw. Even if their premises are true, the conclusion of a Pascalian Wager does not follow. The most famous example of this kind of objection is the many-gods objection, which is also the complaint most frequently lodged against the Wager. The Pascalian, according to the many-gods objection, is left with an embarrassment of riches, as the Wager recommends no particular deity, or theological tradition, but many mutually incompatible ones. Another methodological objection is that the notion of an infinite utility is incoherent or at least problematic, since standard decision theory implies several theorems and principles that are incompatible with infinite utilities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine various methodological objections. Chapter 3 looks at three versions of the many-gods objection, while Chapter 4 examines several problems that arise from the notion of an infinite utility. As we will see, both the many-gods objection and objections to infinite utility are fatal to some formulations of Pascal's Wager. They are not, however, the bane of every formulation, since the Jamesian Wager escapes these methodological objections unscathed.

In Chapter 5 nine objections to Pascal's Wager are examined. Seven of these objections are classifiable as methodological objections, with the other two being theological objections. A theological objection to the Wager is a complaint that arises from the doctrines of Christianity. The first such complaint is that the divine plan presupposed by the Wager is implausible, since, the objection goes, God would not have designed the world in the way that the Wager presupposes. The second is that Pascalian wagering is incompatible with the doctrine of predestination. As with the moral objections and the methodological objections, these theological objections are not fatal complaints to the Jamesian Wager.

Chapter 6 is one part examination of William James's 'Will to Believe' argument, one part examination of J. S. Mill's 'Religious Hope' argument, and one part examination of the argument that the consoling benefit of theistic belief is so great that theistic belief is permissible even when one thinks that the existence of God is much less likely than not. As we will see, while the consolations of theistic belief may be great, they are not so great as to overcome the moral and epistemic duty not to accept propositions that one takes to be much less likely than not.

As mentioned earlier, it is the contention of this study that one version of the Wager—the Jamesian Wager—survives the various objections hurled against theistic pragmatic arguments. Indeed, I will argue that the Jamesian Wager is valid, and there is strong evidence in support of its premises. The Jamesian Wager, in other words, provides good reason in support of theistic belief. The Jamesian Wager contends that benefits associated with theistic belief hinge not just on a world to come, but also on this world. According to the Jamesian Wager, theistic belief as such is beneficial, whether God exists or not. If the castaway's fire provides warmth, and a means to cook, as well as a signal, then the castaway has all the more reason to build the fire. Even if one finally denies that the Jamesian Wager provides support for theistic belief, the study of theistic pragmatic arguments is important, since grappling with the puzzles and problems raised by the pragmatic is reason enough, and reward enough, to undertake the study.

## 2. EXCURSUS I: A NOTE ON THE *PENSÉES* TEXT

Pascal's *Pensées* ('Thoughts') was first published in 1670, eight years after Pascal's death. Pascal had intended to publish an apology for Christianity, and the *Pensées*, a collection of unfinished notes and jottings and fragments, is a very rough draft toward that end. A version of the Wager, however, was published earlier, in the last chapter of *The Port-Royal Logic* (1662). The unfinished nature of the *Pensées* generates much dispute concerning the order in which Pascal intended to present the various fragments. The fragment containing the Wager is entitled '*Infini rien*' ('infinity-nothing') and is described by Ian Hacking as 'two pieces of paper covered on both sides by handwriting going in all directions, full of erasures, corrections, insertions, and afterthoughts'.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no uniform numbering of the *Pensées* fragments in the various translations and editions of the *Pensées*, but the numbering employed by M. Louis Lafuma's Delmas edition (Paris, 1948) is widely used. John Warrington in his English translation of 1960, *Blaise Pascal Pensées* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960), widely available in the Everyman series, follows the Lafuma Delmas numbering (in the Warrington text, the *Infini rien* fragment is 343). Complicating

<sup>3</sup> Ian Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9/2 (1972), 187–8.



matters, Lafuma published a later edition that numbers the *Pensées* fragments differently (the Luxembourg edition of 1951). Another widely available English translation, part of the Penguin classics series, is that of A. J. Krailsheimer, *Blaise Pascal Pensées* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), which follows the Lafuma Luxembourg edition. The *Infini rien* passage in the Krailsheimer translation is 418. A recent English translation by Honor Levi, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), follows a third order of numberings (that of Philippe Sellier). In this translation *Infini rien* is numbered 680. Among older English translations, for instance that of W. F. Trotter (*Pascal's Thoughts* (New York: Collier, 1910; also New York: Modern Library, 1941, and New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), the numbering of Leon Brunschvicg is used, in which *Infini rien* is 233. Dover Publications, as part of the Dover Philosophical Classics series, reissued the Trotter translation in 2003. The Dover reissue includes an introduction by T. S. Eliot, written in 1958.

In the chapters that follow I will cite references to the *Pensées* in the text, using the fragment number and not page number. The Warrington translation I will cite as (W. with fragment number). Whenever I stray from the Warrington translation, and use the Krailsheimer translation I will cite it as (K. with fragment number), and the Levi translation I cite as (L. with fragment number).

# 1

## Pascal's Wager

Pascal's Wager was a revolutionary apologetic device. The Wager is not an argument that God exists. That sort of argument, the appeal to evidence, whether empirical or conceptual, is the domain of the other theistic arguments. Pascal's Wager is an argument that belief in God is pragmatically rational, that inculcating a belief in God is the response dictated by prudence. To say that an action is pragmatically rational implies that it is in one's interests to do that action. In the absence of conclusive evidence, Pascal contends, prudential rationality should be our guide (L. 680). Pascal's pragmatic turn, although foreshadowed in earlier writers, was an attempt to argue that theistic belief was the only proper attitude to adopt when faced with the question of God. Because epistemic reason cannot determine whether God exists, it must yield the field to prudential reason, which wins the day for theism. Impressively enough, even though the evidence should be inconclusive regarding theism, one would be irrational not to believe, if the Wager succeeds. The Wager, at least in its original intent, is not a weapon of the friendly theist; the Wager is intended to show that unbelief is rationally impermissible. With this emphasis on the rationality of belief, Pascal was a modern thinker in his concern with what it is that one should believe.

The Wager presupposes a distinction between having reason to think a certain proposition is true, and having reason to induce belief in that proposition. Although a particular proposition may lack evidential support, it could be that forming a belief in the proposition may be the rational thing, all things considered, to do. So, if there is a greater benefit associated with inducing theistic belief than with any of its competitors, then inducing a belief that God exists is the rational thing to do.

Like the Ontological proof and the Cosmological argument, the Wager is protean. Pascal himself formulated several versions of the Wager. Three versions of the Wager are generally recognized within

the concise paragraphs of the *Pensées*.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I argue that there is a fourth found there also, a version that in many respects anticipates the argument of William James in his 1896 essay 'The Will to Believe'.<sup>2</sup> This fourth version differs from the better-known three by having as a premise the proposition that theistic belief is more rewarding than non-belief, independent of whether God exists or not. The better-known three focus exclusively on the benefit of theistic belief if God exists. As we will see, a variant of this fourth Wager is the strongest of Pascal's Wagers. Let us begin with a brief overview of the apologetic role Pascal intended for the Wager.

