

How to Live Without God

by

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Preface

Are you sure you should be reading this?

This essay is written for two kinds of people: those raised in a religious tradition that no longer satisfies them, and those raised without a religious background at all. The first kind of person often feels loss and trepidation, and may be hesitant to give up something that perhaps has been meaningful, or at least comforting at times, in the past. The second kind of person may instead experience a sense of absence, the lack of anything firm on which to base an attitude and approach to life.

How do you move beyond these doubts to something more positive?

When people are inclined to convert *to* religion, there is a community of like-minded souls eager to welcome them and to ease the transition. For those moving the other way, though, or for those who are non-religious and staying put, there is no equivalent to that. Often, you are on your own. That's why this essay was written. You are *not* on your own, because others have walked this trail ahead of you.

If you are struggling a bit to figure out how you can achieve a fulfilling life without religion, you will find here a set of ideas that you can try on for size, and an overall framework within which you can fill in your own details. You won't get all the answers, but you'll get yourself off to a good start.

If, however, you are a religious believer and are comfortable in your creed, this was not written for you. Some of your beliefs are not going to be treated as kindly here as you might like. I have no wish to annoy you, nor to "convert" you away from your religious life. If it works for you, that's fine with me, and it is probably best to set this essay down now. There is no need to create religious doubts where none exist.

But for the rest of you, read on. I hope that you will find what follows to be thought-provoking, useful, and comforting. You are on a good path. Let me help show you where it leads...

C.S.Y.

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Chapter One

Should you live without God?

Not necessarily.

Belief in God, even devotion to God, has been too prevalent in history, and remains too prevalent in modern society, for us to assume that it is pointless. And if it is not pointless, it is probably right for some people.

For better or worse, the dark side of religion is what most often makes the news. We see clergymen sued or hauled off to prison for sexual abuse, we see passionate adherents of religion railing against science or against certain forms of medical research or trying to legislate their moral opinions into law, we see believers kneeling in front of water stains or window cracks that somehow suggest religious images, we see wars or terrorist acts justified on religious grounds, we see prejudice and hatred legitimized by appeals to scripture.

What we rarely see or hear, however – unless we tune into the religious media (and I'm betting that you don't) – is the bright side of religion. We don't see the hundreds of thousands of good and intelligent men and women of the clergy who, though imperfect as we all are, devote their lives to low-paying work in the service of others. We don't see the missionaries who bring education and medicine and science and hope to people not getting it from their own culture or their own government. We don't see the individual believers, motivated by love of God and belief in the scriptural commandments to love one's neighbor, who work in countless hidden ways to help the poor and the sick and the incarcerated and the refugees. We don't see the millions, perhaps billions, who feel strengthened by their faith and enabled to face what can be a hard, harsh life.

For many, many people, belief in God provides a foundation for everything they do. It explains for them why they are here, what they should be striving for, and how to get there from here. Their belief shepherds them through troubling times, and their churches offer a community that supports them and shares their joys. This is not trivial stuff, and if you get all that from religion, then maybe you simply should not risk trying to find it all without God.

Even those of us not getting all that from religion should stop and think about it, though. No matter how negative an impression we may have, nothing – and no one – is all good or all evil. In learning to live without God, we should

strive to be sensible and fair, so while we grapple with the inadequacies of religious belief, let's keep in mind what is good and powerful in it. Learning to live without God means finding other sources for the good things religion offers – and we can do that only if we acknowledge what those things are.

We will come back to this in more detail at the end of Chapter One, postponing it until then because we first need to think about the validity of religious belief. If such beliefs are true, then maybe we should adopt them whether we like their side-effects or not. But if they are not true, we are probably better off looking for other ways to get the good things that religion seems to provide to its adherents.

The inertia of faith

As mentioned in the Preface, there are two kinds of people who want to learn to live without God: those who have always lived without God (but sometimes wonder if they are missing something), and those who were raised to live with God (but have grown doubtful or distant). For those who have grown up without God, inertia is on their side – inertia being the force that tends to keep us moving in the same direction unless we make an effort to change.

For those raised in religious households, however, giving up faith can be hard. It can feel like a betrayal of one's family and community – and even of oneself, to the extent that religious teachings have become internalized. The long tradition behind most religions gives them a certain weight, a certain appeal – and, some of us may tend to feel, a certain presumption of validity. Let's call this simple psychological fact the "inertia of faith."

The first thing we have to do is put a stop to the inertia of faith.

This is not necessarily easy to do, but consider this: neither the habit of belief nor the antiquity of belief makes it valid. The ancient and natural tendency to believe that the earth is stationary and the universe revolves around it is a clear example of an ancient and obvious belief that is, in fact, false.

Here's another. Not long ago it was commonplace in America – and it is not unheard of today – for families and communities to foster racist attitudes based on beliefs about the supposed superiority of the Caucasian race. White children were raised to be bigots from an early age, and it took an effort of personal insight and will for individuals to overcome the effects of this upbringing. Nowadays, most of us recognize this whole business as evil.

In the case of religion, it is the very ancientness of belief that gives it a presumption of *invalidity*.

Why? Because the great ancient religions grew up in a period of relative ignorance and relative gullibility. The core beliefs of the major religions all go back anywhere from a thousand to almost three thousand years. Were the people of those days smarter than we are, more knowledgeable, wiser about life and the universe? Did they know something we don't know?

On the contrary, they lived in relatively benighted times. Although undoubtedly they felt the same emotions as we do, had the same fears, the same drives,

and wondered much as we do about the Big Questions – they had few means of arriving at good answers.

It is not surprising that religious beliefs sprouted up in relatively primitive and tempestuous conditions. These are conditions that tend to produce wild tales along with the credulity that makes them believable. That the core religious beliefs of civilization hark back to such ancient and difficult times makes them less credible, therefore, not more credible.

In the end, of course, we must judge truth or falseness on the merits of the situation, not on prejudices about the origins of a belief. The point here is not that religious beliefs should be rejected or even necessarily doubted merely because they are ancient. However, they should certainly not be given any positive standing on that account.

Nothing is true just because your people have always thought it was true, or even because *you* always thought it was true. The inertia of faith, for those who feel it, has to be resisted and ground to a halt.

This can be difficult, of course, from an emotional point of view, and we will return to this aspect later. But first, we need to examine whether the traditional beliefs actually have merit or not. Only if they don't do we then need to worry about how to get by without them.

So for a little while, let us focus only on the intellectual aspects. Is religious belief plausibly correct?

Does God exist?

Although it is impossible to prove either the existence or non-existence of God, the best answer appears to be two-fold:

1. There is far more to reality than we understand, and perhaps more than we are ever capable of understanding.
2. The part that is real but beyond our grasp is unlikely to include “God” in any traditional sense of that word.

If we look at the intellectual (as opposed to the emotional) reasons why people believe in God, most of them boil down to this: there are aspects of reality that we simply can’t explain without God, so there must be a God.

That, at least, is the way believers tend to understand their own reasoning. What their reasoning really amounts to, though, is something a little less persuasive: if there were a God, this could partially explain some of the things we otherwise don’t understand – so whatever we don’t understand we will attribute to God. This reasoning, unfortunately, is logically equivalent to: if there were an eternal, omnipotent giant toad, that could partially explain some of the things we otherwise don’t understand – so whatever we don’t understand we will attribute to the toad.

In some ways, actually, the toad (or any of a zillion other equally dopey notions) is a somewhat better explanation than God, as traditionally understood. But let’s come back to that after we examine briefly the specific arguments people give for believing in God.

There are three main reasons, though each comes in various flavors. There is the argument that Somebody must have gotten it all started, there is the argument that the universe is too well designed to have appeared accidentally, and there is the argument that only God can be responsible for miraculous events that occur in life. Let’s run each of these around the track a bit.

Somebody must have gotten it all started?

This is one of the classic issues of philosophy: why is there something instead of nothing? Similarly: why is there *this* something, instead of something else? Most religions have answered these questions the same way: God did it.

If you already believe in God, the answer is obvious. But as a reason to believe in God, there is not really a compelling argument here. We do not know,

first of all, whether we should really be amazed that something exists. The philosophical questions can just as easily be turned around: why would there be nothing instead of something? Why should there be something else, instead of what we've got?

Second, God doesn't solve the problem, but just pushes it back one step. If you say that the universe exists because God created it, then you have to ask: why does God exist, instead of nothing? There is no real answer to that question. The closest the theologians can come is some version of: God exists because it is the very nature of God to exist. God cannot not-exist!

That's cool, but if you can say it of God, why can't you say it of the universe? We actually have first-hand experience with the universe (or parts of it, anyway), and one of the basic laws of physics is that matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed. As far as we can observe, that is, what theologians have merely hypothesized about God is actually true of ordinary matter and energy: its very nature is to exist. As for whether that is also true of God, it's impossible to say, as we have no direct experience with God.

Of course, none of this is any kind of real explanation. All we know is that Stuff Exists. We can't explain it, and we can't even be sure it needs to be explained. But if there needs to be some underlying cause or explanation, what exactly can we say about it? Can we call it God?

Sure, we can call it "God." Or we can call it "Bill," or "Homer Simpson" – but giving it a name doesn't tell us anything new. What we need to do is figure out what characteristics such a Cause would have, and see if those characteristics match up with our idea of God. Unfortunately, there is simply nothing useful to say on this subject.¹ We certainly have no basis for thinking that whatever (if anything) caused the universe to exist had the personal and moral qualities we associate with God – or the omnipotent toad, for that matter.

It would be more honest to simply admit that we haven't got a clue. Maybe someday someone will figure it out, but we are a long way from being there.

If you've seen the movie *Men in Black*, you may recall that at the end, the camera pans back from the closing scene, and keeps on panning back until we see the entire Earth, then the Solar System, then the Milky Way and then the entire universe which, it turns out, is merely a marble in the collection of a

¹ Check out Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* if you want to see what kind of embarrassingly illogical arguments get made when a determined and wonderfully clever mind is applied to this hopeless effort.

creature that looks like a young dinosaur. This answer is probably not correct either, but it's more imaginative than my omnipotent toad, or God.

Intelligent design?

Probably the best argument for the existence of God is the most obvious one: the world doesn't merely exist, it positively shimmers. It's a beautiful thing, filled with wonders. The greatest wonders, of course, are the living creatures, even the simplest of which is a marvel. And when you get to the human brain, you are getting to an unfathomable richness of intricacy and power. If God is not responsible for this, than how did it all come about?

Evolution, you say. Well, OK, but let's not just make a leap of faith here. Does evolution really explain it? Let's take it in stages.

Assuming that the universe as we know it started with a Big Bang – which could have been the first event of any kind ever, or merely another round in a cycle of the universe expanding and collapsing and expanding again, or perhaps merely one of countless such events in an infinity of space and time – the eventual development of the Milky Way and the Solar System are not deeply mysterious. Granted, there is a great deal that scientists don't know, but there is no need to assume anything supernatural.

The development of Earth into a place that could support life is a little more striking. For some people, it is reason enough to believe that Someone must have designed it. First of all, it is impressive that such a thing as "life" is possible at all. We needn't get into organic chemistry here, but the simple fact is that if it weren't for the unique properties of carbon and oxygen and hydrogen, life could not exist on Earth or anywhere else, at least not in the form we know it.

It is hard to say whether this is meaningful or not. We don't know whether it is even conceivable that matter could exist in any other form. Mathematics is wonderful, too, full of surprising patterns, and latent with power. But it really does seem that mathematics could not be different. Even God could not make $2+2=5$. For all we know, even God could not make matter that did not include atoms in the form that we know them. Drawing conclusions one way or the other is to assume that we are a lot smarter than we actually are.

But the unique suitability of the Earth to support life, particularly human life, goes well beyond the chemical nature of matter. The Earth is peculiarly suited for life by being part of the Solar System, which is dominated by a single star, not multiple stars, and a star that is not too small and not too big, not too hot

and not too cool. Furthermore, the Earth orbits at a very suitable distance from the sun – not too close, and not too far. And its orbit, though elliptical, is not too elongated (if it were, we would have extremes of hot and cold). Our planet, unlike others, has plenty of water, and an atmosphere that protects us from much harmful radiation, as well as from most of the debris that wanders in space. One could go on at length in this fashion, but you get the idea. The Earth is, undeniably, a peculiarly hospitable place for human life – although people looking for a decent and inexpensive apartment in Manhattan might think otherwise.

Is this hospitability significant? Again, one can't really say. One can always look back and realize that a virtual infinity of coincidences had to happen in just a certain way in order to produce *any* given fact or event. Take the fact that you are reading this now. A thousand things (much more than that, really) had to have happened in your life to bring you to this particular place and time and activity. Similarly, as many things had to happen in your parents' lives to bring them together in a way that you were conceived. And so on, for millions of generations. A comparably innumerable volume of coincidences had to occur before I could write these pages, and get them to a place where you would find them.

The odds against all this, frankly, are virtually infinite. Must we conclude, therefore, that Someone must have made this happen? That God specifically engineered the universe so that I would write this and you would read it? And if so, how come I couldn't get a blurb from him?

Seriously, and obviously, the odds of any particular outcome are infinitesimal. Once that outcome has occurred, it is tempting to see it as marvelous. But given that the universe exists, *something* had to happen. No matter what it was, it was going to be improbable. The improbable, even the remotely improbable, therefore, is not necessarily anything to marvel at.

The same can be said of the Earth. The astronomer and cosmologist Carl Sagan was the first to promote widely the idea that life is inevitable in the universe. There are so many billions of galaxies, each with so many billions of stars, so many of which could have planets, an untold number of which may, like Earth, be capable of supporting life, and many of which may support intelligent life. His calculations, frankly, were dubious – but his general point is well taken: we don't know how much company we have out there in the universe, but it is quite possible that we are not alone.

Even if you are not a skilled golfer, if you hit enough golf balls, you will eventually get a hole-in-one. Intelligent life is the universe's equivalent of a hole-in-one. If you are a universe (and you're not, so don't start making plans), and you produce enough planets, it could well be that from time to time you are going to produce one that will become peopled with intelligent creatures. And you can just bet that each of them is going to think that they are special. And they are – but not specially created, just lucky to be one of the random winners. It may have taken a huge number of coincidences for them to get there, but there they are. And here we are – also lucky winners.

Is this a valid way to look at life on earth? Again, to know that for sure, we would have to be a lot smarter, or at least a lot more knowledgeable, than we are. We just don't know if life is a one-in-a-gazillion long-shot, or whether it happens pretty much every time the conditions are right – or whether it is statistically impossible and had to be the work of an intelligent Creator.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, there were a number of interesting and promising experiments in which some of the building blocks of life were created in the laboratory by applying energy to chemical mixtures that were intended to mimic primordial oceans and atmospheres. At the time, there was hope that eventually some legitimate form of life might be manufactured in that fashion. After some rapid early progress, though, the whole program seemed to hit a wall.

That could be a sign that life did not really come from nonliving matter. Or it could just be that the laboratories are not big enough. On Earth, life did not arise in the space of a test-tube or the time-span of a few days or even a few decades. The Earth's oceans and the atmosphere are almost infinitely bigger than a scientific laboratory, and the Earth had hundreds of millions of years to generate the right lucky circumstances that might have enabled the first self-reproducing molecules to arise. Could it have happened by chance, or did it have to be by design? There is simply no way to know.

No one has yet figured out how life could easily arise, step by step, from non-living matter. But a hundred years ago, no one had any clue how even the first step could be taken, and now we do. We are far from having the final answers, and perhaps we never will have them, but that does not mean that it couldn't have happened. In fact, the whole history of science can almost be read as a morality tale in which things that were thought impossible to do or impossible to explain were, in fact, done and explained. To say: "we shall only know so much, and beyond that we must assume that God is at work" has

been a losing position, historically. This may not be the best time to place a big bet on it.

Biological evolution is a great case in point. It had always been known that some plants and animals were quite similar to others, and over the ages there had been speculations about some kind of evolutionary relationship. But no really plausible method of one species changing into another had been proposed prior to 1859, and the Biblical notion that each species was individually created by God seemed impregnable. In that year, though, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection² provided the theoretical breakthrough needed to make biological evolution generally comprehensible.

Since those days, the theory has been expanded and modified, and support for it has arisen from many branches of science. As a result, many scientists flatly state that evolution is a fact, and this is true, if by this we mean that today's variety of living creatures has evolved over time from much simpler forms. What is not a "fact," but only a "theory," is that natural selection (and related natural mechanisms) are entirely responsible for evolution.

Is there a credible alternative, though? Not really. Creationism – the belief that God created everything in six days, as the Biblical book of Genesis describes – is simply wrong. The only way creationism could be true is if God deliberately made the world to look like it had been around for billions of years, including radioactive minerals that are in a condition that could only be expected after millions of years of lying about, and including fossils of animals that look like ancestors of contemporary creatures but that in fact never existed. Never mind that so many species of animals have now been identified that it would have been impossible to fit all of them on the ark, or even to get them there, since many are endemic only to Australia or South America or other areas that are a long commute from the Middle East.

In addition, microbiologists have known for a long time that certain non-functional parts of DNA that are shared by many living creatures show a pattern of random mutations that mirrors the evolutionary pattern. Creatures that are closely related have very similar patterns of mutations that have collected over time, while those that are distantly related show patterns that differ more greatly. This is exactly what one would expect if life on Earth evolved, as virtually all scientists believe. But it is inexplicable if all creatures were designed

² The same theory was thought of independently at about the same time by Alfred Russel Wallace, who is rarely remembered any more. Perhaps people figured that if he couldn't even spell "Russell," there was no point in giving him credit.

by God, unless God is deliberately trying to mislead us. And if so, God is a lot less divine than we would have a right to expect.³

So creationism does not need to be taken seriously. The more faddish contemporary alternative is that evolution by natural selection and similar means has occurred, but that at critical times, God has intervened to help the process along. Hence evolution is not really random or entirely materialistic; rather, it is a manifestation of “intelligent design.”

This concept has a certain basic plausibility. It is certainly surprising, for instance, that a mechanism as intricate as the human eye could arise step by step, through chance mutations in chromosomes. (The eye has been the favorite example of anti-evolutionists almost from the beginning – for that matter, even before Darwin.) And I am not going to pretend that it can be fully explained here and now. However, scientists have been able to produce a general picture of how even such a complex structure could have arisen step by step, starting with cells that simply became light-sensitive (as even many plant cells are), and that obtained a better chance of survival with each small improvement.

Although “intelligent design” proponents argue that it doesn’t make sense that a structure or process that has multiple inter-dependent parts could arise one step at a time, this betrays a failure of imagination on the part of the intelligent design people rather than imposing any real limitation on natural evolutionary processes.

If you read mystery novels or have ever seen a magic act, or even witnessed something you couldn’t personally explain (such as the launching of a rocket headed for the moon), you have been part of a similar phenomenon. When you don’t know how something has been done, you may be amazed. You may even be unbelieving until someone explains it to you. But your amazement and unbelief does not disprove what is, in fact, explainable. And your personal inability to explain, whether temporary or permanent, does not make the facts untrue.

In the case of biological evolution, we have only partial explanations. We are far ahead of where our peers were a mere two hundred years ago. If human civilization lasts another two thousand years or so, imagine how much more will be known! And yet, are we to stand here today, saying that evolution could not produce an eye (or a cell flagellum, or whatever) just because we don’t know how every step happened? One has to have a lot of confidence in one’s own omniscience, never mind God’s, to take that position!

³ Memo to self: do not buy a used car from God.

But there is one more very important thing in this marvelous life that we haven't discussed yet: the human mind. For one thing, how does consciousness arise out of dumb matter? For another, how does it become so rich, the way humans experience it? The godly have the answers for us: if consciousness is not a property of matter, but of a soul, a soul created by God, then it makes at least a little bit of sense. Otherwise, what could the explanation possibly be?

Nobel Prizes are going to the people who can first provide a solid answer to these questions, and they haven't been given out yet. However, even here, we have some clues. The best people wrestling with this problem seem to be coming to answers that amount, in summary, to this:

First, we have to stop thinking of "consciousness" as a "thing." We *are* conscious, but we don't *possess* consciousness – not in a literal sense, at least. If you are a fast runner, for example, you can say metaphorically that you "possess speed," but that is not a good literal description of what you have. What you have is the ability to run fast. You do not possess, as if in a bottle, some entity called "speed." (And if you do, the police want to know about it!). Likewise, your brain is capable of processes that make you conscious of yourself and some of what happens around you, but you do not "possess consciousness."

