

# AN EPISTEMIC VERSION OF PASCAL'S WAGER

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Forthcoming in *The Journal of the American Philosophical Association*  
(please cite published version)

**Abstract:** Epistemic consequentialism is the view that epistemic goodness is more fundamental than epistemic rightness. This paper examines the relationship between epistemic consequentialism and theistic belief. I argue that, in an epistemic consequentialist framework, there is an epistemic reason to believe in God. Imagine having an unlimited amount of time to ask an omniscient being anything you wanted. The potential epistemic benefits would be enormous. Considerations like these point to an *epistemic* version of Pascal's wager. I compare and contrast the epistemic wager with the traditional wager, and argue that the epistemic wager has several notable advantages.

**Keywords:** Pascal's wager; theistic belief; epistemic consequentialism; epistemic value; heaven and hell

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most theistic arguments are for the conclusion that God exists. Pascal's Wager, in contrast, concludes that one ought to believe in God. The advocate of Pascal's wager reasons that if God exists and one believes in God, one has infinity to gain. If God exists and one doesn't believe in God, one has an infinite loss. If God doesn't exist, what one gains or loses is finite either way. Thus, one should believe in God (Table 1).

	God exists ( $n$ )	God doesn't exist ( $1-n$ )	Expected Value
Believe in God	$\omega$	F1	$\omega$
Don't believe in God	$-\omega$ or 0	F2	$-\omega$ or $F2(1-n)$

**Table 1: The Traditional Wager**

In Table 1,  $\omega$  represents the infinite utility or goodness associated with heaven, and  $-\omega$  represents the infinite pain, disutility, or badness associated with hell. F1 and F2 are finite values. To account for the possibility of annihilationism—and illustrate that one need not believe in hell for the argument to go through—included is the possibility of 0 utility if one doesn't believe in God and God exists. Note that the probability that God exists,  $n$ , needs to be non-zero and non-infinitesimal for the argument to work.

There are many objections to the traditional version of Pascal's wager. A classic problem is the many-gods objection; advocates point out that there are a variety of mutually exclusive religions, and the wager doesn't tell us how to pick between them (Mougin & Sober 1994). Other objections include the worry that we can't control our beliefs, and even if we could, beliefs formed for practical reasons are irrational (Mackie 1982: 64, 201; Jones 1998: 173). Still others have worried about the use of infinities in decision theory in general (Duff 1986; Hájek 2003). While there are responses to these objections (see Jackson & Rogers 2019; Rubio & Chen 2020; Jackson forthcoming), I set them aside for now. My goal is not to defend the traditional version of the wager, and later, I'll address these objections insofar as they apply to my reformulated wager.

Important for our purposes is that, insofar as the traditional wager is successful, it provides a *practical* reason for belief in God—one can maximize expected value or utility in the long-run by being a theist. In this paper, I defend an alternative version of the wager that instead provides an *epistemic* reason to believe in God. This alternative wager centrally relies on a normative theory in

epistemology called *epistemic consequentialism*. More specifically, I argue that if epistemic consequentialism is true, then there's *epistemic* reason to believe in God.

This paper proceeds as follows. In **Section 2**, I explain epistemic consequentialism, give some basic motivations for it, and distinguish various versions of it. In **Section 3**, I apply epistemic consequentialism to theistic belief and describe how this results in an epistemic version of Pascal's wager. I compare and contrast my wager with the traditional wager and explore various upshots of the argument. In **Section 4**, I respond to objections to the reformulated wager, and in **Section 5**, I conclude.

## 2. EPISTEMIC CONSEQUENTIALISM

Ethical consequentialism is traditionally defined as the view that the good is more fundamental than, or explains, the right. Epistemic consequentialism applies this theory to the epistemic realm: namely, that epistemic goodness explains epistemic rightness. In their volume on epistemic consequentialism, Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn define epistemic consequentialism as: "epistemic rightness—denoted by terms such as 'justification' or 'rationality'—is to be understood in terms of conduciveness to epistemic goods" (2018: 2). On this view, epistemic goods are *value-promoting*: conforming to epistemic norms is more likely to cause or lead to epistemically valuable states of affairs than non-conformity. My goal in this section is threefold. One, to give the reader an overview of epistemic consequentialism as a normative theory, and two, to indicate key choice points that have later implications. My third goal is to show that epistemic consequentialism is a defensible and reasonable view; however, I will not give a full-fledged defense of it.

