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The Many Gods Objection to Pascal's Wager

A Defeat, Then a Resurrection

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Famously, Pascal's Wager purports to show that a prudentially rational person should aim to believe in God's existence, even when sufficient epistemic reason to believe in God is lacking. Perhaps the most common view of Pascal's Wager, though, holds it to be subject to a decisive objection, the so-called Many Gods Objection, according to which Pascal's Wager is incomplete since it only considers the possibility of a Christian God. I will argue, however, that the ambitious version of this objection most frequently encountered in the literature on Pascal's Wager fails. In the wake of this failure I will describe a more modest version of the Many Gods Objection and argue that this version still has strength enough to defeat the canonical Wager.

The essence of my argument will be this: the Wager aims to justify belief in a context of uncertainty about God's *existence*, but this same uncertainty extends to the question of God's *requirements for salvation*. Just as we lack sufficient epistemic reason to believe in God, so too do we lack sufficient epistemic reason to judge that believing in God increases our chance of salvation. Instead, it is possible to imagine diverse gods with diverse requirements for salvation, not

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all of which require theistic belief. The context of uncertainty in which the Wager takes place renders us unable to single out one sort of salvation requirement as more probable than all others, thereby infecting the Wager with a fatal indeterminacy.

1. *The Wager Defined.*

I will assume at the outset that prudential rationality requires one to perform the act, from among those acts open to one, with the highest expected utility. The techniques of decision theory allow us to encapsulate Pascal’s Wager in the following decision matrix:

	God exists (p)	God does not exist (1-p)	Expected Utility (EU)
Choose God (G)	∞	f_1	$p \cdot \infty + (1-p) \cdot f_1$
Do Not Choose God (N)	f_2	f_3	$p \cdot f_2 + (1-p) \cdot f_3$

Figure 1: The Pascalian Matrix

In this matrix, the variable p represents the probability that God exists. The quantities in each cell of the matrix represent the “utility pay-off” of that cell. The variables $f_1, f_2,$ and f_3 represent finite numbers, whereas ∞ stands for infinity. According to this matrix, God grants the reward of salvation to those who believe in God, and *only* to them. The matrix thus models the case of a god who practices *salvific exclusivism*, a term I will use to refer to a policy of excluding some people from salvation on account of their beliefs (or lack of beliefs). Note, too, that this matrix models a god who does *not* punish non-belief with eternal torment, but rather simply annihilates (or fails to resurrect) non-theists. Supposing that $p > 0$, the expected utilities of the two options are

$$EU(G) = p \cdot \infty + (1-p) \cdot f_1 = \infty$$

$$EU(N) = p \cdot f_2 + (1-p) \cdot f_3 = \text{some finite value}$$

Thus, according to the decision matrix above, choosing God is an infinitely superior option to not choosing God. And what is more, the option of believing in God is infinitely superior *regardless* of the value of p , so long as $p > 0$ —that is to say, so long as one cannot be *absolutely certain* that God does not exist.

That is a surprisingly strong conclusion, and indeed, one source of appeal of Pascal's Wager is that, if successful, it can rationally license belief in God even in the absence of sufficient epistemic reason to believe in God. I will call "canonical" any version of the Wager that purports to license a type of theistic belief despite there being insufficient evidence for that belief. I turn now to the question of whether the Many Gods Objection can defeat the canonical Wager.

2. The Ambitious Many Gods Objection.

One of the earliest formulations of the Many Gods Objection to Pascal's Wager comes from Denis Diderot, who famously dismissed Pascal's Wager with the brusque remark that "[a]n Imam could reason just as well this way."² Suppose, then, we were to transform the original Pascalian matrix into a "Two-Gods matrix" by distinguishing between a "Christian-favoring God" who saves only Christians and a "Muslim-favoring God" who saves only Muslims. Figure 2 below is the result.³

² Cited in Jordan (1994b, p. 101).

³ A point of clarification: the "Choose Christianity" option in this matrix and others should be understood to be choosing any sort of recognizably Christian belief. Therefore, the Christian believer may believe in an exclusivist Christian god who favors only Christians, or (say) the Christian believer may believe in an inclusivist Christian god who saves all virtuous individuals regardless of their beliefs. Likewise, the Christian-favoring god is a god who favors Christians of any kind; thus, this god favors both Christians who believe in a Christian-favoring god and Christians who believe in an inclusive Christian god. We could in principle imagine more discriminating kinds of gods, such as a god favoring only those Christians who believe specifically in an exclusivist Christian-favoring god, or a god favoring only Catholic Christians, or Baptist Christians, etc. Indeed, one problem that supporters of Pascal's Wager face is the problem of keeping the relevant matrix down to a tractable size. However, rather than press this point against the Wager, I will keep things simple by assuming the Christian-favoring god in this matrix to be favorably disposed to all types of Christians.

	Christian-favoring god exists (p_c)	Muslim-favoring god exists (p_i)	No god exists (p_n)	Expected Utility
Choose Christianity (C)	∞	f_1	f_2	$p_c \cdot \infty + p_i \cdot f_1 + p_n \cdot f_2 = \infty$
Choose Islam (I)	f_3	∞	f_4	$p_c \cdot f_3 + p_i \cdot \infty + p_n \cdot f_4 = \infty$
Choose Non-Theism (N)	f_5	f_6	f_7	$p_c \cdot f_5 + p_i \cdot f_6 + p_n \cdot f_7 = \text{some finite \#}$

Figure 2: The Two Gods Matrix

The Two Gods Matrix appears to justify Diderot’s point. Anyone who accepts this matrix (and supposes non-zero probabilities) will conclude that Muslim belief, like Christian belief, has infinite expected utility. Thus, this wager fails to single out Christian belief as uniquely rational. However, although this wager cannot discriminate between Christian and Muslim belief, it *can* convict the *non-theist* of prudential irrationality, since non-theism has only finite expected utility.

