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Focusing on Horizontal Transcendence: Much More than a “Non-Belief”

Thomas J. Coleman III, Christopher F. Silver, and Jenny Holcombe

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Much of the reigning research on non-religion and non-belief focuses on demographics and personality characteristics. While this is a necessary foundation on which future research may be built upon, such data does not necessarily produce theory. In many ways the dominant cultural milieu of religions along with the benign intent of some researchers force a person who holds no belief in a God to assume an oppositional identity in relation to religion. This oppositional identity tautologically sets researchers up to continually define its object by the absence of *something*. This something cannot always function as a normative point of reference in which to tell researchers *what* to look for. This article provides one such normative trajectory, termed “horizontal transcendence.”

1. Introduction

A recent article appeared in *Time* magazine titled “Why There Are No Atheists at the Grand Canyon” by Jeffery Kluger (2013). While Kluger certainly did not mean that atheists would not visit there, his assertion suggested that if an atheist were to visit this awe inspiring geological location, the view would move them to believe. Kluger paints a picture that denies all humans the right to *not* “be religious” arguing that there exists some sort of inherently religious affective state that no human can escape in the face of awe and wonder elicited from the beauty present in nature.

However, most scholars and researchers have been unable to identify such a thing as a primordial *sui generis* religious emotion or feeling with the possible exception of mystical experience (James 1985; Barnard, 1997; Berger and Luckmann 1991; McCutcheon 1997; Vergote 1997; Boyer 2001; Taves 2009; Belzen 2010; Paloutzian and Park 2013). Kluger claims his statements are supported by recent research from Valdesolo and Graham (2013) who apply a solely religio-spiritual framework in their research, thus receiving a solely religio-spiritual result. Interestingly, the researchers’ published article is

entirely void of any reference to the “religious feelings” Kluger claims that the researchers were “looking at” (2013). Furthermore, he goes on to state that Valdesolo and Graham’s work “confirms” the “awe-equals-religion equation.” Valdesolo and Graham conducted experiments where awe was elicited as part of the study design. The authors suggest that experiences of awe provide motivation to make sense of the world around us. Valdesolo and Graham imply that such sources of meaning *may* lead to a belief in the supernatural. While the data certainly provides an indication that experiences of awe occur for many different types of people, the data only speaks to those experiences. Certainly anything else is a statement of causation, which cannot be inferred from their work (Lakatos 1980).

We cite this research as *only one* example of what we might be able to call, to use Lakatos’ term, a “research programme” (1980, 47) for the investigation of people we might term as non-believers in a God or gods. Current research on non-believers in a God seems to consist of mainly demographical information and psychological personality characteristics of atheists who join groups. This is a welcome start, however, directions as to how to proceed past this point remain unclear or undefined as some of these studies infer nominal description while others – like the one noted above – can lead to the inference of false causations unsupported by the research design or data.

This paper acknowledges that the notion of horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT) (c.f. Streib and Hood 2013)¹ provides a promising research programme with which to advance research into non-believers that will extend past their non-relationship and difference at times to “religion” and or “belief.” Streib and Hood conceive of such transcendences as going beyond the mundane and everyday, however occurring in the “life-world” (140) thereby making them accessible to the believer and non-believer alike. However, they see the vertical transcendence as explicitly religious and state that horizontal transcendence (HT) might be a “variant of religion” which they term as “implicit religion” occupied by those who hold no belief in a God (142). They go on to write that the ‘implicit’ is considered a derivative of the ‘explicit’.

Contra Streib and Hood, we see no reason religion should provide normative claims as to what it means to not believe in a God. Maintaining the focus on Streib and Hood’s horizontal axis, we depart from their underlying assumption of horizontal transcendence as implicit religion. This paper seeks to provide a broad overview of the current field of research involving/focused on non-believers in God and to suggest that we move away from the term “non-believers” – at times – and towards the term “horizontally transcendent” when referring to or describing this population. But what *is* horizontal transcendence and can people who lack a belief in a God transcend *anything*?

2. Researching Non-Believers: An Overview

Inquiries and academic research into non-belief and secularity has been a relatively recent phenomenon (Streib and Klein 2013). Often such research endeavors stem from a cacophony of methodologies and frameworks that have been established for research into the religious and believing human (Hood et al. 2009). Still others simply conduct research with no theoretical framework whatsoever thus leaving us heavy on numbers and light on

theory (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Research frameworks and theory in the study of atheism and non-belief are lacking. Furthermore, as Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009, 482) point out we “must demand good theory as a prerequisite for the collection of meaningful data.”

Debates into how to define the object of ones study (i.e. non-belief, non-religion, atheism, secularity horizontal transcendence) have only begun and no doubt should continue less the social sciences risk prematurely agreeing on how to approach a subject that is just seconds ex-utero. For instance Lee (2012) has argued for defining our object of inquiry based off of belief and religion therefor allowing religion to determine whatever *is* to be considered “non-religion” or “non-belief” while Coleman, Silver, Durham and Hood (under review) have argued for new terminologies and a lexicon independent of, and thus indifferent to “religion” or “belief.” As researchers we must recognize that we do not merely research “who someone is not” – we research who they are. Who they are can be as much of the counter cultural contrast as it can be a nominally dominant variable within research. For example, not being interested in soccer is not interesting unless the overall population embraces soccer as a social or cultural identity. Only then is the identity or lack of interest in soccer interestingly important to social research. Variation of the social norm can then prompt further research within diffusion of change and innovation of new ideas (Rogers 2010). We have to at least offer a way out, another possibility, another option that can be ticked on a survey that does not involve identifying as what you are not. Thus, we insist on *descriptive* definitions (i.e. ones that have content) and terminologies as a more accurate reflection of our actual object of inquiry.

Beliefs, feelings, emotions, meanings, values, importance and the varying intensities of such *things* function along a continuum that is likely shared by the human race as a whole involving individual difference variables. Problems in the allocation of such ethereal concepts can enter in the realm of such contentious, politically and morally charged subjects as religion and other special things (i.e. non-belief, Humanism, horizontal transcendence, atheism, types of Buddhism and many more) when researchers assert that one group bears a greater claim to these things than another group (typically a minority group). Taking into context such arguments, as foci of the social scientific study of religion and non-religion seems much more of a debate about names, terminologies and the right for one group to possess them vs. another (Shook 2012). Thus the timing seems right (i.e. research into religiosity and religion is increasing as well as the acceleration of research into atheism) to introduce and advance a humanistic approach that remains methodologically agnostic and allows for the comparison of “like things” (i.e. both believers and non-believers have things of ultimate value and exceptionally profound experiences present in their lives).

In many ways, our secular reality seems clear (Bruce 2011; Chaves, 1989, 1993,1994; Coleman, 2013). Some theologians are beginning to label secularization as “unstoppable” (Oviedo, 2012). However, religion persists (Luckmann 1990; Pratt 2013) although perhaps not to the degree argued by Pratt (2013) and others. Some scholars even warn of the “will to religion” (Beaman 2013) arguing that some academics are indeed attempting to paint man as *homo-religious*. Still some scholars, in what might be considered the most *atheistic* of all sciences (cognitive/evolutionary), argue for the

naturalness of religion and *against* the affordance of a non-belief in a God as a naturally occurring cognitive phenomena (e.g. Barrett 2010; Barrett and Lanman 2008; Bering 2010, 2012). Yet others, seeking to slow down such premature theoretical cognitivist chauvinism (McCutcheon 2010; Caldwell-Harris 2012; Shook 2012; Hood 2012; Johnson 2012) find such assertions to be hasty to say the least.

Mustn't we recognize the contentious nature and implications of playing such a Wittgensteinian language game with loaded theological terms/concepts such as religion and belief? Is language not a social construct in its entirety and nothing more than, as Berger and Luckmann write, "a facticity external to myself and it is coercive in its effect on me ... language forces me into its patterns" (1991, 53)? Indeed, we as researchers appear as helpless victims to our current language constrictions/barriers. Hood begins his 2000 article by stating "Americans pioneered the psychology of religion and have always defined the nature of the field" (531), referring to the hegemonic dominance of American quantitative research methodologies. This statement can be extended to the newly formed research area of non-belief. If there are problems with traditional methods and frameworks dominating research on religion, what kinds of problems can we expect when these frameworks are extended or applied to atheists, non-believers, freethinkers and agnostics?

Further methodological misplacements may enter the reification of the public domain often times as the pro-social effects of "religion" (for a critical review see Galen 2012). Important to remember is that the majority of the studies done on religion have made no comparison to a category of similar or equal content. In other words, when researchers compare "religion" to that which it is not, no comparison has been made. How does one compare "something" (i.e. religion) to merely the absence of "something" (i.e. not religious)? For example, it makes little sense to compare the existence of, say, an apple with the absence of said apple. On one hand we have something that exists (the apple) while on the other hand we have non-existence (no apple). No comparison has ever truly been made when we compare something *that is* with something that we have determined *is not*. Comparisons are needed which is precisely why we need what Koenig calls "secular sources" (2012). This is imperative if we are ever to hold anything (secular or religious) as some type of source. That is, we cannot truly appreciate the scientific findings of researching religion/belief without appreciating the findings of researching non-religious/non-believers (Vergote 1997).

As Hood notes, we must demand good theory to guide the collection of meaningful data (Hood et. al 2009). Quite simply, theory is lacking in researching non-believers because theories for non-believers are based off of pre-existing religio-spiritual frameworks. There is nothing to guide the researcher within this form of research enterprise other than researching non-believers in order to learn more about believers, as some has suggested surely has its value (Vergote 1997). Others have called for research into non-believers in their own right (e.g. Hood et. al 2009; Silver 2013) and while this is certainly a welcome and foundational step, it does not get us very far. Researching non-belief for the sake of non-belief does not guide us in how to structure and implement data collection nor what data to collect, how to inform our interpretation of it. Is it fair to engage in research comparing a group of people who believe in 'something' that the other

groups of people in the study do not? The secular-non-believing human today is forced to juxtapose him or herself *against something* by identifying as an atheist or non-believer not only in everyday life, but in response to the calls of the very scientists/researchers that study them! Researchers will start to collect meaningful data about ‘non-believers’ when guiding theory and frameworks are created. This does not imply past research on demographics and psychological profiles has been meaningless, quite the opposite – however limit.

Researching non-belief for the sake of non-belief will slowly become obsolete in at least one of two ways. First, it will diminish implicitly as it is inevitable that a sizable body of literature will be created that has changed what it means to do research on non-belief, for better or worse. Second, it could (and should in our opinion) diminish quickly as we can formulate and play with different theories, frameworks, and methodologies that allow us to discover different things that are important for different reasons and to different people (Feyerabend 1975; Belzen 2010, 18). Studying non-belief as a phenomena in its own right can only sustain the field for so long. We need a way out.

3. A Way Out...

To offer up a ‘new theory’ or framework to *anything*, especially when human beliefs and experiences are involved, is to surely invite criticism (Guthrie 1993). However, it is surely welcomed in such an extremely young field as one tentatively titled as “non-religion” (Lee 2012) from a more sociological perspective and as ‘non-belief’ (Silver 2013) from a more psychological approach. It is refreshing to hear that researchers are now beginning to accept that “religion” does not form a stable set of beliefs, affects, meaning and values, thus it is quite simply a constructed category and not a primordial entity with a rigid identity in the world (c.f. McCutcheon 1997, 2007; Paloutzian and Park 2013; Taves 2009). In other words, researchers can identify an entirely new category if they wish, (something not religion, but ‘comparable’) as research into what is tentatively known as ‘non-belief or non-religion’ demands. Systematic categorization (i.e. including this but not that), is the underlying foundation of the sciences and of humans in general (Levi-Strauss 1966; Guthrie, 1993). Therefore let us create something *new*.

Throughout our research into non-belief, one of the most pressing problems we encountered when we asked if anyone had experiences that were profoundly meaningful but not accurately described in religious or spiritual terms was that there was a great reluctance to share such things lest they be construed as religious or spiritual. As mentioned previously, this is likely part of the problem of taking terms and frameworks from the study of religion and applying them to the non-religious and/or non-believing populations. A small vignette from our ongoing work on non-believers in America exemplifies this point further:

I dislike the word “spiritual” as so many religious people use it to describe themselves. I think the term has too many religious connotations. However, there are certainly many awe-inspiring, moving experiences in life, and I might describe

my feeling towards nature as “spiritual,” were I in a solely atheist group who would not misunderstand my beliefs. – ‘Jenna’

It is important to note that Jenna is letting researchers know that their research participants *are unlikely* to express that which is most “awe-inspiring,” “moving,” and important if they know it might be misconstrued. Certainly just as some scholars warn of the “will to religion” (Beaman 2013), the non-believing public is all too weary of the “will to religion” as well. We need a category and dimension for such experiences to function that will not misconstrue one’s worldview. In other words, whatever category or dimension is considered (i.e. horizontal transcendence as one option) it cannot be the very thing the individual declares it is not, like religion – even “implicit religion.”

3. What Horizontal Transcendence *is not*, Implicit Religion

As Streib and Hood push towards a reconceptualization of “the religious field” (2013) through the notion of horizontal and vertical transcendence, we find this approach extremely promising, however we differ in one key area. Thus we find it necessary to state what HT is not, before we explore what it is. As Streib and Hood use the term of “horizontal transcendence” to account for those who identify as non-religious or non-believing, so to do we. However, they attempt to understand HT as “implicitly religious” whereas we do not. Furthermore, we put forth that such a label as “implicitly religious” is a direct violation of methodological agnosticism. Moreover, it approaches methodological theism.

Thanks to our colleagues at the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, who have provided their support to publish excerpts from a recent blog post rejecting such implicit labels authored by Coleman (2013) from their official blog², this provides the rationale for rejecting the inclusion of HT under any category such as “implicit religion.” The concept of ‘implicit atheism’ is developed briefly here as a means to critique ‘implicit religion’ by showing normative claims can be established using *any* term if the word “implicit” is placed before the term. If the category of religion can dictate the nature of something it is not (the absence of religion or belief in God), then perhaps atheism should be allowed to dictate what can count as “religion” or “belief.”

While the notion of ‘implicit religion’ is not something new to academia (e.g. Bailey 1983), it is an area that seems to be gaining momentum, with the first journal dedicated to its ‘study’ – *Implicit Religion* – established in the not too distant past. This ‘implicit’ concept has seeped into the psychology of religion field, and also risks reification from the cognitive study of religion field as well, albeit in the form of ‘implicit belief’ (e.g. Barrett and Lanman 2008; Bering 2010).

What is wrong with the concept of ‘implicit religion’? The relationship between IR and what we are now forced to term as ‘explicit religion’ is of a tyrannical hegemonic nature. The political power to socially construct (Berger and Luckmann 1966) a category or grouping that then allows the current discourse of whatever is deemed ‘religious’ to be extended to things that are not deemed as such by the individual is nothing more than a

power struggle which (similarly constructed) explicit religion always controls. Interestingly enough, this notion of IR, in various forms, seems to be favored by those in academia with theological degrees (e.g. Bailey 1983, 2010; Clay 2009; Francis and Robbins 2007; Streib and Hood³ 2013; Schnell 2003, 2013) however they should not be confused with theologians! We should be asking why we do not extend this ‘implicit concept’ to other areas of academic inquiry. For instance, where is our theory of implicit art or implicit sports (Belzen 2010, 59)? Moreover, why is sports psychology not taking the notion of “*homo-athleticus*” seriously? Perhaps the topic of implicit sports should take a closer look at the three-to-four feet free throw I make with a crumpled up piece of paper into my office trashcan? Would a researcher label my actions as ‘implicit basketball’? Moreover does it contribute to sports psychology? More than likely, however, it would only serve to confuse our idea of what an “athlete” is. The reason implicit concepts are not typically extended into other domains should be made clear. It seems that due to certain religious *a priori*'s (Belzen 2010, 93) or the idea that we are inherently religious (i.e. *homo religious*), some scholars feel it necessary to label humans in general as ‘religious’. This can lead to researchers claiming such things as cross dressing, playing sports, or our reverence and enthusiasm for selling Apple computers (just to name a few) are ‘religious’, albeit implicitly (cf. Schnell 2003).

If we want to know what someone “believes” or does not believe, we have to ask them. We should consider this the nature of ‘belief’. There is no such inherent thing as ‘religion in general’ or a ‘religious act’ or ‘religious emotion’ (Belzen 2010, 12-32), but only things *deemed* to be “religious” by the person carrying out the act and/or displaying the emotion (Taves 2009). If there is anything that could be considered an inherently religious act or emotion, we know that this act or emotion can be fulfilled in secular ways as well (Vergote 1997, 45; Paloutzian and Park 2013; cf. Hood 1975). If the notion of “religion” is not oriented around a belief in the transcendent, then it remains a paradox (i.e. the scientific endeavor can then be considered “religion”) (e.g. Geertz 1973, 90), as we as researchers end up not merely as scientists, but could be considered clergymen proselytizing our favorite scientific theory to the laity. As Vergote says, “The broadening of the object of psychology of religion is done for bad reasons and leads to absurdities” (1986, 68).

Approaching the issue of religious language from another direction, Berger and Luckmann state in *The Social Construction of Knowledge* that ‘I cannot use the rules of German syntax when I speak English’ (1966, 53). If we apply their idea to researching atheists and non-believers in God, you cannot use religious language (German syntax) with ‘religious baggage’ when you want to speak to, research, or describe non-believers and the non-religious (‘English speakers’) or as Vergote states, ‘religious terminology is deprived of clarity’ (1997, 15). All in all, perhaps we need a theory of ‘implicit atheism’ to function as a rhetorical device allowing non-believers to control the discourse on belief or non-belief. If the concept of implicit religion can be found ‘beneficial’ in any way to the social sciences, then so too can a concept of implicit atheism. Intuitively we would assume that atheists do not typically go to church and if you identify as ‘religious’ and don’t go to church, your behavior is atheistic, albeit implicitly so! See how this works,

implicit frameworks are a tyrannical hegemonic enterprise – explicitly so. Thus when addressing the notion of HT as ‘implicit religion’ it will be unlikely to serve future scientific investigation less it assume nothing more than the stance of a school yard bully.

Science has been unable to determine anything to be inherently sacred however, such *things* people refer to as “sacred” are likely a conglomerate of *several things* that, when combined in varying fashions, may be perceived as such (i.e. as sacred) (Paloutzian and Park 2013; Taves 2009). Moreover researchers have largely given up the search for actual things that might be labeled as inherently sacred (c.f. Taves 2009; Paloutzian and Park 2013). This is good news for non-believers as this quite literally implies – nothing is sacred – well at least nothing tangible. However, what might we be able to include in this horizontally transcendent category? What are some possible starting points? Are atheists more like the popular polemicists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, that many researchers (and the public) take their understanding of atheism or non-belief from (e.g. Geertz and Markússon, 2010; Johnson 2012)? Might non-believers and atheists have more in common with Carl Sagan than with Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris?

While religious studies scholars like Mircea Eliade (1959) and other perennialists’ of the homo-religious school deny the nonbelieving /nonreligious human being the wondrous, meaningful and awe-inspiring experiences they so closely associate with only the religious, the non-believing biologist Ursula Goodenough contributes to the reclamation of such wonder and meaning in her 1998 book titled *The Sacred Depths of Nature* which can easily be considered a rebuttal of sorts to both Eliadeians of the past and future. Although Goodenough considers her work in terms of what she calls “religious naturalism,” the concept of a God plays no part. Goodenough appears to have been more or less forced by the use of religious language (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 53) in expressing such profound experiences and thoughts than any suspicious intent to paint humans as religious in their nature. Even psychologist William James considered what to call his collection of experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as, pragmatically speaking of course, a debate about names noting it was merely his personal choice to call such things “religion” (1985). Horizontal transcendence cannot be considered explicit religion, as it finds itself in a space occupied by primarily non-believers and the non-religious, it cannot be considered implicit religion lest it be seen as a sorts of “will to religion” (i.e. everyone is religious). Furthermore, James’ (although he *chooses* to call such things religion) allows us quite easily to choose what we might call our object of investigation. Putting aside what horizontal transcendence is not; it has much to offer social scientific investigation based on what it is!

A reconceptualization of the social scientific study of non-belief and religion as horizontal and vertical transcendence (HVT) has not only methodological and pragmatic benefits (as noted by Streib and Hood 2013)⁵, but it offers up a very humanistic approach in examining humans. Quite simply, HVT conceives of values, meanings, experiences and the intensity of such things to operate along a continuum that takes into account the individuals ontological positioning in the world. The very ground one stands on regarding a life outlook and the very presuppositions and metaphysics with which a person frames their world is of primary importance for research (Bruner 1986). HVT takes into account

both Belief and nonbelief recognizing the continuous nature of the religion and non-religion dialogue. It also takes into account that if we want to look at raw experience as William James did, we must acknowledge that this is a debate about names, so let's take this notion into account. We must recognize that this is a debate about names/labels (semantics) and take that into account as we proceed forward with research.

In keeping with good science HVT is not methodologically atheistic as many operate under such grounding (e.g. Berger 1967), HVT is methodologically agnostic (c.f. Porpora 2006; Hood 2012). It neither confirms nor denies the existence of what McCauley and Lawson term “culturally postulated super-human agents” (CPS) (2002). It does not discern between one label being more meaningful than the other. With HVT neither is presumed as more special, more important or more real than the other and as such, is an attempt to avoid what has been termed by some as “metaphysical chauvinism” (Beck and Miller 2001; Ladd and Borshuk 2013). HVT is a pluralistic framework that is best conceived not as relativism, but to use Berger and Luckmann's term, (1966) “relationism.” In other words, HVT functions as a way to examine relations of *things* with other *things* based off of a person's belief in a CPS or lack thereof. Belief or non-belief is the starting point for all scientific inquiries under this research programme. Perception creates reality, which to the large extent is socially constructed, so for psychological purposes at least, a modified version of the “Thomas theorem” (Merton 1995) should hold true – things, which are held to be true, will be acted upon as if they were true.

4. Horizontal Transcendence: Atheists are not Immune!

If you want to be awe inspired... than let me say, let me just tell you those of us who do not believe we are divinely created, let alone divinely supervised, are not immune to the idea of awe and beauty and the transcendent.
– Christopher Hitchens 2008⁴

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the great many words spoken over the years by noted late atheist activist and anti-theist Christopher Hitchens, this succinct and powerful quote certainly transcends the typical hubristic remarks he is known for in a very awe inspiring way of its own. Another popular atheist activist/rights advocate and author Greta Christina (2007)⁵ writes:

To me, the idea that consciousness and emotion and experiences like ecstasy and joy are physical, biological phenomena – it doesn't diminish these experiences. On the contrary. It makes them more amazing, more awe-inspiring. We are made up of essentially the same stuff as rocks and water and dirt and stars... and yet, out of this stuff, out of these atoms and molecules, we can be aware of ourselves, and of one another, and of the world around us. And we can shape that awareness, and create experiences that bring joy and delight to ourselves and one another. We can make vows to stick together for better or for worse... and we can dance for hours celebrating those vows, using our bones and nerves and muscles to generate connection and meaning, transcendence and joy.

What is most promising for researching such moments of awe-inspiring profundity is that these two popular examples aside, Silver and Coleman's (2013; Silver 2013) research on the six types of non-belief have yielded data from participants that not only support, but also build on the above statements. In other words, these seem to be less of a 'popular notion' and perhaps such horizontal transcendence is widespread in those who don't believe in God? Perhaps most interesting is Keltner and Haidt's (2003, 300) remark, building off of Durkheim (1915) that "the elicitors of these social sentiments [awe and wonder] have to do with collective interests." They go on to note that such collective sentiments often stem from collective values and goals.

Certainly, as noted by many others (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Silver 2013), is that fact that non-believers in a God share a strong connection with, show strong support for and highly value science. The research conducted by Silver and Coleman (2013; Silver 2013) and the previous more popular examples from Hitchens and Christina show support for extremely analytical/scientific accounts in the recall and expression of such awe and wonder. Perhaps if believers use the language and framework of religion to relay such intense, moving and life changing experiences (Keltner and Haidt 2003) non-believers use the language and framework of science to relay theirs. Examples are published here for the very first time from Silver and Coleman's (2013, Silver 2013) research when they asked participants if they believed whether or not there were experiences that were profound in this life but are not accurately described in the terms spiritual or religious:

The nature and scope of the Universe is something that I enjoy learning about and reflecting on to give me profound revelations which I find far more satisfying than religion ever was for me.

I am awestruck by the vastness of the universe and the beauty and elegance of nature, including those parts that are "violent," such as how there are predators that kill and eat their prey.

Yes, I have cried tears of joy looking at clouds in the sky, watching an inspirational music video, or even listening to Carl Sagan talk about the universe.

There are profound moments when one realizes beauty or their own place/importance in the universe. I do not believe these are either spiritual or religious.

Certainly. The feeling you get when you are face to face with the wonders of nature or of humanity – on top of a mountain, or being the first person to see a particular galaxy of stars, or watching a rocket launch – or being in love – or deep intellectual experiences like understanding the gravitational field equations for the first time – there are plenty of profound experiences that come from our brain's software being stretched in new ways, when you appreciate the complexity and majesty of the

world and of our own makeup. I don't call them spiritual because I associate that description with people who believe in a soul that is separate from the hardware it is running on.

The human experience is subjective. We cannot observe the rim of the Grand Canyon, or lock eyes with a wild animal, or even share a meal with a new friend without experiencing a deeply sublime connection to this world and to each other.

Absolutely. Summiting a 14er, seeing an amazing western sunset over the Rockies, skiing deep powder in trees on a bluebird day, getting engaged – all amazing, and profound experiences that have made me the happiest I've ever been. It's never occurred to me that I should thank God/The Universe in those instances. I just feel grateful, lucky, and happy.

Yes, realization of the vastness of the universe and individual place in it.

Yes. The experience of wonder at the incomprehensible beauty of nature and complexity of science.

Yes. There are many experiences which are profound and made more so by the lack of belief that they are intentionally god-created. Sharing love, creating children, holding a loved-one's hand as they die, watching things get incredibly green after a heavy rain, eating a delicious, beautifully ripened pear from your own tree, walking out into the sun on the first really warm day of spring... These experiences are every bit as affecting without god(s).”

Music, art, birth of a child, visually striking nature scenes, moments of true cohesiveness with other people, hugs, “I love you” from your children... Life is full of beautiful moments that deeply stir the emotions.