Several authors, including Alvin Goldman and Daniel Singer, have argued that it is natural to understand epistemology in a consequentialist framework. Singer says, "Epistemic consequentialism is an intuitive natural starting point for theorizing a view of epistemic normativity" (2019: 269). Goldman similarly writes,

People have interest, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in acquiring knowledge (true belief) and avoiding error. It therefore makes sense to have a discipline that evaluates intellectual practices by their causal contributions to knowledge or error. This is how I conceive of epistemology: as a discipline that evaluates practices along truth-linked (veritistic) dimensions. Social epistemology evaluates specifically social practices along these dimensions (Goldman 1999: 69).

Both of these authors suggest that epistemic consequentialism is an intuitive starting place for epistemology. Why think this? An attractive idea is that our epistemic goal is to maximize the number of truths we believe and minimize the number of falsehoods we believe. "Believe truth; shun error" is a mantra that many epistemologists have considered to be at the core of epistemic normativity since William James (1869). Goldman, for instance, conceives of epistemology as a consequentialist enterprise on which the fundamental goods are seeking truth and avoiding error. This picture lends itself to a consequentialist view of epistemic normativity.

However, we need not make epistemic consequentialism merely about believing the truth and avoiding error. One thing we learn from the ethical case is that consequentialism is flexible because it doesn't require us to commit to a certain view about what is good or valuable—it simply says that, whatever the good is, we should promote it (Portmore 2009, Brown 2011, Muñoz 2021). This leads naturally to the question: what is epistemically good?

Before surveying various answers to this question, note that there are two senses of epistemic value. The first is *instrumental* epistemic value: something is valuable in this sense just in case it causes or leads to things that are themselves epistemically valuable. For example, some argue that we ought to follow our evidence because it is a good guide to true belief. Nonetheless, evidentially-supported belief is not good in and of itself; it is merely instrumentally good (BonJour 1985).

Second, there is *final* or *intrinsic* epistemic value. A good is finally or intrinsically epistemically valuable if and only if it is epistemically valuable in and of itself. The most popular view of final epistemic value is *veritism*, discussed above; on this view, accuracy (i.e. truth) is the final epistemic value, and accuracy is understood in terms of gaining accurate beliefs (or credences) and avoiding inaccurate beliefs (or credences). Goldman (1999: 5; 2001: 31) and Singer (2018; 2019) express sympathy for this view, along with many advocates of epistemic utility theory.

But there are numerous other views of final epistemic value. On another view, knowledge is the final epistemic value (Littlejohn 2018), and those who are convinced, alongside Plato, that knowledge is more valuable than true belief will likely be sympathetic to this view (see DePaul 2001). Others argue that evidentially supported belief (or credence) is of final epistemic value (Feldman 2000). On yet another view, understanding is finally epistemically valuable (Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010). Others argue that possessing epistemic virtue is finally epistemically valuable (Turri and Alfano 2017). There are also views on which (some of) the states above are valuable, but only when they contain *important* or *significant* content (Friedman 2018; Talbot 2019). Finally, there are pluralist views that maintain there are several final epistemic values. All of these views additionally include commitments about what is epistemically disvaluable—e.g. false belief, lack of understanding, beliefs that don't amount to knowledge. Here, we need not take a stand on any of these views; I show in the next section that my argument is consistent with all of them.

It is also worth surveying some epistemological views that are consequentialist in nature. The most basic form of epistemic consequentialism is analogous to act-consequentialism in ethics. This view is defended by Singer (2018), among others, and summarized by Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn: “a belief is epistemically justified (or rational) just in case the total causal consequences of holding or forming that belief contain more epistemic good than the total causal consequences of holding or forming any alternative doxastic attitude” (2018: 2).

A related epistemic consequentialist view is reliabilism (Goldman 1979). On reliabilism, a belief is justified just in case it is reliably formed, where reliability is understood in terms of yielding a certain ratio of true to false beliefs (Berker 2013-a: 368). This can be understood either over time or across possible worlds. Either way, on reliabilism, epistemic justification is understood in terms of achieving a favorable ratio of true to false beliefs in the long run—which may be analogous to epistemic rule-consequentialism (Ahlstorm-Vij & Dunn 2023).

Epistemic consequentialism goes beyond reliabilism, however. Selim Berker (2013-b) argues that a large number of views in epistemology are consequentialist.<sup>1</sup> He claims “there is a way of viewing much of the debate between externalists and internalists about epistemic justification over the past few decades as a debate within epistemic consequentialism, roughly corresponding to the debate between objective and subjective consequentialists in the ethical realm” (Berker 2013-b: 368). Some versions of evidentialism and coherentism can be understood as consequentialist (i.e. insofar

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<sup>1</sup> Berker claims that Plantinga's proper functionalism (1993), Sosa's virtue epistemology (2011), Foley's egocentric epistemology (1994), and Alston's epistemic desiderata view (1993) are all versions of epistemic consequentialism. One might reply that if all these views count as consequentialist, then we need a narrower definition of epistemic consequentialism (see Ho 2022). My argument won't hang on which views in particular should be understood as consequentialist. Thanks to Dustin Crummett and Andrew Moon for helpful discussion.

as they ask us to believe the thing that leads to the maximum number of evidentially supported beliefs or coherent beliefs, respectively). Epistemic consequentialism also has defenders in the philosophy of science (Solomon 1992; Laudan 1984).