## 1. THE APOLOGETIC ROLE OF THE WAGER

While it is impossible to know the role in his projected apologetic work Pascal intended for his Wagers, there are hints in the fragment containing the Wager argument.<sup>3</sup> The first hint is the sentence 'let us now speak according to natural lights', while a second hint is the use of the indefinite article, 'if there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension'.<sup>4</sup> These sentences suggest that Pascal intended

<sup>1</sup> Ian Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9/2 (1972), 186–92.

<sup>2</sup> William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1–31. The standard interpretation of James's argument is that it is a pragmatic argument. In Chapter 6 I examine an interpretation of James's argument, which sees it both as a pragmatic argument, and as an epistemic one.

<sup>3</sup> While the present study is primarily a study of Pascal's Wager as an argument and is not a study of the historical context of the Wager, I do hazard a few speculations concerning that context. For studies in English treating the Wager in its historical context, the reader is well advised to consult two important books: David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), and Leslie Armour, *'Infini Rien': Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993). See also John Ryan's informative article 'The Argument of the Wager in Pascal and Others', *New Scholasticism*, 19 (1945), 233–50. Nicholas Rescher provides an insightful comment about alleged precursors to the Wager in *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 138–9 (n. 35). Roger Hazelton discusses Christian precursors to the Wager in a very useful article, 'Pascal's Wager Argument', in R. E. Cushman and E. Grislis (eds.), *The Heritage of Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of Robert Lowery Calhoun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 108–26.

<sup>4</sup> See Charles M. Natoli, 'The Role of the Wager in Pascal's Apologetics', *New Scholasticism*, 57 (1983), 98–106; and his *Fire in the Dark: Essays on Pascal's Pensées and Provinciales* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 8–12.

the Wagers as arguments for the rationality of theistic belief, and not as arguments for the rationality of Christian belief. Theism is the proposition that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect being. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all theistic religions. It is likely that Pascal had in mind a two-step apologetic strategy. The first step consisted primarily of the Wager employed as an ecumenical argument in support of theism generally, with the second step being arguments for Christianity in particular.

As an ecumenical argument in support of theism, the Wager was designed to show that theistic belief of some sort was rational, while appeals to fulfilled prophecy and to miracles were Pascal's favored routes by which his reader was to be led to Christianity. Many of the *Pensées* fragments consist of arguments that either Christianity is the true religion, or that it is superior to Judaism and Islam in significant respects (see *Pensées* 235–76 in the Levi translation, for instance). If this speculation is sound, then Pascal's apology was very much in line with the standard seventeenth- and eighteenth-century apologetic strategy of, first, arguing that there is a god, and then, second, identifying which god it is that exists. This is the strategy adopted by Robert Boyle (1627–91) and by Bishop John Tillotson (1630–94), for instance, and by those, like William Paley (1734–1805), who employed the design argument to argue for a divine designer, and then used the argument from miracles to identify that designer.<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see in Chapter 5, this two-step strategy may also explain the focus of David Hume's (1711–76) works on religion, with his *Dialogues* directed toward the first step, and the essay contra miracle reports directed toward the second. It also explains Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) characterization of the Cosmological argument and the Physicotheological argument as two-staged arguments, with the first arguing from experience to the existence of a superior being, and the second identifying that being with the *ens realissimum*.

One might object to this speculation of a Pascalian two-step that theism as such—the bare proposition that God exists—cannot motivate a Pascalian Wager, which does after all presuppose certain ideas of afterlife (heaven certainly and perhaps hell). This objection is correct. Pascal probably thought of theism as including more than the existence

<sup>5</sup> See Boyle's *Final Causes* (1688); Tillotson's 'The Wisdom of Being Religious', Sermon I, in *Works of Tillotson*, vol. i (London: J. F. Dove, 1820), 317–89; and Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1795), pt. 3, ch. 8.

of God. William Rowe has a helpful distinction between restricted theism and expanded theism, which provides an idea of how we should understand theism in the context of theistic pragmatic arguments:

Expanded theism is the view that [God] exists, conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like. (Orthodox Christian theism is a version of expanded theism.) Restricted theism is the view that [God exists], unaccompanied by other, independent religious claims.<sup>6</sup>

As a first-step argument for theism the Wager was probably an argument for expanded theism and not the restricted kind. The expansion, however, was not so broad as to include the entirety of Christian doctrine, but it probably does include certain propositions about afterlife possibilities in addition to the proposition that God exists. The second step, which includes the appeals to miracle reports and satisfied prophecies, is the argument for full-blown Christian belief. So it is best to understand Pascal as presenting a wager between naturalism and expanded theism, and throughout the balance of this chapter and those that follow, by theism we will mean some suitably expanded version of theism. Of course, as critics have often gleefully pointed out since at least 1746, there are various versions of expanded theism, and, indeed, various versions of what we might call expanded 'quasi-theism' (propositions asserting the existence of supernatural beings distinct from God). This plethora of theistic expansions—what is known as the 'many-gods objection'—will be a focus in a later section of this chapter, and the sole focus of Chapter 3.

## 2. DECISION-MAKING

Having an idea of the basic theory of decision-making greatly facilitates understanding the Wager. The theory of decision-making codifies the logic of rational action in situations in which one's knowledge is limited. The usual limitation is a lack of a reliable basis on which to know or to estimate the objective probabilities of various states of the world. In decision-making situations three elements are of importance: actions,

<sup>6</sup> William L. Rowe, 'The Empirical Argument from Evil', in R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, & Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 239.

states, and outcomes. Actions are the alternative ways of acting available to the deliberator. States are ways the world might be. Outcomes are the anticipated consequences or effects of each action if a particular state occurs. A decision matrix (Fig. 1.1) usefully represents the relationships of these elements. The outcomes will be arranged in cells, the number of which depends on the number of acts and states ( $2 \times 2$ , or  $2 \times 3$ , or  $3 \times 3 \dots$ ). The cells are numbered sequentially from the upper left-hand cell across (Fig. 1.2).

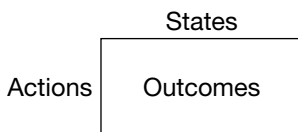


Fig. 1.1.

	State 1	State 2
Act 1	F1	F2
Act 2	F3	F4

Fig. 1.2.

For simplicity's sake, let us stipulate that we are concerned only with actions and states that are causally and probabilistically independent. One's actions, that is, do not causally influence which state obtains. The deliberator values some outcomes; others he does not. 'Utilities' is the term employed to represent the worth of the various outcomes for the deliberator. Some outcomes have a high value or utility for the deliberator, some a low or even negative utility (a disutility). Probabilities, or the likelihood, whether objective or epistemic, of the various states play a large role in decision-making. If one knows the relevant probabilities (the *risk* involved), then a well-established rule is available: the Expectation rule. According to the Expectation rule, for any person S, and any number of alternative actions,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to S, if  $\alpha$  has a greater expected utility than does  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ . One calculates the expected utility of an act  $\varphi$  by (i) multiplying the utility

and probability of each outcome associated with  $\varphi$ , (ii) subtracting any respective costs, and then (iii) summing the totals. So, for example, suppose one were deciding whether to carry an umbrella today. One prefers not to do so, but one also prefers even more not to get wet. We can use a  $2 \times 2$  (two actions and two states) matrix to model these preferences, with the numbers within the cells representing the agent's preferences ranking of the various outcomes (the higher the number the greater the preference) (Fig. 1.3).