Second, these processes are part of the brain, not part of something outside the brain. What we call the mind is, like consciousness, not an entity in and of itself. Nor do we need to assume that each of us has a "soul" that somehow gives us life and consciousness. We are accustomed to think of our minds as somehow separate from our bodies. We tend to think, sometimes, even that we "are" our minds, and that our bodies are along for the ride, or at least that our bodies are just the necessary vessels for our minds, while our minds constitute the essence of us.

But this is probably wrong (not that anyone can know for sure, yet). Here's a more up-to-date way of looking at it: *our minds are really just our brains in action*. When our brains are working, they are aware of reality around them. It seems that our minds are separate from our brains mainly because the brain has no (or very little) direct perception of itself as a physical organ. That's because, like other physical organs, it evolved over time, and it did so for the purpose of helping us survive better in a hostile environment. The brain needed to learn to react to the world around it, but it did not particularly need to learn about itself. Since the brain does not directly perceive itself, its activities *seem* disembodied. But that is a mere blind spot. The mind is not disembodied. It is the brain doing its job.

Although we have true knowledge of consciousness only in ourselves (it is a fun little philosophical puzzle to think about how you can be sure that anyone *other* than you is actually conscious) – we each do have quite a variety of conscious experience. We see that our consciousness varies over time (from infancy to adulthood and then often into senility in old age). We experience how the intensity and other qualities of consciousness vary with things that happen in our bodies. Weariness, fever, drunkenness, fear, concussion, passion, drugs, pain, brain surgery, and various other physical or chemical circumstances dramatically change our conscious thought.

That's because they affect our brains, while our minds, our thought, our consciousness is just our brains in action. When you affect the brain process, you affect consciousness. If the mind were part of a soul that had some kind of indestructible existence apart from the brain, this would be perplexing. But it is perfectly sensible, and in fact is exactly what we would expect, if mental activity is nothing other than brain activity.

Furthermore, we can observe that in the animal kingdom, mental activity (and probably the quality of consciousness) correlates with the sophistication of the physical brain. Advanced animals – such as chimps or dolphins – with relatively complex animal brains, are capable of behavior that is considerably different in degree but not all that different in kind from human mental activity. It was once believed that that no animal was capable of tool-use, or tool-invention, or language, or insight. We now know that these presumptions are false. We're far better at these things, but certain other animals are at least in the game.

Yet as you move down the evolutionary ladder, mental capabilities decrease, and somewhere along the line they become undetectable. Most people today – certainly most dog owners – understand that dogs, for instance, are not mere organic machines but are conscious and even have personalities. One has to believe that less mentally developed animals such as, say, chipmunks and birds are conscious as well, as are, presumably, lizards and fish, whose mental lives are presumably less robust, perhaps more on the level of rugby players (just kidding, guys – please don't hurt me!) What about insects? Now it's getting hard to tell, though it's probably a good bet that they have some kind of dim consciousness. Yet at some point lower on the scale – certainly by the time we get to bacteria and viruses – we have to be highly doubtful that anything we would call consciousness exists, and these creatures are about as conscious as a computer is, if that.

No, we are not nearly smart enough yet as a species to explain what our own magnificent brains are producing. But what we do see is entirely consistent with the notion that the mind is merely the activity of the brain, not a separate entity, and that the brain-mind evolved just as the rest of the body evolved over billions of years of life on Earth.

Yet wouldn't divine creation be a better explanation? Yes, in the sense that it would be simpler. But it is simpler only because, while we know very little about how the mind could be a product of the brain, we know nothing at all of how God could make a mind and somehow link it up with the brain. We're just slapping a label on a big empty box and calling it an explanation.

In the end, there are three main problems with assuming that God is a good explanation of what we observe in the world around us, whether physical or mental.

First, the further that human knowledge progresses, the fewer and smaller the gaps in our own understanding of reality, and the less place there is for God. Yes, there are still places where gaps exist, even big gaps, but "the God of the Gaps," as the "creator" has been called by others before us, has a smaller and smaller role the smarter we humans get. We end up with The Incredible Shrinking God, which is not particularly inspiring as a basis for belief and worship.

Second, divine intervention is not an explanation. It is the absence of an explanation. It says in effect: if you can't explain X, then I will attribute X to God. That's cheating, because I can say: it's not God, it's the omnipotent toad – and my reasoning is just as sound as the theist's, which is to say, it is total hooey. You cannot properly argue from ignorance to answers. My inability to completely describe how the eye evolved or how the mind works does not prove that any particular competing hypothesis is correct. It only proves that I don't have all the answers (which is not exactly a revelation).

Third, and I think the most important point in the end, is that the logic is twisted inside-out here. Just as we saw with the philosophical argument, the scientific argument should not be posed as: there's a missing part, so it must be God. Instead, even if we grant that there is a missing part (and we don't really grant that anything is missing, only that it is currently unknown), the proper next step is to say, if an outside being or force is *assumed* to fill the gap, what can we deduce about the characteristics of that being or force? Would it be "God" – or something else?

In the present context, what we are asking here is: in the event that the world as we know it is the product of some kind of external design, what can we say about the designer?

The answer almost has to be: if there was a designer, it was something unworthy of our worship.

On the positive side, we have to admire the apparent power and intelligence behind the effort. If some impressive being (whom we shall call “Mr. Big,” pending further identification) conceived all of this and somehow imagined it from the beginning and either set it in motion to happen by itself, or else intervened from time to time to redirect the process, this is a really impressive production. So, A+ for skill...

But hold on a second. What if Mr. Big was trying to create a *good* world instead of the mess we actually live in?

The world is indeed rather thoroughly bungled. Admittedly, it possesses grandeur and physical beauty. There are many impressive, even awe-inspiring, elements to it. There are even some that are funny.⁴ Frankly, if I had created the world, there are a lot of things I’d be proud of.

Still, I couldn’t defend every aspect of nature. For there is ugliness as well as beauty. There is pain and cruelty. There is illness and death. There is waste and destruction.

Theologians have grappled forever with the “problem of pain” and the “problem of evil.” If Mr. Big were actually God, how could the world contain so much pain and so much evil? After thousands of years of mulling this over, the answer has finally come in: nobody knows.

There are lots of partial answers. Sometimes what appears bad is actually good – true enough. Or sometimes a temporary evil is necessary to bring about a greater good – true enough. Or perhaps we are just being put on trial to see if we deserve to move on, after death, to a greater and perfectly happy existence – whoa, there: time to hit the brakes!

Never mind that there is very little basis for believing that this last statement is true – we’ll come back to this a little later. But look at it again: it’s actually an admission that the world as we know it is not very good after all. If this were really the best of all possible worlds, we wouldn’t need another world after

⁴ The platypus or the mongoose is always good for a laugh – unless you happen to be a platypus or a mongoose, or a platygoose, which is....oh, never mind.

this one. The fact that almost all major religions postulate some kind of existence after this one is as clear a proof as we can get that this one is not nearly good enough, even (especially?) for religious believers.

Let's not misinterpret the religious position here. They are trying to save the situation by saying that this world is only part of the picture, and when you take the rest of the picture into account, it is wonderful indeed. This position may or may not have merit, but it is at least superficially coherent, and it somewhat excuses Mr. Big.

But our job was not to excuse Mr. Big, but to evaluate him⁵ on the basis of his work. And even believers seem to agree that the work we can see is so bad that we have to hope that there is another part of it that we can't see.

So in the end, even allowing that some of what appears on the surface to be bad or evil may be for our own or somebody's ultimate good, there is too much left over. The cleverest theologians have not explained how it benefits so many infants to be born into brief, miserable lives, and to die before they ever grow old enough to learn any lessons from this or to benefit in any other way. Even if they go straight to heaven when they die, what was the possible point of their being born, suffering, and dying? Why not skip all the ugly middle steps and send them right to heaven in the first place? God couldn't do that? Maybe God could, but Mr. Big couldn't, or at least doesn't.

It isn't just people suffering, either. You can always argue, whether plausibly or not, that there is some moral purpose to human suffering, or some reward in the end. But why do billions, probably trillions at any given moment, of sentient creatures live in almost constant alertness and fear, and usually die in pain, for no evident purpose other than to perpetuate the cycle? It all makes sense if the living world evolved by natural, unintentional processes. But if someone went to the trouble of designing all this, what kind of cruel insanity drove such a designer?

For that matter, what kind of sadistic mind invented the mosquito? Yes, it's a marvel of engineering, but so were the Nazi death camps. Maybe a mosquito serves some positive purpose somewhere, but its predominant roles are (a) to irritate, and (b) to kill (by spreading yellow fever, malaria, etc.). It's hard to believe that Mr. Big thought that life wouldn't be hard enough for us without mosquitoes.

⁵ Sorry about the "Mr." and the "him," by the way, but it's hard to believe that a woman would create a world like this!

If mosquitoes are really good for us somehow, does that mean that there will be mosquitoes in heaven? Will there be leukemia and crack babies in heaven? Will there still be sin and evil, and will genocide still be possible? The answer to such questions is, supposedly, No. But if heaven can exist without pain and evil, why can't earth exist without pain and evil? Why didn't God create heaven on earth, instead of something that resembles more of a mixture of heaven and hell on earth? If there is a good answer to this, it has yet to appear in print, or to be spoken in church.

If God designed this world, he either couldn't do a good job of it, or else chose not to. But either way, such a being cannot really be called "God" without stretching the concept in a direction nobody wants to take it.

Based on what we see and experience, therefore, we don't have any really compelling reason to believe that there is a supernatural Designer out there. And if there is, it isn't the good and benevolent God that some people like to pray to. In fact, if we were simply to look at the world, assuming that we wanted to attribute it to supernatural causes at all, the most sensible conclusion would probably be that of the ancient Greeks and Romans: the world is too chaotic to be the work of a single god – there must be multiple divinities, who don't play well together, and apparently they are working their problems out on us. Not that we should believe that either, but it makes more sense than attributing it all to someone called "God" whom we are then supposed to admire.

For that matter, the omnipotent toad is a better explanation. At least no one ever claimed that toads are particularly benevolent.

Is God active in our lives?

People today will believe in almost anything (ghosts, psychic phenomena, the Chicago Cubs). Miracles, though, are a little out of favor in most circles. Yet not in all circles. There is a fascinating subculture of religious enthusiasts who still believe in and sometimes practice faith healing, exorcism, and other wonders. Then, of course, we have all the Biblical miracles, as well as many others reported in the interim.

If real miracles occur, and if they occur in the name of God (and only in the name of God), then this would certainly be evidence that God exists and perhaps should be paid attention to. Certainly, people who believe they have seen a miracle, or personally undergone one, feel that they have sufficient reason for faith in miracles, and in God. But the rest of us are hardly compelled to go

along with this. To cite quickly the main reasons why skepticism remains the best position:

- (a) There's a fundamental problem of reasoning here. Either miracles are violations of the natural order, or they are not. If they are not, then they are not really miracles – just coincidences or surprises. But if they are indeed violations of the natural order, then, as the Scottish philosopher David Hume pointed out, they are virtually never believable. Why? Not because God couldn't override the laws of nature, but rather because in any given instance, we should prefer a natural explanation to a supernatural one, and natural explanations can never be completely ruled out. Even if the miracle story is sincere, even if it is documented, it is easier to believe that someone was mistaken, is misremembering, failed to understand what was actually happening, was deluded or hallucinating or tricked, or is even lying or faking it. Even if such explanations seem improbable in a specific situation, it is always more improbable that the natural order has been violated.⁶
- (b) Miraculous phenomena have rarely been tested scientifically, and not conclusively. Faith healers claim that hundreds are cured in a single evening. Would it be all that hard, then, to set up a double-blind, controlled experiment to see whether these miraculous powers are real? There is nothing mysterious about the protocols for determining whether a procedure really works or not. After thousands of years of supposed miracles and hundreds of years of science, we still have no rigorous scientific studies indicating that miracles occur.
- (c) Curiously, whatever “supernatural” power is responsible for miracles seems to have odd limitations. Certain kinds of conditions are unusually susceptible to “miraculous” healing, among them twisted joints, heart problems, skin problems and, frankly, pretty much any illness that is known to have a psychological origin or a frequent psychosomatic connection. Meanwhile, other conditions are never cured dramatically. For example, there does not appear to be a single case of the miraculous regeneration of a severed or amputated arm or leg. There have

⁶ Anyone can be fooled. Who, for instance, would think that a brilliant, pragmatic philosopher and scientist like William James could be taken in by phony spiritualists – but that's exactly what happened, as events later proved. Not that all miracle stories are traceable to fakery. There are lots of other possibilities.

certainly been plenty of people suffering such losses. Is God incapable of this kind of miracle? What kind of God are we talking about here?

- (d) What kind, indeed? What kind of God allows human suffering to swell to such proportions that miracles are needed to relieve it, and at the same time, having the power to heal our wounds, uses this power so sparingly and apparently arbitrarily? Religious teachers will tell us we have no right to question God about all these matters. But we are not questioning God. We are questioning the source of these phenomena, assuming that there is actually some outside source. What kind of being would work this way – is it a god or a demon? Honestly, it's hard to tell. If you worked for a large company where the owner made everyone's life miserable in blatantly arbitrary ways, and then equally arbitrarily gave certain people reprieves (usually temporary) while refusing to do so for the majority, would you think that this was a great boss because once in a while he did something nice?
- (e) “Miraculous” occurrences are not exclusive to the Christian religion, to the major religions, or to religion at all. All cultures report these things happening, whether at the hands of priests, or medical doctors, or kings, or witch doctors, or even spontaneously. Miracles almost never occur with any kind of explanatory text. Gods and demons don't leave calling cards. What are we supposed to conclude about whoever or whatever is doing these things? It's a stretch to answer, “God.” It is much more reasonable to assume that natural processes are occurring here. In a world this big and complex, astonishing surprises are going to happen sometimes, and there is still a lot we don't understand, especially about the workings of the human mind and body. Let us not keep falling into the same trap of attributing every unusual (good) thing that happens to God – especially if we are going to ignore all the unusual bad things that happen.

This is really just one more instance of the same thing we saw about the First Cause and about the Intelligent Designer. It is not evident that anything is going on here that requires supernatural explanation. And if there were, it would not be at all clear that the spiritual or supernatural cause resembles anything we think of as “God.” On the contrary, if there is a supernatural being involved, it does not appear to be entirely competent or benevolent.

We are not saying, however, that belief in God is incoherent. In the end, the theologians come down to the same answer that the secular philosophers and scientists come to: there are questions whose answers are simply beyond us.

In the Bible, the Book of Job raises the question of how God can allow good people to suffer. Although various answers are proposed and rejected in the text of this brief and entertaining book, the final answer is, appropriately, a question. God speaks to Job and says, in effect, how dare you ask? “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?” he challenges Job. Undeniably, if there is a God, his understanding and his reasons are far beyond our comprehension. We should no more expect to understand Creation than we should expect a puppy to understand the stock market pages of the newspaper – no matter how much it pours over them. So God, if there is one, gets a pass.

But that’s the whole point: *is* there a God, or is there any reason to believe that there is? And the answer is: as far as we can tell, apparently not, at least not a God of the traditional kind. Hypothesizing God not only fails to answer the mysteries of our existence and of the universe, but it raises new questions and problems.

If, in the end, an assumption that God exists still leaves us with the same kind of mysteries we started with, we are probably better off without that assumption. We have mystery enough already. Why can’t we just be satisfied to admit that the state of human knowledge is such that there are many questions we can’t answer? We can even further admit that the human brain may never even be capable of understanding certain things. The puppy will grow up and may manage a few tricks, but it will never manage a stock portfolio.

So the conclusion here is not that God’s existence is an impossibility, but simply that it is not a very good or very helpful hypothesis, either. Although the idea of God can be comforting at times (scary, at others), if we are seeking the truth, we are certainly justified in putting aside the idea of God, based on contemplation of what we see around us.

What if you still want to believe in some kind of God?

If you do, then that’s OK, up to a point. In the end, we don’t have any fully satisfying explanations of how the world as we know it came to be. If you find the idea of God more comforting than scary, and if you want to believe in some form of divinity out there, or in here, somewhere or everywhere, there is certainly no proof that you are wrong.

On the contrary, while the idea of a traditional benevolent and powerful God does seem to fly in the face of reality as we experience it, other less implausible concepts of God are available. The “deistic” idea is that God was responsible for setting the universe in motion, but that after that he lets it pretty much run its own course. Other people believe that there is no God who resembles a

“person” who watches over us, but that there is a spiritual being of some kind, or perhaps just a spiritual side to the universe.

There is nothing in most of these ideas, or others like them, that contradicts science or logic. Of course, there is little reason to believe that any particular one of these ideas is true, but there is just as little reason to say that none of them are true. Godless materialism itself is a form of “faith,” in that it comes to a conclusion that simply cannot be proved. In the end, we are all just left with whatever guess feels right.

This gives us some freedom to choose the beliefs that work for us, but it does not give us the freedom to be certain and dogmatic. It also does not give us grounds to stack one unproven guess on top of another, until we have a whole creed full of beliefs that are pretty much baseless. Where knowledge leaves us in the lurch, we can fall back on guesses or “faith,” but it is a false move to pretend that faith is itself a form of knowledge. Our ignorance should make us intellectually humble, not intellectually arrogant and presumptuous.

So if you feel better believing that there is some cosmic spirituality or some hidden divinity, by all means go ahead and believe it. This may make your own life easier to deal with, and it will do no harm. Just don’t start thinking that you understand how this divine or spiritual form of being works, or what it thinks or wants. Otherwise you are wandering into very dangerous ground.

Which leads us to our next subject...

Is the Bible the “Word of God”?

Think about it: we don't find out about most things by logic or deduction. We find out about them because we *experience* them. If there is a God of the traditional kind out there, we would not necessarily expect to know about it unless it announced itself in some way. And, conveniently, we have various religious scriptures that claim that this is exactly what happened.

It would be tedious to examine all alleged divine revelations, but let's spend a little time looking at the most important of them: the Bible. If the Bible is actually the Truth as revealed by God, then the arguments pro and con that we have been contemplating mean little. We should still listen and obey. So...should we?

Perhaps unfortunately, not many people read the Bible these days. Parts of the Bible are truly remarkable: well written, astonishing, inspiring. Never mind that it is the foundation of much of our art and literature, and even of some of our legal and political system. It's worth reading in and of itself.

If you do read it, and do so attentively, you might observe several interesting points about the Bible.

First, the Bible is not one book by one author. Nor is it two (the original Hebrew scriptures, often called the Old Testament, and the early Christian scriptures, called the New Testament). Instead, it is a collection of dozens of writings that are widely different. Some are ancient tales, some are dry history, some are books of poetry or philosophy, some are books of rules, some are narratives of what were then current or recent events, some are letters of exhortation or encouragement or instruction, some are prophecy. Some would have to be included among the finest literature of ancient times, others are stupefyingly turgid. Some repeat the same stories as others, some repeat different versions of the same story within the same book – with inconsistent details. The books were clearly written by different hands – with some individual books evidently by multiple hands – in widely different eras.

Second, the Bible is not self-defined. The books that are now included are not the ones that were always included (and different branches of Christianity even today disagree on some of the books). Nor does the Bible itself claim to have been authored by God. The contents and the nature of the Bible have

been determined by what are now mostly anonymous priests of the distant past, whose thought processes and motivations one can only intuit.⁷

Third, the Bible has a running theme, though one that is not a constant element. The theme is that some limited group of humans form the chosen people of God. But the chosen people repeatedly backslide into idolatry and other forms of faithlessness, and again and again, God has to punish them, send them a prophet to set them straight, and then resume the covenant. The second-to-last stage, in the Christian scriptures, is the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. He is killed by those who reject him, but he comes back from the dead temporarily and returns to heaven – also temporarily. The final act is what is only prophesied in the Bible: the final coming of Jesus and the end of the world as know it, when those who are finally chosen will be saved and sent to an eternal reward, while those who are rejected will be hustled off for punishment. This sequence of events is sometimes called “salvation history.”

