

And with this famous aphorism of Coleridge—

He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.

Inquiry into the evidence of a doctrine is not to be made once for all, and then taken as finally settled. It is never lawful to stifle a doubt; for either it can

BLAISE PASCAL

The Wager*

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) was a French mathematician and philosopher.

Infinite—nothing.—Our soul is cast into a body, where it finds number, time, dimension. Thereupon it reasons, and calls this nature, necessity, and can believe nothing else.

Unity joined to infinity adds nothing to it, no more than one foot to an infinite measure. The finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite, and becomes a pure nothing. So our spirit before God, so our justice before divine justice. There is not so great disproportion between our justice and that of God, as between unity and infinity.

The justice of God must be vast like His compassion. Now, justice to the outcast is less vast, and ought less to offend our feelings than mercy towards the elect.

We know that there is an infinite, and are ignorant of its nature. As we know it to be false that numbers are finite, it is therefore true that there is an infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. It is false that it is even, it is false that it is odd; for the addition of a unit can make no change in its nature. Yet it is

*From Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), p. 233. This material reprinted with the kind permission of Crowell Collier and Macmillan, Inc.

be honestly answered by means of the inquiry already made, or else it proves that the inquiry was not complete.

“But,” says one, “I am a busy man; I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even able to understand the nature of the arguments.”

Then he should have no time to believe.

a number, and every number is odd or even (this is certainly true of every finite number). So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is. Is there not one substantial truth, seeing there are so many things which are not the truth itself?

We know then the existence and nature of the finite, because we also are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite, and are ignorant of its nature, because it has extension like us, but not limits like us. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know His existence; in glory we shall know His nature. Now, I have already shown that we may well know the existence of a thing, without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to natural lights.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.

Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a

foolishness, *stultitiam*; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their words; it is in lacking proofs, that they are not lacking in sense. “Yes, but although this excuses those who offer it as such, and take away from them the blame of putting it forward without reason, it does not excuse those who receive it.” Let us then examine this point, and say, “God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separates us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Do not then reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. “No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all.”

—Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then; Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager them without hesitation that He is.—“That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much.”—Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in

which out of an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

For it is no use to say it is uncertain if we will gain, and it is certain that we risk, and that the infinite distance between the *certainty* of what is staked and the *uncertainty* of what will be gained, equals the finite good which is certainly staked against the uncertain infinite. It is not so, as every player stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty, and yet he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, without transgressing against reason. There is not an infinite distance between the certainty staked and the uncertainty of the gain; that is untrue. In truth, there is an infinity between the certainty of gain and the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of the gain is proportioned to the certainty of the stake according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss. Hence it comes that, if there are as many risks on one side as on the other, the course is to play even; and then the certainty of the stake is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far is it from the fact that there is an infinite distance between them. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one.

“I confess it, I admit it. But still is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?”—Yes, Scripture and the rest, &c.—“Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed; I am forced to wager, and am not free. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What then would you have me do?”

“True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and yet you cannot believe. Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now

stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, &c. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness.—“But this is what I am afraid of.”—And why? What have you to lose?

But to show you that this leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling-blocks.

The end of this discourse.—Now what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous

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You Bet Your Life: Pascal's Wager Defended*

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Pascal's famous Wager is often mentioned in introductory philosophy classes and very occasionally addressed in the professional literature, but never favorably on the whole. It is considered an amusing bonbon and an entertaining early (mis)application of decision theory, but it is hardly thought convincing or even intellectually respectable. We maintain, to the contrary, that the Wager is seriously defensible and that the stock objections to it can be answered, even if there are more sophisticated criticisms to be made of Pascal's argument. We are inclined to think

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pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.

“Ah! This discourse transports me, charms me,” &c.

If this discourse pleases you and seems impressive, know that it is made by a man who has knelt, both before and after it, in prayer to that Being, infinite and without parts, before whom he lays all he has, for you also to lay before Him all you have for your own good and for His glory, so that strength may be given to lowliness.

that the Wager is rational, and we propose to defend it here.

