

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Religion, hypocrisy, and betting on secularity: reversing Smilansky's wager

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Abstract

Saul Smilansky presents us with a puzzle which, in combination with a small number of premises, is supposed to generate a reversal of Pascal's wager: the wagerer should bet on a secular lifestyle, and reject religion, as the surest way of pleasing God (if God exists). In this article, we argue that the puzzle, once unpacked, isn't particularly puzzling, that the premises aren't true, and that Smilansky's wager is open to both *reductio* and a reversal of its own.

Keywords: Pascal's wager; hypocrisy; self-deception; akrasia; faith

In 'Reversing Pascal', Saul Smilansky (2022) puts forward a provocative proposal to the effect that, *contra* Pascal, the rational bet is not to endorse a religious way of life but a secular one. Doing so will allow us both to enjoy the benefits of secularity and to decrease the odds of our being punished by God – if there is a god. This surprising conclusion is supposed to follow from what Smilansky regards as a puzzling phenomenon ('The Puzzle'), namely, that many people who purport to believe in God, and especially in divine reward and punishment, behave in ways that are manifestly inconsistent with such belief.

Smilansky's argument is original and appealing but, in the end, we believe it fails. In the first section, 'Smilansky's argument reconstructed', we reconstruct his argument, presenting it in the most charitable way we can. In the next section, 'Does God prefer the secular?', we reject the argument for a secular wager and argue that Pascal's wager has not really been 'reversed'. In the final section, 'The moral risks of being religious', we propose that Smilansky's treatment of Pascal might be read as just a rhetorically charged way of expressing a naturalistic claim about the relationship between religion and ethics, rather than a religious or a theological claim about how to please God. We present this naturalistic reading of Smilansky and point to its drawbacks.

Smilansky's argument reconstructed

The route from Smilansky's Puzzle to the conclusion that one should wager on a secular way of life runs through a number of premises; empirical, ethical, and theological. In this section, we tease these premises out in order to clarify Smilansky's overall argument.

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The first premise expresses the Puzzle. It is a claim about religious believers, more accurately about a large group of them, that Smilansky takes to be puzzling:

- (1) There are many people who (a) believe that God prohibits certain actions and severely punishes transgressors but nevertheless (b) commit serious transgressions (mainly moral, but also religious¹) on a regular basis.

The second premise is a claim about the inner world of these transgressors:

- (2) Most of these transgressors are not weak-willed but are liars (at worst) or self-deceived (at best).

The third premise is also an empirical claim, concerning a comparison between believers and non-believers:

- (3) There is much more deception of others (and self-deception) among the religious than among the secular.

From these three premises, it is said to follow that:

- (4) To be/become religious increases the risk of one being/becoming more hypocritical and/or more self-deceived.

The next premise is an ethical one concerning the moral severity of hypocrisy. The premise is not made explicitly in the article but, without it, the argument can't get off the ground:

- (5) Hypocrisy is a master-vice. Better to be less hypocritical even at the price of less (or weaker) compliance with moral requirements concerning right and wrong *behaviour*.

Admittedly, Smilansky would deny that he's committed to (5). He says (in correspondence) that we overstate the role that hypocrisy plays in his argument as for him hypocrisy is just one member in a family of notions that includes also lying, deception, duplicity, and fakery. Collectively, these vices may form a 'master-vice', but he would maintain that hypocrisy is not 'the main thing'. This has to do with Smilansky's understanding of hypocrisy. On his account, 'hypocrisy' refers to the gap between what one tells others to do and what one does oneself.

For Smilansky, what's most salient about the religious population he has in mind isn't that they act in ways that contradict what they tell other people to do, but that they act in ways that are simply inconsistent with the values and beliefs that they present themselves as holding. That sort of gap, between a person's inner beliefs and commitments, on the one hand, and the image that one projects of oneself to others, on the other, might not conform to Smilansky's definition of 'hypocrisy', but is widely thought, by others, to be essential to hypocrisy, hence our use of the term here. But the issue is largely semantic. If Smilansky prefers to use 'fakery' or 'deception' in place of 'hypocrisy', that would make no difference to our argument. Whatever you call it, Smilansky is committed to the existence of a master-vice characterized by a gap between one's inner beliefs and commitments, on the one hand, and the image that one creates of oneself in the public imagination, on the other. We call this 'hypocrisy'. You can call it something else if you prefer.