	Rain	No rain
Carry	10	2
Do not carry	1	5

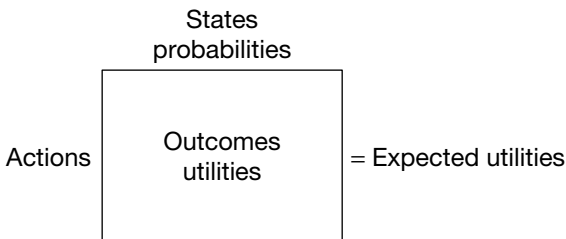
*Fig. 1.3.*

Suppose there is a 50 percent chance of rain today. The expected utility (EU) of carrying an umbrella is greater than that of not carrying, since:

$$\frac{1}{2}(10) + \frac{1}{2}(2) = 6 = \text{EU (carry)}$$

$$\frac{1}{2}(1) + \frac{1}{2}(5) = 3 = \text{EU (do not carry)}$$

This kind of decision-making or deliberation with knowledge (or estimation) of the relevant probabilities and utilities of the outcomes is what is known as 'decisions under risk'. So, if one deliberates armed with knowledge of both the outcomes and the probabilities associated with those outcomes, one faces a decision under risk (Fig. 1.4).



*Fig. 1.4.*

Typically, decisions under risk require an 'objective evidential basis for estimating probabilities, for example, relative frequencies, or actuarial tables, or the relative strengths of the various propensities of things (states of affairs) that affect the outcome'.<sup>7</sup> Even so, decisions under risk can employ subjective probabilities, or probabilities that are degrees of belief, or estimations of likelihood.

On the other hand, when deliberating with a knowledge of the outcomes but no knowledge of the probabilities associated with those outcomes, one faces a 'decision under uncertainty' (sometimes called a 'decision under ignorance'). No single rule governs decisions under uncertainty. Various rules are relevant depending upon one's circumstances and preferences. Seven rules, some well established, some not, for decisions under uncertainty are:

- D1. Weak Dominance rule: for any person S, if one of the actions,  $\alpha$ , available to S has an outcome better than the outcomes of the other available actions, and never an outcome worse than the others, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

According to the Weak Dominance rule, an action weakly dominates if there is a state in which that act has a better outcome than the alternatives, and there is no state in which that action has a worse outcome than the alternatives. But it is a *weak* domination, since it occurs only with some outcomes and not all outcomes.

- D2. Strong Dominance rule: for any person S, and action  $\alpha$ , if in each state  $\alpha$  has a better outcome than the alternatives in that state, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

Strong Dominance occurs whenever an action always has better outcomes than its competitors. An action strongly dominates if it has better outcomes no matter how the world turns out. The last few sentences of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* present a nascent appeal to Strong Dominance as a reason for worker solidarity and ruling-class fear, since there is a world to win and nothing to lose but exploitative chains.

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. E. Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard Press, 2001), 106.



- D3. Satisfactory Act rule: for any person S, and actions  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , if S is satisfied with every outcome of  $\alpha$ , but not with every outcome of  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ .

If an action carries only outcomes that one can live with, while the other alternatives have some intolerable outcomes, then the former is said to be satisfactory.

- D4. Indifference rule: assume each action is equiprobable and employ the Expectation rule.

The Indifference rule converts decisions under uncertainty into decisions under risk. Doing so provides a kind of methodological elegance to decision theory, since only two rules are then necessary. On the other hand, many critics have argued that the Indifference principle is problematic, since, by crediting some alternatives with unacceptably high probability values, one's decision is systematically skewed.

- D5. Maximin rule: choose that action the worse outcome of which is superior to the worst outcomes of the other alternatives actions.

The Maximin principle is perhaps best known as the principle of choice in John Rawls's famous theory of justice. It is a conservative principle advising the avoidance of the worst case as the decisive guide to action.

- D6. Maximax rule: choose that action the best outcome of which is superior to the best outcomes of the other alternatives.

The Maximax principle is an extravagant principle with its advice to throw caution to the wind and 'go for the gusto'.

As we will see, Pascal's four versions of the Wager correspond to the Weak Dominance rule, the Indifference rule, the Expectation rule, and the Strong Dominance rule. One could easily construct variations of the Wager corresponding to Maximin (indeed Locke presents a Maximin version), Maximax, and the Satisfactory Act principle. I will argue that a refinement of the Wager, employing a principle I will call the 'Next Best Thing rule', proves the strongest member of the family of Pascalian Wagers:

- D7. Next Best Thing rule: for any person S making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the actions,  $\alpha$ , available to S has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available

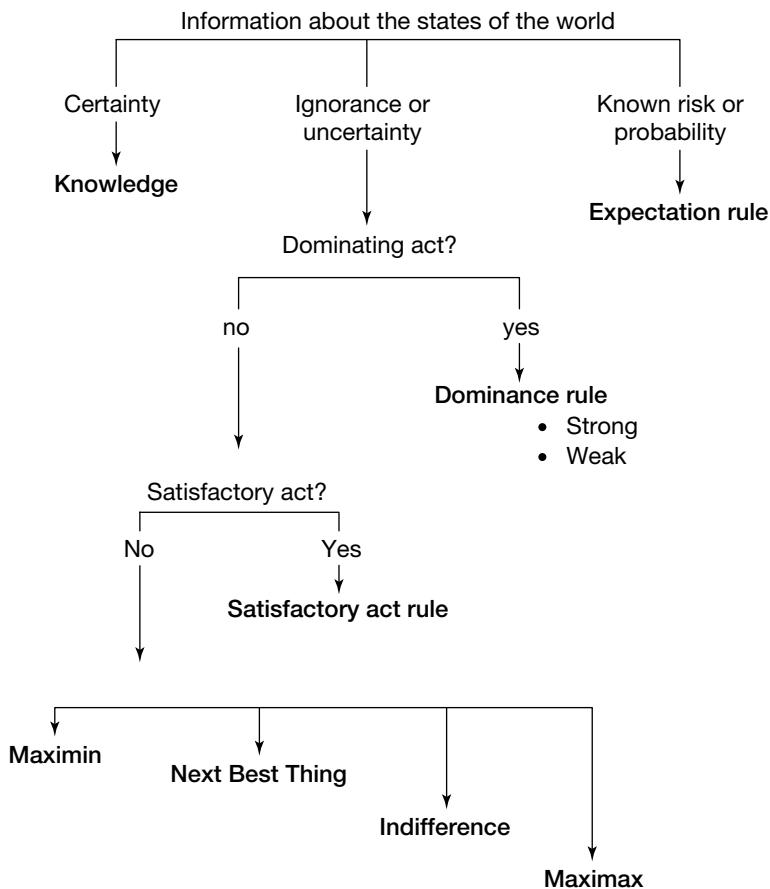
actions, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other available actions, and, excluding the best outcomes and worse outcomes of the available actions, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other available actions, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

This principle advises choosing an action whose middling outcomes are better than those of its competition, whenever the best outcomes and worst outcomes of the alternatives are the same. The Next Best Thing principle asserts that a particular action should be chosen if, in the state in which that action does best, it does as well or better as its competitors do in the states in which they do best; and in no state does that action have an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of its competitors, and in every state other than the states in which the best and worst outcomes of the alternatives are found, that action has outcomes better than its competitors. The Next Best Thing principle, we might say, is a cousin of the Weak Dominance principle, since, if there are states in which a particular alternative has an outcome better than that of the others and, moreover, that alternative has no outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, then that alternative is the next best thing.

