



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Reversing Pascal: scepticism about religious belief and its value

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### Abstract

Pascal famously argued that practical reasoning should lead people to try to form within themselves a commitment to religious practice and obedience, based upon a belief in God. I propose to take a less ambitious argument, which I call the Sensible Argument, and use it to present The Puzzle. I argue that there is a huge puzzle here, about the radical dissonance between the beliefs and practices of many of the purportedly religious. There are, I will argue, good reasons to doubt, concerning *many* (clearly not all or indeed most) purported religious believers, whether they are indeed believers, or at least whether their beliefs are strong; and religion seems to greatly *increase the risks* of deception, duplicity, and hypocrisy, as well as self-deception and inauthenticity. By turning towards a religious form of life, one will therefore be adding great morality-related risks. Arguably, if there is a God who deeply cares about individual moral behaviour, he would punish religious moral transgressors more than the secular ones. One is unlikely to be saved from hell (or other severe divine punishment) by becoming religious. If one is going to wager, it seems much more sensible to wager on the secular side.

**Keywords:** Pascal; deception; hypocrisy; moral paradox

Pascal famously argued that practical reasoning should lead people to try and form within themselves a commitment to religious practice and obedience, based upon a belief in God (Pascal 1670/1995). The argument roughly goes like this: if God is all powerful and all knowing, and he will reward the righteous with heaven and condemn sinners to eternity in hell, it would be irrational to risk upsetting him. Rationally, one ought to ‘wager on God’. If God does not exist, one’s losses (such as in missing out on the joys of sin, or wasting time on religious ritual) will be relatively meagre, and in any case finite; while eternal torment in an insufferable hell is an infinite risk, which it would be radically foolish to take. There are philosophical difficulties in Pascal’s argument, such as on which God to wager, or the thought that God is unlikely to be pleased by those who follow his commandments as a pragmatic gamble (for a survey see Hajek 2018). But these need not concern us here.

I propose to take a less ambitious argument, which I call the Sensible Argument, focusing on divine moral injunctions – and use it to present The Puzzle. I argue that there is a huge puzzle here, about the radical dissonance between the beliefs and practices of many

of the purportedly religious; so that that we should be highly sceptical of the prevalence, strength, and value of religious life and belief in God.<sup>1</sup> There are, I will argue, good reasons to doubt, concerning *many* (clearly not all or even most) purported religious believers, whether they are indeed believers, or at least whether their beliefs are strong; and religion seems to greatly *increase the risks* of deception, duplicity, and hypocrisy, as well as self-deception and inauthenticity. In these ways, many religious people end up being much worse than otherwise similar, seriously morally offending, secular people. By turning towards a religious form of life, one will therefore be adding great morality-related risks; it is playing with fire. Arguably, if there is a God who deeply cares about individual moral behaviour, he would punish religious moral transgressors more than the secular ones. And so, *pace* Pascal, *prima facie* it seems better to wager on the secular life.<sup>2</sup>

### The Sensible Argument

1. Assume that one has Firm Religious Beliefs, and in particular believes that
  - (1.1) there is an all-powerful and all-knowing God,
  - (1.2) who commands people to behave morally,<sup>3</sup> and
  - (1.3) who will severely punish those who disobey these moral commands, and put those who disobey his major commands in hell, which is an extremely (and perhaps infinitely) awful place.
2. Such commands in (1.2) involve basic moral injunctions, like not stealing, not grossly lying, and not committing adultery. Therefore,
3. It would be manifestly mistaken and irrational for one not to obey God's commands, and behave immorally, for example steal, grossly lie, or commit adultery.

Given the premises, the conclusion in 3 follows. It can be extended in various ways. For example, it can extend to the promise of heaven and not only to the threat of hell, but we do not require heaven for my argument, so I will keep things simple. Similarly, the argument can perhaps be extended to the observance of some strictly religious commands, and not only moral ones. But, again, we do not require this extension, and here it might weaken matters, for given a belief in God, there are greater reasons for doubt concerning which forms of religious observance God favours (in the light of the multiplicity of religions and for other reasons), than to doubt his commitment to basic moral injunctions such as the above. Yet towards the end we will get back to the way people deal with strictly religious commands, as part of the overall picture. Finally, we do not need the threat of hell as in (1.3). It is of course crucial that one does not think that the pleasures of sin outweigh the price of punishment, and the rest is a matter of estimating risks, and so, belief in a likely severe divine punishment for serious moral wrongdoing will suffice. Yet such belief in hell is widely prevalent, and as in Pascal's original argument, it helps to focus matters in my own 'Reversing Pascal' version.

### The Puzzle

Given the Sensible Argument, matters become very puzzling. How can we explain that in reality many seeming holders of Firm Religious Beliefs (1) above, nevertheless consistently behave immorally, such as in lying in order to make financial gains or having sex with people who are not their spouse?

