

## Betting on God: why considerations of simplicity won't help

BRADLEY ARMOUR-GARB

*Department of Philosophy, Graduate Centre, City University of New York and Brooklyn College, New York, NY 11210*

**Abstract.** In his famous Wager, Blaise Pascal attempted to adduce prudential grounds on which to base a belief in God. His argument founders, however, on the notorious ‘Many Gods Problem’, the problem of selecting among the many equiprobable gods on offer. Lycan and Schlesinger try to treat the Many Gods Problem as a problem of empirical over-determination, attempting to overcome it using methodologies familiar from empirical science. I argue that their strategy fails, but that the Many Gods Problem can be solved (or dissolved) nevertheless. The solution I offer both avoids the problem faced by Lycan and Schlesinger, and does so while respecting the original Pascalian intuitions to a greater extent than any solutions thus far proffered.

### I

#### INTRODUCTION

Either God is or He is not. But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide the question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How shall you wager?

Good question; too bad Pascal's response<sup>1</sup> has recruited fewer believers than the pamphleteers lingering around your local airport. The notion of relying on prudential grounds in a theistic wager should be eminently attractive to anyone who is hard-pressed to acknowledge the legitimacy of *any* of the epistemic grounds on which such a belief could be based. Appealing though it is, the wager strategy appears fraught with difficulties – difficulties that have rendered it nearly impotent in the struggle to convince the non-believer.

William Lycan and George Schlesinger<sup>2</sup> have attempted to untangle some of these difficulties and present the Wager as a palatable option. They claim that by applying scientific methodology – specifically, by applying the principle of simplicity, realistically construed – they can avoid the notorious ‘Many Gods Problem’. In what follows, I will consider their response to this objection. Although the idea that we could assimilate the Many Gods

<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal ‘The Wager’ reprinted in Joel Feinberg (ed.) *Reason and Responsibility*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Berlmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1993), 97–99.

<sup>2</sup> William Lycan and George Schlesinger ‘You bet your life: Pascal's Wager defended’ in R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetmar (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 270–282. Herein referred to as ‘L&S’; citations in the text.

Problem to problems of empirical over-determination of theories is attractive, ultimately the strategy will not work, or, at least, so I shall be arguing.

## II

## PASCAL'S WAGER

Just to remind you: either God exists or God doesn't exist.<sup>3</sup> Either we believe in God or we don't. As reason cannot decide the question, and as we are in something of a forced betting situation, Pascal suggested that we look to prudence in order to make our decision. With L&S, we can concentrate on a standard expected-utility version of the Wager, determined by the application of the following formula:

$$(E) \quad (\text{Probability} \times \text{Payoff}) - \text{Cost} = \text{Expected Utility}.$$

Pascal's claim goes as follows: given that the Christian God offers infinite happiness to those who believe and practise, and infinite suffering to those who fail to believe and practise, and given the finitude of whatever costs one incurs as a consequence of following the tenets of a religious tradition, assuming that God's existence enjoys a non-zero probability, it is rational to 'bet on God' on *prudential* grounds, even assuming that there is no way to establish the rationality of such a belief on *epistemic* grounds.

## III

## THE MANY GODS PROBLEM

God is not alone in logical space. There is a veritable infinitude of possible gods, each one promising eternal bliss, should you choose to believe in it. This means that Pascal's claim that the Christian God has a 0.5 probability of existing is, as L&S claim, 'grossly presumptuous'. In fact, given the number of logically possible gods, unless we are able to rule out some of them, we will be saddled with the following two, rather unattractive options: either we allow that the probability of any particular god existing is the same as the probability of any other god existing, making the probability that Pascal's Christian God exists negligible; or we reiterate Pascal's argument for each of the logically possible gods, leading us directly into contradiction.<sup>4</sup>

L&S see the Many Gods Problem as one of the greatest stumbling blocks to acceptance of the Wager. The upshot of the Many Gods Problem is that

<sup>3</sup> By 'God', I mean the Judeo-Christian God, the god of relevance for Pascal.

<sup>4</sup> The contradiction arises from the possibility of jealous gods, who promise infinite rewards to their faithful – those who deny the existence of all other gods. More to the point, the contradiction arises from iterated instances of Pascal's argument: there might be  $n$  possible gods,  $n \geq 2$ , each of which offers infinite payoff to those who both believe in it and reject all other gods, leading us to the conclusion that it is rational to believe in each and rational to believe that each does not exist, hence, to both believe and disbelieve in the existence of each.

if we forsake all empirical justifications for a belief in, say, the Christian God, relying only on the expected utility of adopting such a belief, then we have no basis on which to choose among those equi-probable logically possible gods. Since many of those gods offer infinite rewards to their followers, belief in each carries the same (infinite) expected utility.

L&S respond to the objection by reintroducing empirical considerations on to the scene. They argue that the existence of a god for whom some evidential support can be garnered (e.g., historical reports of its doings, Scripture, etc.) – however pitiable – renders that god's existence more probable than that of a merely logically possible god for whom no such support can be found. Irrespective of one's attitude towards religious 'evidence', one can recognize that belief in a god whose existence is alleged to be established by documentation that is presented as historically accurate by sincere, ostensibly intelligent, allegedly impartial observers is at least a little less capricious than a belief in some (merely) logically possible god that has been dreamed up on the spot, for the sake of argument.<sup>5</sup>

On the strength of the claim that empirical evidence can be relevant to our decision, L&S claim that the following conditional can be justified, with fairly high probability:

(G) If there is any God at all then there is a God of type G,

where 'G' is to be replaced by some disjunction of conjunctions of trait terms ascribed to the gods of 'the world's great religions'. If we grant this conditional premise, none of the merely logically possible gods will be candidates for (E). But one might wonder whether or not we can ever really apply it. Leaving aside the claim that (G) is overly contentious, insofar as it is based on the claim that we can find 'empirical' evidence for a theistic claim, it is intolerably vague. Are any of the 'second tier' religions, as we might call those less popular ones, great? Are all extant religions great? What decision procedure is to be employed, if we are to determine greatness?