Finally, consider epistemic utility theory (Joyce 1998; Konek and Levinstein 2019). Epistemic utility theory employs a model similar to decision theory, and its defenders argue that belief states that meet certain constraints are to be preferred, as they lead to better epistemic outcomes, where ‘better’ is normally understood in terms of accuracy. Epistemic utility theory has many applications, including a new, non-pragmatic argument that coherent credences are rationally required. The accuracy-dominance argument for probabilism shows that, for all incoherent credences, there are always alternative credences that are guaranteed to be more accurate (see Greaves & Wallace (2006), Leitgeb & Pettigrew (2010-a, 2010-b), Greaves (2013), Easwaran (2013), Easwaran & Fitelson (2015), and Pettigrew (2016). For an overview of epistemic utility theory, see Pettigrew (2013).)

Thus, epistemic consequentialism is a popular and fruitful view that many epistemologists take seriously, and it is consistent with numerous mainstream epistemological views. While of course, objections have been raised to epistemic consequentialism—notably, by Selim Berker (2013-a, 2013-b) and Kurt Sylvan (2020-a, 2020-b)—it is nonetheless both plausible and widely-held.

I close this section with two final distinctions that play a key role in determining epistemic value and are important later in the paper. The first is the question of whether epistemic norms are *categorical*, and apply to everyone, or *instrumental*, and vary person to person, depending on each individual’s preferences or desires. Consider moral norms: it is commonly thought that they are categorical—universally applicable, and not goal- or preference-relative. On some views, such as Kelly (2003), epistemic norms are similarly universally applicable.

On the instrumentalist view, epistemic norms depend on human goals or desires, and thus are a means-ends norm. Means-ends norms are derivable from an agent’s mental states (as long as those states satisfy certain constraints, like transitivity). Decision theory, widely taken to be our best theory of means-ends rationality, doesn’t tell one what to desire or believe, but how to act *given* one’s beliefs/credences and desires/utility function. On a similar instrumentalist view in epistemology, epistemic goods are valuable insofar as one desires them.

Note that, on either view, there is some agreement for what counts as epistemically valuable, as people often desire the candidate ‘universal’ epistemic goods, such as certain pieces of knowledge or true/rational belief. My argument utilizes the overlap between the two views, so we need not take a stand on this controversy regarding epistemic norms.

Finally, there are diachronic issues concerning epistemic value. Consider an axiology on which true beliefs are categorically epistemically valuable. There are two ways to measure this value. (For simplicity, we’ll bracket disvalue for now.) On a *synchronic* measure of epistemic value, each instance of learning a truth is valuable, no matter how long a token belief is held. To calculate epistemic value, simply add up the total number of true beliefs one had, for any amount of time. On this view, forgetting a previously-known truth doesn’t detract from epistemic value, which is (arguably) counterintuitive. On a *diachronic* measure of epistemic value, the value of true beliefs is based on the length of time they are held, so, e.g. having a true belief for 100 days is better than having a true belief for 1 day. This view might initially seem more plausible, but it has the counterintuitive

consequence that living longer makes one epistemically better off. Again, while this distinction is relevant later, we won't have to take a stand on the best way to measure epistemic value over time.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. THE EPISTEMIC WAGER

In the next two sections, I defend this paper's main claim: if epistemic consequentialism is true, then we epistemically ought to believe in God. In this section, I present an alternative decision matrix that represents the epistemic wager. I explain the relevant aspects of the matrix and defend the required premises. I also discuss the difference between finite and infinite versions of the epistemic wager and compare the epistemic wager to the traditional one. In the next section, I respond to objections.

#### 3.1 Explaining the Epistemic Wager

Let's begin with the following decision matrix, which represents the epistemic wager (Table 2):

	God exists and non-believers go to hell (P1)	God exists and non-believers are annihilated (P2)	God exists and universalism is true (P3)	God doesn't exist (P4)
Believe in God	U	U	U	F1
Don't believe in God	V (< U)	F3	U - F4	F2

**Table 2: The Epistemic Wager**

In Table 2, U represents the value of the epistemic goods associated with going to heaven. Notice that those who believe in God receive U, unless God doesn't exist, but those who don't believe in God only receive U if universalism is true and everyone goes to heaven (but, on this outcome, they are dinged for having a false belief). V is the value of the epistemic goods associated with going to hell. Note that there may be *some* epistemic goods associated with hell, assuming people in hell learn things. Nonetheless, I'll argue that U is greater than V. Also note that U and V may be infinite or finite; we will address this shortly.