It is important to recognize that the Next Best Thing principle is a principle of uncertainty and not risk. It would be utterly inappropriate in a risk situation. Suppose that the best outcome of  $\beta$  is extremely likely, but has the same expected utility as the best outcome of  $\alpha$  (while  $\alpha$  carries much payoff,  $\beta$  is nearly a sure thing with a smaller payoff). Suppose further that the worst outcome of  $\alpha$  is extremely likely, but has the same expected utility as the worst outcome of  $\beta$ . So, the best cases and the worst cases of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are the same. Further, the middling outcomes of  $\alpha$  are slightly better than those of  $\beta$ . In such a case one might reasonably choose  $\beta$  over  $\alpha$ . Indeed, if the odds were stretched enough, it would seem foolish to make any other choice. But the Next Best Thing principle proffers contrary advice. When the risk is known, the Next Best Thing principle is irrelevant.

The relationship between the various rules and principles of decision-making is illustrated by Fig. 1.5.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I have adopted and adapted this chart from the class notes of Professor Douglas Stalker. Stalker adapted his chart from Ronald N. Giere, *Understanding Scientific Reasoning* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), 293.

*Fig. 1.5.*

### 3. A FAMILY OF WAGERS

About a third of the way into *Pensées* 680 a dialogue commences.<sup>9</sup> Along with most commentators I assume that Pascal formulates his

<sup>9</sup> For more detail on the various versions of the Wager see, in addition to Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', Edward McClennen, 'Pascal's Wager and Finite Decision Theory', in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 115–37. And see Alan Hájek, 'The Illogic of Pascal's Wager', in T. Childers et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 10th Logica International Symposium*

Wager arguments in response to seven questions and comments from an unnamed agnostic interlocutor, usually described by commentators as a libertine, who contends that Christians, lacking proof, are indictable for committing to belief without reason.

Before presenting his Wager arguments, Pascal sets the stage with certain observations. The first is that neither the nature nor the existence of God admits of rational proof: 'Reason cannot decide anything... Reason cannot make you choose one way or the other, reason cannot make you defend either of two choices' (L. 680). This should not be taken as asserting that evidence and argument are irrelevant to philosophical theology. Pascal did not think that. Certain kinds of arguments and evidence are irrelevant; while certain kinds are relevant.<sup>10</sup> Pascal clearly thought that his Wager arguments were not only relevant but also rationally compelling. Secondly, wagering about the existence of God is unavoidable: 'you have to wager.' Wagering is forced, since refusing to wager is tantamount to wagering against. A decision is forced whenever deciding nothing is equivalent in practical effect to choosing one of the alternatives. Voltaire (1694–1778) objected that

'Tis evidently false to assert, that, the not laying a wager that God exists, is laying that he does not exist: For certainly that man whose mind is in a state of doubt, and is desirous of information, does not lay on either side.<sup>11</sup>

Voltaire is no doubt correct that not laying a wager that God exists is not the same as wagering that God does not exist. But Pascal never asserted it was. When Pascal asserts that one must wager, he is not asserting that the refusal to do so is identical with wagering against, but rather that refusing to wager has the same practical consequence as wagering against. One remains in a state of religious skepticism by either wagering against or by laying no wager. To wager for God requires movement out of the status quo.

(*Liblice: Filosofia*, The Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 1997), 239–49.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Foukes, 'Argument in Pascal's *Pensées*', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 6/1 (1989), 57–68.

<sup>11</sup> F. M. A. Voltaire, 'Pascal's Thoughts Concerning Religion' (Letter XXV, 1734), in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), ed. N. Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127. The translator of Letter XXV is unknown. It first appeared in English in the second edition of *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1741). Why Letter XXV was included in a text ostensibly devoted to English topics is not apparent.

What is it to wager that God exists? There are at least six possibilities here.<sup>12</sup> The first is that a pro-wager (a wager that God exists) consists of acting or behaving as if God exists. This need not involve belief in God, since an agnostic or even an atheist could behave as if God exists. Of course, since one tends to acquire beliefs that fit one's behavior, it may be that over time acting as if God exists results in theistic belief. Indeed, toward the end of the *Pensées* passage Pascal counsels imitating those who have already made a pro-wager as a way of trying to inculcate belief: 'Follow the way by which they set out, acting as if they already believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. This will naturally cause you to believe ...' (W. 343). A second possibility is that wagering for God is to believe that God exists. If wagering as such implies belief, then Doxastic Voluntarism is implied by this second possibility. Doxastic Voluntarism is the thesis that one can believe at will. The problem with this possibility is that belief as such does not imply appropriate action or behavior. The devils believe that God exists and they shudder, proclaims the New Testament book of James. But presumably, even though they believe and shudder, the devils do not reform, they do not act appropriately. A striking passage in the *Pensées* text suggests that Pascal did not take wagering and believing as the same. Pascal's interlocutor laments that, even though he agrees with the Wager argument, he is unable to believe: 'my hands are tied and my mouth is gagged; I am forced to wager, and am not free; no one frees me from these bonds, and I am so made that I cannot believe' (W. 343). So while he cannot believe, he is yet forced to wager. If we understand the second possibility as implying a belief that God exists and no other belief or action on the part of the bettor, then this possibility is problematic. The third possibility is that pro-wagering is to inculcate theistic belief. It is to take steps to bring about theistic belief. Perhaps, however, one can wager without having successfully inculcated theistic belief. So, the fourth possibility is that pro-wagering is attempting to inculcate theistic belief. This fourth possibility, unlike the third, does not imply that pro-wagering is always a successful endeavor (clearly enough, the third possibility implies the fourth). I assume, by the way, that the third and fourth possibilities both imply the first. Taking steps to inculcate belief requires acting as if God exists.

<sup>12</sup> My account of what wagering for God amounts to is influenced by Lucien Goldmann, 'The Wager: The Christian Religion', in H. Bloom (ed.), *Blaise Pascal: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 53–60.

The fifth possibility is that pro-wagering is to accept that God exists. Acceptance is a voluntary action that consists of a judgment that a particular proposition is true. Acceptance implies assenting to a proposition, and acting on the proposition (there is more on acceptance in Chapter 2). More strongly, the sixth possibility is that wagering is committing oneself to God. This possibility implies the first, and both the fourth and fifth possibilities. To commit to God is to reorient one's goals, and values, and behavior by including the proposition that God exists among one's most basic values and beliefs. It implies much more than just belief. Pascal seems to employ this sense of wagering when he says 'learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have' (L. 680). Put concisely, to commit to God is to believe in God, which involves more than merely believing that God exists. I will take the sixth possibility as what is meant by wagering that God exists. A con-wager or a wager against, then, is to remain as one is. It is not to commit oneself. For convenience, I usually express wagering for God as inculcating theistic belief, or as believing in God, but these phrases are convenient shorthand for committing oneself to God. Wagering for God, in short, is to commit oneself to God.

Pascal was not, and no Pascalian need be, a doxastic voluntarist. A Pascalian Wager neither entails nor assumes that belief is under our direct control. What is necessary, perhaps, is that we can bring about belief in a roundabout, indirect way. For those making a pro-wager Pascal suggests a regimen of 'taking holy water, having masses said' and imitating the faithful. It is not anachronistic to note the Jamesian similarities here: wagering about God arises because argument and evidence are inconclusive. Moreover, wagering is forced, and, clearly, the matter is momentous and involves, for most of Pascal's readers, living options.

