

The Unlikely Comeback of Pascal's Wager: On the Instability of Secular Post-Modernism

Abstract

Pascal's wager faces serious criticisms and is generally considered unconvincing. We argue that it can make a comeback powered by an unlikely ally: postmodernism. If one denies the existence of objective facts (e.g. about God or His relation to the world), then various non-theological considerations should come to the fore when considering the rationality of religious commitment and the choice of education for one's children. In fact, we shall argue that, if one genuinely cares about one's children, then – in many Western countries – one cannot consistently be both secular and post-modernist.

1. Introduction

'Post-Modernism' [PM] is a term used to capture not a single and well-delineated view, but a number of closely related views (Aylesworth, 2015). There is nevertheless a radical notion at the heart of them all. It has to do with the death of objectivity – not merely at the level of epistemology, regarding how sure we can be that any one of our beliefs is objectively true; but at the level of metaphysics – that there can be no such thing as the way the world objectively is.

This contention would seem to be lethal to 'meta-narratives', i.e. grand theories claiming to describe the way the world is (Mackie, 1984, p. xxiv). This might seem particularly inimical to mainstream religions, which tend to embrace particularly grand meta-narratives according to which God really exists "out there," that Jesus was executed in Jerusalem, that the Quran was delivered to Muhammad, etc. PM therefore seems to threaten religion and to strengthen a secular worldview.¹

In this paper we argue that far from threatening religion, in the conditions that prevail in many Western countries, PM actually provides its adherents with a strong reason to become religious. In many Western countries, if one genuinely cares about one's children, one cannot consistently be both secular and post-modernist. This is quite a surprising conclusion, pointing to the instability of secular PM.

¹ See, for instance Stackhouse, 2010, p. 245 ("Strong postmodernism, finally, amounts to an antireligious secularism"); Watkin, 2019.

In Section 2, we explain the version of PM that we'll be working with in this paper. In Section 3 we show how recent empirical research about religion enables one to “naturalise” Pascal's wager. We then show, in Section 4, how PM rescues the wager from a host of problems and enables Pascal a surprising comeback. Section 5 concedes the difficulties in subscribing to a worldview that one does not really believe in, but argues that the wager applies with full force to the question of how one should educate one's children. Section 6 explores the ramifications of our argument for the relationship between secularism, ideological commitment, and PM.

2. What We Mean by PM

Despite the alleged death of objectivity, post-modernists needn't refrain from making assertions about the way the world is. A more nuanced and challenging form of PM would argue that objective facts do obtain, but only because we human beings have *constructed* them. There is no way that facts can be said to exist independently of human narratives, choices, and concepts. Take some proposition about the mind-external world, say that there are chairs in this room. PM denies that this proposition is made true or false in virtue of the way things are “out there”, or in virtue of the nature of reality.

How can one deny that p is made true or false by the way the world is? Richard Rorty claims that such denial makes sense once we realize that there are two ways to interpret the phrase, “in virtue of the way things are” (1998, p. 87):

One [interpretation] is short for “in virtue of the way our current descriptions of things are used and the causal interactions we have with those things.” The other is short for “*simply* in virtue of the way things are, quite apart from how we describe them.” On the first interpretation, I think that true propositions about the presence of chairs, the existence of neutrinos, the desirability of respect for the dignity of our fellow beings, *and everything else* are true “in virtue of the way things are.” On the second interpretation, I think that no proposition is true “in virtue of the way things are.”

The first element of Rorty's view, then, asks us to relativize claims about the way the world is to a theory or a description. When you say that there are chairs in the room, all you mean

is that, according to a theory that you're currently holding, it's true that there are chairs in the room. What the fact-objectivist would take to be assertions of objective facts are really only assertions relative to a theory. It's not just morals, or aesthetic evaluations, that are true relative to a theory, but every truth that could ever be expressed – be it about chairs, dignity, or neutrinos. The second element of Rorty's view is his pragmatism. He writes (1994, p. 57):

Given that it pays to talk about mountains, as it certainly does, one of the obvious truths about mountains is that they were here before we talked about them. If you do not believe that, you probably do not know how to play the language games that employ the word "mountain." But the utility of those language games has nothing to do with the question of whether Reality as It Is In Itself, apart from the way in which it is handy for human beings to describe it, has mountains in it.