Put another way, consider a Perfect Surveillance State with an amazingly efficient crime unit, and very severe punishment. If the citizens believe that this is the state they live in, surely their modes of behaviour would be radically affected, and one would not find anything like the same level of transgression as in more typical, lax states.

The Perfect Surveillance State would create a parallel Sensible Argument, which we can predict *will* be closely followed. This immediately gives rise to our puzzle: why is not the same true of many purportedly religious but seriously offending citizens of the City of God?

There seem to be three main possible general explanations of this puzzle:

- a. Immoral apparent believers in God are radically weak-willed.
- b. Immoral apparent believers in God are radically irrational.
- c. Immoral apparent believers in God do not really believe in him, or their beliefs are quite weak in the pertinent sense.

All three purported explanations could be true of some of the apparent believers, and (a) and (b) can be both true, together, of some of them, that is, they can be both radically weak-willed and radically irrational. Under certain conditions, all three can apply to a single person. Nevertheless, both (a) and (b) do not seem sufficient to explain our broad puzzle. We need to take some care in exploring the reasons why.

It is implausible to think that, as human beings, religious believers are inherently, radically more weak-willed than non-believers. Note also that we are not focusing on minor transgressions, which indeed most if not all human beings, not being perfect, fall into. We are focusing on stark moral injunctions taken very seriously by God and accompanied by the severest threats. Matters such as the moral injunctions among the Ten Commandments.

Moreover, the great majority of all people, whether they are believers or not, do not follow temptations when there are similar conditions to those in our context, such as when the risks of being punished are high. For example, it is tempting to over-speed, but very few people do so if they see a police car in front of them. Yet surely firm belief in an all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, if it is indeed real belief, is a motivating reason to resist temptation that is at least equivalent to the police car in a case of over-speeding.

Additionally, we are mostly not speaking about a one-time affair, where it might be plausible to propose weakness as an explanation. Consider married men and women who have adulterous affairs, either consecutive affairs, or ones that last for months or years. This is quite common. Yet such men and women typically take care to deceive their partners, and manifestly have the will-power to resist temptations, when they think that they might be found out. Likewise, in examples of financial chicanery, where the purported believers can and do resist engaging in their immoral (and illegal) ways for financial gain, when they think others, such as customers, their boss, their business partners, or the tax authorities, can catch on. But God, presumably, is just the sort of being whom one cannot deceive, who will find out what you are doing, in adultery or financial deception. Note that in this example the person is *not* weak-willed (e.g. when seeking to escape being caught by his spouse or boss) in *exactly the same situation* where the proponent of the weakness of will explanation is saying that he or she is weak willed, mysteriously not fearing God and not abstaining from doing what will surely get him or her in great trouble.

The second alternative is to hold that The Puzzle can be solved by seeing that most relevant people, while not radically weak-willed, are radically irrational. They *can* control themselves, if they would see a good reason to do so (as when the policeman or their spouse might catch them in over-speeding or adultery, respectively), but, somehow, do not do so, in the case of God, because of irrationality. They *do* firmly believe in God, but (unlike the policeman or their spouse) the threat 'does not properly register', 'is not salient', or something irrational of that sort is going on. The weak of will are also

typically irrational in these sorts of examples, but the difference between the two explanations is that with weakness of will, it is the character defect that carries the major explanatory weight, while here it is the irrationality in belief.

Again, just as I need not deny that some believers are radically weak-willed, I need not deny that some believers may be radically irrational in such ways. But surely it makes no sense to think that most believers relevant to our concerns are radically irrational, to the extent we require in order to solve The Puzzle. If one really believes that God exists, that he will see you if you continue your affair with the neighbour, and that he will severely punish you, then it does not take much to see that it would be incredibly stupid to continue to do so. Assuming that the belief in God is real, firm, and salient for one, the demands for ratiocination, here, are minimal. And, again, many such people manifestly do exhibit the required level of rationality in the exact same situations, when understanding that they must hide their actions from their spouse. So it makes no sense to say that they strongly believe in God (and his absolute knowledge, etc.) but, somehow, cannot figure out what follows, in terms of behaving sensibly, in exactly the same situation in which they do get it right concerning their partner.

If neither (a) nor (b) can be plausibly seen as sufficient to explain The Puzzle, this seems to point us to the rather striking explanation (c): namely, that many of the purported believers do not really believe in God, or at least that their belief is quite weak in the pertinent sense.

Yet before we see what this would mean, we need to note a few other more specific possible explanations. Of course, we need not look for a single explanation for all cases, and diversity (and combined explanations) would also be possible. One explanation would be that the believers indeed believe in (1), but that they also believe that God is extremely forgiving and merciful, so that, however one behaves, one can still save oneself from divine retribution. This would be, for example, because God would not take too seriously particular transgressions, but 'average out' one's lifelong behaviour and come to a 'diluted' final conclusion. But this cannot be interpreted as anything but denying that divine injunctions are taken seriously by God. Moreover, recall that typical moral transgressors are repeat offenders, such as committing adultery continuously, or lying to one's customers. The degree of 'toleration' required here of the deity is surely incredible. Presumably God is neither a sucker, nor weak-willed, nor irrational himself, and hence if he commands that one must not commit adultery (or steal, seriously lie, etc.), but one nevertheless repeatedly does so, then, surely, one ought to believe that he *will* punish you.