Clearly, as Christopher Hitchens stated previously and these vignettes demonstrate, non-believers are not immune to the transcendent feelings of awe and beauty. These brief excerpts seem to support notions of Keltner and Haidt's groundbreaking work theorizing “awe” (2003), fitting such categories as awe extended to nature (e.g. mountains and the Universe), awe extended to human art/artifact (e.g. music and art) and its extensions to epiphanic experience (e.g. gravitational field equations and other scientific frameworks). Such conceptualizations of awe fit snugly into the idea of horizontal transcendence defined by Coleman, Hood, and Silver (2013) as “the experiential dimension to human life of interconnectedness that is profound, exceptional, and wondrous while requiring no religious, spiritual, or theistic framework or narrative in which to force the structure of the discourse.” Such a framework and definition is important as it serves to take an individuals' absence of a belief in a God or gods as an underlying assumption moving research forward. That is, with horizontal transcendence, there is no “will to religion”

(Beaman, 2013), no “implicit belief” or “implicit religion” to be found. Moments of profundity, awe and beauty are accepted as phenomena that can be critically important objects of study without the need for religiously tinged language and terms or the need to provide an identity that states what you do not believe, as again, it is an underlying assumption that forms the very outlook from which the world is viewed.

5. Focusing on What is – Not What’s Not

What should be the focus of “non-belief” research? If we shift the focus from the one thing this population does not believe exists (God) we can explore a category that is filled with a great many wondrous things while valuing such an ontological stance as it forms the very discursive from within which the world is viewed. Experiences of horizontal transcendence and how they relate to, or differ from, those of vertical transcendence will allow the sciences to get away from negative juxtapositions against religion, even if some atheists may define themselves as such. Just as James chose to focus on “religious experience” perhaps it would serve academics well to focus on “horizontally transcendent” experiences.

If people who don’t believe in a God believe in so many other things, let’s lift the curse of forced identifications about what people do not believe in and start looking at what they do believe in and experience. Returning to Kluger’s article (2013) and Valdesolo and Graham’s research (2013), we strongly invite further conceptual and methodological sophistication to provide greater details into awe, moving beyond the nominal centrality of the religious variable. This is not only an academic problem, but a social problem as well. Maybe the awe elicited by Valdesolo and Graham’s research is less of a religious phenomena and more of a shared human experience that some interpret as ‘religious’, while others find such a religio-spiritual framework limiting and a false representation of their beliefs, or lack thereof? Focusing on horizontal transcendence provides a start at a new direction that moves the focus away from religio-spiritual variables and constitutes much more than a non-belief.

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NOTES

1. For direct access see <http://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/publication/1856797>.
2. For the text in its original form see <http://blog.nsrn.net/>.
3. Dr. Ralph W. Hood Jr. *does not* hold a degree in theology.
4. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6UU9C-WmvM&safe=active>.
5. See http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/ which has moved to <http://freethoughtblogs.com/greta/>

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Can Liberal Christians Save the Church? A Humanist Approach to Contemporary Progressive Christian Theologies

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In contrast to many traditional theologies, today's progressive theologies offer believers an attractive ethic that is humane, pacific, and Earth-centered. And when God is spoken of, he is generally portrayed as non-coercive, deeply invested in the well-being of all, and attentive to the cries of any who suffer. On the one hand, then, humanists have good reason to celebrate this recent shift in thinking about the sacred and divine-human relations. Indeed, we share with progressive Christians a very similar set of core moral values. But, are progressive theologies really any more persuasive than earlier conceptions of the sacred? Do they offer better evidence for their claims? It is argued here that most all suffer from unresolved and rather serious epistemic issues that ultimately undermine their plausibility – and, therefore, their future viability.

Today's most celebrated critics of Christianity – Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and A.C. Grayling, to name a few – generally target traditional theological beliefs. And they are right to do so, for a large majority around the world still subscribe to them. Most Christians, for instance, believe in: 1) a personal God who regularly intervenes in human affairs; 2) a savior whose death releases adherents from sin and eternal punishment; and 3) an inspired body of writings that serve as a reliable – even infallible – guide both to divinely approved moral conduct and to salvation. One might also add a few key historical claims related specifically to God's son Jesus, whom all Christian communities maintain faithfully disclosed his father's character and purposes. Jesus, for instance, is said to have: 1) entered the world by divine conception; 2) healed by non-natural or miraculous means; 3) rose bodily from the dead; and 4) and ascended into heaven.

Theologians in elite liberal seminaries and divinity schools find many of these traditional beliefs unpersuasive because they are incompatible with worldviews grounded in the latest research from the social and natural sciences. But they also point to the ways in which these kinds of beliefs have been used to justify patriarchy, slavery, colonization, and disregard for Earth and its nonhuman species. So, for elite liberal theologians,

traditional beliefs not only misrepresent reality as we understand it today but often are used to justify profoundly unattractive ethical visions as well. As a result, they have devised new theologies that they maintain are consistent with recent work in the sciences and promote ethical orientations that are far more humane. It is these recent and more sophisticated theologies, they contend, that today's outspoken critics of Christianity fail to address in any substantive way. If critics were to take the time to familiarize themselves with these new constructions of God, perhaps they would not be so dismissive of the discipline of theology or so strongly opposed to the Christian church.

Whether or not progressive theologies offer a more persuasive alternative to their predecessors, they do indeed share one very attractive feature for which we can be grateful: a compassionate and humane ethical outlook that respects human variation (with regard, for instance, to sexual orientation, ethnicity, even religious affiliation), promotes equal rights for all, is ecologically aware, and is generally pacific. Practically, what this means in part is that groups formerly excluded from the theological conversation are now an integral and influential part of it. In fact, during the past four decades, a majority of vacant teaching positions in liberal seminaries and divinity schools have been assumed by women, ethnic minorities, and subaltern peoples. Their voices are now at the very heart of the theological dialogue, and they are shaping it for the better.

Among these new humanistic and Earth-centered theologies, however, there is one very important distinguishing feature: while some claim genuine insight into a sacred realm that our forbearers either didn't have or failed to emphasize, others maintain that we have no way of knowing whether or not more recent portraits of God better approximate the divine character and will, or even whether a transcendent order exists, and so refuse to advance any traditional knowledge claims at all. The first type therefore still adheres to a modernist Enlightenment paradigm, the second to a postmodern perspective rooted in Continental philosophy. Where the first type speaks confidently of the existence of a sacred order and holds that we can acquire reliable knowledge about this order, the second type makes no such epistemic pretensions, altogether eschewing the notions of "justification" or "grounds for belief." None of us, postmodern theologians argue, is able to press behind our cultural inheritances and language games to *The Way Things Really Are* or to some transcendent signified – to "God" or to "the Real," for instance. What I wish to do here is to examine each of the above types – modernist progressive and progressive postmodern theologies – and assess whether either one makes Christianity a more attractive, persuasive, and viable option today.

1. Modernist Progressive Christian Theology

For progressive Christians who hold that we can speak with some confidence about the divine nature and will, God is generally believed to be infinitely loving, compassionate, and just. This God is especially attentive to the suffering of historically oppressed and marginalized communities, is opposed to social and economic structures that would privilege a few at the expense of the majority, and works tirelessly to create conditions in which all people, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, may flourish.

God therefore desires an immediate end to any belief system or social order that oppresses, demeans, stigmatizes, or excludes.

This God, moreover, no longer imposes his will on us or on any other creature: unwilling to infringe on creaturely autonomy, God is said to invite or “lure” us to pursue his purposes. God’s power, therefore, is no longer a power of coercion but of persuasion, and it is our responsibility to work with him to create conditions in which all may flourish. Fulfilling God’s will minimally would involve fostering just societies in which no one wants, no one is deprived of her dignity, and no one is used merely as a means to advance the interests of another. But many progressive theologians claim that God’s love extends beyond *Homo sapiens* to all sentient life, even to Earth itself. For those who understand God’s love in this more expansive way, they would engage in the additional work of safeguarding our fragile ecosystems, preserving endangered species, reducing our carbon footprint, and so on. Progressive Christianity’s God, then, endorses a broadly humanistic and Earth-centered ethic.

In order to convey this recent shift in conceptualizing the divine, progressive theologians propose replacing traditional patriarchal metaphors such as King, Lord, and Father with far more agreeable ones like Friend, Mother, or Life-giving Spirit. Some of these metaphors are already present in the biblical writings (although were rarely emphasized by ecclesiastical leaders), but others are entirely new, emerging especially among disenfranchised communities that have caught a glimpse of a deity radically different from the authoritarian Sovereign whose chief preoccupations once amounted to obsessively monitoring private moral behavior and culling sheep from goats. No longer narrowly conceived as guarantor of personal salvation and stern judge of the godless, he has become liberator of the oppressed and comforter of the afflicted. As noted above, the chief benefit of reconfiguring deity in this way is to authorize a far more just and humane ethical orientation. If theology is to persevere as an academic discipline (there appears no end in the foreseeable future), this is the kind of God-talk that humanists should welcome. We may disagree over how an ethical stance ought to be justified and what ultimately ought to motivate moral behavior, but progressive Christians and humanists do share a very similar set of core moral values.

I want to offer a few quotations that illustrate this recent shift in how God is conceptualized. Laurel Schneider, for instance, when summarizing key insights that have emerged specifically in African American and Latino/a communities, writes:

Black and Latin American liberation theologians argue that it is through the teachings and ministry of Jesus that clues to this God can be obtained. To the extent that Jesus is divine, we see a clear preference for the company of children, of the ridiculed, of the subjugated. In other words, we see an image of God not only as friend and lover of the vulnerable or suffering but as the vulnerable and suffering themselves. In Jesus’ own homeless birth and life under the yoke of colonial rule we have an image of divinity that stands in opposition to triumphal, militaristic models of power and instantiates the cost of those models. The God revealed in

Jesus' actions and teachings is incompatible with imperialism and so, presumably, with racism and sexism.¹

This emphasis within African American and Latino/a theology might just as well be applied to a wide range of theologies emerging among other ethnic minorities here in the U.S. as well as among subaltern peoples formerly colonized by Western powers. For progressive theologians generally, Jesus' teachings and deeds are taken to disclose the divine character and purposes. They highlight his solidarity with the victims of Roman imperial power and his efforts to foster a fully inclusive community in which everyone has what they need. Jesus, it is said, offers a countercultural vision that contests Roman social and economic structures that privilege a few at the expense of the many, often under the threat of violence. His identification with the underclasses in early Roman Palestine is believed to mirror God's own predilection for the poor and disenfranchised generally.

For Elizabeth Johnson, too, through the ministry of Jesus, God is revealed as "love in solidarity with the struggle of denigrated persons," as an unfailing companion who "accompanies the lost and defeated ... on the journey to new, unimaginable life" (italics mine).² But Johnson's claim that "God is love" is hardly unique. In fact, in her recent survey of progressive theologies, she is led to conclude: "If it were possible to summarize [these theologians'] rediscoveries in one metaphor, it would be the classic Christian belief that '*God is Love*.'"³ Importantly, this love is no longer extended only to a handful of God's favorites – only to the ancient Hebrews, for instance, or to orthodox Christians who happen to believe that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine – but to all people. God's love is all-inclusive, and if partial in any way, it is partial to the have-nots, the denigrated, the disenfranchised of this world.

Finally, for progressive evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock, among these new models of God, the austere and aloof monarch of ages past has been displaced by:

a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans. ... God's openness means that God is open to the changing realities of history, that God cares about us and lets what we do impact him. Our lives make a difference to God – they are truly significant. God is delighted when we trust him and saddened when we rebel against him. God made us significant creatures and treats us as such. We are significant to God and the apple of his eye.⁴

What is the upshot of a conception of God such as Pinnock's for believers? Judith Plaskow puts it well: "The idea that we are loved for what is most valuable in us, that God sees our worth even when we cannot, is far more conducive to human empowerment and accountability than the idea that we are loved despite our worthlessness."⁵ So, whether or not one finds persuasive the notion of creator who, like a "caring parent," sees and treats just one of Earth's species as "the apple of his eye," this conception of the divine has clear

pragmatic value: it is far more conducive to psychic well-being than portraits from the past that inspire fear and guilt.

While progressive theologians consistently highlight the social, psychological, and ethical benefits of this shift, a majority really do believe that these recent reconceptualizations better reflect God's character. In other words, in spite of the requisite nod to the "ineffable mystery" of God,⁶ or to the inability of any one metaphor or set of metaphors to adequately capture the essence of God,⁷ they wish to claim that real epistemic progress has been made over the past half century, due largely to insights from historically oppressed and marginalized communities. "These [new] metaphors," writes Judith Plaskow, "are not just political correctives to dominant modes of seeing and being; they arise from and refer to *real discoveries* of the sacred in places we had long stopped looking to find it" (italics mine).⁸

Elizabeth Johnson, too, does not hesitate to attribute this shift to actual "glimpses of the living God."⁹ Indeed, she believes that we "are living in a golden age of discovery,"¹⁰ that the trove of new metaphors for the divine are not merely a product of the human imagination – an endless play of signifiers that fail to penetrate behind the veil – but reliably mediate the character of a very real God. When surveying recent reformulations of Trinitarian doctrine, she writes:

The God whom Israel knows as creator and liberator, whom Christians know and experience through the Messiah, Jesus, who spoke with authority, healed the sick, died on a Roman cross as King of the Jews, and was raised by Spirit on the third day, the same Spirit who is present now in the world – *this is who God is even when no one is looking* (italics mine).¹¹

Contemporary progressive theologians, she believes, have a better understanding of the divine than our forbearers. God's character is not totally inaccessible. Our updated imagery, at least to some degree, "gets it right": it corresponds to someone who is actually there.

Even Sallie McFague, who concedes that theology is "self-consciously constructive" and inescapably metaphorical – indeed, "mostly fiction" – nevertheless believes that "there is a reality to which our constructions refer, even though the only way we have of reaching it is by creating versions of it."¹² Contesting more extreme forms of postmodernism, she asserts: "I believe that the supposition that theology is a verbal game is as dangerous as the refusal to admit the role of imagination in theology. *There is something outside language ...*" (italics mine).¹³

These recent "insights" or "discoveries" into the divine nature are most often rooted in religious experience, and more often than not, they are said to be consistent with some underemphasized or neglected aspect of Christian tradition. Unlike many conservative theologians, progressives generally do not appeal to reason or attempt to prove the historicity of events believed to be foundational for Christianity (such as the resurrection of Jesus). Rather, it is religious experience that gives one confidence in the reality of God as liberator and friend, supplemented by a highly selective use of scripture and doctrine.

And it is religious experience that enables one to say “I know” when confronted by challenges to biblical authority or by extraordinary instances of natural and moral evil that might cause one to question God’s benevolence.

Of course, staking one’s faith on religious experience is risky business, for the believer is ultimately put at the mercy of God’s whim: God may or may not choose to disclose himself, and even if the religious experient is fortunate enough to receive some kind of communication at some point in her life, there is certainly no guarantee that he will continue to make his presence known on a regular basis. As many Christians have testified, a believer may go years, even decades, before again benefitting from the kind of assurance that once made the reality of God so persuasive. Regular and convincing communication of the sort Muhammad, Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Paul purportedly received is rare. Furthermore, most religious experiences are vague and non-sensory. The ordinary believer generally does not see or hear God speak in the way, say, that one sees a deer cross the road or hears a dog bark. Rather, she is left to render a primarily emotional experience – a surge of gratitude or love, for instance – after the fact into propositional language.

Even more troublesome, however, is that religious experiences yield the widest possible range of “revelations,” many of which are incommensurable. For example, Joseph Smith’s earliest visions, in which he learned that all Christian denominations had missed the mark and that therefore he had been appointed to restore the true church, is incompatible with other Christian disclosures that confirm the truth of mainstream Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant doctrinal claims. A monistic experience of the sort an Advaita Hindu ascetic might have, where one sees that his or her *atman* is none other than *brahman*, the impersonal ground of all that is, is incompatible with the theistic experience of a Muslim or Christian mystic who is overcome by love for a personal deity ontologically distinct from all of creation. Even within a single tradition, religious experiences are often incommensurable. A Theravada Buddhist’s experience of *nirvana* – the cessation of *tanha* coupled with the dissolution of the boundaries of the self – is nothing at all like the peak experience sought by a Pure Land Buddhist, who aims to cultivate feelings of love and gratitude for Amida (or Amitabha). And a Southern Baptist’s experience of the Eucharist as a mere memorial of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples is radically dissimilar from that of a traditional Roman Catholic, who believes (or should believe) that the elements she is about to ingest have become the very body and blood of Christ.

In view of the huge variety of religious experiences, one naturally may be led to wonder: Which of these communities has a better grasp of the sacred? Is “ultimate reality” fundamentally personal, as traditional Muslims, Jews, and Christians maintain, or is it impersonal, as many Hindus, Taoists, Confucians, and Jains claim? No believer, after all, is able to step outside of her cultural-linguistic tradition and objectively assess the hundreds of thousands of hypotheses on the nature of ultimate reality. Such universal or transcendent criteria for evaluating these wildly diverse views of the sacred are no longer available in our postmodern milieu. At the end of the day, there really is no good defense for why one might believe Christian metaphysics has it right and Advaita Vedanta or Pure Land metaphysics have it wrong. It seems that any religious adherent who is honest with

herself is left in the uncomfortable position of having to acknowledge that endorsement of any one of these worldviews is a product of one's cultural inheritances – an accident of birth, upbringing, or association – rather than of rational analysis. In other words, the foundational premises of a given tradition are persuasive chiefly because one already has been acclimated to such premises (often as a child) and currently shares deep social bonds with others who share these premises.

One might also add that religious adherents, so far as we know, do not suddenly have a religious experience commonly associated with a tradition not their own. A Christian, for example, does not wake in the night with a personal communication from Shiva or Vishnu. A Muslim does not rise from bed one morning with the assurance that Amida has granted her entrance into the Pure Land at death, where she might continue her journey toward liberation under more ideal conditions. That this is the case – again, so far as we know – strongly suggests that religious experience is constituted by culture, by the religious language game in which one is presently immersed, and not the result of a “break through” from a single sacred realm. If religious experience is to be explained with reference to a real transcendent order, one has a lot of heavy lifting to do in order to account for why there are so many radically divergent descriptions of this order, and why the messages received from it are so often incommensurable. Unlike conservative Christians, progressives generally don't feel the need to address these difficult epistemic issues. More often than not, they are willing to concede that it comes down to faith: one simply *trusts* the witness of scripture and tradition – or, rather, the few parts amenable to a liberal agenda – as well as the veridicality of their own and others' religious experiences. Today, apologetics is left to conservative communities.

In addition to their inherently precarious foundation in religious experience, progressive Christian theologies suffer from a tendency to idealize the divine, to attribute to God only the most positive and politically expedient qualities. Their God is everything a progressive would ever want in a deity: he passionately desires the flourishing of all sentient life, abhors any social or economic order that disenfranchises or marginalizes, suffers alongside all who suffer (particularly women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and subaltern peoples), and makes use of persuasive rather than coercive power. This strong idealizing tendency is correctly reflected in Elizabeth Johnson's astute observation (cited earlier) on the root metaphor that governs most all progressive theologies: “If it were possible to sum up [these theologians'] rediscoveries in one metaphor, it would be the classic Christian belief that *God is Love*.”¹⁴

Sallie McFague's landmark monograph *Models of God* is emblematic of this idealizing bent, for she only ever considers exploring metaphors that “express the trustworthiness and graciousness of the power of the universe for our time,” settling finally on Friend, Lover, and Mother.¹⁵ In his *In the Face of Mystery*, Walter Kaufman likewise constructs the divine in such a way that believers may learn “to live with a deep confidence in the basic order and goodness and meaning of the world.”¹⁶ Clark Pinnock, as we've seen, insists that we think of God “as a caring parent” who treats *Homo sapiens* in particular as “the apple of his eye.”¹⁷ Kathryn Tanner conceives of God chiefly in terms of a “giver of all good gifts” whose primary role “is to communicate such gifts to us.” In

fact, she says, “[t]he history of the world is God’s working for the fuller bestowal of such gifts, each stage of this history – creation, covenant, salvation in Christ – representing a greater communication of goodness to the creature.”¹⁸ Laurel Schneider prefers to see God as “the bodysoul of the cosmos [who] creates the world, sustains it, and engages in all that is toward healing.” “God is ever emergent,” she continues, “responsive not only to our prayers but to our imaginings and concepts. The constructive task is one of attention to all that God is that confounds our tendencies to diminish life.”¹⁹ Finally, John Haught, widely known for his efforts to incorporate evolutionary theory into thinking about the sacred, sees a “God of love” at work in our emerging universe, even in the competitive struggle and waste of life inherent in the evolutionary process.²⁰ Although Haught acknowledges that there is an enormous amount of gratuitous suffering in our world (due largely to the freedom we have received from God to pursue our own aims), he believes that the universe remains an “unfinished” project, and that even now God is laboring to “redeem all the struggle and pain in the entire emergent universe.”²¹ Put simply, among progressives God is only ever spoken of as wholly good – as passionately desiring and working for the well-being of all.

But retaining God’s goodness – indeed, focusing *exclusively* on God’s goodness – comes at a significant price: in order to account for natural and moral evil in a world that God is said to have created, God must be denuded of his power, so that he no longer has the capability to diminish suffering in any meaningful way. For progressive theologians, the task of reducing the suffering of sentient life therefore generally falls to us. One may wonder, though, what lasting appeal such an impotent deity can sustain over the long term, or even whether this God is even still a god at all. For, inherent in any notion of deity is power that exceeds what human beings are able to muster on their own. If Bill Gates or Ted Turner can do far more with their billions to relieve suffering around the world than even God can, can we really still refer to the Christian deity as a god? Isn’t he now missing an essential feature of divinity? My hunch is that over time a large majority of religious people, if they ever really are able to buy into the notion of divine impotence, would eventually lose interest. Why pray? Why worship or petition God when he can’t do anything truly meaningful? Admittedly, most progressive Christians do believe that God is present to comfort and encourage us when all hope seems lost. But I fail to see how such solace constitutes any improvement over the encouragement our friends and family members can give us. At least we can verify their existence and count on them to show up when we need them. Too often, even the most committed Christians find God absent in times of trouble or despair. If solace is all God can offer us today, and if even that proves difficult for many Christians to perceive or to verify, then one legitimately may wonder what the point is of keeping such a deity alive.

And yet, progressive theologians generally still conceive of God as creator in some sense and of creation as self-expressive of his character. But if a Christian should choose to endorse both of these premises, surely God must bear at least some responsibility for suffering and evil. Is it really conceivable that a creator – again, most all theologians still award God this title – would have no power whatsoever to diminish suffering? Has he no capability at all to revise the fundamental laws of his own universe in the interest of

creaturely well-being? Furthermore, to insist that any creator of this world is *exclusively* loving, compassionate, and just is to turn a blind eye to the brute – often brutal – facts of life. It is dishonest, and it opens one to the charge that one worships a god of one's own making. Given the world in which we actually find ourselves – a world in which 99% of Earth's creatures have gone extinct, species compete to the death for scarce resources, and fiendish microbes make the lives of so many higher species a living hell – isn't it far more likely that its creator either doesn't care what goes on down here, doesn't know, or has a character composed of both "good" and "bad" qualities? But progressive theologians generally dismiss out of hand the insights of writers like Annie Dillard, Herman Melville, Richard Rubenstein, David Blumenthal, or even the author of Job, all of whom suggest that any creator of *this* world is very likely to have a dark side too. Can progressives demonstrate that their experience of the sacred is veridical and that Rubenstein's or Blumenthal's is not? Can they show that those who experience the sacred as a fiendish or amoral power are wrong? Or, for that matter, can they show that conservatives who worship a bigoted, interventionist deity obsessed with piety and personal salvation have gotten God's basic character wrong? It is, in fact, their inability to satisfactorily resolve these epistemic issues that in part accounts for the appeal of postmodern theologies (to which we shall turn shortly), which refuse to advance any truth claims about the nature and purposes of God, or even about whether a sacred order may exist.

To what extent, we may ask, are progressive theologians entitled to their beliefs? After all, believing in their deity would seem to foster the kinds of virtues that enhance human well-being overall, so even if their portraits of the divine turn out to be fictions, one may wonder what harm could come of Christians embracing these newer models of God on a large scale. For me, it depends chiefly upon whether a theologian sells her God-talk as "knowledge" or as "mostly fiction." In spite of conceding that God's nature is ultimately unknowable and inexpressible, many theologians, as we've seen, claim to have genuine insight into his character and aims. Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and James Cone, or feminist theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna, all write in such a way as to suggest that they really do know not only that God exists but that he also adamantly opposes any social order, belief system, policy, or program that would unfairly favor one class or gender. For them, God really does manifest "a preferential option for the poor," and in his eyes, women truly are "beloved" and therefore worthy of equal treatment and respect.²² The Christian God is not, as some conservatives would claim, a stern patriarch who enforces a status quo that benefits straight white men, but rather "a liberating God whose signature deeds set people free."²³ Modernist progressive theologians generally do not offer their portraits of God to readers as tentative suggestions. On the contrary: they are presented as reliable knowledge claims based both on the (purportedly veridical) religious experiences of oppressed peoples and on the witness of certain parts of the Bible.

A few, however, like Sallie McFague do emphasize the inescapably constructive character of all theology, even going so far as to concede that it is "mostly fiction."²⁴ The metaphors she proposes for thinking about divinity – Friend, Mother, and Lover – together constitute "an imaginative picture that ... provides a habitable house in which to live for a

while, with doors open and windows ajar, and with the promise that additions and renovations are desired and needed.”²⁵ For her, theology is “a tentative affair,” and no metaphor or set of metaphors for the divine should ever be deemed “sacred” or “authoritative,” valid for all Christians in all times.²⁶ Although she does believe that “there is a reality to which our constructions refer,” and that theology cannot be reduced to mere “fantasy, illusion, or play,” I nevertheless find a profound and refreshing epistemic humility in her work.²⁷ For McFague, theology is overwhelmingly a product of the human imagination, and if knowledge claims are to be made at all, they should be ventured tentatively and kept to the barest minimum.

As a humanist, I have little trouble with a theological approach such as McFague’s. Other progressive theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez or Elizabeth Johnson, however, who traffic in far too many knowledge claims based on the flimsiest of “evidence,” are really no different than conservative theologians in their basic approach. Both proclaim with confidence to know who God is and what he wants of human beings. Even when the output of a given theology is a progressive and humane ethic, confidence in the metaphysics used to underwrite this ethic simply isn’t warranted today. Because religious claims of a metaphysical nature are unverifiable and nonfalsifiable, none ever ought to be prefaced with “I know.” So, while I find McFague’s tentative “I believe” to be acceptable, the “I know” implied in the work of many other progressive theologians is not.

Van A. Harvey helpfully clarifies the important distinction between these two epistemic orientations:

When one says ‘I know’ one puts forward a claim to speak with some authority and backing. It implies that one stands ready to give compelling reasons for what one says. The words ‘I believe’ ..., on the other hand, are more ambiguous and are frequently used to simply report the state of one’s mind, to indicate that one is aware that she lacks the acceptable grounds for saying ‘I know.’ ‘I know,’ in short, lays claim to an entitlement in a way that ‘I believe’ does not.²⁸

Wittgenstein puts it a bit more concisely: “‘If someone believes something, we needn’t always be able to answer the question ‘why he believes it’; but if he knows something, then the question ‘how does he know’ must be capable of being answered.’”²⁹ When speaking of immaterial entities and realms not directly perceivable by our senses, or when appealing to private religious experiences that are not able to be confirmed by others, one is not entitled to say “I know.” “I believe” or “I have a hunch” is admissible, but no theological assertion can qualify as a knowledge claim, whether in a traditional or a postmodern sense. Even on Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatist definition of knowledge – any statement that currently enjoys widespread consensus – no theological claim would qualify, since there are just as many conceptions of deity as there are theologians today conceptualizing deity.