So much for generalities. What should we think of this book? There seem to be four main attitudes toward it:

- (a) The Bible is authored by God and is true literally and in every detail (the Fundamentalist stance).
- (b) God inspired the writing of the Bible and it reflects his point of view, adapted to the culture to which its various parts were addressed. From the standpoint of our own culture, we can see that many details are not to be taken literally, but the overall theme of salvation history and the moral messages that the Bible embraces do reflect the acts and the will of God.
- (c) The Bible was not literally inspired, but much of the historical portions are true, or mostly true, and most of the moral guidelines are valid. The prophets (including Jesus, if you are a Christian) and the scriptures

⁷ Most likely, those ancient souls did *not* believe, or expect anyone else to believe, that these writings were in some way authored by God. If they did want to suggest this, they probably would have left out the parts that contradict one another. Instead, the Bible appears to have been assembled simply as a collection of key writings documenting Hebrew culture – much as we might collect the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the legend of Paul Bunyan, some Bob Dylan tunes, and various other writings into a compendium of U.S. culture, without expecting everything to be consistent, or implying that any of it is supernatural in origin.

themselves remain our best conduit to the God represented in the Bible who is, after all, the one true God.

- (d) The Bible is a collection of ancient writings whose status is no more and no less than that of other ancient writings. Like non-Biblical texts, the Bible contains some fact and some legend. It presents the laws, the morals, the beliefs, and the actions of the people of its time, or at least a portion of those people, but it is best understood as an artifact of history, with no special status as a guide for our own beliefs or morals.

Obviously, other views are also possible, but let's limit our own discussion to these four. Which makes the most sense?

Clearly the first is untenable. It was never really tenable, since the Bible itself contains many internal contradictions. But unless substantial portions of modern scholarship in history and science are simply rejected, it is hopeless to maintain the fundamentalist position.

Positions (b) and (c) are certainly possible, but there are two main problems with them. First, there is no actual reason to believe them. Second, the Bible itself makes them rather difficult to accept.

Ever notice that it is rare for anyone to provide a reason – any reason at all – to believe that the Bible has some special status, that it is somehow more true than other books of its kind? People of faith often give reasons why it makes sense to believe in God, even if those reasons are faulty. Christians also offer reasons to believe that Jesus was not just another prophet, or that he was actually God. But when it comes to the Bible, somehow blind, unquestioning faith seems good enough.

The main excuse for this silence must be that there is, in fact, no reason to believe it. The claim is incredible on its face, as incredible as that Allah dictated the Koran to Mohammed, or that God gave the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith, or that some supernatural power inspired the sonnets of Shakespeare (a claim that is never made, though it would be at least as plausible as the others).

The actual reason that people believe in the Bible is that other people have believed in it for a long, long time. But as we saw earlier, when thinking about the “inertia of faith,” this is not a good enough reason to accept a belief. Can't we come up with some better evidence concerning the validity of the Bible?

Naturally, it's a hard thing to prove, one way or the other. In theory, one could *conceive* of convincing reasons that the Bible was the Word of God. The Bible itself gives us a clue about one such possibility. In the Second Book of

Kings, the story is told that the Ark of the Covenant – essentially a small portable house for the tablets of the Ten Commandments – was being transported and began to tip; a man named Oza saw this, reached out his hand (out of pity) to stabilize it, and was immediately struck dead by God, because God had commanded that the Ark not be touched. So the Bible tells us that God can protect human-made artifacts if he deems them worthy. Presumably, then, God could do something similar for the Bible itself. Suppose that every time a Bible were printed, using the same process as with any other book, that copy of the Bible became, unlike other books, impervious to damage. It could not be burned or torn or mildewed or eaten away by acid. That would be pretty hard to explain other than as a divine endorsement of the text.

I suppose God doesn't owe us anything like that, but the point is, there could, in principle, be proof that the Bible had a special status. Suppose that anyone who swore an oath on the Bible would be incapable, like Jim Carrey's character (in the 1997 movie *Liar, Liar*), of not speaking the truth. Suppose that a practice followed by some believers, wherein they open the book and point randomly to a passage, did indeed generate the hoped-for supernatural guidance – by which we mean guidance that was consistently, infallibly correct. It would be easy enough to test such a phenomenon, if it happened.

But in reality, we see none of that. There is no external reason whatever to believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

There could be internal reasons for belief in the Bible, though. The book could be so superior in content to every other book that we would have to believe that it was inspired by a higher power, or at least believe that regardless of where it came from it would deserve to be accepted.

It's hard, however, to see how anyone could actually read the Bible from cover to cover and come to that conclusion.⁸

Again, this is not to deny its many excellences. Like many human books, it has its fine moments: well-told stories, thought-provoking insights, expressive and elegant writing, morally uplifting messages, pathos, glory. Despite its errors, many of its historical observations, including some that were once thought to be baloney, have proved to be true, or at least partly true. These are all good reasons for reading the Bible, or parts of it. But they do not set the Bible apart from other books, nor even apart from other ancient books.

⁸ Re-reading it doesn't help, either. I read it three times from start to finish, waiting for it to get better; it reads about the same each time. Still, it's a perennial best-seller, which one hopes is a precedent for other books about God.

At the same time, there is a good deal that is horrible about the Bible – and I mean that literally. It is not just badly written in parts, factually incorrect in places, frequently tedious, and simply hard to get through. It is at times truly horrifying, and morally despicable. In the older historical books of the Bible, anyone who lived in Palestine but wasn't a Hebrew had, apparently, no moral right to live. The only thing better than winning a battle against the Canaanites was the outright massacre of everyone who lived in a Canaanite village or town, including women and children. It wasn't just the outsiders who were in trouble, though. Even within the Hebrew family, relatively trivial offenses were punishable by death – not because the Hebrews necessarily thought that this was a good idea (one imagines that there must have been at least a few dissenters), but because the scripture demanded it. It was the Law of God, as laid down in Exodus or Deuteronomy.

Frankly, God comes across rather badly in the Bible. He does have his good moments, but he is moody and frequently cruel. When he makes up his mind, he is easily talked out of it, or negotiated to a lesser resolution. He is deeply insecure, jealous of non-existent gods, impatient, quick to anger. He has no sense of restraint: the Pharaoh won't let his people go, so the first-born male of *every* Egyptian family must die, even though the mere news of most of those deaths cannot possibly reach the Pharaoh by the time he sends the Hebrews away. (In an echo of this, Herod later slaughters a much smaller number of innocent babies in a futile attempt to kill Jesus, but somehow it's a bad thing when someone else does it.)

This sort of moral childishness is perfectly understandable, of course, if the Bible is just a collection of writings from ancient Palestine, reflecting the aspirations – spiritual and political – of those people and those times, including their own blind spots and prejudices. But if it is supposed to represent the high standard of morality that one expects to find in a God, it falls way short.

Christians, of course, like to say that all that bad stuff is from the *Old Testament*, but the *New Testament* is much more idealistic and civilized. And that's true, at least if you disregard all the New Testament talk about people – apparently a vast horde of us – ending up in everlasting fire (the whole Hell theme is not really a big feature of Judaism). But having mentioned that, there truly is an impressive emphasis in the New Testament on love, and on taking care of the disadvantaged. It is a big step forward – though hardly the last word in uplifting human morality.

Unfortunately, there is another problem with the Old Testament that is, if anything, made worse in the New Testament. Both are full of prophecies, and

both are wrong. The Old Testament predicted a Messiah (literally, an “anointed one”) who would bring peace and glory to the Hebrew people. This never happened – in 3,000 years, it hasn’t happened, even during the Holocaust when a Messiah might have been just the ticket.

In the Christian faith, Jesus is the Messiah. His story is told in the Gospels with a lot of otherwise irrelevant details that connect him to the Old Testament prophecies, so there is no question that the Gospel writers believed it, or at least that they wanted their audience to believe it. But the Jews of the time mostly did not buy into this concept, because they knew that the Messiah was going to come in power and glory, which Jesus definitely did not. The Christian response was, and 2,000 years later still is – well, yeah, but he’s coming *back*, and *next* time he’ll come in power and glory. If you come to this argument as a disinterested third party, it’s hard not to side with the Jews on this one: the “Jesus Is Messiah” claim is pretty much unsubstantiated. But the Jews don’t win either, because they still don’t have their own Messiah.

You would think that the Bible, of all books, would have its most central prophecy come true. Instead, after thousands of years, the prophecy has failed. And if we were going to have to wait this long, or longer, you’d think that maybe the Bible would have mentioned that. But somehow, when it comes to religious prophecies, there’s always a catch. They rarely if ever come true (except when they are told in retrospect, when amazingly they always seem to come true). There’s forever an escape hatch, though – some implausible reason why the prophecy is not false but merely delayed, or it came true in a way other than what seemed to be the clear language of the original. These loopholes may help the true believers who simply can’t accept that their cherished beliefs are groundless (not necessarily false, mind you – merely groundless). It’s not evident why any of the rest of us should take their claims seriously, though.

If one is simply trying to be objective, therefore, the most reasonable conclusion is that the Bible is nothing other than a pretty interesting collection of old writings with no unusual claim to the truth. There is definitely truth in it, but not necessarily more or different kinds of truth than other books possess, and there is also falsity in it: inaccurate history, depraved morality, false prophecy. It is almost certainly just the Word of Various Men, not the Word of God.

Is it OK to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, nonetheless?

Previously, we came to the conclusion⁹ that it was OK to believe in some kind of divinity or spiritual being (and sure, call it “God” if you want to). So isn’t it equally OK to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, even though it can’t be proved?

Actually, no, it isn’t OK. It isn’t much better than saying that *The Guinness Book of World Records* is the Word of God, and it is not at all better than saying that the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita is the Word of God. The divine origin of the Bible is a completely groundless belief that leads to a lot of mischief.

You certainly may *respect* the Bible and its teachings. If you have any moral sense at all, you can derive a lot of inspiration from the Bible (as you can from any scripture, most books about moral thought, and much philosophy, poetry, biography, and fiction). Reading the Bible is a good thing, and extracting what is best from it, while ignoring what is small-minded and wicked, can only do you good.

But if you fall into the trap of thinking that the Bible is more than it is, that it is itself somehow sacred, rather than just being a book *about* the sacred (among other things), then you are almost certain to come to conclusions that are false and harmful.

Don’t go there!

⁹ At least I did. I hope you haven’t gone out already and started your own religion.

Was Jesus divine?

If “divine” is a relative or metaphorical term, then he probably was. Pick any one of the four gospels and read it straight through (it takes about two hours, maybe less). If you are not moved by what you read, you are one hard-hearted dude.

Jesus is undeniably one of the great moral teachers of all time. As with most great moral teachers, he did not say much that had never been said before, but he said it with great force and in a novel manner that is nearly as striking today as it must have been in his own time. Moreover, he spoke in defiance of the religious authorities of his day – criticizing their hypocrisy and complacency. Most of all, he strove to place a moral rule of love ahead of a moral rule of law. This was so powerful and so strange, that even 2000 years later it is rarely enough observed (including by Christians with political agendas).

In his day, as in ours, it is not those who cry out “Lord, Lord” who are the holy ones – rather, it is those who aid the poor and the sick and the hungry and the naked and the imprisoned. It is, he said, as hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle (the “Eye of the Needle” being a particularly small gate into the city of Jerusalem, through which a camel could pass only on its knees and unburdened of whatever treasure it was carrying). These were innovative and difficult teachings in the time of Jesus, and they are just as difficult today.

If you are skeptical of all the miracle stories that speckle the Gospels – as they similarly adorn the stories of other prophets, gods, kings, and leaders both spiritual and worldly of ancient times – then ignore them. Lying beneath and around them is the tale of a great man, a great teacher, and a great martyr to the highest aspirations of humankind. If any man could be divine, Jesus was.

But no man can be divine, and Jesus surely was not. Even if you take every word of the New Testament as literal truth, it merely proves that Jesus could be as mistaken about the most important things as any other mortal. His biggest prophecy, too, came to nothing.

His biggest prophecy was not his own resurrection. Yes, that was big, but it directly involved only himself. Whether it actually happened or not, of course, is open to dispute. If you do believe that the Bible is the Word of God in a way that guarantees its essential truth, then you are more likely to believe that Jesus rose from the dead two nights after his crucifixion, as the story is told.

But when you understand that the Bible is a collection of old books that have no extraordinary claim to our belief, then the story falls into that category of miracle tales that are just too wild, and too weakly documented, to be taken seriously.

Resurrection stories do not begin and end with Jesus. They are not exactly common, but neither are they unheard of in the ancient world. Presumably, the other ones are mere legends or myths, and presumably the same is true of Jesus's resurrection. Even in the New Testament there are no actual witnesses to the resurrection, only a series of brief and relatively private appearances that occurred afterward and involved a handful of his closest followers.

Although before his crucifixion Jesus preached to throngs of people, after his supposed resurrection he never did. He was not above flaunting his miraculous powers to thousands at once before his death, so why the relative modesty afterwards, when he really would have had something unique in history to demonstrate? The easiest answer is: because he never did come back. The New Testament claims that he was back only briefly, then ascended bodily into the sky, promising to return before long. Even so, there was plenty of time for public appearances. Yet neither the New Testament nor secular history records any such thing.

The claims of his followers are not only unproven, therefore, but they are highly suspicious. Yet later readers of the relevant scriptures, including many in our own day, have found it natural to believe the tales of a small number of people who might have simply lied or might have allowed themselves to be deluded – or more likely, some of both.

Believers might ask, how could even that number of people (perhaps a few dozen) be wrong? Unfortunately, this phenomenon happens all the time. Even today, in a world of modern journalism and electronic recording devices, people in large numbers will believe things that have no foundation at all. Some are urban legends that swarm through the populace. Some are deliberate lies planted by political leaders, by advertisers, by media blatherers, by advocacy groups, or by anyone with a message they believe is true or wish were true. There is no validity in something just because people proclaim it vociferously, cherish it fervently, or defend it to the death.

It is certainly conceivable that Jesus rose from the dead, but it is no more than conceivable. The more extraordinary the claim, the more persuasive the evidence should be. The resurrection of Jesus is an astounding claim, but there is

no correspondingly astounding evidence for it – when there easily could have been, if Jesus had been truly divine and eager to demonstrate that fact.

But as I say, none of this is the big prophecy that failed – it is just a preliminary failure. The true failure is, again, the failure of a central prophecy. Jesus was supposed to come back in power and glory – and he never did.

As hesitant as we are to speak harshly of our friends and relatives who remain believers, the idea that somehow this is still going to happen reflects an impressive gullibility. Perhaps this is because going to church on Sunday and listening to scattered excerpts from the Bible does not give you a true picture of what the Bible contains. In particular with regard to the New Testament, only reading it from beginning to end makes clear that the primary message of these books is not just the good news that Jesus came and died for our sins, but the even better news that he is coming back *any day now* and we will all be swept up into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Who’s “we”? Clearly it is not us, those of us living two millennia later. Rather, it is those living in the years and decades immediately after Jesus’s death. To speak plainly: both Jesus and his immediate followers believed that all of this – Jesus’s return in power and glory as the Messiah, and the opening of the gates of heaven to his disciples – was going to happen during their own lifetimes. Jesus said that it would happen “before this generation passes away.” Paul, who wrote many of the letters (“epistles”) preserved in the Bible, also believed this, and clearly was writing to communities of the faithful who also believed it. Peter believed it, too. The theme pervades the New Testament.

Prophecies of the end of the world have been a common religious delusion from ancient times until today (it is particularly prevalent today, in fact, among a certain type of Christian). But the failure of such prophecies as we have recently witnessed¹⁰ has happened in every generation. The whole Jehovah’s Witness movement was based on the fact that the world was going to end about a century ago – it didn’t, and of course neither did the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Why should they be dismayed by the failure of their central prophecy, when all of Christendom can blithely ignore that its founder made the same kind of prophecy two thousand years ago, and all the men who wrote the supposedly inspired and true books of the New Testament also believed it, and every one of them was flat wrong?

¹⁰ According to various prophecies, the year 2000 would be the beginning of the end. According to others, John Paul II was to be the last pope.

As we observed before, there is always an excuse – usually something like, “the prayers of the faithful stayed the hand of God.” But since when are the faithful praying for the kingdom *not* to come? The rest of us need not look for arcane and implausible reasons why the end has not come. The answer is self-evident: the prophecies are false, as are the prophets who made them.

Jesus was a brilliant and wonderful man who had a huge impact, the kind that comes along once every thousand years or so. But ultimately he, too, was a false prophet. We may admire him as a moral teacher, and we may even choose to follow what he taught. But we are kidding ourselves, and not in a helpful way, if we suppose that he was literally divine.

So is it OK to believe that Jesus was divine? As with the Bible, this is going way beyond anything that is reasonable, and if it leads you to believe that every story about him or every word that is attributed to him is somehow infallibly true, then you are just grasping onto air. You would make the same mistake if you believed that everything Moses said was true, or everything that Mohammed or Joseph Smith or Mary Baker Eddy – or for that matter, Casanova or Mark Twain or Truman Capote – wrote was true.

It would be nice if someone had the Truth, and he or she could just hand it to us. But so far, no one has come along who could plausibly make that claim. And that includes Jesus. So do read his story and his words and, if they suit you, ponder all of it in your heart, and think about how you can make some of it work for you. Listen to it as you would to the teaching of one of the greatest moral leaders of all time, for that’s what Jesus was. But don’t take it for more than that.

The Truth, if it is accessible to us at all (and maybe it isn’t), doesn’t come at such a cheap price.

Is There Life After Death?

This is one of life's great mysteries.

On the one hand, most people seem to like the concept and prefer to believe in it. It has a two-fold attraction. First, it can be very comforting to think that the troubles in our lives will be relieved after we die, that we will be reunited with those we love, and that we will live forever in bliss. Second, it seems unfair that evil people should prosper, as is so often the case, and that even those who suffer in the end (we're thinking Hitler here) do so not at all in proportion to the suffering they caused – wouldn't it be nice, or at least fair, if there were some after-life punishment for such people?

On the other hand, wishin' ain't gettin' – and there seems to be precious little evidence that there actually is some kind of life after death. In fact, it seems pretty unlikely.

In favor of the concept of life after death, we have the religious teachings of thousands of years and the beliefs of billions of people. Of course, not all of them believe in the same thing. The Jewish faith is rather reticent on this subject, and Buddhism teaches that whatever we have that resembles a "soul" does not maintain its individuality but is ultimately reabsorbed into some sort of universal spiritual dimension. Hindus tend to believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls through multiple existences until, again, some sort of unity with the cosmic spiritual plane is attained. Christians and Moslems form the two major religious groups that maintain a clear doctrine of permanent personal survival of death. So it does not seem that the belief in the after-life, as we traditionally think of it, at least, is universally agreed to.

Apart from doctrine, we can look to outside phenomena. If the dead live, perhaps they manifest themselves to us, either directly or indirectly. So we ask, do ghosts exist? Again, lots of people think so, and quite a few claim to have had some personal experience of this. But solid evidence is lacking. As with all paranormal phenomena, the more scientific the investigation, the more the phenomena simply disappear. There are many reasons why people think that they experience ghosts: sometimes they simply want to, sometimes they have dreams or hallucinations, sometimes people are pulling tricks on them either for fun or for more nefarious reasons, sometimes it is just the play of random sounds and odd lighting. And of course, sometimes people are just making up stories.

Unfortunately, we have all been conditioned to think of ghosts as a category of possible, if not probable, reality. Starting with fairy tales and cartoons and Halloween images in childhood, eventually graduating into the horror film genre, many of us have had this category of creature burned into our imaginations. We all know that this does not make ghosts real – but it may give their existence more plausibility than it deserves.

If ghosts really existed, one would think that their appearance should be more common than it is. There are far more dead people than living ones, yet the number of ghosts – even if we were to accept every wacky tale as true – is far less than the number of living persons. For that matter, it is far less than the number of victims of violent death (a favorite “explanation” for ghosts). Of course, since we don’t really know what, if anything, happens after death, or why, it is a bit presumptuous to say that the pattern of supposed ghostly appearances is somehow impossible, or even unlikely. Yet the rarity of ghosts does seem odd, if they are real, and there does not appear to be any good theory that covers both the situations that are claimed to have occurred and the many, many similar situations in which no ghosts or hauntings happen. With no coherent and verifiable theory to account for ghosts, we have to be suspicious, at the very least.

Another possible clue to life after death lies in the experiences of people who have revived or been resuscitated after apparently dying – people who have had “near-death experiences” (or NDEs, as they are referred to in the trade). NDEs are commonly characterized by a feeling of peacefulness, the famous passage through a dark tunnel with a light appearing at the end, visions of one’s dead family members, and the sense of viewing your surroundings as if you were an observer – that is, an “out-of-body” experience.

It is not clear what such experiences mean, if anything. Although the features just mentioned are *frequently* reported, none of them are *always* reported. Nor do we have any reports of people who have been brain-dead for months, weeks, or even days. The most basic explanation is that NDEs are what the mind experiences as it is shutting down, as the brain gradually goes out of business.

