

# Construing faith as action won't save Pascal's wager

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## Abstract

Arthur Falk has proposed a new construal of faith according to which it is not a mere species of belief, but has essential components in action. This twist on faith promises to resurrect Pascal's Wager, making faith compatible with reason by believing as the scientist but acting as the theist. I argue that Falk's proposal leaves religious faith in no better shape; in particular, it merely reframes the question in terms of rational desires rather than rational beliefs.

Arthur Falk has recently attempted to breathe new life into Pascal's "wager" argument for God.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of his proposed new reading is a shift from construing faith as a form of belief to construing faith as having essential components in action. This departure from the standard notion of faith neatly dodges the objection that Pascal's argument advocates wishful thinking. Even better for the theist, Falk's construal of faith promises to allow one rationally to *behave* as a theist with great conviction while *believing* as a scientist who finds the evidence for God to be low. In this way Falk reconciles faith with science; one can have high faith despite low belief because of the appropriate action components.

Though this approach is intriguing, I argue that it does not ultimately provide any additional help for theist arguments. The most serious of its problems is that it dodges the typical charge of faith as irrational *believing* only at the expense of a faith that requires irrational *desiring*. In effect, though the bump in the theist's rationality carpet disappears in one area, it surfaces just as problematically elsewhere.

## 1 Falk's argument and the key move

A simple, "standard" version of Pascal's Wager goes roughly like this:

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\*Thanks, of course, go to Arthur Falk for a stimulating paper and subsequent helpful conversations on this topic; thanks also to Ashley McDowell.

<sup>1</sup>Falk (2005). Throughout, I will use the proper name 'God' for the god of the Abrahamic tradition.

If you believe in God, and God actually exists, then your circumstances will be far better off than they are now. (You will have a source of meaning in life, eternal happiness in heaven, the comfort of a master plan, and so on.) If you believe in God and God does not exist, on the other hand, you stand to lose very little. The bet, therefore, is in your favor. In fact, because the potential benefits are so enormous, belief in God is in your favor however low you estimate the odds are for God's existence. Therefore, you should believe in God.

Falk points out that a standard version like this advocates the fallacy of wishful thinking, for it suggests that your desire for  $p$  to be true provides reason to *believe* that  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 Faith beyond belief

Falk's response to this problem is, first, to take Pascal to be arguing for *faith* in God rather than belief in God. Second, he construes faith as something above and beyond mere belief. According to Falk, faith is a complex of which belief is just one component:

First, faith includes belief that covers territory that the sciences cover, is descriptive and deals with what's observable, just as science does, although it goes further and covers values. Second, faith is belief that is personalised, prayer-like. Third, the act of faith is voluntary, a matter of choice. Fourth, it's a habit and commits one to a dynamic I call Abrahamic steadfastness.<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical tradition, of course, has faith as a species of belief—often, as belief that is not subject to reason. Falk quotes Mark Twain's witticism, for example, that "faith is believing what you know ain't so."<sup>4</sup>

There is some independent motivation, however, for the proposal that faith is not merely a species of belief. Falk provides a good example of a case where belief and faith plausibly come apart: "if faith were just belief in a god, faith would be compatible with cursing god."<sup>5</sup> Job, for example, could lose faith in God while still believing that God exists. This is somewhat hard to explain if you think faith is a type of belief. (One possible such explanation, though: perhaps Job loses belief-faith in the proposition that *God is good* while maintaining belief-faith in the proposition that *God exists*. Belief-faith in the latter proposition, but not the former, is consistent with cursing God.)

Other, non-religious examples of faith might further support Falk's case for separating faith and mere belief. Consider a cancer patient facing a treatment with a very low probability of success, say, or someone deciding whether to buy a lottery ticket. Suppose they do not believe to any significant degree that the treatment will work, or the lottery ticket will win; perhaps they are an oncologist and a statistician, respectively,

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<sup>2</sup>See especially p. 554.

<sup>3</sup>pp. 454–546.