Fortunately, we need not resolve any of these issues. The point of (G) is to guard against the capricious positing of an infinite number of logically possible gods, so let's introduce a predicate that does so more directly. Call the positing of a possible God *capricious* just in case the only description (i.e., trait term) associated with the god (or the name of the god) is the non-conjunctive description under which the god is posited.<sup>6</sup> We can read L&S's restriction as, at least, the restriction of the application of (E) to only non-capriciously posited gods. This means that for every god under consideration there will be at least two descriptions that it is believed to satisfy. For

<sup>5</sup> As I will argue later on, one might accept this simply on the grounds that a theistic claim that is sincerely proffered by a rational and reflective agent should enjoy some positive probability, simply in virtue of being so proffered.

<sup>6</sup> Since, according to L&S, beings can only be posited only under a description, the null case, in which we have a god and no positing description, is automatically ruled out.

example, if you are an *Anselmian* Christian, you might believe your god to satisfy ‘the entity that is absolutely perfect’, and if you are an *Anselmian Christian*, you will also believe it to satisfy ‘the god who is worshipped in *this religion*’, where ‘this religion’ is a complex demonstrative that picks out, in this case, (some form of) Christianity. Call the pair that consists of a (possible) god, and a religious tradition that purports to worship the god, a ‘god, religious tradition pair’.

Were (G) (or, now, the non-capriciousness condition) put forward as sufficient to answer the Many Gods Problem, its predicament would be obvious: while it allows us to winnow out all of the merely logically possible gods, it gives us no way to choose among the remaining god, religious tradition pairs. Though the field has shrunk, the dilemma remains the same.

## IV

## METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: SIMPLICITY

It is at this point that L&S bring the principle of simplicity to bear on the issue. They point out that the present case is, in many ways, analogous to a classic case of *under-determination of theory*: we have a number of competing religious claims (Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, etc.), none of which is favoured by a balance of the evidence, that each yield incompatible predictions and offer incompatible counsel. When the scientist is faced with such a choice, she turns to considerations of theoretical simplicity, or parsimony. Given two or more competing laws (or hypotheses), equivalent with respect to all past observations but in conflict with respect to future predictions, we are enjoined to choose the simplest among the competitors. L&S suggest that the same should hold for us when we are trying to determine on which god, religious tradition pair to wager.

In order to compare various laws for simplicity, the scientist compares the relative degree of simplicity of the mathematical expressions that can be adduced to represent each of the competing laws. This is usually done by considering the number of terms such an expression contains, the power of its variables, and other quantifiable features of the expression representing the law (or hypothesis). The simplest law, then, is that law the mathematical expression of which has the highest degree of simplicity according to at least some of the standards just mentioned.

For *theistic* claims, L&S recommend an application of the following form of the principle of simplicity (L&S, 104): ‘Given two or more postulates, the one whose statement requires fewer *nonadventitious* predicates (a predicate is *adventitious* if it is made up by the theologian, in the manner of ‘grue’, to accommodate a longer complex expression) is to be favoured’. They point out that St. Anselm’s predicate, ‘absolutely perfect’, is the paradigm of an adventitious predicate ‘in that it implies all of the other predicates tradition-

ally ascribed to God' (L&S, 103). In proclaiming the existence of a god that satisfies Anselm's predicate, the theist offers a complete description of the deity. The question of the nature of God is answered and, in effect, replaced by the question of which properties contribute to the excellence of a thing – a more tractable one, and one that should probably be given an answer, anyway. By contrast, a description of a possible god that makes use of nonadventitious predicates would be both considerably more complex and considerably less complete.<sup>7,8</sup>

## V

## AN OBVIOUS CRITICISM

L&S point out that there is an obvious criticism to their proposed solution. I will discuss it, briefly, as a prelude to what I take to be a more serious one. The principle of simplicity in application to scientific hypotheses regards laws, not entities. Consider Galileo's experiments with free-falling bodies near the earth's surface. As is well known, Galileo found that all of the results satisfied  $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$ . However,  $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2 + f(z)$ , where  $f(z) = 0$  for all observations made prior to now, accommodates his results equally well and, as such, is one of an infinite number of competing laws that we could adduce. In comparing the competing laws, we are comparing the simplicity of the mathematical expressions representing the laws. In the Galileo case, we choose the former law over the latter because we judge that its mathematical expression is simpler. The hypotheses are invariant over the postulation of entities.

Now, the criticism goes, while it appears quite natural to compare the relative simplicity of competing *laws*, where all of the laws concerned are in agreement with respect to the entities posited, it does not appear at all natural to apply these same methods where the issue is the existence of *particulars*. In fact, it makes no sense to speak of the relative simplicity of two or more particulars, as particulars are not amenable to the sort of representations required to effect the requisite comparisons.