In reply, the non-theist could propose expanding the Two Gods Matrix so that it contains an extra column for an inclusive god who saves non-theists as well as Christians and Muslims. This makes the expected value of non-theism infinite, like that of Christian and Muslim belief. However, the defender of the Wager has a plausible response. For the defender may insist that non-theism remains a riskier bet than either theistic alternative. After all, only *one* state of the world generates an infinite “win” for the non-theist – namely, the state in which an inclusive god exists – whereas a theist “wins” in the inclusive god case PLUS the case of a god who favors his or her sort of theism.

Thus, a better reply from the non-theist is to expand the Two Gods Matrix by adding a “skeptic-favoring god”, who at death saves non-theists and annihilates theists.⁴ This leads to the perfectly symmetrical matrix in *Figure 3* below:

	Christian-favoring god exists (p _c)	Muslim-favoring god exists (p _i)	Skeptic-favoring god exists (p _s)	No god exists (p _n)
Choose Christianity (C)	∞	f ₁	f ₂	f ₃
Choose Islam (I)	f ₄	∞	f ₅	f ₆
Choose Non-Theism (N)	f ₇	f ₈	∞	f ₉

Figure 3: The Three Gods Matrix

Note that of course the non-theist does not *believe* in the existence of a skeptic-favoring god; after all, such a belief would turn him or her into a type of theist rather than a non-theist. Instead, all the non-theist has to believe, in order to license the inclusion of this new column in the matrix, is that there is some non-zero *chance* that a skeptic-favoring god exists. And that is easy to believe, since it is commonly held that only logical contradictions should be assigned zero probability, with all other propositions having non-zero probability. The non-theist can then simply observe that, so long as the probability of a skeptic-loving god is greater than zero – even a mere speck greater than zero – the expected utility of non-theism is infinite. Thus, the non-theist can conclude that rejecting religious belief is just as prudentially rational as embracing it.

⁴ For examples of this reply, see Mackie (1982, p. 203), Martin (1983, p. 59), Oppy (1991, p. 165), and Blackburn (1999, p. 188). Jordan (2006, pp. 74-75) traces the first appearance of a skeptic-favoring god as a reply to Pascal’s Wager to Leslie Stephen (Stephen, 1898, pp. 274-275). Although not explicitly addressing the Wager, David Hume (1998, p. 129) makes a similar point about whom God would favor. In his *Dialogues on Natural Religion* he writes: "And were that divine Being disposed to be offended at the vices and follies of silly mortals . . . the only persons entitled to his compassion and indulgence would be the philosophical sceptics, a sect almost equally rare, who, from a natural diffidence of their own capacity, suspend, or endeavor to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and such extraordinary subjects."

I will call “ambitious” any version of the Many Gods Objection that claims to be able to defeat Pascal’s Wager so long as the probability of a skeptic-favoring god is non-zero. The Ambitious Many Gods Objection thus tries to beat the Wager at its own game: just as the strongest version of the canonical Wager purports to show that belief in God is rationally required so long as God has a non-zero probability of existing, so too the Ambitious Many Gods Objection claims to defeat the Wager so long as the probability of a skeptic-loving god is likewise non-zero.

3. Making Probabilities Relevant

I believe that the Ambitious Many Gods Objection fails, for I believe that the theist can plausibly reject the claim that the precise probability of a skeptic-loving god is irrelevant so long as it is non-zero. I begin my argument for this claim with an analogy. Suppose as a gift you are given a choice between two lottery tickets, SAFE BET and LONG SHOT. In both lotteries, a ball is drawn from an urn containing a million marbles, only one of which is white, with the rest black. In the SAFE BET lottery, drawing a black ball earns you a million dollars; a white ball earns you nothing. LONG SHOT is the opposite: a white ball earns you a million dollars; a black ball earns you nothing. The clear rational choice is SAFE BET. Now suppose the odds remain the same but the prize is a trillion units of personal happiness. SAFE BET is now even more clearly the uniquely rational choice. Finally, suppose that the prize increases to ∞ units of happiness. Intuitively speaking, SAFE BET remains clearly rationally superior to LONG SHOT. And yet, owing to the infinite stakes, SAFE BET and LONG SHOT both have infinite expected utility. Thus in terms of expected utility, decision theory tells you nothing about which is better.

Surely, though, it is absurd to regard the relative probabilities of an infinite win to be irrelevant. To avoid this absurdity, rational choice theorists need to find *some* way to show that the the relative probabilities of SAFE BET and LONG SHOT matter for the rationality of a choice

between them. This need, moreover, has important implications for the Wager, since whatever method is found to show that probabilities matter in the choice between SAFE BET and LONG SHOT will surely also show that probabilities matter in the choice between the skeptic-favoring god, the Christian-favoring god, and the Muslim-favoring god. And then it will follow that non-theism is rational only if a skeptic-favoring god is more probable than both other gods, thereby defeating the Ambitious Many Gods Objection.

But can a method be found of preserving the relevants of probabilities when infinite payoffs are involved? Unfortunately for supporters of the Ambitious Many Gods Objection, I believe so. At least two ways suggest themselves: one might either modify standard rational choice theory or reject the claim that the happiness of salvation is equal to the extended real number ∞ . Some defenders of the Wager have opted for the former option. For instance, Schlesinger (1994, pp. 89-90) and Jordan (2006, p. 104) propose adding a rule to rational choice theory stipulating that, when choosing among options that all have infinite expected utility, rationality requires one to choose the option most likely to yield infinite utility. This rule is quite plausible insofar as it instructs one to choose SAFE BET over LONG SHOT.