1. THE ORIGINAL ARGUMENT

We shall concentrate on the standard expected-utility version of the Wager.¹ Pascal supposed that the relevant partition was (“God exists”, “God does not exist”), and, at least for the sake of argument, that its members are equiprobable, since

[r]eason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separates us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager?²

The relevant choices are to believe in God and adopt a reverent and devout lifestyle, or not to believe and to behave however one otherwise would.³ Since the Christian God, at least, promises eternal joy and blissful union with Himself to those who do truly

believe, and damnation (on some accounts eternal torment) to those who have heard but do not believe, the expected payoffs are as follows:

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Believe	∞	-20
Don't	$-\infty$	20

The two nonfinite payoffs represent (respectively) the eternal joy granted to the believer if God does exist, and the infinite suffering one will undergo if God exists and one chooses not to believe in Him. “-20” somewhat arbitrarily represents the inconvenience of living a devout and continent life when one doesn't have to, and “20” represents the fun one would have if totally released from religious hangups. (We assume for the moment that sin is fun; if not, so much the better for Pascal's argument.) The expected utility (EU) of theism is thus $.5(\infty) + .5(-20) = \infty$; the EU of agnosticism or atheism is $.5(-\infty) + .5(20) = -\infty$.⁴ According to Pascal, this doesn't even leave room for discussion; one would have to be demented to pass up such an offer. Whatever inconveniences may attend the devout and unpolluted life, they pale beside the hope of eternal joy and the fear of damnation.

Pascal is not, of course, arguing for the existence of God; he affects to think that no such argument can be given and that the balance of evidence favors agnosticism. He is contending that despite the epistemic irrationality of theism, if you like, it is prudentially rational—i.e., in one's interest—to believe in God regardless of the balance of evidence.⁵

2. MISGUIDED OBJECTIONS

Just to get a better feel for the Wager, let us very quickly run through a few preliminary objections, before coming to the two which we consider serious.

(i) “But my beliefs are not under my control; if I don't believe, then I can't believe, any more than I can believe there to be a live swordfish in front of me just because someone offers me \$1,000 if I can get myself to believe that.” Reply: In the long run, most people's beliefs are under their control; as Pascal himself emphasized, behavior therapy is remarkably effective even upon intellectuals. Start going to church and observing its rituals; associate

with intelligent and congenial religious people; stop reading philosophy and associating with cynics and logical positivists. To quote William James's pungent paraphrase of Pascal,⁶ “Go then and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples.” It may be that some people, of an indefatigably analytical and uncredulous temperament, simply cannot let themselves neglect the evidence and acquiesce in faith, just as some people simply cannot let themselves be hypnotized. But this is no reflection on the prudential rationality of the Wager; many people are psychologically incapable of doing what is demonstrably in their interest and known by them to be in their interest.⁷

(ii) “The Wager is cynical and mercenary; God wouldn't reward a ‘believer’ who makes it.” Reply: Of course He wouldn't, just like that. Pascal's claim is rather that our interest lies in leaving our cynicism behind and eventually becoming believers, if we can. There is no particular reason to think that God would punish a truly sincere and devout believer just because of the historical origins of his/her belief. People are reportedly saved as a result of death-bed conversions, even after lives of the most appalling corruption, if their new belief is sincere and authentic.

(iii) “Pascal is wrong in conjecturing that the probability of theism is as high as .5. It isn't; it's minuscule.” Reply: That doesn't matter; even if the probability of theism is .001, the expected payoffs are still infinite. “All right, then, the probability is zero. I'm certain there is no God.” Reply: How certain? And on what grounds? We would need to see a very convincing argument that no God of even roughly the traditional sort could exist, and it would have to be better than most philosophical arguments. (How many philosophical arguments do we know that confer probability 1 on their conclusions??)

(iv) “But if I bet on theism and in fact there is no God, my life will have been based on a lie.” Reply: But if one bets on atheism and in fact there is a God, one's life will have been based on a lie. (And one's afterlife will be based on the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched.) “But Pascal is telling us, brazenly, to form a firm belief that is unsupported by evidence and may even go directly against the evidence. That is an epistemic vice, the shirking of an epistemic obligation. As a professional philosopher I couldn't live with myself knowing I had done

that." *Reply*: Epistemic obligation is not moral obligation. No one suffers if (in this sort of case) one violates an epistemic norm.⁸ No one could possibly care except (a) academic philosophers, (b) self-righteous textbook slaves, and (c) God Himself. As history abundantly shows, the first two of these may safely be ignored; the third is ultimately to be counted on Pascal's side (see the reply to objection [ii]). What does an epistemic peccadillo matter, compared to infinite joy or damnation?

(v) "What do you mean, '-20'? I love sin! And we're not talking about just a few Sunday mornings here, but proposing to bet an entire lifestyle." *Reply*: Does anyone really love sin so much as to be rationally and without AKRASIA willing to risk eternal damnation for it? That cannot be true of many people. Indeed (to make a slightly different point), a survey would probably show that religious people are on the average happier and more satisfied with their lives than are nonreligious people⁹ (whether this happiness is *opiate* in some objectionable sense is a vexed question, resting on mixed empirical issues and philosophical concerns). How bad could a devout life be, compared to the (possible) alternative?