More troubling still is that the bases of religious knowledge for many progressive and conservative Christians are virtually indistinguishable: each group appeals chiefly to religious experience and to the witness of scripture. Although progressives profess to have

different kinds of religious experiences and take their moral cues from different parts of the Bible, their sources of authority are the same. When Kevin Vanhoozer, a professor of systematic theology at the famously conservative Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, justifies Christian knowledge claims by appealing to “apostolic testimony” and the authority of scripture,³⁰ this is hardly any different than the justification offered by progressives, who similarly rely on the testimony of minority and subaltern Christians, as well as a selective appropriation of biblical texts that point to a gentle, caring, non-coercive deity who endorses a social vision roughly commensurate with an early twenty-first century liberal agenda. Both groups are asked to “have faith” in the veridicality of religious experience – whether of the apostles, as Vanhoozer prefers, or of disenfranchised Christians, as progressives favor – and in the reliability of scripture – whether the whole corpus, as conservatives purportedly do, or only selections congenial to liberal values, as progressives do.

There are two additional (and ultimately ethical) issues worth considering before turning to postmodern theologies: 1) whether or not progressive theologians really believe the constructions of God they create; and 2) what ultimately motivates these constructions. If we were to draw a distinction between *beliefs* as statements one can’t help but endorse and *acceptances* as propositions that require some epistemic commitment or effort of will,³¹ one might be hard-pressed to conclude that progressive theologians truly believe their constructions of the sacred, in the same way that they believe assertions like “Earth revolves around the sun” or “Objects fall when you drop them.” My sense overall is that they *accept* rather than *believe* them – that is, in the absence of sufficient or conclusive evidence, they are willing to proceed “as if” their constructions roughly approximate the divine character, generally for some laudable purpose like fostering tolerance or empathy. As Pascal Engel puts it when summarizing Jonathan Cohen’s recent analysis of belief and acceptance:

[A]cceptance is more a matter of *supposing*, of *assuming*, or of *hypothesizing* that *p* is true for prudential or practical reasons rather than a matter of believing in proportion to the evidence one has. In other words, acceptance is more the outcome of a practical, pragmatic decision than the outcome of a cognitive, epistemic reason.³²

When Laurel Schneider reconfigures God as “bodysoul of the cosmos,” Sallie McFague as “friend” or “mother,” Clark Pinnock as “a caring parent,” Philip Clayton as “heart ... soul ... [and] mind of the world,”³³ or Elizabeth Johnson as “SHE WHO IS,” I never get the sense that these theologians believe passively or involuntarily, as if they simply can’t help but see God is these ways because of the overwhelming persuasiveness of the evidence. Rather, it appears that they *accept* their imag(in)ings of the divine and proceed “as if,” in part because these newer images are ethically beneficial. For all their assertions of having “glimpsed” God or acquired some new “insight” into his character based on the religious experiences of marginalized peoples, one finds in their writings an equal – if not greater –

number of statements detailing why, practically, these newer conceptions are better for us than the older Eurocentric ones.

Judith Plaskow, for example, on the one hand maintains that recent “feminist metaphors for God ... arise from and refer to *real discoveries* of the sacred” (italics mine).³⁴ But the emphasis in her work generally lies on how these newer metaphors benefit women by breaking “the hold of male metaphors that have been used for millennia” to prop-up patriarchal social orders and prevent women from flourishing.³⁵ Indeed, Plaskow states that “we *need* to find ways of speaking about God’s presence in community that do not invoke metaphors of domination” (italics mine).³⁶ One almost gets the impression that whether or not God actually bears traditional female or maternal traits is beside the point: if we are to empower women in religious communities and subvert patriarchal systems of domination, we must, at a minimum, supplement male metaphors with female metaphors for deity. For, as Mary Daly famously (and correctly) observed many years ago, if “God is male, then male is God.”³⁷

Or again, while Elizabeth Johnson believes that those who think primarily of God as a liberator really do have a better grasp of God’s character than those who use God to underwrite an oppressive and patriarchal social order, she also acknowledges that “[s]eeing God as the liberating God of life is a most practical insight, for it enlists the power of the Most High in opposition to whatever mars the divine image in women and men.”³⁸ The same goes for female metaphors of God: although “every female naming of the Holy produces one more fragment of the truth of the mystery of divine Sophia’s gracious hospitality,” “*only* if God is named in this more complete way, ... *only* then will the idolatrous fixation on one image of God be broken, will women be empowered at their deepest core, and will religious and civic communities be converted toward healing justice.”³⁹

There remains, then, an unresolved tension in modernist progressive theologians’ writings between wanting to believe that these newer models of God are the product of genuine insight and acknowledging that the divine must be re-conceptualized anyhow (regardless of who God really is) if we are at all interested in the emergence of truly just social relations. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that one chief motivation for reimagining God as liberator, mother, or friend is commendable: to promote an ethical orientation that is far more attractive than those currently endorsed in conservative Christian communities. If their primary motive were purely one of self-interest – say, to pacify a fear of death or to coax themselves into believing the consoling notion that they shall be reunited with their loved ones beyond the grave – we should, I think, object to their theology generally. That it is driven in part by a commitment to humanistic values, by a desire to see oppressive social orders dismantled and all people flourish, is perhaps even cause for celebration.

But a troubling question remains: Is it ethically desirable to promote these newer models of God in instances where pragmatic concerns like the dismantling of patriarchal social relations clearly trump a concern for generating models of reality that are a better fit with recent work in the social and natural sciences? Shouldn’t theology – or any academic discipline, for that matter – be driven primarily by a concern for truth? I tend to side with

William James rather than W. K. Clifford on the matter of what is morally permissible to believe in the event that we are presented with insufficient or inconclusive evidence: our “passional natures,” as James calls them, may indeed play a role in swaying our decisions for or against propositions of existential importance. Clifford’s evidentialist principle – that it is *always* wrong to believe on insufficient evidence – is overly stringent. None of us is capable of abiding by it. Indeed, if we at least were to try to adhere to it, would be left with precious few beliefs at all. As Wittgenstein once said, “My life consists in my being content to accept many things.”⁴⁰ Gone are the days when philosophers hoped they might be able to identify a sure foundation of indubitable, self-evident propositions upon which to build reliable bodies of knowledge. With Wittgenstein (and many others), we’ve had to admit that “many of our fundamental beliefs are literally groundless, acquired not through testing or investigation but simply by belonging to a community bound together by science and education.”⁴¹

But whether a creator of some kind does or does not exist is something for which the evidence truly is inconclusive. So, if a person wishes to believe that there is an artificer who “kick-started” the universe or even the first forms of unicellular life, I have no problem at all with this. Progressive Christian theologians, however, do not stop there. They purport to be able to say something about the nature, desires, and purposes of this God. And, like conservative theologians, they do not rely upon an examination of what this deity has made to infer his nature and will, but rather fall back upon divine revelation mediated through religious experience and scripture. In effect, they ignore the evidence furnished by the kind of world bequeathed to us by God and choose rather to trust the private communications of select individuals who claim to be especially attuned to the sacred. Progressives simply *have faith* that God cares for all creatures, does not exercise coercive power, and wants *Homo sapiens* in particular to care for Earth and its inhabitants. That the creator is endowed with this particular nature and these (progressive) desires certainly cannot be demonstrated or proved. Like conservatives, they take it all on faith: they *accept* (rather than believe) these newer models of God, and proceed “as if,” aware that even if they’re wrong, a metaphysic rooted in a deity of infinite love and compassion will at least have morally desirable consequences.

Although I share progressive theologians’ ethical orientation and am happy to see God-talk moving away from the belligerent, interventionist, misogynist Sovereign of the past, I am troubled by their failure to follow the evidence and let genuine beliefs arise naturally. Training one’s mind to accept an ethically advantageous portrait of the divine just seems odd and unnecessary today. I am also troubled by their appeal to religious experience, their highly selective and disingenuous reading of scripture, as well as their unwillingness to take an honest look at all the gratuitous suffering and waste of sentient life built into the very fabric of their God’s own world. These are not the sorts of habits-of-mind that will most benefit future generations. Patient, critical inquiry aimed at acquiring a better understanding of our world and how it works, no matter where it might lead, ought to be encouraged instead, especially among children. As W. K. Clifford pointed out long ago, our belief-forming practices do have social consequences. We invariably pass our habits-of-mind and consequent bodies of knowledge onto the next

generation, and if we have encouraged labored acceptance of happy fictions rather than a thorough and careful examination of the evidence (which leads naturally to belief), we have failed in our epistemic duties.

So, to allow one's "passional nature" to tip the scales in favor of the existence of a barebones artificer is perfectly fine, for the evidence on this matter is indeed inconclusive. However, to permit a "filling out" of this deity's character and purposes based on religious experience and scripture rather than on a hard look at the world he purportedly made is epistemically irresponsible. I am certainly not altogether opposed to fostering beliefs that are good for us, but our doxastic practices generally ought to be aimed first at getting a better understanding of our world and how it works. Put differently, our belief-forming practices ought primarily to be truth-conducive. Acclimating one's mind over time to an ethically beneficial portrait of the sacred, and simply trusting that people really do have the religious experiences they say they do, are not truth-conducive habits-of-mind. Critical inquiry aimed at the generation of beliefs based on the persuasiveness of the evidence will do far more good for our species in the long run than faith and acceptance.

If progressive theologians were to offer their constructions of deity as pure fictions – as products of the human imagination and nothing more – I don't think I could object. But as we've seen, they generally do not sell themselves to the public as creative writers or poets. On the contrary, while conceding the constructive character of theology and the "ineffability of God," they nevertheless claim that behind their metaphors lies a kernel of truth upon which we might stake our very lives. For them, the creator is *in fact* a non-coercive liberator and co-sufferer who works tirelessly on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, and conservatives who insist that God is anti-gay and really only wants males to assume important leadership roles in the church are *in fact* dead wrong. Like conservatives, progressives also advance strong epistemic claims, but without the kinds of evidence and processes of critical inquiry expected of academics in other fields. This, I think, is enormously disconcerting.

There are, however, a number of theologians today who press beyond Sallie McFague's characterization of theology as "mostly fiction" and concede that it's human construction *all the way down*. But what are we to make of theologians who refuse to advance any traditional epistemic claims? Of what enduring value is their work? And, is there any reasonable chance that theology marketed entirely as fiction could take hold in today's Christian communities? To postmodern theology we now turn.

2. Progressive Postmodern Theology

Postmodern theology dispenses with all epistemic privilege or pretensions. The modernist quest for The Way Things Really Are is abandoned, and priority is given to developing models of God and reality that enable us to achieve certain aims. For a large majority of postmodern theologians – indeed, maybe for all – these aims are driven by ethical concerns, primarily by a desire to see more and more people live fulfilling lives free of coercion, poverty, and belief systems that punish difference. Choosing one set of beliefs over another becomes a thoroughly pragmatic affair aimed at building a better future

rather than an overly serious search for “the intrinsic nature of reality.” Richard Rorty puts this pragmatic outlook – this decisive shift away from the Platonic obsession to distinguish reality from mere appearance – concisely and well:

Pragmatists ... do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question of ‘useful for what?’ is pressed, they have nothing to say except ‘useful to create a better future.’⁴²

Postmodern theologians, on the whole, would affirm Rorty’s statement. Where modernist theologians wish to hold onto a hard kernel of truth buried beneath all the metaphors and God-talk, postmodern theologians have given up the misguided quest for certainty. They argue that we are not capable of pressing back behind our respective cultural inheritances and language games to reality-as-it-is. The objective, impartial vantage point – the so-called “God’s-eye view” – is unobtainable. We must learn how to be content always seeing from a particular perspective. We must acknowledge that all of us are inescapably enmeshed in a web of social relations and discourses that predispose us to see and interpret the world in very specific ways.

Embracing a postmodern stance does not, however, leave one totally incapable of rendering an assessment of competing models of reality. Some critics of postmodern thought assume that epistemic relativism also implies judgmental relativism, but this need not be the case.⁴³ What’s changed for postmodern thinkers is that one now justifies a model of reality based on how well it works – on how well it manages to advance the cause for justice, for example, or on how well it assists us in negotiating our world. The primary criterion for assessing a model of reality is no longer whether or to what extent it mirrors reality but rather how effective it is in helping us achieve specific aims. So, a postmodern theologian may argue strenuously for germ theory over the traditional religious notion that demons or ancestors cause illnesses because of the impressive track record Western medicine has treating (and even eliminating) various diseases. By contrast, the track record of prayer and sacrifice in treating illness is poor at best. Because the explanation offered by germ theory best enables us to achieve the results we desire – the diminishment of human suffering – it is germ theory that elicits our endorsement. Religious worldviews that attribute the cause of illness to supernatural agents and propose treating it by consulting religious leaders simply don’t “work” very well. It should come as no surprise, then, that postmodern theologians generally embrace scientific rather than pre-modern views of reality. However, many are also quick to point out that scientific discourses are as thoroughly situated and perspectival as any other and therefore do not necessarily have the final word. Postmodern theologians like David Ray Griffin, for example, find the sensationist and mechanistic character of the scientific enterprise restrictive and so prefer to remain open to insights given through non-sensory perception as well.⁴⁴

Furthermore, postmodern thinkers do not necessarily give up altogether using familiar words like “truth” or “knowledge,” in spite of the modernist baggage associated with these terms. Richard Rorty, for instance, is happy to retain both words, but he strips them of their modernist pretensions to certitude. When, according to Rorty, we say that a statement is “true,” we no longer mean that it represents or corresponds to reality in some deep sense. Rather, “true” becomes merely “a general term of commendation” like “good” or “pleasing” that is applied to beliefs most of us currently endorse. Similarly, “knowledge” is taken to refer not to indubitable, incorrigible, or self-evident truth claims, but rather to “beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed.” In effect, for Rorty “knowledge” refers to nothing more than statements that currently elicit widespread agreement.⁴⁵

One of the most appealing aspects of postmodern thought is its commitment to ethics. Where a modernist first has an obligation to uncovering “the truth of the matter” or to “getting things right,” a postmodern thinker foregrounds the question, “Which of these descriptions of reality is most beneficial and for whom?” Indeed, for David Tracy, postmodernity’s most significant contribution is “the turn to the other” – or, in Levinasian terms, “the face of the other, the face that commands, ‘Do not kill me,’ the face that insists ... do not reduce me or anyone else to your grand narrative.”⁴⁶ Along with a deep mistrust of the totalizing nature of Lyotard’s “grand narratives” (*grands récits*) and their appeal to a “universal Reason” for legitimation⁴⁷ comes a reclamation of and newfound respect for the many suppressed “little narratives” (*petits récits*) generated by subaltern peoples, by ethnic minorities, by women, by the disabled – by any whose voices have been drowned out by the (generally male European) powers-that-be. The result, observes, Gianni Vattimo, has been a virtual “explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen* ... [that] render any single worldview or any unilinear history impossible.”⁴⁸ Western meta-narratives, such as the Enlightenment narrative of progress or Christianity’s account of “salvation history” (which invariably ends with the triumph of God over all forces that have opposed his will), no longer command automatic respect or allegiance. And there is the acknowledgment that now “everyone is on the same footing, that no one enjoys privileged access, which has a salutary ethical and political import because it shows us that we’re all in this together and that nobody is hardwired up to the Secret.”⁴⁹ Amid this “flowering of differences” arises both a compassion for the other who sees and experiences differently and an epistemic humility that relinquishes its hold on certainty.⁵⁰ In effect, epistemic privilege is obliterated before “a whirlwind of sheer differences,”⁵¹ and empathy blooms in its place.

So, although progressive postmodern theologians generally share a broadly humanistic ethic of empathy and respect with their modernist colleagues, they differ in that they refuse to arrogate to themselves any special epistemic access to what lies beyond our language games. No postmodern theologian, then, speaks with confidence about the existence or nature of a transcendent order. They claim no authority, and they do not justify their God-talk by appealing to the veridicality of religious experience or to the authority of scripture. Theology is human construction all the way down. It is *all* fiction – not, as Sallie McFague would say, “mostly fiction.”⁵²

I must admit that I find postmodern theology's epistemic humility and humane ethical orientation very attractive. It offers a significant improvement over modern theology's specious knowledge claims about the existence and character of a sacred order. There are, however, a few drawbacks.

First, there seem to be few grounds for saying that conservative Christian theologies – particularly their cosmogonies, cosmologies, eschatologies, and anthropologies – are simply incorrect. Postmodern thinkers point out that today we find ourselves confronted with a cacophony of competing worldviews, each endowed with its own peculiar grammar and logic, each operating according to its own set of rules, and each justifying itself with its own set of game-relative criteria.⁵³ Among these models of reality, of course, are a dizzying array of religious worldviews, which are to be numbered among the many “little narratives” suppressed by secular and scientific discourses rooted in Enlightenment thought. Because, it is argued, we are no longer in a position to adjudicate the truth claims of these little narratives by appealing to an impartial “God’s-eye viewpoint” or to “universal Reason,” they ought to be given space to compete in the marketplace of ideas. The loss of confidence in Western secular and scientific metanarratives creates room again for God-talk of many varieties,⁵⁴ including theology that is ethically unappealing and cosmologically antiquated. A postmodern theologian certainly may say that traditional theologies offer unpersuasive or improbable models of reality, or that they are ethically unattractive, but she cannot say to Franklin Graham or to Rick Warren, “You are absolutely wrong (in some deep sense).”

The fact is, though, that traditional theologies venture many falsifiable – and demonstrably false – claims about reality and about how the world works. Young-Earth creationists are, in fact, mistaken: Earth and its first unicellular forms of life came into being billions rather than mere thousands of years ago. The evidence against creation science is overwhelming and conclusive. Creation science should not be treated as just one more “final vocabulary” (Rorty) or “language game” (Wittgenstein), one more option among many competing options. Their cosmogony, rooted in two early Hebrew mythological narratives (Genesis 1-3), is not simply unpersuasive but *incorrect*, and it's important that we retain justifiable grounds for saying so.

Even many moderate and progressive Christians still speak with confidence both about the efficacy of prayer and about the extraordinary human sacrifice that supposedly did away with the consequences of sin around 30 C.E. But the claim that prayer and sacrifice are efficacious in persuading a deity, spirit, or ancestor to show human beings favor (a claim affirmed by many non-Christians as well) is often falsifiable. Unfortunately, neither of these religious practices even comes close to generating the kinds of beneficial and predictable results they should, if the claim that they are efficacious were, in fact, true. For instance, to date the few empirical studies conducted on the efficacy of intercessory prayer has revealed nothing more than what would be expected from the placebo effect. Furthermore, the terrible cataclysms ancient peoples once believed would occur if they failed to offer regular sacrifices to the gods or ancestors have not taken place, which strongly suggests that these sacrifices were not required in the first place to sustain cosmic order. Although Aztec human sacrifices, for example, ceased many centuries ago,

the sun continues to “rise” and drive the biochemical processes necessary to sustain life. Postmodern thought seems not to have the will to invalidate the falsifiable claims of antiquated religious worldviews, many of which are not merely unhelpful or unpersuasive but demonstrably incorrect.

In addition to an unwillingness to offer strong criticisms of outmoded religious cosmologies, postmodern theologians generally have given up on the notion of justification – or, more precisely, on justifying models of reality to those who do not already share their language games. The incommensurability of our respective cultural-linguistic traditions is taken for granted, so justification is often viewed as an exercise in futility, or worse: an attempt to impose a hegemonic order upon an other. Philip Clayton, for instance, when engaged in an exercise of constructive theology, dispenses entirely with the modernist theologian’s prolegomenon in which one traditionally identified and justified one’s premises. He is perfectly content to begin doing theology “*in media res*.”⁵⁵ Conceding from the outset that only progressive Christian readers who already share his premises are likely to find any value or benefit in what he has to offer, Clayton is not interested in defending his sketch of the sacred and divine-human relations to those outside the Christian community. Atheists, Taoists, Wiccans, and Buddhists may listen in if they so desire, but he does not expect or even want them to accept his construction of the sacred. Neither does he offer them any reasons as to why they should.

Assuming, then, that his readers already are disposed to believing in a creator favorably disposed toward sentient life, Clayton proceeds to tell the “story” – his preferred term for theology in a postmodern key – of a God who relates to the world much as the mind is related to the body. Just as the mind cannot live without the body and the body without the mind, God and creation are mutually interdependent, influencing one another’s development. All that we do and think, in fact, has an effect upon God, who is in a ceaseless state of “becoming” just as we are.⁵⁶ As the mind of the world, God guides or “lures” creatures to pursue his aims, although in a non-coercive, noninterventionist manner that fully respects creaturely autonomy. Clayton even holds out hope for an ideal future in which, as the author of Revelation put it, there will be “no more tears.”⁵⁷ The chief advantage of conceiving of God in panentheistic terms – the world is within God, yet God is more than the world – is that it offers “a powerful means for ... motivating environmental concern.”⁵⁸ If the world is not separate from God but an extension of God’s very being, humans should want to care for it. So, whether or not Clayton’s panentheism offers a close fit with reality (or with ultimate reality), the consequences of accepting such a model are nevertheless beneficial both for us and for all of Earth’s inhabitants.

But an outsider to Clayton’s language game may find herself wondering: Why should we accept Clayton’s characterization of the divine? And, how does he really *know* any of this? He doesn’t, of course, and to his credit he never sells it to readers as an account of how things really are, but merely as a “story” that may require a suspension of disbelief and willed acceptance.⁵⁹ Unlike a conservative or a modernist progressive theologian, Clayton does not appeal to religious experience or to scripture to underwrite his vision of the sacred. Neither does he defend himself as a classical foundationalist would “by constructing a chain of inferences, such that each proposition is justified as true

by those that preceded it.”⁶⁰ Perhaps most important, he offers not another totalizing metanarrative but one humble “little narrative,” all the while eschewing “the sort of generality or timelessness typical of claims in modern theology.”⁶¹ What readers are offered, then, is a groundless and happy story that comes with no epistemic pretensions, no authority, and no claim to represent things as they are. Although Clayton’s construction of the sacred does have the advantages of not squelching the voices of so many other religious people and of motivating environmental concern, the troubling question persists: Why should anyone not already committed to his central premises accept anything that he says? And, if pragmatic concerns have entirely displaced the search for a better understanding of our world, is there any advantage to reading postmodern theology over, say, a book of poetry or fiction?

I also wonder whether it is truly possible for anyone to fully embrace a construction of reality that is acknowledged as nothing but construction – as fiction – all the way down. Some highly educated Christians claim to be capable of inhabiting a worldview with postmodern ironic distance, but I am not. One may, I suppose, eventually come to *accept* a theological construction as construction, but belief proper – conviction elicited involuntarily based on the persuasiveness of the evidence – would seem unlikely. And, as I noted when addressing modernist progressive theologies, we ought to be worried if too many of us are in the business of convincing ourselves (and others) to accept propositions for which the evidence is weak or even nonexistent.

I want to conclude this section by offering one example of postmodern theology from which reference to the supernatural has altogether been expunged. For this, I’ll turn to John Caputo’s recent work. He is one of several postmodern theologians for whom the thought of Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, and the French notion of “the event” have proven seminal.

Caputo dispenses entirely with traditional Christianity’s God of sovereign power (what he and others call ontotheology) as well as any metaphysical dualism that would posit an “earthly” over against a “spiritual” realm. For Caputo, there is no transcendent order distinct from this one, no deity presiding over human affairs, and no salvation to be found outside this world – for him, “the one and only world we know.”⁶² Such traditional notions, observes Caputo, have a long and disastrous history of “intimidation, oppression, and violence,” and Nietzsche was right to proclaim this God dead.⁶³

When Caputo speaks of God, he’s actually referring to an “event” harbored *within* this culturally and historically contingent “name,” not to “some super-being who out-knows, out-wills, out-does, out-powers, and out-exists every entity here below.”⁶⁴ This event, which takes us by surprise and solicits a response from us,⁶⁵ is essentially the “open-ended promise” of the advent of “justice.”⁶⁶ Inaugurated primarily by Jesus and Paul, it is both “a machine for making trouble for the powers that be” and a means for granting the “nobodies” of this world equal access at the table.⁶⁷ It challenges the existing social order with a whole new set of values and practices for relating to one another.⁶⁸

So, in place of values such as counting the cost, “managing risk,” “calculating the future,” keeping track of who owes what to whom, accumulating wealth on the backs of the poor, and punishing the trespass to the letter of the law – all values of “the world” – in

God's kingdom, a whole new set of values hold sway: parity, beneficence, hospitality, generosity, forgiveness, and patience.⁶⁹ But in God's kingdom, these values are not imposed unilaterally from above or instituted through a violent revolution that deposes the ruling classes. Rather, they emerge organically and gradually from below, among "the things that are not" (1 Cor. 1:26-31), in free response to "the weak force" of God.⁷⁰ Importantly, the "justice" of God's kingdom never finally arrives. It remains the object of our desire, something forever beyond our reach, something for which we long and even pray. Indeed, for Caputo, prayer is wholly naturalized, practiced by all who yearn for justice. Prayer is not, he says, only "the property of the faithful, but a common passion, ... the common lot of us all."⁷¹ So, when we ask in the *pater noster* for "thy kingdom [to] come," we do not address a personal being "out there." Rather, we articulate an irrepressible longing for things to be made new, for justice to arrive. Caputo himself, in fact, admits to praying (in this way) every day.