However, I believe theists would do just as well to consider the second option mentioned above, namely, rejecting the claim that the happiness of salvation is equal to ∞ . As a lead-in to my description of this option, I suggest that the root intuition at the heart of the Wager is the idea that salvation is *incomparably good*.⁵ By this I mean that the goods of this world allegedly pale into insignificance when compared with the good of salvation, or any chance thereof. Setting the utility of salvation equal to the mathematical notion of ∞ is *one way* to attempt to model this root

⁵ Here I follow the method employed in Duncan (2007).

notion of incomparable goodness. We must ask, though, whether there is another way of modeling this idea.

Indeed there is. My suggestion is that the idea of incomparable goodness can be adequately modeled by using an “arbitrarily large” finite number. Consider again the original Pascalian matrix in Figure 1 above, and suppose we were to set the value of salvation at, say, $100^{100^{100}}$. Then even if the odds of God existing were quite small (say, 1.0×10^{-10}), the expected utility of theism would remain extremely large – large enough to decisively outweigh the relatively paltry this-worldly expected utility of non-theism. Thus, this-worldly utilities could still be said to be swamped into insignificance, thereby preserving the root intuition that salvation is an incomparable good. Moreover, setting the good of salvation equal to an arbitrarily large finite number does not make probabilities irrelevant when competing options each offer a chance of salvation. For imagine God were to appear to you and allow you to choose either the SAFE BET or LONG SHOT lottery ticket, with the prize being salvation. Then the expected utility of the SAFE BET ticket would be $0.999999 \cdot 100^{100^{100}}$ compared to $0.000001 \cdot 100^{100^{100}}$ for the LONG SHOT lottery ticket. Both have very high expected utility, of course – it is good to be offered either lottery! – but the SAFE BET lottery has nearly a million times more expected utility, and thus is clearly the rationally superior choice. I conclude that the idea of an “arbitrarily large” finite number works better than ∞ as a method of modeling the root intuition that salvation is incomparably good.

At least two objections to this way of modeling the incomparable good of salvation deserve consideration. According to the first objection, when setting the good of salvation equal to (say) $100^{100^{100}}$, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the finite utilities of this world are swamped into insignificance, as I earlier claimed. For what if, say, the probability of God existing is a

miniscule $\frac{1}{100^{100^{100}}}$? Then the expected utility associated with salvation will be a paltry 1 unit, and thus salvation is hardly an incomparable good. However, this objection attaches too much weight to a specific assignment of value for the good of salvation. Instead, the good of salvation is meant to be “arbitrarily” large. This means that one is simply to choose a finite number large enough that any utilities associated with this-worldly happiness become insignificant. If $100^{100^{100}}$ does not achieve this, then simply increase it (e.g. use $100!^{100!^{100!}}$).⁶ This reply, though, leads in turn to a second objection.

In an influential paper on Pascal’s Wager, Alan Hájek briefly considers and rejects the method of assigning the good of salvation an arbitrarily large finite value.⁷ His ground for rejecting this method is that it appears to transform God into a mere satisficer, which is inconsistent with the perfection that necessarily belongs to God’s nature (Hájek, 2003, p. 45). After all, no matter what number one chooses for the value of salvation, there is always a higher number, and thus God could have constructed an even better salvation than the one on offer. Moreover, there also is the possibility of competing religious sects falling into a never-ending bidding war as each sect claims that its god offers a better salvific payout than its rival sects’ gods.

This objection suffers from the same flaw as the first objection, namely, attaching too literal significance to the particular number assigned to represent the value of salvation. Whatever

⁶ What, though, if the probability of God’s existence is to be judged “arbitrarily small” (i.e. arbitrarily close to zero)? My preference is to regard the expected utility as indeterminate in such a case; another possibility is to judge the expected utility as equal to 1 (by using the same large finite number in the numerator and denominator). Neither result strikes me as an unintuitive verdict in the case of an arbitrarily small chance of an arbitrarily large payout. Note too that models of the Wager that use the extended real number ∞ face a similar quandry with infinitesimals (Oppy, 1991, p. 163), so this is not an issue unique to my model.

⁷ In addition to arbitrarily large finite numbers, Hájek also considers alternative methods such as using “surreal numbers” or assigning lexical priority to the good of salvation. My preference for arbitrarily large finite numbers over these alternatives is largely on grounds of simplicity.

particular number is used, it is important to note that this number's only role is to *model* the incomparable goodness of salvation; the number is not meant to denote the precise quantity of this good. As such it is more accurate (that is, truer to the root intuition of incomparability) to think of this number as simply "arbitrarily large" rather than fix its value to a precise quantity. This blocks any charge that God is guilty of satisficing, and thwarts any attempt to initiate a salvific payout bidding war.

4. The Modest Many Gods Objection.

I believe that the method of using an arbitrarily large finite number to represent the incomparable good of salvation is plausible enough that we have reason to explore its implications for the Wager. To begin with, we have seen that this method preserves the relevance of salvific probabilities, which in turn entails that the Ambitious Many Gods Objection fails. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that in the wake of this defeat we can "resurrect" a successful version of the Many Gods Objection, which I will call the "Modest Many Gods Objection." This is a more modest version since, unlike the Ambitious Many Gods Objection, it does not aspire to establish the very strong claim that non-theism is prudentially rational so long as a skeptic-loving god has *any* non-zero probability.

The matrix in Figure 4 below, which I will use to explore the Modest Many Gods Objection, uses H (as in "Heaven") instead of ∞ to represent the incomparable good of salvation; I stipulate that H represents an arbitrarily large finite number.