Actually, we are forced to agree, the devout life could be very bad indeed. The strictly correct answer to our rhetorical question leads directly to the first of the two objections to Pascal's argument that we are inclined to take more seriously. (After addressing it, we will turn to the second, *viz.*, the celebrated Many-Gods problem.)

3. THE TWO SERIOUS OBJECTIONS

We need not dwell on the potential intolerability of time-consuming weekly devotions and of even more frequent abstinence from sin; for many leading religions, including Christianity and particularly Islam, require potentially far more: specifically, *martyrdom*. If political conditions are inimical, you or I might be faced with the choice of denying our faith or being put very horribly to death. Now, even if we grant that a few Sunday mornings and even a fully reverent Christian lifestyle of the 1980's are an eminently good bet *sub specie aeternitatis*, what if we were suddenly faced with real martyrdom? Would Pascal counsel beheading for anyone in Thomas More's position? Should we be willing, *just in virtue of making the Wager*, to be cast into the Coliseum and wait patiently for the biggest lion?

A first and sensible reply would be that most of us who are reading this paper have excellent (though hardly conclusive) grounds for thinking that we will never in fact be called upon to martyr ourselves; and if so, then the Wager remains reasonable at least *for us* until such time as we are presented with ominous new contrary evidence. But this is too simple. For in order to attain the *genuinely* religious life, as is required for salvation, we must achieve a condition in which we *would* gladly martyr ourselves if called upon to do so, even though we could not rationally want this in our present agnostic state. Could it possibly be reasonable for us, now, in our *present* circumstances and state of mind, to embark on a procedure that we fully intend will brainwash us into accepting a potentially disastrous course of action?—Is this any more rational than (for money) taking a pill that will make us into suicidal depressives or lunatic daredevils?

Yes, of course it is. The expected payoff is still infinite. For death, even horrible and very painful death, is still only finitely disutile. There are fates worse than death, as is evidenced by the plain fact that countless human beings *have* willingly and not irrationally chosen death before dishonor, death rather than drastic indignity, death to save a loved one, death in service of a cherished cause, or the like. In that sense one's life is one's own, and is available as a stake among other stakes in a gamble, though such a gamble must be a desperate one.

If this is right, then our instinctive recoil from martyrdom is just that—instinctive recoil. Of course we shrink from violent death, and of course the prospect of immediate rending and shredding would very likely cause us (quickly) to rethink the Wager. But this does nothing *argumentatively* to show that the Wager is not still in fact rational. At best it shows that visceral fear drives out sound argument, and we knew that anyway. If Pascal's argument works at all, it works in the face of martyrdom, and one cannot show the falsity of this latter conditional's antecedent by simply assuming that of its consequent; one must find an independent objection to the Wager.

Let us turn at last to the Many-Gods problem.¹⁰ Pascal assumes a very specific sort of god—roughly a Christian god who rewards His own partisans with infinite bliss and who perhaps sentences opponents and even neutrals to damnation of one truly awful sort or another.¹¹ But logical space contains countless possible gods of very different natures—all infinite,

if you like—and if we can know nothing of infinitude then we cannot have reason to prefer any one of these gods to another. Unfortunately, their respective expected payoffs are diverse and conflicting: What if instead of the Christian God there is a Baal, a Moloch, a Wotan, or a Zeus, who prepares a particularly nasty fate for devout Christians? What if there is a very shy and reclusive god who does not want to be believed in and who enforces this desire by damning all believers to eternal torment? Etc., etc. Pascal assumed that *his* God has a .5 probability of existing, but this is grossly presumptuous in the face of all the other gods who cannot be ruled out *a priori*. Either Pascal's Christian God must take His place equiprobably alongside the indefinitely many other possible deities, in which case the probability of His existence is negligible, or Pascal's argument could be reiterated for every other god who offers infinite payoffs, in which case it proves too much and leads directly to contradiction due to incompatibly jealous gods.

4. A FIRST ANSWER TO THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION

A natural response is to say that for one reason or another all the various possible gods are *not* equiprobable.¹² Intuitively, it is far more likely that the Christian God, the God of the Jews, or Allah exists, than that there is a vindictively shy god or a god who rewards all and only those who do not shave themselves or a god who wears pink bowties that light up. For here, we believe, empirical evidence is relevant to a certain extent.¹³ There is *some* empirical reason for thinking that the Christian God or the God of Israel—or even Allah—exists, in the form of partially checkable scriptures, historical reports (made by ostensibly intelligent and impartial observers) of divine manifestations, and the like, even if this evidence is pathetically far from convincing; while there is simply no reason of any sort for thinking that there is a reclusive god or a divine rewarder of non-self-shaving or whatever. (We also think that the ability of a particular religion to attract and sustain millions of adherents over thousands of years is epistemically a mark in its favor, even if a very weak one.¹⁴ More strongly, we suggest that on empirical grounds Pascal might justify, with fairly high probability, a conditional premise of the form "If there is any god at all, there is a god of type *G*," where '*G*' is replaced by some complex disjunction of conjunctions of traits of the deities of all the world's great religions. If this conditional premise is granted and if sufficiently

many of the disjuncts have the infinite-payoff feature, then EUs are still on the side of accepting the disjunction (assuming one can manage it).

