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Pascal's Wager and the Many Gods Objection

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Abstract: **Pascal's Wager is finding ever more defenders who aim to undermine the old Many Gods Objection. It is my thesis that they are mistaken. After describing the Wager and the objection, I report on Jeff Jordan's repeated attempt to limit legitimate religious hypotheses to those that are traditional. In separate sections I criticize Jordan, first coming from epistemology and second from anthropology. Then I describe George Schlesinger's repeated appeal to the 'simplest' religious hypothesis, and argue that it fails for similar reasons. Finally, I summarize and reject miscellaneous defences of Pascal by Robert Anderson, Bradley Armour-Garb, James Franklin, Joshua Golding, and Nicholas Rescher.**

Introduction

Pascal's Wager faces a standard challenge known as the Many Gods Objection (Diderot in the 1700s, Cargile (1966), Martin (1975) and (1990), Dalton (1975), Flew (1976), Kaufmann (1978), Mackie (1982), Oppy (1990), Gale (1991), Mougin & Sober (1994), Carter (2000)). In recent years this challenge has been taken up by Schlesinger (1977), (1988) and (1994), Lycan & Schlesinger (1989), Rescher (1985), Jordan (1991) and (1994b), Golding (1994), Anderson (1995), Franklin (1998), and Armour-Garb (1999). Moreover, it is implicitly rejected by others who endorse the Wager, e.g. Eastwood (1936) and the French writers cited therein, Brown (1984), Armour (1993), Morris (1994), Quinn (1994), and Bartholomew (1996). (For a list of other Pascalians beginning with Socrates, see Ryan (1994).) Nor is Pascal's Wager a purely academic matter. Millions of people who pray, go to church, and believe in God do so at least occasionally, I suspect, from the sense 'better safe than sorry'. But is this right? In what follows, I shall argue that the Many Gods Objection is more powerful than Pascalians have been willing to admit.

The Wager

Pascal's dialectic presupposes that the traditional arguments for and against the existence of God are unconvincing. Given this premise, Pascal invokes

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the following sort of decision-theoretic matrix. (For an elucidation of distinct versions of Pascal's Wager, see Hacking (1972).)

(1)	*God exists*	*God does not*
You believe in God and act accordingly	(A) $+\infty$	(C) $+100$
You do not	(B) $-\infty$	(D) $+100$

Let's suppose God exists. If you embrace God, you will be rewarded with eternal life in heavenly bliss (cell A), whereas if you reject God you will suffer eternal torment for your impiety (cell B). But now let's suppose that God does not exist. The utility for cell C will more or less match that for D, depending on your individual personality. On the one hand, cell C might have greater utility for you than D, if religion gives you comfort and a sense of meaningfulness (cf. Bower (2000)); on the other hand, C might have less utility for you if religion discourages you from acquiring earthly pleasures. Either way, your utility will be merely finite, and for the sake of argument we can suppose that C and D are each equal to 100. Now (reading across in the top row of (1)), the utility of believing in God = ($+\infty \times$ some finite probability) + (100 $\times$ some finite probability) = $+\infty$. On the other hand, the utility of not believing in God = ($-\infty \times$ some finite probability) + (100 $\times$ some finite probability) = $-\infty$. Since the expected utility of believing in God exceeds that of not believing, it's rational to believe in God and irrational not to. (This is true no matter how small the probability of God's existence, so long as it's finite, and no matter what the values of B–D are, so long as B and D are not infinite gains and C is not an infinite loss.)

The Many Gods Objection

Matrix (1) assumes that there is either a highly particular kind of god (one who infinitely rewards worshippers), or no god at all. But in fact there are many possible gods, and any adequate cost/benefit analysis must take them into account. For instance, imagine, following Gale (1991, 350) a god who rewards you with infinite bliss if you make a point of stepping on every third sidewalk crack that you walk over, and who metes out infinite punishment if you do not.

(2)	*Sidewalk god exists*	*Sidewalk god does not*
You believe in sidewalk god and act accordingly	$+\infty$	$+100$
You do not	$-\infty$	$+100$

Since there is no reason to adopt analysis (1) over (2), there is no decision-theoretic reason to believe in Pascal's god rather than the sidewalk god. (Although the gods as described in cases (1) and (2) are not necessarily incompatible, it's clear that for any hypothesized god there is some alternative possible god whose postulation

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nullifies any decision-theoretic rationale for worshipping one rather than the other.)

Jordan's principles unsound

In reply to the Many Gods Objection, Jeff Jordan (1991) and (1994b) denies that *logical* possibility implies non-zero subjective probability.

(*) $\Box P \rightarrow pr(P) > 0$

Just because Gale's god hypothesis is logically possible, that does not mean that it belongs on our matrix of relevant alternatives.

I agree that (*) is incorrect, and that any argument that depended on it would be unacceptable. However, the Many Gods Objection relies on a quite different principle, the principle that *epistemic* possibility is somehow connected to subjective probability (more on this below). The question we need to ask, then, is this: what kinds of theological hypotheses are epistemically possible?

Jordan judges that Pascal-defeating hypotheses, like those invented by Richard Gale and Walter Kaufmann, ought to be dismissed.

> **A rejection of Kaufmann-like hypotheses is justified by noting the ad hoc nature of such hypotheses: there is no backing of tradition. Such a hypothesis, being 'cooked up', is not, in Jamesian terms, a 'genuine option' … . That is to say, these cooked up 'religious' hypotheses are so bizarre that one is justified in assigning them, if not a zero probability, a probability assignment so small as to warrant only neglect.** ((1991), 314; cf. (1994b), 107)

> **When one tosses a coin considered fair, it is possible that it land on its edge, remain suspended in mid-air, or disappear, or any number of bizarre but possible events might occur. Yet, because there is no reason to believe that these events are plausible, one quite properly neglects their possibility and considers the partition of 'heads' and 'tails' jointly to exhaust the possibilities.** ((1994b), 107; cf. (1993), 54)

Jordan's work is valuable because it identifies, correctly I believe, the common but heretofore unspoken reply by Pascalians to the Many Gods Objection. Nonetheless, I shall argue that it is fallacious.