F1, F2, F3, F4 are all finite. F2 and F3, while similar, have different values because theistic beliefs have different truth values on each outcome. F4 represents the badness of having a false theistic belief during one's pre-afterlife existence; its value may be negligibly small.<sup>3</sup> P1–P4 are probabilities. P1 is the probability of [theism and the traditional view of hell], P2 is the probability of [theism and the annihilationist view of hell, i.e. that non-believers cease to exist after death], and P3 is the probability of [theism and universalism, i.e. that all go to heaven]. P4 is the probability of atheism.

This table assumes a couple things. First, given theism, there are three possible afterlives for non-believers that are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. If we understand these afterlives broadly—i.e. heaven represents the “good” afterlives, hell represents the “bad” afterlives, and annihilationism represents the “neutral” afterlives—it is plausible that they exhaust the probability space. Second, for the argument to work, the disjunction of P2 or P3—that is, either annihilationism or the traditional view of hell—must be (at least) non-zero and non-infinitesimal. Note that this is consistent with thinking universalism is quite likely, and even with *believing*

<sup>2</sup> For more on diachronic issues concerning epistemic value, see Kawall (2010), Treanor (2013), Whitcomb (2018), Aronowitz (2021), and Singer and Aronowitz (2022). Thanks to Dustin Crummett for helpful discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Josh Brecka.

universalism, as long as one does not assign universalism credence 1. On certain finite versions of the epistemic wager, this assumption may need to be slightly stronger, but it is in most cases consistent with believing universalism.

The argument requires that either: (i) the value of P2, the probability of annihilationism, is sufficiently high, or that (ii)  $U > V$ , that is, it is epistemically better to be in heaven than to be in hell. On most credence functions, the value of P2 will be high enough for the argument to go through, but there's also good reasons to think that (ii) holds—that U is in fact greater than V. Here are a few. Consider the Beatific Vision—the doctrine that those in heaven are face to face with God and see God's essence. This is commonly understood to have an intellectual component, where one gains new beliefs/knowledge/understanding about God, themselves, and the world, in an indescribably rich and glorious way (Aquinas 1265-1274/1912: supplement to the third part, Q92; Boersma 2018). Further, on many theological traditions, those in heaven have direct access to God. They can ask God any question, about any topic that they want. This is not only 'objectively' epistemically valuable on almost any theory of epistemic value—one has access to unlimited true beliefs, knowledge, accurate credences, understanding, etc.—but it is also an epistemic good that is likely to be desirable to many. Thus, it is also extremely valuable if epistemic norms are instrumental, derived from the agent's epistemic goals. The agent can learn any piece of information by simply asking God about it.

Further, while it is possible that agents in hell learn things, and potentially even attain significant knowledge, if hell is in other ways undesirable, unpleasant, or involves serious suffering, agents there are less likely to pursue epistemic goods. Further, there's also the possibility that hell is epistemically bad because it is a place of confusion and self-deception; agents in hell may actually gain false, unjustified, or incoherent beliefs. Thus, hell may have an overall negative epistemic value. Finally, recall that V is the epistemic value of not believing in God if God exists. Those who don't believe in God thus miss out on at least one true belief (but potentially more, as they are also likely to also miss out on true beliefs that follow from or cohere with theism).

This brings us to an important, related question: whether U (and V) are infinite or finite. Is afterlife *infinitely* epistemically good? Suppose those in heaven gain a finite number of epistemically valuable states per day (or per finite period) for all eternity. On a synchronic measure of epistemic value, then, heaven is infinitely epistemically valuable.<sup>4</sup> If one also has epistemically valuable states for an infinite time period, then heaven is also infinitely epistemically good on a diachronic measure of epistemic value. I won't completely rule out the possibility that hell is infinitely epistemically valuable for similar reasons, even though I've given some reasons to doubt this above. If heaven and hell are both infinitely good, but heaven is better, then to compare them, we need a decision theory that enables the comparison of different sizes or kinds of infinities.

Note that not all infinite epistemic goods are decision-theoretically equal. For example, getting 100 pieces of new knowledge a day is better than getting 1 per day, which is better than getting 1 every 1,000 years, even though these are all strictly-speaking infinite. Further, if the content of what is learned matters, then we should prefer gaining a significant piece of knowledge every day to gaining an insignificant piece of knowledge every day. Finally, we should prefer a 99% chance at getting an infinite epistemic good than a 1% chance at the same good, so both utility and probability matter in the infinite case. (Plausibly, we can use ordinally-ranked infinities to compare these cases.)