On this view, the proposition that mountains were here before we talked about them *is* true, but only relative to a language game that it pays to play. As noted by Paul Boghossian (2006), a trenchant critic of PM, Rorty's version of PM is much more attractive than versions that give up on facts altogether. According to Rorty, relative to theories, there *are* facts, so it is not the case that anything goes. Moreover, we don't adopt the theories that ground facts willy-nilly. We adopt them as and when it pays us to do so.

In our estimation, Rorty's version of PM is in better shape than many of its cousins and commits no obvious fallacy.² Accordingly, and in order to avoid "strawman-ing", it is this brand of PM that we shall be referring to when arguing about the relationship between PM and secularism.

3. Pascal's Wager Naturalized

² According to more radical forms of PM, even constructed facts fall prey to "logocentrism." Those holding this view might think that Rorty is something of a sell-out, and that the fact that his theory commits no obvious fallacy is itself a *symptom* of his logocentrism. But thinkers who are unwilling to engage in discourse governed by logic, even as one language game among many, are perhaps beyond the pale of constructive philosophical debate. The Pascal envisioned in this paper might simply walk away from a discussion with such people.

As is well-known, Pascal thought that we all face a choice as to whether to embrace Christianity or not. His basic thought was that we stand to win eternal bliss if we embrace Christianity and to lose nothing if we don't. In his words (Pascal, 1995, p. 154): "If you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!"

Pascal's wager has faced serious criticism along the years and is generally considered unconvincing.³ One element that seems especially remote from contemporary readers is that of eternal bliss; a notion which can make no sense without a host of deeply controversial metaphysical assumptions. However, in light of recent empirical research on the psychological, medical, social, and moral benefits of leading a religious way of life, Pascal's wager can be "naturalized" to make it less metaphysically obscure. Let us briefly look at the results of this research and then show how PM can be used to strengthen the rationality of accepting the wager.

Based upon multiple empirical studies, Koenig, King, and Carson argue that religious persons have more social contacts, greater satisfaction with their social support-network, higher self-esteem, more optimism, more hope, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life. They are also more likely to have stable families (Koenig, et al., 2012, p. 269).

Similarly, Chaeyoon Lim and Robert Putnam (2012) report that religion is a more potent statistical indicator of subjective well-being than education, marital status, social activity, age, gender, and race.

Ellison, Gay, and Glass (1989) report that religious involvement has an effect on subjective well-being that is comparable to or stronger than the effect of income. Indeed, Lim and Putnam found that the difference in subjective well-being between people who attended a weekly religious service, and people who didn't was comparable to the gap in subjective well-being between people whose annual family income was \$10,000 and those whose annual family income was \$100,000 (2012, p. 920). Studies find that religious affiliation tends to increase life-span (Li, et al., 2016) by an average of four years (Wallace, et al., 2018).

³ See Cargile, 1966; Dalton, 1975; Flew, 1976; Carter, 2000; Saka, 2001; Hájek, 2003.

Can we be sure that religious affiliation was the *cause* of these benefits? No. Most of the studies merely found a correlation, and correlation needn't entail causation. But there is *some* evidence pointing to a specific direction of explanation, such that religiosity (or religious affiliation) is what leads to a more meaningful life with enhanced moral and social behaviour, rather than the behaviour, morality, and sense of meaning leading people to a religious life.⁴ Although we don't know the exact causal mechanisms behind the above correlations, since the immersion in a religious life-style dramatically increases the odds of securing these benefits, it seems fair to assume that a religious life-style is the most reliable way to secure this package of benefits. Accordingly, whether or not religious observance guarantees *eternal* bliss, it seems pretty effective in promoting this-worldly bliss.

