

Gambling on God edited by Jeff Jordan. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 1994.
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Is it rational to believe in God? This question has been answered in a variety of ways. Classical evidentialism answers the question by appeal to objective evidence, such as the existence or design of the universe. Those evidentialists who deny that such evidence is supportive of theism, of course, answer the question in the negative. Reformed epistemology eschews what they take to be the extravagant demand of evidentialism and argues that belief in God is properly basic--i.e., it is rational to believe in God without the support of evidence or arguments. Reformed epistemologists bolster their position by critical reflection on both our beliefs and our noetic faculties which typically produce beliefs without evidential support. A final set of positions begins to emerge. Because of the failure of classical evidentialism to settle the matter of rational belief in God on the basis of evidence or argument, what is the rational stance to take toward belief in God? One might boldly embrace fideism, belief in God in the absence of or contrary to reason.

Or one might bring costs and benefits into the analysis of rationality, thereby making a Pascalian wager that God exists. Pascal's famous wager trades on two facts: it is possible that God exists and it is possible that the unbeliever will be punished with eternal damnation and the believer rewarded with eternal bliss. Given these facts, it is rational to wager that God exists. As Editor Jordan puts it:

...if one bets on God and believes, then there are two possible outcomes:

1. God exists: one enjoys an eternity of bliss.
or:
2. God does not exist: one loses very little.

On the other hand, if one bets against God and wins, one gains very little. But if one loses that bet, then the consequences may be horrendous. Because the first possible outcome promises an infinite gain whereas nonbelief at best offers only

a finite gain, the choice is clear to Pascal: even if reason does not provide an answer, prudence does--one should try to believe. There is everything to gain and little, if anything, to lose (2).

How will you wager? As Pascal says at the end of his defense of the wager: “Wager, then, that God exists.

Pascalian wagering, however much it has factored into the actual production of belief in God, has been held in deep suspicion among philosophers. *Gambling on God*, however, is an attempt by a powerful coterie of professional philosophers to revive prudential analyses of rationality and their application to belief in God. Important, acute and careful thinkers such as Philip L. Quinn, Thomas Morris and George Schlesinger marshal their intellects in support of Pascalian wagering. It is beyond the scope of this review to treat each essay thoroughly. I will, however, raise the critical issues involved as well as the crucial responses by the defenders of Pascal’s wager.

Let us first consider the standard problems with Pascal’s wager raised in more developed forms by Ian Hacking and Richard Foley, two of this volume’s critics of the wager. (1) Pascalian wagering only works if one has an exhaustive listing of the possibilities. Even so, it works best if there is only a small number of possibilities. Pascal only considers whether one ought to believe roughly in the Christian god or not; consider how difficult it would be to use his method to decide which of all the religions that postulate a doctrine of eternal punishment one ought to accept. (Perhaps an important strategy for Christian apologists would be to develop the most agonizing doctrine of hell) (2) Believing simply to avoid the torments of hell and to gain the pleasures of heaven is a crassly self-interested basis for belief and cannot provide a suitable foundation for genuine faith in God. (3) Even if one were persuaded that it is in one’s best interest to believe in God, it does not follow that it is possible for one to acquire that belief. Beliefs, by and large, are not within our direct, voluntary control. If you think that beliefs are within your control, try believing that you now weigh fifteen

pounds less than you actually do (because, on prudential grounds, you might have better psychological health if you considered yourself as more physically fit than you are). (4) Prudential reasons of the sort defended by Pascal are not very good at gaining access to truth. Pascal presented an argument about what it is prudential to believe, not about what is true. If Pascal's wager is to be defended, it must respond to these formidable criticisms.

Morris's essay refutes the common notion that Pascal is asking us to wager in an evidential vacuum. Pascal believes that there is evidence in favor of Christian theism, say prophecies and miracles, but that concupiscence prevents a fair evaluation of the evidence on everyone's part (Pascal intended to develop a complete defense of the evidences of Christianity but was prevented by his untimely death). Our desires, for better but usually for worse, affect our abilities to discern the truth. The wager can create in us a desire to seek the truth about God and if our desires are changed, the ability to see the evidences properly. The wager, on this account, is not the basis of faith; rather the evidence, re-examined by weight of the prudential considerations of the wager, is the basis of faith. Quinn likewise locates Pascal's wager within its larger epistemological and religious context. The religious context of the wager is a roughly Augustinian account of original sin. On this doctrine humans are morally culpable for the epistemic blindness from the fall of Adam; hence, God can properly hold the concupiscent eternally blameworthy for their ignorance. Because Augustinianism is no longer so palpable, Quinn locates the wager in a theological context wherein no one deserves the benefits of eternal bliss. If God wishes to gratuitously shower the blessings of eternal bliss on those who believe in him yet withhold them from those who ignore him (and provide them with some deserved happiness and then annihilation), then he has not involved us in any system that is immoral. Although not everyone will agree with Quinn's annihilationist's views nor with Pascal's Augustinian views, within these larger contexts there are sustained intellectual justifications which undermine facile

claims of injustice.

One of the most perplexing problems which the wager faces is the many-gods problem. Which God should one believe in? Schlesinger's intriguing essay attempts to reduce the field by a priori theorizing. It is, for example, antecedently more reasonable to consider a "scrupulously just deity who ensure that each person's celestial reward is in direct proportion to the amount of energy and time invested throughout one's earthly life....(91)" Schlesinger brings other plausibility considerations together--simplicity and the principle of sufficient reason, for example--to reduce the number of possible candidates to an absolutely perfect being. In so doing, he eliminates trivial, lesser, and immoral gods from consideration. In addition, Jordan offers a technical critique of the many-gods objection. But both of these essays are blunted by the presence of Schlesinger, an orthodox Jew. If the many-gods objection is not persuasive, why should Schlesinger remain a Jew? Although both Judaism and Christianity adhere to most-perfect-being theology, their salvific systems are quite different. Why not become a Muslim, or consider some other theistic option? And how do we avoid the "My hell is worse than your hell" strategy which suggests itself at this point? Here the more inclusivist tendencies of the writers comes up--perhaps religious differences aren't all that important. But that places Pascal's wager within an entirely foreign conceptual context. Pascal was attempting to persuade people that they ought to become Christians, not perfect-being believers, nor Jews, nor Muslims (and surely he knew of many other salvific systems). Jordan concedes this ground and believes the wager is only successful in showing agnosticism and atheism to be irrational. But the question "Which God?" remains.

Much is still at stake here. Take all of the religions with equally fierce, just and powerful deities who consign infidels to flames of woe. Suppose, although this is unlikely, we could narrow this list down to a mere ten. It is meager comfort to realize that, even though the odds are dramatically reduced, one still has a 90% chance of justly

suffering eternal torment. The many-gods objection has been tamed but not defanged. Here one feels some pressure to surrender the medieval torture chamber views of hell. No doubt one could still, as Quinn suggests, work a Pascalian wager if the options are eternal bliss or annihilation. The prudential considerations in this case would still weigh heavily in favor of belief in (a) god. This approach has the further advantage that one could sleep more easily at night. But medieval torture chamber views of hell aren't simply up to us to accept or reject. They are true (or false) independent of our preferences, or desires for sleep. So the pressures that generate Pascal's wager persist.

Pascal's wager--and the issues it raises--is endlessly fascinating and the contributors to this worthy volume have advanced the discussion in new and fruitful directions. There is more to be said, as I have argued, so the wager of our lives goes on.