	Christian-favoring god exists (p _c)	Muslim-favoring god exists (p _i)	Skeptic-favoring god exists (p _s)	No god exists (p _n)
Choose Christianity (C)	H	f ₁	f ₂	f ₃
Choose Islam (I)	f ₄	H	f ₅	f ₆
Choose Non-Theism (N)	f ₇	f ₈	H	f ₉

Figure 4: The Revised Three Gods Matrix

The resulting expected value equations are as follows:

$$EU(C) = p_c(H) + p_i(f_1) + p_s(f_2) + p_n(f_3)$$

$$EU(I) = p_c(f_4) + p_i(H) + p_s(f_5) + p_n(f_6)$$

$$EU(N) = p_c(f_7) + p_i(f_8) + p_s(H) + p_n(f_9)$$

Let us consider under what conditions Christian belief has greater expected utility than non-theism.⁸ Given the above equations, it follows that

$$EU(C) - EU(N) > 0 \text{ iff } [p_c(H) + p_i(f_1) + p_s(f_2) + p_n(f_3)] - [p_c(f_7) + p_i(f_8) + p_s(H) + p_n(f_9)] > 0$$

Thus,

$$EU(C) - EU(N) > 0 \text{ iff } H(p_c - p_s) + p_i(f_1) + p_s(f_2) + p_n(f_3) - p_c(f_7) - p_i(f_8) - p_n(f_9) > 0$$

Let $f_a = p_c(f_7) + p_i(f_8) + p_n(f_9) - p_i(f_1) - p_s(f_2) - p_n(f_3)$. Then it follows:

$$EU(C) - EU(N) > 0 \text{ iff } (p_c - p_s) > \frac{f_a}{H}$$

Note that f_a is a function purely of the this-worldly utilities associated with losing bets, discounted by the probabilities associated with the relevant gods. Thus, f_a will simply be some non-arbitrarily-large finite number. As a result, f_a will be dwarfed in size by the arbitrarily large value H , so that $\frac{f_a}{H}$ is in fact arbitrarily close to zero. Therefore, for all practical purposes, $EU(C)$ is

⁸ A full investigation would of course also have to compare $EU(N)$ with $EU(I)$, the expected utility of choosing Islam. I believe the arguments I use in my investigation of $EU(C)$ versus $EU(N)$ carry over to this case.

greater than EU(N) if and only if the quantity $(p_c - p_s)$ is greater than zero – that is, if and only if $p_c > p_s$.⁹

It will be my contention below that the defender of the Wager is unable to show that p_c is greater than p_s . That may seem surprising. After all, from a commonsense standpoint, there is surely reason to believe that p_s is extremely low. I will not dispute this, but in fact I will claim that an epistemically responsible agent should not judge p_c to be any higher than p_s .¹⁰

Two sorts of considerations, scriptural and moral, are especially relevant to an investigation of the relative values of p_c and p_s . Christian-favoring exclusivist gods of course have a scriptural advantage over a skeptic-favoring god, since the New Testament purports to provide evidence of the former, while no scriptures at all exist in favor of the latter. A full investigation of the question, then, would need to assess the quality of the New Testament's testimonial evidence. That is a large task, and I will not attempt it here. Instead I will content myself with noting that a number of reasons tell against trusting the New Testament's testimonial claims: the existence of various internal inconsistencies in the Gospel narratives;¹¹ the fact that the Gospel narratives were written down by non-eyewitnesses, and only decades after the occurrence of the events they purport to describe;¹² the human-all-too-human process by which some texts were canonized for inclusion in the New Testament while other texts (including alternative "gospels")

⁹ Note that this means the essence of the canonical Wager is preserved, since theistic belief can be prudentially required even when the odds of God existing are less than 50%. For instance, if (say) $p_c = 0.00002$ and $p_s = 0.00001$, then Christian belief generates incomparably more expected utility than non-theism.

¹⁰ Recall that the Schlesinger/Jordan rule mentioned in the previous section is an independent way of establishing the relevance of probabilities when payoffs are infinite. Adopting it instead of the method of arbitrarily large finite numbers would thus be an independent way of motivating the inquiry that I now begin, namely the inquiry into whether $p_c > p_s$. As such, the argument of the remainder of this chapter is independent of my specific claims in this section regarding arbitrarily large finite numbers.

¹¹ Cf. Ehrman (2009).

¹² Cf. Ehrman (2016) and Ehrman (2014).

were rejected;¹³ the general Humean argument against believing testimonial reports of miracles;¹⁴ and the existence of competing scriptures and miracle claims in other religions. Rather than explore the intricacies of these considerations, I will simply register my belief that one can, with full epistemic propriety, judge that the scriptures constitute, at best, *extremely* weak evidence for the existence of an exclusivist Christian god. Readers may disagree with this assessment of scripture, but for the sake of argument I invite such readers to see what follows if my assessment is correct. *Prima facie*, even weak evidence for Christianity appears to be a fatal blow to the non-theist, since even a slight advantage of p_c over p_s is enough to generate incomparably greater expected utility for the option of believing in a Christian-favoring god. Thus, the non-theists' only hope for acquitting themselves of the charge of prudential irrationality is to find a compensating advantage that p_s enjoys over p_c , enough to cancel out Christianity's scriptural advantage.

I believe this hope can be fulfilled via a moral case against salvific exclusivism. In particular, I will argue that the favoritism shown by the salvific exclusivist gods in the Many Gods matrix is an immoral sort of favoritism. Of course, even if I am right, this moral objection cuts against *both* the Christian-favoring and skeptic-favoring gods, since both types of gods are exclusivist. However, I will argue in the next section that a skeptic-favoring god's exclusivism is in fact *less* immoral than a Christian-favoring god's exclusivism. The greater moral plausibility of the skeptic-favoring god, I will argue, raises its odds of existing relative to the Christian-favoring god, thereby potentially counteracting the scriptural advantages of the Christian-favoring god. As a result, the most sensible response is to refuse to judge either one of p_c or p_s to be greater than

¹³ Cf. Ehrman (2003).