Smilansky might think his argument could function with a weaker demand in place of premise (5). On our construal of his argument, the vice of hypocrisy (or whatever else you might want to call it) has to be a super-vice, by which we mean a vice so terrible as to outweigh almost any other ethical consideration. Perhaps this is to exaggerate the case that Smilansky is making. Perhaps his argument could work even if hypocrisy is just an extra vice that attaches to all wrongdoing committed by religious people, but which doesn't attach to the wrongdoing of secular people. On this reading of Smilansky, it's no part of his argument that hypocrisy is a master-vice that specifically outweighs other considerations.

Indeed, Smilansky asks us to compare the case of two adulterers, one secular [S] and the other religious [R]. S lies to his wife and to others. He presents himself as faithful and feigns disgust at adultery. He is a hypocrite and a scoundrel. All of this negativity accrues also to R, but in addition to the badness that attaches equally to both of them, R is transgressing specifically religious commandments that he takes himself to be bound by, or, at least, he is transgressing specifically religious laws that he outwardly presents himself as having accepted. That means that R is guilty of additional degrees of hypocrisy that don't attach to the wrongdoing of S, in that R is transgressing additional obligations that he takes himself to be bound by. In addition to this addition, R is lying to the world when he presents himself as being religious – even more hypocrisy. Thus, while S has only one black mark to his name, R has three (adultery, transgression of religious precepts, and religious fakery). Thus, maybe for Smilansky, all that matters is that in any pairwise comparison of two sinners – one secular, and one religious – the religious sinner comes off with more vices to his name and there is no need to appeal to a master-vice.

However, Smilansky's argument will not work unless the vice in question is so weighty as to push multiple pressing considerations to the side. Otherwise, why should we think God prefers people to have no relationship with Him, and to receive none of the benefits that accrue to those who live a religious life (benefits that we'll come back to later on in this article), only to save them from the accretion of extra vices when they stumble? The argument will only work if the vice in question is extremely weighty – a master-vice.

The next part of the argument constitutes the Pascalian move. It starts with two theological premises concerning the nature of God, which, in turn, lead to the assumed rationality of a secular wager:

- (6) If there is a God, He is a moral God, and a moral God ultimately cares mostly about morality ('As long as one remains moral, then a moral God will presumably be sympathetic and favourable, *whether one is religious or secular*' [italics added])

It follows from premises (5) and (6) that:

- (7) God, if He exists, prefers non-hypocritical transgressors to hypocritical transgressors even when the latter are in some respects more compliant with the requirements of morality, and will punish hypocrites more severely.

Finally, it follows from (4) and (7) that:

- (8) To reduce the odds of getting punished by God (such as the odds of going to hell), one's best bet is not to be religious.

In the next section, we deal with propositions 5–8. In the one following, we deal with propositions 1–4.

Does God prefer the secular?

Smilansky's argument leads to the paradoxical conclusion that God prefers the secular over the religious. Since 'Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord' (Proverbs 12:22) and since the lips of the religious tend to lie more often than those of the secular, it is the secular whom He favours. But we don't think the argument works.

First, the article is not about logically possible religions but about the well-known monotheistic ones, religions that are assumed to hold what the article calls the *Firm Religious Beliefs*; that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, that He commanded people to behave morally, and that He will severely punish transgressors and perhaps put them in hell. Indeed, in two places the article explicitly refers to 'established religion' as its point of reference.

The problem is that the established religions, definitely Christianity (about which Smilansky speaks quite a lot), but also Judaism and Islam, don't care only about morality; they also have a 'religious' component. Open almost any page in the canonical texts of these three traditions and you'll find propositions about the supreme value of trusting God and worshipping Him, as well as harsh words and threats of punishment addressed to those who refuse to serve Him, or to non-believers and heretics. Premise (6), therefore, seems ungrounded. Needless to say, there is nothing conceptually impossible about a god who doesn't care very much if people are religious or secular. It is just that the religions that Smilansky has in mind are not like that. Certainly, the God of these faiths commands moral behaviour, but He seriously cares about other things as well.

Second, surprisingly, in his list of Firm Religious Beliefs, Smilansky omits a belief which is essential to all three monotheistic traditions (as they are standardly understood), namely, God's moral perfection. And when one takes this divine property into consideration, together with His omniscience (which Smilansky *does* mention), the result is inconsistent with premise (6). The reason is straightforward: if God is all-knowing, then He knew in advance that imposing upon human beings His moral and religious requirements would make them more deceptive, hence less moral (see proposition [4] above). How could a perfectly good God do such a thing? He couldn't. So, premise (6) is incompatible with God's perfection.² And thus, the truth of premise (6) would constitute an objection to the very existence of God, again, at least the God familiar from 'established religions'. This fact, in turn, undermines the coherence of endorsing some way of life, on the basis of this argument, *in order to please God*. To be clear, God's non-existence might be welcome to those who adopt a secular lifestyle. But it cannot justify adopting such a lifestyle in the hope of pleasing God.