In countries in which religion reliably makes these sorts of contributions to well-being, to social stability and to morality, Pascal seems to have gotten it right; there is not much to gain by being secular, but much to gain by being religious. And most importantly, the expectation of this gain does not rely on obscure beliefs about the immortality of the soul (or the body?) or the existence of Hell and Heaven, but relies on scientific knowledge about the factors that tend to contribute to well-being, stable family life, and so forth.

Of course, there will be *some* costs if one undertakes the wager. You'll spend more time praying than you would have done as a non-religious person. You'll avoid certain pleasures from which you and your fellow believers abstain. But these costs pale in comparison to the benefits. In that sense, "quitting" one's secular way of life is like quitting smoking. There is *some* cost in such a decision, but clearly it is overall the rational thing to do.

Of course, a proponent of PM would point out that the empirical findings we've shared in this section are only true relative to a theory. But remember that PM is generally committed to accepting the theories that *pay*. The studies that we've cited belong, broadly speaking, to the field of empirical psychology. Their findings are asserted relative to a network of theoretical assumptions common to the social sciences and to psychology in particular. Accordingly, the proponent of PM can only consistently reject these findings as relative to an alien theoretical framework if she's willing to discount much of contemporary

⁴ Putnam & Campbell (2010, p. 462)

psychology. We suggest that that would constitute a considerable cost. Although there is much to debate within the incomplete science of psychology, it seems clear that psychology as a whole is a science that pays.

Before concluding this section, we need to face the following objection. Most of the statistical correlations between religious affiliation and worldly goods have been found to hold in North America and in other liberal democracies (and our wager is only offered in those countries). But while being religious in such countries turns out to come with various benefits, living in religious *countries* is statistically correlated with all sorts of worldly costs. In general, the more religious the population of a country, the higher the inequality between rich and poor (Pew Research Center, 2018, p. 23), the lower the life-expectancy (p. 16), and the lower the level of literacy and education (p. 19) (indeed, the United States is something of a statistical anomaly. It is the only country with an above average GDP in which citizens report daily prayer at a rate that is higher than the global average, see *ibid.*, p. 21). While a religious lifestyle in a secular country might be correlated with all sorts of goods, life in a religious *country* isn't.

This means that embracing a religious life-style might benefit you only if enough people in your home country *don't* follow suit, which raises the worry that taking Pascal's wager requires that we free-ride on the secularism of others. Moreover, if all Americans were led to embrace religion because of the data in the USA, then, over time, America would become more and more religious, until – to judge by the experience of other countries – it will no longer qualify as a liberal democracy at all. This means that the benefits that we secured for our children will be lost on our grand-children and great-grandchildren, as inequality and illiteracy soar and life expectancy plummets.

Yet this objection labours under a misconception. It assumes that to embrace a religion is *ipso facto* to denounce the politics of liberal democracy and the separation of Church and State. American religiosity demonstrates that this need not be the case. Despite America's above average religiosity, the First Amendment enjoys continued and widespread popularity (Freedom Forum Institute, 2018). Although, in many countries, widespread religious devotion may be a causal factor in poor governance and in the absence of political freedoms, it does not *have* to play this causal role. If the religion in question cherishes the

separation of Church and State, for example, there is no reason to believe that widespread devotion to that religion would contribute to poor governance.

Accordingly, and so long as Pascal's wager encourages us only to embrace religions that respect the separation of church and state, promote education for all, and are compatible with the politics of liberal democracy, we have no reason to fear that increasing religiosity in the general population will have harmful consequences, or that the benefits of religiosity require free-riding on the back of secular society.

4. Pascal's Wager and PM

What does this naturalized version of Pascal's wager have to do with PM? As we now turn to show, it helps to defend the wager from some powerful objections, in a way that locks secular post-modernists into a tough dilemma; either accept religion, or renounce PM.

The first objection we have in mind can be labelled 'epistemic'. According to this objection, there's something wrong about trying to believe p for pragmatic reasons if you believe that p is false. Whether people can believe on the basis of pragmatic reason is a question we can bracket for the sake of the present discussion.⁵ The point is that even if they *can*, it would be epistemically wrong. It would do "violence to one's reason and understanding" (Mackie, 1982, p. 202).