But why, one may ask, does Caputo retain mythological religious language when what he really means by "God," "kingdom of God," and "prayer" is nothing like what most Christians mean by these terms? For Caputo, God is not a supernatural being, the kingdom of God is not a place or sphere over which a deity reigns supreme, and prayer is not an address to a more powerful and very real Other who is capable of assisting us in time of need. All of these terms have been purged of their ordinary meanings and stretched to encompass something foreign either to conservative or progressive Christianity. Indeed, like Derrida, Caputo is to be numbered among those who "rightly pass for atheists."⁷²

On the one hand, Caputo laments the fact that religious language has been hijacked by conservative Christian communities here in the U.S.: it is, regrettably, they who define its meaning for the overwhelming majority of Americans.⁷³ And too often, the "strong theologies" they advocate "are invariably in league with power," deployed to underwrite oppressive and exclusionary social orders.⁷⁴ He wishes to challenge their reading of Christian texts, to show that they might be used to encourage a much different and far more progressive ethical orientation. For, at the moment, we appear to be stuck with religious discourse. American culture in particular is so deeply rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions, says Caputo, that "[w]e do not know how not to talk about God."⁷⁵ Because "the name of God will not leave us alone – not for a while" – there ought to be at least a few theologians who contest the hermeneutical hegemony of the conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist churches.⁷⁶ There may indeed come a time when "we might end up having to release that name," but that day is still far off.⁷⁷

On the other hand, Caputo really does believe that behind the mythological language lies an event to which we should bear witness and respond. There is a vision and passion for justice, particularly in the thought of Jesus and Paul, that we should not let go of. The historically conditioned and contingent name of the Christian God may be discarded one day, but the event harbored within that name is of far too great a value, for it "belongs to the order that disturbs the world with the possibilities of being otherwise."⁷⁸

Caputo is indeed correct: there is a passion for justice in certain parts of the New Testament that is subversive and ethically appealing. But I wonder whether preserving the

mythological “names” – “God” and the “kingdom of God,” in particular – is at all wise or even honest. After all, when “God” is pronounced here in the U.S., for virtually everyone it connotes a personal, supernatural being of some kind. Even progressives, as we have seen, routinely employ personal metaphors such as mother, friend, companion, or liberator for the divine. “Prayer,” moreover, in common parlance refers not to a vague longing for the emergence of justice shared by “the common lot of us all,” but to a very specific religious practice in which a very real deity is addressed, often for the purpose of persuading this deity to do something on the supplicant’s behalf, such as curing a loved one of their illness. Even for most progressive Christians, prayer retains this ordinary sense.

While I’m perfectly happy to allow for a wide range of possibilities for speaking about God, I do think that applying the term to an “event” is going too far. Caputo, it seems, is no longer playing by the rules of our language game, and this is unfair to those of us who are. Just as “fork” or “tablecloth” or “democracy” cannot mean anything you want them to mean, neither can “God.” Admittedly, forks do come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and they may be used for a variety of purposes, but they all must share the feature of “having two or more prongs.” A fork cannot, for instance, have “a small shallow bowl with a handle.” We have a different word in English for such an object: spoon. If we wish to have a reasonable shot at successfully communicating with one another, we ought to play by the current rules of the game, even if we simultaneously concede that the rules are relatively arbitrary, contingent, and – at least to some degree – always in flux. At the moment, though, for the overwhelming majority here in the U.S., the monosyllable “God” means “supernatural being,” however variously conceived and described, and not “event.” If Caputo really wishes to talk about an *event* harbored within the name of God, then that’s precisely the terminology he ought to use, and simply leave off with God-talk altogether to avoid confusing or misleading his readers.

The same might be said for Caputo’s use of the phrase “kingdom of God.” While he does acknowledge that he is really referring to “a kingdom *without* a kingdom, a kingdom without sovereignty, where there is no capitol city and where the rule is the rule of the unruly, of the weak and foolish,”⁷⁹ virtually no one else on the planet uses the term in this way. The term “kingdom” historically connotes a realm – a bounded, geographical area – presided over by a king and/or queen, who retains enormous power over his or her subjects. We have a few remaining kingdoms today – the Kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, for instance – and they are not at all characterized by the kinds of social relations and values that are embraced freely in Caputo’s utopian “kingdom of God.” In these modern-day kingdoms, women generally do not have the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities as men, gays and lesbians are often targeted with discriminatory laws, and the gap between the haves and have-nots is enormous. If Caputo doesn’t really mean “kingdom” in the ordinary sense, he ought not to use the word. Again, he’s not playing by the rules of the game, and therefore unnecessarily complicates the already difficult process of communicating with one another. I am reminded here of Richard Rorty’s remark in *Philosophy and Social Hope*: as an atheist who finds himself persuaded by the so-called “postmodern turn,” he “now finds it merely confusing to talk about God.”⁸⁰ Like Rorty,

Caputo is also an atheist who endorses postmodernism's key insights. That he continues to employ theological language so freely, especially in such a highly idiosyncratic manner, is indeed "merely confusing."⁸¹

Finally, Caputo's reading of the biblical writings is far too selective and reductionistic to be taken seriously by any scholar of the Bible. Like most progressive theologians, Caputo seems to assume that the New Testament writings on the whole advocate for the values he cherishes so much: inclusiveness, forgiveness, hospitality, patience, and a special regard for the most vulnerable among us. While one does indeed find these values articulated in *certain* parts of *certain* writings, the New Testament is also shot through with ethnocentrism, sexism, heterosexism, desire for revenge, hatred for any who have persecuted the Christian community, and intolerance writ large. Caputo ignores these less palatable features of the New Testament, presumably because they are not conducive to his understanding of "the event" harbored in the name of God.

Although we might rather easily illustrate the New Testament's most unattractive features by turning to repressive household codes in the deuterio-Pauline letters that have been used to underwrite misogyny and slavery, to Jesus' and Paul's Jewish ethnocentrism, or to the author of Revelation's deep-seated antipathy toward Rome and longing for bloody vengeance, we really need go no farther than a handful of Jesus' parables from the First Gospel. The Gospel of Matthew is the most widely read of the four biographies of Jesus (it is a favorite of Caputo's as well), and the parables – short vignettes drawn from first century Palestinian life – are still among the most beloved of Jesus' teachings. But there are some very unattractive features of these popular stories, and Christians often overlook them.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus relates a number of memorable parables, some of which are intended for his disciples, others for his opponents. In those that were created to illustrate how Jesus' followers are to conduct themselves in the interim between his ascension and parousia, we find that Christians who: 1) fail to forgive will be "handed over to torturers" (18:21-35); 2) do not use their resources and gifts for the advancement of God's kingdom will be "cast into the outermost darkness" (25:14-30); 3) find themselves unprepared for a delay in Jesus' return shall be barred from entering God's kingdom (25:1-13); and 4) carouse with "drunkards" or treat others entrusted to their care abusively shall be "cut in pieces and put with the hypocrites" (24:45-51). Caputo's inclusiveness, forgiveness, hospitality, and patience are conspicuously absent in all of these parables. And what's perhaps most unsettling is that the recipients of God's wrath here are not Jesus' opponents but members of the Christian community!

In the parables targeted at Jesus' opponents, things certainly are no better. We learn, for instance, that the Jewish religious authorities shall be dispossessed of their share in God's kingdom and "annihilated in a most terrible manner" (21:33-44). And any (Jews) who have mistreated Jesus' followers shall "be destroyed" and have their city "burned down," a rather transparent reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. (22:1-14). Both series of parables culminate with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in which Jesus reveals that any group of people that fails to treat Christians (or possibly just Christian missionaries) hospitably will be consigned to "the eternal fire

prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:31-46). Again, missing here are Caputo’s preferred values. The final destinies that God has prepared for Jesus’ opponents and for disobedient Christians are about as horrifying as one can imagine. I see an intolerant, unforgiving, vengeful deity here who seems to know nothing of the early twenty-first century attitudes and practices Caputo so prizes. In fact, in these parables, God’s character seems to mirror that of the very worst tyrants of the Roman world, and his kingdom operates in much the same way that other repressive regimes of Jesus’ day did. Reducing the operative values in “God’s kingdom,” based on a reading of the New Testament, to early twenty-first century niceties like inclusiveness, tolerance, and forgiveness just isn’t convincing.

3. Conclusion

Modernist and postmodern progressive theologies both offer believers an attractive ethic that is humane, pacific, and Earth-centered. And when God is spoken of, he is generally portrayed as non-coercive, deeply invested in the well-being of all, and attentive to the cries of any who suffer. On the one hand, then, humanists have good reason to celebrate this recent shift in thinking about the sacred and divine-human relations. Indeed, we share with progressive Christians a very similar set of core moral values. There is no reason why we shouldn’t be working together to fashion just societies and to safeguard our planet and its fragile ecosystems.

But neither type has satisfactorily addressed nagging epistemic issues that undermine their plausibility – and, therefore, their future viability. Progressives who wish to advance at least a few knowledge claims about the nature of ultimate reality often do so on the flimsiest of “evidence”: religious experience and a handful of passages from the Bible amenable to early twenty-first century liberal values. They find themselves in the precarious position of having to *trust* that the experiences of those who claim to have received communication from a sacred realm (often members of historically disenfranchised communities) are in fact veridical. Not only are these experiences not confirmable in the same way that ordinary perceptual experiences are, but they also yield a wildly variegated array of often incommensurable disclosures. Progressive Christians cannot show that their religious experiences reliably mediate God’s character and will while those had by conservative Christians do not. Neither can they demonstrate that the sacred is fundamentally personal rather than impersonal, as many Hindus, Taoists, and Confucians maintain. And when progressive theologians create brand new metaphors for God and divine-human relations, too often we find them laboring to *accept* these newer models for some commendable (usually ethical) aim rather than believing involuntarily on the persuasiveness of the evidence. Finally, they fail to take seriously the enormous amount of gratuitous suffering and waste of sentient life worked into the very fabric of their creator’s own world. If one is going to continue to award God the title of “creator,” surely he must bear at least some responsibility for suffering and evil. And if one wishes to claim that creation is in some sense self-expressive of God’s character, God cannot be exclusively loving, compassionate, and just, as progressive theologians generally

maintain. Given the world in which we actually find ourselves, it would seem that its creator either doesn't care what goes on down here, doesn't know, or has a dark side.

Postmodern progressive theologians helpfully acknowledge that theology is entirely an exercise of the human imagination – construction all the way down. They do not profess to speak with authority on the existence or character of a sacred order. Neither do they seek to justify their conceptions of ultimate reality by appealing to religious experience, scripture, reason, or the historicity of events believed to be foundational for Christianity. Conceding from the outset the incommensurability of our respective language games, they speak primarily to insiders – to those who already share similar cultural inheritances and therefore are predisposed to accept their premises. And, what they offer insiders are models of reality and ultimate reality designed not to penetrate beneath the play of signifiers to “the intrinsic nature of things,” but rather to assist us in fashioning a more just, equitable, and humane social order. For postmodern theologians, utility always takes precedence: a decision for or against a given “final vocabulary” ultimately comes down to how well it helps us achieve our aims, not on a purported fit with reality. The postmodern theologian, then, is not a metaphysician, and certainly not an inspired prophet gifted with privileged access to a transcendent realm. She is, rather, an artist, a writer of poetry or fiction who has given up traditional knowledge claims for creating “stories” that prod us out of the familiar and open up new ways of seeing and relating to others. Their epistemic humility is commendable, I have argued, but an outsider may be left wondering: What advantage is there to reading postmodern theology over a chapbook or a novel? If we aren't necessarily learning anything about our world or about ultimate reality, why not pull an anthology of science fiction from the shelf instead?

Progressive theologies of neither variety, I'm afraid, have what it takes to save the church. While both thankfully offer adherents an ethic far more humane than what conservative Christian communities currently do, they suffer from unresolved and rather serious epistemic issues. Neither presents us with more or better evidence than traditional theologies: they simply sketch portraits of the sacred that are more attractive – portraits, not coincidentally, that are commensurate with early twenty-first century progressive values. But these newer models of God did not inspire or drive social change; rather, they emerged only in the wake of changes *already taking place* in many places around the world. It's not as if God himself, sometime in the mid-1960s or early 1970s, suddenly underwent a fundamental shift in character from narrow-minded tribal chieftain to urbane social and environmental activist, and astute theologians at Harvard, Vanderbilt, Notre Dame, and Yale somehow managed to detect this shift. On the contrary: it appears that progressive theologians have merely reinvented God to stay with the times. In twenty to thirty years, we can be sure they'll do it again, if they wish to keep pace with advances in the sciences, in culture, and in politics.

Contemporary theology just looks too much like wishful thinking to persuade those of us not already immersed in their language games. And until progressive theologians find a satisfactory resolution to those troubling epistemic issues, I suspect they will continue to lose more and more from their ranks who wake to the insight that they can embrace an ethic of care and respect without the backing of a precarious metaphysic.

NOTES

1. “God beyond Racism and Sexism,” in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, ed. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 70.
2. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), pp. 244–245.
3. *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 17.
4. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1994), pp. 103–104.
5. From *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), quoted in *The Many Faces of God: A Reader of Modern Jewish Theologies* (New York: URJ Press, 2004), p. 233.
6. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 18–21.
8. “Facing the Ambiguity of God,” *Tikkun* 6.5 (1991), p. 70.
9. *Quest for the Living God*, p. 1.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
12. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 21, 182.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.
14. *Quest for the Living God*, p. 17.
15. p. 57.
16. Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 457–458.
17. *The Openness of God*, pp. 103–104.
18. *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 1.
19. “God beyond Racism and Sexism,” in *Constructive Theology*, ed. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, p. 75.
20. “Theology of Evolution,” in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. W. Van Huyssteen (New York: Macmillan, 2003), p. 306.
21. *Ibid.* Haught accounts for gratuitous suffering by claiming that a truly good God – a God worthy of our love and devotion – “would generally endow the universe with ample scope to become a self-coherent world rather than letting it be a passive, puppet-like appendage of deity” (p. 305). Put differently, because God values free creatures above all else, he “is more interested in promoting freedom and arousing adventure in the world than in pressing the status quo or legislating impeccable design” (p. 306). There is a risk, of course, in granting sentient beings such latitude to wander and explore, and the outcome of having taken this risk is moral and natural evil, the sources of much of our pain. But the universe remains a project-in-the-making, and even now God is working to diminishing creaturely suffering and create conditions in which all beings might flourish” (*Ibid.*). For Haught, then, it’s not that God is entirely impotent. Rather, he so values freedom that he deliberately pulls back, opting for a

laissez faire approach that allows creatures the space to explore and experiment with various potentialities.

22. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, pp. 73–74, 93.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

24. *Models of God*, p. 182.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–40.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

28. “The Ethics of Belief and Two Conceptions of Christian Faith,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 63 (2008), pp. 41–42.

29. Quoted in Van A. Harvey, “The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered,” *Journal of Religion* 59.4 (1979), p. 414.

30. “Pilgrim’s Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 95.

31. For a helpful summary of recent discussions on the differences between belief and acceptance, see Pascal Engel, “Introduction: The Varieties of Belief and Acceptance,” in *Believing and Accepting*, ed. Pascal Engel (Boston: Kluwer, 2000), esp. pp. 1–16.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33. “God and World,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 209.

34. “Facing the Ambiguity of God,” 70.

35. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 159–160.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.

38. *Quest for the Living God*, p. 82.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

40. Quoted in Harvey, “The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered,” p. 411.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 410.

42. *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 26.

43. See, for instance, Roy Bhaskar’s distinction between “(a) the principle of *epistemic relativity*, viz. that all beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient and neither truth-values nor criteria of rationality exist outside historical time and (b) the doctrine of *judgmental relativism*, which maintains that all beliefs are equally valid in the sense that there are no rational grounds for preferring one to another. I accept (a), so disavowing any form of epistemic absolutism, but reject (b), so upholding judgmental rationality against irrationalism.” Qtd. in Christopher Norris, *What’s Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 98.

44. Griffin understands the terms sensationist and mechanistic in the following way: “The crucial assumptions [of the modernist paradigm] are taken to be the *sensationist view of perception*, according to which our sensory organs provide our only means of perceiving things beyond ourselves, and the *mechanistic view of nature*, according to which the ultimate units of nature are devoid of all experience, intrinsic value, internal purpose, and internal

relations” (“Reconstructive Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, esp. pp. 95–102).

45. “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence E. Cahoon, 2nd edn (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 448–449.

46. “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” *Theology Today* 51.1 (1994), p. 108.

47. James K. A. Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), pp. 129–132.

48. John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 23.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

51. Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” p. 108.

52. *Models of God*, p. 182.

53. Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), p. 132.

54. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, pp. 19, 133. See also Smith, “A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), pp. 131–134.

55. “God and World,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 204, 216.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 217–218.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

58. *Ibid.*

59. For the distinction between “account” and “narrative,” see R. Douglas Geivett’s helpful essay, “Is God a Story? Postmodernity and the Task of Theology,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), pp. 38–40.

60. “God and World,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. 216.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *After the Death of God*, p. 81.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

64. *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 39.

65. “Open Theology – Or What Comes after Secularism?” *CSSR Bulletin* 37.2 (2008), pp. 46–47. See also *The Weakness of God*, p. 4.

66. *The Weakness of God*, pp. 2, 30.

67. “Open Theology – Or What Comes after Secularism?”, p. 48.

68. *The Weakness of God*, pp. 30, 287.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17, 39.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 11.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *After the Death of God*, p. 145.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

78. *The Weakness of God*, p. 8.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

80. p. 163.

81. I might also add that Caputo's idiosyncratic redefinition of key Christian terms coupled with his evisceration of the divine has no chance of catching fire in any faith community, whether progressive or conservative. To be sure, deconstruction and the aspects of Continental philosophy upon which he bases his "theology of the event" are difficult for non-academics to grasp, but he also dispenses with the features of Christianity that most adherents find attractive: a living deity who actually hears and responds to our requests; the promise that one will spend eternity in the company of loved ones; and postmortem justice both for those who were short-changed in this life and who made existence a living hell for others. Put simply, while Caputo may be conducting a "hermeneutics of the event" *astir* in the name of God, he is no longer engaged in theology proper. Caputo really ought to be honest with his readers and fess up: he is talking not about "God" or his "kingdom" in any widely recognized sense, but simply about the desire to see justice emerge.

A Humanist Ethic of *Ubuntu*: Understanding Moral Obligation and Community

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The secular conception of *ubuntu*, as proffered by Thaddeus Metz, supplies a foundation for a humanist argument that justifies obligation to one's community, even apart from a South African context, when combined with Kwasi Wiredu's conception of personhood. Such an account provides an argument for accepting the concept of *ubuntu* as humanistic and not necessarily based in communalism or dependent upon supernaturalism. By re-evaluating some core concepts of community as they are presented in Plato's *Republic*, I argue that this account of *ubuntu* fits as the basis from which to understand obligation to community from a secular humanist perspective.

1. The Noble Lie and the community

Regardless of the claims made for secular foundations of morality, whether deontological, consequentialist, or virtue-based, a widespread and popular belief remains with regards to ethical obligation and concern in Western thought, which is that there must be some supernatural story used to ground moral consideration for others.¹

Perhaps the most famous example of such a story is that which Plato proposed as a response to Glaucon's immoralist challenge in Book II of *The Republic*.² Despite strong arguments favoring justice over and against injustice, the Noble Lie is to be implemented in the case of moral obligation to the community, at least according to Plato's argument. Socrates states at the end of Book III of *The Republic* that this Myth of the Metals, as a supernatural genesis myth, is necessary for the citizens of the kallipolis to feel bound to one another.³ The case of the Noble Lie is a typical case of the belief that community morality cannot stand on humanist arguments alone when it comes to an *actual* or *potential* community and one's moral obligations to that community. This assumption that a supernatural story is necessary for community morality is flawed. The flaw in argument stems, at least in part, from an atomistic conception of the individual, wherein the individual person precedes the community and must therefore be convinced by a supernatural 'just-so story' that the community is something to which the individual is

bound. The assumption that the individual is the primary social or moral unit that is then added to other individuals to form a community is a predominantly Western idea.⁴ If the individual is taken as such a prior entity, then providing a humanist justification for moral obligation to one's community is surely a difficult task.

If we look at one of the main principles of South African philosophy, however, we find – perhaps contrary to common overgeneralizations and assumptions concerning African thought being prescientific and based upon nothing but folk beliefs – a strong humanist foundation from which to understand individuals' obligation to community. The South African concept of *ubuntu* can provide such a foundation, but this foundation is not necessarily obvious, especially because of the variety of interpretations that have been given to the term, as well as incorrect assumptions made concerning personhood, spirituality, folk beliefs, and African philosophy.⁵

I argue that the secular conception of *ubuntu*, as proffered by Thaddeus Metz, supplies a foundation for a humanistic argument that justifies obligation to one's community, even apart from the South African context, when combined with Kwasi Wiredu's conception of personhood. To make this argument, I provide a survey, briefly offering many of the types of meanings of *ubuntu*. I explicate Metz's particular argument concerning *ubuntu* as a secular moral foundation, adding elements of Kwasi Wiredu's quasi-physical conception of personhood in order to expand *ubuntu* beyond a strictly South African context. Such an account of personhood provides an argument for accepting the concept of *ubuntu* as humanistic and not necessarily communalistic or dependent upon supernaturalism. Finally, I re-evaluate some of the core concepts of community as they are presented in Plato's *Republic*, supplanting the Western conception of the person with Wiredu's, combined with Metz's account of *ubuntu*.

This re-evaluation involves an analysis of key elements of community as proffered by Plato, and reveals how well the concept of moral obligation from the perspective of *ubuntu* fits as the basis from which to understand being bound to one's community as a humanistic obligation, especially in contrast to a supernatural story to account for such obligation.

2. *Ubuntu*, secularized

Ubuntu is from the South African Bantu languages, its root being *ntu*, which signifies primal being.⁶ Magobe B. Ramose has provided an analysis of the prefix (*ubu-*) and the stem (*ntu*). According to Ramose, the prefix “evokes the idea of be-ing in general”.⁷ *Ubu-* specifies a one-ness, while *ntu* specifies a wholeness. *Ubu-* is oriented towards *ntu* as a being becoming whole. The concept of *ubuntu* as a progression into wholeness is the basis of understanding *ubuntu* as an ethical concept and provides a foundation from which to understand the various meanings that have been assigned to the word throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In his essay, “The Historical Developments of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*,” Christian B. N. Gade presents the wide varieties of the meaning of the term, beginning with *human nature* in 1850.⁸ Gade states that there are five primary types of definition that have been assigned to *ubuntu* in the literature he has surveyed: A) as a human quality; B)

as either connected to, or identical to, a philosophy or ethic; C) as African humanism; D) as a worldview; E) as connected to the proverb, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' [people are people through people].⁹ The first meaning is the vaguest, simply referring to one's "humanness." Despite the vague meaning, humanness is the root of all the meanings that have followed, and Ramose has indicated that *-ness*, which is "characterized by dynamism, change, and temporality," is the correct suffix attached to human. "Humanity" would be an incorrect meaning of *ubuntu*, connoting a static set.¹⁰ *Ubuntu* pertains to the ongoing process of becoming human.

The second meaning, as philosophy or ethic, is general, but pertains to the interdependence, or mutual provision, of people within a community.¹¹ Pieter H. Coetzee has defined the community with regard to morality in African thought, as "an ongoing association of men and women who have a special commitment to one another and a developed (distinct) sense of their common life."¹² The third meaning, pertaining specifically to African humanism, indicates that *ubuntu* refers to the particular sympathies and aids involved in the interdependent relationship within community. The fourth meaning, which was likely popularized by the writing of Desmond Tutu,¹³ is that of a worldview centering upon amnesty and love.¹⁴ The fifth and most popular meaning is that based upon the proverb, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.' This is from the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele. In Sotho-Tswana, the proverb is, '*Motho ke motho ka batho babang*.' Both mean, "A person is a person through other persons," or "I am because we are."¹⁵ This last meaning of the term is best for understanding moral obligation to community because it entails the general meaning of humanness, but specifies how the human being becomes constituted as a being through the community. In addition, *ubuntu* as "I am because we are" does not require a supernatural backdrop or dogmatism of any kind. As Ramose states, "One of the first principles of *ubuntu* ethics is the freedom from dogmatism. It is flexibility oriented towards balance and harmony in relationship between human beings and between the latter and the broader being or nature."¹⁶ This conception of *ubuntu* contributes to a humanistic foundation from which to base the moral obligation of individuals to the community in which they exist.

In his argument for an African moral theory that is secular, Thaddeus Metz has attempted to capture what he takes to be six uncontroversial moral judgments and six specifically African moral judgments by providing a theoretical formulation of an African ethic. Metz proffers the following definition of *ubuntu* as this theoretical formulation: "An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community."¹⁷ Whether or not Metz accurately captures a specifically African ethic is beyond my purposes here. Given criticisms levied towards Metz's argument, there is surely doubt that he has captured such an ethic.¹⁸ What he has provided, despite arguments regarding whether or not his formulation is appropriately African, is a powerful formulation for moral obligation within and to one's community.

In order to understand how such a foundation is supplied and is humanistic, it is helpful to first explicate Metz's argument, which is based upon the combination of the moral judgments he provides, as well as his conception of *ubuntu*. Although Metz's agenda is to "construct an African theory of right action," it is my contention that his construction is well-served as a foundation for moral obligation that is humanistic.¹⁹ Using

Metz's argument in this way re-directs it away from a specifically African theory of action and towards a more general basis of moral duty to one's community.

Metz has stated that he has attempted to "develop a normative ethical theory of right action that has an African pedigree and offers something different from what is dominant in Western moral philosophy."²⁰ In order to develop such an ethical theory, he focuses on *ubuntu* as a central normative principle of sub-Saharan African thought.²¹ Focusing on *ubuntu* provides a useful contrast with traditional Western moral principles that tend to be rooted in atomistic conceptions of the individual.²² As Mangena has indicated, the Western emphasis on individuals and individualism does not seem to pertain well to most African cultures, especially with regard to concepts of *rightness* or *justice*.²³ Based upon this contrast, Metz attempts to provide a formulation that can account for the shared moral judgments between Western and sub-Saharan African cultures, as well as those judgments specific to sub-Saharan African cultures that help explain why such individualism is discordant to such cultures.

The six moral judgments that Metz proposes are "accepted by both adherents of *ubuntu* and Western people in modern, industrialized, constitutional democracies."²⁴ These moral judgments are largely unproblematic as generally accepted judgments. Metz states that it is *pro tanto* immoral: "to kill innocent people for money"; "to have sex with someone without her consent"; "to deceive people, at least when not done in self- or other-defense"; "to steal (that is, to take from their rightful owner) unnecessary goods"; "to violate trust"; "to discriminate on a racial basis when allocating opportunities."²⁵ Note that all of these forbidden types of actions violate the rights of another individual, but they also affect the general strength of the community.

The six moral judgments that Metz claims are specific to adherents of *ubuntu* are centered on particular aspects of the South African community. According to Metz, it is uncontroversially *pro tanto* immoral: "to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus"; "to make retribution a fundamental and central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to seeking reconciliation"; "to create wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one"; "to distribute wealth largely on the basis of individual rights, as opposed to need"; "to ignore others and violate communal norms, as opposed to acknowledging others, upholding tradition and partaking in rituals"; "to fail to marry and procreate, as opposed to creating a family."²⁶ From these twelve judgments, Metz makes it his "task to find a principle that captures all of the commensensical moral judgments ... and that is fundamentally secular."²⁷ The principle he finds is *ubuntu*, which he formulates, as indicated above, as: "An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community."²⁸ Metz reaches this principle in his attempt to account for the moral judgments he lists, and in doing so he also develops a conception of harmony around which the principle is based.