These two points (that God might care about more than just morality, and that the argument itself undermines belief in God) are sufficient to show the implausibility of the Pascalian part of Smilansky's argument. Let us, however, add a few words about Smilansky's assessment of the master-vice, which we call *hypocrisy*, expressed in premise (5) which then leads, through premise (6), to (7). To start, note that it is an unusually harsh assessment, viewing hypocrisy as such a terrible vice that avoiding it is called for even at the price of less (or weaker) compliance with other moral requirements.

Moreover, (5) would imply that, morally speaking, it is best to adopt the least demanding morality, accompanied by the weakest social pressure to comply with it. Under such conditions, there would be no need to pretend to be more moral than one really is, hence much less hypocrisy. This is, of course, a *reductio* of premise (5). One good thing about hypocrisy is that it indicates a recognition of moral norms and some kind of commitment to them. As Michael Walzer put it, 'wherever we find hypocrisy, we also find moral knowledge' (Walzer (1977), 19). Removing such rules (together with the social mechanisms that

support them) or seriously weakening them is a clear case of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

If premise (5) is true, then Smilansky's reverse Pascal's wager ought to be much more ambitious than to support a regular secular lifestyle. Instead, the wagerer should opt for that lifestyle which places the bar of moral expectation as low as it can, so as to minimize all risk of hypocrisy. What we're left with, in order to please Smilansky's God, and to escape the master-vice of hypocrisy, is a lifestyle of explicit and open hedonic egoism. Nobody could criticize the hedonic egoist of moral hypocrisy, so long as she is open and forthright about her being a hedonic egoist, since she is acting as the wager dictates that she should act.

So far, we've used premise (5) for the purposes of two *reductios*. According to the first, there is something absurd about demanding a secular lifestyle so as to please a God who, by the lights of your own premises, couldn't exist. According to the second, the wagerer is compelled to adopt a lifestyle of an unashamed and unabashed hedonic egoist.

But premise (5) can also be used to reverse Smilansky's reversal of Pascal's wager. Let's imagine that Smilansky is secular only to avoid hypocrisy, and therefore to maximize his chances of pleasing God (should God exist). But a secular lifestyle purports to manifest all sorts of values and philosophical commitments. If Smilansky is only adopting that lifestyle on the basis of a wager, then he adopts it hypocritically, pretending to be committed to these moral values while he is not. The best way to avoid this particular form of hypocrisy, it would seem, would be to adopt a non-secular lifestyle, in the attempt sincerely to serve the will of God (should God exist).

One might think that Smilansky can escape from the clutches of this reverse-reverse wager because his aim is to address an audience who are already secular – secular for their own deeply held philosophical and theological reasons. What Smilansky wants to tell this audience is that Pascal's wager doesn't give them any reason to waver in their secularism, since even if God did exist, he'd prefer the heartfelt secularism of the secular over the hypocritical religiosity of the religious. But that wouldn't really be a reversal of Pascal's wager. Pascal wasn't addressing an audience who were already religious in an attempt to reinforce their religiosity. Rather, he was trying to give the *secular* a reason to become religious. To reverse that wager, Smilansky will have to do the opposite, namely, to offer the *religious* a reason to become secular. But since the only reason that he offers them is self-serving, he will have created a cadre of secular hypocrites; people who profess to be secular while what really motivates them in their secular way of life is the wish to increase their odds of escaping God's wrath. If, then, hypocrisy is a master-vice that characterizes many believers, Smilansky has given them no means of escaping from it. Premise (5) is, therefore, highly problematic. It either opens Smilansky's argument up to *reductio*, or to an ironic reversal, or to both.

As for the conclusion expressed in (7), namely, that, for God, being non-hypocritical is of utmost value, this again seems unsupported by the canonical texts of those established religions that Smilansky has in mind. To be sure, all three monotheistic religions condemn hypocrisy,³ but these condemnations pale in quantity and in quality in comparison to the condemnation of a long list of other moral and religious sins. So, to say that the God of these traditions cares about non-hypocrisy more than almost anything else is a clear exaggeration.