<sup>4</sup>It is Twain's "schoolboy" whom William James quotes in (1896), pp. 206–207.

<sup>5</sup>p. 543.

and well aware of the odds. Still, we might imagine them undergoing the treatment, or buying the ticket, and they might say they did it because they had “faith” that it would work out. It’s not obviously an abuse of language to say so.

Finally, the Kierkegaardian tradition of faith coincides nicely with Falk’s construal. This tradition compares faith to the act of leaping into a chasm. Importantly, this leap looks irrational from a belief standpoint; one has doubts, and perhaps one even believes that the leap will be fatal, but one jumps anyway.

## 1.2 Faith as action

Even if these examples aren’t convincing, though, it doesn’t matter much to Falk’s argument; Falk can simply say that his argument advocates some kind of behavior (call it “schmaith” if you like) that is both rational and worshipful. The main point in common to these examples is that sometimes we want some result enough that it seems worth the risk to act as though it will come about, even if we believe it probably won’t. Somewhat more formally:

- (F) *S* has faith that *p* (by action *A*) if and only if: a) *S* would perform *A* to bring it about that *p* even with quite low credence that *A* will actually bring it about that *p*, and b) *S* would do this because *S* desires *p* enough for the expected utility of *A* to be maximal.

(F) is my proposal for a general account that captures Falk’s move of faith as more than mere belief.

Note first that the more precise (F) is compatible with believing *p* will result from *A* to high degrees of credence, too; *S* can have faith that *p* (through *A*) in such a case if *S* would still perform *A* even when *S* stops believing to any significant degree that it will bring about *p*.

Note also that (F) implies Falk’s religious faith as a special case. The dimensions to faith beyond belief that Falk mentions all emphasize *action* elements to faith—“personalising”, making the “act of faith” voluntarily, and forming a steadfast “habit”. The action dimension to faith is also required for his more precisely decision-theoretic reading of Pascal. To defend faith as rational, Falk ultimately appeals to the Jeffrey expected utility principle (JEU), which is a guideline for determining which *actions* are rational.<sup>6</sup> This shows that Falkian faith is centrally a matter of action. Falk says the belief component of (religious) faith is roughly that “a personal god exists and deserves one’s fealty”;<sup>7</sup> to act as though this is the case, as (F) would demand, involves the kind of action components Falk details. For these reasons, I think (F) makes explicit the crux of Falk’s proposal.<sup>8</sup>

With this new notion of faith, Pascal’s Wager runs more like this:

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<sup>6</sup>The Jeffrey expected utility calculation gives the utility of different acts as a function of the degree of desire for each of the possible outcomes and the degree of belief the act will lead to each outcome; more formally, the principle is to pick the action *A* such that  $JEU(A) = \sum_{i=1}^n \text{bel}(p_i|A)\text{des}(p_i \& A)$  is maximal. See Falk’s appendix, p. 561, which refers to Jeffrey (1983).

<sup>7</sup>p. 543.

<sup>8</sup>Strictly speaking one cannot directly have faith *that God exists* (by pious actions) on (F), since no actions can bring that state about. Still, that proposition is a belief *component* of the faith that one can, for example, attain divine salvation (by pious actions), and thus one may loosely speak of having faith that God exists.

If you act as though God exists, and God does exist, then your circumstances will be far better off than they are now. In fact, the benefits of acting in such a way are potentially so enormous that one should so act. Since by (F) to act as though God exists for such reasons is just to have faith that God exists, one should therefore have faith (but not necessarily believe!) that God exists.

Falk's version of Pascal has at least three nice advantages. First, it involves no wishful thinking, for it involves no adjusting the degree of belief based on what's desired. Thus it neatly avoids a major problem for the standard construal of Pascal's Wager.

Second, this proposal makes faith and reason thoroughly compatible. Just as it might be rational to undergo a risky cancer treatment, or to buy a lottery ticket with a big enough prize, so it might be rational to act as though God exists, as long as the expected utility of the act is the highest of available alternative actions. (Of course our expected utility calculations might be wrong in one way or another, in which case the faith can be irrational.) Such compatibility between religious faith and rationality should strike most theists as a prodigious advantage.