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<sup>4</sup> There's one notable exception to this: if agents simply learn, forget, re-learn, re-forget the same truths over and over. However, this afterlife seems unlikely, and the argument can go through as long as we don't assign it credence 1. Thanks to Dustin Crummett.

The lesson—that we shouldn’t treat all infinities as the same in decision theory—is one that many have drawn in response to the mixed strategies objection to the traditional wager, and there are numerous formal models to compare infinities that can easily be translated over to the epistemic wager. These models utilize mathematical tools such as limits and ratios or surreal numbers (see, for instance, Bartha 2007; Jackson & Rogers 2019; Rubio & Chen 2020). The epistemic wager is consistent with a variety of formalisms; we need not commit to a specific way to compare infinities here, as they agree on the main results we need. On all of these models, given an infinite version of the wager, the value of F1 and F2 and the probability of [hell or annihilationism] won’t matter, as long as the probability of [hell or annihilationism] is non-zero and non-infinitesimal.

Nonetheless, some are skeptical of infinities in general, or at least of the use of infinities in decision theory. Others might simply question whether the epistemic gains in the afterlife are infinitely valuable. To account for this, we can utilize an alternative model on which U and V are finite, but nonetheless quite large. On the finite version of the wager, the probability of the disjunction of P2 or P3—annihilationism or the traditional view of hell—would need to be larger than simply non-zero/non-infinitesimal. However, we can utilize arbitrarily large finite values for U and V, so that the probability of the disjunction of P2 and P3 can be extremely small. Thus, the epistemic wager is consistent with afterlife epistemic goods being either finite or infinite.

Finally, for the epistemic wager to be successful, one needs to care about promoting long-term expected epistemic value (in a synchronic or diachronic sense). As with the traditional wager, if one is an epistemic future discounter, then, depending on the exact discount function, the epistemic wager may not have purchase. Some of the above epistemic consequentialist views described above (e.g. some versions of epistemic utility theory) focus only on the short-term epistemic consequences of, e.g. adopting a certain credal state. Thus, not *all* versions of epistemic consequentialism pay attention to long-term consequences.<sup>5</sup> But these restricted views face other challenges. When should we stop caring about the epistemic consequences? Is there a non-ad-hoc way to determine the cut-off point? Second, most philosophers think discounting in the practical case is irrational; why would it be rational in the epistemic case? (See Jackson and Rogers 2019: 79ff.) Finally, as I argue later in section 4.2, if one doesn’t consider total consequences of one’s decisions when acting, it’s not clear that one is following a consequentialist norm.

In sum, the epistemic wager requires three things. One, we need a sufficient probability of [annihilationism or the traditional view of hell]—but this probability can nonetheless be extraordinarily low (how low depends on whether the wager is finite or infinite). Two, we need either (a) a sufficiently high probability of annihilationism (but again, this can still be relatively low), or (b) that the epistemic value of heaven is greater than that of hell. Three, we need long-term expected epistemic consequences to be normatively relevant.

### *3.2 The Traditional Wager Verses the Epistemic Wager*

This sub-section compares the traditional wager and the epistemic wager. There are at least four salient differences, several of which are clear benefits of the epistemic wager.

The first involves the irrationality objection to the traditional wager. According to this objection, beliefs formed for practical reasons are epistemically irrational. If I believe p because you’ve paid me money to believe p, or simply because I want p to be true, my belief isn’t epistemically rational. Beliefs formed on the basis of the traditional wager are similarly based on practical reasons, and thus—so the objection goes—also epistemically irrational. This general line of reasoning is

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Joyce (1998). Thanks to Rohan Sud.

advocated by several in the literature, including Clifford (1877: 289), Flew (1976: 64), Mackie (1982: 202), Oppy (1991: 167), and Schroeder (2012: 266). (For responses to the irrationality objection, see Jackson 2016, Benton 2018, Jackson and Rogers 2019, Jackson 2023-a, and Jackson forthcoming.)

But this objection doesn't apply to the epistemic wager. If, as we've assumed, epistemic consequentialism is the correct theory of epistemic normativity, then the epistemic wager provides an *epistemic* reason to believe in God, not just a practical reason. Belief in God maximizes expected epistemic value, as it promotes epistemically valuable states and helps us avoid epistemically invaluable states. One of the most important features of the epistemic wager is that it provides epistemic, rather than practical, reasons for belief. Against the backdrop of epistemic consequentialism, the irrationality objection does not apply.