There are still two powerful objections to this initial response. First, how are we to choose between the gods of the major religions? Why should we believe in the Christian God rather than Yahweh? (These deities may well be considered identical by theorists, but their worship is not; they respectively require incompatible conduct.) For that matter, why should we believe in either of those rather than Allah, or in one or more of the Hindu gods? There are probably more Muslims and more Hindus than there are genuinely religious Christians or Jews, so consensus is of no help in the present regard.

Here some fine-tuning is in order, though we cannot pursue the question in any detail. (i) Empirical indications are still germane. If one looks carefully, one may find that history provides more respectable evidence (however imperfect) for one of the major gods than for another. (ii) One must attend to the details of the respective payoffs; other things being equal, one should go for the deity that offers the more attractive afterlife and/or the nastiest form of damnation. (More on this shortly.) (iii) Given the facts taken account of in (i) and (ii), one must try for the lowest common denominator in terms of tolerance: that is, one must keep one's faith as ecumenical as one dares. Some gods are more jealous than others, of course; some deny salvation to any but the adherents of some crackpot sect, while others grant it to anyone who has led the right sort of life and had an appropriately respectful attitude toward something or other. So, overall, one must balance considerations (i), (ii) and (iii) against each other for each particular case and see how the resulting EUs come out. This is a very tricky but not completely unfeasible bit of comparison shopping. Of course, we may get it wrong and back the wrong god. In fact, given the multiplicity of major deities and the narrow tolerances involved in our attempt at judicious ecumenism, we *probably will* get it wrong. But a significant chance of infinite success offset by a greater chance of infinite failure is still better odds than *no* chance of success supplemented by a *still* greater chance of failure.

A second objection to our initial line is that when nonfinite payoffs are at stake, finite probabilities simply do not matter. If the reclusive god, for ex-

ample, offers infinite bliss to those who deny him and eternal torture to his worshippers, then (so long as the probability of his existence is not a flat *zero*, which it is not) the EU of belief in him is itself still infinite and so equal to that of belief in the Christian God despite the far greater probability of the latter.

Our first reply to this is that if EUs are *equal*, then by Bayesian principles it doesn't matter what one does and one may follow one's inclinations. Moreover, so long as prudence does not rule on the matter, one would do best on *epistemically*-rational grounds to go with the probabilities, and side with one's best traditional bet rather than with a crackpot or made-up god. Indeed, in this case we think a person should be rationally faulted for failing to prefer an objectively more probable god, so long as EUs are equal.¹⁵

This response is complemented by our second general answer to the Many-Gods objection, to which we now turn.

5. LEMMA FOR A SECOND ANSWER TO THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION: ST. ANSELM ON THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

Some people may see no empirical ground for distinguishing the probabilities of the various rival theistic hypotheses, and may find no other reason for preferring any one possible supernatural being to the others. Even so, it seems reasonable for such people to employ a further, common methodological principle, universally applied in more mundane situations which present us with indefinitely large choices among down-to-earth empirical hypotheses.

In science, underdetermination of theory is rife: When we can find one hypothesis accounting for a particular body of observational data (no matter how large), then we are invariably able to produce indefinitely many alternative and competing hypotheses, each capable of accounting for the same body of data. For example, if an expression $y = f(x)$ explains such-and-such a large set of experimental results we have just obtained, then necessarily these same results could equally have been accommodated by $y = f(x) + g(z)$, where $g(z) = 0$ for all observations made prior to now. The two equations (actually infinitely many, according to varying versions of $g[z]$) are of course equivalent with respect to all past observations, and so the observations cannot ad-

judicate between them; but they make different predictions as regards future observations, and so there is a genuine question as to which we should rationally adopt. As everyone knows, we escape such indecision by using the principle of simplicity, and choose the simplest of all such hypotheses.¹⁶

For the case of theistic hypotheses, we suppose that one postulate is simpler than another if its statement requires fewer nonadventitious predicates (a predicate is adventitious if it is just *made up* by the theologian, in the manner of 'grue,' to abbreviate a longer complex expression). Now, St. Anselm called our attention to the very remarkable predicate "absolutely perfect," which is theologically unique in that it implies all the other predicates traditionally ascribed to God.¹⁷ In proclaiming the existence of an absolutely perfect or "greatest possible" being, the theist offers a complete description of the deity thus postulated. The theist's brief statement, that his object of worship necessarily exemplifies a maximally consistent set of great-making properties, enables one to determine for any property P whether the putative being does or does not possess P: If having P contributes to the excellence of a thing that does have P, then an absolutely perfect being has P; otherwise the being does not have P. (If there are evaluatively *neutral* properties that a divine being could exemplify, these presumably do not affect the rationality of our choice. We shall say a bit more below on the question of neutral properties.)