The second objection concerns *authenticity*. If you commit yourself to religious practice – prayer, ritual, and the like – but you do so without *believing*, then such practices would be inauthentic. Thus, whilst you might recognise that it would be in your interest to believe in a certain religion, until you *do* believe, there would be something disingenuous with throwing yourself into its practices.⁶

The authenticity objection is closely related to a third objection concerning hypocrisy. If you don't really believe in some religion but nonetheless observe its rituals and practices, you'll be projecting a false image of yourself. People will look at how you behave and infer that you believe things that you don't.

⁵ See recently (Antill 2020).

⁶ This objection is raised by Gale (1991, p. 352)

In short: our naturalized form of the wager is in pretty bad shape. But things change once we throw PM into the mix. The epistemic objection only makes sense if you believe in an objective reality against which doxastic practices could be skewed. But the post-modernist has no such belief, and so is immune from it. If you adopt a religion as a theory for describing the world, and you do so for pragmatic reasons, because you think that doing so is likely to increase your happiness, wealth, health, and more, then, according to Rorty, you are not lying when you say, “I believe that Jesus was God incarnate”, or “I believe that Mohammed was God’s messenger” (depending on which religion you adopt). You’re not lying because whenever you assert p , all you really mean is that p is true relative to some theory that you’ve adopted for pragmatic reasons. This assertion will be perfectly true and perfectly sincere. It will be perfectly *authentic* too, which takes care of the authenticity objection. Similarly, the acceptance of the wager need not involve any hypocrisy. The believer on the basis of the wager is no less sincere in her religious beliefs and practices than she – or others – are in other beliefs (about chairs, mountains or what have you).

Our “Post-Modern Pascal” can also respond to another problem in the original wager, known as “the many gods problem.”⁷ Recall that Pascal didn’t suggest the wager as a way of convincing people to be religious in general, but as a way of convincing them to be *Christian*, more specifically to be *Catholic*. But unless you can prove that Christianity is more likely true than any other option, why bet on Christianity rather than on any of the other religions? What if Islam is true, and what if it’s true under the interpretation that says that non-Muslims are damned to eternal hellfire? What if some form of Hinduism is true, and if I don’t engage in certain Hindu rituals, I risk reincarnation into some horrible state of affairs? With all of these options on the table, each promising a very different set of rewards and punishments, it’s far from clear how we should bet. Perhaps the safest bet is not to bet at all, for fear of risking the wrath of a god that we don’t back.

Thankfully, a postmodern Pascal need not concern himself with anxieties about the wrath of other gods, since before adopting a theology, there are no facts about other gods.

⁷ This objection was first raised by Denis Diderot (2018) in section LIX of the ‘Addition to the Philosophical Thoughts’. It was later developed by (Cargile, 1966; Dalton, 1975; Martin, 1975; Flew, 1976; Oppy, 1900; Carter, 2000; Saka, 2001; Mackie, 1982, pp. 200-203).

Moreover, our naturalized wager isn't focussed on posthumous reward or punishment. The rationality of betting on religion has to do solely with its this-worldly benefits.

Yet this response gives rise to a new version of the many gods problem. If the rationality of leading a religious life, or adhering to religious beliefs, has to do with their tendency to enhance well-being, social commitment and so on, that means that one would be expected to look way beyond the boundaries of one's own culture and country to find the way of life that is most correlated with high well-being etc., which seems like a reductio of the wager. For example, if it turned out that the residents of some remote village in Nepal got the highest scores in well-being, moral action, and so on, and if these high scores seemed related to their religious worldview, then secular Londoners would be rationally expected to travel – physically and culturally – to Nepal and try to immerse themselves in these promising local beliefs and practices, which sounds unreasonable.