To drive this point home, consider an analogy. For a long time, probabilism, the view that one's credences should be probabilistically coherent, was taken to be justified by Dutch book arguments—that is, one could lose money in a series of bets if they had incoherent credences. However, this view faced a key objection: this a pragmatic reason to have probabilistic credences, not an epistemic one. In response, the new accuracy arguments for probabilism use epistemic decision theory to show that for all non-probabilistic credences, some probabilistic credences are guaranteed to be more accurate (Joyce 1998). Thus, one of the major applications of epistemic decision theory is that it provides a non-pragmatic justification of probabilism. This gives us an *epistemic* reason to have coherent credences. Along similar lines, the epistemic wager provides an *epistemic* reason for belief in God, rather than merely a pragmatic one.

Consider a second way the epistemic wager differs from the traditional wager. Another worry for Pascal's wager involves the motives exemplified by taking the traditional wager. The thought is that if one simply believes in God to avoid hell or get the reward of heaven, this seems unvirtuous—something that God would not be pleased with. While I'm not convinced this objection is correct (see Jackson 2023-b), those sympathetic to this worry may prefer the epistemic wager. Consider the person who wagers on God because they take it to be their best shot of getting at the truth. Being motivated by epistemic goods, such as gaining knowledge, finding answers to significant questions, etc., is admirable. Thus, the motives involved in the epistemic wager may be more virtuous than those involved in the traditional wager.

Third, the traditional wager is often viewed as a simple trumping argument. Infinite value is always better than finite value, so one should wager on God, even if their credence in theism is extraordinarily low. The epistemic wager is more complex, partially because it's not obvious that the epistemic value is heaven is *infinitely* better than that of hell. Thus, the epistemic wager doesn't involve the simple trumping of the traditional wager. However, several authors have argued that even the traditional wager cannot rely on simple trumping principles, due to the mixed strategies objection (see Duff 1986; Hajek 2003; Jackson & Rogers 2019; Rubio & Chen 2020). This may be a feature of all plausible versions of Pascal's wager.

The final difference is that the epistemic wager does better the higher one's credence that non-believers are annihilated, whereas the traditional wager does better the higher one's credence that non-believers go to hell (unless hell has negative epistemic value). This is because hell may be epistemically better than being annihilated, but is pragmatically worse. Epistemically and pragmatically, annihilation has utility 0. By contrast, going to hell has a negative pragmatic utility, but may have a positive epistemic utility.



## 4. OBJECTIONS

### 4.1 *Belief and Control*

One might object that, given the epistemic wager, I can't simply make myself believe in God, even if I know it'll lead to a lot of epistemic goods down the line. In this, the epistemic wager faces a control problem: believing for long-term epistemic goods seems just as difficult as believing for practical reasons. In reply, I've merely argued that we epistemically ought to believe in God, and I've only argued for this *conditionally*, on the supposition of epistemic consequentialism. I haven't even argued that the antecedent holds, much less argued for anything about control over belief.

The objector might reply that the epistemic ought implies can. In other words, if S epistemically ought to *phi*, then S can *phi*. Given this principle, if we can't control our beliefs, one can modus tollens my argument. I have two preliminary replies. First, again, this isn't an objection to the conditional claim, which is my primary thesis. And second, many (Feldman 2000, Hieronymi 2009, McHugh 2012) deny that epistemic ought implies can, so epistemic obligations can govern our beliefs even if we can't control them.

That said, this argument would be less interesting if the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional thesis were false, and I don't want the argument to hang on whether epistemic ought implies can. This brings me to a third reply, which focuses on the acts in the epistemic decision matrix. Suppose first that the acts are as they are in the matrix above, simply *believing* and *not believing* in theism. One interesting thing about the epistemic wager is that there is less pressure to move away from this straightforward interpretation, since it provides epistemic reasons, and those apply to belief. On the straightforward interpretation, we either need to deny ought implies can or argue that we can control beliefs. I've argued elsewhere (Jackson forthcoming) that, when it comes to belief in God, many of us are in an *epistemically permissive* case: our evidence underdetermines what we epistemically ought to believe. I also argue that, in permissive cases, we have a much more direct kind of control than in other cases. I argue that we have either direct or what I call "semi-direct" control over belief in permissive cases, and thus we can, in some meaningful sense, choose to believe based on Pascalian considerations. Further, we need not commit to the level of control being direct; almost everyone who works on issues about belief and control agrees that we have *indirect* doxastic control: we can *try* to believe certain things, and, in many cases, successfully influence our beliefs over time. This is even more plausible when we consider propositions that are candidates for being permissive (like theism) rather than propositions that are clearly true or false, like  $1+1=2$  or *the Earth is flat*.