However, it is important not to underestimate at this point the seriousness with which many Christians seem to take the doctrine of grace and how expansive it is believed to be. This may help explain why fear of divine punishment is not so overwhelming as to prevent such religious people from committing repeated transgressions. A profound faith in a deep doctrine of grace might help to sustain the belief in the 'last minute repentance' option. On this, divine retribution might be avoided through confession and a commitment to change one's ways, which could reverse the verdict, even a short time before one dies. Then it could make sense to behave immorally, yet not fear divine retribution from an all-knowing and all-powerful God. One could, as it were, extract oneself at the last moment from getting the punishment one deserves. Such beliefs can help partly to explain The Puzzle, either directly, or by greatly encouraging weakness of will and irrationality.

But this direction would not take us as far as we need, at least concerning the great mass of believers of the sort that we are concerned with. For, first, unlike weakness of will and irrationality which (if they were convincing explanations) might apply to all the relevant seriously transgressing believers, this sort of purported solution to the

puzzle would presumably apply only to Christians with certain types of beliefs. Second, grace is hardly thought to be given to everyone automatically (presumably hell is not vacant), and so even if all depends upon grace, presumably you need to shape yourself into the sort of person who could even be a candidate for grace. Moreover, one does not have control as to whether one will receive Divine grace, which limits the security such beliefs provide. Third, this sort of reliance upon grace lies in considerable tension with the way such Christians are brought up to behave. Divine injunctions against (say) stealing and adultery are commonly emphasized, and a model of righteousness put forth, that would not support a widespread feeling that one can commit serious moral transgressions and easily get away with it. For example, 'regular religious participation exposes congregants to religious messages reinforcing the importance of marital fidelity and the supernatural consequences of deviation' (Burdette et al. 2007, 1558). Fourth, according to most Christians many of the sins under discussion are 'mortal sins', which means that they cut the sinner off from divine grace. It is thus not clear that such sinners can reasonably believe that they will be getting divine grace. After all, the New Testament proclaims:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (Corinthians 6: 9–10)

The belief in 'last minute repentance' (with or without an accompanying commitment to grace) involves numerous difficulties. It is one thing to do one's best to live in a way that one takes morality and God to require, fear divine retribution, but have a subsidiary belief that God is also merciful, with uncertain personal implications; and quite another thing to live consistently and repeatedly in a clearly deviant way (continuously stealing, being involved in deceitful business practices, committing adultery, and the like), with the always-present idea that one could always take care of things, even right at the very end, before one dies. Many seriously transgressing religious people act in ways that would seem to require the stronger assumption. Yet the policy of leading a sinful life up to a very late point in one's life and repenting at that late point is deeply contrary to God's will on a theistic understanding. Compare Maimonides here: 'God will not grant the person who commits such deeds to repent because of the gravity of his transgressions . . . One who says: "I will sin and then, repent". Included in this category is one who says: "I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone [for me]"' (Laws of Repentance 4: 1).

The repentance would presumably be recognized to have to be sincere and voluntary in order to be effective, whereas the whole reasoning leading to it is deeply insincere. We do not yet have a 'conversion pill', which would allow us to make our conversion pure at the last moment (compare Kavka 1983). On the sensible assumption that God would condition forgiveness on true contrition, this would then also involve contrition about going about continuously sinning and planning a late repentance. And that is beginning to look like a very risky strategy. Moreover, 'last minute repentance' is not entirely under our control, since typically we do not control the time and manner of our death. So counting on it may be very irrational, even bracketing questions such as whether a sincere repentance of something we very much enjoyed is under our control, and whether the policy of a sinful life which concludes on such calculated repentance would find favour in God's eyes. Thus, while such thoughts may well play a role in explaining an absence of fear of divine retribution particularly among some Christians, it does not seem radically to change the puzzlement of The Puzzle.<sup>4</sup>

The limitations of this 'escape route' from The Puzzle can be also easily seen by comparing it to Pascal's original thought; and Pascal of course knew about the doctrine of grace. If it would make sense to hold that God can be made to fairly dependably grant one immunity from his threats by a last-minute act, then the whole structure of Pascal's argument would have been different. One need not at once aim to turn oneself into a believer for the rest of one's life, which is what Pascal actually proposes. One could, on the contrary, continue in one's irreligious ways, and safely gamble on a mostly-irreligion strategy, in the following form: (I) live as though there is no God and do what one wishes till as nearly as possible to one's expected time of death; and then (II) begin to behave as a believer should, right at the very end. Perhaps the risk of unexpected early death would matter when factored in. But clearly Pascal did not think that this was the sensible approach. God presumably follows one's path in life, and is likely to catch on, if one has set out to live as an infidel for as long as one thought it possible to get away with it, and nevertheless somehow believes that one can snatch heaven at the last moment. Hell would presumably be waiting for people who follow such a track.<sup>5</sup>

We can see this from another angle. It would make little sense, for conventional believers, to hold that God created a social order which involves (i) threats worded in the strongest possible terms, concerning severe moral transgressions, combined with (ii) no tendency whatsoever to carry the promised threats out, if unheeded. Even if one holds God to be merciful, the discrepancy is simply too great.