## VI

## THE RESPONSE

L&S respond to this by claiming that, while it is obvious that we cannot compare individuals *per se*, using the methods that we use to compare the relative simplicity of laws, 'individuals can be *posited* only under a descrip-

<sup>7</sup> For a defence of this claim, see L&S, 103.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that L&S are conceiving the issue of choosing among the god, religious tradition pairs as involving a choice among various possible gods and the various traditions in which they are or each is worshipped. They are not adopting the position that each religion is attempting to worship the same god under different modes of presentation.

tion, and descriptions can be compared with respect to simplicity if predicates can' (L&S, 103). So, their claim is that we can compare the relative simplicity of *particulars* by comparing the relative simplicity of the descriptions under which they are posited. Just as we determined which of a number of empirically equivalent laws is simplest by calculating and comparing the degrees of the formulas representing all of the competitors, we can calculate and compare the degrees of the descriptions under which each of the competing gods was posited, thereby coming to determine on which we should bet. That god posited via the description containing the fewest nonadventitious predicates should be adopted.<sup>9</sup>

Why adopt the god posited under the simplest description? According to L&S:

If we are realist enough to regard acceptable scientific hypotheses as presumed to be literally true then it is not unreasonable to select the Anselmian hypothesis rather than any of its many rival theologies. A staunch scientific realist thinks of the principle of simplicity not merely as an aesthetic consideration or a measure of short-term convenience, but as providing the best chance that we shall make the correct choice when faced with an infinite array of equally well confirmed hypotheses. Reason recommends that we employ the same principle in our theological context (L&S, 105).

The crucial point, and one to which we shall be returning, is that L&S rely on a parallel between the scientific realist's employment of the principle of simplicity to choose among competing scientific theories and the theological realist's employment of the principle to choose among competing theologies, where this amounts to choosing among competing positing descriptions. As I will try to show, no such parallel exists. When the relevant disparallel is brought to light, the analogy on which they are relying will be seen to fail, and, with it, the suggestion that we can rely on simplicity considerations in order to save Pascal's Wager.

## VII

### THE REAL ISSUE

It is undoubtedly true that we can compare descriptions if we can compare predicates, since comparing descriptions would be a matter of comparing the predicates that comprise their matrices. So one certainly cannot appeal to the impossibility of such comparisons in order to argue against L&S. However, the fact that the descriptions under which the various gods are posited can be compared for simplicity does not imply that the gods themselves can be compared (i.e., by proxy), unless it can also be shown that the positing

<sup>9</sup> As should be obvious, a statement of the existence of a deity other than the absolutely perfect being will be considerably more complex than the statement of the existence of the Anselmian God. Hence, unless there are other gods that are posited under similarly adventitious descriptions, the Anselmian God wins on methodological grounds.

descriptions commit the relevant theologies to entities that satisfy their matrices. If it should end up that the competing religious traditions are not so committed, then it will be hard to see how considerations of the relative simplicity of the descriptions could be in any way criterial to our choice among the ‘theories’. Insofar as the simplicity of the positing description is supposed to be *relevant* to the probability of the existence of the entity posited, unless satisfaction of the former is a necessary condition on the existence of the latter, an application of the principle of simplicity will be inappropriate.

The real issue, then, is this: is it the case that when a theist introduces a god under a description, her object of worship (i.e., the object of worship of her religious group) necessarily satisfies the description under which it was posited?<sup>10</sup> Although L&S do not really consider this question, some of what they say suggests an affirmative answer. What makes this question important is that unless there is some such connection between positing description and posited entity, it is utterly incomprehensible how the relative simplicity of the description could be used to select a particular god, religious tradition pair for which an application of (E) is uniquely appropriate. Hence, the real issue that should exercise L&S regards the relationship between the entities that are the alleged objects of worship of the various religious traditions and the descriptions under which those entities are allegedly posited.

## VIII

POSITING A GOD UNDER A DESCRIPTION: SATISFACTION IS  
NEITHER NECESSARY NOR SUFFICIENT

*Satisfaction is not necessary*

To posit an entity is to introduce it into one’s ontology and, we might add, to introduce some way of individuating it into one’s lexicon. Viewed in this way, the claim that an entity can only be posited under a description distinguishes the *positing* of an entity from the mere *introducing* of a name. Presumably, the difference lies in the fact that we merely introduce a name for an entity when we are not, at the same time, enriching our ontology; when we posit an entity, we are both enriching our ontology and our lexicon. On such an understanding, the claim that we can only posit an entity by description makes sense: if the entity is not already in our ontology, i.e., if we do not yet have an expression in our lexicon that refers to it, we cannot use any non-descriptive means to single it out. The most important point to note is that L&S appear to be committed to the claim that we must posit gods under descriptions and that we must introduce names or other individuating devices that will pick out those gods only under descriptions.

<sup>10</sup> This is implied by their claim on 104 that when a theist claims that her god is the absolutely perfect entity, she is claiming that the object of her worship necessarily exemplifies a maximally consistent set of great-making properties.

This, then, brings up the question of the relation between positing description and posited entity. However, since positing an entity involves introducing an entity and introducing a name that will allow us to refer to it, we can discuss this relation as one holding between a positing description and the name that it introduces.<sup>11</sup> Our question is this: what is the relationship between the description under which a god is posited and the god (or the name of the god, see note 11) so posited? There are three options. Either satisfaction of the description is a *necessary* condition for being the reference of the name of the god, so that something could not be the reference of the name unless it satisfied the description. Or satisfaction of the description is a *sufficient* condition for being the reference of the name of the god, so that something could be the reference just so long as it satisfied the description, whatever else might be true of the entity. Or satisfaction of the description is both necessary and sufficient, so that the name is synonymous with the description. As we shall see, none of these possibilities seems plausible. Let us fix on an example.