By contrast, a statement of the existence of any deity other than the absolutely perfect being will inevitably be more complex. For example: Although there is a very considerable body of ancient Greek literature regarding Zeus, we are still far from having a complete description of Zeus' character. We are informed that Zeus, who weighs the lives of men and informs the Fates of his decisions, can nevertheless change his mind; but we have no notion of *just* how unsteadfast he is and in what ways. He is sometimes described as being asleep, but we have no idea how many hours of sleep he gets per day. We know he is not omnipotent, but we are given no detail here. And so on.

No one would suggest that Zeus constitutes the simplest alternative to Anselmian theism. But someone might be attracted by the hypothesis that there is a deity who is almost perfect except in such-and-such a respect, say, except for falling short of being 100% just. The trouble is that that characterization provides

incomplete information; we would need some further specification of the precise ways in which that god may be unjust.

Here again there are two obvious objections. First, one may question the sweeping assumption that it is within the power of a single nonadventitious predicate to contain a full description of all the Divine attributes. After all, for some properties P it is hardly obvious whether P adds to or subtracts from the excellence of its possessor. For example, we usually assume that *omniscience* is a perfection or at least an admirable quality. Yet someone might argue that a being whose knowledge is forever incomplete and who constantly, nobly seeks to increase it—who never ceases from inquiry and learning—is more to be admired (and certainly more to be emulated) than one for whom the concepts of seeking and inquiry do not even make sense. A more familiar example might be that of *timelessness*. Theologians have insisted throughout the ages that a being who exists in time is therefore in some important sense limited or circumscribed; so they have thought it necessary to release God from temporal confinement and place Him above or beyond time.¹⁸ However, some philosophers have recently maintained the contrary—that Divine majesty requires temporality. E.g., J. R. Lucas writes: "To say that God is outside time, as many theologians do, is to deny, in effect, that God is a person."¹⁹ So it seems that the application of the predicate "absolutely perfect" does not settle the temporal (or atemporal) nature of God.

A defender of Anselm can reply that the problem is merely epistemic. The objector's two examples show only that it is not always *obvious* whether the possession of a property P is an advantage or a liability, not that there is no fact of the matter. We might even go further and contend that it is always *knowable* whether P confers positive or negative value; perhaps careful, thorough analysis would inevitably reveal that in light of the various value judgments to which we are already committed, coherence requires our ascribing such-and-such a determinate value to P. Be that as it may, both parties to the dispute assume that the temporality question is one of fact, that temporality either is excluded or is required by the notion of absolute perfection.²⁰

The second objection we anticipate is that the scientific principle of simplicity keys on laws rather than on entities, in that when we are confronted with infinitely many competing scientific hypotheses—

paradigmatically in curve-fitting exercises—the alternatives do not differ in their existential claims, but rather presuppose the same set of phenomena and differ only in the laws they posit as governing those phenomena. For example, upon experimenting with freely falling bodies near the earth's surface, Galileo found that all the results satisfied $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$. The equation $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2 + f(z)$ accommodates his results just as completely and must be considered as a competitor; but all parties are in full agreement concerning the existence of all the particulars relevant to the phenomena under investigation. In Pascal's case, by contrast, the dispute is precisely over which particular to postulate as the source of the great reward we may anticipate—not over which of a set of regularities obtains. Moreover, while it is intuitively obvious (if difficult to spell out) that putative laws of nature may be compared with respect to simplicity, it is quite possible to deny altogether the appropriateness of gauging the relative "simplicity" of two supernatural beings, or indeed of any two *particulars*; it makes moderately good sense to ascribe a degree of simplicity to a law which is represented by a mathematical expression, since the degree can be measured by the number of terms the expression contains, the powers of its variables, and other well-marked and quantifiable features, but beings, individuals, are not capable of such representation.

To this we respond that a particular being or individual can be *posited* only under a description, and descriptions can be compared with respect to simplicity if predicates can. And if predicates *cannot* be compared with respect to simplicity, it is hard to see how laws themselves can; thus we see no contrast in comparability between hypothesized laws and posited particulars.²¹

6. OUR SECOND RESPONSE TO THE WAGER

The respective choices we face when confronted, on the one hand, with Galileo's equation and all its rivals, and on the other with our array of possible superbeings, are basically similar. For the nature of every particular is manifested in the laws it obeys; if the law governing the free fall of heavy objects near the earth's surface were other than Galileo's, then either the earth or some heavy objects would be different objects from what we now believe them to be. Thus in science as in theology, we may describe our

problem as an uncertainty regarding the *kinds of particulars* we should postulate.