What you sense during that process is some altered state of awareness, not identical in everyone, that may combine heightened (or “less filtered,” perhaps, is a better term) perception of one’s surroundings, with the gradual sensation of losing consciousness as portions of the brain slow down (perhaps with some other portions trying to compensate by speeding up temporarily). Such experiences are much more common than used to be thought, but even

so, it is not the sort of thing that can be studied scientifically other than by collecting individual reports and looking for patterns. You can't very well bring people to the point of death and then revive them just so you can measure their brain activity during the process. Most would call this cruelty.¹¹

It is legitimate to suppose, therefore, that the study of NDEs could tell us something important about the process of dying, but it doesn't tell us much, if anything, about being dead – and it is very unlikely to tell us much about what happens long after death.

Probably the main reason for doubt concerning survival of death, though, is that if we regard humanity as the peak (so far) of biological evolution, we would not expect there to be life after death, whether in ghostly form or any other. On the contrary, if the mind is really just the activity of the brain, then when the brain ceases, the mind ceases with it. There is no “soul” that is separate from the body – there is just the body. When the body dies, it stops working, consciousness ceases, and when, eventually, the body decomposes, there is simply nothing left. This appears to be true of bacteria and protozoa, of plants and insects and fish and birds and mammals – including humans. We *are* different from other creatures, but we're not *that* different – even if we wish we were.

For all that, however, the case is not firmly proved one way or the other, and it is probably better not to insist on an absolute answer. Unlike other elements of religious belief (e.g., which god, if any, one believes in, or which form of supposed revealed truth one offers allegiance to), the question of an afterlife seems to have little tendency to touch off wars and persecutions. People believe, or they don't, in heaven or in reincarnation or in something else, but they seem marvelously unconcerned about sending either themselves or their enemies into the afterlife to prove their point.

How nice it would be if every theological dispute were subject to such peaceful disagreement! Since this one seems to fall into this category, though, maybe we should let people quietly choose their own preferences. For purposes of this little book, however, we will assume that there is no afterlife – not because that is certain, but to show that it is possible to live a good and rewarding life not only without God, but without heaven, either.

In fact, as we will see in Chapter 3, it can be a much more satisfying way to live.

¹¹ Others would call it Neilsen Ratings.

Could billions of people be wrong?

Although there is much more that could be said about all of the issues we've looked at so far, it is probably time to stop and take stock.

First, a reality check. We've splashed a lot of cold water on a lot of common beliefs. Is it really credible that so many other people could be so wrong? Isn't this just a wee bit pushy of us?

Actually, no, it's not pushy at all. On the contrary, we can be quite confident that most of the world is wrong. This is not opinion – it's fact. We can be sure of it because no more than a relatively small minority actually agrees about key doctrines. The largest more-or-less unified group is the Roman Catholics, who comprise less than 20% of the world's population. If they are right, more than 80% of the world is wrong. If anyone else is right, considerably more than 80% of the world is wrong. So we know for sure that most people are wrong. If most, then why not all, or nearly all?

The sad truth is that anybody can be wrong. It's so easy, even I can be wrong (of course, I'm a professional; don't try this at home!). The hard thing is being right. Being right is so hard, in fact, that it is quite possible that nobody is right. We don't even understand ourselves, let alone everyone else, the rest of the world, the rest of the universe, and the fundamental nature of reality and truth. Pretty much the only way to avoid being wrong is not to hold any opinions at all – but of course that's not a realistic option, either. So chances are that very nearly 100% of people are wrong about something important.

Setting yourself apart from most of them, therefore, should not really be a problem, at least not in terms of thinking that maybe – just maybe – you are grasping onto a few things that might be true.

But we have been speculating a lot about what might be true and what seems to be false. In the end, all of this is merely background. *Truth is important, but it is not the most important thing to everyone.* I'm thinking of the way William Saroyan describes a character in one of his plays: he knew the truth, but was looking for something better.

Beyond Truth

Most of us, if asked, will praise the importance of truth, but this does not reflect how we live our lives. Day to day, we are just trying to get by, trying to

be good to ourselves and the people we care about, and generally attempting to be happy and stay out of trouble. “Truth” is not, and frankly does not need to be, an active part of most of our thoughts and plans.

Still, the rational folks among us would like to think that truth guides action in subtler ways – that even when we are not explicitly thinking about truth, what we know (or believe) guides what we do. So ultimately, truth is very important indeed.

This viewpoint isn’t exactly wrong, but it’s only part of the story. For the opposite is also the case. Our impressions of what is true and false often arise from what we do. We act in a certain way, and we like the results. We act in another way, and we don’t like the results. Over time, we tend to favor the actions that satisfy and reward us, and we tend to reject those that harm or displease us. Our perceptions of truth are modified by, or even formed by, these reactions.

In the end, few of us will change our lives because either we or someone else has persuaded us of some Grand Truth. Rather, we change because we find that what we have been doing (where “doing” includes the activity called “believing”) is not working all that well for us, and/or because we come upon some other approach that seems more promising and, ideally, that we find works better for us.

Truth has its benefits, but a false belief can work. And a true belief can fail to work. So the real question – for us and for all those other billions of people – is not simply “What is true?” but beyond that, “What works for you?”

Does God work for you?

This is not to ask, of course, whether God is on your payroll – although if he is, now might be a good time to think about doubling up on your investment.

Rather: does *belief* in God work for you? Does it enrich your life, give substance to your daily routine, give you hope, inspire you with love, drive you to do good works for others, or help you in any other significant way? If so, God is working for you.

In the remaining two chapters of this essay, we will look at whether there are alternatives that might work for you as well. If you are reading this, though, then probably either God has never worked for you, or else no he longer works the way he used to. Later, we'll deal with the question of whether you can fire him without being sued for age discrimination.¹²

If belief in God used to work for you, even a little, and now it doesn't, this can be disturbing, and the transition can be difficult. For many people raised in a church tradition, giving up God is like giving up an old and steady friend. Should you let him go, or should you try to hang on?

If life were only about truth, then the best advice would probably be to let go, and good riddance. But if life is more about stories and styles and patterns of action that work or don't work for you, then only you can decide whether God works for you or not.

Here are some reasons why God might work for you, even if you have strong doubts that any God is present – even, to some extent, if you are sure that he isn't:

- The teachings that presumably derive from God may form the basis of your morality. If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-benevolent, then it seems reasonable enough to accept his instructions as legitimate and morally binding. We have our marching orders, and except for details in their implementation, we don't have to wonder what is the right way to live our lives. For that matter, religious belief can inspire us toward truly noble behavior: self-sacrifice, charity, devotion to duty, love. Why give that up?

¹² This is a bald-faced lie. Watch for it in the movie version, though.

- Belief in God may give you a sense of a unifying reality: perhaps God cannot be explained, but if you accept that one unexplained thing, other things (some other things, anyway) seem easier to explain.
- Religious belief is comforting. The idea that there is some kind of divine providence, perhaps even a guardian angel, out there can help us get through the day, especially if the day has been horrible. The idea that there is a heaven waiting to receive us when we die can make the travails of life more palatable.
- Religious belief gives meaning and value to our lives. We are here because someone stronger and smarter than us put us here, and even if we don't entirely understand the meaning and the purpose, we can assume that one does exist. Our lives are important, if for no other reason, because God gives them importance.
- Religious belief binds us to a community. Particularly if you come from a religious household, holding onto your religion unites you with family and neighbors and friends, whereas renouncing your traditional belief may cause anguish for various parties, perhaps even some kind of split. Giving up one's faith does not necessarily promise to replace any of this with something just as good.
- We often have, as mentioned before, a certain inertia in our beliefs. We tend to keep believing what we've always believed, unless there is a powerful reason to change. For some people, doubt alone is powerful enough, but oftentimes it isn't. Even if you know in your heart that your traditional beliefs are suspect, probably wrong, or even definitely wrong, if there is nothing at least as attractive to replace them – and preferably more attractive – you may be just not going to let go.

Perhaps, depending on how strongly these factors affect you, you shouldn't let go. Perhaps God is working for you in ways that are important to *you*, and that for *you* cannot be replaced in his absence.

The remainder of this essay is intended to help you think through whether living without God can be made to work for you as well as – or, ideally, better than – living with God. What I hope to show you is that the same kinds of benefits that come from traditional religious belief can be obtained and maintained without it – in general. Inevitably, of course, this remains a highly personal decision that only you will be able to make.

So read the rest, then decide.

Chapter Two

Can you be moral without God?

Yes, you can be just as moral as you can be with God.

But of course, there's more to it than that. In reality, the whole concept of morality, of right and wrong, of good and evil, is something of a puzzle.

No one has yet come up with a rational explanation of why some things are right and others are wrong. Philosophers have proposed various "fundamental" rules, but none of them are entirely self-justifying. The utilitarian philosophers (Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill), for example, argued that we should act so to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This isn't a bad rule of thumb, but what, exactly is "good," and how do we measure and compare it? Immanuel Kant came up with his "categorical imperative" that we should act in such a way that the rule on which our behavior is based would work if it were universally applied. (For example, it is not right to lie, because if lying were universally practiced then all communication would become hollow – and even lying would no longer have an effect.) This is another decent rule of thumb, but why should we take it as some kind of ultimate truth?

Let's try to get to the bottom of this, if indeed there is a bottom. Then perhaps we can figure out how morality should really fit into our lives.

Don't be a "why's" guy...

If you were ever a kid, you probably went through a stage when you asked your parents why something was right and when they told you, you asked why *that* was right, and then why *that* was right, and so on until you got an answer that was final enough, such as: (a) "Because I said so;" (b) "Shut-up, kid;" or (c) *Here's why* (whap, whap, whap).¹³

Perhaps you were not completely satisfied with those answers, though, and now that you are older and more philosophical, you might want to return to such questions. Why should you avoid X? The answer, perhaps, is that X would do somebody some harm. So, why is that a bad thing? Well, no one wants to be hurt. That in turn raises other questions, such as "aren't some things good even though they hurt?" and even "why should it matter if people don't want to be hurt?" Whatever the answers to those questions might be, you can keep asking why, and keep asking why, until eventually you come to a point where there is nothing left to say.

It seems as if there is not, and cannot be, any final answer to Why?

Does God solve that problem for you? Not really. When you get to the point where you are saying, "Avoid X because God commanded it," the perfectly obvious question is: Why should that matter? Would we avoid X because Saddam Hussein commanded it?

God has at least three good things going for him, according to common belief: he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, whereas Saddam Hussein comes up a tad short on these measures. Do these things matter, though?

God's power seems irrelevant, unless all you are worried about is his ability to punish you if you mess up. The devil is supposedly powerful too, but in an evil way. Power, by itself, does not equal goodness or provide a moral mandate for obedience. One rule we all know is: might does not make right.

Knowledge seems like a better recommendation – though not a really solid one. After all, the devil is supposed to be supernaturally knowledgeable, too – not necessarily any less so than God. The relevant difference between God and the devil is not power or knowledge, but how that power and knowledge is used: God uses it for good, the devil for evil. But how do we know that? If

¹³ The last of these sounds crude, but it's a Zen Buddhist favorite. No joke!

God says, "I'm the good one," but Lucifer says, "No, I'm the good one," how do we determine who's telling the truth?

If good and evil apply to beings at the top of the supernatural food chain, then this seems to suggest that good and evil are something outside and even above God and the devil. If God ceased existing, would good and evil still make sense?

Most of us think that it would. What God says is good is not good merely because he said so. Rather, it seems, God tells us what is good because *it is* good and he wants us to be good. God does not make it good. Wanton murder would not be good if God was having a bad day and decided to say that it was.

Furthermore, if things were good just because God said so, then we couldn't say that God himself was good. All we could say is that he is in the lucky position of being able to set the standards. God can only be called "good" if that word has some meaning outside of God's say-so.

Therefore, God is *not* the final justification for good and evil. We might suppose that he knows more about it than anyone else, and that if we are wise we will follow his commandments on that account. But that would be mere prudence on our part (or maybe not – we'll come back to this later).

So we are still left to wonder, what makes goodness good, and makes evilness evil? It isn't God. But if not God, what?

If you're waiting for the answer, you're not going to get it yet. This line of thought leads us into empty space. At some point, we just have to say: I can't explain it, I just know (or am willing to accept) that certain actions or certain principles are good, and others are bad. And we have to do that whether we believe in God or not. So from this angle, belief in God doesn't solve our problems.

Let's go after it a different way.

Where good and evil come from

If ultimately there is no truly self-explanatory answer to “why” good is good and bad is bad, maybe there simply is no such thing as good and bad.

This is a tempting position on more than one level. First, it sweeps away the whole conundrum at one blow. If good and evil don’t really exist, but simply reflect a bunch of outdated commandments and dubious customs, then shovel them overboard and forget about them. Life is so much simpler that way.

Second, if there is no Good, there are no obligations. If there is no Evil, there is no cause for guilt and shame. Freedom is complete: we not only *can* do whatever we like, we *may* do whatever we like.

There are catches, of course. If we can do whatever we like, so can other people, including the ones who want to do it to *us*. Freedom is nice, but anarchy carries a big price tag.

More philosophically, if there were no good or evil, no basis for determining that some things are better or worse than others, it would be hard to justify anything at all. You would be free to do anything, but you couldn’t have much rational motivation for doing one thing over another. Your activity would either come to a standstill, or it would be completely random, or it would merely be a reaction to whatever internal or external forces nudged you along. Life would be inherently pointless.

Frankly, a life without any moral standards at all is just too repugnant to contemplate. Even if it were somehow true that there were no right and wrong, good and evil, better and worse, we couldn’t live that way. We’d have to pretend that these qualities existed. It has been said that if God didn’t exist, we’d have to invent him. That’s not true. But it is true that if good and evil did not exist, we would have to invent them. We can’t live without them.

Of course, if we didn’t have minds, we could. If, like plants and the simplest of animals, we merely reacted to physical stimuli and never had to make a deliberate decision, morality would be irrelevant. Similarly, if we were solitary predators, we might dispense with it as well. If we simply had no conscience – and no need of one, because we had no responsibilities outside of our own personal survival and pleasure – then we could do without right and wrong. We might be motivated simply by our appetites and desires, which could be purely biological in nature with no moral component at all, and we would live until we died. It would still be pretty pointless, but it could happen – and pos-

sibly if you are a cougar or a hawk or a shark, that's the way life is. Maybe it would even be fun (more fun to be the cougar than the cougee, at least).

What if you're, say, a dog, though? Would this total selfishness work for you? Dogs are by nature pack animals. Wild dogs may be merciless toward their prey, but they work best when they work together, and that means that they need to cooperate among themselves. Domesticated dogs sometimes even carry this inter-social attitude to the point of actual devotion to their owners.

Depending on how you feel about pet dogs, you may believe that they have a true moral sense or not. Regardless of whether dogs are genuinely moral, however, they often act as if they are. Probably they are not doing so because they have given it a lot of thought – or because they are familiar with the Ten Commandments. No, they act that way because they have been bred – first by nature, then by humans – to act that way. If you are going to live well as a pet, or if you are going to live at all as a member of a wild dog pack, you have to be able to get along. You have to learn to play your role in the group, you have to learn to share with your peers, and you have to learn to yield your own comfort and convenience at times to the welfare of others, sometimes protecting them at physical risk to yourself.

In the early days of evolutionary theory, when the catch-phrase was “survival of the fittest,” and the image was of “nature red in tooth and claw,” any kind of altruistic behavior in the animal kingdom seemed hard to explain. But over time it has become clearer that, to a large extent, a plant or animal is a complex mechanism by which genetic material (mostly DNA) perpetuates itself.¹⁴ One way for DNA to perpetuate itself is for the dog (let us say) who carries it to succeed individually, and to procreate. But another way for DNA to perpetuate itself is for that same dog to protect the life of a brother dog who carries most of the same DNA.

So a community of dogs that runs together can help each other in more than one way. They each survive better just by having the advantage of being more effective together than they are separately (e.g., a dog pack is a fiercer antagonist than an individual dog, so they all eat better together than they would

¹⁴ There actually is a correct answer to the question: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The egg came first, hundreds of millions of years before the first chicken. Being big creatures ourselves, we are naturally inclined to think that the egg is the chicken's way of reproducing itself. In reality, the chicken is the egg's way of reproducing itself – or rather, of the chicken DNA reproducing itself.

apart). But beyond that, even if one dog in effect lays down his life for his fellow dog, the dog community benefits from it, and dog DNA is more likely to increase in the world.

Attitudes and actions that we tend to think of as moral, therefore, give an evolutionary advantage to some species of animals – though less, or even none, to others. So from the standpoint of evolution, it makes sense that dogs are loyal and affectionate, while cats (descended from mostly solitary hunters) tend to be aloof and untrustworthy.

Is there a clue here to our own morality?

The human animal

Let us assume that biological evolution is a reality, and that human beings rose to their current state out of the primate family (apes, chimpanzees, and the like). Let us further assume, as proposed earlier, that the human mind is simply the activity of the brain, and therefore the capabilities of the mind, like the features of the brain, are also a product of biological evolution. Does this help us explain anything?

It does, in fact, give us the beginnings of a solution to the problem of good and evil. We can observe, for starters, that the primates are social creatures, and we humans are no exception – if anything, we are more social than the others. Primate societies are relatively complex, too. There are leaders and followers – a general pecking order. There are roles that relate to age, and roles that relate to gender. There is mutual assistance (e.g., members grooming one another), communication, and cooperation in group activities. And in humans, of course, such connections are multiplied in number and complexity. In such a society, is it helpful or hurtful that members have some sort of moral sense?

Clearly it is helpful. Feelings of obligation and loyalty encourage members to work for the benefit of the group; feelings of guilt and shame punish those who slack off. A sense of subservience and awe reinforces the authority of the leader, and hence his or her ability to fulfill the role. Feelings of sympathy and caring promote the cooperation and sacrifices that benefit the group. A sense of justice inflicts punishment on those who harm the group, or drives bad characters out altogether, while rewarding those who behave well.

Presumably, the hairy primates do not intellectualize all of this. They presumably do not construct moral codes, commandments, or general rules – and if they did, it would not help much, because they cannot communicate them. It is all the more important, therefore, that these impulses to perform and re-

ward good, and to avoid and punish evil, are deeply instinctive. With these moral impulses, a given community of monkeys or apes, for example, has a much better chance of surviving as a group and passing their DNA down to future generations. Without them, they would just be hanging around, waiting for disaster.

Of course, to say that there is an evolutionary advantage in possessing some basic level of moral instinct is to explain *why* a rudimentary moral sense would have evolved, but not *how* it evolved. Things don't just happen in evolution because it would be nice if they did. After all, pigs don't fly.

So how did this moral instinct evolve? At the current state of human knowledge, it is possible only to propose a general explanation. But it seems evident that animals at a much more primitive level than the primates already possessed consciousness. It also seems evident that animals at lower levels possess appetites. In a conscious and intelligent creature, it is not a huge leap from appetite to morality. Here's how:

As a chocolate lover, I perceive chocolate as good. It is especially good when I have some, and best of all when I am eating it. Of course, I can make a distinction between chocolate being good to eat (i.e., pleasure-giving) and, say, saving a drowning child being morally good to do. But these two kinds of goodness have a lot in common.

Physical appetites create an attraction toward a certain object or goal or action, and therefore a motivation to achieve it. Having a goal means, simply, perceiving something as desirable (i.e., good) and actively moving in a way that will help one achieve the object or state that is desired.

Perceiving something as morally good rather than just instinctively attractive is mainly a matter of generalizing this desire. The first step is what we might call pre-moral. If you're a near-human from a million years ago, a banana might be an object of desire. But once your intelligence has advanced to the point where you can generalize, you might think not just that a particular banana is good, but that bananas in general are good. This is now a judgment rather than an instinct, but it is not yet a moral judgment.

It begins to resemble something moral when the generalization advances one more step, when it becomes about the action rather than the object. So it's not just that *bananas* are good, *obtaining* bananas is good. You might be thinking that this is really still just a practical generalization, not a moral one, and you are right about that.

But suppose the instinct being gratified here is not just physical hunger and enjoyment of something that tastes good. Suppose, as a proto-human, you also have the instinct to associate with your peers and pick lice out of their hair (as primates tend to do). In theory this could be a purely automatic, non-conscious sort of activity, but that would be doing it the hard way. We already have a creature who is conscious and capable of making simple generalizations. So just as the acquisition of bananas is generalized as good, so is mutual grooming. Now we are talking about doing something that benefits someone else, and perceiving this as a good thing. We are very, very close to morality here. Whatever distance remains is a pretty short hop.