A second possible direction of explanation would be to weaken (1.3), and believe that God is indeed all-powerful and all-knowing, and commands the believer to follow major moral injunctions such as we have seen, but that the punishment one risks is not very severe. So, unlike the previous alternative, God is not radically tolerant of sin, nor does he allow one intentionally to set oneself on a lifetime of sinning but then buy one's safety even at the last moment, but his punishments themselves are very mild. Yet this again would be an implausible explanation of The Puzzle. Typical purported believers do not sport the sort of beliefs that would make divine retribution thought to be easy to contemplate. The God of the Abrahamic traditions is not known for his tolerance or laxity concerning severe moral transgression, nor for his mildness of punishment. Moreover, even if one doubts the specific idea of hell, surely the thought of being punished by God for one's moral wrongdoing, coupled with this being a major transgression of divine commands, suffices to be an excellent reason to behave oneself.

Note how belief in God is here clearly different from the typical weakness of will and irrationality of the majority of cases where people are doing things that are not sensible, such as smoking. The typical smoker is gambling on enjoying smoking but not getting 'caught', that is, that he will not get cancer. And for most smokers the gamble works out, for although the percentage of smokers who do get cancer is much larger than among those who do not smoke, most smokers do not get cancer. Gambling on not being punished due to the weakness or ignorance of a God one believes to be all-powerful and all-knowing would be very different.

If we conclude that indeed radical weakness of will and radical irrationality (separately or when combined) are grossly insufficient as explanations of The Puzzle, and moreover some more 'local' possible alternatives also cannot carry most of the explanatory weight (at least for most deeply religious, normative people), then we are primarily left with one overwhelming option, (c), namely, that the relevant apparent believers in God do not really believe in him, or their beliefs are quite weak in the pertinent sense.

In terms of associated beliefs, this might involve a variety of very different stances. My argument does not require anything like the idea that the purported believers feel that they have thoroughly investigated the issue, and are fully satisfied that atheism is certain. One could hold that a traditional God might exist, but probably does not, that is, have a

low degree of belief. Alternatively, one may hold that maybe there is some vague supernatural existence, but not a being that the would-be-sinner needs to worry about. Or, perhaps, even a belief in something like the traditional God, coupled with the thought that he does not bother with individual lives but (after having created the world) is mostly passive; or just intervenes in the grand scheme of things, saving nations for example but not individuals. It might even be that although one may have grown up with the Firm Religious Beliefs and on some level has not actually consciously given them up, one does not really feel the presence of God, and it is easy for one to be distracted, and very hard for one genuinely to internalize ideas like severe divine punishment, in this day and time. And so, in an operative way one does not really believe in the pertinent sense. The belief can also be less propositional and more a matter of attitudes weaker than beliefs, such as faith and hope. It is not clear how weak one can make one's belief in God and yet have it remain a belief in God, or what is required in order to say that a person has faith in God. Yet we need not enter this difficult topic. Even if one does believe in God, in some sense, but in such a weak form from which *very little follows as to how one should behave in our sort of contexts*, then this would count as non-belief, in the relevant sense, for our purposes. Such a God is not the God Pascal is speaking about.<sup>6</sup>

Proposal (c), namely, the idea that The Puzzle is primarily solved by scepticism as to the prevalence of belief in God (or its strength), will invite an Error Theory (Mackie 1977). Why, then, do we think that there are so many firm believers, whereas there actually are far fewer? A variety of possible explications of what is going on is available. The general picture would be one where the purported believers deceive their social environment (and perhaps partly themselves) for social and psychological reasons. They typically have grown up religious, have deep, emotionally important, social ties, and it would be painful for their family, were they to say that they are no longer religious, or express their scepticism concerning the existence or nature of God. They may have to leave their community, separate from family and friends, and even economically suffer if making this move. Continuing to have the life they have, while largely *pretending* to be religious, allows them not to rock the emotional and social boat, while secretly doing morally forbidden things such as it would be mad for a true believer to gamble on doing.