Ian Hacking in his important 1972 paper 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager' identifies three versions within the *Pensées* fragments. The first, which Hacking dubs the 'Argument from Dominance', is conveyed within the admonition to 'weigh up the gain and the loss by calling that heads that God exists ... If you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating' (L. 680). Rational optimization requires adopting a particular alternative among several mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive options, whenever doing so may render one better off than by not doing so, and in no

case would doing so render one worse off.<sup>13</sup> According to Pascal theistic belief (weakly) dominates.<sup>14</sup> Consider Fig. 1.6. In this matrix there are two states of the world, one in which God exists and one in which God does not exist; and two acts, wagering that God exists (a pro-wager), and wagering against the existence of God (a con-wager). Given that the outcomes associated with the acts have the following relations:  $F1 \gg F3$ , and  $F2$  is at least as good as  $F4$ , believing weakly dominates not believing (the expression  $X \gg Y$  should be understood as  $X$  greatly exceeds  $Y$ ). Following Pascal, no great disvalue has been assigned to  $F3$ . Nowhere in L. 680 does Pascal suggest that nonbelief results in hell, or in an infinite disutility, if God exists. The version of the Wager found in the *Port-Royal Logic* does employ the idea of a loss greater than all the evils of the world totaled, attached to nonbelief, if God exists.

	God exists	~ (God exists)
Wager for	F1	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

Fig. 1.6.

The Argument from Dominance proceeds:

1. for any person  $S$ , if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , available to  $S$  has an outcome better than the outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the others,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
2. believing in God is better than not believing if God exists, and is no worse if God does not exist.<sup>15</sup> Therefore,
3. one should believe in God.

<sup>13</sup> And given that the acts are causally independent of the states.

<sup>14</sup> As described, the first version of the Wager is an argument from *Weak Dominance*.

<sup>15</sup> Clearly enough the acts in this case have no propensity to bring about the states. William James, perhaps it should be noted, does allow that, for all we know, the acts in this case could play a part in bringing about the states. In his 1895 essay, 'Is Life Worth Living?' he writes: 'I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.' See 'Is Life Worth Living?' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1896; repr. New York: Dover, 1956): 61). James is the only philosopher I know of who entertains this possibility.

This first Wager is an example of a decision under uncertainty. Given Pascal's claim that 'if there is a god, he is infinitely incomprehensible to us ... we are incapable, therefore, of knowing either what He is or if He is', it is not surprising that his first version of the Wager is a decision under uncertainty.<sup>16</sup>

The conclusion—that one should believe that God exists—is an 'ought of rationality'. Pascal probably did not intend, nor should a Pascalian for that matter, to limit the imperative force of (3) to pragmatic rationality only. The idea of (3) is that belief in God is the rational stance all things considered. Let us distinguish between something being rationally compelling and something being plausible. An argument is rationally compelling if, upon grasping the argument, one would be irrational in failing to accept its conclusion. On the other hand, an argument is plausible if, upon grasping the argument, one would be reasonable or rational in accepting its conclusion, yet one would not be irrational in failing to accepting it. Pascal believed that his Wager made theistic belief rationally compelling. Since (3) will figure as the conclusion in all Pascal's Wagers, we will hereafter designate the proposition expressed in (3) as proposition (C).

The transition to the second version of the Wager is precipitated by the interlocutor's objection to the assumption that theistic wagering does not render one worse-off if God does not exist. In response Pascal introduces probability values to the discussion, and, more importantly, the idea of an infinite utility:

Since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you won only two lives instead of one, you could still put on a bet. But if there were three lives to win, you would have to play ... and you would be unwise ... not to chance your life to win three in a game where there is an equal chance of losing and winning. (L. 680)

There are versions of the Wager shorn of probability considerations found previous to Pascal. Pascal's genius, in part, was the introduction of probability to the Wager. While probability plays no part in the first argument, it has a prominent role in the second version of the Wager, which Hacking calls the 'Argument from Expectation'. Built upon the concept of maximizing expected utility, the Argument from Expectation stipulates that the probability that God exists is just as likely as not.

<sup>16</sup> Contra J. J. MacIntosh, 'Is Pascal's Wager Self-Defeating?', *Sophia*, 39/2 (2000), 6–13.



Perhaps Pascal here employs a nascent Indifference principle in order to sustain the claim of an even probability. In any case, the expected utility of believing in God, given an infinite utility and a probability of one-half, is itself infinite. With the assumption of an infinite utility, theistic belief easily outdistances not believing, no matter what finite value is found in F2, F3 or F4 (Fig. 1.7).

	God exists $\frac{1}{2}$	$\sim$ (God exists) $\frac{1}{2}$	
Wager for	0.5, $\infty$	0.5, F2	EU = $\infty$
Wager against	0.5, F3	0.5, F4	EU = finite value

*Fig. 1.7.*

The symbol  $\infty$ , though not one that exists in transfinite mathematics, is meant to represent the notion of an infinite utility. I will assume that  $\infty$  consistently represents the same order of infinity whenever employed.

Put schematically:

4. for any person S, and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to S, if  $\alpha$  carries a greater expected utility than does  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  5. given that the existence of God is as likely as not, the expected utility of believing in God vastly exceeds that of not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

Hacking asserts that the assumption of equal chance is 'monstrous'. Perhaps it is. The beautiful thing about infinite utility, though, is that infinity multiplied by any finite value is still infinite. The assumption that the existence of God is just as likely as not is needlessly extravagant, since, as long as the existence of God is judged to be greater than zero, believing will always carry an expected utility greater than that carried by nonbelief. And this is true no matter the finite value or disvalue associated with the outcomes F2, F3, and F4. This observation underlies

the third version of the Wager, what Hacking titles the 'Argument from Dominating Expectation' in which  $p$  represents a positive probability range greater than zero and less than one-half (Fig. 1.8). No matter how unlikely it is that God exists, as long as there is some positive non-zero probability that he does, believing is one's best bet:

	God exists, $p$	$\sim$ (God exists), $1 - p$	
Wager for	$p, \infty$	$1 - p, F2$	EU = $\infty$
Wager against	$p, F3$	$1 - p, F4$	EU = finite value

Fig. 1.8.

- 6. for any person  $S$ , and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to  $S$ , if the expected utility of  $\alpha$  exceeds that of  $\beta$ ,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  - 7. believing in God carries more expected utility than does not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

Because of its ingenious employment of infinite utility, the third version has become what most philosophers think of as Pascal's Wager. This is the version dubbed in the Introduction as the *Canonical version* of the Wager.

The Canonical version may seem a surprising argument from one who denied the human capacity to know independent of revelation that God exists. Perhaps Pascal's motivation for the Canonical version is this: given that God is a possible being, there is some probability that he exists.<sup>17</sup> And, as long as there is some positive probability (or as long as we know the probability is not zero), coupled with an infinite utility, the Canonical version supports its conclusion.

The appeal of the Canonical version for theistic apologists is its ready employment as a worst-case device. Suppose the theist were to encounter a compelling argument for atheism, and so theism appears

<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 3 I argue that this proposition is false whenever subjective probability is at issue.

much more unlikely than not. With the Canonical version the theist has an escape: it can still be rational to believe, even if the belief is itself unreasonable, since inculcating theistic belief is an action with an infinite expected utility. This use as a worst-case device is something like throwing down a trump defeating what had appeared the stronger hand.