It also seems, therefore, that distinct individuals may be compared with respect to their simplicity. We may say that one individual is simpler than another if its properties can be described by simpler statements, that is, if its behavior can be described by simpler laws.

If we are realists enough to regard acceptable scientific hypotheses as presumed to be literally true, then it is also not unreasonable to select the Anselmian hypothesis rather than any of its many rival theologies. A staunch scientific realist thinks of the principle of simplicity not merely as an aesthetic consideration or a measure of short-term convenience, but as providing the best chance that we shall make the correct choice when faced with an infinite array of equally well confirmed hypotheses. Reason recommends that we employ the same principle in our theological context.²²

Our second approach to the Many-Gods problem is of course troubled by the Problem of Evil: The Anselmian hypothesis of an absolutely perfect superbeing is not obviously compatible with the amount and variety of suffering we know the world to contain. We shall not suggest any particular theodicy here, but only point out that for purposes of Pascal's Wager there need only be some nonnegligible chance that an adequate theodicy exists; the Wager is still prudentially rational if we can assign a nonzero probability to the hope that the Problem of Evil admits of solution.

7. A THIRD ANSWER TO THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION

A deeper and more authentic approach would take into account the special nature of the reward on which one is bid to wager. First, we are to realize that what Pascal is urging is for the gambler to set his eyes upon a prize of a sort entirely different from the "poisonous pleasures" Pascal advises him to abandon. The gratification to be pursued by the religious seeker is not something extrinsic to the devout life, but an organic outgrowth of it. It does not differ in kind from the seeking, as if one were to be handed a new IBM color-graphics monitor as a prize for having won the Carrboro Marathon, but is the natural fruit of one's way of life. Theists in every age have anticipated the dissolving of their narrow selves in

the ecstasy of a God-centered life here on earth and, more to Pascal's point, their eventual smooth translation into a disembodied existence in holy felicity—an eternal love of the Divine. A human being becomes capable of this kind of love only after he/she has grasped the idea of God. Maimonides puts it as follows:

What is the proper love of God? It is the love of the Lord with a great and very strong love so that one's soul shall be tied to the love of the Lord, and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love-sick individual, whose mind is at no time free from his passion for a particular woman, the thought of her filling his heart at all times, when sitting down or rising up, even when he is eating or drinking. Still more intense should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him.²³

According to classical theologians, one who has spent one's life as a passionate servant of the Lord will have developed and perfected one's soul adequately to have acquired the capacity to partake in the transmundane bliss that awaits in the afterlife. The suitably groomed soul, when released from its earthly fetters, will bask in the radiance of the Divine presence and delight in the adoring communion with a loving God (if this is a multiply mixed metaphor, it doesn't matter).

It is appropriate at this point to comment again upon objection (ii) considered in sec. 2 above, the complaint that because of its calculating and mercenary character, the Wager is both morally repugnant and inefficacious, and incompatible with the spirit of any genuine religion. Many people would recoil from a Wagerer just as they would from a hypocrite who went out of his way to brighten the mood of an enfeebled (but wealthy) elderly person for no loftier reason than to increase his chance of being mentioned in that person's will. Such misgivings could not easily be dismissed if Pascal had had in mind a pie-in-the-sky, anthropocentric sort of heaven such as that which Heinrich Heine sardonically claimed to be reserved for the righteous. According to Heine's mouth-watering description, Heaven is a place where roast geese fly around with gravy boats in their bills and there are brooks of bouillon and champagne and everyone revels in eternal feasting and carousing. It would and should be hard to admire anyone who pursued a godly, righteous and sober life mainly in the hope of gaining admission to that kind of paradise. But we are considering the Wager in the context of an infinitely more exalted afterlife. Suppose that

we have always had great admiration for Smith because of the noteworthy humanitarian works he has performed, and that lately we have heard of further truly heroic acts of benevolence on his part that make his previous accomplishments pale into insignificance. Then we should hardly be condemned for making efforts to discover more information concerning Smith's further laudable deeds—even if we are fully conscious of the sentiments of Thomas Carlyle, who wrote, "Does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him?"²⁴ Most people would find our conduct neither ignoble nor stupid, even if our efforts to discover the grounds of Smith's greatly intensified worthiness were done explicitly for the sake of feeling ourselves made higher by doing reverence to a more exalted personage.