Before proceeding, I would like to clean up Jordan's argument. First, the only probability 'so small as to warrant only neglect', when we are dealing with infinite payoffs, is zero. Second, I need to disentangle the passage just cited. It refers to tradition, the ad hoc, 'genuine options', and the bizarre as if these all amounted to the same thing, but they do not. As a rough approximation, a belief is backed by tradition iff it belongs to some tradition, and it belongs to some tradition iff it endures as a belief across generations. As a result, a traditional belief is believed by (the members of) a multi-generation population; by analogy, a traditional *value* is valued by a multi-generation population, and a traditional *hypothesis* is hypothesized by a multi-generation population. It may be that traditional hypotheses are never ad hoc. It does not follow, however, that *non*-traditional hypotheses

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are *always* ad hoc. For ad hoc explanations are those lacking independent motivation, and there can be motivations for positing a proposition other than tradition. (Much more needs to be said about the metaphysics and epistemology of tradition, but that is a topic for another paper.)

The notion of a genuine option allows for quite a few different interpretations (Saka (1999)). For current purposes I shall assume:

> (Df) For subject S, P is a genuine option iff S is willing to consider seriously the possibility that P might be true.

'Bizarre' is rhetorically a term of abuse. As such, I suggest, it lacks truth conditions and instead possesses *attitude conditions* like the following (see Saka (1998)).

> (Df) Speaker S regards P as bizarre iff S regards P (i) as unusual and (ii) therefore with disfavour.

With the foregoing clarifications in mind, I read Jordan as relying on the following principles:

(1) Bizarre hypotheses have zero probability.
(2) Ad hoc hypotheses have zero probability.
(3) Non-traditional hypotheses have zero probability.
(4) The probability of a sidewalk-style god existing is comparable to that of a coin landing on its edge in a coin toss; both are zero.
(5) Unless P counts as a genuine option, P has zero probability.

As you can guess, I find all of these unsatisfactory. Principle (1), though it may be intended as a variant formulation of (2), (3), and/or (5), comes across as mere name-calling. Principle (2) strikes me as invalid. Einstein's cosmological constant, for instance, is an ad hoc tweak that's meant to make for a steady-state universe, for which there is no conclusive evidence one way or the other; yet, for all we know, Einstein's constant truly belongs in his equations. Moreover, now that the issue has been raised, I know that, for all I know, the cosmological constant is correct, in which case the subjective probability that is ideally assigned to that proposition is, though quite small, non-zero. In short, the adhocery of a proposition does not absolutely nullify its prescribed subjective probability.

Principle (3) likewise strikes me as invalid. If we were seriously to adopt the principle that propositions unsanctioned by tradition are to be classified as epistemically impossible, then new beliefs could never justifiably be adopted. For example, I could not justifiably acquire the belief that my new address is Chiquita Boulevard, for there is no established tradition of anyone's believing that Saka's new address is Chiquita Boulevard. Now it's possible that Jordan has something different in mind. Perhaps all he means is that religious beliefs backed by tradition are more likely to be true than those that are not. But this suggestion fails in two ways. First, it is unclear why tradition should carry any epistemic weight at all in

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the case of religion, where traditions are at odds with each other, and where, moreover, explanations are available for the persistence of traditional beliefs that has nothing to do with their truth. Second, even if tradition gives Pascal's hypothesis far greater probability than Gale's, there would still be no reason for assigning to the latter an absolutely zero probability.

Can following tradition be validated by methodological conservatism? According to methodological conservatism, it is rational for us to continue holding some beliefs in virtue of our already holding them. One rationale is partly utilitarian, insofar as revising beliefs costs cognitive resources. Another rationale is more interestingly epistemic: on pain of scepticism, we *must* hold on to some of our background beliefs if we are to evaluate incoming hypotheses (Sklar (1975)). But this argument does Jordan no good. If a religious proposition P currently numbers among our background beliefs, then (assuming methodological conservatism) we *already* have reason to believe P; Pascalian calculations are beside the point, as they won't affect P's epistemic status for us. On the other hand, if P does *not* currently count as one of our background beliefs, there is no reason for us to be conservative about it.

One last rationale for conservatism treats tradition as a criterion of justification rather than as constitutive of justification: if a belief has stood the test of time then it must have something going for it (Adler (1990)). This applies, however, only if a belief has empirical consequences, and only if the believer is open-minded. Adler's account explicitly rules out pseudo-scientific beliefs, and it may rule out religious beliefs as well. Moreover, we need to distinguish between individual and social principles of conservatism. In the former case, *my* believing P gives *me* reason to continue believing P. But this does not apply to Pascal's Wager, where I'm supposed to start off agnostic. In the social case, my knowing that *others* believe P gives *me* reason to believe P. But clearly, if my justification for believing P is that the proposition P has stood the test of experience, then my justification is defeated if I learn that still others believe $\sim$P, for then the proposition $\sim$P too has stood the test of experience.

Turning to claim (4), I'd like to say that the analogy is badly flawed. *Normally*, when we gamble by tossing a coin, we implicitly hold that the decision mechanism does not halt until the coin lands as either heads or tails (and in an acceptable manner). That is to say, if a coin lands on its edge, then the toss doesn't count as successful, and the coin is tossed again. Thus, the partition really includes just two possibilities, heads and tails. If it were otherwise, then it would, in fact, be a theoretical mistake to deny the possibility of a coin landing on its edge, and a prudential mistake to disregard it whenever the stakes were sufficiently high.