The neglected version of the Wager, version number four, found in *Pensées* 680, resides in the concluding remarks that Pascal makes to his interlocutor:

But what harm will come to you from taking this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will win thereby in this life ... (L. 680)

The fourth version brings us full circle, away from decisions under risk and back to those under uncertainty (Fig. 1.9). Like its predecessors, the fourth version implies that the benefits of belief vastly exceed those of nonbelief if God exists; but, unlike the others, the fourth implies that, even if God does not exist,  $F2 > F4$ . No matter what, inculcating belief is one's best bet. Belief strongly dominates nonbelief. Let us call this version of the Wager the 'Argument from Strong Dominance':

8. For any person S, if among the alternatives available to S, the outcomes of one alternative,  $\alpha$ , are better than those of the other available alternatives, S should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  9. believing in God is better than not believing, whether God exists or not. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

	God exists	$\sim$ (God exists)
Wager for	$\infty$	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

*Fig. 1.9.*

Premise (9) is true only if one gains simply by believing. Pascal apparently thought that this was obvious:

The Christian's hope of possessing an infinite good is mingled with actual enjoyment as well as fear, for, unlike people hoping for a kingdom of which they will have no part because they are subjects, Christians hope for holiness, and to be free from unrighteousness, and some part of that is already theirs. (K. 917)

Sincere theistic belief results, he thought, in virtuous living, and virtuous living is more rewarding than vicious living. The response of Pascal's interlocutor, we might plausibly imagine, would be that Pascal has made an illicit assumption: why think that virtuous living requires theism? And, even if virtuous living requires theism, why think that being morally better is tantamount to being better off, all things considered? Now, whether virtue is its own reward only in a theistic context or not, the relevant point is whether theistic belief provides more benefit than not believing, even if God does not exist. If it does, then this is an important point when considering the many-gods objection.

Nicholas Rescher argues, in effect, that the fourth of Pascal's Wagers is not Pascal's at all. According to Rescher, Pascal's Wager must be 'other-worldly' and not empirical. Pascal did not seek to motivate belief, he suggests, by arguing that the 'this-worldly' benefits of theistic belief exceed those of not believing.<sup>18</sup> Two points of response are in order. First, there is clear textual support for the fourth version. The natural reading of the end of fragment 680 is represented by (8)–(C). There is little doubt that the fourth Wager resides there. Moreover, while the Canonical Wager may have been Pascal's argument of choice (and arguably the formulation of the Canonical Wager ranks as an intellectual achievement with Anselm's Ontological proof, or Thomas's Five Ways), it does not follow that the fourth Wager is not Pascalian. It is not anachronistic to acknowledge what is found in the text, even if it is not generally been recognized.

The decision-theoretic relations between the various versions of the Wager might be represented as shown in Fig. 1.10.

<sup>18</sup> Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 118–19.

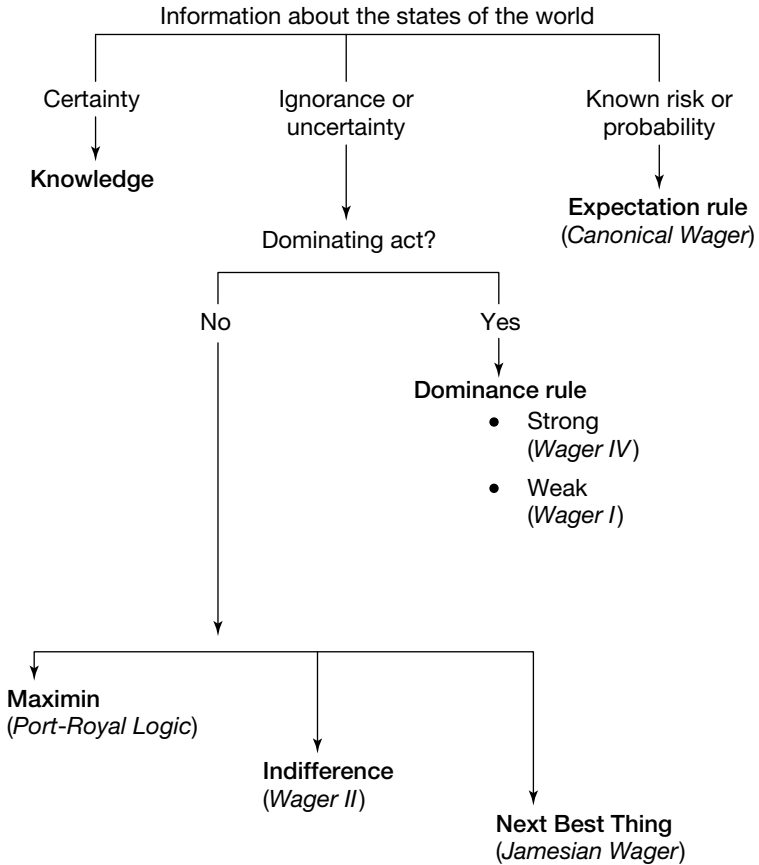


Fig. 1.10.

#### 4. THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION

Notice that in all four arguments the Wager consists of a  $2 \times 2$  matrix: there are two acts available to the agent, with only two possible states of the world. From Pascal's day to this, critics have pointed out that Pascal's partitioning of the possible states of the world overlooks the obvious—what if some deity other than God exists? Once theism is expanded, one might say, the possible permutation the expansion takes is limited only by the bounds of one's imagination. For instance, what if a

deity exists, something like Michael Martin's 'perverse-master' deity that harbors animus toward theism, such that he or she rewards nonbelief?<sup>19</sup> In effect, the many-gods objection asserts that Pascal's  $2 \times 2$  matrix is flawed because the states it employs are not jointly exhaustive of the possibilities.<sup>20</sup> Let us expand the Pascalian matrix to accommodate this objection (Fig. 1.11). With D representing the existence of a non-standard deity, a 'deviant' deity, whether personal or impersonal, which is exclusivist in doling out the benefits of afterlife to all but theists, and N representing the world with no deity of any sort (call this state 'naturalism'), theistic belief no longer strongly dominates.<sup>21</sup> With the values of F3, F6, and F9, even Weak Dominance is lost to theism.<sup>22</sup> Just as the many-gods objection is thought by many to be the bane of the Canonical version, one might think it is fatal to the fourth version of the Wager as well.

	G	N	D
Wager for G	F1 $\infty$	F2	F3
Wager for neither	F4	F5	F6 $\infty$
Wager for D	F7	F8	F9 $\infty$

Fig. 1.11.

Still all is not lost for the Pascalian. With a proposition similar to (9) in hand, along with the Next Best Thing principle, the Pascalian can salvage from the ruins of the fourth version a Wager that circumvents the many-gods objection. If we revise (9) to read that believing in God is better than not believing, whether God exists or naturalism obtains (that is, if neither G nor D obtains), and given that the utility of the lower two

<sup>19</sup> Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 232–4.

<sup>20</sup> Recent proponents include Paul Saka, 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 321–41; Graham Priest, *Logic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94–8; and William Gustason, 'Pascal's Wager and Competing Faiths', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 44 (1998), 31–9.

<sup>21</sup> By 'non-standard deity' I mean the gerrymandered constructions of philosophers.