But the point of the post-modern wager isn't that one should look for where people are the happiest and just emigrate there in order to join their community. There are costs involved in emigration and in conversion to certain religions. Thus, although Hindus in Britain are amongst the happiest citizens,⁸ it doesn't follow from our argument that British post-modernists should all convert to Hinduism. Multiculturalism has taught us about the importance of belonging in one's own linguistic and cultural community.

Accordingly, one's best bet would be to find a balance between the general statistical benefits associated with a religion, the proximity of that religion to one's own background, and any other costs associated with the transition in question.⁹ While the cost of emigrating to Nepal and becoming part of a religious community there would probably be too high, this cannot be said about embracing the religious beliefs and practices of one's own linguistic and cultural tradition. A secular New Yorker from a protestant family wouldn't find it too difficult to join the local church, to study scripture and so on. Similarly for secular Muslims in the contemporary US, whose grandparents (if not parents) were almost always religious. For most of them, "emigrating" to the religious world of Islam would be like returning to familiar territory, not like exploring a completely new place.

⁸ See: Office for National Statistics (2016)

⁹ We don't deny that for some people the "emigration" to a culturally distant religion might work perfectly well and make them very happy. Maybe for them such emigration would be rationally mandated.

The accessibility of a religious community and a religious way of life for many people living in North America today helps to take care of another objection, according to which it is strong commitment to an *ideology* that predicts the various personal and moral goods we are talking about, rather than strong commitment to a religion *per se*. Indeed, there is data suggesting that non-religious people who are strongly committed to some ideology or form of life are at least as happy – and perhaps even happier – than strongly committed religious people. For instance, data collected by Catherine Ross (1990) suggests that the strength of one’s convictions tends to be a better predictor of happiness than the content. Similarly, people who claim to be “absolutely certain there is no God” also reported higher levels of psychological well-being” (Paterson & Francis, 2017, p. 436). If that is the case, then a Post-Modern Pascal doesn’t have a stronger reason to become religious than to become committed to some ideology and treat his or her children accordingly.

However, at present, in a large number of countries, the option of living a religious life, or within a religious community, is far more accessible than the option of living other varieties of ideologically committed lives that could be rationally assumed to yield similar returns. Given the data cited above, the postmodernist has to ask herself certain questions. For example: *which* ideology should I join (for pragmatic reasons); and what exactly does it mean to *join* it? Thanks to the social structure of most religions and given the fact that there is often a religious community that’s culturally and historically at hand to any given person, turning religious is often the most accessible option. At any rate, it is more accessible to many more people than the decision to endorse some other form of ideologically driven lifestyle. Therefore, in many cases, PM really is going to find it hard to resist Pascal.

5. The Wager and How Post-Modernists Should Educate their Children

The post-modernist might concede the difference between subscribing to a distant and alien religion and joining the religious community that is part of one’s own culture, but might still reject the wager simply because one cannot *decide* to believe in the existence of

God (or, for that matter, in any other proposition). Beliefs are not subject to voluntary control.¹⁰

This response is well-taken, but its success in evading the wager is only partial. While it can probably get the post-modernist off the hook as far as the forming of their own beliefs is concerned, it does not get them off the hook as far as the formation of their *children's* beliefs is concerned.

We mentioned earlier the empirical research regarding the contribution of religion to well-being and to social capital. To repeat: on average, statistics show that, at least in North America, as well as in some other Western countries, leading a religious way of life tends towards increased happiness, optimism, hope, and stability. It also tends towards an increased contribution to society at large. Studies show that, measuring charitable donations as a fraction of income, those in the most religious fifth of Americans are more than four times as generous as those in the least religious fifth (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 488). And it is not only religious causes that they care about; religious Americans give more generously to secular causes as well (ibid., p. 446). Given these data, and given that parents – even post-modern ones – recognise that they are under a moral obligation to select an education that has the best chances of making their children as happy as possible whilst raising them to be kind, altruistic, and just, parents ought to give their children a religious education.