Suppose that our theist, St. Anselm, introduces the name for the Christian God, call it ‘God<sub>A</sub>’, via the description ‘entity who is absolutely perfect’. If we hold that the entity posited necessarily satisfies the positing description, then, if the description ends up being unsatisfied, the name that is introduced should be vacuous and we would expect that no entity had been posited. But, intuitively, this seems the wrong thing to say.

Imagine that St. Anselm posited the Christian God under the aforementioned description, and imagine further that the moment after he had done so, he was revealed to by a long-faced supernatural being. The supernatural being announced to St. Anselm that, sad to say, It wasn’t quite all that Anselm had chalked It up to be: while It was pretty close to perfect, It still had some issues to work through.<sup>12</sup>

If satisfaction of the description is a necessary condition on being the referent of the name and, *ipso facto*, on being the object of worship, we would expect Anselm to be unfazed by the news. After all, if this supernatural being (who, *ex hypothesi*, is responsible for eternal rewards and punishments doled out to Christians and non-Christians, respectively) is not absolutely perfect, it is not the Christian God – i.e., not God<sub>A</sub>. But this is not what we would expect Anselm to conclude. Rather than concluding that this supernatural being in front of him was not God<sub>A</sub>, the object introduced *under* the positing description, but, also, *as* the god of his worship, we would expect Anselm to conclude that he was in possession of a false belief about the nature of God. This is incompatible with the claim that satisfaction of the description is a

<sup>11</sup> I am presupposing what is known in the philosophy of language as a *Millian* view of proper names. On such a view, names are mere tags, conventional devices whose sole job is to refer to whatever they were introduced to refer to. For further discussion of such a view, see Saul A. Kripke *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> I trust that the reader will get the point of this fanciful story.



necessary condition on being God<sub>A</sub>. Further, and more importantly, it is incompatible because of the potential conflict with the other relevant description, 'God who is the object of worship of my religious tradition'. Hence, if L&S require such a connection to hold, their argument relies on a false account of the connection between positing description and posited god.

There are two questions that one might have at this point. How could the god fail to satisfy a description and yet be posited under it? And how do we reconcile the fact that a god can fail to satisfy the positing description with the claim that a god has whatever properties it has, necessarily? In answer to the first question, we should note that the name, though introduced via the positing description, was introduced *as* the name of the Christian God. Evidently, there is no reason to believe that failure to satisfy the former description implies failure to satisfy this latter;<sup>13</sup> ergo, the possibility of intra-traditional theoretical debate. As previously mentioned, the correct thing to say, if, for example, it ends up that there is a god that the Christians *are* worshipping, who will reward them with infinite happiness if they believe and practise, who doesn't *exactly* satisfy the positing description, is that the positing theologian was wrong as to the exact nature of *that entity*, the object of Christian worship, God<sub>A</sub>.<sup>14</sup>

In answer to the second question, we should note that even if the theist is committed to the claim that God has whatever properties It has, necessarily, she is not committed to the claim that God has the property or properties picked out in the positing description, necessarily. Rather, she is committed to the truth of something like the following:

For any god G and any property P, if G exemplifies P then necessarily G exemplifies P.

As should be obvious, this does not commit the theist to her own infallibility or omniscience: she can recognize that she could be wrong about the nature of God while, at the same time, holding that God has whatever properties It has, necessarily.

<sup>13</sup> One might suggest that the positing description is a conjunction of the two descriptions; i.e., 'the entity who is absolutely perfect and the entity who is the object of Christian worship'. In this case, we will have failure to satisfy the description by virtue of the fact that we have failure to satisfy one of the conjuncts. Hence, we would have to conclude that the Christians are worshipping no god, which seems wrong. One might try to argue that, so long as one of the descriptions is satisfied, the whole description holds of the thing that satisfies *it*. That is, one might argue for some sort of disjunctive view. As I will show, such a solution could not work. See note 15 below.

<sup>14</sup> In claiming that 'God<sub>A</sub>' is not equivalent to 'the entity that is absolutely perfect', and in claiming that some motivation for this derives from the fact that the entity posited under, though failing to satisfy, such a description may nevertheless satisfy the description 'entity that is the object of worship of this religious tradition', I am not claiming that the name is equivalent to the latter description. My point, as will be borne out soon, is that it does not appear to be the case that the name is necessarily equivalent to any description.

*Satisfaction is not sufficient*

At this point, one might argue that this really is not the relevant case. One might claim that all that L&S should require is that the satisfaction of the description be *sufficient* for the non-vacuity of the name. So, for example, though the Christian God would be the Christian God even if Anselm were incorrect in his judgement about Its nature, if anything satisfies Anselm's description, It is the Christian God. This would be a weaker claim than the one initially considered, but it would at least provide a connection between the positing description and the entity that is posited under it. On such a position, the names that are posited are *conditional names*: if the descriptions with which they are introduced denote, then the names refer, and they refer to whatever are the unique denotations of the descriptions. Further, and obviously, what they refer to is the object of worship of the religion under consideration.