Further support for this can be found where people *do* exhibit the expected 'fear and trembling', based upon their beliefs in (1)–(3) above. Samuel Johnson suffered repeatedly from the fear that his sins will lead God to send him to hell. On one occasion he was 'much oppressed by the fear of death', adding dismally that he was convinced he was 'one of those who shall be damned'. Asked what he meant by damned, he replied, 'Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly' (quoted by Boswell; Martin 2008, 511). Given his beliefs, such fears make sense, although his sins were actually not very impressive. In communities where religious belief is firm and taken seriously, such patterns can be widely prevalent, and the terror of divine retribution will be crushing. For example, 'Late medieval European mentalities developed an obsession with the end of the world. The terrors of hell predominated, creating (and reflecting) considerable anxiety' (Fudge 2016, 120). Such examples are particularly important for us, since they reduce the force of the 'escape route' from belief in divine grace that we saw above, although clearly they do not eliminate it altogether.

Among many purported believers who nevertheless do not behave as believers would be expected to, in the light of the Sensible Argument and the spectre of divine retribution, we are likely to find some weak remnants of belief, a large measure of social (familial and communal) conformity and deception of others, and a measure of self-deception. When emphasizing that for many, serious doubts about the reality of their religious belief needs to be posed, and not merely weakness of will and irrationality, I pushed towards

setting aside these two elements, but of course they too are likely to be present. Human beings are complex and varied.

Sometimes *The Puzzle* can be reasonably 'solved' by a combination of weakness of will and strong local, motivated irrationality. For example, it might be that a believer had never before disobeyed a major moral commandment, but at one time the circumstances were extremely tempting, and (say) a very attractive colleague at work set all out to seduce him. He sinned and now regrets it deeply, but at that instant a thought about divine mercy suddenly entered his mind. He said to himself that since he is generally so decent, God will forgive this one-time transgression, and he can go ahead. This interfered with his deliberation, overshadowed the threatening beliefs, weakened his will, and made him succumb to the temptation. If such a believer also exhibits contrition and now becomes distressed and quite fearful as to how God will treat him, then his belief may be thought to be genuine, and we might say that he indeed is a real believer, who fell prey on this one occasion to weakness of will and irrationality. But note what sort of thing would be required, in order to find such alternative explanations plausible.

Additionally, religious people may be more prone to weakness of will for the simple reason that there are many more rules they can break – in addition to 'normal' moral rules. And it is not only that there are more rules, but that the extra rules often add inconvenience and require repressing urges and desires. Thus it is statistically more likely that they will exhibit weakness of will more often than secular people. And, for some, there is 'too much' they need to follow, and some moral weakness may follow, together with compromises on morality which would be psychologically defended by strict conformity on the religious side (just as someone who is trying to quit smoking is likely to be hindered if she is also trying at the same time to lose weight and allows herself occasional transgressions). On the other hand, tying moral injunctions with religious ones can help some people to toe the line, and be generally more obedient. At any rate, here as well, it is hard to see how such weakness of will can fully explain *The Puzzle*, if people consistently sin yet belief in God and his expected retribution are firm.

One way of defending the role of irrationality would be to note that divine punishment, although believed to be inescapable, is significantly delayed, which, especially in cases of repeated moral transgressions, which are not immediately punished, may create an illusion of security. This delay distinguishes religious punishment from much of common punishment, which closely follows transgression. But although this might help form some of the phenomenology, I do not see how it could really explain *The Puzzle*, unless it feeds into serious doubts about belief in God (and the rest of the Firm Religious Beliefs). For the seriously religious, surely a God that is worshipped daily is sufficiently salient. People will do a great deal not to risk losing their pension, although for most of their work life it is far away in the future.

At this stage it might be objected that my reply conflates old age with death. Imagining our old age is not difficult, and becomes easier as we age, but many of us still psychologically deny our death. Perhaps this also affects the salience of the idea of divine punishment following death, for religious believers. The punishments are not salient because death itself is rarely salient. It is hard to assess what to make of this objection. Nearly all people live through the death of grandparents, and then parents. As we grow older, people who are closer in age to us, or younger, die around us. For believers, hope that their loved ones are in heaven is widely prevalent and expressed. There are many reminders of death in particular in Christian art, sacred texts and the liturgy; and partly in other religions as well. Recalling the quote from Samuel Johnson and the historical comparison further helps to counter the idea that, for the truly religious, fears of divine retribution are easily denied because our death is not salient.

What seems crucial, philosophically, is to retain our sense of wonder at The Puzzle, which we have miraculously been able largely to avoid. Firm belief in an all-knowing and all-powerful God, who commands that one strictly follow a small number of major, clear, moral commandments, on threat of severe punishment, does not square with the prevalence of repeated and severe immoral behaviour of the specified sort, among many purported believers. The same sort of immoral behaviour by non-believers is not puzzling at all, in this prudential way. The non-believer who regularly steals from his boss, deceives his customers, or is unfaithful to his wife, is morally unvirtuous, and there might be some localized wonder as to why he is doing so (perhaps he ought to be grateful to his boss, or his wife is lovely). But, as long as he sensibly does what he can to try to not get caught, there is nothing equivalent to The Puzzle here.