Some readers might think that, within a post-modernist framework, it makes no sense to use moral arguments as we just did. But the form of PM that we're assuming here is not committed to the denial of moral propositions more than it is committed to the denial of propositions about chairs. Propositions about moral obligations can be true or false, so long as one recognises that their truth or falsity is necessarily theory-relative.¹¹

Anyhow, the argument in favour of granting a religious education to one's children is powerful enough, even without the moral dimension of the argument. It's hard to imagine a normal parent who is indifferent to the well-being of her children. If she realized that some

¹⁰ For an influential argument for this claim, see Williams (1970).

¹¹ Indeed, Rorty (1998, p. 87) thinks that claims about human value and claims about neutrinos are in the same boat.

school significantly raised the odds of her children living a happier and more meaningful life, she would surely (other things kept equal) opt for it.

Thus, although it's pretty hard, if not impossible, to make *oneself* believe *p* just on the basis of the pragmatic advantages of doing so, it is possible to raise one's *children* to believe *p* by sending them to schools that encourage that belief, by living within communities that believe *p*, and by holding rituals at home that express this belief. These measures raise the odds of one's children leading a more satisfying and a more meaningful life. In fact, many parents who are themselves agnostic already send their children to religious schools and go to Church with them because they believe that such measures will turn their offspring into better human beings and better citizens.¹²

We can foresee four objections to this proposal. The first concerns the assumed deception or hypocrisy of such parents. Yet, once again, the objection doesn't get off the ground for post-modernists of the type we are referring to. In their view, propositions are true or false only relative to a theory, the adoption of which is a pragmatic matter. And, since there are strong pragmatic reasons to believe in religion and to play, so to speak, its language game, the relevant assertions made in the playing of this game turn out to be *true*.

We should add that in more radical versions of PM, of the kind that reject the notion of truth altogether, the objection is even weaker. If there is no truth regarding the existence of God, one cannot be faulted for making decisions on the basis of pragmatic considerations alone. One cannot be faulted for lying if there's no truth of the matter as to whether you lied or not. Our point is that even if one refines PM to allow for a notion of truth *a la* Rorty, Pascal's wager is still difficult to resist, at least when it concerns the education one must select for one's children.

The second objection is that if the religious beliefs in question don't resonate subjectively with parents, because they adopt them for merely practical reasons, they are likely to be ineffective in raising their children as believers. Our response is that insofar as parents are pedagogically less equipped to perform this task, they will be able to reduce their role as educators and assign the lion's share of their children's education to the relevant religious institutions.

¹² See Manning (2013), and for anecdotal evidence, see Glaser (2009).

The third objection is that cultivating religious beliefs in your children might conflict with your values. You might hold an ethical theory that promotes, say, equality, liberalism, and critical thinking, and you might fear that raising your children in a religious school will run against these values.

There are two responses to this objection: (a) The religious marketplace is broad and varied. Not every religion or religious community is as conservative as the other, and so the sacrifice in question needn't be made, or needn't be as severe as the objection alleges. (b) If the parents in question are post-modernist, then, for them, ethical theories have to answer to pragmatic concerns, and what could be of more pragmatic concern to a loving parent than the wellbeing of her children?

Of course, if the parents in question believed in objective moral facts, things would be different. But post-modern parents don't believe in such facts existing independently of any theory and of pragmatic considerations. It's hard to see, therefore, why abstract ethical concerns should have more clout than the concrete empirical facts that a religious upbringing is statistically likely to maximise the wellbeing of their children.

The fourth objection is that we're asking postmodernist parents to turn against their own position. Most religious believers reject the main tenets of PM.¹³ This means that, on our argument, post-modernist parents are advised to raise their children in a way that will most probably lead them (i.e. the children) to reject PM, which seems like a self-defeating demand; how could parents be required to raise their children in a way that will almost surely end up in their children rejecting the worldview of the parents?