Finally, it's reasonable to think that Falk's take on Pascal's Wager gets the theist an even better conclusion than the conclusion of the standard version. On the standard version, the conclusion is only that you should *believe* God exists; as Falk points out, that belief is compatible with, for example, cursing God. The theist would probably prefer to see converts in *action*, as Falk's conclusion exhorts.

## 2 Objections

Falk's is a plausible construal of faith, and the resulting defense of Pascal's Wager is admirable. Still, I don't think it succeeds in providing any support for theism.

### 2.1 Initial problems

First, it's worth mentioning briefly that though Falk's account solves one major problem for Pascal's Wager, other classic problems will survive with straightforward adjustments. For example, we can amend the "Many Gods" objection to Pascal in order to fit Falk's argument: Falk's argument also seems to make it rational to have faith (not belief) in Odin, Vishnu, Zeus, Zoroaster, and so on. Given that the actions required for faith in each are contradictory, we seem to have a *reductio* of the argument.

Still, we might reasonably agree that it is at least progress to avoid the wishful thinking charge against Pascal, and hope that objections like the Many Gods problem can be handled in some other way. I will not press such objections further; instead I will concentrate on problems particular to Falk's proposal. Also, I should emphasize that the objections are not against the rationality of faith in general—that would be, as defined in (F), simply to object to decision theory, and I have no wish to do that. Instead the objections will be particular to its application to religious faith.

One difficulty is that religious faith in the sense of acting as though God exists seems to require one to, among other things, *say* that God exists. A person of faith in

God should proclaim God's existence from the mountain tops, swear by creeds, and so on. But on the faith version of Pascal's Wager, this puts one in the position of saying "God exists, but I don't believe it." In the published version, Falk responds to my objection this way:

I assume that persons of faith do not qualify their *professions* of faith with the remark that they do not believe a word of it, nor do they flaunt their low degree of belief. They wish it could be higher. I assume that much of their behaviour and talk is guided, not by the absolute probability of there being a god, but by the conditional probability of propositions, given that their faith corresponds with reality.<sup>9</sup>

But the fact that persons of Falkian faith wouldn't say such things out loud is of no help; presumably they wouldn't exactly because it's embarrassing to be in a state where such assertions are appropriate. A simpler and more forceful way to state my objection is this: to the extent Falkian faith advises you to assert that God exists despite low credence, then it advises you deliberately to assert what you don't believe, and that in turn seems simply to advise you to lie. If a person of such faith tells a child that God exists, and the child then asks "do you really believe that?", an honest response would justify a charge of deception from the child. Christians, for example, should not be happy with converts to the faith who can only be lying when they begin the Nicene creed with "we *believe* in one God . . ."

The other part of Falk's response—that such behavior is guided by conditional probabilities, and not outright (subjective) probabilities—does not seem to help. If he means that choice of faithful actions should be based in part on conditional beliefs about the outcomes of actions available to me, then of course; that's just decision theory, as illustrated in his appendix on Jeffrey expected utility. The conditional probability that such-and-such desires will be satisfied should I proclaim God's existence is already factored in to the JEU calculation for such proclaiming.<sup>10</sup> This does not answer the objection; the objection is that guiding your actions by this conditional probability, in the case of religious faith, enjoins you to lie.

It seems that Falk means something more here than merely restating JEU—perhaps, that the faithful will guide their behavior as though their belief that "God exists" is to degree one (or to a very high degree). In other words, perhaps he means that faith should have you act as though your belief that divine salvation will result from your actions is high. That would be a different story, and maybe if you commit to acting that way, then you're not lying. But then of course that would also be plainly irrational, at least in the JEU sense Falk and I share. To determine your actions in ways contrary to your actual beliefs would be to advocate acting *against* expected utility theory. It's hard to see how one could justify that. Besides, to act and deliberate in all ways as though *A* will bring about *p* seems mighty close to just-plain *believing* that *A* will bring

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<sup>9</sup>p. 544 note 1.