At this stage we might take up another aspect of the wonder as to The Puzzle, and reflect not about punishment, but about love. The Puzzle seems striking concerning the absence of fear of divine retribution, and we have also been following Pascal in this focus on risk-aversion concerning punishment. However, if one really believes in God, surely one should fully believe that the result of violating God's moral injunctions is that the all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God would know that one has done evil. Let us set aside punishment, and the possibility that you might somehow avoid hell in the end. If one is a true believer, would one want to be seen as doing evil by a person one loves and admires so much? Think of the human person you love most: most people do immoral things either with the thought that their immoral doings will remain unknown, or with the thought that those they deeply care about will not disapprove. But surely a disciple, a lover, a child, would not do, in plain sight, what the person – teacher, lover, parent – whose opinion he so cares about, and whom he so admires, takes to be evil. But for the deeply religious, God is, or is supposed to be, someone we love, and look up to the most. And God certainly would know, and certainly would disapprove. Surely this strengthens The Puzzle, as well as the thought that many purportedly religious serious moral transgressors are not really believers.

So, there is a striking difference between firm believers and non-believers (and very weak believers), and that is the crux of The Puzzle. The major solution to The Puzzle surely must be that the great majority of purported believers who are regularly engaged in seriously immoral behaviour are not really believers (or are very weak and doubtful ones). But if true, this means that there is a truly stunning amount of deception (including much self-deception), pretension, duplicity, and hypocrisy, going on among such people who are thought to be believers, and particularly with followers of established religions and members of religious communities, on a scale that there is no reason to think exists with unbelievers.

### **The large difference between purported believers and secular non-believers**

Religion, and the Firm Religious Beliefs, put forth a challenge and create a potentially great dissonance and tension, for religious believers, who are also tempted by immorality. In this way religion radically 'ups the stakes', beyond the challenges and tensions that exist for the secular as well. One deals, after all, with the almighty. Hence religion inherently pushes many people towards weakness of will and irrationality, for they find it difficult to square their religion and its beliefs with the circle of their morally sinful inclinations. Nevertheless, as we saw, weakness of will and irrationality are unlikely to suffice. Many lose their belief to some degree or another, and it becomes helpfully inoperative, hence *allowing* immorality without the terror of divine retribution. Yet for many the religious life, social conformity and the pretence of belief will continue. The people we are considering will typically continue to practise religion and worship God with their family

and friends, on a weekly or even daily basis, educate their children to obey God, condemn others, and in general sustain the widespread impression of their religiosity and firm belief. Religion will hence widely be, for the immoral, a major force leading to deception (including much self-deception), pretension, duplicity, and hypocrisy.

Nothing here makes secular non-believers morally or otherwise admirable; some are, and some much less so, or not at all. If we focus now on secular non-believers who seriously and repeatedly morally transgress in ways such as we have seen, then they merit the condemnation and negative evaluation that they do, depending on the specifics, at level X. But people engaged in the same kinds of wrongdoing, who are also purported believers and active practitioners of religion, would seem *pro tanto* to merit much more condemnation and a much more negative evaluation than X. For, given our argument, they are also very likely to be flagrant public liars, deceivers, frauds, and hypocrites, probably coupled with much self-deception and inauthenticity, on a level that has little parallel with their secular non-believer brothers and sisters. And this point is stronger, the more publicly the person professes to be religious, and the more religious she professes to be.

It might be countered that secular non-believers who engage in serious transgressions such as we are considering are just as likely to be public liars, deceivers, frauds, hypocrites, self-deceivers, etc. Most people, after all, present themselves as being morally decent and not the sort of people who would engage in serious wrongdoing. Hence, a given non-believer who repeatedly engages in stealing, serious lying, or adultery will show the same faults as his religious counterpart.

This is true, insofar as it concerns the narrow transgression-related aspects. If two friends steal, one secular and the other religious, they may well hide their crime in the same way, and publicly pretend to virtue. Likewise, if they both cheat on their respective wives, they may well be indistinguishable in their public pretence of being faithful husbands. But my argument is very different. The stealing and adultery are not the focus of the deception, hypocrisy, and so on that concern us, but the question whether they are indeed devoutly religious. My argument was that many such serious transgressors, who are purportedly religious, cannot really be so – because their transgressions indicate that they do not really have the Firm Religious Beliefs they pretend to have, and the concomitant expected fears from divine retribution. But the secular, of course do not pretend at all at religiosity. Hence the whole way of life of the purported believer who pretends to be religious will be a sham, his public religious identity, his daily or weekly engagements in public prayer, the way he guides his children to obey God, his condemnation of others, and the like. It is not only that he will be deceptive concerning his job or his marriage (as his secular counterpart), but he will also be deceptive (and a fraud, hypocrite etc.) concerning the central aspects of his existence, who he is, what his identity is, what he values and what he believes in. This is a totally different magnitude of falseness, deception, and hypocrisy. And that is a difference that God is likely to be paying attention to.