But there is really no contradiction here because there's nothing in the post-modernist view that mandates raising one's children as post-modernists. To this we should add that on post-modernist assumptions, if your child ends up disbelieving PM, she cannot be said to be *wrong*. Relative to the theory she would end up holding, i.e. her religious outlook, the rejection of PM is definitely reasonable. And so long as the subscription to this theory pays, it is rational for her to accept the judgments that follow from it, including the rejection of PM. Therefore, post-modernist parents who are convinced by the version of the

¹³ This is true despite the popularity of post-modern theology in some more academic religious circles, e.g.: Vanhoozer (2003), Lowe (2007), and Feldman Kaye (2019)

wager defended here need not worry about the contradiction between the philosophical assumptions that underlie the education they select for their children and the expected denial of these assumptions by their children, if the education succeeds.

Note that our argument isn't only about post-modern parenting. First, even if you are a post-modernist without children, you probably have children in your sphere of influence – nephews, nieces, and the like – and you would surely care about them having the best possible life. So, at the very least, the post-modern non-parent should encourage those around him/her to raise their children as our Post-Modern Pascal would have them raised. Second, while it is probably impossible to intentionally decide to believe p at t_1 , it is possible to set oneself on a route that might lead one at some point in the future, t_2 , either to wholeheartedly believe p , or at least to be much more open to the possibility that it is true. Pascal urges his readers to set themselves on just such a route. Hence, regardless of whether they have children or not, post-modernists have a good reason to put themselves on a track that raises the odds that *they* will be committed to religious beliefs and practices, which in turn raises the odds of them (and their children, if they have any) living happier, healthier, longer and more ethical lives.

6: Conclusion

This paper has sought to uncover the vulnerability of the combination of a secular Western lifestyle and a commitment to PM. Empirical research shows significant benefits accruing to members of religious communities in most Western countries. Accordingly, a post-modernist living in one of those places, who wants to embrace a secular lifestyle, will be caught in a dilemma. By her own lights, given her situation, it would seem that she should be pursuing a religious lifestyle. If she cares about her children's welfare, she should either (a) endeavour to raise them to be religious or (b) have the courage of her secular convictions and give up on her PM, admitting that the reason she's not taking Pascal's wager is that she has convictions about how the world really is and about what her obligations really are.

Since the expected benefits from religion are not universal, PM would not lead to the above conclusion everywhere in the world. We haven't uncovered a *contradiction* so

much as a vulnerability or instability in the combination of post-modernism and secularism. There are Western countries that buck the trend, like Denmark, in which believers tend to be *less* happy than non-believers.¹⁴ In Denmark, PM would seem to encourage a *withdrawal* from religious beliefs and practices.

Now, of course, there *are* theologians who try to swim against the tide and reconcile their faith with PM.¹⁵ But the religious post-modernist in Denmark is in a similar position to that of secular post-modernists in many other Western countries, such as the US. Thus, while in the US, post-modernists ought to take the wager of our post-modern Pascal, and select a religious upbringing for their children (whether or not they currently subscribe to religious beliefs and practices), in Denmark, they ought to take the wager of the post-modern *anti*-Pascal, and select a secular upbringing – again, regardless of whether or not they currently hold secular beliefs and practices.

Perhaps our argument can be extended beyond PM, to all those skeptical about ultimate truth – be they pragmatists, relativists, or other opponents of mind-independent truth. The greater the skepticism regarding such notions of truth, the more open one should be to the wager (in countries where the empirical correlation between religiosity and well-being hold), provided – of course – that one cares about one’s own well-being and especially – as emphasized in the present paper – about the well-being of one’s children.

The conclusion of this paper could be viewed as either good news for Pascal and for other pragmatic salespeople trying to peddle strong ideological commitment, or bad news for PM. Costs and benefits of adopting a lifestyle need to be weighed up on a case-by-case basis, but when religious commitment would seem to pay, and there are likely to be many such cases, the situation bodes well for Pascal. If postmodernists recoil from the implications of these wagers, they would be forced to give up PM. In fact, postmodernism seems to buckle under its own weight (or lack thereof). On the one hand, it eschews metaphysical convictions. On the other hand, and to the extent that convictions *pay*, it must also seek to embrace them.

¹⁴ See Snoep (2008).

¹⁵ See Vanhoozer (2003), Lowe (2007), and Feldman (2019).

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