¹⁴ Hume (1748, pp. 109-131, Section X, "Of Miracles").

the other, and judge instead that the task of determining their relative value is beyond our epistemic ability.

5. The Morality of Salvific Exclusivism

Let us examine, then, the moral case against salvific exclusivism. This is easiest to see in the case of a punitive god who condemns to eternal torment those whom he does not save.¹⁵ It is extremely doubtful whether even the most grievous wrong by any *finite* human being could warrant a strictly *infinite* punishment. But if even the most execrable wrong-doer fails to deserve eternal punishment, how could any person deserve such a fate merely on account of his or her morally innocent beliefs? That seems impossible, and thus a punitive exclusivist god, in virtue of meting out undeserved punishment, is an unjust god. (I assume for the time being that both non-theism and theism are morally innocent forms of belief. Later in this chapter I will scrutinize this assumption.) The immorality of punitive salvific exclusivism in turn contradicts the traditional idea of God as a perfect being: the idea of a morally perfect being who eternally torments people on account of their morally innocent beliefs is no more coherent than the idea of an omnipotent being who cannot make a pizza, or an omniscient being who does not know the thousandth digit of pi. Therefore, a punitive, salvifically exclusivist god cannot be *God*.

What, though, about a non-punitive salvifically exclusivist god, who merely annihilates the unsaved? Such are the gods in the matrices above. Might *that* sort of god be moral? I do not believe so. For starters, it is quite easy to conceptualize annihilation – and the consequent loss of an incomparable good – as itself a type of punishment. (Loss of privileges is a quite familiar

¹⁵ We could expand the matrices above to include *both* gods who annihilate the unsaved *and* gods who condemn the unsaved to hell. However, the moral argument that I present below, which blocks the conclusion that $p_c > p_s$, applies with even more force to the appalling case of a god who sends the unsaved to hell. Thus, including such a god does not help the defender of the Wager.

form of punishment, after all.) Moreover, although it is true that such a god does not eternally *torment* disfavored people, let us note that such a god does refuse to grant the incomparably good reward of eternal salvation to some people on account of their morally innocent beliefs. That is morally arbitrary, and thus morally imperfect. Therefore, while a policy of differential salvific reward based on morally innocent beliefs is certainly *less* morally bad than eternally punishing such people, it is by no means clear that a morally *perfect* being could enact such a policy.

However, let us consider one interesting argument to the contrary due to Philip Quinn (1994, pp. 74-78).¹⁶ Quinn begins by agreeing with critics of the doctrine of hell that no finite being can deserve infinite punishment. Quinn then cleverly inverts this claim: just as no finite being can deserve infinite punishment, it is likewise true that no finite being can deserve *infinite reward*. Salvation is thus in every case a gracious, undeserved gift. As such, says Quinn, considerations of desert do not constrain the distribution of salvation. No one who is denied salvation can rightly complain that he or she failed to get a deserved reward, and hence, no one who is denied salvation can rightly complain that he or she was treated unjustly. Quinn concludes from this that God does not act unjustly in denying the gift of salvation to non-theists.

Quinn's argument, though, presumes that the act of giving gifts in excess of desert is immune to moral evaluation. But this is false. For example, a teacher may graciously distribute halloween candy to her students. If the students cannot be said to *deserve* this treat, then it is true that the teacher could not have been faulted had she chosen not to distribute any candy to anyone. But suppose she gives the candy to all the kids except for the kid in the corner with red

¹⁶ Quinn is responding to Terence Penelhum, who argues that it is immoral to wager in Pascalian fashion, on the grounds that Pascal's exclusionary god is immoral and thus a wagerer is complicit in that divine immorality (Penelhum, 1971, pp. 216-218). I agree that a salvific exclusivist god is immoral. But this does not necessarily make the wagerer likewise immoral, since (as I noted earlier in footnote 3) one can wager for God without being an exclusivist oneself, e.g. one can be an inclusivist Christian who also believes there is merely a small (but non-zero) chance that God is an exclusivist who favors Christians of all stripes (including inclusivist Christians).

hair (she dislikes red hair, say). Then the teacher has acted arbitrarily and thus can be morally faulted. For imagine there is some threshold on a scale of deservingness above which a kid may be said to deserve some reward such as halloween candy in the classroom. Though we have supposed that all students fall *below* this threshold, I suggest that to deny candy only to the red-haired kid is in effect to treat her, merely on account of her red hair, as falling *further* below the threshold of desert than the others. But that would be a moral mistake, for red hair makes one no less deserving of treats. Similarly, I suggest that an individual with a morally innocent belief is no less deserving of a gracious gift of salvation than any other finite being, and thus that any god who denies such a person salvation while granting it to others has made a moral mistake.¹⁷

I conclude that a morally perfect god cannot be a salvifically exclusivist god.

If I am right that the idea of a morally perfect, salvifically exclusivist god is a contradiction in terms, then it may seem that such gods must have strictly *zero* probability of existing, since logical contradictions have zero probability of being true. And if that is the case, then it would seem that the moral objection voiced above to salvific exclusivism is enough to defeat Pascal's Wager by itself, without the need for any reasoning along the lines of the Many Gods Objection. However, things are not so simple. For at this point we should distinguish *objective probability* from *epistemic probability*. If a state of affairs is logically impossible then it has objective probability 0, to be sure. But it may be that an agent does not have enough evidence to *know* that a given state of affairs is logically impossible. If so, then although in fact that state of affairs has objective probability 0, the agent should not assign it epistemic

¹⁷ In the literature on desert it is now common (since Feinberg 1974) to distinguish between *non-comparative desert* (which judges people against some absolute standard of deservingness) and *comparative desert* (which judges people relative to others' success or failure in heeding the relevant standard). I am suggesting that although moral perfection may permit merciful departures from non-comparative justice, it requires that such departures comply with comparative justice. (If God saved all but redheads, say, that would be unjust!)

probability 0, but rather should assign it some non-zero probability. By way of illustration, consider a mathematical analogy. Goldbach's Conjecture states that every even integer greater than 2 can be written as the sum of two primes. If it is true, then it is necessarily true, and thus has objective probability 1. However, although we have strong inductive evidence for the truth of the conjecture (computers have so far failed to find a disconfirming instance), as of yet mathematical proof is lacking. As a result no human agent is in a position to assign *epistemic* probability 1 to Goldbach's Conjecture. At most, an epistemic probability very close to 1 is warranted.