A brief consideration suggests that, in fact, the mere satisfaction of the positing description by something or other is not even sufficient to guarantee the existence of (e.g.) the *Christian* God. Consider again Anselm's description, 'the entity that is absolutely perfect'. Now, suppose that there is some unique way of cashing out that description and that, when it is cashed out, it ends up that the universe itself satisfies it. Does it follow from this that the universe itself is the object of Christian worship? That is, that the universe is the referent of 'God<sub>A</sub>', and that Christians are some sort of pantheists? Clearly not.<sup>15</sup> This seems to be the case because, though the god is being posited *under* the Anselmian description, it is being posited *as* the God of the Christian religion, and, though the universe itself might satisfy the former description, there is no reason to believe that that entails that it satisfies the latter.

## IX

## THE CONSEQUENCES

What seems to follow from these considerations is that our positing description has the status of a defeasible claim about the nature of God. As such, we have no reason to believe that any particular religious tradition is, or should be, necessarily committed to the existence of a god that satisfies the description under which it is posited. If this is the case, it looks as if the positing description merely *fixes the reference* of the term that is introduced to refer to the god (i.e., while, at the same time, serving to introduce the god), such reference being determined by a number of features of, among other things, the context of the positing. One might be worried by this claim.

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, this answers the question raised in note 13. If we allow for a disjunctive reading of the description, then it ends up that the universe *is* the object of Christian worship, making the worshippers not Christians, but some sort of pantheists.

When a description is used *merely* to fix the reference of a term, the description used allows others to *fix on* the (intended) referent. As such, a description can merely fix the reference of a name (i.e., rather than setting up a relation of synonymity) only if there are other ways in which the referent can be identified. In the case of God, we have no non-descriptive means of identifying the referent of our term. Hence, the claim that the description merely fixes the referent, as well as the motivation, here, is suspect.

Taking note of the requirement that all gods under consideration must be non-capriciously posited, we have a ready answer to this worry: though there will almost certainly be no non-descriptive means of identifying the god available, the fact that the possible gods under consideration must be non-capriciously posited entails that there will always be another description available. There will always be at least two available descriptions, the one under which the god is posited, and the one that encodes what it is posited as. So, we will *always* have another means (albeit descriptive) of identifying the entity, and we can always wonder whether or not the entity that satisfies the one description satisfies the other.

If we are correct about the relation between positing description and name (or entity) introduced via the description, the consequences are not good for L&S (and, by proxy, not too great for Pascal, either). For if the link is as we have described it, we have an important *disanalogy* with the science case. To see this, we must turn to a consideration of simplicity and scientific laws.

## X

## SIMPLICITY AND SCIENTIFIC LAWS

L&S are concerned with the scientific realist's justification for the deployment of the principle of simplicity. According to the scientific realist, when we are faced with observationally equivalent hypotheses that make competing predictions, we should adopt the simplest among them because that is the one that is most likely true. The scientific realist sees a connection between the simplicity of the representation, or expression, of a hypothesis or law, and the truth of the hypothesis or law itself. All of this is well covered terrain.

In order to determine which among an array of such laws we should accept, we adduce mathematical representations of the various laws and determine the relative simplicity of the various mathematical expressions. Now, one may ask, how can the simplicity of the mathematical expression of a law provide us with a motive for concluding that the law itself is true? This question can be taken in two ways. On one reading, this is a question about the relation between simplicity and truth. This is not a question that we will be answering. Our question regards the other reading, the reading on which this is a question about the relation that holds between the

*mathematical expression of the law* and *the law itself* in virtue of which facts about the latter can be inferred from facts about the former. An answer to this question seems easy: to speak about a mathematical expression and the law that it represents is to speak of a mathematical expression and its *meaning*. Put in as neutral a way as possible, and neglecting the issue of what a *meaning* is, if a mathematical expression *e* expresses, represents or refers to a law *l*, then *l* is the meaning of *e*.<sup>16</sup>

So, the scientific realist can determine which laws to accept by determining which mathematical expressions, among those that represent competing and empirically equivalent laws, are simplest. By adopting a particular set of laws, she adopts a particular predicate scheme – a particular *ideology*, to steal a phrase from W. V. Quine. Given the relation between a predicate and the property that is its meaning, it follows that adopting a particular predicate scheme entails countenancing a particular distribution of properties. This means that the scientific realist can use the principle of simplicity to determine which kinds of things she will countenance. However, from the fact that one has adopted a particular predicate scheme, nothing follows about which entities fall where in the distribution. The principle of simplicity is wheeled out when our decision regards how to distribute a given ontology, not which ontology to distribute. It will allow the realist to determine which kinds of particulars to countenance; if we are concerned with whether or not some specific particular falls here or there (or anywhere!) on the distribution, when we are concerned with *ontology*, the principle will be of no use to us.

## XI

### SIMPLICITY AND GOD

The problem is now clear. It is in virtue of the fact that the mathematical expression of a law has the law as its meaning that we can allow considerations of the simplicity of the expression to play a role in our decision whether or not to adopt the law. L&S claim that the principle can also be used to choose among competing theologies, where this amounts to choosing among competing positing descriptions on the basis of the simplicity of their matrices. The problem that arises is that there is a real disparallel between theology and science, a disparallel that surfaces at precisely this point.