Moving on, principle (5)'s distinction between a genuine and a spurious option is unclear (Saka (1999)). For now, let's suppose that a genuine option is a hypothesis that one is willing to consider seriously. In this case, if John Doe is unable or flatly *unwilling* to even *consider* the possibility of the sidewalk god, then Jordan is

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right: the sidewalk hypothesis is not a genuine option for John Doe, and it has zero subjective probability or it doesn't even enter his analysis of costs and benefits. But notice what just happened. We've moved from discussing what an informed and reasonable person rationally believes to discussing what *John Doe* believes. (As Oppy asks, 'What's so great about getting very *stupid* people to believe in God?', Oppy (1990), 164).) Yes, those who think that Pascal's (1) is a complete and justifiable partition of possibilities could very well conclude that it is rational to believe in God, but this is little more than a fact of psychology. Our real question is, what does the actual justifiable partition of possibilities look like? To say 'John Doe should exclude the sidewalk god hypothesis because he in fact does', is unacceptable. In order legitimately to assign a probability of zero to a proposition, one needs to have a reason for doing so.

Jordan might respond that since Pascal's Wager is a prudential argument, it is a mistake for me to invoke ideal reasoners. Because human cognitive resources are limited, it is justifiable and rational – indeed, it is necessary – for us to omit infinitely many god possibilities from analyses. As far as this goes, I am willing to agree; we *cannot* take every possibility into specific account. Some epistemically possible hypotheses will not, and perhaps should not, receive any probability assignment (which is different from receiving an assignment of zero). That said, it remains the case that those few hypotheses which do arise should receive some probability assignment or another. To fail to consider the sidewalk god in the first place may give an excuse for leaving it out of the decision-theoretic matrix, but to consider any hypothesis and then deliberately omit it is legitimate only if one has reason to suppose that it has negligible possibility (where 'negligible', in the context of an infinite payoff, means *zero*).

Now I'm in a position to formulate my own counterpart to Jordan's straw principle (*).

(**) (a) If, for all S knows, P is true, then S should not assign to P a probability of zero.
(b) And if S knows that, for all S knows, P is true, then S should assign to P a probability greater than zero.

There is a difference between assigning to P a probability of zero, and not assigning to P any probability at all. The former happens when you conclude that P is necessarily false. The latter happens when the possibility of P does not even occur to you. There is also the cognitive state that assigns to P a non-specific range of probability, e.g. the precise 'more than seventy-five per cent' and the vague 'highly probable'. The fact that it is practical for the human mind to assign such non-specific probabilities as 'more than zero' suggests that it is prudentially rational for us to consider any god possibility that presents itself.

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To make Jordan's appeal to genuine options plausible, therefore, I propose to reformulate principle (5).

> (5′) Unless P *should* count as a genuine option, P should have zero probability or no assigned probability.

This interpretation replaces a substantive but invalid principle with one that is correct but vacuous.

To summarize, I have identified five distinct principles advocated by Jordan, I have clarified and rebutted them, and in the cases of (*) and (5) I have offered revisions, (**) and (5′).

Jordan (personal communication) suggests that principles (1)–(5) work conjunctively. The idea is that if a hypothesis is bizarre, ad hoc, non-traditional, comparable to a fluke coin toss, *and* spurious rather than genuine, *then* it has negligible probability. It's true that at least some of these qualities may reduce the probability of a hypothesis, and it's true that in concert they may reduce the probability of a hypothesis more than any one would by itself. But I fail to see how (1)–(4) can drive the probability of any hypothesis down to zero, which is what is required when we are dealing with infinite payoffs, and I fail to see how (5′) can be applied without begging the question. Besides, even if Jordan's most important principles were taken together, they would not rule out all rival Pascal-defeating hypotheses, as I shall next argue.

Jordan's principles ineffective

So far I've argued against Jordan's rationales for rejecting the sidewalk god hypothesis. But even if they were valid, his reply to the Many Gods Objection would *still* fail. The reason is that, aside from the sidewalk god and an infinite number of other devastating possibilities, there are also a number of damaging hypotheses that are not ad hoc, that are sanctioned by tradition, and that should count as genuine options for those who lack convincing arguments for or against the existence of God.

To begin with, consider the cockroach god. Ellen DeGeneres writes,

> **Sometimes I wonder what God is like. We picture God to look like us … . But … maybe God looks more like those drawings of aliens … . Maybe God is a huge sphere with millions of ears or antennas like a satellite dish for excellent reception. Maybe God is a giant bug, and when we die we're going to have to account for every cockroach and ant we've killed.** (DeGeneres (1995), 129)

This line of speculation yields the following analysis:

(3)

	God exists	*God does not*
You worship bugs	$+\infty$	$+100$
You do not	$-\infty$	$+100$

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My critic may insist that Ellen DeGeneres is a comedian whose comments are intended as humour rather than as serious speculation. But humour is perfectly compatible with utter seriousness; 'I am never so serious as when I am joking', said Robert Frost. Indeed, the cockroach gag would fail to work as humour if it did not 'make sense' on some level that speaks to the audience. Therefore the cockroach hypothesis should count as a genuine option. Moreover, it is independently motivated rather than ad hoc. As for psychological motivation, DeGeneres aimed not to refute Pascal's Wager, but simply to get a laugh, and maybe to poke fun at her childhood belief in an anthropomorphic god. As for epistemic motivation, belief in a buggy god may be derived from the fact that there are 400,000 species of beetle compared to 8,000 species of mammal, and that total insect biomass exceeds all other animal biomass. (This is why J. B. S. Haldane said, 'The Creator, if he exists, has a special preference for beetles'.) If any creature on earth at all is made in the image of God, there exists some reason to infer that it is the beetle, maybe the cockroach.

My critic may deny that the cockroach god is backed by tradition. Given that there is a Hindu monkey cult, a Hindu viper cult, and a Hindu rat cult, and given the Egyptian veneration of scarab beetles, the critic's self-assured claim is in doubt. Nonetheless, it may be right. Let us consider a different case, then, the professor's god (Kaufmann (1978), Mackie (1982), Martin (1990)). Imagine a god who rewards intellectually scrupulous sceptics and punishes fawning worshippers. As J. L. Mackie writes:

> **... there might be a god who looked with more favour on honest doubters or atheists who, in Hume's words, proportioned their belief to the evidence, than on mercenary manipulators of their own understanding. Indeed, this would follow from the ascription to God of moral goodness ... .** (Mackie (1982), 203)

But is this correct? Is it true that selfish decision-theoretic theism is immoral, and that only evidentialist doubt would be rewarded by a just god? Philip Quinn (1994) for one does not think so. He argues that the exercise of Pascalian reasoning is not really a case of mercenary manipulation but an act of love, and for all I know he is right. Unless he were to claim that he is infallible, however, he must acknowledge that there is some possibility, however minuscule, that he is wrong. Unless we are dogmatic, then, Quinn's argument does not eliminate Mackie's god as a possibility. Hence our analysis ought to encompass the following:

(4)

	God exists	*God does not*
You believe in God on Pascalian grounds	$-\infty$	$+100$
You do not	$+\infty$	$+100$

Given this analysis, there is reason *not* to believe in God on Pascalian grounds.