To clarify: by "objective probability" I mean a *wholly* mind-independent type of probability that does not vary at all from agent to agent. By "epistemic probability" I mean a probability assignment that reflects the degree to which the proposition in question is supported by the evidence that the judging agent possesses.¹⁸ Since different agents often possess different evidence, epistemic probabilities will often vary from agent to agent; to that extent they are "subjective." However, epistemic probabilities are not *wholly* subjective, since they are constrained by plausibility arguments and logic. For instance, if agent *A* possesses evidence *E* that strongly supports proposition *p*, but *A* assigns *p* low epistemic probability, then *A*'s probability assignment is flawed.¹⁹

Since the arguments for the immorality of salvific exclusivism are very strong, the arguments for the impossibility of a morally perfect, salvifically exclusivist god are likewise very strong. Such gods may indeed have zero *objective* probability of existing. However, I am not

¹⁸ For further discussion of kinds of probability, including epistemic probability, see Skyrms (2000, pp. 23-26, 137-150) and Mellor (2005, pp. 11-12, 80-90).

¹⁹ This potentially blocks Jeff Jordan's (this volume) appeal to the idea of a "live option" as a means of rebutting the Many Gods Objection. If agent *A* has *any* evidence at all in support of *p*, then *A* rationally ought to assign *p* epistemic probability >0. Thus, in such a case *A* is *not* rationally permitted simply to declare that *p* "is not a live option for me" and assign it probability 0.

willing to say that the anti-exclusivist arguments leave absolutely no room for even the tiniest speck of doubt. For starters, many religious believers make the (implausible, but not *certainly* false) claim that “God’s morality” is wholly distinct from human morality. Additionally, Quinn’s argument defending the propriety of salvific exclusivism is not *wholly* unreasonable. While I have provided a rebuttal to his argument, I cannot claim to have shown beyond all doubt that a morally perfect, salvifically exclusivist god is a logical impossibility. Thus, I conclude that although the moral argument against salvific exclusivism drastically lowers the values of p_c and p_s , understood as *epistemic* probabilities, it fails to shrink these quantities all the way to zero.

In one way that is a disappointment to the non-theist (it would have been nice if the moral argument against salvific exclusivism had been able to defeat the Wager all by itself). However, the non-theist should still be heartened by the fact that the moral argument lowers the probabilities p_c and p_s very close to zero—a small fraction of 1% at most, I would say. We might express this point by saying that there is an extremely low “probability ceiling” on all types of salvifically exclusivist gods.²⁰ Therefore, the odds of a Christian-favoring god, if they are indeed greater than the odds of a skeptic-favoring god, could only possibly be greater by just a tiny speck—some fraction of the distance between zero and the extremely low probability ceiling just mentioned. Still, the scriptural advantages of the Christian-favoring god arguably provide just that speck of increased probability, and the incomparable good of salvation then converts this slight probability advantage into an incomparable advantage for Christian belief in terms of expected utility. Non-theists thus need to find a compensating epistemic advantage enjoyed by skeptic-favoring gods, enough to create a comparable speck of increased epistemic probability for p_s .

²⁰ Note that I am only officially committing myself here to *salvifically exclusivist forms of Christianity* being much less than 1% likely to be true, not all forms of Christianity.

A further stretch of moral argument provides this needed speck. Key to this argument is the dialectical context of the canonical Wager, which assumes a lack of sufficient evidence for belief in God (so that the pragmatic considerations of the Wager are needed to lead rational people to such belief). In this context, a noteworthy asymmetry between the Christian believer and the non-theist exists. For in such a context the non-theist is complying with epistemic rationality by refusing to form theistic beliefs in the absence of sufficient evidence, whereas the Christian is forging ahead and embracing such belief despite this absence. This gives the non-theist a credible claim to be more *epistemically virtuous* than the Christian believer.²¹ Thus, a skeptic-favoring god's salvific exclusivism is in fact a policy that rewards a type of virtue. As a result, I suggest that this god's salvific exclusivism, while still immoral, is *less* morally appalling than the exclusivism of the Christian-favoring god. By pursuing a less morally appalling salvific policy, the skeptic-favoring god is in that respect a more plausible god than the Christian-favoring type.

By way of illustrating this point, consider the following contrasting pair of questions:

- A. Would a morally perfect god (i) provide insufficient evidence for the truth of Christianity and then (ii) make humans' chance of salvation depend on their possessing Christian beliefs?
- B. Would a morally perfect god (i) provide insufficient evidence for his own existence and then (ii) make humans' chance of salvation depend on their respecting this lack of evidence as they form their beliefs?

²¹ For an overview of "virtue epistemology," see Greco and Turri (2016). Perhaps further investigation within "the ethics of belief" would reveal that epistemic virtues and vices are simultaneously *moral* virtues and vices. If so, then my argument grows stronger, since in the dialectical context of the Wager, Christian belief would then be a moral vice, and the skeptic-favoring god would thus not be a god who excludes people from salvation on account of morally innocent beliefs (theism not being morally innocent). However, my argument does not *require* this claim. Even if epistemic virtue is exclusively a non-moral excellence, simply by being an excellence it remains relevant to moral desert. E.g. a teacher whose judgments of deservingness track student academic excellence is morally preferable to a teacher who grants and withhold rewards independent of *any* excellence-tracking criteria.