In fact, some religions explicitly endorse the commission of hypocritical actions in cases where to do so would be the lesser of two evils. The Talmud, for example, argues that there are times in which it is better to transgress God's will in private than to do so in public and thereby desecrate his name (Tractate *Kiddushin* 40a). Moreover, the Rabbis endorsed the maxim according to which it is better to do the right thing not for the right reason, than not to do the right thing at all, since – they believed – in the

process of doing the right thing for the wrong reason, one is likely to become refined, and to end up doing it, eventually, for the right reason (Tractate *Pesachim* 50b). Blaise Pascal seems to have agreed. He argued that the wagerer who couldn't simply elect to believe in God, should at least begin to act as if he believed in God, given the likelihood that such acts will eventually bring belief in their wake (Pascal (1995), 156). In non-ideal circumstances, hypocrisy might be religiously mandated.

Given the drawbacks of Smilansky's reverse wager, one wonders how literally one should read his proposal that *in order to escape God's wrath*, the best bet is to deny His existence, stop obeying His (strictly religious) commandments, stop going to church, mosque or synagogue, and so on. This is a crazy conclusion, to use a notion of which Smilansky is fond.⁴ But maybe we would do better interpreting Smilansky's Pascalian move as a way merely of highlighting a different point, one about the puzzling nature of religious life, a topic which constitutes the lion's share of his article. Accordingly, let's turn now to look at this alleged puzzle.

The moral risks of being religious

We accept premise (1) without hesitation.⁵ There are indeed many people who (a) 'believe' that God prohibits some actions and severely punishes transgressors but (b) nonetheless, commit serious transgressions of these prohibitions on a regular basis. But should this lead us to conclude that adopting a religion is likely to increase hypocrisy and/or self-deception? On the face of it, there is no more risk here than there would be in adopting any demanding ethical code, like becoming a Kantian or a Utilitarian. There is nothing unique here to religion.

To power his argument to his desired conclusion, Smilansky requires something stronger than (1). He has to claim that hypocrisy and/or self-deception is much more widespread among the religious than among the secular. This is the claim of premise (3). But premise (3) is unsubstantiated. Admittedly, when the requirements of society are high, the odds of non-compliance increase, and with them the potential for increased akrasia, self-deception, and hypocrisy. But since – needless to say – secular people also have values and significant moral expectations of themselves and each other, there is no *a priori* basis for assuming that the religious are significantly more hypocritical than the secular. Moreover, Smilansky hardly provides any empirical evidence for this claim. He simply takes it for granted that 'in reality many seeming holders of [the] Firm Religious Beliefs above, nevertheless consistently behave immorally, such as in lying in order to make financial gains or having sex with people who are not their spouses'.

We obviously don't wish to deny that *some* people who see themselves and are seen by others as religious transgress moral/religious rules on a regular basis, but for Smilansky's argument to work, the size of this group is critical. Only if the group is significant, and larger than the group of hypocritical secular people, does the moral risk involved in being religious become troublesome. Towards the end of the article, Smilansky points to some evidence, but, in our estimation, it is insufficient. For instance, he talks about the high proportion of believers among prisoners in the United States, yet many of them might have breached the law only once or twice, not on a regular basis as Smilansky requires, and some might have become religious only *after* being imprisoned.

What Smilansky finds 'very puzzling' is that people who believe that God severely punishes transgressors, perhaps even by putting them into hell, nonetheless steal, grossly lie, or commit adultery on a regular basis. But he provides no evidence to think that those who self-identify as religious, or are seen by others as such, actually hold this belief. Maybe on some versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam they *should*, but that doesn't mean that they do. They might sincerely believe that there is a god, but be ambivalent or

indecisive about the existence of hell, or about how the divine system of reward and punishment works.⁶

Ironically, the claim, that if a person doesn't believe in some doctrine, then she isn't a true believer but a fraud, is often one made by religious preachers in order to encourage observance, not what we expect from researchers looking at the religious phenomenon from the outside. What appears from *this* perspective is a much messier picture of the mental and behavioural life of those falling under the title of believers, who often hold extremely varied beliefs about God and have different religious commitments. Furthermore, they are often confused, ambivalent, and inconsistent in their beliefs – just like their secular counterparts.⁷ Restricting the title 'religious' to those who hold the Firm Religious Beliefs misses much of the complexity of the religious phenomenon.