Harmony, as conceived by Metz, is a combination of shared identity and good-will. "To be close or part of the whole is reasonably understood as sharing an identity, whereas to be sympathetic or realize the well-being of others is to have good-will. The combination of the two conditions is what I deem to be the most attractive conception of harmony."²⁹ Based upon his idea of harmony, Metz enriches his definition of *ubuntu* to:

“An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will.”³⁰ The conception of harmony, along with part of the list of moral judgments provided by Metz, supplies a bridge by which to connect the principle of *ubuntu* to the idea of community that does not give precedence or preference to the individual over and above the community. Rather, it supplants any alleged need for a supernatural account of obligation to the community with a humanistic account.

In order to understand a person’s moral obligation to the harmonious function of community, there must be an explanation of what a person is and how that relates to community. Metz does not provide such an account in his argument concerning *ubuntu*, but Kwasi Wiredu has supplied a compelling explanation of personhood that is humanistic. In addition, Wiredu’s explanation provides a convenient link between the South African concept of *ubuntu* and morality more generally conceived, i.e. morality as cutting across cultural differences of custom.

3. Personhood, naturalized

Kwasi Wiredu’s conception of personhood is radically different from that of much of traditional Western philosophy, as well as much of African philosophy. Much of African philosophy is based in a dualistic conception of personhood, in which both a visible and an invisible world exist. The person is the medium and center of the universe through which communication between the two realms is made possible.

Unlike much of Western philosophy, African philosophy does not include an atomistic notion of personhood. “Individuals become real only in their relationships with others, in a community or group.”³¹ D.A. Masolo comments that Wiredu’s framework for thought “poses the fundamental question that could be re-framed as follows: What would the philosophical theories as we have been made to know them look like if we were to change the basic underlying sociological assumption – the category of the subject – upon which they are built?”³² Utilizing his philosophical background in both Western philosophy and Akan (the language and culture of Ghana), Wiredu’s conceptions of community and personhood are based upon communication; personhood is only possible via community. As he states, “No human society or community is possible without communication, for a community is not just an aggregation of individuals existing as windowless monads but of individuals interacting as persons, and an interaction of persons can only be on the basis of shared meanings. Indeed, without communication there is not even a human person. A human being deprived of the socializing influence of communication will remain human biologically, but mentally is bound to be subhuman.”³³ From the interaction of the human organism, i.e. the biological entity, with its surrounding community, that organism develops the function of mind (*adwene* in Akan), which is concomitant with becoming a person. This conception of personhood is taken from the traditional Akan understanding “that a human creature is not a human person except as a member of a community.”³⁴

Wiredu bases the ability for human creatures to create communities upon their shared biology. This biological similarity “makes possible the comparison of experiences

and the interpersonal adjustment of behavior that constitute social existence.”³⁵ This picture of human personhood developing through the interaction of organism and social environment is reminiscent of John Dewey’s position that claims a “natural continuity between inquiry and the elementary form of organic behavior,” to which Wiredu approvingly refers.³⁶ Wiredu’s stance concerning the person’s reliance upon the community for becoming a person shares a similar foundation to Dewey’s position concerning community. Both provide humanistic arguments regarding the development of personhood, which entail the person coming into being through what Dewey refers to as “the give-and-take of communication.”³⁷ This humanistic position is one in which a person becomes a person through a community of other persons.

A person being a person through others mirrors the proverb of *ubuntu*: ‘*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.’ What Wiredu has provided in addition to the proverb is a biological basis from which to understand the development of the human creature through community into person. For instance, in contrast to the Akan philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, who proffers a conception of personhood containing a supernatural and immaterial component of self, Wiredu’s conception of the person is entirely humanistic, avoiding any ontological reliance upon supernatural concepts.^{38, 39}

Wiredu’s position is in stark contrast to much of African philosophy, as argued by Chukwudum Okolo, and, as mentioned above, closer to that of John Dewey.⁴⁰ According to Okolo, there is a general resemblance between the conception of the self in African philosophy and that of John Dewey because both conceive of the person as being born from a series of interactions and interconnections within a social matrix, but this resemblance ends with Dewey’s naturalism, in which reality is entirely within nature.⁴¹ Wiredu’s conception of personhood sustains this resemblance with Dewey’s position, which is a *quasi-physicalist* position in which there is no dualism, especially not a dualism consisting of the natural and the supernatural. All of reality is within nature. Concepts like mind (*adwene* in Akan), for instance, are considered as capacities, which are not substances, that contribute to the constitution of particular persons and are a part of nature. The position is not a strict physicalism because it is merely based on the imperative that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity. Quasi-physicalism does *lean* toward physicalism and sustains an adherence to natural causes without reliance upon supernatural causality, but it also contains a built-in fallibilism that provides an openness to other possibilities without actually suggesting that those possibilities are the case.⁴²

In contrast to supernatural conceptions of personhood, the quasi-physicalist, humanistic understanding of personhood that Wiredu proffers is stable ground for a humanistic ethic of *ubuntu*. The person is an organism – considered as a quasi-physical entity – born from other persons functioning as a community.

4. Personhood and *Ubuntu*, naturalized

Because the person’s existence *qua* person is rooted and supported within the existence of community, it is the sustenance of community that is the basis of moral obligation. Obligation to one’s community facilitates preventing the collapse of that community. To act disharmoniously within the community threatens one’s very personhood, which, as

Wiredu states, is contingent upon the community. The projects and achievements of persons are interdependent with community, forming an obligatory bond between persons and their communities.⁴³ As Okolo notes, even one's first name, which individuates the person as a person, is granted by the community.⁴⁴ Morality is connected to the harmony of the individual's interest in survival and the interests of others. As Wiredu indicates, this becomes obvious when we reflect upon commonly accepted moral imperatives, such as those presented by Metz.⁴⁵ In fact, all six of the general, uncontroversial moral judgments that Metz lists help perpetuate the harmony of the community.

The six *specifically South African* moral judgments Metz indicates not only foster community harmony; they also perpetuate what might be called a *communalistic* ethic. From specific Bantu perspectives, this might entail that *ubuntu* is necessarily a communalistic ethical concept.⁴⁶ According to some theorists, such as Okolo, most of African philosophy proffers a communalistic ethic based upon the overwhelmingly social nature of self.⁴⁷ According to Wiredu's conception, however, *ubuntu* is not necessarily a communalistic ethical principle. Rather, it simply indicates that the South African ethic portrayed by Metz may lean towards communalism more than individualism. On the difference between communalism and individualism, Wiredu comments that it is merely that of "custom and lifestyle rather than anything else," going on to say that the distinction is only one of degree.⁴⁸ This means that when *ubuntu* is considered a moral concept, as Metz has argued, rather than a concept attached to lifestyle or custom, then it is applicable to various systems, regardless of which way they lean. This raises the question: is it possible to sustain Metz's conception of *ubuntu* without necessarily accepting the six ethical judgments that he has deemed specifically South African?

Given Wiredu's conception of personhood as contingent upon the harmony of the community, it does not seem as though these six South African ethical judgments are necessary for *ubuntu* to be applied as a moral obligation that persons have to the community. Metz's definition of *ubuntu* is: "An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will."⁴⁹ If necessary conditions of community are shared identity and good-will, which Metz has combined into the concept of harmony, then this definition of *ubuntu* fits Wiredu's concept of personhood, even apart from the six South African moral judgments. This is evident when analyzing the six general moral judgments provided by Metz in tandem with his definition of *ubuntu* and Wiredu's concept of personhood.

The six moral judgments that Metz considers to be shared both by adherents of *ubuntu* and Westerners in modern, industrialized, constitutional democracies are that it is *pro tanto* immoral:

- A. to kill innocent people for money.
- B. to have sex with someone without her consent.
- C. to deceive people, at least when not done in self- or other-defense.
- D. to steal (that is, to take from their rightful owner) unnecessary goods.
- E. to violate trust, for example, break a promise, for marginal personal gain.
- F. to discriminate on a social basis when allocating opportunities.⁵⁰

Combining Metz's definition of ubuntu with Wiredu's conception of personhood, while not including the six moral judgments specific to South Africa, ubuntu becomes a viable humanistic ethic that grounds community morality in non-South African-specific contexts. The conception of personhood proffered by Wiredu is one that explains the genesis and development of personhood as dependent upon the community. In order for the person to come into being, there must be a community in which this may occur. Communication is a necessary process that facilitates human organisms to develop into persons within communities. In order to sustain lines of communication and the ensuing development of personhood, harmony and solidarity are required. Harmony provides the community with stability from which persons may develop. Solidarity provides the community with identity that contributes to the identification of the person *as* a person. These two qualities of action – promoting harmony and promoting solidarity – are the conditions necessary for an action to be moral from the standpoint of the ubuntu ethic that Metz proposes. Actions that betray the harmony and solidarity of the community are thereby immoral in accordance with the same ethic of ubuntu. As Metz correctly remarks, all six of the moral judgments shared between Westerners and South Africans pertain to actions that threaten the harmony and solidarity of the community.⁵¹ What Wiredu provides with his conception of personhood is a humanistic foundation upon which to understand the connection of ubuntu, i.e. moral obligation to sustaining harmony and solidarity, between the person and the community, which is lacking in Metz's account on its own.

Jason van Niekirk, in an attempt to overcome this lack of foundation between the person and the obligation to the person's community, proposes an autocentric account of ubuntu that provides a basis for the shared intuitions that ground the moral judgments that Metz supplies.⁵² Van Niekirk's autocentric account is that persons aspire to genuinely care and value others for their own sake, rather than merely for the sake of self-development, in addition to being motivated by the ultimate benefit that pursuit of this aspiration rationally supplies.⁵³ The account proffered by van Niekirk is compatible with Wiredu's conception of personhood, but it does not seem to be a necessary condition for the moral obligation a person has to community through the ethic of ubuntu.

From the humanist perspective that combines Wiredu's conception of personhood with Metz's definition of ubuntu, persons are obliged to pursue the harmony and solidarity of the community because not to do so would threaten their very status as persons. The genesis and perpetual development of a person as a person is dependent upon the continual interdependent relationship of that person with the community. That interdependent relationship is only sustained if harmony and solidarity are continually promoted within the community by the persons who comprise that community. A threat to the harmony and solidarity of the community is a threat to those persons who are persons through the community.

The obligation to engage in truth-telling, as evinced by Wiredu, provides a simple example of the interdependent relationship between person and community, the importance of harmony, and how the need for harmony of community leads to moral principles (rules) like those listed by Metz. According to Wiredu, community is dependent

upon communication, and it is community that is the vehicle for the subsequent creation and development of persons. Communication, the necessary condition of both community and personhood, is only possible if truth-telling is considered binding because, as Wiredu states, “if truth-telling were, by open common avowal, not binding, and everybody could tell lies without let or hindrance, no one could depend on anyone’s word.”⁵⁴ Communication would be impossible if there was no underlying obligation to tell the truth. The very basis of communication is the belief that what is being conveyed is *not* being conveyed as an attempt to deceive.

Contrary to Kantian ethics, which would support the principle that one has a moral obligation to tell the truth based upon the categorical imperative, Wiredu provides justification for truth-telling as a moral rule based in the importance of sustaining the community. As he states, “A rule of conduct is not a moral rule unless its non-existence or reversal would bring about the collapse of human community.”⁵⁵ Moral rules, when grounded in sustaining community, do not cause the same dilemma as Kantian ethics with regard to being able to be universalized. The moral rule is that persons should consistently tell the truth in order to sustain the harmony and solidarity of the community, but that truth-telling is not obligatory in those cases in which the harmony and the solidarity of the community are threatened *because of* truth-telling.

Due to the necessary condition concerning sustaining the community, a moral rule is one that also helps sustain the genesis and development of persons, given the interdependence between persons and the human community. Truth-telling is thus a moral principle that consistently helps sustain the harmony and solidarity of the community and is thereby also a moral principle that helps sustain persons *as* persons. Each of Metz’s general moral principles is a case of a rule that helps to sustain the harmony of the community in ways similar to truth-telling. Thus, the ethic of ubuntu provides a general rule that captures these moral principles. When combined with Wiredu’s conception of personhood, ubuntu is a humanistic ethic that does not require supernatural scaffolding. This provides a means by which to supplant the atomistic conception of personhood and morality as put forth in *The Republic* with this combination of community-dependent personhood and the ethic of ubuntu. Re-evaluating the community established in *The Republic* with this humanistic combination of personhood and moral obligation provides an answer to Glaucon’s immoralist question that does not require a supernatural narrative as originally put forth by Plato.

5. The Noble Lie, supplanted by *ubuntu*

Initially, applying the relational accounts of personhood and ubuntu to Plato’s Republic might seem ill-conceived, especially after considering the contradiction with the individualist account of the person proffered by Plato. Both Metz⁵⁶ and Mangena⁵⁷ have remarked on the stark contrast between the ethics of Plato and that of ubuntu, but neither has pursued an attempt to apply the concept to Plato’s account of moral obligation within a community of persons. In fact, applying the ethic of ubuntu to Plato’s conception of the individual might be an impossible task, but when the atomistic conception of the individual is supplanted with Wiredu’s relational concept and combined with ubuntu, this

provides a humanistic basis for moral obligation to the community. This obviates any need for a supernatural narrative to buttress moral obligation within the community proposed by Plato. From this example, the same obviation should be apparent regarding moral obligation to communities more generally.

The supernatural narrative that is proposed in *The Republic* is the Noble Lie – The Myth of the Metals – that is meant to provide the bond between persons in order to sustain community. The implication of proposing the Noble Lie is that without this narrative, the individuals within the community will not be morally obliged to that community. This is an interesting case with regard to Wiredu's comments concerning truth-telling and community (see above). In this particular instance, not abiding by truth-telling as a moral rule is justified because *lying* actually sustains the harmony of the community. This lie, however, is only necessary because Plato operates with an individualistic moral conception of personhood. Working from an atomistic understanding of personhood in attempting to establish and sustain the harmony of a communalistic society, i.e. the kallipolis, requires a narrative connecting the individual persons to the community.

Replacing this conception of the individual with Wiredu's relational conception eradicates the need for such a lie. Wiredu's conception of personhood, when inserted in Plato's Republic instead of the atomistic conception, provides a stable, humanistic foundation for the kallipolis because persons only *exist* as persons *through* the existence of the kallipolis as a community. Persons are not atomic entities that precede the community and thereby must later be bound to the community through the use of a fabricated, enforced supernatural narrative. As Menkiti remarks, this is a predominantly Western conception of the relationship between individual and community.⁵⁸ Rather than this Western con-ception, a humanistic perspective takes persons to be naturally bound to the community through their genesis as persons from within the community. Unlike the atomistic conception of personhood, the relational idea of personhood directly aligns with the ubuntu ethic as proposed by Metz. The quality that defines ubuntu – harmony – is also the quality that is essential for the just community as conceived by Plato. The entire functioning of the kallipolis as conceived in *The Republic* is rooted in being harmonious. Through a brief re-evaluation of some specific aspects of the kallipolis within *The Republic*, this connection between the just community as Plato imagines it, and the concept of ubuntu as proffered by Metz, becomes strikingly clear.

Before the Noble Lie is presented in Book III of the Republic, Socrates puts forth his ideals of early education, which will entail children being educated in music and poetry,⁵⁹ followed by physical training.⁶⁰ One of the main purposes of such training is harmony of the soul.⁶¹ Even here, the focus on education, especially when considered against the backdrop of Wiredu's conception of personhood (replacing soul with his notion of *okra*),⁶² indicates that human beings are becoming persons through their education. In fact, they are developing as harmonious with the community in which they are being raised through the use of fables and stories that provide them with the ethos fundamental to making them persons.⁶³ Just before the Noble Lie is proposed at the end of Book III,⁶⁴ Socrates remarks on the dangers of the individual not being harmonious when he criticizes those who are too soft and overcultivated, or too hard and savage.⁶⁵

If a relational conception of personhood is here considered, then it becomes evident that harmony refers to not merely harmony of oneself (as in the atomistic conception), but harmony with the rest of the community. The discussion of the Noble Lie follows upon this consideration of basic education because Plato has only considered the early education of children as if they are individual entities separated from the community in which they are being educated. Wiredu's conception of personhood provides a corrective to this assumption. In fact, the relational idea of personhood also better supports Plato's claim in Book IV that the outcome of education is a newly finished person.⁶⁶ Returning momentarily to Ramose's etymology of ubuntu (see above), the concept of *ubuntu* as a progression into wholeness nicely captures the concept of education within *The Republic*, especially as it pertains to the development of the person from within the community.

The four virtues of the kallipolis, as they are discussed in Book IV, are all based in sustaining the community. Wisdom concerns good judgment pertaining to the laws and judgments within the kallipolis that sustain the community.⁶⁷ Courage is a preservation of the values and laws of the community.⁶⁸ Moderation is a kind of harmony within the city that keeps the people and their desires in check.⁶⁹ Justice consists of each person being what they are and doing what they are supposed to do within the community.⁷⁰ All four of these virtues are supported by Metz's definition of ubuntu in that they promote "shared identity among people grounded on good-will" and function to prevent any vice that "fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will."⁷¹

The definition of injustice supplied in Book IV is evidence of the importance of the kind of moral obligation to the community that is advocated by ubuntu: any action that destroys harmony is unjust.⁷² Every movement away from the moral obligation of ubuntu within *The Republic* leads to the destruction of the community and the persons of that community. This is most obvious in the case of the tyrant in Book IX, who, through destruction of the community, ceases being a person. This reiterates Wiredu's contention that a human organism without community and the communication entailed by the community is bound to become less than a person.⁷³ The person who becomes tyrannical was not morally obliged to the community because of a supernatural narrative that binds the people together. The person who became the tyrant had been morally obliged to the community because it was the community that developed and sustained that person as a *person*. Once the person betrayed that obligation, they revoked their personhood. This obligation is less contentious if understood as being humanistically grounded rather than based upon a supernatural narrative that merely a falsehood for the sake of the community.

6. Conclusion

Ubuntu supplies the humanistic moral rule that underlies the obligation the person has to the community and provides an understanding that this moral rule works to sustain the harmony of the community. Without a humanistic foundation to moral rules, Plato deemed it necessary to propose the Noble Lie, i.e. a supernatural narrative that was meant to sustain moral obligation to the community. This is plainly not necessary once we replace Plato's conception of personhood with that of Wiredu and supplant the Noble Lie with

Metz's idea of ubuntu. A relational conception of personhood, combined with the ethic of ubuntu, provides a humanistic foundation upon which to accept a moral obligation to upholding the virtues Plato describes, all of which contribute to the harmony of the community.

Given Wiredu's conception of communitarianism being custom and lifestyle rather than a necessary outgrowth of the ubuntu ethic, moral obligation to community does not merely relate to communities such as the extreme case in Plato's *Republic*. As a humanistic foundation for moral obligation, ubuntu actually pertains to communities that lean towards individualism, as well as those that lean towards communitarianism. Bringing together Metz's secular account of ubuntu with Wiredu's conception of personhood provides a stable humanistic foundation for moral obligation to community that is rooted in African philosophy, but is applicable to both African and non-African contexts. This basis of moral obligation, as is evident by re-evaluating Plato's *Republic*, supplants the need for supernatural narrative, thus simplifying and strengthening the secular foundations for morality. Even if all gods are dead, not everything is permitted, and we need not resort to supernatural 'just-so stories' to account for morality. As persons, we are still obligated to the community through ubuntu.

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NOTES

1. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 245; cf. Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 65.

2. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 360c.

3. *Ibid.*, 414c–415c.

4. D.A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 158–159; cf. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction, Third Edition*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 179–180.

5. Kwasi Wiredu, "How Not To Compare African Thought With Western Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction, Third Edition*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 149–162.

6. Henri Maurier, "Do We Have An African Philosophy," trans. Mildred M. McDevitt, in *African Philosophy: An Introduction, Third Edition*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 32–33.

7. Mogobe B. Ramose, "The Ethics of *ubuntu*," in *The African Philosophy Reader, Second Edition*, eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 324.

8. Christian B.N. Gade, "The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on *Ubuntu*," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2011): 307.
9. Gade (2011), pp. 315–318.
10. Ramose (2003), p. 328.
11. Gade (2011), p. 317.
12. Pieter H. Coetzee, "Particularity in morality and its relation to community," in *The African Philosophy Reader, Second Edition*, eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 274.
13. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999).
14. Gade (2011), pp. 317–318; cf. Moeketsi Letseka, "In Defense of *Ubuntu*," *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* 31 (2012), pp. 47–60.
15. Thaddeus Metz and Joseph B.R. Gaie, "The African ethic of *Ubuntu*/Botho: implications for research on morality," *Journal of Moral Education* 39 (2010): 274; cf. Letseka (2012).
16. Ramose (2003), p. 326.
17. Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15(3) (2007): 334.
18. M.B. Ramose, "But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2007), pp. 347–355.
19. Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," (2007), p. 322.
20. Thaddeus Metz, "The Motivation for "Toward an African Moral Theory"," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2007): 332.
21. Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," (2007), p. 323.
22. Fainos Mangena, "Towards a hunhu/*ubuntu* dialogical moral theory," *Phronimon* 13.2 (2012): 1–17; cf. Wiredu (1984); Wiredu (1996).
23. Mangena (2012), pp. 7–8.
24. Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," (2007), p. 324.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 324–327.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
31. Chukwudum B. Okolo. "Self as a Problem in African Philosophy." in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 209–215.
32. Masolo (2010), p. 158.
33. Wiredu (1996), p. 13.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.
37. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927), p. 154.
38. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 85–86.

39. The debate between Wiredu and Gyekye concerning the Akan conception of the person rests, in part, upon the meaning of the term *okra*, which is one of the three parts constituting the person (the other two are *sunsum*, which is personality, and *honam* or *nipadua*, which is body). Wiredu translates *okra* as a quasi-physical term, which is a function of the body and not soul, while Gyekye translates *okra* into the English equivalent, soul, which is to be understood as an immaterial component of self. Didier Njirayamanda Kaphagawani, "African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 332–333.
40. Okolo (2002), pp. 210–213.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 213.
42. Safro Kwame. 2004. "Quasi-Materialism: A Contemporary African Philosophy of Mind," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 343–351.
43. Wiredu (1996), p. 71.
44. Okolo, (2002), p. 214; cf. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959); Mark D. Tschaepe, "Halo of Identity: The Significance of First Names and Naming," *Janus Head* 6.1 (2003): 67–78.
45. Wiredu (1996), pp. 63–64; Metz "Toward an African Moral Theory," (2007), pp. 321–341.
46. Tempels (1959); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).
47. Okolo (2002), pp. 214–215.
48. Wiredu (1996), p. 72.
49. Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," (2007), p. 338.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
52. Jason van Niekirk, "In Defense of an Autocentric Account of *Ubuntu*," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2007): 364–368.
53. van Niekirk (2007), p. 367.
54. Wiredu (1996), p. 63.
55. Wiredu (1996), p. 63.
56. Thaddeus Metz, "An African Theory of Moral Status: A Relational Alternative to Individualism and Holism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15 (2012): 391.
57. Mangena (2012), p. 2.
58. Menkiti (1984), pp. 179–180.
59. Plato, 377a.
60. *Ibid.*, 403c.
61. *Ibid.*, 401d.
62. See note 39 above.
63. *Ibid.*, 377a.
64. *Ibid.*, 414c.
65. *Ibid.*, 410d.
66. *Ibid.*, 410d.
67. *Ibid.*, 428b–429a.
68. *Ibid.*, 429a–430c.
69. *Ibid.*, 430d–432e.

70. *Ibid.*, 433a–435b.

71. Metz “Toward an African Moral Theory,” (2007), p. 338.

72. Plato, 444a.

73. Wiredu (1996), p. 13.

Environmentalism and Posthumanism

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The term ‘posthumanism’ has not been promoted by many environmental philosophers, and it is not clear how the figures I discuss would react to being characterized as posthumanist. It is more typical for advocates of the perspectives I discuss to characterize them with labels such as ‘non-anthropocentric,’ ‘ecocentric,’ or ‘deep ecology.’ Yet, as I will argue, the ideas that have emerged in these lines of thought reflect philosophical commitments that could aptly be characterized as posthumanist.

Like most post isms, posthumanism designates a very obscure set of philosophical themes. In 2002, the conservative social critic Francis Fukuyama published a book entitled *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. Fukuyama’s use of the word ‘posthuman’ was intended to provoke a line of questioning directed at the possibility of technologies that would substantially re-shape the nature of consciousness and human experience.

Although Fukuyama pointed toward biotechnology, the potential for intelligent robots and interfacing the brain with electronic sensing or processing capabilities was an important component of the potential to reshape consciousness into presumably unrecognizable forms. Posthumanism was something that Fukuyama was against (Fukuyama 2002). He was laying the foundations for an argument to regulate these technologies on grounds not unlike those discussed by Leon Kass, former chairman of the Bush Administration’s advisory panel on bioethics (Kass 1997). More generally, posthumanism is a term that has been used to classify a number of theorists in the continental tradition who, in some respects inspired by Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism,” argue that one should be skeptical about all claims to the effect that humanity or “the human” represents a stable or valid metaphysical category. A third strand of posthumanism emerges directly out of work in environmental philosophy and animal ethics over the last four decades. Its focus has been to challenge the view that all moral values must be grounded in human experience.

My main focus here will be this last strain of posthumanism, though there are interesting an important ways in which this line of thought intersects with recent French and German philosophy. I will not be directly discussing the usage introduced by Fukuyama at all. The generally conservative elements in Fukuyama’s reaction to the

posthuman future may intersect with certain old school debates over the role of religion and religious faith in grounding value judgments, and I am sure that there are humanists who would find an examination of that intersection worthwhile. Nevertheless, these questions are somewhat indirectly related to the focus of *my* inquiry, and they shall remain tacit in my exposition. Indeed, the term ‘posthumanism’ has not been promoted by many environmental philosophers, and it is not clear how all the figures I will discuss below would react to being characterized as posthumanist. It is more typical for advocates of the perspectives I will discuss to characterize them as ‘non-anthropocentric,’ ‘ecocentric’ or ‘deep ecology.’ Yet as I will argue, the ideas that have emerged in these lines of thought reflect philosophical commitments that could aptly be characterized as post-humanist.

The contemporary era in environmental philosophy blends longstanding themes in the philosophy of nature and nature aesthetics with the understanding that the world is enduring an environmental crisis. While the former themes are seen to be as old as philosophy itself, the latter are viewed as being somewhat recent. Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962 is often credited as the touchstone for widespread awareness of environmental crisis, though certainly much earlier works, including George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864) or Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold 1949) could also be cited. John Passmore’s *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (1974) established an enduring philosophical dialectic for analyzing environmental crisis and decay. Passmore asked if duties to preserve and protect nature and natural process required innovations in ethical theories, on the one hand, or whether they could be grounded in more conventional forms of moral obligation amongst human beings, on the other (Passmore 1974). This has proven to be an extremely fertile philosophical debate, with literally hundreds of contributions that have explored alternative interpretations of Passmore’s basic framing.