The professor's god hypothesis is not ad hoc. It is not motivated solely as a means for refuting the rationality of Pascal's Wager, but also by a certain concep-

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tion of moral goodness. Nor is it non-traditional; as a hypothesis, it has been transmitted from one generation of philosophers to another, e.g. from Mackie to me to my students. Of course it is not as *big* a tradition as, say, Pascal's Catholic tradition (counting either by number of generations or by number of practitioners). But to stipulate a critical size at which a tradition's epistemic weight changes from zero to positive would be arbitrary and ad hoc.

Jordan might respond that epistemic possibilities are limited to traditional *beliefs* and that, since no one actually believes in the existence of the professor's god, even though many have traditionally speculated about it, its epistemic probability is zero. Whether or not this approach comports with the facts of religious belief – personally I suspect that plenty of theists do believe in a type (4) god – it makes the appeal to tradition more arbitrary. If tradition is relevant at all, why should it be relevant to beliefs but not to fears, hopes, speculations, and other propositional attitudes?

Regardless of how the appeal to tradition might be finessed, plenty of clearly traditional religious hypotheses remain. Suppose, for instance, that there is a god who rewards true believers, punishes worshippers of false gods, and sends to a neutral limbo children, unevangelized peoples, and honest agnostics. This, according to some biblical traditions, is precisely what the Christian Trinity does. It is furthermore what some versions of the Judaic Yahweh does. Thus we get the following matrix:

(5)

	Trinity exists	*Yahweh exists*	*No god exists*
You worship Trinity	$+\infty$	$-\infty$	$+100$
You worship Yahweh	$-\infty$	$+\infty$	$+100$
You're agnostic	$+100$	$+100$	$+100$

If we were mathematically naive, we might calculate the expected utilities in (5) as follows. *First*, we might temporarily assume that each column has a one-third chance of being true. Reading across: the utility of worshipping the Trinity is $(+\infty \times \frac{1}{3}) + (-\infty \times \frac{1}{3}) + (100 \times \frac{1}{3}) = 33$; the utility of worshipping Yahweh is similarly $(-\infty \times \frac{1}{3}) + (+\infty \times \frac{1}{3}) + (100 \times \frac{1}{3}) = 33$; and the utility of agnosticism is $(100 \times \frac{1}{3}) + (100 \times \frac{1}{3}) + (100 \times \frac{1}{3}) = 100$. *Second*, we might recognize that the probabilities for each column do not matter, so long as each is greater than zero and they all add up to one. Naively, then, we might conclude from (5) that agnosticism is the only rational choice. However, the foregoing arithmetic is illegitimate: $(\infty - \infty + x)$ does not necessarily sum to x, because the positive and subtracted infinities may be of different magnitudes. The real moral is that analysis (5) does not prescribe *any* choice. Given that (5) is rationally preferable to analysis (1) as a basis for decision – because (5) contains information that (1) omits – decision theory does not prescribe any particular religious belief.

The limitations of transfinite arithmetic might be overcome in cases where comparative probabilities can be assigned to the different columns. To begin with,

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Jordan (1993) suggests that if theistic possibility X is more probable than theistic possibility Y, then the rational choice is to believe in X, regardless of how probable atheism might be. The reasoning behind this proposal, I'm guessing, is this: X beats atheism because X, unlike atheism, involves the possibility of an infinite payoff; and X beats Y because X is more probable than Y. (But couldn't one just as well reason that atheism beats X because X, unlike atheism, involves the possibility of an infinite cost?) Taking a different tack, Byl (1994) reframes the Wager in terms of limits instead of infinities. Now if the rewards for correctly worshipping X and Y merely *approach* infinity, and if the probability of X is greater than that of Y, then the rational choice is to believe in X, regardless of how vanishingly unlikely it may be compared to atheism. (But doesn't this argument assume that the rewards for X and Y approach their limits equally fast?)

I've raised parenthetical challenges for Jordan and for Byl, but the real problem is that any given deity is less probable than the combined probability of all other deities. (Or rather it ought to be if you have no convincing argument for the existence of one god over any other, which is surely the case if you have no convincing argument for theism over atheism.) So long as we're entertaining jealous deities who infinitely punish the followers of rival gods, and who ignore agnostics, our matrix looks like (6).

(6)	*God G exists*	*Other god exists*	*No god exists*
You worship god G	(approaches) $+\infty$	(approaches) $-\infty$	$+100$
You're agnostic	$+100$	$+100$	$+100$

Since the first column is less probable than the second, the solutions of Jordan and Byl to the problem of transfinite arithmetic both yield agnosticism as the rational choice. Since there is no reason to prefer matrix (1) over (6), there is no reason to choose theism over agnosticism.

My critics might object that the Trinity, Yahweh, and so on are just different names for the same god (though Jordan disavows this option). Indeed, many in the liberal tradition do conceive of matters in this pluralist way. I am reminded though of a story told by Bertrand Russell: a taxi driver once asked him his denomination, and Russell replied that he was an agnostic. 'I've never heard of agnostics', said the cabbie, 'but I guess we all worship the same God'. Of course the taxi driver, inspired by the praiseworthy desire to find common moral ground but hobbled by a constricted imagination, is mistaken. Likewise, I believe, those pluralists are mistaken who deny that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam carry distinct metaphysical commitments (Saka (2000)).