Let us return for a moment to the notion of expected utility. Rationality requires that when faced with a number of choices one is to bet on the hypothesis having the highest EU. In the special case in which the various outcomes are equiprobable, one's choice is then determined by the magnitudes of the respective payoffs. In Pascal's situation, then, where D ranges over possible deities: The degree of justified inclination to embark on a process leading to worshipping D = the probability that D exists × the magnitude of religious fulfillment to be gained by worshipping D provided D does exist. And when D₁, D₂, . . . are equiprobable, the degree of justified inclination and the rationality of one's choice must be determined by the second factor on the right-hand side.

It is the crux of our problem that for more than one deity there is an eternal and hence infinite payoff. Still, the very nature of the sublime gratification the believer aspires to ensures that its quality will vary with the character of the deity he/she bets on. When Carlyle spoke of the self-enhancement resulting from doing reverence to what is above oneself, he had in mind an entirely worldly context. But when the object of one's homage is a divine being, the uplift is immeasurably greater. Pascal wagered on the ecstasy to be derived from exalting a supereminent being and basking in its radiance, and naturally, the more glorious and sublime the being, the greater that worshipful ecstasy would be. Thus, Pascal's argument leads us to maximize religious benefit by positing that superbeing which is the very most worthy of worship, *viz.*, the absolutely perfect being, which

we take to be the God of Judeo-Christian theism and of some other, non-Western religions as well, minus some of the tendentious if traditional special features ascribed to Him by sectarian practitioners of those religions.²⁵

8. CONCLUSION

If one does not already incline toward theism, or perhaps even if one does so incline, there is still a temptation—a powerful one—to refuse to take the Wager seriously. How, again, can one listen to all this stuff about grooming one's soul, absolute perfection, infinite ecstasy, and the like, if one (as things are) *simply does not* believe in any god and regards theism of any sort as being on an equal epistemic footing with belief in the Easter Bunny?

To this we say: Consider the arguments fairly. We maintain that the *standard* and ubiquitous intuitive rejection of the Wager by philosophers is grounded in a confused conflation of the objections we have already addressed, particularly: the feeling that one could not do anything about one's beliefs even if one tried, the feeling that theism has probability zero, and the feeling that any failure to proportion one's belief to the evidence is a shameful if secret vice. But once these various misgivings have been separated and cast explicitly in the form of objections, they are seen to have little rational force.²⁶ If one wishes to decline the Wager one will have to think of more subtle criticisms than those which have appeared in the literature to date.

We do not claim that our case is conclusive, or that the Wager is now dictated by reason. We do contend that at the present stage of investigation Pascal's argument is unrefuted and not unreasonable.

Let us pray.

NOTES

1. In "The Logic of Pascal's Wager" (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 9 [1972]), Ian Hacking distinguishes the "equal probabilities" version of the argument from a simpler "dominance" version and from a mixed "dominating expectation" version. He also provides a fascinating account of the historical context and of the early reactions to Pascal's "Infini-rien."

2. Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," reprinted in this volume, pp. 80–82.

3. Of course there are degrees of belief in between, including a significant range of agnosticism. The possibility of metaphysical agnosticism accompanied by a selflessly beneficent—even saintly—life is a piquant one, and much debated by some major religions, but we shall neglect it here.

4. Again, agnostics and atheists might not in fact be treated the same, depending on one's idea of God's jealousy, but we pass over this theological tangle.

5. The distinctness of these two notions of "rationality" should be obvious enough. The second seems not epistemic at all; but for that matter cost-benefit considerations have recently begun to enter into traditional epistemology in a disconcerting way: See Lycan, "Epistemic Value," *Synthese* 64 (1985), and Hilary Kornblith, "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action," *Philosophical Review* XCII (1983).

6. William James, "The Will to Believe," extract reprinted in this volume, pp. 91-98.

7. Someone experiences an ominous medical symptom, and does not—cannot—go to the doctor because he is paralyzed with fear. He ends up dead. Someone else does not—cannot—make Pascal's Wager because he is paralyzed with textbook rationality. He ends up dead. Permanently.

8. Indeed, if Pascal is right in conjecturing that the probabilities are even, one may not even be violating any norm; it is arguable that when probabilities are even, one may believe as one likes. (On this issue, see Lehrer, Roelofs and Swain, "Reason and Evidence: An Unsolved Problem," *Ratio* 9 [1967], and George Mavrodes, "Belief, Proportionality, and Probability," in M. Bradie and K. Sayre, eds. *Reason and Decision [Bowling Green Studies in Applied Philosophy, Vol. III]* (1981). Mavrodes's article is the most trenchant examination we know of the thesis that one ought always to "proportion one's belief to the evidence.")