I submit that a loose group of philosophies we might well refer to as ‘post-humanism’ emerges from those who have argued *against* Passmore’s conclusion. These theories hold that our responsibilities to nature cannot be derived from more conventional duties that people in the present generation owe to other human beings, including those in generations yet to come. There are a number of reasons why one might take this tack. First, as Richard Routley (later Richard Sylvan) argued, it is not difficult to generate widely shared intuitions that seem to indicate such duties. Routley proposed the “last man” thought experiment in which one assumes the role of the last person living and ponders whether it would be permissible to destroy intact ecosystems for one’s own amusement (Sylvan (né Routley) 2003). Few think that it would be. The project of arguing for direct duties to nature can be understood as one of first accounting for and then ratifying those intuitions. Second, some arrive at the articulation of duties to nature out of a more deeply felt dissatisfaction with mainstream neo-Kantian and consequentialist moral theory. Arne Naess’s version of deep ecology would be an example of a view that seeks to ground the aesthetic appreciation of nature experienced by many wilderness enthusiasts in a moral epistemology that interprets these experiences as cognition of something objective, real and actually existing in nature.

Still other motivations for innovation in environmental philosophy had more of a practical and instrumental source. Much public policy analysis based on economic methods was effectively committed to the notion that preferences revealed in human behavior were the sole basis for evaluating the costs and benefits of a policy. Arguing for intrinsic values was strategically attractive for those who objected to the environmental policies that these methods were indicating. In legal settings, the question of “standing” was critical to whether a given set of interests could be viewed as material to the decision. Christopher D. Stone’s hugely influential *Should Trees Have Standing?* (1972) was originally conceived as a friend of the court brief intended to open the way for decisions that would recognize non-human entities including animals and ecosystems as having interests worthy of protection in the courts. The metaphor of legal standing shaped the philosophical debate launched by Passmore, as environmental philosophers questioned which entities are recognized as having moral standing, and which should be?

As the question of moral standing was enjoined by those attempting to frame a philosophical response to environmental crisis, their enquiries converged with those of philosophers who had been arguing for a renewed attention to the interests of non-human animals. The current era in animal advocacy had its own origins at Oxford University in the 1960s, when a multidisciplinary group was moved to enquiry by Ruth Harrison’s 1964 book *Animal Machines: The New Factory Farming Industry*. The discussion eventuated in the publication of *Animals, Men and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-humans*, which was reviewed in 1973 by Peter Singer in *The New York Review of Books*. From the U.S. perspective, it was Singer’s review and his subsequent book *Animal Liberation* (1975) that brought the moral standing of animals to widespread attention. Singer’s core argument is widely known: It would be unethical, on any of many ethical theories, to allow a relatively trivial interest to override one’s obligation to alleviate pain and suffering being endured by others. In the case of his work on animals, this principle is combined with an empirical argument to show that animals used in laboratory settings and in industrial farming endure pain and suffering. He goes on to argue that species difference offers no ground to ignore this pain and suffering (Singer 1975).

A second major line of thought in animal ethics was contributed by Tom Regan in *The Case for Animal Rights*. Regan argues that Singer’s view has all the faults of its utilitarian origins: It is possible to generate arguments that rationalize sacrificing fundamental interests of individuals to alleviate suffering among a larger group. But Regan’s basically Kantian form of moral theory engages the animal question at a metaphysical level. Kant is mistaken to presume that only human beings exhibit the traits requisite for generating duties of respect. Indeed, Kant’s view does not adequately protect human beings who lack the capability for acts of autonomy. If we view children and people suffering from dementia as having moral standing, we must adopt a metaphysical standard for moral standard that is much lower than full rationality. Animals, he argues, are subjects-of-a-life, so to be consistent we must accord all animals that have a sense of self, of their own interests and of the future the full consideration that we extend to all moral patients (Regan 1983).

Certainly all of the themes discussed above could be and have been amplified and subjected to criticism. What is important to notice in the present context is the way that

Singer and Regan's arguments in animal ethics intersect with a set of questions raised by philosophers attempting to understand and defend direct duties to care about and subsequently protect nature and ecosystems. The convergence of these two lines of thought has been characterized as "extensionism": a strategy in philosophy that begins by noting that those features thought to ground obligations among members of the human community are not unique to human beings. If features such as having an interest, experiencing pain and suffering, or being the subject of a life are the basis for articulating a moral responsibility to other humans, they would also be a basis for justifying moral responsibilities to non-humans.

Aside from Singer and Regan themselves, the most important extensionist in environmental philosophy may be Holmes Rolston III. Rolston has produced a number of works in which he motivates his view of duties beyond the human sphere in stages, beginning with arguments which note that ecosystems are the home of many non-human animals. Considered as individuals, these animals have interests in continuing to reside in ecosystems that go beyond interests they may have in avoiding the experience of pain or suffering. Humans and other animals share these interests, Rolston notes, though his point is to take us beyond a view of moral standing based on the capacity to experience pain and suffering. Rolston goes on to argue that the survival interest of individuals is grounded in the survival interest of a non-sentient entity, the species or breeding population. He argues that as individuals, both human and non-human animals have an interest in future generations that is transcended by the species' collective interest in survival. But this interest does not depend on the survival of any particular individual. Rolston thus argues that it is possible to see the nature of survival interests being transformed as one extends the notions of reproduction and survival through ever more comprehensive biological systems (Rolston III 1999).

There are, in fact, many points of difference among these environmental philosophies, as well as many points on which critics would note difficulties. For example, while Singer and Regan begin with an other-regarding feature (suffering in Singer's case and subject of a life status in Regan's) and then extend this to non-humans, Rolston begins with a self-regarding value, survival, and then argues that this value is adumbrated systemically throughout the natural world. Clearly, these orientations will generate rather different conceptions of moral obligation. Rolston's strategy also shares elements with that of non-philosophers such as James Lovelock who argue that we should see the earth itself, or even the entire universe as a living entity. Despite all these differences, the crucial similarity lies in the way that these theorists begin by noting something about individual human beings that could be thought to ground a conception of moral obligation, and then attempt to show that this feature is not unique to individual human beings. Furthermore, all these theorists would disagree with Passmore's original contention that duties to nature can successfully be articulated and defended within the constraints of moral theories that limit moral standing to the human species.

Self-professed humanists will undoubtedly have a variety of responses to the lines of thought outlined above. However, to the extent that humanism is understood in terms of moral theories that are grounded in terms of duties that human beings have to other human beings, as distinct from duties that are owed to supernatural beings, we may speculate that

the passel of theories just described violate the letter but perhaps not the spirit of humanist philosophies. To the extent that humanists argue against the idea that intentions of supernatural minds could be ultimate sources of direction or change in the cosmos, the theorists I have just described would almost certainly agree. Even those, such as Lovelock, Rolston or Naess, who entertain the existence of entities that transcend human consciousness do so in a thoroughly naturalistic vein. Those, such as Rolston or Regan, who are in dialog with religious thought construct that dialog in a manner consistent with many religious humanists.

Humanists, and indeed anyone, might express concern that these extensionist trends might license forms of inference that would subjugate vital human interests to putative environmental values. Indeed, there is little doubt that the intent of all the philosophers discussed above has been to assert that there are some circumstances in which duties to non-humans would override at least some interests of human beings. However, it is also true that in no case have those cited above developed philosophies that would give the interests of nature untrammelled authority over those of human beings. All have developed highly nuanced ethical theories that discuss how vital human interests would be respected even given an axiology that implies moral standing for non-humans.

Adequate discussion of this point would require delving into the details of these theories in manner that is not germane to the present context. Yet it is worth stressing that while some minor figures in environmental thought have expressed genuinely anti-humanist sentiments, there is little reason to think that any of the theorists discussed above have views on moral standing that entail the sacrifice of those human values that humanists have elevated to the highest levels of moral importance. While there will certainly be room to debate the implications of extensionism on a case by case basis, extensionists have generally been careful to qualify their views in ways that leave considerable room for protecting human life and liberty.

However, other trends in environmental thought owe a profound debt to critics of humanism that emerged from in the Continental tradition. These trends have focused especially on animals. The Continental thread in environmental philosophy has taken up the critique of dichotomous categories inherited from modern philosophy. The early versions of this critique arose from Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl, all of who were reacting to the unprecedented rise of the natural sciences at the end of the nineteenth century and the accompanying transformation of the academy. A succinct statement of their concerns and counter-proposals defies imagination, but much potency was derived from noticing that the scientific worldview was built upon a set of implicit distinctions such as man vs. nature, nature vs. society, mind vs. matter and society vs. the individual. While implicit acceptance of the dichotomous nature of the categories implied by these distinctions had created an institutionalization of knowledge production activities that had enormous fecundity, the distinctions themselves were patently pragmatic in nature and their categorical institutionalization left many lacunae in academic practice. Later European philosophers that include Horkheimer and Adorno, on the one hand, and Foucault and Derrida, on the other, saw grave ethical and political implications as this compartmentalization of knowledge production became wedded to economic interests and the structures of state power.

Derrida in particular became interested in the implicit categorical distinction between the human and the animal. In one of his last works, he argues much of Western philosophy has been built on a presumptive dichotomization between human beings, or “man,” on the one hand, and all other animals. The lectures published in English under the title *The Animal that Therefore I Am (Following)* were delivered in Derrida’s usual inimitable and wandering style, and the text has numerous openings where multiple interpretations or developments might be inserted. However, a few points are made with uncharacteristic clarity. Most important is simply the assertion that a dichotomous categorization of humans and other animals has been assumed under a number of different guises in Western philosophy. Although Derrida sees the human-animal divide through the history of philosophy, he sees Descartes’ denial of mind to animals as its apogee. We are only now beginning to explore the implications of Bentham’s riposte: “But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, *Can they reason?* nor, *Can they talk?* but, *Can they suffer?*” (Derrida and Wills 2002)

Derrida is keen to suggest that the implications of Bentham’s challenge go well beyond our moral obligations to non-human animals. He notes that when “human” and “animal” marks the categorical divide, the enormous differences in the capacities and needs among non-human animals become sublimated into a generic, undifferentiated notion of “the animal”. He notes further that the prospects of seeing non-humans as individuals become diminished, as does the potential for interacting with individual animals in a manner that is presumed giving and receiving responses: response-ability. Derrida also undertakes a detailed discussion of the way that Freudian and post-Freudian thought, including that of Lacan, Deluze and Guatteri continues the Cartesian tradition, responding to Darwin by incorporating the human/animal divide into the subconscious. Various theorists in the tradition have reconfigured Freud’s original views on the sublimation of an animal id through the socialization process, but none have challenged the way in which “the animal” stands as that element in the human psyche that comes first, with humanity to follow through a process of differentiation and taming.

Derrida is also careful to qualify the thrust of his remarks, emphasizing that it would be asinine to equate humans and other animals, or to regard humans and other animals as incapable of being differentiated. The ethical implications of his musings are taken up by theorists such as Mathew Calarco, Cary Wolfe and Kelly Oliver. All stress that it is the uncritical acceptance of dichotomous categories that permits the emergence of institutions and practices in which animals are subjected to abuse, or in the case of wild animals, where their homes and habitats are destroyed wantonly. All also stress an important distinction between an animal ethics that draws upon Derrida and the extensionist approaches developed by Singer and Regan. Succinctly, the problem with Singer and Regan is that both of them use cognitive properties characteristic of the human species to rationalize and justify extension of moral standing to non-humans. It is because non-humans experience pain, or are subjects-of-a-life, in either case just like humans, that non-humans deserve moral standing. In arguing this way, they never consider whether properties characteristic of a given non-human species, but *not* characteristic of human beings, could have importance for members of that species (Calarco 2008; Oliver 2010; Wolfe 2010).

For example, hens have a biological drive to build a nest, but humans do not. On the animal ethics developed by Singer and Regan, affording moral consideration to this drive depends on reconciling whatever experience chickens have in connection with the frustration of this drive with the human-centered notions of suffering, in the case of Singer, or interests, in the case of Regan. Even more problematically, in navigating and controlling their environment many animals process sensory signals such as the polarity of light or sound waves that are unavailable to the human sensory apparatus. Actions that interfere with this processing seem to *prima facie* candidates for making a difference to these animals, yet it is difficult to see how the extensionist argument form that stresses the continuity between species can accommodate this profound difference. This type of critique, it should be noted, appears to be most persuasive among theorists who have argued against enlightenment moral theories on the grounds that they are insensitive to difference in race, gender or ethnicity.

I do not propose to undertake a detailed evaluation of the posthumanist argumentative strategy in the present context. Wolfe, Oliver and Calarco develop somewhat more detailed versions of the general strategy I have outline here. I note also that it is theorists who argue along these lines that seem to be most comfortable calling themselves posthumanists. They share a generally pro-animal orientation with extensionists such as Singer and Regan. That is, they want to assert that moral obligations to non-humans are both more secure and farther reaching than many traditional ethicists might have thought. However, they distinguish their positions from those of Singer and Regan by arguing that Singer and Regan are still operating within the parameters of enlightenment philosophy. Enlightenment moral theories seek universally shared traits on which to ground moral duties, but this very orientation disrespects the multitude of ways in which individuals differ from one another. A truly posthumanist ethic recognizes the moral significance of difference and builds its understanding of recognition and response on the theme of respect for difference.

However, these theorists also adopt a philosophical stance that is classically humanist in an important respect. All of them, and especially Wolfe, argue for the primacy of the humanities, by which we can understand discursive forms that stress narrative, metaphor and expressive potential, over empirical, analytic and quantitative forms of knowledge production more traditionally associated with the sciences. Wolfe is particularly effusive in making this argument as part of his attempt to dissociate his own form of posthumanism from the putatively posthumanist futures that were the subject of Fukuyama's critique. Wolfe sees this "bad" posthumanism as an unconstrained development of the enlightenment project through technoscientific means. He seizes in particular on the work of Daniel Dennett as exemplifying the kind of posthumanism from which he wishes to dissociate himself. In his critique of Dennett, Wolfe ties Dennett's interest in the scientific study of consciousness and his willingness to entertain the theoretical possibility of conscious robots to classically reductionist attacks on the validity of narrative discourse, on the one hand, and to anti-animal attempts to ground a sharp distinction between humans and non-humans in virtue of human linguistic capacities, on the other.

There is little doubt that Dennett has made a sophisticated cognitive science version of this latter argument in his book *Kinds of Minds*. There Dennett assembles a variety of findings from the study of animal behavior and the human brain to develop a hierarchy of self-replicating systems to which the general explanatory category of intentionality might legitimately be applied. Dennett finds even microbes and plants to exhibit forms of directedness and functionally purposive behavior. As he has argued throughout his career, Dennett believes that the animate control distributed throughout body tissues in all animals is the basis for more the complex central nervous systems in vertebrates that allow an organism to monitor first its own internal states, and subsequently the movement and intentions of other organisms in its environment. Dennett does not shy away from classifying these forms of systemic monitoring and control as forms of intelligence, but he does argue that the potential for symbolic labeling of items both within and outside the organism's representational system facilitates levels of complexity in intentional systems that amount to a unique status for human capabilities (Dennett 1999).

Dennett does indeed argue that human beings' capacities for linguistic representation and manipulation of the complex of processes we typically call 'thinking' is the basis for a distinction between pain and suffering. In contrast, Wolfe argues that Dennett's distinction "is based on a set of phantom abilities, anchored by but not limited to language and its imagined representational capacities in relation to the world of things, that no subject, either nonhuman or human, possesses in fact." This critique forms the basis for a reassertion of the pro-animal stance that Wolfe reconstructs through quotations from Derrida: "the question [of human moral responsibility to non-humans] is disturbed by a certain *passivity*... a not being able... What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability? ... [W]hat is this non-power at the heart of power? ... What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us?" (Quoted in Wolfe, p. 46). This line of questioning suggests to Wolfe that the *ursprung* of morality, so to speak, consists in responsiveness to this passivity, this vulnerability. The heart of posthumanism for Wolfe is summed up in his concluding riposte to Dennett:

If it is true that cognitive science has an enormous amount to contribute the area of philosophy that we used to call phenomenology – if it has even, in a way, taken it over – then it is also true that the textually oriented humanities have much to teach cognitive science about what language is (and isn't) and how that, in turn, bears on any possible philosophy of the subject (human or animal). This is simply to say that it will take all hands on deck, I think, to fully comprehend what amounts to a new reality: that the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects. (Wolfe 2010, p. 47)

Wolfe goes on to create a four celled diagram in which the philosophical positions of are positioned with respect to their commitments to humanism. The vertical axis of the diagram indicates the extent to which a philosophy is humanist in the sense that its ethical commitments are "pro animal" or "anti animal," as I have been using these terms here. The horizontal axis indicates the extent to which a philosophy has metaphysical and epistemological commitments that are derived from what might be called "enlightenment

humanism”: the presumption that forms of rationality, perception and experience characteristic of the human species – some would say the white male property owner – are taken be paradigmatic universals.

Wolfe’s own labeling scheme for these cells places the thought of Rawls and Habermas into the Humanist Humanism category: philosophies that both retain enlightenment commitments and that afford no moral standing to nonhumans. The Humanist Posthumanists include Singer and Regan, who find a basis for pro-animal views within the enlightenment traditions. Wolfe classifies Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault as Posthumanist Humanists. They make the critique of foundationalism, yet show little affinity for nonhumans. Among a cluster of Posthumanist Posthumanists Wolfe includes Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway along with Derrida.

Although there are any number of comments and criticisms that might be put forward with respect to each of the views that I have outlined here, I will conclude with three brief points. With the self-declared posthumanists and Derrida, I think that it is both correct and insightful to notice cultural and intellectual trends that can be usefully characterized as posthumanist. Just as many diverse philosophical viewpoints that emerged during the enlightenment and modernist eras can be characterized as broadly humanist in their respective commitments to forms of naturalism, to moral ontologies that enable human liberation and self-realization and to modes of expression celebrating the autobiography of the human species, the viewpoints surveyed above mark shifts in the trajectory of humanism that for all *their* diversity nonetheless add up to what Wolfe calls “a new reality.”

I would go on to say that this characterization becomes increasingly less useful as one delves more deeply into the details of any given philosopher’s respective position. In the details, all these varieties of posthumanism diverge from one another. At the same time, none of the thinkers I have discussed here advocate a return to the philosophical/cultural constellation of ideas that humanism has opposed. In fact, I would go on to argue that the diversity could be expanded even more by recognizing how deeply it penetrates into the sciences themselves.

Dennett’s own views notwithstanding, the scientific study of animal behavior and ecology contributes much to our species’ appreciation and grasp of value and our recognition of responsibilities to the other than human world. The presumption that the natural scientific disciplines are committed to foundational epistemology is not, in my view, borne out by the encounter with working scientists. When I proposed a sketch of posthumanism to one of my colleagues who studies the molecular biology of plants, her response was “All biologists have that view.” She retreated a bit when I pointed out that in my experience many scientists who work with laboratory animals seem wedded to a dichotomous view of humans and nonhumans almost as a psychological defense mechanism. It keeps them from having to think too much about the implications of their work.

Nevertheless, in the writing of figures such as Donna Haraway, not to mention John Dewey, we find a perspective that retains a commitment to scientific methods as indispensable modes of knowledge production, yet which recognizes fully the contingency, fallibility and perspectival nature of the knowledge those methods produce. It is thus

possible, I claim, to maintain greater openness to intersubjective validity claims generated through methods specifically designed to generate such claims among a community of inquirers than Wolfe's sweeping critique of cognitive science would seem to admit. To the extent that Derrida's reflections are viewed as exercises in maintaining critical distance from our own community commitments, they are fully compatible with such openness.

When our inquiries adopt the wide view of cultural process and intellectual trends that a meaningful interpretation of either humanism or posthumanism seems to demand, I am not sure that posthumanism is in any sense contrary to the general spirit of humanism. Post in the sense of after humanism it may nonetheless be. If this formulation helps us locate our current locus in the continuing autobiography of our species, that is enough to make a meditation on posthumanism worthwhile.

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Capital Punishment: Its Lost Appeal?

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A large proportion of the population thinks that capital punishment is a reasonable method to reduce crime and punish those who have been convicted of a capital crime. I discuss aspects to the philosophy of capital punishment, and analyze factual elements of murder conviction processes, to significantly cast doubt on the pro-capital punishment argument. In order to measure the true value and need for capital punishment, one must analyze pro capital punishment arguments in light of the alternatives. While theories of deterrence, incapacitation and retribution will be reviewed, theories of rehabilitation and restoration will not since they are not applicable to the capital punishment discussion. With increased legal protections, which are a good thing, and rising costs of incarceration, capital punishment is not the greatest good punishment option for capital crime. The remaining options are revising the capital punishment system, an enormous challenge, or suspending it indefinitely.

1. Introduction

On a cold January day in 1974, a newly laid off Dennis Rader found his first “project” while roaming the streets of Wichita, Kansas. He spotted, Julie Oterio, a thirty-four year old Latina taking her children to school.¹ While Julie was out, Rader broke in to the Oterio home and lay wait for his project to return. To Rader’s surprise, Joseph Oterio, Julie’s husband, returned home which made it four. Rader used his soon to be regular shtick that he needed money to be on his way.² This was intended to subdue fears before torturing his victims.

Rader began by strangling Julie and Joseph individually with sporadic periods of rest. Since it was Rader’s first time strangling a person, (he self-proclaimed to have strangled dogs and cats in his youth) he was unsure how long it would take. Accordingly, the children watched in horror as their Mother and Father thrashed for life on the floor. With the parents out of the way, Rader focused his attention on the children. As he put it, “the coup de grace” was watching Joseph (age nine), gasp for breath peering out a fogged

plastic bag as the final Ortereo, Josephine (age eleven), was led to the basement. Placing a cord around Josephine's neck Rader whispered, "honey your gona [sic] be in heaven tonight with the rest of your family."³

In the basement Josie was found hung from a drainage pipe, panties down, just above the floor with toenails ground into the floor. Stimulated by his actions, Rader left genetic evidence that lead to his conviction 31 years later.⁴ Given the State of Kansas at the time of his arrest did not utilize capital punishment; Rader was sentenced to life in prison where he lives presently, with access to television, newspaper, and radio for good behavior.

The post-conviction treatment of Rader is rather common in the United States. Whenever events such as the Otereo murders are discussed feelings run the range of; Rader should be behind bars for the rest of his life to; Rader should be executed. In light of the aforesaid, the remainder of this document will discuss the history, philosophy and present status of capital punishment in the United States. In addition, Utilitarian philosophy, as described by John Stewart Mill, will be used as the lens to measure the validity of Capital Punishment as a valid deterrent of capital crime.

The following analysis is not intended to apply to cases with terrorists, justice issued by war-time tribunals under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Moreover, this article is not intended to provide a religious position for or against capital punishment where faith is fundamental to one's argument.

1.1. History

Capital punishment, as an institution has been with most organized societies back to antiquity. Those who violated significant compacts with society were frequently executed for all to see. Prior to the past one hundred years or so, public rapid executions were thought to reduce criminal behavior. As people formed small townships and collectively found the means to build and staff community jails the ability to house criminals for longer periods of time became more practical, yet still not ideal. Even with a growing penal system, the actual use of life sentences was rare in the United States prior to the start of the twentieth century. Criminals often received fixed sentences or were executed. It was impractical and costly to keep a person in prison for life when they could be inexpensively executed.

1.2. Progressive Era

By the end of the nineteenth century a new movement started to sweep the political landscape called, progressivism. Progressivism sought to; write the wrongs of big business, support woman's suffrage, promote urban ideals as a replacement for the agrarian way of life, and abolish capital punishment on the grounds that it was cruel and unnecessary.

From 1897 to 1917 the progressive wave influenced ten states to abolish capital punishment. While justifications for cessation of capital punishment remained valid, the public was apprehensive. Without faith in the criminal justice system executing criminals,

lynching and burning at the stake was *believed* to be more common place than ever before the ban. Because of a few notable cases of vigilante justice, mob rule became a top concern among local governments, while local law enforcement frequently looked the other way.⁵ By the 1930s all but a few states that began the progressive experiment reinstated capital punishment leading to an all-time execution record in the United States for executions in 1935 at 199, which stands today.⁶

1.3. Modern Capital Punishment

As capital punishment continued through the 1930s, most states added one of its first safeguards protecting the accused, the automatic appeal.⁷ Even with the automatic appeal it was not a silver bullet. Without free legal services, not introduced until years later, most could not afford costs associated with the appeal process. Then, by the late 1960s defendants began asserting habeas corpus which increased the defendants' rights through the incorporation of the Fourteenth Amendment.⁸

By utilizing federal habeas corpus review the courts conducted a review of the state's legality of detention and added extra complexity to capital punishment cases.⁹ Even with additional constitutional protections applied to capital punishment cases, no one expected how *Furman vs. Georgia* of 1972 would change capital punishment proceedings for years to come.

1.4. *Furman vs. Georgia*

In *Furman vs. Georgia*, Henry Furman was convicted of committing a murder during a robbery when his weapon accidentally went off. Due to Georgia's felony-murder rule at the time, Furman qualified for the death penalty because of the resulting death. In a Supreme Court 5-4 decision the justices decided the arbitrary manner in which death penalty sentences were decided constituted cruel and unusual punishment, thus violating Eighth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. As a result states that wanted to continue to utilize capital punishment took years revising their sentencing processes to abide by the findings of the *Furman vs. Georgia* case.

The *Furman* ruling also increased the administrative and judicial complexities of carrying out a capital punishment trial. Furthermore, the ruling compelled the court to abide by an "evolving standard of decency" as an ongoing process.¹⁰ Accordingly, many states began issuing sentences of life in prison without the possibility of parole, a first for many.¹¹

As of this writing the typical capital case consists of; 1) conviction, 2) direct review, 3) state review, 4) federal habeas corpus and, 5) Section 1983, that allows the convicted the ability to challenge the excessive punishment elements of capital punishment.¹² With the steps often taking years to complete, it's understandable capital punishment states perform executions so infrequently. Moreover, due to the increased complexity and decreased frequency, the costs of performing executions became exceedingly expensive.

1.5. Cost

In 1988 Von Derhle of The Miami Herald found the cost for each electrocution of \$3.2 million, nearly 5 times the cost of life imprisonment.¹³ In Texas the picture is not much better. With over 300 inmates on death row, the state spends \$2.3 million per case, three times more than the same inmate serving a 40 year maximum security sentence.¹⁴ In New York state the department of corrections estimated implementing capital punishment would cost the state approximately \$118 million more annually.¹⁵ Lastly, a capital murder trial in California costs up to six times more than a typical murder trial.¹⁶ While the aforementioned figures are shocking, they are not unique; every state that implements capital punishment incurs higher costs than issuing life sentences.