Thus, even if one focuses on *belief* as the most important characteristic of religious believers, it is unclear that they hold the belief in divine reward and (mainly) punishment that Smilansky attributes to them or even *pretend* to hold it. Indeed, it is unclear what would be meant by the claim that the religious prisoners mentioned by Smilansky *pretend* to believe in this system. How would they express such pretension? And how could anybody from the outside – like Smilansky – get to *know* about this assumed pretension?

Moreover, as argued by Lebens (2021; 2022), even if we focus only on people who sincerely profess to believe in the relevant doctrines, 'belief' in this context may easily be misunderstood. The epistemic attitude most distinctive of religiosity is faith, even if it is commonly called 'belief' in day-to-day conversation. Faith and belief, despite being related, are distinct. To have faith that *p* is true is consistent with having too low a credence to count as believing that *p* is true. Smilansky's puzzle disappears once one recognizes that the so-called 'religious believer' is typically a person of faith, rather than belief. For example, religious faith can be beset by doubts in ways that are not characteristic of belief (see McKaughan 2013).

Smilansky isn't entirely convinced by our appeal to the distinction between faith and belief. In correspondence, he accepts that softening religious belief might help, but then he warns us: if you soften belief too much it then becomes difficult to see why God would view you as 'one of the believers'. Sure, Smilansky insists, a person might worship regularly, and send their children to religious schools, and the like, but when temptations take hold, we see their true colours. Why would God hold such a faith – when infused with such weak belief – so dear?

And yet it remains the case, according to most religions (at least under many reasonable interpretations), that God doesn't really demand belief so much as faith. Despite the fact that even in religious contexts the two words are sometimes conflated, it really is faith rather than belief that matters to God (see Lebens 2022). Unlike mere belief, faith suggests an emotional and existential investment. Sure, it might be cognitively weaker than belief, and therefore more susceptible to periods of doubt. Accordingly, God knows that we're likely to stumble. 'There is no righteous man on earth who does good without sin' (Ecclesiastes 7:20). But, the person of faith has faith that, in the wake of each stumble, God invites us to repent, to try to repair the various weaknesses that caused us to sin, and to keep walking in God's ways. So yes, God does, according to traditional religions, look kindly upon the person of faith however soft the belief component of faith might be.

Smilansky might say that all of this just confirms his main point, namely, that there are many people who appear to their religious fellows and to their secular friends as believers while in fact they are not. Thus, they are liars; they deliberately create the image that they believe in hell – or generally in divine punishment and reward – while they do not. First, we would argue that, if faith is characteristic of religious practice, rather than belief, then the false impression in question isn't really created; and to the extent that it is, the

outside observer of religion is as much to blame for the misunderstanding, by conflating the notions of faith and belief, as is the religious devotee. But even in cases where the religious devotee really does believe, there are better explanations for any gap between her assumed belief in divine punishment and her life of sinful behaviour, for instance in terms of self-deception. Smilansky himself provides the basis for another explanation. When he says that believers who commit serious sins on a regular basis do not really believe in God, he hastens to add another possible explanation; ‘or their beliefs are quite weak in the pertinent sense’. Such weakness would seem a much more plausible explanation for the sinful behaviour of (some) believers, and would render the deception thesis even more forced.

Smilansky, however, doesn’t follow this route but regards religious people as ‘*very likely* to be *flagrant* public liars, deceivers, frauds and hypocrites, probably coupled with much self-deception and inauthenticity’ (italics added). However, if there really is a high degree of self-deception among such people, expressions like ‘flagrant public liars’ seem inapt to describe them and, at any rate, the moral condemnation of the gap between their inner world and their projected image has to be attenuated. Indeed, as argued by several philosophers,⁸ ‘pure’ hypocrites who know that they don’t believe *p* but, nonetheless, intentionally pretend to believe *p* for the sake of various social or other benefits are a much rarer phenomenon than often assumed. They mainly inhabit plays and novels, not real life. As Peter Gay observes, this was true even regarding the Victorian Age, notorious for its assumed hypocrisy:

Not even those bourgeois who indulged self-serving cant . . . not even those who espoused doctrinaire purist views on sexuality while keeping a mistress or resorting to prostitutes, were necessarily untroubled frauds. They were, more often than not, at war with themselves. Hobson was right: an authentic hypocrite is a rare animal, more common perhaps in the bourgeois century than at other times, but rare enough even then.⁹

To this, we should add the growing research in the last decade or two on how inconsistent and self-deceived people are regarding their moral beliefs and commitments, and how creative they are in inventing and utilizing mechanisms that enable them to maintain a positive moral self-image in spite of violating moral norms.¹⁰ What seems to follow is that, in the absence of positive evidence that people are trying to *lie*, self-deception provides a better explanation for inconsistencies between what people seem to believe and how they behave than does the possession of Smilansky’s master-vice (weakness of the will is also often involved though we cannot sort here the exact relation between self-deception and weakness of will). One might further speculate that the immediacy of the pleasure promised by a moral transgression, as compared to the time delay of the religiously forecasted punishment, creates an especially large gap within which the mechanisms of self-deception can function.