<sup>10</sup>p. 561. The calculation, remember, is  $JEU(A) = \sum_{i=1}^n \text{bel}(p_i|A)\text{des}(p_i\&A)$ . The relevant conditional belief is the 'bel( $p_i|A$ )' part, for the improbable outcome that your act will result in salvation. This probability is low if you think it unlikely God exists: since your subjective probability that God exists is low, so too is your subjective *conditional* probability that if you act faithfully you will actually satisfy your fervent desires. Falk's point is that your desire  $\text{des}(p\&A)$  can be so great that  $JEU(A)$  is nonetheless maximal.

about  $p$ . On this understanding of Falk's response he would, despite himself, end up endorsing a new, higher degree of belief in God—and the fallacious wishful thinking that he agrees comes with such endorsement.

## 2.2 The main objection

Thus neither construal of Falk's response to this objection seems promising. There is still a more serious objection, however: such Falkian religious faith relinquishes a demand for what Falk agrees to be apparently irrational religious beliefs (in our "scientific age") only to demand irrational religious *desires* instead.

Of course I am not claiming that some desire for salvation, eternal grace, and other similar benefits of divinity are irrational. But crucial to Falk's point is that desire, like belief, comes in degrees—and it is important to note that degrees of desire can also be irrational. Suppose, for example, that I fervently desire to be a dolphin, rather than the poor land creature I am now. Let  $d$  stand for the proposition that *I will be a dolphin*. Medical science and metaphysics together suggest that a rational degree of belief in  $d$  should be very low indeed, but it could reasonably be above zero. Suppose I am sensitive to such arguments, and reasonably assign an extremely small degree of belief to  $d$ . Should I have *faith* that I will be a dolphin? By (F), that is to ask if behaving as though  $d$  has maximal expected utility. Perhaps, for example, I should save up for highly experimental genetic resequencing. Perhaps that gives me the best possible chance at being a dolphin—a one in a million chance, say. Whether such actions have maximal expected utility depend partly on my degree of belief in  $d$ , but also on my degree of desire that  $d$ . If the outcome of being a dolphin were at least a million times more valuable to me than any other outcome, then it would be rational in decision-theoretic terms to undergo the operation. In that case, I should have *faith* that I will be a dolphin!

But I hope I can take it for granted that undergoing such an operation would be clearly irrational behavior. The source of this irrationality is not in the belief; my extraordinarily low degree of belief that  $d$  seems eminently reasonable given the circumstances. The irrationality is also not the fault of the expected utility principle; that simply tells me to act so as to maximize my expected outcome. Only the immense degree of *desire* can be the source of irrationality in this case. It is simply not rational to want that much to be a dolphin. Given my low degree of belief that  $d$ , the rational thing to do is just to give up the desire, or at least adjust it way downward.

Of course I do not suggest that religious desires are as absurd as a fervent desire to be a dolphin. Still, once we grant that faith (the activity) in  $d$  can be irrational as a result of irrationally high degrees of desire, we can then ask whether religious faith has a similar problem. That amounts to asking whether religious desires to the degree required for faith are rational, given the low credence in theism that (Falk and I agree) is warranted. Desires Falk mentions such as salvation from wretchedness are of course hugely important (given that we *are* wretched). Related desires for eternal life or a meaningful existence are similarly of clear importance. Such things are plausibly not close to comparable with  $d$  in terms of reasonable degree of desire.