With the aforementioned in mind, one of the only rational capital punishment arguments appears to be a cost benefit analysis of a capital ruling verses a life sentence. The problem of such a formula would be from its failure to pass the requirements of the 1972 Furman ruling, in that, the decision to perform executions cannot be deemed as arbitrary, that is, “without taking into account factors relating to the individual [crime].”¹⁷ Moreover, if such a calculation was of any value it would most likely consider the age of the convicted, thus disproportionately disaffecting those who are projected to live the longest, female and young adults, thus be discriminatory *prima facie*.

While discussing the cost of capital punishment we must also look at the concept of the *known vs. unknown* which McKee, David L., and Michael L. Sesnowitz which illuminates the obscure logic that supports capital punishment expenditures described below:

Consider the reaction of the country to the plight of the Apollo 13 astronauts. It was known with certainty that without an extraordinary effort on earth, their fate was death. Nobody would have questioned an expenditure of a billion dollars in an attempt to save their lives. But this hypothetical figure could have been devoted to a large number of alternative uses, each of which could have reduced the probability of death for others. Suppose that the installation of a billion dollars in traffic signals could be predicted to save one hundred lives per year. Is it rational to use such resources to save three astronauts? The answer at the time would have been ‘yes’ because the nation was at least implicitly aware of the enormous difference between death with certainty where the victims are identified and a decreased probability of death where the victims cannot be identified.¹⁸

When the known verses unknown concept is applied to capital punishment sentencing this issue becomes obvious. A state will spend extreme amounts of money to execute an individual (the known is the finality of executing the criminal and the high cost) with the assumption that doing so will save lives (the unknown because it is unknown if the execution will prevent additional murders and save lives.)

2. Theories of Penology

To measure the true value and need for capital punishment, one must analyze pro capital punishment arguments in light of the alternatives. While theories of deterrence, incapacitation and retribution will be reviewed, theories of rehabilitation and restoration will not since they are not applicable to the capital punishment discussion.

2.1. Deterrence

The most common argument for capital punishment is deterrence. Deterrence is the theory of preventing one from committing a crime because it is known one will suffer negative consequences from performing such an act. Whereas in theory deterrence should decrease the murder rate, studies show otherwise. One such study by Ruth D. Peterson and William C. Bailey attempted to find a correlation between capital punishment and murders over a period of 11 years in the 1970s and 80s. Their study showed no deterrent effect between capital punishment and murder rates.¹⁹

Another implicit difficulty with the deterrence theory is founded on the concept that the public is assumed to understand the true level of executions to make a calculated decision prior to committing the crime. Ruth D. Peterson explains this concept below:

Like most recent deterrence and death penalty investigators, we have operationalized the certainty of capital punishment as a ratio-death sentences for homicide to total homicides. The use of this type of measure assumes that persons' perceptions of the certainty of capital punishment are based upon a calculation of the volume of killings relative to the volume of death sentences. This may not be the case. Most persons in a community probably do not have accurate knowledge about the actual number of criminal homicides. Rather, most probably perceive the level of murder in their community in very general and crude terms such as 'high,' or 'increasing.' This is especially likely in larger communities where homicides may be so common place that only atypical killings are newsworthy. If the public is ill-informed about the actual volume of homicides (which is the figure used as the denominator of the certainty measure), then an objective measure of the certainty of the death sentence may not reflect the public's perception of capital punishment.²⁰

Thus, deterrence theory could only be marginally effective at best.

2.2. Incapacitation

Another reason often cited for capital punishment is incapacitation, specifically, preventing the criminal from committing another crime by altering their ability to do so. Incapacitation differs from deterrence, in that the influenced has the ability to commit a crime but is deterred from doing so, whereas incapacitation actually prevents the criminal from committing a crime by an external means, i.e., the murder is executed, hence it is

impossible to commit another murder, or in the case of a thief, the thief's hand is cut off to prevent further theft. Furthermore, with deterrence the target of its effects are not necessarily a criminal whereas, incapacitation is indented only for criminals.

With modern penal systems in place it is difficult, if not, *almost* impossible for high risk criminals to escape. Therefore, the argument that criminals who pose a substantial risk to society must be incapacitated is virtually unupportable. ("Virtually" is used with precision in the prior sentence because, although society is typically shielded from the high risk inmates, prison guards bear the risk the continual risks of a system where its most violent are not executed.)

2.3. Retribution

The last frequently supported justification for capital punishment is retribution. Retribution is the act of creating a positive effect for the offended and negative effect for the perpetrator. Historically, this has come from enacting pain or punishment for the convicted, to bring upon satisfaction to the offended, or can consist of a fine, although the latter is not of concern for the discussion at hand.

Retribution is a significant element in the hearts and minds of people's belief in the legal system. When a person commits a crime, the court attempts to right the wrong. For instance, when a car is stolen and the perpetrator is caught, the perpetrator will receive punishment (negative effect) while the car is returned to the owner (positive effect). Whereas the theory of retribution is effective in certain matters, it is wholly unacceptable as justification for capital punishment because of the permanence of the crimes.

Often criminals that are sentenced to capital punishment are convicted of violent rape or murder. Thus, the act of executing the criminal, albeit does serve as a negative effect, is not able to right the wrong. This is because the victim cannot be un-raped, and the murdered, cannot be resuscitated. Consequently, the theory that retribution is an effective justification for capital punishment is difficult, if not impossible, to support other than by those who are greatly influenced by emotions.

3. Errors and Racial Bias

At first glance a large proportion of the population think capital punishment is a reasonable method to reduce crime and punish those who have been convicted of a capital crime. In light of the aforementioned philosophy of capital punishment, the following elements of the conviction process significantly cast doubt on the pro-capital punishment argument.

3.1. Race

In a study conducted by David Baldus et al, a review conducted over the 1970s and 1980s found after controlling for 230 variables, researchers determined the odds of receiving a

death sentence for those who kill whites in Georgia are 4.3 times higher than those who kill African Americans.²¹

Jack Greenberg describes similar anti-African American biases by describing the time between 1930 and 1982, of the 455 persons executed for rape, 405 were African American and almost 90% of the executed were African American men convicted for the rape of a white woman.²² Even though it is not known if the race disparities originate from jurors or the system, execution rates should closely follow the nature of the crime not the race of those involved.

A report from the Government Accounting Office (GAO) titled, *Death Penalty Sentencing: Research Indicates Pattern of Racial Disparities* (February 1990), clarified glaring race related problems with capital punishment. The study found the probability of a person being sentenced to death was more likely based on the race of the victim rather than the race of the accused. Not only did those who murdered whites receive a far greater probability of receiving a death sentence than those who killed African Americans, but the study found race disparities across all stages of the judicial proceedings. In addition the GAO concluded a bias towards both African Americans and whites who receive murder convictions from urban and rural settings with white defendants were more likely to receive the death penalty in an urban setting with the African Americans in the rural setting.²³

3.2. Conviction Errors

Whereas Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) evidence is often touted as the foolproof tool of convicting those who commit crimes, it has also proved to be a key tool for proving innocence. As of September 2011, 273 people including 17 death row inmates have been acquitted by use of DNA tests.²⁴ While at first glance the news is positive, one must contemplate how many others will be or have been executed by error without DNA evidence to exonerate them.

Studying the same topic of conviction errors and accuracy, Liebman, Fagan et al at Columbian University conducted an extensive study that compiled capital punishment errors across the nation. The findings suggest an error occurs in 68% of all capital convictions. While the study revealed 76% of the errors are found and corrected in the second stage of the criminal justice process, the problem arises from the estimated 24% of the cases that are not corrected. Moreover, “82% of the cases sent back for retrial at the second appeal phase ended in sentences less than death, including 9% that ended in not guilty verdicts.”²⁵ Other findings of the Columbia University study are as follows:

1. *The closer the homicide risk to whites in a state comes to equaling or surpassing the risk to blacks, the higher the error rate [emphasis added].* Other things equal, reversal rates are *twice as high* where homicides are most heavily concentrated on whites compared to blacks, than where they are the most heavily concentrated on blacks.²⁶

2. *The higher the proportion of African-Americans in a state – and in one analysis, the more welfare recipients in a state – the higher the rate of serious capital error* [emphasis added]. Because this effect has to do with traits of the population at large, not those of particular trial participants, it appears to be an indicator of crime fears driven by racial and economic conditions.²⁷
3. *Chronic capital error rates have persisted over time* [emphasis added]. Overall reversal rates were high and fairly steady throughout the second half of the 23-year study period, averaging 60%. When all significant factors are considered, state high courts on direct appeal – where 79% of the 2349 reversals occurred – found significantly more reversible error in recent death verdicts than in verdicts imposed earlier in the study period. Other things equal, direct appeal reversal rates were increasing 9% a year during the study period.²⁸

3.3. Conviction Errors – First and Second Degree

The difference between first and second degree murder is an immense difference when it comes to determining a death penalty conviction.

In the case of *Dobbert v. State of Florida*, Dobbert was executed in 1984 for murdering his daughter. The key decision between first and second degree murder rested in the testimony of Dobbert's 13 year old son. While it was understood Dobbert's abused his children, Dobbert's son provided testimony, later recanted after the execution, which apparently would have effected the sentencing decision. As Justice Marshall put it, "That may well make Dobbert guilty of second-degree murder in Florida, but it cannot make him guilty of first-degree murder there. Nor can it subject him to the death penalty in that State." Therefore in essence Florida executed an innocent man when they put to death Ernest Dobbert.²⁹

In a more recent case in Washington State the court of appeals overturned Joel Condon's conviction of aggravated first-degree murder because the trial court did not properly instruct jurors on a lesser charge of second-degree intentional murder. While the Dobbert and Condon cases are only two examples of judicial sentencing errors, one must surmise of other cases where an error such as these went unnoticed.³⁰

3.4. Utilitarianism Ethics and the Greatest Good

When John Stewart Mill clarified the concept of Utilitarianism in 1863 in *Utilitarianism*, Mill explained the connection between Justice and Utility as being essentially related. He explained the principle of the greatest good as those, "actions [that] are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."

Per Mill, the greatest happiness is not that of the individual, but the greatest happiness of everyone combined, typically called, the *greatest good*. An example of the concept is listed below:

You are driving a trolley down a steep hill unable to stop quickly. You notice six workers on the track who do not see the trolley approaching and will be killed. Nevertheless, there is a switch you can reach, which will switch the train to another set of tracks, saving the six workers but instead killing one woman pushing a baby in a carriage across second set of tracks. What shall be done?

One may say, the workers have at least lived longer than the baby in the carriage, thus save the baby so it can grow up and live a long life. But according to the greatest good concept, if anyone must die it should be the two because it is “less bad.” The greatest good to save the six over the two. Moreover, the greatest good theory does not focus on what could have been, such as the baby growing up to be a doctor and saving lives, because no one knows what will be. Consequently, the greatest good theory requires one to work with what is and not what could be.

When the greatest good theory of Utilitarianism is applied to criminology and capital punishment, Utilitarianism support for abstaining from capital punishment becomes clear. As Mill states, “justice which is grounded on utility [is] the chief part, and incomparably the most sacred and binding part, of all morality.” He later points out the assumption that we all, that is society, strive to be safe and society sees the greatest means of achieving safety as the highest form of utility, that being justice.

To further elaborate the relevant aspects of capital punishment through the eyes of utilitarian justice one must address the following elements.

1. *It is unjust to deprive one from liberty and property.* As Mill stated, “It is considered unjust to deprive any one of his personal liberty, his property, or any other thing which belongs to him by law. It is unjust to break faith with anyone, to violate an engagement either express or implied, or disappoint expectations raised by our conduct, at least if we have raised those expectations knowingly and voluntarily.”³¹ Considering the problematic aspects of capital punishment in totality, it’s difficult to be in disagreement with Mill.
2. *Must be impartial.* “It is universal admission, inconsistent with justice to be partial; to show favor or preference to one person over another, in matters to which favor and preference do not properly apply.”³² As this document has shown, impartiality is a common problem with the capital punishment institution. While attempts have been made to address this problem by creating mandatory sentencing, doing so creates the crux of the Furman case mandatory sentencing issue that found the process of mandatory sentencing to be arbitrary. Thus, trying to resolve the problem of impartiality leads to the problem of arbitrary decision making.
3. *The punishment must match the offense.* “With many, the test of justice in penal infliction is that the punishment should be proportioned to the offense; meaning it should be exactly measured by the moral guilt of the culprit.”³³ In this example Mill may actually agree with capital punishment as matching the offense. Although, if

the capital punishment system truly followed this concept, each person that commits murder would be executed, but we know this is not the case. Capital punishment as it is performed today utilizes far too much “grey area” for this to be affirmed.

4. *The punishment must bring the greatest good to all.* First, Capital Punishment arguably provides less “Good” through the lengthy collection of the aforementioned problematic elements, i.e., increased cost, conviction errors both of guilt and of the first and second degree type, race selection bias, etc., than sentencing the criminal to life in prison. Consequently, the “impact” society must bear to conduct such a problematic method of punishment cannot be justified by the trivial benefit such an execution may bring to victim families.

Therefore, if a person is wrongly executed, the punishment is excessive or does not result in more societal good than the punishment alternatives, an injustice is the result and capital punishment cannot be supported under the utilitarian perspective, according to Mill.³⁴

4. Can Capital Punishment be Justified...Ever?

By way of applying the Greatest Good concept of Utilitarianism theory to capital punishment it's conceivable one can argue the execution of a war criminal or despot may bring the “Greatest Good” to the citizenry as a whole, that is, greatest good as quantified by the pain and suffering of the populous, if such a value could be quantified.

Looking back hundreds of years, the greatest good in small towns and villages may have been executing individuals quite often because it was *their* best option, per the greatest good at the time. A point that bears repeating is how the greatest good must be for the “greatest” number and not the “few” although there are exceptions. Take for instance the following example.

Joe, a father of two children, one day has his child kidnapped and killed by Mark, the neighbor across the street. Joe, looking for his lost child witnesses Mark hurriedly burying Joe's dead child in Mark's back yard. Is it justified if Joe, in an act of rage kills Mark, the child killer?

At first glance one could say, under Utilitarianism greatest good philosophy, Joe killing Mark could be justified if one could be assured Mark did the crime, but what if Mark was just helping hide the body.

One could also say Joe killing Mark benefits society per the Greatest Good because it removes a child killer from society. Mark, the killer, would have to be caught in the process of killing to make it clear cut, no pun intended.

5. What can be Done?

5.1. Utilitarianism Education

If one stood on a busy street corner and asked everyone that passed their thoughts regarding Capital punishment, and why, one would receive a broad range of answers; many of which would be based on incomplete information and faulty reasoning. Mill in *Utilitarianism* offered the following solution.

Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even that most intractable of enemies, disease, may be indefinitely reduced in dimensions by good physical and moral education, and proper control of noxious influences; while the progress of science holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe.³⁵

As Mill shows in the aforesaid quote Mill understands the key to mobilizing the power of utilitarian ethics from a society level takes education at its core. He further elaborates on the need for education as he describes the power education and opinion has on individuals and society.

As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence.³⁶

Mill continues to elaborate how the need for utilitarian philosophy must be in the minds of individuals as an element of ones upbringing.

If the view adopted by the utilitarian philosophy of the nature of the moral sense be correct, this difficulty will always present itself, until the influences which form moral character have taken the same hold of the principle which they have taken of some of the consequences – until, by the improvement of education, the feeling of

unity with our fellow-creatures shall be (what it cannot be denied that Christ intended it to be) as deeply rooted in our character, and to our own consciousness as completely a part of our nature, as the horror of crime is in an ordinarily well brought up young person.³⁷

So if Mill is correct believing education is the answer, we have an immense challenge with the lack of critical thinking instruction in our elementary and high schools. To make matters worse current educational curriculum does not emphasize critical thinking, while placing excessive attention in student centered concepts, which is contradictory to Utilitarian philosophy.

5.2. Utilitarianism's Impersonal Appearance

The second area that must be addressed is the image problem of utilitarianism ethics appearing cold and impersonal. When first describing utilitarianism hypothetical thought experiments such as the trolley problem are frequently presented. Similar to the trolley problem, the utilitarianism problems force an individual to make a decision between two choices; one bad and another worse. Such issues, albeit some realistic and others not so much, represent problems that force a decision, even though the decision may be far from perfect.

Furthermore, for utilitarianism to be accepted on a national or global level, a consistent philosophy must be applied to topics such as capital punishment, abortion, euthanasia and the legalization of drugs, just to name a few. It is this interpersonal conflict that will be difficult for most to reconcile and adopt as a replacement for their personal decision making process.

5.3. Educate the Ignorant

While it is neither practical nor prudent to educate all supporters of the capital punishment "machine" its supporters should not be ignorant of the true nature of what one is supporting. No one put this concept as succinctly as Albert Camus in his essay *Resistance, Rebellion and Death: Reflections on the Guillotine* in 1957 when he said,

silence or tricks of language contribute to maintaining an abuse that must be reformed or a suffering that can be relieved, then there is no other solution but to speak out and show the obscenity hidden under the verbal cloak. France shares with England and Spain the honor of being one of the last countries this side of the iron curtain to keep capital punishment in its arsenal of repression. The survival of such a primitive rite has been made possible among us only by the thoughtlessness or ignorance of the public, which reacts only with the ceremonial phrases that have been drilled into it. When the imagination sleeps, words are emptied of their meaning: a deaf population absent-mindedly registers the condemnation of a man. But if people are shown the machine, made to touch the wood and steel and to hear

the sound of a head falling, then public imagination, suddenly awakened, will repudiate both the vocabulary and the penalty.³⁸

Although Camus was referring to France, Spain, and England decades ago, Camus's description of what needs to be done is as pertinent now, as it was decades ago. Those who vote repeatedly to preserve capital punishment as a vestige of the past, know very little of what they are actually supporting. They know very little about the errors, the cost, and the overall lack of "greatest good" that is the intended result of its use.

6. Conclusion

In the United States capital punishment has existed in some form or another since the nation's inception. While those who fought for independence did so under the flag of liberty, they strongly supported the federalist movement to place ultimate control in the states, in fact the people. While early Americans frequently choose capital punishment, they did so in a time when inexpensive executions were carried out promptly; needless to say times have changed.

With increased legal protections, which are a good thing, and rising costs of incarceration, capital punishment is not the greatest good punishment option for capital crime. Thus the only real choices are revising the capital punishment system, an enormous challenge, or suspending it indefinitely. What is more, abolishing capital punishment would require answers to difficult questions, such as, why murders such as Dennis Rader remains alive while eleven year old Josephine Ortereo and her family is not.

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Towards an Understanding of Moral Underpinnings

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Much of today's public and private discourse surrounding social norms, morals, and values is non-productive, if not counter-productive. It is rare that any kind of consensus is reached when such discrepancies surface. Some of this is due to honest disagreement among genuinely reflective and open-minded individuals, but it is becoming more obvious that a large and perhaps growing portion of this problem stems from misunderstandings about the nature of these concepts themselves. Sadly, these misunderstandings do not seem to be diminishing. This essay is an attempt to further the clarification of these ideas from the perspective of a concerned citizen.

1. Towards an understanding of moral underpinnings

People are often overheard talking about what is right and what is wrong, and if these discussions progress for very long at all, they usually devolve into arguments about morals and morality. At this point many people reach the limits of their ability to “one-up” their opponent which is why such discussions frequently end up as little more than shouting matches, although sometimes they are very polite shouting matches. As I made a personal effort to pay closer attention to more of these discussions, whether heard through the cubicle walls at work, gleaned from written media, heard over radio and television, or engaged in personally, I became increasingly concerned about the layers of confusion that were evident. I began to try and work through some of the issues with an eye towards gaining a clearer understanding of the concepts and ideas involved, and why it is so difficult to agree on these things. I am hopeful that my thoughts here will make a small contribution to that end.

Imagine a young woman who is six weeks pregnant. She is young, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, and has grown up on the wrong side of the poverty line. She received her high school diploma but works two part-time jobs in order to help pay the bills at the house where she lives with her mother, who collects disability from the government. She had plans to marry her boyfriend, especially after they discovered her pregnancy, but he

disappeared a week ago and she has been unable to contact him at all; she is becoming increasingly desperate.

There are a number of actions she might take in this situation. The course upon which she decides may be the same as you or I would make in similar circumstances. It might be diametrically opposed to what her mother's wishes would be. She may decide to do something illegal, or take action that would endanger her own life or health.

It is human nature to consider recommendations we would make to this young woman; we all have suggestions we could make as to what she should or should not do. For many people, these suggestions stem from judgments they make by appealing to an individual system of values, reflectively weighing the circumstances against an interpretation of what those values proscribe, and by translating those proscriptions to actions in a manner congruent with what they assess to be the intent of those values. If those individual values are similar in principle to the laws of a legal system, then the interpretation and transcription of those values into actions is analogous to the deliberation and outcome of a court case.

Recently I heard a commentator used the term "moral fortitude" to describe what he thought should impel the Boy Scouts of America to resist efforts to change their stance on allowing homosexuals to participate as leaders or scouts. The interviewer's conversation with him brought out the fact that he believes the values that the BSA holds are such that they are in conflict with allowing gays to participate in scouting, and that those values should preclude any action to the contrary – if the BSA allows this to happen they would be abandoning a value he believes they hold, and which he believes they share with him. His phrasing indicates that he equates moral behavior with adhering to held values, and it turns out that this is a common perception of what underlies morality. Persons with such a perception would also claim that any advice given to the young woman mentioned above would be of a moral nature, and what they offer would be gleaned using a process similar to that above, although it should be noted that such advice is usually colored far more by the values of the adviser than those of the advised.

Doctors Without Borders, which originated in France in the early 1970s under the name Medicines Sans Frontieres, or MSF, is a non-profit organization that provides modern medical services in places lacking access; often these places are war-zones or have been devastated by natural or man-made disasters. Services are provided by physicians, nurses, and other highly-skilled professionals. MSF also provides relief and support for epidemic outbreaks, malnutrition, and also to people whose only need is access to medical services. MSF pledges also to speak out on behalf of those it serves whenever it encounters abuse or severe neglect. The determination of who is eligible for their services is based solely on need; no other criteria, such as race, sex, political affiliation, or religion, are considered. The organization itself uses the term "humanitarian" to describe its mission. They act on a neutral basis, with no bias other than targeting those most in need or those whose suffering is greatest.

Although the internally-held motivations of the individuals involved with MSF may vary widely, the actions taken by the organization as a whole stem from a sense of responsibility to others – other humans, thus the term "humanitarian." MSF behaves in conjunction with a social contract which they perceive as shared amongst all human

beings; the sole requirement for the granting of this contract's rights and privileges is human life itself, and this contract therefore obliges them to help out fellow humans in need. Thus, in the case of MSF (and a host of other societal elements, including many individuals), moral actions are based on social structure, the resulting interrelationships, and obligations defined thereby.

2. Values and Morals

These examples illuminate the contrast between two modes of understanding morals and moral actions. One is based on adhering to held or perceived values, and the other is based on social relationships. One may interject at this point that the latter may in fact be a special case of the former, where the fundamental value is the that of the social structure itself. If the latter is merely a subset, it is special and unique in nature in that, as I intend to argue, from a single value all moral actions can be derived. The former is more of a one-to-one relationship between values and precepts.

We humans are vain whether we admit it or not; we all perceive the motives behind our actions as of superior quality. We desire for others to emulate and even admire our behaviors and standards. In short, we all wish on some level that our particular standards, values, and morals could be universal. Many throughout history have had both the desire and the ability to enforce this, most often through manipulation, suppression, violence, coercion, and persecution; an unknown and undoubtedly far larger number have had the desire yet were thankfully of insufficient means. This is indicative of the commonality of man's striving for universally accepted standards, even though such efforts are frequently, sometimes horribly, misguided. The most harmonious scenario would be for all involved to freely and with full knowledge agree on those standards, and thus is justified, at least in part, the search for and importance of universal grounds. The importance of these standards points to how crucial it is that we get them correct.

If a truly universal basis could be found that grounded acceptable standards of behavior there can be no doubt that we would all be much better off. Moral relativism is the enemy of an effective mankind; humans, separated into disparate groups that cannot agree on simple standards of interpersonal relationships, have no hope of progressing in any but the most stultified and halting fashion, if at all.

This should not be confused with one mistakenly saying that humankind can move forward only if it first achieves complete *cultural homogeneity*; the opposite is in fact true. Cultural diversity is as important to mankind's survival and ongoing progress as genetic diversity is to its physical survival. However, common moral standards are what allow this variety of cultures to coexist. If humans are by definition cultural beings, then a set of common moral standards is actually the only thing that can ensure the continuity and cohesion of our species. Any such standards, therefore, must respect the existence of a wide variety of cultures.

Let us assume for a moment that we can all agree that there *are* such things as a set of common moral standards of behavior, whether they are known or remain yet undiscovered. In this case, truly common standards must necessarily be objectively derivable

– all sub-elements of society must be capable of agreement with their basis and reason for existence. The logic behind their acceptance must be sound and not based in any way on facts or truths unknowable or unable to be apprehended by any rational person or group. Also, if such standards exist and are indeed universally applicable, then a condition of that applicability cannot be a demand that all must be in conformity to a particular sub-element's tenets, behaviors, traditions, or beliefs, unless, of course, these features can be shown as objectively derivable. If such demands were allowed, the term "universally applicable" would be an inappropriate designation. Our "standards" would only apply to a homogeneous group of like-minded and like-behaving individuals which would violate the necessary respect of cultural diversity.

This makes it obvious that no single societal group can lay claim, by virtue of anything other than sound and logical reason, to being the sole proprietor of universal moral virtue, if such a thing exists.

If, on the other hand, there are in fact no such things as universally applicable moral standards, then it must also be true that no single group has any legitimate basis, by definition, to debase or even criticize the practices and beliefs of any other group. In this case, there can be no "moral high ground" at all; we are ultimately isolated and merely fighting for mastery over our own islands, which are of not only cultural but also moral relevance each merely to its own.

Since throughout past and present, humans have always behaved not only as if they wished universal standards exist, but also as if their own personal standards should be the norm, we can reasonably conclude that a wide majority of us feel and act as if there are indeed such things as universal moral standards, or universal goods, even if we are more often than not much mistaken as to their true nature.

The immediate first casualty of the acceptance of the possibility of the existence of universal goodness is, of course, any definition of goodness that is based solely upon or that is justified merely by religious criteria. There has never been anything so divisive to humanity as religious belief; at all times people have separated themselves, cast blame, mistreated, and waged war based on little more than religious differences. Many religious groups actually make it a point of pride and/or doctrine that one can truly understand their belief system only from *within that system itself* – this makes the ground of their precepts not apprehensible *by definition* to outsiders. Also, it is well known that it is impossible for all (or even just a few) of the world's religions to be simultaneously true, so we must at the outset put religion aside when considering the root of any truly universally acceptable moral standards.¹

This is not to say that any particular religion is incapable of holding one or more of the universal standards we seek, but only that those standards cannot be justified on religious grounds alone. Such cases would illustrate that religions may accept or absorb truths that are in fact not theirs alone and that are not really derived in the manner in which they assume. The problem arises when they fail to acknowledge this and instead promulgate themselves as the *exclusive dispensaries* of such truths.

