

Infinite Happiness Is Not Enough: A Dantean Objection to Pascal's Wager

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Research Article

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Abstract

Pascal's Wager seems to derive its force from the simple asymmetry that salvation offers infinite happiness, while the alternatives do not. Dante's *Inferno* III complicates that picture. The ignavi occupy an eternal condition whose badness is not exhausted by suffering; their punishment is also bound up with failed agency, lack of commitment, shame and the loss of moral standing. This suggests the striking possibility that even in Hell, value may not reduce to welfare alone. Once non-welfare dimensions are allowed to structure eternal outcomes, the move from infinite happiness to the all-things-considered dominance of salvation becomes less straightforward. Thus, Dante far from supplying a mere illustration provides a distinctive objection to the axiological assumptions built into familiar versions of Pascal's Wager.

1. Introduction

In standard contemporary decision-theoretic reconstructions, Pascal's Wager assigns infinite utility to salvation while representing the alternative outcomes by finite utilities (Hájek, 2003, pp. 28–29; Hájek & Jackson, 2026, p. 534; Kuźniar, 2026, pp. 3–4). The mathematical attraction is straightforward. If salvation has infinite utility and every competing outcome is finite, then any positive probability of salvation appears to swamp the alternatives. Pascal himself puts the point in terms of an “infinite and infinitely happy life” and concludes that, once the stake is finite and the possible gain infinite, there is nothing more to be weighed (Pascal, 2011, S680/L418).

This paper argues that the inference requires more than the infinity of salvific happiness. It also requires an axiological dominance assumption, that is no value realised by a non-salvific outcome may rival or remain incomparable with the value of salvation. Dante's treatment of the ignavi in *Inferno* III gives conceptual reason to question that assumption. Dante portrays eternal conditions as differing not only in suffering, but also in features connected with agency, steadfastness, glory and shame. If such non-welfare features persist throughout an eternal existence, their value need not be finite relative to eternal happiness or suffering. They may themselves be unbounded, or they may belong to evaluative dimensions that resist scalar aggregation. The point then is that the infinity of happiness cannot by itself establish the dominance Pascal's argument needs.

This objection is adjacent to, but distinct from, several existing criticisms. Bartha considers a ‘Dante-like series of infinitely worse hells’ within his relative-utility framework (Bartha, 2007, p. 51, n. 27); Kuźniar rejects a narrowly hedonistic treatment of utility by introducing independent epistemic values; Hájek considers vector-valued and lexicographically ordered value (Bartha, 2007; Hájek, 2003; Kuźniar, 2026). The present claim is narrower. Even within a single Christian eschatological picture, a losing outcome may contain enduring non-welfare goods whose value is not automatically finite or dominated. Dante supplies a concrete model of why that possibility should be taken seriously.

2. Pascal and the dominance assumption

Pascal first denies that abstention is a genuine practical option: you must wager (Pascal, 2011, S680/L418). He then turns explicitly to happiness. If one wagers for God and wins, one wins everything; if one loses, one loses little or nothing. The argument culminates in the prospect of an infinite and infinitely happy life. Because the earthly stake is finite, Pascal concludes that the infinite possible gain settles the decision (Pascal, 2011, S680/L418).

Hájek represents wagering for God, conditional on God's existence, by infinite utility, while the remaining cells receive finite values (Hájek, 2003, p. 28). Hájek and Jackson use the same basic reconstruction i.e. the utility of salvation is ∞ , whereas the outcomes associated with not wagering for God are represented by finite numbers (Hájek & Jackson, 2026, pp. 534–535). Kuźniar notes an important interpretative fact behind this formalisation. Pascal himself speaks in terms of happiness rather than the technical notion of utility, while contemporary discussions standardly translate that happiness into utility (Kuźniar, 2026, p. 3, n. 3).

That translation is not innocuous. Pascal certainly gives happiness a fundamental role. He maintains that all human beings seek happiness and that the will moves towards it (Pascal, 2011, S181/L148); yet, as Moriarty stresses, Pascal does not simply identify happiness with the supreme good. God is the supreme good, while authentic happiness consists in union with God (Moriarty, 2020, pp. 229–254). Pascal's own broader axiology can therefore explain why salvation should occupy the highest rank. But the Wager's mathematical force does not independently establish that ranking. It works only after the relevant values have already been represented in the required way.