When human intelligence enabled our ancestors to generalize in more abstract ways, they could turn the concepts of good action and bad action into rules and commandments and laws. Eventually, they could generate truly abstract concepts, like good and evil, right and wrong. These concepts helped them understand what they were doing, so they probably seemed worth perpetuating.

When good is bad

But perhaps in a different way they were not helpful.

Since we humans tend to intellectualize everything, we have ended up with generalizations about “the Good” and “the Evil” that probably do not correspond with anything real. We have turned an impulse to act in certain ways, ways that have advantages to our species, into abstract concepts that we have no valid reason to think actually exist anywhere outside of our own heads.

Because we tend to think (at least at times) in categories like right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse, we are naturally inclined to suppose that there really are such things. And it might be nice if there were. Arguably, if you believe that Good and Evil are objective realities in the universe, you might be more likely to obey the good and shun the bad.

And yet we can now see that our moral sense probably arises from our biological, animal nature combined with our species’ native intelligence. The idea of some Objective Moral Code out in the universe – something, as we saw a few pages back, that is superior even to God – is not needed to explain why we feel moral compulsions. Most likely, therefore, the reason we can never answer “why” we should be moral or where the Objective Moral Code comes from is that there is no such thing. Our impulse toward morality comes from within us, not from outside.

So we come to a rather unpleasant conclusion. We think in moral terms because it was both possible and advantageous for our species to develop that way. But there is no reason to believe that these terms correspond with anything real. The universe merely exists, and living creatures (including us) merely evolved. The moral impulse helps us survive, but it is just a way we think, not a true description of reality.

The moral imperative

So, what do we conclude from this? Do we decide that since right and wrong are nothing more than categories of thought that have appeared in an amoral evolutionary history, we should jettison them and choose to be immoral?

Nothing justifies that. First of all, note that it contains the word “should.” If there is no objective basis for one thing being more right than another, the word “should” loses a lot of its meaning. Even if there is no objective right and wrong – in fact, *especially* if there is no objective right or wrong – then we are not obligated to either accept or reject our customary moral conceptions. Either way is morally equal, objectively, if morality is a merely human conception. The universe would not notice if our entire planet simply disappeared. It certainly doesn’t care whether we play nice, or not.

But there is another level, a practical one, at which morality is not optional. Even if we do think in moral terms only because evolution makes us think that way, the fact remains that we *do* think that way. So while there is no objective, universal, cosmic reason why we need to think in moral terms, or why we need to do things we perceive as good rather than those we perceive as evil, we are fighting our own nature if we try to walk away from morality. And what is the point in that? We might as well give up eating or breathing, just because there is no cosmic Eatingness or Breathingness.

So there is a moral imperative after all. But it does not come from outside of us, it comes from within. We are moral, and we “should” be moral, because we are built that way. For practical purposes, unless you are a sociopath, you have no real choice. Moral concepts (right/wrong, good/bad, etc.) are built into you. You are wired to think that way.

Now it all makes sense. Now we can see why we cannot explain where morality comes from philosophically (since its basis is biological, not philosophical), yet why we cannot manage to drop the concept. Thinking in moral terms is simply a fact for us. So we had better learn to live with it.

Of course, none of this speaks to the content of morality, only to the fact of morality. How, under this scheme, can we ever establish that some things are really right and some things are really wrong? The moral imperative is just a door with nothing behind it. It says, "Be moral." But it doesn't tell us how. Or maybe it does...

The content of secular morality

If this whole story about the origins and nature of morality is roughly true, then our moral rules fundamentally are an attempt to codify the *instinctive* attitudes and behaviors that most of us perceive either as good in themselves or as promoting what is good.

But if so, what does the genesis of our morality say about its content? Less, perhaps, than we might like – but quite a bit, nonetheless.

Basic Rules

If we never thought we had any divine revelation, and if we did not already grow up with a wide variety of moral and behavioral rules inculcated into us by our parents and by society, and we had to invent the rules based mainly on our own instincts and experiences, there are probably quite a few general rules most of us would come up with on our own. Here are some pretty obvious examples:

Things to try to do:

- Love our family members
- Respect and honor those who do good things for us and for others
- Stand up for others close to us when they are in trouble
- Tell the truth, most of the time
- Treat others in our community kindly and, where possible, even generously
- Contribute our share to the general well-being
- Send chocolate to your favorite writer – *lots* of chocolate

Things to try not to do:

- Don't kill or injure other people
- Don't mess with other people's stuff
- Don't go out of your way to incite jealousy, resentment, anger, fear, or doubt
- Don't betray a trust

- Don't be careless in ways that might adversely affect others
- Don't be needlessly offensive

You don't need God to tell you these things, you don't need the Ten Commandments to outline them (among other reasons, because they don't anyway). You already know these rules, and others like them, and you could hardly drop them if you wanted to. You can ignore or overrule them at times, but you can't take them out of your heart.

It is hard to say, though, that rules like these are truly "instinctive." In humans, just about anything that is instinctive is also affected by our experiences and by our intellectualizations. Perhaps the real genesis of much of our moral thinking comes from the realization, at some age, that when we either crave or object to a certain kind of treatment ourselves, other people mostly feel the same way, and that we are all better off if we each treat others the way we like to be treated.

It is probably not necessary to pull the rules apart according to their various multiple sources. The point is that our moral sense, however it works and wherever precisely it comes from, brings most of us to an agreement on points such as those listed above.

Rules of this sort, by the way, do fit into our whole evolutionary theory. They bind the human community together, which makes it more effective in surviving and increasing in a pretty hostile world. Without instincts/rules of this sort, we would each end up alone, and extremely vulnerable.

So all the pieces inter-lock: we have a moral sense, and we mostly all agree on some basic rules, because of the kind of creatures we have evolved into, and because of the sophistication of our brains. We can think this way, and we benefit from thinking this way – so we do. And it is "good" that we do.

This is "why" we are moral, and "why" we *should* be moral. We don't need God's law or divine revelation.

Keeping your moral balance

If we are moral because it is an imperative of our very nature, then the manner in which we are moral needs to reflect our nature. If our morality does not reflect our nature, it is pointless, since there is no other real basis for morality. Furthermore, morality not based on our nature is self-defeating, since it fails to fulfill the imperative within us.

So what is our nature?

There are two answers to this: there is human nature in general, and there is your own nature in particular. Each can be very hard to pin down.

But we don't need to pin them down here. It is enough, for now, to make some general observations. Then we can see how it works with a couple of examples. Your life's work will be to figure out the rest from there.

Observation #1:

Morality needs to reflect the many-sidedness of human nature

We are animals by nature, but we also have high intelligence.¹⁵ We have instinct and visceral emotions that we share with our animal cousins, but we also have reason and judgment that is on a par with no other species. We are social and loving creatures, but we also have a strong drive for our own personal advancement and survival. We love peace and ease, but we have a violent streak, too.

Any moral code that does not take all such elements of our nature into account will fail. This may seem obvious, but many moral codes don't even try. They place one aspect far above another – glorifying our reason or our lovingness or our self-sacrificing impulses while denigrating their opposites. Sure, we can admire people so narrowly focused morally that they adopt lives of great asceticism, enforced celibacy, or unabating service to others. But at the same time, people who live such lives are probably themselves out of balance, and in any case, elevating such single-minded modes of living into moral ideals is both unrealistic and false to who we are. (Kant's rule also works here: if everyone were totally ascetic, completely celibate, or interested in nothing but serving others, human society would fall apart, or even cease to exist – so such practices are unlikely to be true moral ideals.)

¹⁵ Let's give each other the benefit of the doubt here.

If there is one secret to morality, I might suggest that it is this: *balance*. We need to embrace all aspects of our nature, but since many of them are somewhat contradictory, our great task is to keep them in balance. Our instincts need to be balanced by our judgment, our emotions by our reason, our selfishness by our caring for others, our drive for perfection by a recognition of limits and of the reality around us.

This is less a matter of logic than of experience. Logically, you might suppose that if you put all of your eggs into, say, the “emotion” basket or the “reason” basket, you still have the same number of eggs as if you split them evenly. But if you seek out those rare people who live happy, fulfilling, productive, involved lives, people who are loved and respected by others and who in turn love and respect others, people wise enough to do the right thing almost all the time and strong enough to stand up to adversity – generally you will find that these people have striven for, and to some extent have achieved, the kind of personal and moral balance we are considering here.

Of course, as noted a moment ago, there is our individual nature to take into account as well as general human nature. Most of us are born lopsided, and raised lopsided. We tend to be either highly emotional or highly rational, we tend to be selfish or we tend to be self-sacrificing, we tend to be rigid about things or blasé, we tend to trust our instincts or we tend to fear them. Ironically, many people of high achievement – whether for good or evil – have been among the most imbalanced emotionally and morally. They have, in effect, taken advantage of their defects, employing their extreme characteristics (though not always deliberately) to propel them down a path that a well-balanced person would never explore. And as I say, sometimes such people do marvelous, good things. But if you read their biographies, you will find that they are rarely happy and rarely feel fulfilled, regardless of what they achieve. They typically are very unpleasant people to live or work with – or to be.

So you may choose that, if you wish. But the better strategy for most people is to identify their imbalances, and to nurture the aspects of themselves that are naturally weak, while making an effort to rein in those that are strongest. Such efforts will rarely be more than partially successful – which is a good thing, actually, or else all of us would end up in the same mushy middle ground. Our society works better because of our differences: we need both nurses and engineers, scholars and laborers, artists and mechanics.

In the realm of morality specifically, perhaps we benefit from some variation as well. People in whom self-aggrandizing impulses are strong, for example,

can be high achievers, great entertainers, dedicated public servants. But even for them, their personal moral code should recognize all sides of their own nature, and all sides of human nature in general. Otherwise their strengths will lead to immoral choices and actions. How often we see single-mindedness in politics or war or business or even in religion or the arts eventually lead to evil.

Building a lopsided moral code is perverse and destructive, whether it be built, for example, on the value of self-centeredness (such as Ayn Rand did), or on its opposite, self-abnegation (as many religious “saints” have done). To the extent that our morality does not represent *all* aspects of our human nature, it damages ourselves and others. And to that extent, it is *immoral*.

Balance is the key.

Observation #2:

There are no absolute and universal moral rules

To the extent that there is a biological basis in the brain for all of this, and to the extent that the development of the brain is determined by the interaction of genetics and environment, it would seem highly unlikely that any moral instinct is held by everybody. In fact, this is what we observe. Some of us melt when we see someone cry, others find their hearts hardened. Some tend naturally to bravery, some to cowardice. Some experience empathy strongly, some weakly or not at all.

This means that there is always some flux in any particular moral rule. One person may very strongly endorse a rule that says, “Thou shalt not kill (ever),” and embrace it as an absolute. But that rule is absolute only for that individual, and for anyone else who feels the same way. For the rest of us, it may be an ideal or a guideline, but it is not an absolute.

Similarly, rules may be universal by societal agreement, but then they are not morally absolute. “Thou shalt not commit murder,” is a rule most societies have agreed upon and intend to be applicable to everyone. So by intention, at least, it is universal. But it is still not universally absolute, because some individuals accept it only conditionally, and some not at all.

All moral rules have limitations, therefore, in their force or their applicability. This does not mean we should not follow them, but it does mean that we should resist turning them into rigid, absolute, inviolable moral laws.

Unfortunately, as humans, we tend to do this all the time.

Part of this is due to our rational nature. On our good days, we do like to be rational. We may not actually be all that rational, or even consistent, but we sure don't want to appear (to others or even to ourselves) as irrational or inconsistent. So rather than act on pure moral instinct at every turn, we concoct general rules. This is definitely helpful, up to a point. But we also tend to overdo it, making the rules rigid and applying them stringently where a balanced approach would be more appropriate.

The other reason we gravitate toward inventing absolute, universal rules is that it makes life superficially easier. Once we establish such rules, we don't have to think about them, and moral decisions are easier. So the temptation to lock our moral rules of thumb into hard-and-fast codes of morality is almost irresistible.

But it is a temptation we need to resist. The more successfully we do so, the more we enable ourselves to do the best thing in each particular case, even though (horror of horrors!) we might actually have to think about it with insight, sensitivity, and sound judgment.

This is a bit of work, but again: the secret is balance, not easy, phony absolutes.

*Example #1:
Every man is my brother?*

There are many times when a naturalistic, balanced approach to morality simply works better than religion or some other absolutistic approach. One good example of this involves our decisions about how to treat other people.

The truth is, most if not all of us have an instinct to take better care of those close to us than those farther away, those more closely related than those more distantly related. Ideally, we *love* our families, we hold our closest friends *very dear*, we are *concerned* about what happens to other people we know more casually, we *root for* people from our town or state or country, and we have a *generic sort of compassion* for people far away who have no real connection to us. This is all perfectly natural.

It is more than natural, though – it is both practically and morally necessary that the obligation decrease as the distance increases. It is practically necessary because we simply can't give equal attention to everyone in the world. It is morally necessary, because most of us would consider someone to be wicked (or at least seriously misguided) rather than saintly if he treated everyone the same – if, for example, he gave away everything he had to the distant

poor and ended up depriving his own children of adequate food, education, and medical care in the process.

So caring for people in proportion to their closeness is natural, practical, and moral. But it is very difficult to express this in the form of a commandment. Religious doctrines, in fact, usually end up in the opposite camp, teaching us platitudes like “every man is your brother.” Yet in real life, such teachings are rarely taken seriously. The byword is, “charity begins at home, brother.” Even Jesus recognized the essential truth of the more nuanced, balanced doctrine: when he was being soothed by Mary Magdalene using expensive oils that might have instead been sold to benefit the poor, he defended her wastefulness by pointing out that “the poor are always with us,” in contrast to himself, who was there now and needed soothing.

The religious platitudes are simply wrong. They make great sound bites, but they are unnatural, impractical and, if taken literally, immoral.

If you haven’t noticed it yet, though, consider how natural, in evolutionary terms, this instinct to take care of those closest to us is. To put it in simplest terms, those closest to us share more of the same DNA with us than those who are more distant, so the more we care for and aid those closest to us, the more we perpetuate our own DNA. From the standpoint of evolution, this makes all the sense in the world, so any inclination that our ancestors had in this direction would tend to be replicated, while its opposite would tend to fail and die out.

There is no suggestion here that either Mother Nature or we ourselves have to be conscious that this is what is going on. Quite to the contrary, our moral instinct to treat our closest relatives and friends best is there because it works, and it works whether we know why it works or not. Yet it is remarkable – and probably not coincidental – that for most of us, our natural instinct to help (and even sacrifice for) others is largely in proportion to their genetic relationship to us: immediate family most, more distant family less, unrelated people and foreigners least.¹⁶

At the same time, we have to keep our *balance*, and not give these instincts free rein. One ill effect of our natural tendency to care less about those farthest and most different from us is the tendency to disparage, demonize, or de-

¹⁶ Our caring for spouses and friends – though they may not match us genetically – does not disprove this observation so much as expand it. Our mutual relationships with such persons help both us and our offspring survive, so these relationships, too, offer a survival advantage for our own DNA.

stroy those least like us, which has led to racism, genocide, wars of aggression, and other abominations. We need to think sensibly and wisely if we want to nullify these dark tendencies. We need to let our reason balance our instinct. And when we apply it that way, the naturalistic approach is more moral than an absolutistic religious one.

*Example #2:
Abortion*

Feelings are so strong on this subject that it's tempting to leave it untouched. But it is worth getting into, to show that a naturalistic approach to morality can deal sensitively even with hard issues – and perhaps better than a religious approach can.

Before we dive right in, though, let's consider something else – another way in which our instincts may lead us astray, and need to be balanced.

Our senses are perhaps less powerful than some other animals', but even so, they are picking up a lot of information most of the time. Apparently, it is easier for the brain to deal with all of this data if it can categorize things. So anything that seems to be a rock is a rock, and we can deal with it that way without giving a lot of thought to what makes it different from other rocks, unless we have the leisure and inclination to do so. When a wild boar is charging us, the fact that it's a rock is good enough – and anything more in the way of subclassification or ambiguity could be a deadly waste of time. As long as we can tell the rock from a clump of dirt, that's all we need at a critical moment. So this is a useful category.

This way of looking at the world – by categories – is so natural and commonplace that Plato thought that everything fell into such categories (which he called "Ideas") and that they had some kind of existence that, if anything, was more real than the world we perceive around us. We might not all be inclined to take it that far, but we do like to identify things, name them, and pigeon-hole them. It's the way humans tend to think.

But hard-and-fast categories can lead us astray. A rock is not always distinct from a clump of dirt. Some rocks are soft, and some clumps of dirt are hard. Or to take another example, we all know the difference between a stool and a chair (a chair has a back), but what if you made a stool with just a very slight rim around the back side of it to make it a little less likely that someone would slide off – would that make it a chair? Exactly how high would the rim have

to be before it was no longer a stool, and now a chair? Obviously, the answer is arbitrary. In the end, this is true of virtually all categories.

We need to recognize that our categories are, for the most part, matters of convenience. There is no actual reason to think that there is some sort of “chairness” or “rockitude” that exists out there in a cosmic reality-land (sorry, Plato). We see things the way we see them in part because our brains and senses are built that way, and in part for arbitrary but convenient reasons of our own. So when it comes to classifying things that do not fall clearly into a category, there is usually not a right and wrong decision about whether they belong. Instead, it is more a matter of individual decision or group consensus whether they belong to this category, that category, a new category, or no category.

The abortion controversy involves that kind of situation.

The religious opposition to abortion is based on equating abortion to murder. Fetuses are innocent humans, killing innocent humans is murder, therefore abortion is murder – and therefore it is impermissible, period.

This is a classic example of forcing an ambiguous situation into a particular category, and using universal, absolute moral rules to evaluate it.

However, a similar thing happens on the other side of the debate. Some “choice” advocates consider that fetuses are a part of the woman’s body, a woman has an absolute right to do whatever she wants with her body, therefore a woman has an absolute right to have an abortion. Similar mental attitude, opposite conclusion.

If people relied on their instincts, though, rather than on absolutistic doctrines, they would probably come out more in the middle of this dispute.¹⁷

What we know is that immediately after conception there is a unique human cell. That says less than it appears to say, though. Every human cell is unique, and in principle (though not yet in practice), any living human cell could be

¹⁷ The U.S. Supreme Court decision on the subject, remarkably, did just this. It acknowledged that both sides of the argument and both parties in an abortion had a legitimate stake, saying that when the fetus was clearly not able to live on its own (first trimester) it could be considered part of the woman’s body and her rights prevail, and when the fetus was clearly able to live on its own (last trimester) then it should be considered an independent person whose own rights would prevail, and that during the ambiguous in-between period the sensibilities of each locality (state) could decide which way to go. Although this decision is often viewed as pro-abortion, it is actually straight down the middle.

developed into a separate human being. So the difference between a fertilized egg and an unfertilized egg or even an ordinary cell is not very great, from a biological point of view. From there the cell grows bit by bit until eventually you have an embryo, and then a fetus, and then a separate person. So at just what point does this cell become a person?

If you believe that people have souls that are somehow distinct from their bodies, then one “answer” would be that the budding individual becomes a person when the soul appears (or separates itself from the parent-soul, if one supposed that it worked that way). Unfortunately, we know much less about this than we do about the biological aspects of reproduction – in fact, as we discussed earlier, there is no reason to believe that a soul exists at all, so any talk of “when and how” is a bit silly. But the point is, even if souls existed, they wouldn’t help us answer the question.

Indeed, the right question is not even, really, when does the cell or fetus become a person, because it is not always murder to end the life of a person (it may always be regrettable to some degree, but it might also be legitimate or even morally right in some circumstances). So the question is not just the difficult one of whether or when a fetus is a person, but rather the even more difficult one of whether and when a fetus is a person deserving of protection from abortion.

The answer is: there is no objective answer. Believing in one is a great example of taking an ambiguous case and trying to make it definite. In reality, of course, we need a definite answer, so that the practice of abortion can be appropriately regulated. But that is a practical matter that can be subject to a practical compromise. The real question we are dealing with here is: what is the theoretically morally correct answer? And that answer is, by its nature, ambiguous and frankly arbitrary.