Another criticism of (5) and (6) is that, although the Trinity and Yahweh are granted to be distinct, the values listed are wrong. Universalists don't see God as a jealous and vindictive punisher of righteous heathens. In reply, I'm not claiming that I've deployed the only or the most prominent brands of Christianity and

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Judaism; I am simply saying that: (i) they have been historically endorsed; (ii) they continue to command adherents; (iii) they leap to mind as salient hypotheses; and (iv) they are therefore epistemically viable in the Pascalian dialectic. If the gods described here are not epistemically possible for informed parties unmoved by traditional arguments in the area of religion, then I do not know what gods would be.

Now let's compare Pascalian theism with Buddhism. One version of Zen Buddhism teaches that existence is suffering and that suffering, because of reincarnation, is eternal unless the soul attains the beatific release of *nirvana*. Since *nirvana* is attained by emptying the mind of all desires and attachments (including love for God) and all thoughts (including belief in God), Buddhist practice not only isolates one from the joys and sorrows of earthly life, it precludes theistic worship. Assuming a god who sends non-believers to limbo, we get (7), which once again undermines (1).

(7)	*God exists*	*Nirvana exists*
You worship God	$+\infty$	$-\infty$
You empty your mind	0	$+\infty$

Buddhism is a traditional religion; it is not invented for the sake of refuting Pascal's Wager, and – for those attentive enough to know that it is taken seriously by hundreds of millions and who yet have no convincing argument against it – it should be a genuine option. Since there is no reason to exclude this possibility, there is no decision-theoretic reason to believe in God. Hence Jordan is again mistaken when he claims that, although Pascal's Wager doesn't always allow us to decide between religions, it definitely gives reason for believing in some god rather than none. (He seems to equate atheism with the secular variety, ignoring Buddhist and other religious atheisms.)[1]

Jordan's principles keep us from multiplying possible religious hypotheses to infinity. Nonetheless, given the history of human belief so far, they still allow us to consider untold thousands of possibilities, a good many of which defeat Pascalian argumentation. The reason for this is that different religions do not merely prescribe occasionally conflicting modes of worship; they *usually* prescribe conflicting codes of morality. Consider, for example, the old Mayan view that heaven is the reward for men who die in battle, women who die in childbirth, kings, priests, sacrificial victims, and suicides. The Mayan religion was *actually* held and transmitted across generations, and therefore is traditional; until now it has never been used as an attack on Pascal's Wager, let alone an ad hoc one; and insofar as intellectually responsible agnostics seeking to calculate the expected utility of religious belief ought to consult encyclopedias of religious possibilities, the Mayan religion *should* be a genuine option. The Mayan view, according to Jordan's principles, ought to be entered into the Pascalian matrix.

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(8)	*Mayan god exists*	*No god exists*
You kill yourself	$+\infty$	0
You do not	?	$+100$

By this analysis, committing suicide dominates, and you should do it right now, before you risk dying in some less honourable way. But, of course, this way of reasoning is absurd – and so too, I maintain, is Pascal's decision-theoretic approach to justifying religious faith. (This example shows that Pascalian reasoning applies to options of *action* in general rather than just options of belief.)

Jordan might deny that the old Mayan religion is backed by tradition, for he might define tradition to include only those customs and beliefs that are currently held. But such a move would seem to contradict Jordan's assertion that 'those who have gone before us are yet, to some extent, our epistemic peers' ((1991), 315). Further, dismissing Mayan religion assumes that the Catholic conversion of Central America completely succeeded in wiping out incompatible indigenous beliefs, which is doubtful. Inter-ethnic contact usually results in mixings and superpositions, not in sanitized replacement.

Even if we confine ourselves to present-day Western thought, counter-Pascalian possibilities remain, for example Satanism. (i) Some self-styled Satanists are nothing more than terminologically impaired hedonists (e.g. LaVey (1969)) – rebelling against Christian puritanism, they fail to see the various Christian and atheistic options of hedonism. (ii) Others are sociopaths who find evil attractive and, again steeped in the Christian framework, conclude that they must be Satanists (e.g. Son of Sam). (iii) Relevant to my purposes, there are those who believe that Satan has been slandered by Christianity and that Satan, not the Trinity, is the supreme being worthy of worship.

(9)	*God reigns*	*Satan reigns*	*Neither exists*
You worship God	$+\infty$	$-\infty$	$+100$
You worship Satan	$-\infty$	$+\infty$	$+100$
You're agnostic	$+100$	$+100$	$+100$

It's plausible to think that if God reigns then Satanists might be condemned to hell, and that if Satan reigns then God-worshippers might be the ones to get infinite torment. And further, if there really were a struggle between the two supernatural giants, it's plausible to think that neutrals who did not ally themselves with the opposition might be ignored, hence left without either punishment or reward. Thus, my postulated distribution of values is a reasonable possibility, and the only question is whether including the Satan column is justifiable according to Jordan's principles.

There are several sources for positing Satan's reign as a genuine option. First, the dualistic doctrine according to which good and evil are about equally matched is widespread (e.g. the Persian Zoroastrianism and Manicheanism, the Hindu Shiva, the Norse belief in Ragnorak, the Mayan Hero Twins, the Navaho religion,

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the medieval Cathars, the modern Mandeans). According to some dualisms, Good has domain over some things while Evil has domain over others. Thus, the idea that your soul may ultimately fall under the control of Evil is far from 'bizarre'. Second, the equipotency of Good and Evil would do much to explain the existence of evil. Although such a hypothesis is not the only one available, rival hypotheses – the free-will and soul-making theodicies – are sufficiently controversial to make hypothesizing about equipotency not unreasonable. Third, there is some support in the Christian holy book to view Satan as supreme lord. Although God is depicted as creating the physical world, with two members of *homo sapiens* in it, it is the promethean Lucifer, bearer of light, who bestows the human spark: self-awareness and self-esteem, moral understanding and moral worth, and the reproductive sexuality that is responsible for the creation of everyone alive today. (Notice that despite God's *command* against eating of the tree of knowledge, it is Satan's mere *suggestion* to do otherwise that prevails.) Of course, my interpretation is heterodox, and is moreover contradicted by certain passages in the Bible. At the same time, it is supported by a number of passages that seemingly make the orthodox interpretation impossible. As far as logical coherence with the Christian *mythos* goes, and moreover coherence with the existence of apparent evil, it cannot be regarded less seriously than orthodoxy can.