Jerry Cohen famously asked, ‘If you’re an egalitarian, how come you’re so rich?’ (Cohen 2000), but his answer to this question was not to say that rich egalitarians are ‘flagrant public liars, deceivers, frauds and hypocrites’, the descriptions used by Smilansky to explain the gap between the beliefs of religious people and their behaviour. Instead, he took a rather gentle approach to them, emphasizing that ‘sound judgments about the justice and injustice of people are much more contextual’.¹¹ We propose a similar attitude towards religious sinners as well. Only rarely would the gap between what they in fact believe (or what they supposedly *should* believe) and their actual behaviour indicate an intentional attempt to mislead individuals or society about their true beliefs. Most

often it would indicate the presence of faith rather than belief, and/or the presence of doubt, confusion, irrationality, weakness of the will, or self-deception.

Needless to say, the point is general and applies to non-believers as well. For instance, maybe by the principles to which they are committed, secular liberals should all become vegetarian or vegan, but many of them don't, which doesn't necessarily show that they are *liars*; knowing, as it were, that they are not true liberals but nonetheless pretending to be so for the sake of the social benefits that go with it.

In Smilansky's view, however, while *akrasia* and self-deception can explain inconsistencies between the beliefs and actions of the secular, they fall short of explaining such inconsistencies among the religious. This is because in the religious case, and seemingly only in the religious case, beliefs fail to cause belief-appropriate action, even in contexts that should be especially *fear inducing* for people with the relevant beliefs.

If you believe that a police officer is watching you right now, then, even if you often suffer from weakness of will, you won't break the speed limit as you drive past. Similarly, if you hold even a relatively weak conviction that a gun is loaded, and you want to carry on living, then you won't pull the trigger while looking down the barrel. But for religious people who believe in a powerful and punitive God, a God who sees all and remembers all, pretty much every situation that includes a temptation to disobey God should be a fear-inducing situation. Accordingly, if religious people do not demonstrate close to 100% consistency between their religious beliefs and their actions, then they don't really believe.

But, to repeat and recap the points made above, Smilansky himself concedes that the inconsistency might attest to weak belief in divine punishment rather than to no-belief, weakness that is understandable given the temporal gap that often exists between one's sins and the expected punishment. This gap also enables believers to deceive themselves into thinking that the results of their sins are not irreversible as they can repent and receive atonement. The Rabbis were well aware of this temptation and hence taught (Mishna, Tractate *Yoma* 8:9), '[With regard to] a person who says: "I will sin and then repent, I will sin and then repent!" Heaven does not provide him the opportunity to repent.' But the need to warn against this phenomenon shows that it wasn't uncommon. For the present discussion, the important point is that sinners who violated the Mishna's guidance would be better described as weak and self-deceived than as liars. The way they manage to soften the tension between their sinful behaviour and their religious commitments is reminiscent of the ways utilized by secular wrongdoers as well.¹²

We should add that the difficulty of vividly imagining God as a super-policeman who constantly follows our steps and makes sure that we pay for our sins is not a new one, characterizing, as it were, the modern world, especially in the West. Indications for the existence of this difficulty can be found among believers throughout history, including among people seen as paragons of religiosity.

Here is one telling example. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai was one of the greatest sages of the first century who played a central role in the revival of Jewish religious life after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. The Talmud (b. *Berachot* 28b) relates that when he lay on his deathbed, his students paid him a visit. 'Master, give us a blessing', they implored their fading leader. The insightful sage acquiesced, offering his students a parting wish: 'May it be the will of the Almighty that the fear of Heaven be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood.' The disciples were taken aback: 'Thus far and no more?! Need not the fear of God be greater than the fear of mortals?' The aged scholar replied: 'Were it only so!' Reality is very different: 'Know, that when people commit crimes, they say – "O that no one should see me!"' R. Yochanan ben Zakkai captured the reality that even for people strongly committed to religion – clearly people of faith – human policemen, and even our neighbours' eyes, are often more fear-inducing than the eyes of

God. That the faith or the religious belief of some people is weak, or difficult to sustain, in no way warrants Smilansky's harsh judgement that they are liars.