9. Actual demographic surveys do show at least that religious people fare better with respect to divorce, suicide, and other indicators of troubled personal lives.

10. See Hacking, *op. cit.*, p. 190; Cargile, "Pascal's Wager," *Philosophy* 41 (1966), p. 255; Stich, "The Recombinant DNA Debate," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7 (1978).

11. There was nothing dialectically suspect about this at the time; Pascal was writing specifically for fellow Christians whose faith was wavering, stagnant, or lapsed.

12. Cargile (*op. cit.*) briefly considers this option, but dismisses it without much ado and goes on (p. 256) to press the negligible-probability version of the Many-Gods objection. Our own responses to that objection work, we believe, against Cargile's version in particular.

13. See Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977), in which the empiricalness of theistic hypotheses is emphasized.

14. One might wish to join Peirce, and more recently D. M. Armstrong, in seeing consensus as a mark of epistemic probity, though the epistemic value attaches more properly to methods of producing belief than to beliefs themselves.

15. It still may be protested (as it has been by Cargile in correspondence and by Michael Resnik in conversation) that the very idea of an infinite EU is still intrinsically problematic. In the St. Petersburg paradox, for example, a game is constructed which affords an infinite expected payoff in money but which no even faintly sensible person would pay more than a moderate amount of money to play (cf. R. D. Luce and H. Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1957, p. 20]). We cannot take up the paradox in any detail here, but we are inclined

to follow Bernoulli himself in ascribing it to the declining marginal value of money. If the game were recast in terms of some intrinsic value, such as happiness, and if the infinite payoff were made possible to obtain (which presumably requires eternal life), then it does not seem to us unreasonable to pay an arbitrarily large amount to play it (unless one in some way knows that one will not win).

16. For a defense of appeals to simplicity against various skeptical objections, see Schlesinger, "Induction and Parsimony," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1971), Lycan, "Occam's Razor," *Metaphilosophy* 6 (1975), and Lycan, "Epistemic Value," *loc. cit.*

17. This simple idea has not received nearly the attention it deserves.

18. This seems particularly reasonable if one supposes that time is nomologically, even metaphysically intertwined with space and with matter-energy, in such a way that time is inextricably part of the physical world and so part of creation.

19. *A Treatise on Time and Space* (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 300.

20. There is of course the possibility that timelessness is evaluatively neutral and that two beings identical in every respect save that one is timeless while the other is not cannot differ in degree of excellence. If true this would refute Anselm's thesis, since the property of absolute perfection would not then determine the temporal nature of its possessor. Anselmian theology must presuppose that every property P that is a candidate for ascription to a divine being must either enhance or diminish the excellence of its instances; there cannot exist any neutral divine attribute. Though a fairly strong thesis, this does not seem unreasonable to us.

21. For that matter, it is by no means obvious that the questions of the kinds of particulars that constitute the furniture of the universe and the laws that govern those particulars are fundamentally different, or that the two notions of "initial conditions" and the "laws of nature" are truly separate and independent. In order to describe the initial conditions prevailing at t_0 one must give a full characterization of every particular existing at t_0 , and we cannot fully have described a particular until we have listed all the properties in virtue of which that particular belongs to its particular kind, which in turn requires listing all the fundamental physical laws it obeys.

22. A further if small advantage of the Anselmian conception of God is that it answers to the feelings of many people that some version of the Ontological Argument is plausible. We do not share that feeling ourselves, but many excellent philosophers have manifested it; and unless the absolutely perfect being is the god of choice, the Ontological Argument is simply and obviously a non-starter—no one would even think of trying to prove the existence of Zeus, or of Baal, by Anselmian means.

23. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Teshuvah X.

24. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: J. Fraser, 1841), p. 1.

25. For a loosely related argument and a limning of the connection between Pascal's Wager and Kierkegaard's "leap of faith," see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion," *Monist* 60 (1977).

26. Oddly, the Many-Gods problem, which is surely the most powerful philosophical objection to the Wager, does not play a significant role in people's immediate intuitive revulsion; most people do not even think of it.

WILLIAM JAMES

The Will to Believe*

I

Let us give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either *live* or *dead*. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: It is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. Options may be of several kinds. They may be first, *living* or *dead*; secondly, *forced* or *avoidable*; thirdly, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.

1. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you: "Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan," it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: "Be an agnostic or be a Christian," it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

2. Next, if I say to you: "Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it," I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, "Either love me or hate me," "Either call my theory true or call it false," your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, "Either accept this truth or go without it," I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

3. Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. *Per contra*, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds an hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: he believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done.

It will facilitate our discussion if we keep all these distinctions well in mind.

II

The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion. When we look at certain facts,

*Extracts from William James, "The Will to Believe," an Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. First published in the *New World*, 1896.