While I believe both questions warrant an answer of No, surely it is *less* preposterous to answer Yes to B than to A. This relative boost in plausibility for the skeptic-favoring god, I suggest, is the needed offset to the scriptural advantage enjoyed by the Christian-favoring god.

Thus, the overall situation is this: the extremely low probability ceiling that stems from the moral implausibility of all types of salvific exclusivism means that, if a skeptic-favoring god and a Christian-favoring god differ at all in their probability of existing, then this difference is at most a tiny fraction of a percentage point. The question then becomes whether in this very narrow space one type of god is more likely than the other. On the one side of the balance, scriptural considerations favor a Christian-favoring god, whereas on the other side of the balance, moral considerations favor a skeptic-favoring god. I do not believe that the human ability to estimate probabilities is capable of the exquisite precision it would take to judge with any confidence that, say, the scriptural considerations weighed against the moral considerations leave a 0.001% greater chance of the Christian-favoring god existing than the skeptic-favoring god, or vice versa. Instead, the only epistemically responsible verdict is to judge that, given how extremely unlikely each god is, we cannot reliably know which type of god is slightly more likely than the other. Thus, the modest form of the Many Gods Objection achieves the same result that the ambitious form sought, namely, it shows Pascal's Wager to be indeterminate. The Wager does not single out either wagering for God, or wagering against God, as prudentially superior.

6. Objections

There is bound to be resistance to my argument that we are not epistemically equipped to settle the probabilities between a skeptic-favoring god and a Christian-favoring god. So much his-

tory exists in support of the latter god that many readers will naturally think it superior in probability to the former. In this section I consider possible objections to my argument that might occur to such readers. In replying to these objections, my goal is not to show the superiority of p_s over p_c , but rather to raise enough doubts about p_c to lead readers who would otherwise favor p_c to accept that it is no easy matter to determine its relative size compared to p_s .

Objection 1: Forgiveness, Not Belief

According to this objection, the test for salvation is not fundamentally *belief-based*, but rather is *forgiveness-based*. That is to say, what matters for salvation is whether you have asked for and received God's forgiveness for your sins. Belief in God is a necessary *element* of this process (one doesn't ask for forgiveness from an entity one does not believe exists), but it is the forgiveness itself that is saving, not the belief. And since the presence of forgiveness *is* a change in creaturely moral status, it is thus *not* morally arbitrary for God to favor those who have sought and received forgiveness from God, and to reserve salvation exclusively for them.

This argument deserves a fuller inquiry than I have space to provide here. I remain skeptical of its promise, however. What matters most from the moral point of view, I suggest, is that a wrong-doer recognizes the wrong done and shows contrition / remorse. A divine being who views all such contrition as nugatory unless supplemented with an explicit request to itself (the divine being) for forgiveness is a divine being in the grip of either a morally dubious legalism or a morally unbecoming narcissism. As such, it is highly doubtful that a morally perfect being would place such a requirement at the heart of its salvific policy. Moreover, the non-theist can plausibly argue that since an immoral act wrongs the party who is mistreated by the act, morality demands that forgiveness for one's wrongs should be sought from the fellow

beings whom one wronged, to the extent that this is possible. No divine intermediary is needed for a morally worthy form of forgiveness to be possible.²²

Objection 2: A Theist-Favoring God

Might a supporter of the Wager do well to consider a distinct type of salvifically exclusivist god, namely, one who favors *all theists* (on some suitably inclusive definition), not just Christians? Such a god is less arbitrarily exclusionary than a Christian-favoring god, it might be said, and therefore the moral objections against such a god are correspondingly lessened.

Perhaps so, but not all moral objections disappear, and I believe that the moral objections which remain against a theist-favoring god are still stronger than the moral objections against a skeptic-favoring god. After all, the dialectical context of the canonical Wager assumes that arguments of natural theology (e.g. the cosmological, design, and ontological arguments) are insufficient to establish God's existence. And surely it is highly unlikely that a morally perfect god would (i) provide insufficient evidence for the truth of theism and then (ii) make humans' chance of salvation depend on their belief in theism. By contrast, in the sphere of religious belief, non-theists possess more epistemic virtue than theists, and thus the skeptic-favoring god's favoritism is not *wholly* morally arbitrary.

Additionally, note that the scriptural advantages enjoyed by a Christian-favoring god are significantly sacrificed in the case of a switch to a theist-favoring god. After all, the arguments of natural theology do *nothing* to support the claim that the god who exists saves all and only theists

²² Theologians have formulated detailed doctrines of God's saving grace that differ significantly from popular "ask for forgiveness and be saved" versions of Christianity. For instance, on a strict Augustinian version of the Fall, humans in their corrupted nature can do nothing themselves to be saved, and instead are wholly dependent on a prior and entirely unmerited act of God's grace. "Asking forgiveness" on this view is not the *cause* of one's salvation; rather, it is the *effect* of God's saving and unmerited grace already at work within oneself, for it is only God's prior act of grace that leads one to seek forgiveness at all. The logic of this doctrine, though, leads to a predestinarian vision of salvation that seems at odds with a presupposition of the Wager, which supposes that there are indeed actions that one can take to increase one's chances of salvation

in the next life. And the scriptures of revealed religions typically describe a deity who shows favoritism toward people who believe in those particular scriptures, as opposed to a favoritism directed toward all theists but no non-theists. Therefore, all things considered, it is by no means clear that a theist-favoring god is any more probable than a skeptic-favoring god.

Objection 3: Morally Superior Christians?