We, therefore, believe that conclusion (4) is unsubstantiated. Smilansky has failed to show that being or becoming religious increases the risk of being a flagrant public liar, or even that it increases the risk of being more self-deceived than are secular people in general.¹³ But even if we are wrong and religion does tend to make believers more self-deceived, it is not at all clear that, from a moral point of view, one should bet on secularism. The reason is that solid research from the last two decades has pointed to significant moral and social benefits of leading a religious way of life.¹⁴

Smilansky is aware of this research and concedes, with respect to infidelity for instance, that 'there is somewhat less (self-reported) infidelity among the religious'. That's why he formulates the claim he objects to as saying that 'being religious *radically* reduces one's likelihood of committing such [morally serious] transgressions' (italics added), implying that he does not deny the weaker claim that being religious reduces to *some* extent one's likelihood of committing morally serious transgressions. But if being religious decreases the odds of committing serious moral transgressions, then only a zealous adherence of some ideal of authenticity, according to which even the appearance of hypocrisy is a master-vice, would recommend abandoning religion in order to slightly reduce self-deception – if indeed abandoning religion had this effect (which we see no reason to assume).

The reviewer of our article kindly shared with us their own concern with Smilansky's argument, which echoes what we've said here. They illustrate their concern with the following example:

There are a set of rules for students at my College. If someone familiarizes themselves with the rules, they are less likely to infringe them (i.e. they are less like to be a rule-breaker) than if they don't; but if they familiarize themselves with the rules AND then go on to break them, they are (at least in some cases) treated more severely than if they had acted in ignorance of the rules; they are then, we might say, 'hypocritical rule-breakers' in contrast to non-hypocritical rule-breakers, the status enjoyed by those who proceed to break the rules in ignorance of what they are. Whether or not it is in an individual student's best interests (pragmatically speaking) to familiarize themselves with the rules obviously depends in part on how likely it is they'll infringe the rules significantly less if they familiarize themselves with them, to the extent that even though, if they do familiarize themselves with the rules, then it is true that any infringements will be hypocritical ones, the risks of engaging in rule-breaking *per se* are sufficiently reduced so as to outweigh the benefits that would have accrued to one had one not familiarized oneself with the rules, *viz.* the benefit that any rule-breaking would have been non-hypocritical rule-breaking.

In short, Smilansky's argument is insensitive to the potential moral benefits of adopting a religious lifestyle that might outweigh the risks of which he speaks. The insensitivity was salient, for example, in Smilansky's comparison of the two adulterers, R and S. Even if, in a pairwise comparison of their adultery, R comes off worse than S due to his increased hypocrisy or fakery, a full moral account would have to compare the larger net costs and benefits of R's religiosity against the larger net costs and benefits of S's secularism. Since Smilansky agrees that adopting a religious lifestyle is likely to improve one's overall moral standing, his only way to deal with this challenge is by subscribing to the strongest reading of premise (5), according to which the vice of hypocrisy (or whatever else one

might want to call it) is so toxic as to outweigh almost any other concern. But as we've already argued, that premise is implausible.

Concluding thoughts

Smilansky presents us with a puzzle which, in combination with a small number of premises, is supposed to generate a reversal of Pascal's wager. The picture he paints is enticing. The problem with Smilansky's argument is that the puzzle, once unpacked, isn't particularly puzzling, the premises aren't true, and the wager is open to both *reductio* and a reversal of its own.

There is nothing particularly puzzling about the phenomenon of religious people sinning. It sometimes expresses hypocrisy and deceit, but is more often, as in the moral failings of secular people, to be explained in terms of lack of commitment, self-deception, and akrasia. Smilansky provides us with no empirical data and no convincing arguments to think that self-deception is more common among religious people, and certainly no reason to think that hypocrisy or lying is. Furthermore, Smilansky's reverse wager only goes through on the assumption that hypocrisy constitutes something of a master-vice. This leads to *reductio*, since (a) it would seem to imply that we should all adopt the life of an unashamed and unabashed hedonic egoist, and (b) Smilansky's premises collectively imply that the God of the established religions couldn't exist, and yet he asks us to embrace a secular lifestyle in the hope of pleasing this non-existent God!

Even if we don't take Smilansky's reversed Pascal too seriously, and relate to it merely as a clever way by which to make a point about the special prevalence of hypocrisy among the religious, we hope to have shown that the arguments he proposes to substantiate this point are unconvincing.