<sup>22</sup> As before I exclude infinite disutilities.

cells of the D column are the same as the upper cell of the G column, and that  $F3 = F4 = F7$ , the Pascalian can employ the N column as a principled way to adjudicate between believing theistically or not. That is, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one is exposed to the same kind of risk ( $F3$  or  $F4$  or  $F7$ ). The worst outcomes of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief are on a par. Moreover, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one enjoys eligibility for the same kind of reward ( $\infty = \infty = \infty$ ). The best outcomes, that is, of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief, are on a par. Given the revision of (9), we have reason to believe that the utility associated with  $F2$  exceeds that associated with  $F5$ . In addition, we have no evidence to think there is any deviant analogue of the revision of (9). We have no reason, that is, to think that belief in a deviant deity correlates with the kind of positive empirical benefits that correlate with theistic belief. But this absence of evidence to think that belief in a deviant deity correlates with positive empirical benefit, conjoined with the obvious opportunity costs associated with such a belief, is itself reason to think that  $F2$  exceeds  $F8$ . Indeed, no matter how we might expand the matrix in order to accommodate the exotica of possible divinity, we would have reason to believe that  $F2$  exceeds any this-world outcome associated with the exotica.<sup>23</sup> So, given that  $F2$  exceeds  $F5$  and that  $F2$  exceeds  $F8$ , even if the  $2 \times 2$  matrix is abandoned in favor of an expanded one, a Pascalian beachhead is established:

10. for any person  $S$  making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , available to  $S$  has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other available alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worse outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other available alternatives, then  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst

<sup>23</sup> Even though it is possible to imagine any number of deviant gods, any extension beyond a  $3 \times 3$  matrix is logically redundant given that  $F2$  exceeds the 'this-world' outcomes of the deviant deities, and given that the best cases and worst cases are on a par.

outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives. Therefore,

- C. one should believe in God.

Since this argument is strikingly similar to William James's famous Will to Believe argument, let us dub it the 'Jamesian Argument' or the 'Jamesian Wager'. While the many-gods objection may show that theism does not dominate its competitors, it is not a fatal objection to the Wager. Given the popularity of the many-gods objection, however, it is a topic that deserves more scrutiny than we have perhaps given it here. We best return to it in Chapter 3 to ensure by a more thorough examination that the many-gods objection is in fact benign.

## 5. THE LOGIC OF PASCAL'S WAGERS

The title *Pascal's Wager* is misleading for a couple of reasons. First, as we have seen, Pascal's Wager comes in various formulations. There is not just one Wager presented by Pascal but four. Second, there are versions of the Wager not found in Pascal's *Pensées*. For instance, it is commonly thought that the prospect of hell, or an infinite disutility, is employed in the Wager.<sup>24</sup> It is not. One does, however, find that dismal prospect employed in the *Port-Royal Logic* presentation of the Wager. Despite the infelicities associated with the title *Pascal's Wager*, we will continue to use it as a title for any of the family of Pascalian Wagers, whether found in the *Pensées* or not, that has as its conclusion the practical proposition that one should believe in God.

Every member of the family of Pascalian Wagers shares three features. The first is that Pascalian Wagers constitute a distinct class among pragmatic arguments. As mentioned above, pragmatic arguments are arguments that have premises that are prudentially directed rather than

<sup>24</sup> Even prominent philosophers mistakenly assert that Pascal employs hell or a negative infinite disutility. See, for instance, Bernard Williams, 'Rawls and Pascal's Wager', in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 94–100; and see Stephen Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 7/3 (1978), 189–91.

Pascal does hint at a version of the Wager (a Maximin version) incorporating hell in a passage that is not part of the Wager fragment (the *Infini rien* fragment): 'Who has the most reason to fear hell: he who does not know whether there is such a thing as hell and who is sure of damnation if there is, or he who is certainly convinced that hell exists, but hopes nevertheless to be saved?' (W. 349).



truth-directed. Pascalian Wagers are not just pragmatic arguments. Pascalian Wagers are pragmatic arguments that have the structure of gambles, a decision made in the midst of uncertainty. Pascal assumed that a person, just by virtue of being in the world, is in a betting situation such that he must bet his life on whether there is or is not a god. This may be a world in which God exists or this may be a world in which God does not exist. The upshot of Wager-style arguments is simply that, if one bets on God and believes, then there are two possible outcomes. Either God exists and one enjoys an eternity of bliss; or God does not exist and one loses little, if anything. On the other hand, if one bets against God and wins, one gains little. But, if one loses that bet, the consequences may be horrendous. Because the first alternative has an outcome that overwhelms any possible gain attached to nonbelief, the choice is clear to Pascal. Even if epistemic reason does not provide an answer, prudential reason does—one should try to believe. There is everything to gain and little, if anything, to lose.

And this leads to the second constitutive feature: a Pascalian Wager is a decision situation in which the possible gain or benefit associated with at least one of the alternatives swamps all the others. With the Canonical version, of course, the possible gain of theism is supposed to be not just greater than that of nonbelief, but infinitely greater. Because an infinite gain minus any finite loss is still infinite, the possible gain attached to theistic belief appears nonpareil. Pascalian Wagers can come in topics that are not religious, so it is best to understand the swamping property as a gain that is vastly greater than any of its rivals, even if it is not an infinite gain. As Rescher notes with the swamping property of the Wager, ‘agreement on the exact size of values is wholly unnecessary ... All that matters is the rough and ready consideration that the magnitude of the value of the heavenly alternative is “incomparably greater” than that of the mundane.’<sup>25</sup> Typically the gain is so great as to render the probability assignments, even if they are known, virtually irrelevant.

The third feature has to do with the object of the gamble. The object must be something that is of extreme importance. The existence of God is not the only relevant topic. For instance, a Pascalian argument might be employed to contend that the catastrophic consequences that may flow from global warming make conservation measures compelling,

<sup>25</sup> Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 20.

even if the risk of catastrophe is less likely than not.<sup>26</sup> Or one can imagine a Pascalian Wager, call it the 'patients' Wager', in which a person diagnosed with a terminal disease, and having exhausted the available conventional therapies, deliberates whether to invest any effort in unconventional therapies as a long-shot desperate last hope.<sup>27</sup> This sort of Pascalian Wager, like a desperate 'Hail Mary' pass on the last play of a football game, is a 'go-for-broke-since-there-is-nothing-to-lose' Wager. Pascalian Wagers deal with subjects that are of great concern. As long as one's argument is pragmatic in nature, with the swamping property, and it has to do with something of an ultimate concern, one is using an argument form due to Pascal.

## 6. THE MAXIMIN VERSION

John Locke (1632–1704) formulated a version of the Wager, which we might call the maximin version:

when infinite happiness is put in one Scale, against infinite Misery in the other ... Who in his Wits would chuse to come within a possibility of infinite Misery ... If the good Man be in the right, he is eternally happy; if he mistakes, he is not miserable, he feels nothing. On the other hand, if the wicked be in the right, he is not happy; if he mistakes, he is infinitely miserable ...<sup>28</sup>

The Maximin rule advises the adoption of any available alternative whose worst outcome is singularly better than the worst outcomes of all other available alternatives. Locke clearly has a Maximin rule in mind as he advises his reader to avoid the risk of infinite misery.

Locke probably encountered the Wager in the *Port-Royal Logic* (1662) written by Pascal's fellow Jansenists Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Pierre Nicole (1625–95). The Wager is presented there in the last chapter as a Maximin Wager:

It is the nature of finite things, however great they are, to be able to be surpassed by the smallest things if they are multiplied often ... Only infinite things such as eternity and salvation cannot be equaled by any temporal benefit. Thus we

<sup>26</sup> David Orr, a Professor of Environmental Studies, presents something like this argument in his 'Pascal's Wager and Economics in a Hotter Time', *Ecologist*, 22/2 (1992), 42–3.