Critics might challenge (9) on the grounds that Satan, being pure evil, would never grant infinite utility to anyone, not even to Satanists. But this is to confuse what I distinguished immediately prior to table (9): (ii) the devilish evil one and (iii) Lucifer, the maligned Promethean hero. To insist that Satan is evil is to beg the question in favour of Christianity. Matrix (9) remains as a reasonable defeater for (1).

My remarks on the professor's god, Judaism, Buddhism, Mayan religion, Satanism, and the cockroach god are not just a tedious recitation of obvious possibilities that all make the same point. Aside from the fact that my examples display minor variations that might matter (God, so to speak, is in the details!), there is further motive to my method: not only to identify counter-Pascalian possibilities, but to illustrate how *easy* it is to generate them. My point is to *emphasize* that there is no excuse for any citizen of a pluralistic society to dismiss, out of hand, exotic religious hypotheses.

To summarize, I have argued that Jordan's criteria involving the ad hoc, tradition, and genuineness do not really measure epistemic possibility (the previous section), and I have further argued that even if they did, they do not rule out all the religious hypotheses that defeat Pascal's Wager (the current section). There are versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which make it foolish to risk believing in any of them, and furthermore these versions are not ad hoc (they were not concocted for the sole purpose of refuting Pascal); they are traditional (we can find multi-generation populations in actual history who have held them); and they are genuine insofar as the preceding facts should make any open-minded

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observer, not already convinced by some religious position, take non-condescending notice of them. Similar remarks apply to the Buddhist and Mayan views, and yes, even the Satanic and cockroach views.

Schlesinger's defence

I'm not going to rebut Lycan & Schlesinger (1989) specifically, because that job has already been done admirably by Robert Amico (1990) and (1994), and Bradley Armour-Garb (1999). Instead I shall focus on the very similar work of George Schlesinger (1977), (1988), and (1994). To start off with, Schlesinger writes:

> **It is a necessary presupposition of the wager that one understands that the notion of 'genuine religion' is conceptually associated with a number of other exalted notions, and those people whom Pascal addresses are to be assumed to have a basic grasp of the sublime concerns of its practitioners. Divine worship in an authentic sense (as distinct from the pagan sense, where one is trying to propitiate the supernatural powers on whose whims one's fate depends) is in no way to be likened to a commercial transaction. Whatever the probability of the existence of an afterlife worth seeking with all one's might is, it is certainly not to be viewed as a place to which one may be admitted after one has paid the amount demanded by its Divine Proprietor.** (Schlesinger (1994), 88)

Schlesinger's pretended knowledge of the afterlife begs the question. Where he gets his conviction, and how he justifies it, is left unexplained. That aside, Schlesinger's concept of religion differs from the concept as used in anthropology, sociology, and on the street. It is simply a linguistic mistake, reflecting ignorance of the English language, to deny that the word 'religion' refers to pagan religion. Schlesinger's conception erroneously rules out fictional religions that are readily recognized as such by the public (e.g. the Ferengi religion on *Star Trek*, according to which God indeed is a divine proprietor); and it rules out Christianity's own Calvinism (or at least a common conception thereof), according to which the elect are coextensive with those who die having turned a sizable profit.

Perhaps Schlesinger meant to stipulate a technical meaning for the word 'religion'. But what is the point of such a move? So long as Satan, *nirvana*, etc. are epistemic possibilities, then, regardless of what they're *called*, they ought to be entered into the Pascalian decision-theoretic analysis. If Schlesinger is making any sense at all, he must be relying on some unspoken but substantive assumption, such as 'if a hypothesis does not posit an exalted god then it has zero probability of being true'. But there are reasons to reject this principle. For one thing, it is irrelevant because the Satan that I have described is just as exalted as Pascal's god. For another, it is fallacious because it question-beggingly rules out varieties of atheism as even possibly true, be they Buddhist, secular, or other.

Schlesinger quickly abandons this line of argument and turns to another, which can be schematized as follows:

(a) The probability of Pascal's God existing exceeds the probability of

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any other particular god's existing.

(b) Hence it's rational to believe in Pascal's God.

The inference from (a) to (b) is illegitimate within standard decision theory, as emphasized by Amico (1990) and (1994), and Sorensen (1994). Still, standard decision theory may be revised (Jordan (1993)), or Pascal's infinities may be reframed in terms of limits (Byl (1994)); either way, I shall not have anything to say about the inference at hand beyond what I've already said in my discussion just prior to table (6). Instead my focus shall be on the soundness of (a).

To defend (a), Schlesinger makes the following claims.

(1) A scrupulously just deity is more probable than a cavalier or capricious one is.
(2) Theologies that have an internal coherence are more probable than those that do not.
(3) Theologies that appeal to the intellect are more probable than those that do not.
(4) Theologies that appeal to the nobler sentiments are more probable than those that do not.
(5) Deities who are fit to be worshipped are more probable than those who are not.
(6) The simplest god hypothesis is more probable than elaborate god hypotheses.

Schlesinger claims that a scrupulously just deity is more probable than a non-scrupulous or capricious one, but the naked assertion is unconvincing. To begin with, if we view divinity on the model of humanity, i.e. if we view God as a superior kind of person, then we have every inductive reason to regard God as limited, and hence as susceptible to an occasional lapse. But more seriously, why should we regard God as person-like at all? If we regard God by analogy to natural law, then it would seem most reasonable to regard God as a blind, amoral force. Furthermore, the Problem of Evil, even if eventually it be soluble by any theodicy, provides some reason now to suspect that God is not necessarily just. In short, no case has been made for holding principle (1), despite prima facie cases against it.