According to this objection, even if non-theists are superior to theists in terms of epistemic virtue, it is possible that along other dimensions of virtue Christians possess more virtue on average than skeptics possess. Christianity, the objection claims, offers time-tested moral instruction and motivation, and so we should expect Christians on average to be more morally virtuous than non-theists. From this claim, the objection concludes that (taking all types of virtue into account) a Christian-favoring god is no less rewarding of virtue than a skeptic-favoring god is, and thus, a Christian-favoring god is no more morally objectionable than a skeptic-favoring god. As a result, and contrary to what I have argued above, moral considerations confer no probability advantage to the skeptic-favoring god.

Several problems beset this line of reasoning, however: (i) It does not accord well with traditional Christianity, which does not typically promise to transform sinners into moral exemplars, but instead is all too conscious that sinners remain sinners. (ii) It is empirically doubtful that non-theists on average have lower levels of moral virtue than theists.²³ (iii) Even if this objection works in its own terms, it still fails to show that non-theism is *inherently* prudentially irrational. At most, this objection shows that serious vice is inherently prudentially irrational, but leaves it up to individuals to take effective practical steps to avoid such vice—and

²³ I review some of this evidence in Duncan, 2013, pp. 392-393. Cf. Decety et al., 2015.

these practical steps needn't involve inculcating religious belief in oneself, if one succeeds in finding other means of avoiding vice.

Thus an objection alleging moral superiority on the part of theists will successfully rescue the Wager only if it can be shown that non-theism *itself* is inherently immoral. Some theists do claim this. For instance, William Lane Craig (1994, pp. 35-36) writes

When a person refuses to come to Christ it is never because of a lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties: at root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God's spirit on his heart. No one in the final analysis fails to become a Christian because of lack of arguments; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God.

This strikes me as a grossly implausible and unfair generalization. Far from revealing the immorality of non-Christians, it instead casts Craig's own brand of Christianity in a morally dubious light. What is more, even if correct, it would be irrelevant in the dialectical context of the canonical Wager. For Craig's charge is that non-Christians reject the ample evidence that God furnishes, but we have noted that the Wager's context presupposes a lack of rationally sufficient evidence for God's existence. If by stipulation we agree that the evidence for God's existence is inconclusive, then I fail to see how non-theism *per se* could possibly be immoral.

A general lesson to draw from Craig's quotation is that Christian salvific exclusivism typically supposes that God has provided sufficient proof of Christianity. This observation in turn helps us to diagnose a chief failing of the Wager: the Wager aims to combine (i) an assignment of significant probability to Christian salvific exclusivism – which only really makes sense if sufficient evidence for Christianity *does* exist – with (ii) an assumption that sufficient evidence for Christianity *does not* exist (thereby necessitating a pragmatic argument for becoming Christian). Unsurprisingly, this combination proves to be untenable. This same general observation also helps offset a possible incredulous reaction to my argument: “You ask us to

agree that Christian salvific exclusivism is obviously unjust,” a critic might say. “And yet that implausibly implies that for thousands of years Christian theologians – some of the brightest thinkers of their times – overlooked this obvious injustice, and indeed, organized their lives around this injustice instead of calling it out.” My response is that these thinkers did not suppose themselves to be in the dialectical context of the Wager, but instead supposed themselves to have sufficient evidence for the truth of Christianity. Had they themselves judged the proofs of Christianity to be inadequate, many of them would likely have taken note of the injustice of Christian salvific exclusivism.

Objection 4: Imperfect Gods

This objection questions whether moral objections to exclusivist gods can really acquit the non-theist of a charge of prudential irrationality. According to this objection, we must consider the hypothesis of *imperfect* deities, or even demons, who favor Christians in the afterlife, or who favor skeptics in the afterlife. A morally flawed afterlife policy doesn't count against the existence of an imperfect deity, after all. In particular, moral considerations do not make an imperfect skeptic-favoring god any more likely than an imperfect Christian-favoring god; the skeptic-favoring god thus loses its probability advantage in this regard.

However, while true, this fact is of little help to the Wagerer, for an imperfect Christian-favoring god also loses its scriptural advantage over the skeptic-favoring god. After all, an *imperfect* deity who favors Christians in the afterlife is distinct from the god of Christian tradition (what Christian would say that the god whom he or she worships is morally flawed?). Christian scriptures thus don't count in favor of such a god. Accordingly, there is no reason to think that either type of imperfect god is more likely than the other type.

7. Conclusion

Let us take stock. My exploration of the Many Gods Objection led ultimately to the matrix in Figure 4, which uses arbitrarily large finite values to represent the incomparable good of salvation. Rejecting the ambitious form of the objection (which claims that Pascal's Wager is defeated so long as a skeptic-favoring god has *any* non-zero probability), I defended a modest form of the objection. This form entails that the prudential rationality of non-theism turns on the question whether a Christian-favoring god is more likely to exist than a skeptic-favoring god, that is, on whether $p_c > p_s$. However, the probabilities p_c and p_s describe something highly doubtful, namely, a morally perfectly being who excludes some people from salvation on morally innocent grounds. As a result, if one of p_c or p_s is greater than the other, then the absolute difference between the two quantities will be extremely tiny, since both quantities are themselves already very tiny. Compounding the difficulty of judging which quantity is greater is the fact that competing evidential considerations pull in opposite directions. I have suggested that the scriptural advantage enjoyed by the Christian-favoring god is weak evidence at best, and that this advantage is in any case cancelled by the moral advantage enjoyed by the skeptic-favoring god who, in the dialectical context of the canonical Wager, is a rewarder of epistemic virtue. All things considered, then, epistemically responsible agents are in no position to judge one of the probabilities p_c and p_s to be greater than the other. Therefore, skeptics can rationally reject the Wager's conclusion that the prospect of salvation makes non-theism imprudent, and believers are unable to rationally rely on the Wager to justify their theistic views.

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