Nonetheless, I'm also open to interpreting the acts in the epistemic wager more broadly. We might frame the wager in terms of things besides belief, like desire or action. Alternatively, the wager might be understood not in terms of belief but in terms of *faith* (assuming faith doesn't entail belief, as Pojman 1986, Audi 1991, Alston 1996, among others, contend). Or, the act in question might be a *commitment* to God, a commitment to pursue a relationship with God, or a commitment to accept (i.e. act as if) God exists (see Golding 1994, Jones 1998, and Rota 2016-a, 2016-b). While this requires that there are epistemic reasons for action—which is controversial; see Simion (2018)—this is another viable version of the epistemic wager.

There are thus at least three ways out of this objection to the epistemic wager. One, we frame the epistemic wager about believing or trying to believe, and argue that we have the relevant kind of control, even if indirect. Two, we deny that epistemic ought implies can, or three, we focus on epistemic reasons for action or commitment.

## 4.2 Trade-offs and Long-term Consequences

According to the epistemic wager, it is epistemically rational to believe in God because it leads to a large expected epistemic benefit. However, one might argue that leading to a bunch of other true or rational beliefs about  $q$  and  $r$  can't make my belief that  $p$  epistemically rational; this is what Berker (2013a) calls "the separateness of propositions". In other words, simply because believing in God will lead to a bunch of expected epistemic value down the line doesn't make my belief in God epistemically rational, especially if that value concerns other propositions.

In reply, first note that the trade-off worry is an objection to epistemic consequentialism, which I'm not arguing for. This objection parallels a classic objection to ethical consequentialism, namely, that ethical consequentialism doesn't respect the separateness of persons (but in the epistemic case, it's the separateness of *propositions*). Of course, what one's view says about this case depends on their epistemic axiology. However, many epistemic consequentialists don't merely value the accuracy of a single attitude, but the accuracy of a belief or credal state as a whole.

And it is hard to see how you could have a genuine version of epistemic consequentialism without committing to the permissibility of *some* epistemic trade-offs. Littlejohn (2018) and Wedgwood (2018) both emphasize that, in a genuine consequentialist theory, the total consequences must be used to derive the normative property. As Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn (2018: 6) point out, if all that matters for the thing being evaluated is just the thing itself, it isn't clear how this is a version of consequentialism. On most versions of consequentialism, we don't restrict the relevant consequences, as long as they concern things in our value theory. And only being concerned with one's attitude toward a single proposition doesn't seem like a sensible epistemic value theory.

Further, if I'm right that many of us are in an epistemically permissive case with respect to theism, so that we could be rational as theists, atheists, or agnostics, then it's plausible that downstream epistemic goods could be a "tie-breaker." If multiple attitudes to  $p$  are evidentially on a par, then one could consider other epistemic consequences that go beyond one's attitude toward  $p$ . To consider an analogy from the ethical case, consider the choice between two actions: action 1 saves only  $S$ 's life, and action 2 saves  $S$ 's life and a bunch of other lives. Even if  $S$  has special axiological consideration, action 2 seems better, as it dominates action 1.

Finally, note that the epistemic wager may be successful apart from a full-blown commitment to epistemic consequentialism. There are at least two possibilities. First, one might endorse epistemic consequentialism with side-constraints. For example, maybe one should believe the thing that has the best epistemic consequences unless their evidence suggests it is definitely or very likely false. For example, if one's credence that *God exists* falls below some threshold, then one ought not believe, but otherwise, believe  $p$  because of the large expected epistemic value. This would avoid the consequence that  $S$ 's believing  $p$  can be epistemically rational even if, say,  $S$  thinks  $p$  is obviously false, as  $S$ 's epistemic position toward  $p$  must be sufficiently favorable.<sup>6</sup>

Second, there are deontological views in ethics on which one ought not commit certain acts unless the consequences are extreme. For example, one might think torture is wrong unless, e.g., a million lives are at stake. One could adopt a similar view in epistemology: epistemic consequences don't matter for rationality unless the relevant consequences are sufficiently weighty. When the stakes are quite high, however, epistemic rationality depends on consequences. Because there's so much

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<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, Michael Rota (2016-a) defends a version of the wager on which one should wager if their credence in theism is at least 0.5. The threshold need not be that high, however. Thanks to Justin Mooney.

to gain in the epistemic wager, we ought to believe in God, even if the consequences aren't relevant when the epistemic stakes are lower (compare: we shouldn't torture someone to save three lives).<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.3 *Many Gods*

One might wonder what the epistemic wager implies about mutually exclusive religions. Suppose I take the epistemic wager and believe in the God of religion 1; I may not get the epistemic goods of religion 2.