When choosing among competing theologies, it is not just the ideology (i.e., what can be said in the language about what there is), but also the ontology (i.e., what there is, according to the language), that counts. This is the case insofar as, *ex hypothesi*, different religions posit different, and not just differently described, gods. Choosing among theologies is a matter of

<sup>16</sup> As should be clear, I am taking *the law itself* to be an abstract entity of some sort or other. The details are irrelevant.

choosing among (possible) god, religious tradition pairs, pairs of specific entities and, if you will, predicate schemes – ontology, ideology pairs. What is crucial, then, is not just which ideology is most simple, but whether the specific object of worship is a member of the kind picked out by the positing description. As we have seen, there is no guarantee that the specific object of worship ever is a (or the) member of the kind picked out by the positing description. This means that the simplicity of the description could not select any particular god, religious tradition pair because it cannot select any specific entity whatsoever. If, for example, within a particular religious tradition, T, they posit their god under a description, D, the question of whether or not anything satisfies D is independent of the question of whether or not anything satisfies the description ‘the object of worship of T’. This follows from the putative fact that satisfaction of the positing description is neither necessary nor sufficient for the posited entity to exist (i.e., for the name introduced to be non-vacuous).

At this point, we would expect the Pascalian wagerer to object. She might argue as follows: suppose that a particular religious tradition, T, posited a god, G, under a description D. Suppose further that D is the simplest of all of the relevant positing descriptions that are under consideration, so that the probability that an entity satisfies D is greater than the probability that an entity satisfies any of the other positing descriptions. Now, D is posited from within T. If D has the highest probability of being satisfied, and G was posited under D from within T, then T should be adopted over any T\* that posited its possible G\* under some or other description, D\*. Further, this is the case, not because there is a necessary connection between G and D, but because if D has the highest probability of being satisfied and D was posited from within T, then T has the highest probability of being true. Of course, our wagerer may concede, there is *some* possibility that there is no connection between the satisfaction of D and the truth of T, but, clearly, we must admit that, if D has the highest probability of being satisfied and D is posited from within T, then T has a higher probability of being correct than any of the T\*s.

I think that this conclusion is attractive, and, yet, it should be resisted. Given that satisfaction of D is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for satisfaction of ‘the object of worship of T’, the question arises as to why one (e.g., the agnostic) should accept that the relative simplicity of D somehow privileges the religious tradition from within which a god was posited under it. Of course, if there were a necessary connection between positing description, posited entity, and religious tradition, this would not be a worry. However, without any such connection being obvious, we are owed an explanation of the relation that is alleged to hold between the positing description and the religious tradition from within which it is posited, such that the simplicity of the former somehow makes more plausible the latter.

The first thing to notice is that one can accept (G), or some variant thereof that relies on the notion of non-capricious positing, without at the same time accepting any of the existence claims made by any of the particular religions. For example, accepting:

(G) If there is any god at all then there is a god of type G,

commits one to the claim that, if a god exists, then it satisfies the positing description provided by one of the major religions. However, there is nothing in (G) that commits one to accept any particular god, religious tradition pair. So, for example, the fact that D has the highest probability of being satisfied, combined with the fact that D was posited from within T to pick out the entity that is the object of worship within T, does not, on the basis of the principle of simplicity and (G), give one reason to accept the existence claim:

(D) The god who is the object of worship in this religious tradition (i.e. T) is the D.

It is important to note that (D) follows from (G) and the principle of simplicity only if you also accept:

(F) The fact that a particular religious tradition says that the god who is the object of their worship is D implies, or provides a good reason to believe, that the god who is the object of their worship is D.

From (G), (D), (F), the principle of simplicity and the fact that, *ex hypothesi*, D is the simplest among all of the relevant descriptions, we could infer that there is good reason to believe that T has the highest probability of being correct, and, therefore, should be selected as the unique religious tradition to which we apply (E). (F), however, would not necessarily be acceptable to the agnostic. In fact, there is good reason to believe that many agnostics are agnostics because they deny things like (F).

For example, an agnostic who accepted the following three claims would, most likely, reject (F):

- (i) mere logical possibility (of, say, the existence of a capriciously posited god) does not warrant an assignment of a non-zero probability to the claim that such a thing exists;<sup>17</sup>
- (ii) on the assumption that each possible god that is posited from within a religious tradition was sincerely posited by a rational, reflective agent, each possible god posited from within a religious tradition has some non-zero probability of existing;<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See James Carlisle 'Pascal's Wager', *Philosophy*, 41 (1966), 256 for this claim.

<sup>18</sup> This could be the sort of justification that an agnostic would give for her acceptance of (G).

(iii) though (G) is acceptable (e.g.) on the basis of considerations like (ii), none of the individual claims (e.g.) to the effect that the absolutely perfect entity is the god of *this* religious tradition can be assigned any special probability.<sup>19</sup>

The upshot of (i)–(iii) is that an agnostic can accept (G), or something like it; and maybe she could even accept that simplicity considerations would yield a particular kind of god as having the best chance of existing. However, even given acceptance of these claims, she might find no reason to favour any particular god, religious tradition pair on that basis, including the pair consisting of the (possible) denotation of the simplest positing description and the tradition from within which it was posited.

## XII

## THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

The problem with L&S's suggested response to the Many Gods Problem emerges once we note the *disparallel* between the interests that drive an application of the principle of simplicity in science, and the interests that are present in the theological case. What makes it fail, ultimately, is a *parallel* between theology and science. Just as scientific ideology is indifferent to ontology, theological ideology is indifferent to ontology.<sup>20</sup> Since theological theory choice is sensitive to ideology and ontology, and since the principle of simplicity operates only on the former, the principle of simplicity cannot be used to select a particular theology as the unique candidate for an application of (E). The principle of simplicity is useful in science, if it is, in allowing us to determine what we should say in the language about what exists; it can be applied to determine which basic laws to adopt and, in turn, which kinds to countenance.