A further distinction is important. Pascal need not assign damnation $-\infty$. Indeed, Hájek and Jackson argue that such an assignment sits awkwardly with Pascal's claim that divine justice towards the outcast is "less vast" than mercy towards the elect (Hájek & Jackson, 2026, p. 537). The canonical Wager needs only one infinite entry i.e. salvation. This makes the present objection more, not less, direct. It does not depend on reconstructing Hell as infinitely bad. It asks whether the other values contained in a non-salvific eternal condition may themselves be unbounded or non-commensurable.

The additional requirement can be stated as follows:

Axiological Dominance (AD)

no value realised by a non-salvific outcome is infinite in a way that rivals salvation, nor does any such value belong to an independent dimension that is incomparable with or lexically prior to salvific happiness.

If AD holds, the infinite happiness of salvation can swamp the alternatives. If AD does not hold, "infinity" alone no longer settles the comparison. The rest of the paper offers a Dantean reason to deny that AD follows simply from the description of salvation as infinitely happy.

3. Dante's countermodel

Italian text follows Dante Alighieri (2016); translations are mine. The relevant scene occurs before Dante enters Hell proper. Virgil identifies the souls of those who lived “*sanza ’nfamia e sanza lodo* [without blame nor praise]”, together with angels who were neither rebellious nor faithful to God but remained for themselves (Inf. III.34–39). Heaven rejects them, yet the deeper Inferno also refuses them, because the wicked would otherwise possess “*alcuna gloria* [some glory]” over them (Inf. III.40–42). Their condition is so abject that they are “*nvidiosi ... d’ogne altra sorte* [envious of any other fate]” (Inf. III.46–48). Later Dante associates the group with the figure who made the “*gran rifiuto* [great refusal]” through “*viltade* [vileness]” (Inf. III.58–60).

Hollander reads the reference to “*alcuna gloria*” as implying that the fallen angels could take pride in their higher situation relative to the neutral angels if the latter were admitted to Hell proper; he also glosses the *ignavi* as envying every other class of sinners (Hollander, 2000, comm. Inf. III.40–46). Those who never followed a determinate cause now eternally follow an indeterminate banner, reproducing in punishment the lack of fixed purpose that characterised their lives (Hollander, 2000, comm. Inf. III.52–57).

The *ignavi* lived without either blame or praise; the world allows them no fame; both mercy and justice disdain them; and Virgil refuses even to dwell on them: “*non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa* [let’s not consider them, look and proceed]” (Inf. III.49–51). Their degradation is therefore not exhausted by pain. They are denied standing, memory and a determinate moral identity. The poem can therefore condemn an agent absolutely while still ranking one condemned condition above another for reasons connected with agency and character.

The minimum philosophical conclusion is thus that Dante evaluates eternal conditions along more than a single hedonic dimension. The *ignavi* are not merely in pain. Their state is marked by shame, lack of fame, lack of commitment and a form of agency so debased that every other fate is enviable. More precisely, the text allows the rebellious angels a comparative ‘glory’ over the neutral angels. How an agent chose, and what kind of agency the choice expressed, affects the evaluative character of the eternal outcome.

Their punishment is tailored to what they failed to do as agents. That makes the manner of choice part of the outcome itself, rather than a merely historical fact about how the same outcome was reached.

Pascal’s Wager abstracts from precisely such differences. Once salvation fails to occur, the standard matrix assigns the losing outcome a single utility. Yet Dante gives us a coherent model on which two equally unsaved agents, and even two agents enduring indefinitely bad welfare, may differ substantially in other evaluative respects. One may have chosen through cowardice and evasion; another through constancy, integrity or at least determinate commitment. The point is that whether these qualities must outweigh suffering is a substantive axiological question rather than something settled by the word “infinite”.