<sup>27</sup> I owe this example to Doug Stalker.

<sup>28</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P. H. Nidditch, bk. II, ch. XXI, sect. 70 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 281–2.

ought never to balance them off against anything worldly. This is why the slightest bit of help for acquiring salvation is worth more than all the goods of the world taken together. And the least peril of being lost is more important than all temporal harms considered merely as harms. This is enough to make all reasonable people draw this conclusion, with which we will end this Logic: the greatest of all follies is to use one's time and life for something other than what may be useful for acquiring a life that will never end, since all the goods and harms of this life are nothing in comparison to those of the other life, and the danger of falling into those harms, as well as the difficulty of acquiring these goods, is very great.<sup>29</sup>

More generally, the Maximin Wager is an example of a type of decision-theoretic argument that Stephen Stich calls the 'doomsday' argument.<sup>30</sup> Doomsday arguments recommend avoidance of possible horrendous scenarios, catastrophic events, as a way of choosing among alternatives. Doomsday arguments advise disaster avoidance above all other considerations. For instance, David Orr has used a doomsday argument to advocate widespread changes in industrial societies in order to forestall global warming. Orr admits that the scientific evidence is (at least at the time of writing) inconclusive regarding the impact of industry on global warming. But, he says, 'if it turns out that global warming would have been severe and we forestalled it by becoming more energy efficient and making a successful transition to renewable energy, we will have avoided disaster'.<sup>31</sup> Letting  $I$  stand for *Climate affected by industry*, and  $A$  stand for *conservation policies adopted*, we can represent Orr's argument with a simple  $2 \times 2$  matrix (Fig. 1.12). The worse outcome of  $A$  is  $F2$ , with  $F3$  the worse outcome of  $\bar{A}$ . Assuming that  $F3$  is worse than  $F2$ , Orr contends that the choice is clear: industrial nations should adopt widespread conservation measures and policies.

	$I$	$\bar{I}$
$A$	F1	F2
$\bar{A}$	F3	F4

Fig. 1.12.

<sup>29</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, trans. Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275.

<sup>30</sup> Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', 189.

<sup>31</sup> Orr, 'Pascal's Wager and Economics in a Hotter Time', 43.

Stich argues that doomsday arguments fall prey to an analogue of the many-gods objection—given the swamping property, and given a non-zero probability associated with at least two mutually exclusive alternatives, a doomsday Wager makes no recommendation.<sup>32</sup> Stich's analysis is done within a context of evaluating a doomsday objection against the moral permissibility of recombinant DNA investigations. As Stich notes, 'it is at least possible that a bacterial culture whose genetic makeup has been altered in the course of a recombinant DNA experiment may exhibit completely unexpected pathogenic characteristics ... a strain against which humans can marshal no natural defense'.<sup>33</sup> The doomsday objection might be represented using *E* to stand for *engage in recombinant DNA research*, and *O* to stand for *a catastrophic mutation occurs* (Fig. 1.13). The first thing to notice is that there is a causal connection between the acts and the states. This causal connection renders the doomsday objection, as presented, invalid. Perhaps there is an assumption at work that the possibility of a catastrophe in the absence of active research ( $\tilde{E}$ ) is ignorable. Let us suppose so. If *F3* is neglected, *F1* is clearly the worst case. Given the assumption that the mutation is catastrophic, *F1* swamps *F2* and *F4*. On a Maximin rule, then,  $\tilde{E}$  prevails. While Stich does not comment on the causal connection between the acts and the states, he argues that this doomsday objection fallaciously assumes the proposition that 'all endeavors that might possibly result in such a catastrophe should be prohibited'.<sup>34</sup> And, as long as *O* carries a swamping property (always outweighs  $\tilde{O}$ ), then *F3* cannot be ignored: 'if we fail to pursue recombinant DNA research now, our lack of knowledge in the future may have consequences as dire as any foreseen in the doomsday scenario argument'.<sup>35</sup> The upshot of Stich's evaluation of doomsday arguments is that the swamping property renders them all logically fallacious—for any conclusion supported by a doomsday argument, the denial of

	<i>O</i>	$\tilde{O}$
<i>E</i>	Catastrophe	<i>F2</i>
$\tilde{E}$	<i>F3</i>	<i>F4</i>

Fig. 1.13.

<sup>32</sup> Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', 190–1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 191.

that conclusion is also supported with equal dialectical force by that argument. If Stich is correct, then the swamping property renders a doomsday argument, 'logically overbearing', we might say, by providing equal support to both its intended conclusion and the denial of its conclusion.

Has Stich given us reason to think that doomsday arguments are invalid because they are all logically overbearing? He has not. While some doomsday arguments may be logically overbearing, others are not. Consider an embryonic argument suggested in an essay by Ronald Reagan against abortion on demand:

I have also said that anyone who does not feel sure whether we are talking about a second human life should clearly give life the benefit of the doubt. If you don't know whether a body is alive or dead, you would never bury it. I think this consideration itself should be enough for all of us to insist on protecting the unborn.<sup>36</sup>

While much detail is omitted, the argument suggested here is that, in the absence of knowledge whether the fetus counts as a moral person or not, abortion on demand is morally ill advised: if one aborts and the fetus is a person, one has committed murder. On the other hand, if one does not abort and the fetus is not a person, one has not committed any wrongdoing comparable to murder. Let *A* stand for *abort*, and *P* for *the fetus is a person* (Fig. 1.14). Reagan's antiabortion argument is a doomsday argument, the assumption being that the commission of murder is a moral catastrophe that swamps F4. But clearly this argument, whatever faults it may have, is not logically overbearing.

	P	~P
A	Murder	F2
~A	F3	F4

*Fig. 1.14.*

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 21.

## 7. WHAT IS AHEAD?

Two versions of the Wager will be featured in the chapters that follow. The Canonical version:

6. For any person  $S$ , and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to  $S$ , if  $\alpha$  carries greater expected utility to  $S$  than does  $\beta$ ,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
7. believing in God carries more expected utility than does not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

And the Jamesian Wager:

10. For any person  $S$  making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worst outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives, then  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives.<sup>37</sup> Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

In looking at the various objections to Pascal's Wager I will focus on whether these two Wager arguments survive the objections. It is my contention that the Canonical version does not, but the Jamesian Wager does. The Canonical Wager stumbles three times. In Chapter 2 I argue that one can endorse both a moderate version of Evidentialism and a

<sup>37</sup> The Jamesian argument has as a suppressed premise the proposition that:

Theism has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worst outcomes, theism has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives.

wager that serves a kind of tie-breaker function. The Canonical Wager, however, is incompatible with all versions of Evidentialism. In Chapter 3 I argue that the Canonical Wager succumbs to the many-gods objection. But with the Jamesian Wager the Pascalian has the resources to elude all versions of the many-gods objection. In Chapter 4 I argue that the Canonical Wager is incompatible with the most plausible solution to the St Petersburg paradox. The Jamesian Wager, again, is compatible with that solution.

The Jamesian Wager, as we will see, is the strongest member of the Pascalian family, as it enjoys both validity and premises that no one would be irrational in accepting. Indeed, in the chapters to follow I argue that there is good reason to think that the Jamesian argument is sound. With the Jamesian Wager in hand, we might do no better than to invoke James himself: 'Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith ... complete.'<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 11.