Applied to theology, one might claim that the principle counsels us on the decision regarding which *theological* kinds to adopt. Hence, the question of which positing description is simplest might be seen by the realist as a question of which kind adequately characterizes, and so has as its member

<sup>19</sup> The reason for accepting (iii) might be nothing other than the reason our agnostic is an agnostic. Our agnostic might reason as follows: one who makes a claim about the nature of her god does so either on the basis of her scriptures and writings or on the basis of some argument that is independent of her particular religious tradition. If it is the latter, we have no reason for accepting that the god posited is especially associated with her religious tradition. If it is the former, the justification for her claim turns on the justification for the claim made in the scripture or religious document, i.e., the justification given by the writer or writers for the claims that they make. If, as they most likely would, a justification of the claims made in scriptures or religious documents adverts to such things as divine inspiration, contact with a god, the word of a god interpreted, or some such thing, then the agnostic will reject the claim on the basis of her belief that there is no such thing as divine inspiration, contact with a god, a god's word interpreted, or any such things. In fact, she might point out that it is a repudiation of such that led her to agnosticism in the first place.

<sup>20</sup> The various forms of Christianity can be seen as differing in ideology while agreeing on ontology; Reconstructionist Judaism and Conservative Judaism agree (for the most part) on ideology while disagreeing on ontology.

or members, God (or, the gods). If we think about it in this way, then the question that I have raised is whether or not the kind characterized by the matrix of a positing description has the same member or members as the kind picked out by the matrix of the relevant demonstrative description ‘entity (or entities) that is (are) the object of this religious tradition’.

As we have seen, given the contingent relation that holds between the two descriptions, there is no reason to believe that satisfaction of the one entails satisfaction of the other. If this is the case, then the principle of simplicity will do us no good in our search to single out a unique god, religious tradition pair for application of (E). The upshot of this is that L&S have failed to solve the Many Gods Problem; the principle of simplicity is useless to us in our quest to single out some unique religious tradition as the one that we should adopt and, in effect, bet from within.

Though much of our discussion has revolved around somewhat technical issues in the philosophies of language and science, the basic points are more general. L&S attempted to adduce a decision procedure for selecting a unique god on whom to bet, as well as a unique religious tradition from within which to do the betting. Where they went wrong was in identifying too closely the concept of God with God Itself. Here, again, there is an analogy with science. The Newtonian scientist, including, of course, Newton himself, was wrong about the properties of space: the description under which he thought of space – the description under which space was posited, if you will – was true of nothing. This provides not even the slightest inclination in us to claim that Newton and his followers were not deeply concerned with understanding space, the same space that exercised Einstein. Space is one thing; the Newtonian description thereof was another. The same is true of theology. The description under which a god is posited provides evidence as to what a theologian believes God to be like, evidence as to the concept of God, as that is held by members of a religious tradition. However, the concept of God is not God.

Once we distinguish between the concept of God, and God, and once we recognize that a tradition’s concept of their object of worship bears only a contingent relation to that object (if such should even exist), two things follow. First, it becomes obvious that the Pascalian wagerer cannot rely on a consideration of the various god concepts in order to determine which religious tradition’s posited god has the greatest chance of existing. Second, we note that the fact that there are an infinite number of logically possible ‘god descriptions’ poses no problem for the Wager (or the wagerer). Indeed, given the contingent relation that holds between the concept of god that is held by a particular religious tradition and the putative object of its worship, the idea that one should pick a religious tradition (i.e., bet on a god) based on the complexity of the description of the divine entity associated with that religious tradition is unmotivated. 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. However, we are faced with the question of which sort of god concept to adopt – a question that is in many ways inseparable from the question of which religious tradition we should embrace.

## XIII

## AN EMPIRICAL SOLUTION?

Isn't the Many Gods Problem simply replaced by the problem of selecting among a variety of religious traditions, and cannot this 'Many Theologies Objection' be levelled with equal force?<sup>21</sup> The first thing to note is that, given our deflation of the question of which god, religious tradition pair to adopt to the question of which religious tradition to embrace, one no longer need worry about the capriciously posited (merely) logically possible gods. One is now in the position of having to select from among those traditions mentioned in the consequent of (G), a considerably easier choice. Given the fact that each of those traditions comes with a *god concept* – one that may be inaccurate, we might add – we find ourselves in the position of having to choose among sincerely espoused, competing religious traditions. Our epistemological predicament has changed, for we are now confronted with a finite number of competing options, each of which enjoys the same expected utility.

Things have not got much easier, however. On Bayesian grounds, i.e., taking the probability calculus to be understood as *the* set of rules of rationality, if the expected utilities of each choice are equal, as they are, there is no rational choice to be made; on prudential grounds, no decision is any better or more rational than any other. Hence, we see clearly Pascal's legacy. Although he may have provided us with good reason to favour theism over atheism, his methods break down in the face of inter-theological choice.