This realization also helps to deal with another possible objection. It can be argued that what one has pragmatic reason to do in our context depends in part on comparing hypocritical over non-hypocritical rule-breaking. If it is only a little bit worse to be a hypocritical adulterer than it is to be a non-hypocritical adulterer, that will make my case less strong than if it is much worse. Again, I agree that the specific element of hypocrisy involved in adultery (or stealing, etc.), while significant, does not radically change the severity of the original act of adultery or theft. But, we recall, my argument was not so much about those specific transgressing acts, but about who one is, or pretends to be, in general. And for those purported believers concerning whom one accepts my arguments and sees that they are not really believers, the significance is thus much greater

than that of being a hypocrite about marital fidelity or pretending to professional honesty.

At the beginning we set aside the strictly religious injunctions, and focused on central moral ones. But here we need to come back and enrich the broth, and see that the typical picture with the purported religious believers in God, and particularly those who appear to be regularly engaged in the practice of established religion, who are also regular and serious sinners, seems to be even darker, morally. For the religious have a whole further area of dubiousness, concerning their pretence in the way of their following the strictly religious injunctions, which the secular lack. But this means that the religious then have a large further field in which many of them seem to be weak-willed, irrational, and self-deceptive, but even more interestingly – gross deceivers of others, duplicitous frauds, and hypocrites. But although the content here is strictly religious, being deceitful, hypocritical, and so on are serious *moral* faults. The secular, since they have not taken upon themselves those religious commitments in the first place, do not then share these moral faults of the religious transgressors.<sup>7</sup>

Our focus is on the central demands for moral behaviour (which can be shared by the religious and the secular); and here, being religious seems, for the reasons that we have seen, to be potentially a moral calamity. It might be that for some becoming (or remaining) religious can further their chances of becoming or staying moral. Setting aside our argument, the evidence on whether religion makes people more or less likely to be serious moral transgressors seems conflicting, and the topic is complex. But this issue clearly matters to my argument. If it would turn out that (a) those who profess to believe the Firm Religious Beliefs and yet commit serious moral transgressions are but a tiny minority among the wider group, or that (b) being religious radically reduces one's likelihood of committing such transgressions, then this would be crucial. For then, even if one admitted my claim that becoming religious added considerable risk of greater divine enmity (because one's whole life might become a sham), if this were applicable only to a tiny minority, or most transgressors could readily avoid being such (and hence any divine sanction) by becoming religious, then the wager might turn against secularity. It may then be that it would still make sense (in probable cost/benefit terms) to try to get oneself to profess to believe.

Matters are immensely complex here, due to conceptual, methodological, and empirical difficulties, yet there are strong reasons to doubt both (a) and (b). Diverse societies such as the Scandinavian countries, the Czech Republic, and Japan where religiosity is lowest, are also among the very safest societies with the lowest crime levels (see e.g. Harrendorf et al. (2010); UNODC 2020; Institute for Economics and Peace 2022). Among Western democracies, the United States has the highest levels of both active religiosity and crime. Most prisoners in US prisons are religious, many of them extremely religious, and the rates of irreligiosity are considerably lower than among non-inmates (Pew Research Center 2012). More generally, the prisons in many highly religious countries are clearly full. There are contrasting and inconclusive findings concerning the relationship between religiosity and deviance; and, in particular, difficulties in singling out religion as the decisive factor. A recent survey of the literature concludes for example that 'The influence of religiosity was mixed for non-violent delinquency and muted for violent delinquency' (Montagnet 2022, 17).

Concerning infidelity, it is difficult to get trustworthy figures, because of the dependence on people's self-reporting (and tendency to under-report, probably extenuated among the publicly religious). Moreover, as with crime, it is difficult to separate the role of religious belief from other factors such as communal control. There is somewhat less (self-reported) infidelity among the religious, but adultery by the purportedly religious is clearly not limited to a tiny minority (e.g. Burdette et al. 2007; Atkins and Kessel 2008).

It is time to return to Pascal (on my moralized version). We are focusing on the presumed importance to God of people's following the basic precepts of morality. If morality is not thought to be very important to the deity, surely this will affect other beliefs, such as the belief that God is all good and deserves our reverence. A God that is deadly serious about human observation of strictly religious injunctions, such as certain dietary laws or the performance of intricate rituals, but does not take at all seriously severe moral transgressions, would be surprising and disappointing to anyone who deeply cares about morality; and arguably unworthy of worship (although of course prudential concern can continue). Belief that God is so seems sacrilegious.<sup>8</sup> In any case, a God who is not focused upon morality leaves us with the familiar Pascalian conundrum of not knowing which religious beliefs and practices to wager upon and follow. In the moral sphere, divine expectations are much clearer. We will assume that it is not the case that being a non-believer as such already means that one is bound to go to hell, and that the deity would be mostly concerned with people's *moral* behaviour. We focus on those who are serious moral transgressors.