As for principle (2), it's quite controversial. One common view, to be found among both theologians and theists on the street, insists that God is an absolute mystery who need not display logical or moral consistency as measured by human standards. But even if we were to grant principle (2), it wouldn't do Schlesinger any good. The possibilities that I sketched earlier – the professor's god, Satan, the divine cockroach etc. – are all just as coherent as Pascal's god. Indeed, my simple descriptions of other gods enjoy *greater* internal consistency than the tortuous Old and New Testaments do.

Now what about principle (3), which seems to be a generalized form of (2)?

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'Theologies that appeal to the intellect are more probable than those that do not.' The intellectual support spoken of cannot come from Pascal's Wager, for that would be question-begging. But it cannot come from traditional arguments for theism either, which are presupposed to be unconvincing. To this Schlesinger might reply that, although traditional theistic arguments are not conclusive, they offer *some* evidence in support of his favoured religious hypothesis. But if this is his claim then he must make good on it. He must at least hint for us why he thinks that the Argument from Scripture better supports monotheism than Hinduism, why the Teleological Argument better supports an anthropomorphic god than a cockroach god, etc. If he fails to do this then we are left with multiple gods, all enjoying equal intellectual appeal, that undermine each other in the Pascalian calculus.

Principle (4) says, 'Theologies that appeal to the nobler sentiments are more probable than those that do not'. Again, there are several problems with this. First, I don't see how judgements of nobility can be made without appealing to 'the eye of the beholder', which seems to be too subjective for a philosophical theistic argument (remember the Mayan view of what counts as noble!). Second, even if everyone were to agree on what counted as noble, principle (4) is invalid. Our mere wanting something does not make it more likely to exist (except insofar as our wanting it leads us to manufacture it ourselves), and to suppose otherwise is to commit the fallacy of wishful thinking. Finally, even if the principle were valid, and we agreed to judge nobility by current local standards – so that noble actions are those that reward charity, intellectual integrity, fairness, etc. – it would do Schlesinger no good. Satan as described here, the professor's god, the universalist god, and Pascal's God all seem to be indistinguishable as far as these vague standards go.

Principle (5) seems to be a variant on (4), and similar objections apply against it.

Finally, I come to the principle that Schlesinger makes the most of: 'The simplest god hypothesis is more probable than elaborate god hypotheses'. Of course, the notion of simplicity is highly contentious, and different conceptions of it will yield different god hypotheses. Sklar (1981, 161) suggests that the simplicity of a hypothesis is measured by the ease of conjuring it up, which obviously will vary from person to person and depend partly on acculturation. For a Moslem, the simplest god is one having unlimited powers; for a pagan, the simplest god is one who is recognizably human.

For Schlesinger, the simplest god hypothesis is the one that uses a single predicate; to describe God, one merely says that 'He' is an absolutely perfect being. Now it's unclear to me whether absolute perfection can even exist (analogy: there is no such thing as a highest number). My confusion here is connected to the fact that I just don't understand what an absolutely perfect being is supposed to be. (i) A perfect being cannot possess the union of all perfections, for then God would be

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a perfect gentleman, a perfect lady, a perfect ass, a perfect monster, and so forth. But, of course, this is not what Schlesinger means. (ii) Nor can 'perfect being' mean 'one who is perfect at fulfilling human values'. For one thing, this predicate is not the simplest possible. For another, it amounts to principle (4), which I have already criticized. (iii) Relative to *being* I might suppose perfection means 'real' or 'actual' as opposed to illusory or potential, and that a perfect being is one that existed. But this too couldn't be what Schlesinger means, for otherwise a perfect being would simply be any being that actually exists, and there would be no question-begging reason to choose among possible gods. (Anselm's project appears to involve some combination of (ii) and (iii).)[2] My confusion about perfection aside, a few things seem clear to me. Pascal's God is some kind of Christian God. It is a specifically historical god, one who has dipped into the stream of human events in order to speak to selected individuals. This kind of god hypothesis is far from maximally simple and non-arbitrary. Satanism, Buddhism, etc. seem at least as simple as Pascal's religious belief. By the standard of simplicity, then, the cost/benefit analyses (3)–(9) remain standing. (Indeed, Pascal's Catholic God, who designates certain days for abstaining from some foods but not others, seems just as arbitrary as Gale's sidewalk god.)

Schlesinger's whole approach fails for another reason too. His idea is to invoke 'the most probable' theism and to oppose it to atheism alone, without taking into account improbable theisms. But for most people unconvinced by the traditional arguments for believing in God, the intellectually, emotionally, and morally most appealing god is probably the universalist god who accepts everyone into heaven sooner or later. Saints and devout believers may be the first to go, but even hardened atheist sinners, after waking up in the afterlife, will eventually convert and receive the blessings of an infinitely magnanimous soul. Once they are rehabilitated – which will take a finite amount of time assuming that their earthly transgressions are finite – they should then enjoy the bliss of heaven, like everyone else, if God is just.

(10)

	God exists	*God does not*
You believe in God now	$+\infty$	$+100$
You do not	$+\infty$	$+101$

If the universalist God exists, it doesn't matter what you believe now because your payoff in the long run will always be infinite. (If this is counter-intuitive, it is just another indictment of decision theory as applied to infinite values.) And if no God exists, then, supposing that atheism (and a life of indulgence) gives you marginally better utility than theism (and a life of abstinence), it would be rational not to believe in God. Overall, then, it's rational not to believe in God now.

To summarize, Jeff Jordan and George Schlesinger each offers principles for excluding certain god hypotheses from Pascalian cost/benefit analyses. In both

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cases their principles tend to be unsound as well as irrelevant. They can be taken as unsound because they are given without supporting reason, whereas I have given reasons against them. They are irrelevant because, even if accepted, they neither rule out (in Jordan's case), nor rule comparatively improbable (in Schlesinger's case), rival hypotheses that defeat Pascal's argument.

Other Pascalians

If the Many Gods Objection is indeed sound then it's important that we recognize it as such – not only because of Jordan's and Schlesinger's repeated publications but also because others in the field have been invoking Jordan and Schlesinger, or at least saying similar things. Anderson, for example, uncritically endorses Schlesinger's non-standard decision theory (Anderson (1995), 52).