Dante therefore provides a countermodel to the narrower claim that eschatological value is exhausted by welfare. Rejecting AD requires the further, independent possibility that a non-welfare value realised in a non-salvific outcome is not dominated by salvific happiness. His picture is Christian, eschatological and hierarchical, yet it does not treat the value of a posthumous condition as exhausted by the quantity of happiness or suffering it contains. That is enough to expose a premise that Pascal's practical conclusion needs but the calculation itself cannot supply.

4. Why infinity no longer settles the wager

Suppose, with Pascal, that salvation contains infinitely positive happiness. Let W represent welfare and let S be salvation:

$$W(S) = +\infty.$$

Suppose also, more strongly than Pascal himself needs, that damnation contains infinitely negative welfare:

$$W(D) = -\infty.$$

The comparison is still incomplete if welfare is not the only bearer of value. Let A represent an independent agential value such as integrity, steadfastness, courage or honour. A damned condition could then have the schematic form

$$D = (-\infty_W, +\infty_A).$$

The notation does not assume that courage literally comes in cardinal units. It isolates a structural possibility. Hájek's example shows that a finitely valuable good extended through infinite time can, under some aggregation rules, generate infinite total value (Hájek, 2003, p. 41). If so, the assumption that salvific happiness is infinite while every non-welfare good remains finite requires independent justification.

A decision theorist might reply that "utility" already means all-things-considered value, so there is no gap between welfare and the final ranking. That reply is correct as a point about terminology but not as a defence of the matrix. If utility is all-things-considered value, then the step from "infinitely happy" to "utility $+\infty$ " already presupposes that no other value dimension defeats or blocks the ranking. The objection concerns the justification of that assignment, not the definition of utility. Conversely, if the infinity in Pascal is read more literally as infinite happiness or welfare, then the transition to all-things-considered utility requires AD. On either reading, the substantive axiology cannot be supplied by the arithmetic itself.

If both dimensions are forced onto the extended real line, the problem appears as $+\infty + (-\infty)$, which is undefined. But the deeper issue is not arithmetic. A pluralist axiology may deny that welfare and integrity should be summed on one cardinal scale at all. They may be vector-valued, partially ordered or lexically

ordered. In that case the decision theorist must supply a rule for comparing the dimensions before expected-utility calculation can begin.

Relatedly, Hájek in one model replaces scalar value with a two-dimensional vector of “earthly” and “heavenly” value. Salvation then wins because the model stipulates a lexicographic ordering, that is any increase in heavenly expectation, however small, trumps any increase in earthly expectation, however large (Hájek, 2003, pp. 39–40). The reformulation is mathematically coherent, but its success depends precisely on a dominance relation between dimensions. Hájek later notes that adding a still higher dimension of value would reopen the problem, since a gain in that dimension could swamp the previously maximal outcome (Hájek, 2003, p. 46). Multidimensional value, then, forces us to justify which dimension, if any, has lexical priority.

Bartha’s relative-utility theory addresses a different problem. It attempts to represent non-Archimedean preferences without assigning ordinary one-place infinite utilities. In a footnote he explicitly considers “a Dante-like series of infinitely worse hells”, observing that successive infinite jumps in the negative direction complicate his framework (Bartha, 2007, p. 51, n. 27). That precedent is noteworthy, but the present use of Dante is different. Bartha treats Dantean hierarchy as a sequence of increasingly bad outcomes along an ordered utility structure. *Inferno* III suggests a more radical possibility, namely that eternal conditions may differ in kind of value, not merely in amount. The relevant contrast may be between suffering, glory, shame, agency and integrity rather than between larger and smaller quantities of one good.

Kuźniar comes still closer. He argues that the literature has often relied on an excessively hedonistic conception of utility and introduces epistemic success as a good that need not coincide with happiness (Kuźniar, 2026, pp. 6, 11–12). His revised wager even uses Dante’s Limbo as a model of a posthumous condition whose value cannot be captured simply by physical suffering (Kuźniar, 2026, pp. 18–19). The present argument accepts that anti-hedonistic move but presses it further. Kuźniar largely works by reassigning utilities once additional desires or objective values are recognised. Here the question is whether a non-welfare good that persists eternally may itself become unbounded, or whether several eternal dimensions may resist reduction to one utility number. The challenge is therefore to show that the swamping structure of the matrix survives once the losing outcome contains potentially infinite non-welfare value.