My response is twofold. First, it's sensible to simply ask the question of whether one ought to be a theist, and then leave the choice between religions for later. The main purpose of this paper isn't to adjudicate between religions, but to draw a connection between general theism and epistemic consequentialism.

Second, if all religions offer roughly the same epistemic goods, then according to the epistemic wager, one should practice the religion that one thinks is most likely to be true. It's not obvious, however, that we should quantify the epistemic value of all religions equally; the epistemic goods to be gained in the afterlife vary widely by religious tradition. For example, as discussed above, on many versions of Christianity, heaven involves the Beatific vision—seeing God's essence and gaining a complete understanding of the world. Alternatively, by practicing certain versions of Buddhism, one can eventually reach enlightenment, the state of comprehending reality as it is (see Wright 2016), which also seems quite epistemically valuable. Mormonism teaches that humans can eventually become divine, as they “progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life” (Hinckley 1995). The epistemic benefits of being divine seem quite significant—to say the least. Thus, various religions at least offer *different* epistemic goods; there's a further question of how to weigh these goods against each other. If one thinks that a certain religion offers better epistemic goods than another, one can also factor that into the decision table; if one takes the goods of various religions to be infinite, one can utilize one of the decision-theoretic methods for comparing infinities discussed above. A detailed theological comparison of the epistemic goods of various religions is a promising area of further research.<sup>8</sup> (For more on using the wager to compare religions, see Jackson and Rogers 2019.)

#### 4.4 *Hell vs. Annihilationism*

I've suggested that hell may, in some sense, be better than annihilationism. One may wonder: is this right? This seems to have some counterintuitive consequences. For instance, if we take heaven out of the picture, then, from an epistemic perspective, I should maximize my chance of going to hell.

In reply, there are two views of hell relevant for this objection. On the first, hell is genuinely epistemically better than annihilationism. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that one should all-things-considered prefer hell—hell is merely better from an epistemic point of view. To decide what one should all-things-considered prefer, one may need to weigh epistemic and practical oughts against each other. (This is also potentially relevant to the many-gods issue, because there's also the possibility that one religion's afterlife is the best epistemically, and another religion's afterlife is better practically. That cause would also require weighing different types of goods against each other.) Second, as I mentioned above, there is also the possibility that hell is a place

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Eric Sampson and Kevin Vallier.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Wes Siscoe for helpful discussion.

of self-deception and confusion. On this picture, the epistemic wager looks more like the traditional wager—hell has a negative epistemic value. Then, one should prefer annihilation to hell.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I've defended a cousin of Pascal's wager, conditional on the truth of epistemic consequentialism. More specifically, I've argued that if epistemic consequentialism is true, then there's epistemic reason to believe in God. I've explained epistemic consequentialism, and then shown how it gives us the resources to defend an epistemic wager. I've contrasted the epistemic wager with the traditional wager, noted that the epistemic wager has some significant benefits, and responded to objections.

Of course, some may simply take this as a *reductio* of epistemic consequentialism. Rejecting epistemic consequentialism is a straightforward way to avoid the epistemic wager. But, as we saw, epistemic consequentialism has many defenders, and some maintain that it is a natural starting point for epistemology. If that is so, then my argument has the surprising conclusion that epistemic consequentialists should be theists—even if it motivates others to reject the consequentialism they defend. I remind the reader that my primary goal is simply to defend a conditional claim; one can choose to *ponens* or *tollens* it.

A final possibility involves combining the traditional pragmatic wager with the epistemic wager. So, for instance, if there are both strong epistemic and practical reasons to believe in God—because of the enormous epistemic *and* practical benefits of the afterlife—then we might have an all-things-considered reason to be a theist. This possibility merits further exploration.<sup>9</sup>

In closing, traditionally, many have thought that Pascal's wager is a distinctively pragmatic argument for theism. I've challenged this idea. If this version of the wager is successful, then what sounds like an oxymoron may actually be true: there are *Pascalian epistemic* reasons to believe in God.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Thanks to John Hawthorne for a conversation that inspired this paper. Thanks to Dustin Crummett, Andrew Moon, Wes Siscoe, and two anonymous referees at this journal for comments on earlier drafts. Thanks to Josh Barthuly, Josh Brecka, Justin D'Ambrosio, Perry Hendricks, Brett Lunn, Justin Mooney, Daniel Muñoz, Andy Rogers, Eric Sampson, Rohan Sud, Kevin Vallier, Johnny Waldrop, and to the audiences at the Toronto Metropolitan University Philosophy of Religion work-in-progress group and the Analytic Collective Workshop for helpful comments and questions.

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Wes Siscoe.

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