At this point, following L&S, and, some would say, common sense, it seems right to turn to empirical grounds. In particular, one might attempt to establish that one or another religious tradition makes claims the verifiable of which come out true with a higher relative frequency than the verifiable claims made from within any other tradition. In other words, having exhausted the resources of prudential rationality, and having ruled out L&S's methodological considerations, one might go empirical, perhaps arguing on inductive grounds that the verifiable veracity of one or another tradition provides *prima facie* evidence as to the truth of the more important theological claims made from within that tradition. Even if the introduction of empirical considerations does not favour one religious tradition over all the others, it will yield at worst a limited class of religious traditions, each of

<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

which enjoys the same empirical support. Pascal's methods, combined with an empirical approach, might not yield a unique choice, but they will come close.

Attractive though this option might be, I cannot see that it helps the Pascalian wagerer. Consider any theological claim made from within a religious tradition – in scripture, oral tradition, commentary, or what have you. Either it is taken to have divine origin or it is not. In either case, the epistemic status of the claim can be no greater than that of the theistic existential claim whose truth it both presupposes and is being used to establish as justified. It follows from this that an appeal to empirical considerations will not help establish the verity of the relevant theological claims.

Furthermore, satisfaction of the descriptive existential claim made within a religious tradition (e.g., 'that than which there is no greater exists') is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for an entity's being the god of worship of that tradition. Hence, if the epistemic status of a significant theological claim is equal to that of the descriptive existential claim whose truth it presupposes and is therefore wielded to justify, we have no more reason to countenance any significant claim made within a tradition (i.e., as grounds for adopting, and betting from within, *that* tradition) than we do to accept as true and relevant their god concepts. Digging deeper into the tradition will not help.

#### XIV

##### THE MANY GODS PROBLEM SOLVED

If, on prudential grounds, there can be no sense to the claim that the adoption of one religious tradition is more rational than the adoption of another, and if neither the methodological considerations suggested by L&S nor the empirical considerations lately noted can be brought to bear on the situation, we can say that there are no *epistemically rational grounds* on which to make our choice. It follows from this, I suggest, that in one sense – the theologically interesting sense – there is no choice to be made, appearance of a rational choice dilemma to the contrary notwithstanding.

However, in another sense, equally important for present purposes, the possibility of choice re-emerges. First, notice how far prudential reasoning has taken us. We are now faced with a finite number of options, rather than an infinite number of equally rational options (as well as a contradiction). Our rational methods have got us to theism, but no further. This is to be expected, I submit, as there are considerations that we have not yet introduced.

In order to select from among the competing religious traditions – those in the consequent of G – we must employ a different, more *worldly*, set of criteria. The decision matrix that we now ought to employ – the one involved

in inter-theological choice – includes components such as aesthetic sense, convenience, familial and social ties, and myriad other aspects of personal preference – considerations not significantly different in kind from those that are involved in any significant lifestyle choice. These are to be weighed and deliberated on in accordance with standard decision-theoretic procedures. If all goes well, one among the candidate religious traditions will emerge with the highest expected utility.

The idea, then, is that the at most first-round rational decision procedures – those advocated by Pascal – establish that it is prudent to adopt a theistic world-view, but they provide no help in selecting among a subset of the available options. That is, they leave us with a set of traditions, acceptance of each bearing the same expected utility. Hence, we turn to second-round rational decision procedures. The inputs to our second-round decision procedures are both prudential and pragmatic – they are far closer to the sorts of considerations one employs in ordinary decision making – because they regard *which* equipollent religious tradition to adopt, not *whether* to adopt a religious lifestyle.

The coincidence with ordinary decision making is no accident because the judgement called for is not too different in kind from the judgements we must make regarding where to live, what profession to pursue, etc., given that, effectively, you must live somewhere, do something, etc. Furthermore, as ordinary decision making usually results in a best choice, we should expect no less in the present case – we should expect one tradition to emerge from among the competitors.

What if our procedures do not yield a unique best choice? This is a possibility, albeit a remote one, and it is not one for which any answer is, or could be, forthcoming. If, in our attempt to select from among the extant religious traditions, we have exhausted all theoretical, prudential and practical considerations, and we have still failed to select one tradition as the unique best choice, then we must conclude that there is no best choice. That is, we must conclude that the traditions that remain in contention are, by all available theoretical, prudential and practical lights, equally good choices.

This does not show that we have failed to solve the Many Gods Problem (or the recently mentioned Many Theologies Objection). The envisaged possibility is no more likely than the possibility that our decision-theoretic procedures will yield no best choice in any decision under uncertainty; which is to say that it is no more likely than the possibility that one's analysis will yield no best occupation choice, or no best choice regarding where to live, etc., and that means that it is not too likely. Hence, *modulo* the aforementioned remote possibility, our procedures should deliver one among the possible religious traditions as the rational choice. The Many Gods Problem is solved, to the extent that we have procedures for making decisions under uncertainty.

The Many Gods Problem is not the only problem facing the Pascalian wagerer, of course, and so we cannot conclude that we have vindicated the wager strategy and made the world safe for the Pascalian. What we can conclude is that the Many Gods Problem can be solved, and that, contrary L&S, its solution requires (and can abide) nothing more than the decision-theoretic considerations adverted to by Pascal. If we are right, the solution to the Problem involves a structured iteration of calculations of expected utility, the stages distinguished from one another in terms of the nature of the relevant considerations. That is, whereas Pascal provided us with a method for determining whether or not to adopt theism, we noted that more worldly practical and prudential considerations had to be introduced, in order to resolve the issue of inter-theological choice. In many ways this should be unsurprising, a necessary adjunct to Pascalian reasoning in a pluralistic environment.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This essay is dedicated to Karsten Ahlberg, who hopes that it will convince.