But remember, Falk grants that the reasonable subjective probability of such desires being achieved, given God-directed faithful action, is very low—even lower than

the reasonable subjective probability of belief in God's existence.<sup>11</sup> For some of these desires, such as for a meaningful existence, it might be that the probability of its obtaining given *other* actions is much higher. In those cases, it is of course rational (and JEU would dictate) to pursue those other actions first. Perhaps it is reasonable to believe that a meaningful existence can be had despite the absence of God. Perhaps doing good to others, or creating beauty, or fostering love, or contemplating oneness, or some other such activity is enough to bring meaning to life. Some might think these are less likely to bring meaning than God-directed activity, should God exist. Even if so, given that our belief that God exists is low, the calculations should work in favor of these alternative routes. Even in the case of a fervent desire for eternal life, it seems more rational to pursue cryogenics, or software backups of one's mind. Though I wouldn't myself advocate either route, these at least carry some possible future feasibility in what Falk calls our "scientific age".

But of course for eternal life (and perhaps even for a "meaningful" life, depending on what's required for that), another reasonable option is available—namely, to stop desiring it so much. Given that eternal life is improbable, the wisest route seems to be to make the most of what time we have, and perhaps strive to cherish our lives because they are limited. Naturally talk of which degrees of desires are rational is a difficult and controversial topic, but I hope the intuition that such desire modification could be rational is not too far-fetched.

Falk wisely chooses to avoid such crass religious desires as that for eternal life, concentrating his case on the desire for salvation instead.<sup>12</sup> It's not clear exactly what this desire amounts to, though, except just that God exist—and that my life be better, somehow, as a result. If there are ways to satisfy the desire for salvation without God, then chances are excellent that it's more rational (by expected utility theory) to pursue those instead. If not—if the only way to satisfy the desire for salvation is for God to exist—then Falk in effect assumes that we stubbornly desire God's existence, and that is to stack the deck unfairly. If our degree of belief in God's existence is very low, as science seems to demand, then it seems pointless to desire that God exist. Pure *wishing* may be appropriate, of course—but such wishes are the kind of thing that do not result in action toward the outcome wished. This indicates that in the expected utility sense they are desires of low degree. (It might be, though, that the desire would be very high if the belief degree in its possibility of fulfillment were higher!) This option is not the same as the roughly Nietzschean claim Falk mentions as his foil, the view that a meaningful existence can be had *because* of an absent God. There are many apparently rational points between these two extremes that Falk does not seem to consider. Existence might just be meaningful for reasons that have nothing whatever to do with God's existence or lack thereof.

A still worse problem for Falk comes from his suggestion that if we are religiously

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<sup>11</sup>The probability of faithful action leading to desire satisfaction *could* be higher than the subjective probability that God exists, if one thinks that one could escape wretchedness by praying to a non-existent God. But given that God must actually exist for such salvation, the probability must be at most equal to the probability for God's existence. Normally it will be significantly lower, because even if God exists, acting in those particular ways may or may not be the right ways to bring about the divine favor needed for salvation; these probabilities need to be considered too.

<sup>12</sup>pp. 553–554.

faithful, we must be *steadfast* in this faith as Abraham was. That in turn means that if we find ourselves in a circumstance where expected utility makes faith unwise, Falk instructs us to ratchet our desires up until the faith is rational (has maximal JEU value) again.<sup>13</sup> Falk suggests conversely that if we go the Nietzschean route, we can dynamically adjust our desires so that no degree of belief in God makes God-oriented action rational. But it is unclear how either of these procedures is a rational way to apportion our desires. They both require fixing the action pattern, and then adjusting the desires to maintain the action. This clearly puts the cart before the horse: if we find we are drinking paint instead of milk, we should not sustain the action and make it “rational” by increasing our desire to drink paint. Rational actions serve desires, not vice-versa.

Falk recommends “redefining atheism, as the having of desires that don’t make it rational to promote one’s belief in a god ... to ... faith.”<sup>14</sup> Fine; then the atheist’s claim is simply that such (low degrees of) desires are the rational ones, given related beliefs and such. Shifting the debate from rationality of belief to rationality of desire, as Falk’s paper does, will not make the atheist charge of irrationality disappear.

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<sup>13</sup>pp. 555–556. Strictly speaking, noting the possibility of hedonic involuntarism, Falk admonishes that we put ourselves in a position to increase the desires.

<sup>14</sup>p. 551–552.