Finally, one gets the impression that for Smilansky the main novelty of his article lies, not in 'reversing Pascal', but simply in drawing attention to the Puzzle,¹⁵ namely, to the fact that people who see themselves, and are seen by others, as believers, commit moral (and other) sins on a regular basis, which presumably shows that they 'do not really believe, or their beliefs are quite weak in the pertinent sense'. But this puzzle applies to many non-believers as well, whose immoral behaviour reveals a similar lack of belief (or weakness thereof) in the principles that they see themselves, and are seen by others, as committed to. How people in general manage to live with such deep inconsistencies in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, and nonetheless retain their self-image as rational and ethical is no doubt a great question. Yet it's more a psychological than a philosophical or a theological one and, at any rate, it bears no unique connection to *religion*.

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Notes

1. Although at the beginning of his article, Smilansky sets aside for the sake of discussion (transgressions of) strictly religious injunctions, later on he incorporates them as well into what he calls the Puzzle.
2. God's moral perfection famously faces other challenges, mainly from the apparent existence of evil. But that's no excuse for making God's moral perfection even more difficult to endorse by imagining Him commanding us to keep laws that are prone to make most of us despicable in His eyes. Regarding the problem of evil, either a perfect God has a reason for allowing the apparent evil to persist, or a perfect God doesn't exist. Here too, either a perfect God has a reason to command us to observe a religious lifestyle despite its alleged propensity for the creation of hypocrisy, in which case we should follow God's command, or a perfect God doesn't exist, in which case, we needn't take any sort of wager, or reverse wager, in order to appease Him.

3. See, for instance, Jeremiah 8:8 ('How can you say: "We are wise and we possess the Torah of the Lord"? Surely, for naught has the pen laboured, for naught the scribes'); Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 27b–28a ('Any Torah scholar whose inside and outside are not the same is not permitted to enter the *Beit Midrash* [a hall dedicated for Torah study]'; Quran, 9:67 ('And Allah has promised the hypocrite men and the hypocrite women and the infidels the fire of hell to abide in it forever; this is enough for them; and Allah curses them and for them is a lasting punishment').
4. See, for instance, Smilansky (2013); *Idem* (2022).
5. Although a lot will hang upon the meaning of the word 'belief' in this context.
6. For instance, a number of Christians believe that everybody ultimately reaches salvation, which might somewhat undercut the power of the fear of hell as a motive for one's actions. See, for example, Talbott (1999), Howard-Snyder (2003), and Hart (2019). One could also note that the Hebrew Bible contains very little reference to posthumous punishment. The punishments of the Hebrew Bible tend to be worldly and to apply to the community as a whole, rather than to specific individuals. A cynical believer might then hope, in her less admirable moments, to freeride on the moral rectitude of others.
7. Indeed, numerous psychological studies paint a portrait of humans in general, be they secular or religious, who are systematically prone to form *post hoc* justifications to themselves of their mistakes (Gilbert (2006), part V), to engage in self-deception (Sahdra and Thagard 2003), confirmation bias (Kunda 1990), ethical fading – a process in which agents systematically overlook the ethical ramifications of a prospective course of action (Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004), avoidance of harmful evidence (Greenwald 1997), and self-serving modes of information processing (von Hippel et al. 2005). These are widespread phenomena. Smilansky has provided no *a priori* reason, nor any empirical evidence, for thinking them to be more widespread among the religious.
8. Statman (1997), followed by Wallace (2010), 315 n. 17; Isserow and Klein (2017), 211; Roadevin (2018), 144; and Bloomfield (2018).
9. Gay (1984), 421, cited by Statman (1997), 70.
10. See, for instance, Shahar and Francesca (2012), in addition to the sources cited in note 7.
11. Cohen (2000), 141. See also Vrousalis (2010), 199.
12. See the sources mentioned in note 7.
13. In his comments to an early draft of this article, Smilansky emphasizes that he 'doesn't really care that much about self-deception', although in his article he explicitly talks about how religion 'greatly increases the risks of deception, duplicity and hypocrisy, as well as self-deception and inauthenticity' (italics added). At any rate, in our view, if he wants his argument to get off the ground he *should* care about self-deception because attributing self-deception to the sinners he has in mind is much more plausible than attributing to them a deliberate attempt to deceive their friends, families and society in general.
14. See sources cited in (Lebens and Statman forthcoming).
15. Indeed, in an email correspondence of 13 November 2022, Smilansky conceded that he takes the Puzzle to be his main contribution.

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