The resulting argument can be expressed as follows:

- **(P1)** Infinite happiness entails all-things-considered dominance only if every admissible competing value is dominated by, or ordered beneath, it.
- **(P2)** It is coherent that a non-salvific outcome realises a non-welfare value that is not dominated by salvific happiness, for example, because that value is unbounded, lexically prior to, or incommensurable with welfare.

- **(P3)** Dante provides a model in which such non-welfare values genuinely structure eternal outcomes.
- **(C)** Therefore infinite happiness alone does not entail the all-things-considered superiority of salvation; Pascal needs an additional dominance principle excluding those rival axiologies.

5. Objections

One might object that salvation is simply the best possible thing. Hájek attributes this view to Pascal, relying on the claim that if one wins, one “wins everything” (Hájek, 2003, pp. 28–29). If salvation is stipulated to contain every genuine good and to outrank every alternative, then Dantean courage or integrity cannot threaten it.

This reply is successful only at a price. It makes the Wager conditional on a substantive Pascalian axiology. The decision-theoretic argument no longer shows that infinite happiness dominates everything else; rather, a prior theological claim establishes that salvation is the all-things-considered best state, and the calculation operates within that ranking. This may accurately reflect Pascal’s broader theology. It does not show that an interlocutor who has not accepted that theology must infer AD from the Wager itself.

A further response may target the Dantean goods. Perhaps the “glory” of the rebellious angels is vicious pride, while steadfastness in error is obstinacy rather than virtue. Nothing in the argument requires denying this. Dante is being employed to establish value plurality, not satanic virtue. The ignavi are evaluated partly through features of agency and character that are not identical with their suffering. Once those features enter the evaluation, a further account is needed of their weight and duration. A Pascalian may ultimately rank them below salvation, but that ranking must be defended rather than read off from infinity.

A limitation should be made explicit. The argument targets the canonical infinite version of the Wager. Finite reformulations can avoid the specific collision between rival infinities, but only by giving up the claim that the infinity of salvation by itself settles the choice. They would then need ordinary comparative premises about the magnitude of salvation and the competing goods. That is a different argument and does not answer the present objection.

A final critic might deny that an eternally instantiated non-welfare good acquires infinite value. Courage for eternity, one might say, could still have only finite value. That position is coherent. But it again requires a substantive theory of aggregation. If temporal persistence is relevant to the infinity of happiness but irrelevant to the value of courage, integrity or steadfastness, the asymmetry needs explanation. If, instead, salvific happiness is infinite for some non-temporal reason, one still needs a principle establishing why that kind of infinity lexically dominates every other value. In either case the work is done by an axiology, not by infinity alone.

This conclusion also fits Hájek and Jackson's distinction between practical rationality and all-things-considered normativity. They observe that even if the Wager establishes practical rationality in one sense, epistemic or moral considerations may prevent the conclusion that one ought to wager all things considered (Hájek & Jackson, 2026, pp. 544–545). The Dantean argument locates an analogous gap inside the payoff itself. If Pascal's infinity concerns happiness, then it is an infinity of welfare and does not automatically settle all-things-considered value. If "utility" is instead defined as all-things-considered value, then assigning salvation $+\infty$ and the alternatives only finite or dominated values already incorporates AD. Either interpretation leaves the dominance premise in need of independent support.

6. Conclusion

Pascal's appeal to infinite happiness does not by itself establish the all-things-considered superiority of salvation. That conclusion follows only if salvific happiness is already taken to dominate every competing value. Dante's *Inferno* III gives reason to resist treating eternal outcomes as exhausted by welfare alone: agency, character, glory and shame also structure their evaluation. Once such dimensions are admitted, they may be ordered independently of welfare, and in some coherent models may rival or resist aggregation with it. Pascal's Wager therefore requires not only an infinity premise, but also an additional axiological dominance principle. That dependence should be explicit in its defence.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The author is solely responsible for the conception, research, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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