God does not define what a person is, the Bible certainly does not define what a person is (that is, it doesn’t even try, whether it is the Word of God or not), nor does the universe somehow define what a person is. *We* define what a person is, and we more specifically define who is a person worthy of protection against death. Since these definitions are our doing and no one else’s, whatever we say, in our collective conscience, is what the “right” answer is.

If we go by our instincts rather than by our cherished doctrines, most of us do, I think, end up somewhere near the middle. We do recognize that in an ideal world it would be undesirable to snuff out a fetus’s life. A fetus near to being born resembles a person strongly enough that we feel it should be protected

except in the most extreme circumstances. And since embryos are on their way to becoming fetuses, it is highly desirable to protect them, too.

At the same time, we recognize that the world is not ideal. Carrying a child can be an enormous burden for a woman, more so if she is in a vulnerable medical, psychological, financial, or family/social situation. Having to raise the child can be even a greater burden, especially if the woman is facing the prospect of doing so alone. Weighing these burdens against the rights of an embryo that has no expectations and perhaps not even any physical feeling, most of us would intuitively say that the embryo loses out. It is alive, and it is composed of human cells, but it is no more entitled to protection than, say, a damaged finger that needs to be amputated (even though it, too, is alive and is composed of human cells).

So, do we draw a line somewhere? We could – if we could only agree on where. Birth seems rather late, conception rather early, though some people would argue for either. Anyplace in between seems arbitrary. Where some of us would like to draw the line, perhaps, is the point at which the fetus becomes conscious. But this too is arbitrary, and we have no way of knowing when it occurs anyway.¹⁸

Part of the political/social problem here is that we are not dealing with raw instinct, but with moral sensibilities that change and are influenced by our environment. The great thing is that as human culture advances, it tends to become more sensitive and expansive in its recognition of the interests of others. Although we still care more about those closest to us than those farther away, for instance, we see distant people on television starving or suffering from earthquake damage, and we feel real sympathy, and sometimes are moved to help them. This is a moral advance.

Likewise, we increasingly acknowledge the rights of others. Over the last century or two, we have become much less tolerant of oppression against people of other races, against women, against the poor, against immigrants, against children, against homosexuals; we have even become less tolerant of abuse of animals.

Ironically (in political terms), the anti-abortion advocates are taking a “liberal” position in this process. They are trying to make sure that a borderline class of

¹⁸ Brain activity can usually be detected at about 6 weeks after conception. Response to external stimuli, however, so far is not detectable until about 28 weeks. In neither case do we know if there is any consciousness.

individuals (fetuses and embryos) is *inside* rather than outside the definition of protected creatures.

But doubly ironically, the pro-choice advocates are also taking a “liberal” position, making sure that the rights of women are protected, particularly early in pregnancy.

This is not really the conservative vs. liberal battle it is usually made out to be. Rather it is one kind of liberalism against another. And neither side seems to be all that happy about it.

It can't be rewarding for most religious believers to confront the notion that hundreds of thousands of “persons” they want to protect end up dead. Nor is it rewarding for a young woman to have an abortion that, apart from being an unpleasant surgical procedure, ends the possibilities of what might have been, both for herself and for the potential future child.

If we follow our natural instincts and the increasingly open-hearted inclinations of our civilization, we will throw off the unjustifiable doctrines that push toward absolute rights of one party over another. Instead, we will see abortion for what it is: a hard situation where either choice may bring pain and harm. And seeing it that way, perhaps we can work toward balanced answers that minimize the suffering, even if our preconceived categories of thought have to yield.

The final point, for now, is that this is *our* decision – as individuals, and as a society. There is no objectively right answer. We define our own terms: when a rock is no longer a rock, when a stool becomes a chair, and when a fertilized egg becomes a person whose rights take precedence over its mother's. There is no right answer out there to be discovered, or to be read out of the mind of God. We choose who and what we embrace, and when.

The right decision, therefore, lies in whatever consensus we can achieve, in our love and sensitivity to each party, and in our inevitably fallible attempts to discern, in various circumstances, where the *balance* of good lies. If there were a fixed formula for this, it would be easy. But in naturalistic ethics, there is no fixed formula, and so it is not easy. Nor will it be resolved socially and politically until we are inspired by caring and love (that notion Jesus was so devoted to) instead of absolutism and legalism (which Jesus abhorred and rejected).

But who ever listens to him?

Naturalism vs. Absolutism

There is considerable comfort in absolutism. Taking hold of an absolute position (killing is always wrong, lying is always wrong, my country right or wrong!) works for us on several levels. First, it provides clarity: we don't have to worry about ambiguities or exceptions – we know what the right thing is. Second, it provides certainty: we don't have to wonder if we are doing right or wrong – we're not just making good guesses, we're definitely right, all the time. Third, it means we never have to entertain regrets, apologize, or (heaven forbid!) change our minds or our behavior. All of this is extremely comforting and extremely convenient. And it suits our nature: we don't want to have to question the rock, we just want to pick it up and throw it.

But absolutism denies fair scope to our reason and judgment. Not entirely, of course. We may use reason and judgment to come to our absolutistic decisions, but then after that we shut the door on reason and judgment – not to mention emotion and sentiment. We say that these essential parts of our nature no longer matter – once we have grasped the rule, that's all we need to know.

But this sells us short. Literature and film are full of stories where perfectly normal and “moral” doctrines are applied firmly, and with tragic results. Unfortunately, real life is full of those stories as well.

We do need moral rules, but we don't need absolute moral rules. We need to use all aspects of our nature – our reason and judgment, our instincts and desires, our emotions and passions, our empathy and love, and even sometimes our anger and rage – and let them work together like a team of experts performing some Mission Impossible. As in any team, sometimes one member saves the day, sometimes another does, and sometimes what is needed is each member performing a role.

Good moral decisions are like that. They are sometimes susceptible to being looked up in a pre-cooked table of rules. But always, always the rule needs to be considered. Not just *does* it apply here, but *should* it apply here? Those decisions are well made only when we conduct at least a quick assessment of the other elements – and, in important situations, a very careful assessment.

Living by absolute rules is, in fact, immoral. It substitutes platitudes for judgment, and prevents us from making our best attempt to do well in all situa-

tions. When the situation does not fit well with the preconceived rules, yet we follow the rules anyway, we are acting badly – and for bad reasons.

Absolutism often – probably more often than not – leads to good outcomes. But too often it leads to bad outcomes. If you are a machine or a moron, living by absolute rules may be the best way out. For the rest of us, it is the lazy way out, and it is wrong.

Instead of absolute rules, therefore, the naturalistic approach would recommend rules of thumb: you can't very well think everything through from scratch every time. So killing and lying are *usually* wrong, but under various circumstances they are not wrong, and in some circumstances they are positively right.

Most religious people know this, of course, and they actually live their lives in a more sensible fashion than they might let on. The Ten Commandments (including #5, Thou shalt not kill) do not mention any exceptions, yet the Judeo-Christian tradition is full of instances where killing is allowed, encouraged, or even commanded. It is not clear, however, by what right we humans may overrule the express and unambiguous commandments supposedly handed down by God when it seems suitable to us, yet other rules (like “the right to life begins at conception”) are somehow perceived as absolute and non-negotiable even though God never said them.

In fact, when it comes to morality, most religious people (like most non-religious people) use a combination of handed-down rules, exceptions, prejudices, instincts, emotions, and reasoning. They are not really absolutistic in practice, only in doctrine (and not even then, in all cases). They claim to have knowledge of God's Law, but in fact are constantly second-guessing it, deliberately ignoring it, and modifying it. And it's a good thing that they do. But this is not a practice that really makes much sense, and it is not something the rest of us should imitate – or should feel bad letting go of, if we were raised in such a tradition.

Instead, let us start out with rules that are generally applicable, but flexible, and that allow for exceptions. Let us use these rules with insight and restraint, and let's use our rational intelligence and our emotional perceptions and insights to figure out which rules apply, and to what degree and in what fashion, in particular situations. Let us keep our moral *balance*.

If we do this, and do it well, we will be both wiser and more moral than people who claim to be acting based on some kind of divine guidance.

What does all this mean to you?

It means, as claimed at the beginning of this Chapter, that you certainly can be moral without believing in God, or in any particular religious faith. If you are true to your best self, you might even be more truly moral, in fact, than you would be believing that God was telling you what to do or not do.

But then, what exactly *should* you do, and not do?

First, you should mostly do and not do the things that you already know you should do and not do. Accept that even though no moral doctrines can be proved cosmically valid, we are by nature moral creatures, and we have a need to act in ways that we perceive to be moral. Most of these ways are matters of common lore, and you don't need a lot of research to figure out what they are. For instance:

- treat others with respect and, if they are close to you, with love
- don't do needless damage to others or to the property of others
- share with those in need, especially those close to you
- don't let your passions or your pride take over for your compassion or your judgment
- do as you would like others to do
- and so on, and so on, and so on....

There's not much mystery here. What is hard about morality is not knowing the general rules, but being able to apply them. Jesus's rule (Do unto others what you would have them do unto you) is probably the best general rule ever stated – though also one of the hardest to live by.

Second, try to shake off any rules that are arbitrary and dogmatic. Be on the lookout for things that you have always been told, but seem pointless or even wrong to you. Those doubtful feelings probably have some validity. Don't necessarily discard every rule of that kind, but ponder what it is that makes you hesitate. The rule might still have some value, or even a lot of value in limited situations, and perhaps you can find ways to modify it so that it conforms with your inner moral compass.

Third, take it seriously, and expect it to be hard. Recognize that our moral judgment is driven by our nature, but that our nature is not always rational and right. We are often bundles of contradictions, and our appetites or emotions may urge one thing, and our good sense something else. There is no final rule

for weighing these situations, and indeed there are many cases where there are no good choices (and more rarely where there are no bad ones). Look for general rules, but not for absolute rules and final answers. Instead, be prepared to weigh all aspects as fairly as you can, and as often as you need to. Remember: balance is the key.

Fourth, since it is impossible both to know for sure what is best all the time, and virtually impossible to do what is right all the time, practice forgiveness toward yourself and toward others. All of us are bound to make mistakes, sometimes grievous ones. In addition, for perfectly valid reasons, what appears right to us might not appear that way to someone else. So forgive yourself for your own mistakes, but forgive others for theirs first.

Finally, just go out and do it, much as you always have (but preferably trying just a little harder). In particular, don't forget to send the chocolate.

Chapter Three

How to Live Without God

If you are still here, then presumably you have decided (or at least are tempted) to live without a God of the traditional sort. Perhaps you feel that there is some sort of spiritual entity out there, or perhaps not. Perhaps you like the idea of life after death and will take a chance on it, or perhaps you prefer to think that the game really does end at the final buzzer. Any of these choices are fine.

Here's the catch, though: living life is not primarily a matter of what you believe. It's more a matter of what motivates you, what inspires you, what gives meaning to your existence, what gets you through times of disappointment and despair, what lifts up your heart, and what, when it is all over, you will look back upon with satisfaction and joy.

One of the best things about most religions is that when they are really working right, they help with all of those things. God's commands motivate you, his goodness and love inspire you, the prospect of eternal salvation gives meaning to your existence, your faith and prayers and the community of your fellow-believers help get you through the worst times, the fullness of the spirit lifts up your heart, and when it is all over here on earth, you can look back at a life that has led you to the gate of heaven.

Let's see you do *that*, you existentialist agnostics!

If more people flock to evangelical prayer meetings than to lectures on Søren Kierkegaard, this may be a big part of it (that, plus the fact that gospel music gets the blood moving better). The reality is, we humans need inspiration and hope and belonging.

Suppose everything you have read in these pages so far is correct, and you agree with it. Then you may perhaps congratulate yourself that you have the Truth, or some piece of it. Well, Shania Twain and I are not impressed – that's not going to keep you warm on a Saturday night.

If you no longer (or never did) derive motivation, inspiration, a sense of purpose, and all of those other good things from a religious context, then we need to figure out where you *do* get them from. Where, in a world where God is not watching over things and is not there to reward the good and punish the guilty, where there probably is no afterlife, and where there are no cosmic standards

for anything, does motivation and inspiration and meaning and value and joy and satisfaction come from?

Unless we can answer this question, you might be able to live a cold and miserable life without God, but you cannot live a good and fulfilling life without God – so, frankly, you would be rather a dunce to even try to do it at all. Fortunately, help is at hand!

In the previous chapter, we saw how you can live a *moral* life without God. Now let's see how you can live a *rewarding* life without God.

We can approach this by looking at each key aspect of a good life separately. When we do so, what we shall find is what we already discovered about morality: that religion generally doesn't do so good a job as one might think, and that we can usually do as well or better without it.

These are not abstract issues. This is your life we're talking about. So let's get to it.

Where do we find happiness?

For the most part, we non-believers find happiness the same places that anyone else does. There are some, but very few, religious people who derive their principal joy from their religion. More of them derive an underlying sense of comfort and security from their religion – and we will have to come back to that point – but life is full of opportunities for happiness and joy apart from religion.

For the most part, this is too obvious to bear much belaboring. Good feelings come from anticipation of good things, from satisfaction of our appetites and desires, from achieving things that were difficult, from doing the right thing, from giving and receiving friendship, from giving and receiving love, from sharing the joys of those who are close to us, and from many other sources.

It is doubtful that there are joys that are entirely unique to religion. Feelings of euphoria, awe, contentment, wonder, adoration, and of any other kind are all available in other contexts. Religious feelings are not one-of-a-kind feelings – rather, they are normal human feelings that are harnessed to particular objects and purposes. Those same feelings can be harnessed to any number of other objects and purposes.

From the point of view of evolution, of course, our species' capacity to feel these things far pre-dates the appearance of religion. A sense of awe before a powerful Other is a very handy trait in an animal society or a primitive human society that relies on a social hierarchy and strong leaders. Awe before one's God is just another version of the same thing, though idealized somewhat. If that sense of awe is of value to you, you can stand in awe of the unmatched works of nature (violent storms, towering mountains, heaving oceans, thunderous waterfalls, glorious sunsets, the wonders of the night sky), or before august and mighty human institutions, or even before individual persons who are powerful, wealthy, beautiful, or celebrated.

Religious people also may feel a sense of spiritual transport, and some religious services are specifically designed to encourage this feeling. So are many kinds of secular music and pageantry, which achieve a similar effect in people who are susceptible, as do all of the arts.

It would be tedious to make the same point about every variant of religious experience. Some religious people would object to the whole undertaking, though, and insist that what they or others experience is truly unique. And of

course it *is* unique, as any specific experience or any specific kind of experience is unique. Being uplifted by a sacramental rite is different from being uplifted by viewing a rainbow shimmering across mountaintops, which in turn differs from the kind of music that can snap you out of a depressive state of mind (for me it used to be Led Zeppelin at full power, which was again probably different from someone who got to the same place via Bach or Handel). The details are always special – whether the experience is religious or not. So we are not trying to demean religious experience here, whether ordinary or mystical. We are only saying that you can get essentially the same experience through other techniques.

If the experience was extreme, of course – if you have been a charismatic pentacostalist, for instance – you might need more extreme secular methods to match the phenomenon. But whether the chemistry of the brain generates its own peak states, or whether these are imported from outside, there are only so many states that the brain can attain, and none is unique to religion.

All you lose in terms of emotional possibilities by not being religious is the specific content of religion. And that is, assuredly, a loss.

But every field of human study or endeavor has its own unique delights that you miss out on by not participating. You may be a football fan, a card player, a doll collector, a motorcross enthusiast, a hip-hop fanatic, a dancer, a gourmand, a movie lover, a chess player, a student of fine art – but you are unlikely to be all of those things. Whichever ones you are not, you are missing out on. If you are not religious, then you miss out on that as well. So it gets added to the list of thousands of other things you don't have the time or interest to get involved in. You can only do so much anyway. Maybe if you use the time you might have spent on religion pursuing some new interest, you will actually come out ahead.

Are religious people happier overall, though? Apparently they are not. Though studies vary, because both happiness and strength of religious belief are hard to measure, overall it seems that religion is not a special road to happiness. Certainly it is for some people, but not for most, and probably not for you. If it were, you wouldn't be reading this.

But if by chance you derive pleasure and joy from religion, then by all means, stick with it. The same goes for yoga, skydiving, reading, watching NASCAR, writing poetry, horseback riding, chess, stock-trading, fashion design, golf, cooking, and you-name-it.

What if there is no life after death?

As noted in Chapter One, belief in life after death is relatively harmless. But what if there really isn't any life after death? Doesn't that take all the meaning out of life?

Life after death is actually a mixed proposition. First of all, think about what it would mean if your present life were never-ending, if you were literally immortal, incapable of dying – ever.

Many philosophers and writers have pondered this, and they almost always end up shrinking back from it. This conclusion partly stems from practical considerations, such as: the world would get awfully crowded. But if we assume that the afterlife is some kind of “spiritual” existence – meaning, presumably, existence without a body – then let us also assume that such practical concerns go away.

But there are other concerns. In real life, the mind tends to decay over time. Even people who do not develop some form of senility have trouble with memory – there is just too much stuff in there, and more and more of it gets lost, or mixed up, or takes too long to retrieve. Most people start noticing this after forty or so years. Imagine what it will be like after forty *million* or so years. And compared to eternity, forty million is nothing.

Still, you probably want to assume that there is no mental decay. All right, let's grant you that (though, by way of full disclosure: I am not fully authorized to make this decision on behalf of the universe).

But what about all those other spiritual beings out there? What about the ones who made your life a little bit (or more than a little bit) unpleasant during your lifetime? Do you live forever *without* them? But if you do, don't the people who found *you* irritating get to live without you, too? Can you imagine any community of individuals getting along forever without conflict? According to the Bible, even the angels, supposedly higher spiritual beings than we could ever be, failed to get along and a big heavenly war resulted. Why do you suppose that your life after death is going to be stress-free? Are all the nasty people somewhere else – in hell, maybe? Watch what you wish for, you basically nice but not-exactly-perfect person, you.

Or do you think that you will be perfect for eternity, and so will everyone else in your neighborhood? No one has ever heard of such a place, but let's suppose it is not only possible (dubious) but confidently foreseeable (way dubi-

ous). Who are these people and how did they get that way? Are they all on drugs? Was all of their individuality removed somehow? If you were always cheerful and smiling, would that really be you? Would you want that to be you? Wouldn't a million, billion, zillion years of that be pure hell?

For that matter, what *would* you do for eternity? Supposedly you could be in some automatic state of euphoria forever, but that just makes you a happy zombie, not a real human being. Here on earth, we derive a lot of our pleasure from achievement, from overcoming obstacles, from solving problems, from helping others with their problems, and so on. If all the obstacles and problems are gone, if there is nothing to achieve, the human-ness of this after-life is gone.

One of the great contradictions of Christianity is that God supposedly made the world the best he could, and that pain and evil are there because they serve some larger purpose. But if a truly happy after-life is possible, if heaven is possible, this means that pain and evil are not necessary after all, and that the theologians have been mistaken all along. Or if they are right, we have an even grimmer possibility: that after death, we are not looking at an eternity of joyous existence, but rather an eternity of more pain and evil.

So if you have been counting on an afterlife, you should think about whether you aren't just being childish about it. A five-year old imagines that he or she is going to get that special toy or video game or whatever, and then never be unhappy again. Of course, it doesn't work that way. Odds are, the after-life, if it exists at all, doesn't work that way, either. The common Christian and Muslim versions of it are immature and, even worse, incoherent.

There are other versions, of course. In Eastern religions, the person doesn't really survive, or not sufficiently to retain his or her uniqueness. Perhaps your "soul" – if you have one – is reunited with the great spiritual ocean from which it originally derived. Perhaps it transmigrates into another person or other creature. But if that is *your* soul we're talking about, and at some point your "you-ness" is gone, there isn't much difference between that and simply passing out of existence.

If you wish for an afterlife, therefore, you are wishing for something that is at best a huge gamble, and at worst an eternity of misery. It is hard to see a lot of value in this – for ourselves at least. Granted, people who suffer a lot, or people who die before they are really ready to end their lives, sometimes take comfort in the idea that they will continue after death, but without the suffering, and without the other limitations.

This is reminiscent, in a way, of the old *Twilight Zone* story where space aliens arrive carrying a book titled “To Serve Man.” This sounds like a fun concept, and people line up in droves to return to the alien planet where there are beings who can’t wait to serve them. In the end, though, it turns out that “To Serve Man” is a cookbook, and the people who couldn’t wait for this particular after-life became the ingredients in somebody’s stew.

If you lived on after death, it could end up that way, or any way – and almost certainly it would be a way far beyond your imagination. Let’s hope that this works out for you, but some of us would rather not take the chance.