Golding endorses, as both sound and relevant, Jordan's rejection of the straw thesis (*), that logical possibility entails non-zero probability (Golding (1984), 137). He then goes further, suggesting that a proposition has no probability of being true unless there is evidence available for it, which commits the fallacy of Appeal to Ignorance. The problem with Appeal to Ignorance is that it ends in self-contradiction, if we're reflective. Here's the proof:

(a) Suppose you have no evidence bearing on the proposition P; then
(b) you have no evidence for P, and
(c) you have no evidence for $\sim$P;
(d) if you apply Golding's principle to (b), then you will assign a probability of zero to P, which
(e) is tantamount to accepting $\sim$P, if you are reflective;
(f) if you apply Golding's principle to (c) then you will assign probability zero to $\sim$P, which
(g) is tantamount to accepting P;
(h) now by (e) and (g) you have a contradiction.

Shifting gears, Golding suggests that it is conceptually impossible to entertain any god hypothesis that defeats Pascal's Wager because there is a connection between the concepts 'god' and 'good' (138). But this idea fails just as did Schlesinger's take on 'genuine religion'. First, Golding is mistaken about linguistic facts: although it may be a conceptually necessary truth that God is good, it does not follow that every god is good. There is a difference in meaning between the proper name and the common noun, and Golding's solecism 'a God' equivocates. Second, even if we agreed that the cockroach 'god' and the professor's 'god' were misnamed, as epistemically possible hypotheses they demand a place in the Pascalian calculus.

Retreating from conceptual claims, Rescher (1985) argues that Pascal's Wager is sound as long as it's relativized to the proper audience. Franklin (1998) agrees:

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'When Pascal speaks as if there are only two hypotheses, strict Catholicism and atheism, he is giving a fair picture of the choices actually confronting his interlocutor, the Parisian ''man of the world'' of 1660' (111). This approach, however, is profoundly mistaken. First, it misrepresents history: sophisticated Parisians in 1660 knew of the existence of Greek paganism, Roman paganism, Judaism, Islam, Protestantism, new-world paganism, and probably even the Satanism that was imputed to the freemasons and the Knights Templar. Granted, selecting any of these options would have made one's life hard, socially; and being open to religious conversion would have been unlikely, psychologically. But these factors are irrelevant; they do not prevent paganism and Protestantism from being actual choices that one could easily consider. Otherwise atheism would not count as a choice either, and Pascal's Wager would never get off the ground. The second problem for Rescher and Franklin is that, even if Pascal had been so unimaginative and ill-educated as not to register rival religious hypotheses, that would be irrelevant to assessing the legitimacy of Pascalian reasoning for *us*.

Franklin also writes, 'The possibility that God is malicious has no consequences for action' (113). This is true because the possibility described is described vaguely (the possibility that God is benevolent likewise has no consequences for action). Once we start filling in detailed ways in which God might be malicious or benevolent, though, we do get specific consequences for action. Unfortunately the consequences are varied, and in a cost/benefit analysis they defeat each other.

Armour-Garb argues that 'there is no Many Gods Problem, as such, because we are never faced with the daunting prospect of deciding in which sort of god we should believe' (Armour-Garb (1999), 135). He reasons that we never decide which god to believe in because we believe in whichever god we worship, and we worship whichever god responds to our prayers and controls our lives, which is not something we decide on. But as I argued in my discussion of the Mayan religion (8), Pascal's Wager does not hinge on belief at all (a point also emphasized by Duff (1986)). Armour-Garb recognizes this, for 'we are [still] faced with the question of which sort of god concept to adopt'. Adopting the right or wrong concept may lead to infinite bliss or infinite torment. Now the question of god concept, Armour-Garb claims, is 'a question that is in many ways inseparable from the question of which religious tradition we should embrace … we find ourselves in the position of having to choose among sincerely espoused, competing religious traditions'.

Armour-Garb thus follows Jordan in treating tradition as epistemically relevant in Pascalian reasoning. But why can't our choice space include god concepts that have been espoused merely in jest or mockery, and also concepts too spanking new to belong to any tradition? Without repeating my argument against the principle of tradition, let me just speculate as to the force of its grip. If you believe that tradition carries *some* epistemic weight (which is not implausible in some domains of thought), and if you slip into finitistic thinking (which is easy to do, as the realm

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of the finite is where we get our intellectual training and practice) – then you may be tempted to believe that tradition is relevant in Pascalian reasoning. The temptation may seem especially natural if you believe that all religious traditions are basically variants on Judeo-Christianity. Indeed, this seems to be Armour-Garb's assumption when he further follows Jordan in concluding that, although there are no rational grounds for choosing among religions, 'our rational methods have got us to theism' (136).

As I understand them, Pascalians assimilate the Buddhist, Mayan, Satanic, professorial, and universalist cases to the possibility of Gale's sidewalk gods. If this is in fact what defenders of Pascal's Wager do, it would help to explain why they refuse to accept foreign gods as genuine options. But this assimilation of historically attested religions to hypothetical religions – despite their millions of believers – and this insistence on relegating them to the 'bizarre' or 'inauthentic', strikes me as inexplicable unless some privileging of one's own culture is taking place. The privileging of one's own culture, however, is unjustified ethnocentrism.[3]

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Notes

1. Tim McCarthy (personal communication) points out that the Buddhist matrix (7) is incorrect if utility is understood in terms of preference-satisfaction, since being in a state of *nirvana* entails having no preferences. However, (7) works if utility is understood as goodness, for there are Buddhists who view *nirvana* as an unlimited or even infinite good. This view may follow if you regard *nirvana* as either union with absolute blessedness or as the only means of escape from eternal existence, eternal existence being infinite pain.
2. Nozick (1981) quotes a character from Peter DeVries as saying, 'God is so perfect he doesn't need to exist', and he points out the culture-boundedness of the assumption that perfection implies existence (for Buddhists, perfection implies non-existence).
3. I heartily thank Jonathan Adler, Don Gerardi, Jeff Jordan, Donald Levy, Tim McCarthy, and Robert McKim for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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