So, let us assume that God, if he exists, takes immorality very seriously. Beyond that, he operates in mysterious ways. But if we try to guess, it seems very likely that he will much prefer the openly secular moral transgressors to the purported religious ones, because of all that belief and a religious form of life will add, negatively, to the transgressors. On the same level of moral transgression, the purportedly religious will *pro tanto* be much worse, morally, in the ways we saw, and are much more likely to be gross deceivers of others, duplicitous frauds, and hypocrites, *because they are purporting to follow religion*. Again, it is not merely that their deceptiveness, duplicity, hypocrisy and so on pertain to the particular transgression (stealing or being unfaithful to their spouse, for example), where the secular will also display similar features. The consequence of solving much of The Puzzle through the idea that purportedly religious people are in fact non-believers (or quite weak ones, etc.) is that the *whole lives* of those people are false, deceptive, duplicitous, and hypocritical. If one projects that there is a significant chance that one will seriously sin, then it is better to be secular. By turning towards a religious form of life, one will therefore be adding great morality-related risks.<sup>9</sup>

As long as one remains moral, then a moral God will presumably be sympathetic and favourable, whether one is religious or secular, and hopefully there will not be that much to worry about. But if one turns out to be a serious moral transgressor, then being religious should put one in much worse terms with the deity. That is why (assuming a highly moralized God), one incurs great risks by becoming religious: it is unlikely that becoming religious will radically reduce one's chances of transgressing, and transgressors will typically be much worse, morally, if religious, for the reasons we saw – and hence a moral God is likely to treat them much more harshly than equivalent secular people. It might be thought that God would object to the self-interested calculation behind the opting for secularity. But first, that sort of calculation is of the very nature of Pascal's Wager. Second, the person who hopes that he will not be a serious transgressor but fears that he may be, and then wishes not to be, on top of that, also deceitful, a fraud, and a hypocrite in the whole way he lives his life, is choosing the moral path. Presumably God will appreciate this. If God exists, and particularly to the extent that we predict that he gives precedence to moral turpitude, then one is unlikely to be saved from hell (or other severe divine punishment) by becoming religious. If one is going to bet, it seems much more sensible to bet on the secular side.

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## Notes

1. This needs to be distinguished from arguments that doubt whether anyone in the modern world really believes in God, because of the incredible nature of the beliefs (e.g. Rey 2003). I think that many believers are genuine believers, and the doubts I raise are more limited.
2. For diverse recent defenses or versions of Pascal's Wager see e.g. Jackson and Rogers (2019); Lebens (2020) and Lebens and Statman (2021). For the opposite case, see e.g. Kahane (2019).
3. Exceptions, such as the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, are noteworthy but need not concern us here.
4. Note that if one attributes much causal efficacy to the belief in divine mercy in psychologically allowing severe moral transgressions, then this implies that holding such religious beliefs reduces the motivation to behave well throughout one's life, and hence make one more likely to get in trouble with the deity.
5. The thought that there is no direct connection between salvation and moral behaviour can also follow from beliefs such as in double predestination, but this lies beyond the concerns of this article.
6. If one has faith in a God with the characteristics of the Firm Religious Beliefs, but does not quite have a full-blown belief, this may mitigate some of the charges that follow from our analysis. If the faith is cognitively and affectively strong enough, The Puzzle would largely remain, as well as the grave dubiousness of the moral sinner's behaviour, in the light of the purported content of his faith. But perhaps the charge of blatant hypocrisy couldn't quite be made without belief.
7. Paradoxically, in one way a genuinely religious person who engages in serious moral wrongdoing would be in a worse situation than a similar purported believer who does not genuinely believe. For, if a religious person does a morally wrong thing, then if God exists there is extra wrongness/badness involved since he is also disobeying a God he believes in, which may also express matters like betrayal of God's trust, and ungratefulness. The purported but actual non-believer will, like the secular non-believer, not have these moral faults. Yet the purported but false non-believer will have the further faults of deception, duplicity, and hypocrisy that we have focused upon, unlike the secular non-believer. He will continuously publicly pretend to be grateful to God, and so on.
8. Many religious sources of course emphasize that the superstructure of religious practices and rituals is primarily a way in which to assist people to become moral.
9. It might be suggested that one could gamble on being religious, but then if one sees serious sin coming, switch. Perhaps this could work for a small number of people. But it is hardly likely that this could be carried out in the normal course of events. If someone is living a religious life in a religious community, then he is firmly embedded in religious commitments and a social network. If the urge to have a secret romance with the neighbour or steal from his boss grows in him, and he finds that he cannot take seriously and be deterred by the idea that he is facing imminent divine retribution, then he is unlikely to shatter his family and leave the religious social milieu; most likely he will just become duplicitous and hypocritical.

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