Meanwhile, though, there is another reason many people take comfort in the idea of an afterlife: namely, that that’s where we like to think our loved ones go when *they* die. And so, first, they are not really dead, which means that their lives are not simply over and that these lives have not become meaningless. Second, when we die, then we get to see all of our loved ones again, so our loss is only temporary, and it will be more than made good in the end. We might even get to see people we never knew, but only admired from a distance, including those long dead. Who wouldn’t want to get to hang out with Elvis or Groucho or Socrates – or all three at once (now *that* would be a party!).

Of course, maybe you don’t get to meet your deceased family and friends. Or you do get to meet them, but they are not really themselves any more, but some insipid personality-less smiley-face version of themselves. Or just as bad, they *are* still themselves, but you weren’t really thinking about how they could get on your nerves sometimes, about how so-and-so used to constantly complain about nothing, or used to pick on you, or didn’t really seem to care about you that much when a certain someone else was around, or whatever. Nobody is perfect, and no human relationship is perfect. Granted, it would be great to see once more the people we loved most who have died ahead of us. But do we have to see them twice more, a dozen times more, a thousand times more? I don’t mean to be critical of your deceased relatives and friends, but honestly, most people’s company wears thin after a while, and it can make “forever” seem like an eternity!

It’s that same old all-too-human habit again. We want something because we crave the good things that come with it, but we forget that there are always dark and unhappy things, too – at least in any life (or afterlife) that contains humans.

It is certainly conceivable, of course, that an afterlife will somehow, despite all the odds, be pure heaven. But it is far more likely that, if it exists at all, it won't be pure heaven. It might, in fact, be a whole lot like living on earth forever, which is an awfully long time.

So be wary of an afterlife. More important, there are some things that are positively good about the idea that it's over when we die.

For one thing, we don't have to worry about hell any more, or purgatory, or even limbo. We are not going to be eternally, or even temporarily, cooked over a supernatural fire because of mistakes we made when we were alive. Which is only fair, considering we've already lived through a trillion television commercials about indigestion, body odor, and hemorrhoids – how much punishment can we be expected to take?

Probably more significantly, though, dying gives importance to life. Think about it: if you lived forever, nothing you did would matter much. Eventually you would see it come apart, or be superseded by something else, or mostly, just be forgotten. Everything would just be another mile in a train ride that went nowhere, because it never ended, and could have no destination.

Imagine yourself sitting on a beach, or a wide prairie, or the top of a snowy mountain. Now imagine that you have lived many lifetimes – not just a few dozen, but one full lifetime for every grain of sand on the beach, every blade of grass on the prairie, or every flake of snow on the mountain. Untold trillions of lives. What do you imagine could surprise you after that much time? What could thrill you, entice you, even vaguely interest you? There would be nothing you hadn't seen, done, or heard, thousands of times too many.

Death may seem to suck the meaning out of life sometimes – for example, when it cuts a life too short. For most of us, though, it is death that gives life meaning, and it is eternity that would make life meaningless.

Of course, if the traditional Christian view is correct, life on earth is important because it sets us up for eternity. It's hard to believe in a God who is that unreasonable and cruel, but that's the official story: in the relative eye-blink of 70 years, give or take, we supposedly use up every chance we will ever have to determine what happens to us not just for another 70,000,000,000,000,000 years, but for a lot longer beyond that. If that were true, then certainly our lives here on earth would be extremely important. But what a horrid concept, and what kind of an evil imagination must have first come up with it!

Fortunately, there is no good reason to believe that it is true. And just as fortunately, a more secular concept of the transience of life provides a strong ar-

gument for life's importance, without making its supposed consequences so ugly. In a limited lifetime, what you do is meaningful because it is your one chance to try to get things right. True, in the end, you probably just die, your brain stops working, and your body is given back to the earth. That in itself is rather pointless, and not terribly inspiring. But life is like a book or a movie – or a game. While you are playing the game (or reading the book or watching the movie), you give yourself over to it, you get into the spirit of it, and you enjoy it as if it were real.

Imagine a baseball game that lasted forever. What would be the point of even trying to score? Anything you did would have no meaning in the end, because there would be no end. But when a game has nine innings, you know you have a limited time to win it. You could, of course, just say: well, it's going to end, and once it's over it's over, so why bother to play hard. But most people don't do that. Once they get into the game (or whatever it is they enjoy), they just run with it, make the most of it, and when it's over they look back with pleasure, if they tried hard and did well.

You have the option of taking no interest in the game. You can even drop out of the game if you want. And some people do that with their lives. But for most of us, the very fact that we have a limited amount of time to play increases the challenge. We call upon ourselves to make the most of our time at bat (or our time at the poker table, or our chance to be on the stage, whatever metaphor you prefer). Exactly because it's *not* going to last forever, it is richer, and every moment is valuable.

So all in all we are far better off that, as we saw in Chapter One, there probably isn't an afterlife anyway. Giving up belief in an afterlife is like giving up belief in Santa Claus: it was fun for a while, but eventually it's time to let it go, because it is not true and, if it were, it would be more than a little scary. When we grow up, we find that real life is much richer and more rewarding than made-up fantasies.

What is the purpose and meaning of life?

Religion has always tried to give an answer to such questions. Life is important because God gives us life – whether directly or indirectly – and he has a larger purpose for us. Sometimes the assumed purpose is generic (God created us to love us, so that we could love him, and/or so that we could live happily forever with him). Sometimes the assumed purpose is specific, but unknown: when something bad happens, people take consolation in the notion that “everything happens for a reason.”

The real power of the religious answers lies in their emptiness. We can't imagine why God thinks it's a good idea that a baby is born with a painful congenital illness, suffers and dies, but we assume that God is wiser than we are, and that's good enough for some people. We can't quite imagine how we could be happy forever in heaven doing nothing in particular, but again, we assume that God has it covered. These things are conceivable, and if you choose to believe them, they may indeed comfort you. But there is no good reason to accept such beliefs, and if you lack them, or are trying to figure out if you can get by without them, then you need a different point of view.

The meaning and purpose of life can come from two sources: from outside of you, or from inside of you. In general, the meanings and purposes that come from outside are weaker. Often they don't take hold at all.

We've all had this experience. Our parents or our teachers or maybe a boss or some friends are trying to tell us why certain things should matter to us, so we'll change our behavior or attitude. But for whatever reason, what they're saying doesn't work for us. Maybe someday it will, maybe they're even right about all of it. But until *we* feel a certain goal or purpose resonating within ourselves, it doesn't really exist in us. We might go along, but it's not because we feel their purposes as our own.

Relying on God for your purpose in life, or for defining the meaning of your life, is a lot like that.

It is not like that for everyone, of course. If you, for whatever reason, have bought into the idea that God is really looking out for you personally, and in the end is going to make sure that what happens to you will work for your benefit somehow, then that can be legitimately meaningful, and it can help give your life a purpose. It would be more meaningful, certainly, if you knew what the purpose was, and if you could buy into that specific purpose, rather

than just having generic trust. And some people do have that: they believe that God is personally interested in their own salvation, something that they, too, believe in and want, perhaps desperately. So religion does lead to a true personal commitment that gives meaning and purpose to life in some cases, and if that's what you have, this essay is not for you anyway.

If, however, you have had some religious upbringing or experience, but it never got to that level, and all you have left is a weakened and generic sense that maybe God knows what's best, either in general or in your particular situation, then you are not giving up very much if you let that go. It doesn't give you much reason to get out of bed in the morning, or to do your best during the day. Something more specific is required.

We all need to feel that our lives are *about* something. We need a purpose that means something to *us*. It is not enough if that purpose comes from outside – whether from parents, or from God, or from anywhere else – unless we embrace it as our own. And once we do that, it no longer comes from the outside. It is now ours, it comes from the inside, and the original outside source, if there was one, becomes unimportant.

How do we acquire such a purpose, though? Although, as acknowledged above, religion can be the original source of that kind of personally embraced meaning, it is not the usual source or by any means the only such source. You can have that with or without religion.

Meaning and purpose in life are usually found in one or more of three places:

- *How we want to be.* This means making the most of who we are: becoming the person we want to be, however we define that. It has to do with integrity, skill, education, wisdom, body image, goodness, courage, kindness, and every other virtue or condition that we value.
- *What we want to do.* This usually reflects How we want to be, but it is mainly oriented toward the results of that. It has to do with either specific goals we want to achieve, or activities we want to perform (teaching, healing, building, creating, discovering, achieving a secure living, having fun, etc.), or both.
- *How we relate to others.* Again, this often ties in with the other two, but it can provide some of the most appealing sources of meaning and value in life. It takes into account our roles with regard to those we love and/or are related to, our friends, our co-workers, our teammates, our neighbors, our fellow citizens. We may find meaning in the com-

fort and joy we bring to others, to serving their needs, making their lives better and happier, making them laugh, easing their pain, offering them hope, and supporting their own goals and desires, as well as from the same benefits they provide to us.

Of necessity, these are generalities. There is no definition of life's meaning or purpose that applies to everyone. Our DNA and our experiences differ, and so what is important to us differs from one of us to the next.

Furthermore, there need not be (and generally ought not to be) just one overriding meaning or purpose in life. Most of us already have a lot of meanings and a lot of purposes in our lives, and people who have just one are usually emotionally and socially imbalanced. We each have tendencies in lots of directions. Of course, we can't pursue all of them, but we can follow more than one. We can try to be, for example, intelligent and compassionate and ethical. At the same time, we can pursue a particular career, and particular hobbies, and other interests, all of them meaningful to us. And we can also love those around us, performing our role as child, spouse, lover, sibling, friend, helper, or whatever it may be, as regards the various people around us.

Each of these adds purpose and richness to our lives. It's not that there are not enough sources of meaning, rather that there are way too many. We can't possibly be and do all the things that we would potentially like.

The overall purpose of our lives, then, is to be and do as many of those as we can – particularly those that well suit our abilities, personalities, and situations. And when we do that, life has meaning and value for us – God or no God.

Of course, all this raises some questions.

How do we choose?

If you feel that you lack purpose in your life, and if your life feels meaningless at present, this is probably because you are depressed (which a psychologist or psychiatrist could probably help you with), and/or you lack satisfying ways of *Being how you want to be*, *Doing what you want to do*, and *Enjoying how you relate to others*. Unless the cause is psychological, therefore, and oftentimes even when it is, you need to work on these things. You need to find some meaning and value.

But how?

We do it by guess, instinct, advice, reason, and trial and error. In adulthood, finding fulfillment in life is usually more a matter of discovering than of

choosing. As we mature (a process that takes decades), we learn more and more about who we really are, about what we are good at, what pleases us, what works for us – even as we are changing all the while. At the same time, we learn more about life’s possibilities – in terms of options about *How we want to be*, *What we want to do*, and *How we relate to others*. We try to make smart decisions, and we try to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. If we are wise, we experiment – meeting new people, learning new skills, trying out new experiences, listening to what works for others.

There is no secret strategy that works, and as always in life, it’s better to be lucky than to be smart. Luck, however, is outside of your control, except for this: if you are open to new things, you are more likely to be lucky. And if you keep working on expanding your knowledge and skills and connections with other people, and if you maintain positive attitudes, more opportunities will come to you, and you will be more prepared to seize them when they do come. There is not just something (or someone) for you, there are *many* some-things and someones for you.

You’ll know them when you see them, but you won’t see them unless you look for them. If you just wait for them to come to you, they probably won’t – or at least, the ones that do will not be as good as the ones you could have found if you had put a little effort into it. Keep trying new things, keep meet-ing new people, keep looking for ways to make yourself into the person you really want to be. Purpose and meaning will follow.

What about “selfish” purposes?

So far, we have tried to allude mainly to noble purposes: self-actualization, serving others, loving others. But face it, a lot of people seem to derive their purpose from baser motives: the desire for wealth, celebrity, or power; the wish to lord it over others, or even to harm others. Criminals, after all, may be full of purpose, even though it’s a bad purpose.

As we saw in the middle chapter of this little book, though, morality does not go out the window when religion does. Leaving your religion behind – or not having any in the first place – does not make it prudent or wise or moral to be evil. It is also worth pointing out that for most people, evil purposes don’t really work in the end. Yes, once in a while crime does pay, the bad guy ends up with the girl, the person with a dark soul comes to power. But such people rarely feel happy or fulfilled, even when they are overtly successful.

Sometimes things that are not good for us feel good, for a while. When looking for meaning and purpose in life, as when looking for anything else, it is easy to be fooled initially. Our excitement and enthusiasm for the new thing or the new person clouds our judgment. But in time, what is not right for us begins to feel unsatisfying. You should not look for “good” purposes that don’t suit your interests and personality, but neither should you settle for the excitement of “bad” purposes just because you think you can. Neither strategy has staying power.

So try things that seem right and good, or at least morally neutral – not all of those will work for you, but some of them will. Try to avoid things that are wrong or bad, because those will seldom if ever work over the long haul.

What if it’s all fundamentally meaningless?

We can’t leave this general topic, though, without taking a last look at meaninglessness. If there is no God, and the universe is morally neutral, and our own sense of morality is just an artifact of evolution, isn’t life basically meaningless? And if it is meaningless, aren’t we just kidding ourselves if we seek purpose and value there?

The answer to both questions is “yes – sort of.” But this does not have to be a problem.

Let’s return to the idea of life as the equivalent of a story or a game. In the context of overall reality, a story or game has no real meaning. It is essentially an amusement, and usually nothing more than that. Nothing that happens in the story or game need have any significance outside of that limited context. Yet we love a good story, and thrill to a good game. Why is that?

The reason is that when we enter into the spirit of a story or a game, a new context for meaning is created. What happens to fictional characters does matter within the novel you are reading or the movie you are watching. Who scores the most does matter within the context of the game you are playing.

Your life is like that. In the context of the universe it makes little or no difference. The universe no more changes when your life ends than it does when an ant or a weed dies. But within its own context, your life does matter, because it matters to you and to the people who are connected with you. “Meaning” is not some abstract entity out there. To say that life has meaning is to say that it has meaning *to* someone. That someone could be God or the Devil, but even if it were, what means something to such a personage does not necessarily have to have meaning to you.

As we saw before, meaning that comes from the outside (i.e., because it is meaningful to someone else) is a weak form of meaning. The strongest meaning comes from yourself. The principal meaning of your life, therefore, is the meaning that you find in it, create in it, value in it. It doesn't matter if your existence has no purpose for the universe – as long as it has purpose for you, that is purpose enough, and better than any other possible meaning.

This way of looking at it is also liberating. If your primary purpose for existence were actually defined by the universe or by some outside Being, then you would not be truly free. Yes, you might have the ability to accept or reject that purpose (i.e., you could be a “saint” or a “sinner”), but that is only the freedom to brand yourself with someone else's mark.

If the ultimate definer of your purpose in life is you, however, then you are much freer. You are still not perfectly free, of course, because you are constrained by biology and by society and by your own experiences and preferences. But at least you do not have to place the meaning you find in your life under some kind of cosmic microscope, and have it judged by standards invented somewhere else.

Freedom is always a little scary, of course. If you have to find your own sense of meaningfulness, that puts a bit of a burden on you. For most people some of the time (and for some people all of the time), freedom is uncomfortable, even paralyzing. Sometimes it is so much easier just to be told what's what. But in the end, such submission is oppressive, and the submissiveness it engenders is demeaning. Freedom is the best thing going, provided you embrace it, and provided you put out just a little effort to make it work.

If you do that, and if you try to be insightful about yourself and open to life's opportunities, your life will be as meaningful and fruitful as it could possibly be.

How do we cope with disappointment and despair?

One of the great things about religious belief is its ability, sometimes, to help people deal with tragedy. When life is miserable or even horrible, some people can maintain their belief that God will protect them, that God will make it turn out all right in the end, or that God has some greater purpose that justifies their suffering. When life ends, people of faith can believe that their loved ones have gone over to a better place.

So if you never believed in this sort of thing, or you find yourself no longer believing, how do you make it through the tough times?

There is no easy answer to that – including religion. Although religious belief sustains some people even through the worst misery, it doesn't work that way for most folks. When they are miserable, they are miserable; when they are in pain, they hurt like hell. Religion doesn't take that away. In fact, in the worst of times, many people turn against their old beliefs, because they realize that God's "providence" was just wishful thinking.

And it *was* wishful thinking. There is no evidence that believers have fewer problems here on earth than non-believers. In fact, it is one of the classic laments of the faithful that bad things happen to good people, while the wicked prosper. The idea that God provides for us here on earth, furthermore, is not just blind faith, but it is dumb faith as well, at least when it leads people not to take matters into their own hands. Watching a ton of bricks fall on you while assuming that God or some guardian angel is going to protect you does not work nearly as well as hot-footing it out of there. Faith does not actually move mountains – or the stock market, or the germs in your body, or anything else.

Nor does it appear that there is any reason – again, other than wishful thinking – to believe that things are different in some afterlife: that the good people are whooping it up in paradise, while the evil ones suffer or are simply eliminated.

Do you really want to try to believe in those things just because they might make you feel good someday, when life is going against you? Maybe, but consider this:

The best weapon in almost any tough situation is the Truth. Of course, we cannot ever rightly claim to possess Truth, but at least we can avoid believing things for bad reasons. When life is running against us, do we really want to kid ourselves into believing that it is OK? Isn't it better to accept whatever

pain or evil we are dealing with as a simple reality, so that we can face it head-on, and thereby defeat it, or at least outlast it?

Trying to reconcile the world's horrors with the goodness of God is pretty much a waste of time. In the end, the best you can do is say that God's ways are mysterious to us, because he is wiser than we are. That's one way to accept what is happening. Another way, one that works at least as well, is to accept that there actually is no meaning to the evil that befalls us. It's just evil, or sometimes just the way the world is, or most often just bad luck (the "luck of the Polish," as we call it in my family). And you can accept it or you can fight it.

You can accept it as "fate" if you wish – provided you take that term loosely (your future is not, in fact, pre-determined somewhere, but at the same time, rotten stuff happens that you have little or no control over). This is different from accepting it as "the will of God," because even when you say those words, it's hard not to feel that God is betraying you. So in addition to your actual problems, you have a new problem, which is trying to reconcile your horrible circumstances with your supposedly loving God.

You can also accept bad things as fundamentally meaningless. This is where the absence of cosmic meaning could pay off for you psychologically. You are generally not suffering because you are more evil than other people – your suffering is random. It's not about you. You don't need to feel guilty or ashamed. You rolled the dice, as we all do every day, and you crapped out. It's just bad luck. (All right, sometimes you made mistakes along the way and so you helped bring problems on yourself, but that's true whether you are religious or not, so we're not dealing with that situation here.)

The Buddhists have a technique to help people who are suffering rise above it (almost literally so). The idea is to look at yourself from the outside instead of the inside. "Oh, poor Hedwig (or whatever your name is), look at how she is hurting – doesn't she know it will be all right soon?" That is, look at yourself suffering as you would look at someone else suffering: with sympathy and affection, but with also with an outside point of view that puts it in perspective.

As a psychological trick, this can work for religious and non-religious people alike. But the non-religious have an advantage here: they already understand that life in its most cosmic sense is meaningless, and that its only meaning comes from the meaning we give it. So we always have the option of stepping back to that objective level and saying:

Well, yes, I did lose my job and my home and my family and my health, and I really had put my heart into all of those things. But now they are gone, and I can afford, emotionally, to step back and realize that their meaning to me was the meaning I put into them – and so my suffering at their loss is only the loss of something that I chose to hold close. Now I can choose not to hold them so close, and I can look for other things to give my life meaning.

Of course, you still go through a grieving process, and this attitude, if it works for you at all (it doesn't work all the time, or for everybody), can only work once you have done that. But in the end, it does help you to let go, and then to embrace something or someone new. This is not to say that everything can be forgotten or replaced: if you lose the one you love most, it can take a long, long time to get over that, if you ever do. But it actually does help when you understand that your loss, however important to you, is not of cosmic significance. The universe has not betrayed you, and God has not betrayed you. You have simply gotten a bad break – and being able to see it that way helps you to move beyond it and to go find a better break.

So much for acceptance. You can also fight back, if you want. Religious people tend to be a tad careful about defying God. In the Bible, some of Job's friends advised him, when his undeserved punishments were at their worst, to just curse God and move on. Job would not do that – which is the smart play, if you believe in God. But if you don't, you *can* defy your fate, and you can say, in effect: "OK, world, beat me down if you like, but when I get knocked down, I get up again, and you're never gonna keep me down."¹⁹

For all of that, however, it would be unfair to sell religion short as a way of coping with life's evils. You don't have to hang around evangelicals (or even ordinary religious folk) very long before you hear the story of someone who was completely down and out – perhaps a drug addict, perhaps a criminal, perhaps even a politician – and who found the Lord and was saved from the life he or she was living.

It's easy to scoff at that sort of thing, but we really should avoid being smug in that way. Such things happen all the time, whether we non-believers like to credit them or not. You thought I was wise-cracking about politicians a moment ago, but one of the more public conversions occurred in the 1970s when Chuck Colson – one of the bad guys from the Watergate affair – suddenly found religion and even while in prison began preaching a new tune. There

¹⁹ Known in academic circles as the Chumbawamba Declaration.

was a whole lot of sniggering cynicism about that move, but more than thirty years later he is still a born-again Christian with an active ministry in prison reform, when he has no real motivation to fake it. The skeptics were wrong. Religion does change people's lives sometimes.

And here again, we can say that if you fall into that category, there is no real need to turn your back on it. Likewise, if you are not in that category, but know people who are, it is unkind and unwarranted for you to deny the reality of what they have experienced, to make fun of it, or to try to talk them out of it. As we said before, the only thing that legitimately gives meaning to your life is what is meaningful to *you*. If you or someone you know feels that religion has saved him or her, then that's good enough.

But the rest of us need not join them. Religion is not the only thing that saves people who have made a mess of their lives. Love can do it, too. So, depending on circumstances, can psychotherapy, social work, education, hitting bottom, the military, support groups, literature, labor, or any other human thought or activity or social setting that can inject a new sense of meaning or purpose. A person on the edge could be saved by playing Parcheesi, if s/he took enough of an interest in it. Religion definitely has some advantages over Parcheesi, when it comes to pulling people back from the brink, but so do a lot of other alternatives.

There is one other subject we should briefly consider here: prayer. If you have ever been religious, you know how comforting and powerful prayer can be. There are many kinds of prayer, and prayer when life is going bad – either for yourself or for someone you care about – can be a way of letting go emotionally, and a way of “doing something.” When you can't solve a problem yourself, you can put it in God's hands. When people are in trouble and you can't help, you can comfort yourself and them by saying you are praying for them.

The benefits of prayer, though, can be achieved in other ways, though perhaps not with so little effort. It's a great idea that you can spend fifteen seconds in silent contemplation and thereby harness the greatest conceivable power to the solution of your problems. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have much effect, other than making us feel better.²⁰ Feeling better is good, but for oneself

²⁰ In recent years there have been a number of scientific studies on the efficacy of prayer. Some positive results have been reported, though skeptics have complained of procedural, statistical, or other faults in the studies. So there is no definitive evidence either way. But even if some of the results are valid and the effects are real, the impact appears to be small, and its mechanism is unknown.

it can be achieved through contemplation, meditation, or thoughtful discussion. For others, it is better achieved by helping in a tangible way rather than by prayer. And if you can't help in a tangible way, then "you will be in my thoughts" is just as good as "you will be in my prayers."

In general, you will find that there are secular versions of most religious practices and attitudes. There is prayer, and there is meditation. There are religious epiphanies, and there are non-religious ones. There is devotion to one's God or church, and there is devotion to one's country or school or community.

We needn't suppose, therefore, that religious attitudes and behaviors don't work – some of them certainly do, and some of them possibly do. But you can achieve the same benefits in a non-religious flavor. And if you are not, or are no longer, a religious believer, the non-religious version will actually be more effective for you than the religious one, because it doesn't require you to carry so much extra baggage.

In the end, of course, all of life's problems cannot be solved here in these pages. It's not even practical to suggest general strategies for them – lots of other books do that. All I can say is that when you are drowning, there are many things floating out there that you can hold onto – and only one of them is a cross.

The whole endeavor is reminiscent of the early studies of extra-sensory perception, which initially showed strongly positive results but were found to be flawed and ultimately invalid.

How do you make the transition away from religion?

This part is mainly for people who have grown up with religious faith but now find themselves questioning its validity, or find that it just doesn't work for them any more.

It can be hard to give up something that has been with you all or most of your life, especially if that includes your formative childhood years. You may have been thinking or feeling a certain way for a long time – changing that can be hard. You probably also have some positive feelings, or at least some positive memories, about the faith you were brought up in.

If you want to let go, but are having trouble, this section is for you. It provides specific advice for overcoming the “inertia of faith” we considered briefly in the first chapter of this book.

Faith and self-persuasion

Sometimes your brain leads your heart, and sometimes your heart leads your brain. It's probably easier when the heart leads. Man has been called “the rational animal,” but “the rationalizing animal” might be more accurate. We can talk ourselves into believing or justifying just about anything, if our hearts are already committed to it.

You may be in the opposite situation, though. Your head may be telling you that you no longer believe what you used to, that you have outgrown it, or that it just doesn't work for you any longer. But you may still have some sentimental connection, or you may just have trouble feeling that it is OK to change something that for a long time has been a big part of who you are.

So how *do* you do that?

Here's where we steal a page from the believers. They, too, struggle to hold onto their beliefs, or they want to help people who are attracted to religious faith but are having trouble making the leap. What they say is: pray for faith, and God will give it to you.

That may not sound applicable to a move in the opposite direction, but when you understand the psychology of that advice, it can readily be applied the other way. Some religious proponents put the concept differently (the wonderful C.S. Lewis does this in one of his several religious books): Act as if you believe and, by and by, you will find that you do believe.

The psychology behind this is pretty simple. By acting as if you believe, you make a commitment – not a big commitment all at once, but a series of small commitments. You can think or say whatever you like, but there is no actual commitment until you *do* something. Conversely, when you *do* act as if you believe in something (even though you have doubts), you *are* making a commitment to that belief. When you act again, you reinforce that commitment. If you keep it up, you eventually end up truly committed, and your beliefs will naturally fall in line.

Praying for faith is one form of this (though a less effective one, because the commitment is more tenuous). Praying to God for faith presupposes either that God exists or that he at least might exist, and that prayer either is or might be effective. While professing doubt, therefore, one is acting as if one believes. Again, there is an implicit (though weak) commitment here. If you keep this up long enough, your prayers are sometimes “answered,” and you end up with faith after all, because you have slowly built it up inside yourself. Pretty clever, those religious dudes!

But guess what: it works the other way, too. (In fact, it works with anything: you think you don’t love your significant other enough? Just act as if you do, and your love will increase by itself. Don’t like your job? Just act as if you do, throw your heart into it, and you will find yourself liking it a lot more, before long. Etc., etc., etc.)

If you were raised in a religious faith, you don’t have to give it all up at once. Just start acting as if you no longer believe, and your commitment will gradually slide away. Stop going to church or synagogue or mosque. Stop observing religious holidays and traditions. Remove religious artifacts from where you live. Stop praying. At first it will feel odd, but before long it will become second nature. Your faith will weaken, become irrelevant, and finally disappear. If there is one thing that a religious person will dislike most about this entire essay, this paragraph is it – and the reason is, that it really works! You’re hearing this from someone who has been there.

Try it.

Coping with the downside

While you are trying out this technique, keep alert to what you are doing. Don’t lie to yourself and try to pretend you are not giving up something that was meaningful, if in fact that’s what you’re doing. Don’t expect that this will

be entirely painless. Letting go – or admitting that you have already let go – is frequently difficult.

The whole text of this essay, of course, is intended to make this process easier for you. I hope that if you have got this far, you feel more comfortable by now that you are doing the right thing. The truth is most likely on your side, and whatever you are giving up can be replaced, or better than replaced, with other things. Still, you might need to remind yourself from time to time that what you are giving up also had its negative side.

We are trying not to bash religion or its adherents any more than necessary here. But for all the good things that one can say about religion, there are bad things as well. Part of the psychology of making any kind of change in commitment is to focus on the bad parts of what you are leaving, and on the good parts of what you are taking on. When your old lover leaves you and you find someone new, this comes naturally enough. It doesn't mean that you have to totally trash the old person, but you think more about his or her faults and irritating habits than you used to, and you focus on ways in which the new person is better than the old.

Leaving your traditional faith is a similar process. Only you can say what it is about your old religion that is most off-putting. Sometimes those things relate to the doctrine, structure, or history of the faith or denomination itself. Sometimes they relate to a particular minister or to the congregation you belonged to. Sometimes they have to do with the way religion was used by your parents, or other family members, or friends. For all that is good about religion, there are as many things that are hard to swallow, offensive, tedious, smug, ungracious, or downright immoral.

During your transition away from faith, keep those things handy in your mind. Don't stew over them, and don't become hateful. But if you start to waver, you might want to remind yourself what made you decide to leave in the first place.

Embracing the upside

You are not just leaving something that didn't work for you – you are heading toward something that is probably going to work much better. As helpful as it is to remember the negative things you are leaving behind, it is even more helpful to remember the positive things you are embracing. For example:

- You are spiritually free. You are not bound by doctrines invented hundreds or thousands of years ago by strange people who lived in strange lands and strange times. You can go find the beliefs that work for you.
- You can let go of ugly notions like “sin” and “hell.” While you can still embrace the concept of right and wrong, and you will still need to take responsibility when you do wrong, this is no longer something that involves God. When you act badly, you are responsible for making things right if you can. If you hurt others, it is between you and them, and you should fix it. But you don’t have to think about divine displeasure or retribution. (Frankly, we’re not that important!) You also don’t have to worry whether you are “saved.” You were never lost.
- You can let go of phony absolutistic moral doctrines, and replace them with points of view and rules of conduct that are much more intuitive, tolerant, and useful. You can be much more like Christ, for that matter, and a lot less like certain people who claim to be his followers. (For instance, Jesus pretty much had nothing to say about sex. Starting with “saint” Paul, who appears to have been severely neurotic or worse,²¹ people who came after Jesus could hardly *stop* talking about sex – and talking mostly perverse nonsense.)
- You no longer have to try to believe things that are almost literally unbelievable (such as: that a good God is responsible for life as we know it, that Jesus rose from the dead or had a mother who was a virgin, or that any human being or scripture is infallible). Instead, you can em-

²¹ Paul admitted to having a horrendous weakness that he could not overcome (though no one is sure what it was). He also changed suddenly from persecuting Christians to being their most avid missionary, based on the experience of being knocked off his horse, hearing God’s voice chastising him, and being struck temporarily blind. Today, this sort of thing would qualify him for intensive psychological care. He was never a follower of Jesus during Jesus’s own lifetime, yet his re-interpretations and extensions of Jesus’s teachings have been taken seriously, largely because of the belief that his writings were somehow inspired by God (or, to be more cynical, because of the large political base he established in the early church through his creation of so many Christian communities). He was, in fact, a wise and inspiring moral leader at times – but he had his bad moments, too, and unfortunately all of it has been taken with equal fervor, with Jesus’s own teachings left behind roughly in proportion. Paul is, beyond comparison, the man who both made Christianity great and at the same time ruined it. St. Peter was onto him, but couldn’t stop him.

brace the march of human knowledge without fear or reservation. You can belong to the future instead of the past.

- Although non-believers do not form churches or similar communities, you are joining a loose but heavily populated society of men and women who are leading the world forward in understanding and wisdom. These are people who, even if they cannot say for sure what the truth is, have the courage to recognize what it is *not*. We are everywhere, which is why the religious right has become so militant in recent years – they know their dominance is slipping, and they are fighting to hold on. But if you seek out the non-believers, you will often find that they are just the people you want to know.

That's just for starters. You probably have your own reasons why the move from faith to secularity appeals to you (admit it, you really like the idea of sleeping late instead of going to religious services). Whatever your reasons, whether they are serious or frivolous, hold those things in your heart and mind until the transition is complete.

Relations with family and friends

One of the biggest obstacles for young people trying to break free of their religious upbringing is the disapproval (actual or anticipated) of their parents and other family and friends.

There are two sides to this. First, the disapproval of believers is almost certain to be there, even if overt criticism is withheld. When you leave the fold, you are the source of legitimate disappointment. At best, you can hope people will be respectful and tolerant; at worst, though this is rare, you will be cast out of the community or even out of the family.

Second, as a caring person yourself, you do not want to cause consternation to others. Those of us who love and respect our parents find it difficult to hurt them by setting aside everything they tried to teach us, and adopting contrary beliefs and practices.

There are three basic strategies for dealing with this problem, none of them perfect:

- (a) Concede. Stay with your old religion, and keep your reservations to yourself. This will be hard for you, and there is a good chance that you will be sucked back in at some point. But it avoids confrontations and family pain.

- (b) Dissemble. Pretend you are still practicing your faith, but don't. This is hard to pull off unless you are living away, and it is uncomfortable, because it involves either outright lying or at least the systematic conveying of false impressions. Those things are not necessarily morally wrong, if you are doing them for the good of someone else, but they are also not exemplary, and they will wear on you over time. And in the end, the believers in the family will figure it out anyway, because other people are not as dense as we like to think, and they will perceive that your heart is elsewhere, even if you say nothing, or even if you lie about it.
- (c) Stand up. In most cases, this is the best way to go. You simply start living your life your own way, and if questioned, you either say that you consider it a private matter that you don't want to discuss, or you declare honestly that you have had a change of heart.

To the extent that your conversion away from traditional beliefs is gradual, you will probably find yourself following each of these options in sequence. At first, when you are harboring doubts but have not replaced those doubts with opposing convictions, you will probably, for a time, continue your religious practice as you always have. This is appropriate and sensible. No point in throwing something overboard that has been good for you, when you merely have questions about it.

Then, as your doubts become stronger and the balance of your judgment swings to the other side, your religious practice is likely to become less frequent, certainly less devout, and perhaps absent altogether. But until you are truly convinced that you should leave the old ways behind, you will find it easier, probably, to maintain a certain façade of faithfulness, while internally you are more and more letting it all go.

Finally, when you are confident that your choice is right, you do let it go, and you are willing to say so, if asked.

This last step can still be difficult in some circumstances, though, and so we should think about ways that you can make it easier for yourself and others.

First, don't "out" yourself until you are really ready. Doing so causes what may be unnecessary pain for everyone, and also opens you up to efforts to keep you in the fold. The exception: if there is someone (and there probably is at least one) whose love and judgment you trust, you might do yourself a favor by revealing your doubts in confidence. This essay presents a certain point of view, but there are other points of view, and in the end, perhaps traditional re-

ligious beliefs are going to work for you after all, and your problems can be allayed. By keeping it all to yourself until you have made up your mind, you may be giving up that chance. A parent, a relative, a friend, a religious minister, or a lay mentor of some kind might be worth confiding in.

Second, don't be aggressive. If you are making a change, you're presumably doing so because you think you're right. You are entitled to that. But other people are entitled to their beliefs, too. Treat them with respect – because they deserve it, but also because if you do, they are more likely to treat you with respect. In the end, if you do this, you can always make the appeal: “Mom and Dad, I honor your beliefs. All I'm asking is that you honor mine, too.”

Third, don't be too defensive. If you are dealing with people who are rational and who care about you, and you can have a cool-headed discussion with them about why you are doing what you're doing, that's great. But you do not owe anybody a detailed explanation, even if they say you do. Your choice is your own, your reasons are your own, and no one is going to see all of your reasons from exactly your point of view. Making your case to someone not disposed to accept it is usually a losing proposition. If you think that's going to be your situation, then don't enter into that kind of discussion. Just say that your decision is not a rash one and you have put a lot of thought into it, and you prefer not to go into all the details. Or say, if you like, that you are open to an exchange of ideas but not to mutual attempts at persuasion. In any event, your decision should not be up for a vote, so don't let anyone put you in a position where that seems to be the underlying assumption.

Fourth, insist, if necessary, on your own independence. Your family and your religious community had years and years to teach you their beliefs and their ways. They had their turn, and now it is your turn. Part of their bad feelings, in fact, will stem from their own sense of failure with you. Please, do be sympathetic with that. But most parents and most ministers know and accept the reality that once you are grown up, you not only are entitled to make your own decisions, but you are morally obligated to make your own decisions. You have to follow your own convictions and your own conscience, not someone else's. If you make it clear that your choice is not a whim, is not mere rebelliousness or laziness, but is based on an extended period of serious reflection, people who care about you will usually accept your decision, even if they do so sadly.

Fifth, take responsibility for how you deal with your decision, but not with how other people do. You should strive to make the break as graciously, as considerately, as unobtrusively as you can. But if other people make a fuss

about it, that is their responsibility. You are not obliged to call them to account for it, but neither should you take the blame for it. They are eating the fruit of the their own beliefs, if those beliefs turn you into *persona non grata* or into some kind of unspeakable sinner in their eyes, and generate anger or rejection or other kinds of pain. It is their choice to reject your choice, and if there is a fault in that, it is theirs. You don't need to feel guilty about it.

Finally, make this transition as quickly as you can, and then try not to talk about it with family or friends who disagree with you. It is very hard for people who feel strongly about their own beliefs on such deep matters to discuss them dispassionately. If you have left the faith of your childhood because you decided that it was, let us suppose, false and hypocritical, it is going to be hard for you to respect someone who stands up for that. Conversely, if family members feel that you are a hell-bound sinner, blinded by self-aggrandizement or by Satan, it's hard for them to listen without contempt to your point of view. So it is generally best neither to proselytize to them nor to let them proselytize you. Translation: just find other things to talk about.

In sum, letting go might not be completely pain-free, but if you are kind, firm, and diplomatic, it will probably go better than you expect. And once you burst through, you will find freedom and light on the other side.

Raising children without faith

This is a bit of a detail, but if you have young children or think that you might someday, it can be an important one.

Most people are inclined to bring up their children in their own beliefs – or non-beliefs. But many non-believers – especially those who were themselves raised in a religious tradition – think that they should expose their children to religion.

Some do it because they still remember the sentimental, emotionally appealing side of religion, including the mystery and pageantry (fun for kids!) that many religions offer. Some do it because they realize that religion has been and continues to be an important part of our culture, and they want their children to experience it as part of their education. Some even do it as a form of inoculation: if the youngsters get enough involuntary church attendance and boring religious instruction in their early years, perhaps they will be less susceptible to religious proselytizers later in life.

All of these reasons are potentially valid, and parents must follow their own hearts in such matters. But indoctrinating children with beliefs you consider to be false is a dangerous practice. Some children will accept those beliefs, and some will make your life difficult on account of it.

Writing as a parent myself, I believe that one honors one's children best by sharing one's own beliefs more and more fully as the children become older, more capable of understanding, and more curious, and by not fostering beliefs that are counter to one's own. (For that matter, you don't have to pretend that Santa Claus is real, either; children love to pretend, especially if there are presents involved, and you can explain Santa Claus as a fun story from the beginning rather than as a "reality" that they will later discover was misrepresented.)

When it comes to God and related beliefs, you can be similarly honest. You can acknowledge that some people (maybe including grandma and grandpa) believe that there is a heaven and a God watching over us, but that we don't believe this – and that's why we don't go to church when others do. But when you, the child, are older and want to make up your own mind, you can go to church or not, as you please. This is respectful and honest. When the child gets older, you can educate him or her about the Bible and about other peo-

ple's beliefs in more detail, if you feel that that is important. And you can educate him or her about your own beliefs.

Respect and honesty are the keys, though. If you treat children that way, they will learn that those are important values. They will also be much more willing to communicate their own feelings and thoughts, even in their teenage years, if you have always given them the respect that they deserve as persons increasingly separate from you.

You needn't cram anti-religious feelings down their throats, either, though. That may be honest, if you feel that way, but it is not respectful – especially if you have religious friends or relatives. Respect and love are the greatest gifts you can give your children, in all areas of life. Keep that in mind, and make your decisions from there.

Final thoughts

In the preface, I said that you would not get all the answers here, but you'd get yourself off to a good start. I hope you feel that this promise has been fulfilled.

You perhaps did not agree with everything you read here, which is fine. I am not dealing out dogma. You may pick and choose whatever hits home with you. You can reject whatever seems off-target, and find something else to replace it.

There is certainly much more to be said on all of these subjects. Every page here could become an entire book – and such books mostly already exist. If something intrigues you, or if you are unconvinced, find out what other people have to say on these subjects. Read. Talk with people you know and whose opinions you value. Think seriously.

This is a beginning, or perhaps a middle step, not an end. But it is a step in a process that can lead you to a good, moral, meaningful, and satisfying life. The next steps are yours.

The decisions you make in these matters will change your life.