3. Thoughts on Individual Values

Now, if I subscribe to the definition of morality that claims it consists of adherence to personal values, I am still left with an intellectual chasm: from whence come my values?

I might claim, as many do, that my values come from the connection between a numinous “soul” and its unseen creator, and are articulated in a sacred text, but I am then burdened by the weight of my neighbor’s identical claim yet whose values are in opposition to mine. We observe these types of disagreements all the time. The Westboro Baptist Church protests at the funerals of soldiers while hiding behind claims of divinely-inspired or -delivered values, and at the same time their picket lines are often blocked by people whose motivational values are grounded in the exact same scriptures. Consider too the recent power struggle in Iraq, with multiple factions each claiming that their values derive from divergent faiths based somehow on a single set of writings. How can we possibly settle such disputes? Values on both sides are dearly held and are clung-to quite obstinately, but there can be no dialectic at all because there is no possibility of resolution. Productive conversation stops at the point at which raw belief takes over.² Such value systems ground themselves in something that is not apprehensible by all and so cannot be posited as the basis for action affecting others without their consent, unless we promote a totalitarian solution. There are no unforced universal values if this is our only recourse.

Could it be that our individual values are instead derived from our immediate cultural environment? It seems hard to argue against such a thing, given the lack of evidence for the opposite position. Perhaps the better path would be to seek a value that is not.

The valuation of human life itself seems the most likely candidate, but even this has a variability that is unsettling no matter what your perspective. Many cultures place a higher value on the life of a male than that of a female, to the point where infanticide is commonplace for female babies – how can we say that their valuation of human life is the same as ours? Slavery, whether of the racial variety or of the currently more common sex-trade, shows what many (but obviously not all) view as a horribly distorted idea of this value.

Many of the values that we hold dear in the West, such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, are not shared by a great (or perhaps even a simple) majority of people worldwide.

Within the same culture, for example here in the United States, we cannot agree whether we value the promise of stem cell research more than we can bear the thought of the destruction of an early-stage mass of cells that might one day have developed into a full human being. Many would howl just at my having couched the issue in such terms.

Apparently we must look for a different way of bridging the gaps between our personal values if we wish to arrive at anything like a universal consensus based upon them.

What if we think of individual values in the same way as, for example, a toothache? Most of us have experienced the intense discomfort of one and can all describe to our respective dentists exactly what hurts, how much, and where. I may have a toothache

which I can describe to you; you may do the same for me. We can discuss our toothaches intelligibly and also compare them to some other person's toothache that we have both read about. We both understand what it is that we are talking about; we have a common conception of a toothache. Can values be of a similar nature?

In order for a value to be objective or universal, we must obviously all hold the *same* value – we must apprehend the *same object*. When we discuss our toothaches we may understand perfectly well about that which we are talking but we are not sharing the *same toothache*. Our toothaches may in fact cause us an identical amount of pain but they are still separate and distinct objects. In this case we can share the concept or idea of the thing but *not the thing itself*. The same can be said of individual values: my idea of the value of human life may extend to the point where I am a complete and total pacifist who will refuse even to defend myself, while you may hold what *appears* to be the same value and yet be willing to preemptively strike an enemy who merely assumes a threatening posture. We both share the *concept* (“human life has high value”) but are apprehending a different *object*. We might be able to engage in mutual discussion in order to understand the essential point of difference, but the fact that there is a difference at all means we are not discussing the *same object*.

A similar (and sometimes misunderstood) situation in the world of computer code may further illuminate this distinction. Programming constructs (i.e. variables) can be distinguished as being Reference- or Value-types. A Reference-type is one whose programmatic representation is really a kind of placeholder or shortcut, so that when different parts of the program access “it”’s content or manipulate “it” (for example, increase a *circle*’s diameter by a factor of three) they are really just passing around a reference (a datum of location information sometimes called a ‘pointer’) to the spot in the computer’s memory where the actual ones and zeros which represent that *circle* object reside – all of the program’s separate operations are working on the same physical memory space, the *same object*. If the object changes, for example the *circle*’s diameter is multiplied by three in one part of the program, all other parts of the program can instantly apprehend the changed object, in this case the enlarged *circle*. The *circle* is changed for all involved and stays that way until some other part of the program makes another modification when it again changes for all involved, even for the original change-agent. Value types, on the other hand, are separate and distinct representations of a construct whenever they are passed around and manipulated – if a Value-type *ellipse* has its major axis multiplied by three in one programming subroutine, it is only changed as far as that subroutine is concerned, and when the subroutine is finished and exits, other routines that examine the *ellipse* see it with its original size; in fact, other subroutines can operate simultaneously on such a Value-type and none is aware of nor is affected by any changes others may be making. Each subroutine makes its own local “copy” of the Value-type, and can do whatever it likes to its own copy without altering other any other subroutine’s perception of what that object *is*.

It can sometimes be very difficult to distinguish a Value-type object from a Reference-type object in practice, especially when examining code that is not one’s own or that is in an unfamiliar programming language. Results can be unpredictable and mistakes are extremely difficult to track down and correct even for experts. This is a chief

reason that large software packages undergo extensive up-front planning, design-review, and quality control testing. There are complex add-ins that do nothing more than ensure that the mutual understanding of critical pieces of code remains unchanged when modifications are made to one part of a program. All parts of the program must “understand” what it is to which they are referring and how such things may be changed outside of their own scope of influence or understanding. If one part of the program expects to be using the same value represented by a particular variable shared with another routine, but that other routine in fact has a *different value* for that variable, the program can fail catastrophically.

4. The gap between Individual Values and Objective Morals

I am suggesting here that what we often think of as our *values* are in fact very similar to Value-types in a software program. Different actors may indeed share a common understanding of the concept of a given *value* (for example, that of human life) yet at the same time have very different ideas of the content of that *value*. Separate actors are seldom aware that the content of what they perceive as their shared values frequently is markedly different, and they often don’t even know this possibility exists.

It is true that individuals in close geographical and cultural proximity tend to have much more similarity in the content of their values, but this is not always the case, and we also know of people who have no cultural contact and who share no geographical boundaries that can yet have nearly identical value-content.

This helps to explain why moral precepts based on individual values can sometimes be congruent with those based on social contracts and sometimes are in direct conflict with them. The situation is similar to that discussed above whereby religions exhibit (and often attempt to engulf) objective truths without really understanding their root – to use a scientific term, they confuse correlation with causation: the cause-effect relationship is not what they assume the situation to be. Sometimes we “get it right” even if we don’t intend to and even if we don’t know why.

This makes clear the problem with allowing personal values to serve as the basis of moral standards. The inter- and intra-cultural consistency of the content of our individual values is sporadic, incoherent, and unpredictable. We often cannot resolve our differences, or we have differences that are patently unresolvable. In many cases we cannot even agree on what comprises the actual differences. Consequently, it seems that our cultural environments are not shaped by our values, but rather that our values are shaped by our immediate cultural environments. This means that we need to seek a deeper commonality – we must find our “Reference-types” so that we can all understand and agree on the same value objects (with identical value-content).

The opposite position is clearly untenable: “I am right to employ my individually-derived values (which are in all likelihood unable to be apprehended by some significant portion of the affected) as bases for enforceable universal standards.” The problem is, obviously, that we can all make the same claim.

This points to the essential (and often unrecognized) idiocy inherent in the worn-out

mantra of religious defenders claiming that any value-system not based on the spiritually sacred and not derived from their particular holy text leaves us in a helpless state of moral relativism. It is plain to see that they have it exactly, in fact perfectly, wrong. No utopian vision they offer can come to pass without first enforcing totalitarian rigidity and indoctrination to tamp down rival interpretations, for it is well established that alternative value-systems will inevitably surface when minds are both equipped and free to explore. As noted earlier, within virtually any given sect there will be disagreements that profoundly affect how the adherents understand and express their lives, except in those rare cases of cult-followings where the stamp of absolute control and cultural brainwashing is evident. Unless we are *all* members of such a cult, a moral system based on religious values can never be universally agreed upon, and for it to be made universally applicable would be both *totalitarian and immoral* on its face.

A mode of understanding values (as being equivalent to moral precepts) which is related to that just discussed is that they may consist of acts dictated by, or done in order to please, a deity or deities. For this to be acceptable to all, we must first ignore all the evidence of honest disagreements between related sects who listen to the same higher being (for example, through the use of *identical* sacred texts) since this would result in the lack of cohesiveness discussed above. We must also turn a blind eye to the many objections from logic: for example, if we are in any way capable of judging an act to be good or not, we must be using criteria that exist independent of god – that is, “goodness” as an objective quality exists outside of god’s purview and control, making her subservient to morality. Alternatively, if we are incapable of independent judgment in moral matters, and instead define “goodness” as whatever one interprets as god’s will, then morality is itself an illusion, a house of cards which collapses under the breath of a rival god’s contradictory pronouncements. We might just as well be marionettes or ventriloquist dummies, which is nothing more than a scenic route to nihilism that includes a tour through church.

Still, the issue remains, but consider the following: you have been forced to don a remotely-controlled explosive vest and this threat is employed to induce you to rob a bank, and you of course comply. Is your bank heist an immoral act? What if your antagonist instead makes you empty your bank accounts and donate it all to charity – would your donation be done as a moral action? The answer, of course, is “No” in both cases, and it should be clear that acts done under duress or coercion normally considered either moral or immoral are not so in this context, and it is just as clear that the one doing the coercing is performing an unquestionably immoral act. How about a scenario where a financially well-off stranger offers you a hundred dollars if you will just help him in assisting his crippled son climb several flights of stairs: if you agree to do this to collect your reward (whereas you otherwise would have just passed this person by), have you performed a morally good act? Of course not! Yet, it is also just as important to note that the stranger is not trying to “improve” you morally (he just really needs some help getting his son up the stairs), and it is obvious that he does not have a very high opinion of your innate moral sense (since he feels the need to bribe you).

If I promise my daughter an ice-cream sundae in exchange for helping her mother do the dishes I am not really teaching her the “goodness” of doing the dishes (or of

helping out her mother in any situation) – I’m just trying to get her to do something she otherwise wouldn’t do. In fact, if she is shrewd in just the right way (a fair bet for many teenagers) she will instead learn a lesson which is nearly opposite the one I intend, which is a clear refutation to theists who support their position by stating that coerced participation in what otherwise would be “good” works can induce people to change their default behavior towards the good. While this may be true, if they do indeed realize the goodness inherent in a particular action (and don’t take the devious path of merely seeking the end reward) it is in fact an act of *discovery* which indicates that any value of goodness in an act exists independently of the intentions of whomever is doing the forcing: this inherent value of goodness is, in principle at least, discoverable without coercion and without the existence of any guiding entity. This means that if one is doing things (whether or not one thinks these things are “good”) due to either a threat of punishment or a desire for reward then one’s reasons are completely divorced from moral thinking. Thus it is evident that actions taken to either please or mollify a higher being cannot in any way be termed *moral* actions. It also means that a deity who would incite us in this way is either *inherently immoral* or is *amoral and dispassionate towards humankind*.

All of this I think establishes somewhat firm reasoning to insist that individual values must not, indeed cannot, be used as the basis for establishing a moral framework that applies to all of mankind. This is not in any way intended to diminish the importance of personal values, as they are the mechanisms by which we translate cultural norms to our individual situations – in programming terms, they are our “local” instances of Value-types. The important thing to remember is that they are driven by (and derived from) culture, not the other way around. In fact, this view allows a yardstick for objective assessment of organizations that oversee peoples’ lives: since persons must be free to interpret their culture and thus develop, possess, and express their own individual values, we can judge such organizations (governments, for example) on how repressive or permissive they are with respect to this particular necessary freedom. For example, as people come to realize there are laws which obstruct their attempts to plan, direct, and live their own lives, they should be unobstructed in seeking to affect changes in such laws – cases in point would be United States laws establishing slavery, those counting the enslaved as only three fifths of a whole person, or those codifying restrictions against women voting.

5. The Nature of the Social Contract

When we feel empathy for another individual who has undergone a tragic or joyful event we are truly experiencing firsthand the interconnectedness of our social fabric. This is one of the most natural parts of the human experience: the sorrow one feels in concert with the inconsolable grief of a mother who has lost her only child, the enrapt jubilation we can undergo listening to a masterpiece by Liszt or Rachmaninoff, the feeling of victory that surges through us when a loved one overcomes a baffling impediment, or the rage and shame that consumes us when we see images of abused and neglected children. These sensations, which exist in some fashion for people of virtually all cultural backgrounds

throughout time and in nearly all places, give a clue as to what really binds the human race together.

The fact that we empathize with others is strongly related to our innate and highly-developed skill at what Daniel Dennett calls “The Intentional Stance” or what is elsewhere referred to in terms of “other minds.” We observe behaviors and actions of others and infer that those performing such actions do so because they are possessed of a “mind” not dissimilar to our own. One ascribes reasons to the doings of another based on the reasons one imagines would drive oneself – we perceive other agents with intentions. Similarly, when we observe another experiencing abject suffering (or overflowing elation) we relate to their experience in terms familiar to us from the way in which we understand our own minds. The validation of our utilization of this method in both cases is achieved through communication of, and agreement on, such ideas amongst ourselves – we can and do exchange ideas about other minds *with other minds*.

Conversely, if no validation of other minds takes place, we are each hopelessly and completely alone, trapped in our own selves; our experience and imagination tell us that this is perhaps the cruelest form of torture possible. Too, it is widely accepted that individuals deficient in these regards are dysfunctional; lack of empathy appears in the diagnosis of a number of psychological disorders, for example. Although the origins of this system may be somewhat of a chicken-and-egg dilemma, it is nonetheless rational to conclude that absent the persistence of such validation, human society as we understand it will cease to exist. Thus the bedrock (or at least one absolutely essential pillar) of our social being is the existence and exercise of these relationships through which we communicate, understand, and validate our thoughts and feelings.

The simple fact that each of us depends on such “meetings of the minds” (to use a legal phrase) as definition and confirmation of our most basic human natures means that we are all therefore obligated at the very least to return the favor in kind. That we must actively “meet other minds” is a self-evident statement given only the very basic supposition that we each value our own humanity – it is clearly a Reference-type for which we all have the same value-content.

In fact, this Reference-type has the excellent property of extensibility to any other kind of being possessed of a mind; and, it applies to beings with partial, lesser, or under-developed minds as well. To the extent that any other entity has a mind we have a corresponding obligation to it, and it to us. It also has the quality of being objective, if by objective one means that its validity does not depend on any one’s opinion.

What we term “the social contract” is an immediate product or expression of this feature of humanity. It underwrites all of our social obligations to one another and is inextricably tied directly to the most essential parts of what makes us into *us*. It validates our compassion and empathy, our sense of self, and our sense of community. Terms such as “the brotherhood of man” have real meaning when thought of in this way. Actions ranging from Oxfam’s worldwide efforts to my son offering to help his grandmother up the stairs, and every other type of “good” act in between, can be seen as stemming from the same natural, normative, and universal human impulses. We can assess the quality of any action falling within the sphere of human interactions, the sphere of morality, in these terms, which we are all capable of understanding. We may disagree on some details for

particular interactions, but there is indeed now a bright light at the end of the tunnel in such arguments.

Note that this leaves the maximum possible amount of room for religious and non-religious alike to believe and practice according to their own interpretations and subsequent values. However, one should expect to receive criticism when one engages in practices that contradict the social contract or makes attempts to codify one's personal values into laws restricting the freedoms of others to believe and practice according to *their* values. It is plain to see that our Value-types are inappropriate candidates for laws, only our Reference-types.

It should be mentioned, however, that pure objectivity may not in fact be as important as claimed by some (for example, theologian William Lane Craig) – in any case, it is certainly not a trump card. Although the preceding discussion disproves the claim that ontologically the only objective ground for morality is a deity, in order for an objective ground to have any applicability whatsoever *to us* it must be intelligible *by us*. The claim that a deity is the basis for morality is utterly useless unless the nature of that morality can be demonstrated and understood *just as objectively*. The god that is affirmed by apologists as our moral foundation is so far removed from any specific attributions that it is totally devoid of content (which is required in order that it be “objective” as opposed to merely objectionable). To say that deity is the sole objective moral basis without specifying any details of said moral framework, how that framework is necessary or applicable to us, or even how such a framework follows from the objective basis, is to claim nothing whatsoever; as the saying goes, such a claim is “as useless as teats on a bull.” The sound of one hand clapping holds as much meaning for mankind as Craig's assertions on the matter.

What humanity has needed all along is a set of universally acceptable and rationally unimpeachable standards, whether or not they meet a pedantic definition of “objectivity.” It is obvious that appealing to individual values will not do; their nature is of the opposite kind as they are personalized expressions. The social contract, and all that its existence entails, is the only candidate that fits the parameters and meets the needs of all.

If we continue to cluster in self-absorbed and self-directed groups we will undoubtedly fail to see the simple wisdom and goodness inherent in *all* of us behaving well towards one another, and will also fail to reap the obvious and lasting rewards of this behavior. There is a root commonality we all share that even the simplest among us is capable of fully grasping. The best hope for us all to get along, if such a hope exists at all, lies in realizing this; but we must first free ourselves from divisive beliefs, notions, and inclinations, and from deeply-held misunderstandings about the nature of our relationships to each other.

NOTES

1. Given that religion can play no valid part in proscribing the behavior of a harmonious society, one is left to wonder what value religion actually offers to humanity other than the debatable palliative effect on man's discomfort regarding his own mortality. Given its

deleterious effect on overall human progress to date, we should be very cautious indeed about acceding any authority whatsoever to its urgings.

2. If such conversations manage to go on for long at all, we often see that one side sooner or later resorts to some form of reasoned point of argument, but this always seems to be their last-ditch effort, and they never seem to accept similar reasoning when it is used to discredit themselves.

Moral Choices in a Random Universe

Paul Kurtz

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1. Ethical Choices

Human beings always wonder whether events that have occurred could have been otherwise. My response to this question is in the affirmative, though within limits; thus a major stimulus to sociocultural change is human *creativity* that combines inspiration and intelligence, innovation and invention, and the capacity of humans to modify behavior in the light of an intelligent evaluation of existing conditions. The creative introduction of new departures in behavior plays a special role in human affairs. Human beings are capable of *inventing* new tools and adopting new modes of conduct. Thus it is *eupraxsophic pragmatic intelligence* that enables us to make choices and adopt new forms of behavior, whether conformist or radical. Men and women are decision makers bound by their instinctive tendencies, which serve them to fulfill their needs. Their capacity to make choices provides ways of adapting to challenges in the environment.

The study of history reveals the great diversity of languages in human cultures. There are an estimated eight thousand known languages. The evolution of language is like the evolution of all kinds of things encountered in the universe, separately developed by different societies – understood only by those born into a society and brought up under special sociocultural conditions. One can speak French, Spanish, or Italian – all Romance languages with a common Latin source – yet deviating depends on the geographical location. People can learn to speak German, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Sanskrit, Bantu, or any other polyglot creation. Similarly for the flexibility of cultures, their unique moral, economic, political, and sociological patterns develop historically in their own ways in splendid isolation, yet often they encounter other cultures, whether by peaceful commerce or conflict, and are modified in the process.

What is my point? There is great malleability and diversity in ways of living and transacting with others and a gradual or rapid change of cultures. For example, the French

language developed as the language of the educated elites and of international diplomacy. Today it is becoming *Franglish* (which the French deplore), because it has imported English phrases and technical terms as part of a wider planetary civilization that is developing. It is English that has become the international language of trade and cultural exchange. This is no doubt due to the power of the Anglo American empire that has become dominant, and also of the new electronic forms of communication – mobile phones, the Internet, movies, and television – that are able to flood all sectors of the globe with the ideas and values, forms of taste and behavior, influenced by Hollywood, London, New York, Beijing, and New Delhi.

The most decisive illustration of the capacity of humans to adapt rapidly to new cultural conditions is immigration and emigration, whereby large numbers of persons are transplanted to entirely new lands and are forced to learn a new language and adopt new manners and customs. This of course goes back to the earliest days of human history, when invaders would capture foreigners and bring them back as sexual objects or slaves. This has always been true in tribal warfare, when invading hordes of male warriors would plunder the territory, abscond with the women and children, and force others into slavery. The Romans were adept at such practices; the defeated foreigners were forced to serve their masters and adopt their culture. The capturing of blacks in Africa and their enforced slavery vividly demonstrates the cruelty of such persecution and exploitation. African Americans were compelled by European colonists to serve their masters, which meant the separation of families and enforced servitude in a new culture.

This phenomenon of cultural implantation is all the more true today, as people freely leave their native lands in search of a better life in North and South America or Australia and New Zealand. Uprooted by choice, Italians and Germans, Russians and Chinese, Spaniards and Indians, Jews and Gypsies have migrated to new lands, abandoning the culture of their fatherlands and adapting to new sociocultural values. Impressively, foreigners once denigrated as “wops” and “kikes,” “chinks” and “spicks” have become Americans or Canadians, Argentineans or Brazilians, and their children have been able to assimilate an entirely new culture in one generation.

Human beings are malleable, able to imbibe entirely new forms of behavior as they assimilate in distant cultures, learn their languages, and accept their mores – almost overnight. We observe time and again the readiness of people to adapt to a wild-frontier society as Europeans did on first coming to America or as foreigners do today – to an automobile culture in which they live in a suburban environment. My wife, children, and grandchildren are virtually Franco Americans, able to live in two countries, with a diverse set of values (our capacity to enjoy croissants and hamburgers, beer and wine, baseball and soccer, *La Vie en rose*, and ragtime jazz). Of course, this is because America and France have shared cultural values for centuries, but it also applies to radically different cultures – as shown by Nepalese, Bangladeshi, or Koreans who are able to adapt readily to their new American homeland and who often integrate and prosper.

So, what may we infer from this? There is a remarkable capacity of humans to make new choices, whatever the cultural context, and in spite of turbulent times, to abandon the values of the old-time religions and to move on to new forms of living, often

in a relatively short period of time, as their children's children become rapidly assimilated into and absorbed by the new culture.

Thus, there is a constant flow, as civilizations come and go, but humankind has finally reached a new plateau – *the emergence of a planetary civilization in which all parts of the public community now take part*. There are fewer completely isolated breeding groups, separate cultural enclaves, or totally independent social systems. Clearly, there are pluralistic communities in the world, but they have an interdependent transactional existence. No community can live in totally isolated ignorance, indifferent to the needs and wants, beliefs and values of other humans: the planetary community, for the first time, shares common ground.

And herein lies the key to the future of humankind. If nature and the biosphere as well as the physical universe and human affairs have heretofore been particularistic, separatist, and isolationist, this is no longer the case, because there are common interests and needs along with shared dreams and values that unite us. And now we have the technology to communicate instantaneously as part of a global village. The urgent imperative is for humanity to develop a new world order; it is forced upon everyone whether they like it or not.

This is *planetary ethics*. It is unlike anything that has existed before. The separate cultures recognize that though they are rich in historical diversity, they nonetheless share a common desire for a peaceful and prosperous future. Although the universe is turbulent, contingent, random, and chaotic, there is the recognition that we need to establish a new planetary moral universe, formerly “the brotherhood of mankind.” Although nature is indifferent to the moral values of the human species – which is just one among other species on the planet – *we do care*, and there is a new *moral universe* that has been emerging. The human species is a product of coevolution. We possess a biogenetic endowment with instinctive tendencies for *need reduction and satisfaction*. But also our cultural evolution has been accelerating, particularly since the last ice age. There is accordingly a *moral universe*, in addition to the physical universe, and its location is in cultural civilization.

Indeed, the evolution of *ethical culture* provides the first opportunity for humankind to maximize the dimensions of freedom and the latitude to create a new ethic, drawing upon the ethical wisdom of the past for values and norms that are enduring (such as the common moral decencies), and also the capacity to fashion new ethical principles appropriate to the multiseular, transnational, and planetary world in which we live. This includes the ethics of enlightened self-interest *and* a compassionate empathetic altruism. The difference between a *moral* and *ethical* culture is that the latter is *infused by reason*...

2. Freedom of Choice

...An enormous amount of effort historically has been expended on the free will versus determinism debate. In the past I have taken the position of the soft (rather than hard) determinist, arguing that the reality of *both* causal conditions *and* choice in human affairs may be present at the same time. I submit that the problem has been misstated by the hard

determinists who suppose that there are *hidden unknown causes* in human choice. First, the supposition of the theist, that the mind of God is the underlying basis of causality in history, is mistaken. This is surely a speculative leap of faith: God is the unknown entity invoked to *fill the gap* by supposing that there *must be* an ultimate, though unknown, cause. The fallacy in this line of reasoning is that it is based on a pure postulate, sustained as an article of faith. But there is no evidence that a *deus ex machina* explains anything because it is simply thrown in to account for phenomena; and occult causes had been rejected long ago by scientists since they provide no explanation at all. This is the pious sigh of those unable to account for what happens and is an obstacle to genuine scientific inquiry itself, which could not proceed on such a mystical foundation. The first natural philosophers (Galileo, Newton, Kepler, et al.) realized that introducing God to fill the gap is fatuous nonsense. There is no justification for the injection of such an untestable claim.

But there is a similar fallacy introduced by so-called scientific determinists, who are skeptics about the “God of the gap” explanation, though they are predisposed to believe that there *must be* hidden physical causes. Ultimate physicalist causes *may be* at work, perhaps in the neurological or physical-chemical operations of the brain, which, although presently unknown and unverified, exert a causal influence. Emergent choices by humans, however, are *not* admissible for these determinists. This is surely an *a priori* supposition, which is based on faith, not evidence. It predisposes fundamental scientific laws to be the base of all events; it again supposes that the universe (if *not* God) “would not play dice” with human motivation. But scientific determinism is only a presupposition. Clearly, there are concomitant firings of neurological networks that *accompany* decision-making behavior, but this does not preclude the possibility that there may be other forms of behavior that function at the same time at different levels of interaction. . . .

I readily concede that choices are caused and conditioned by a whole range of contingencies, but nonetheless it is the person who makes a choice, and this act of choosing is a form of *behavior* of a human being, including his or her body, brain, and nervous system, which functions in a sociocultural and natural environment. Hence I can say, *I made that choice* or *you made a choice*; indeed, we can both be held responsible for our choices, and in many cases you and I can be persuaded or convinced to change our choices in the light of reasons or evidence on the level of cognitive and emotive behavior...

...What we decide to do as individuals depends on our propensities, habits, and predilections, and these are often so deeply ingrained that it's sometimes difficult to resist them or act to the contrary. Who or what we are is a result of a wide range of social and environmental forces that have conditioned us. Moreover, a person's genetic tendencies and ingrained psychological passions may be so powerful that it often requires an insuperable effort to resist them. Our choices are constrained or impelled by these basic causes. All of this needs to be understood as granted. If a person is gay or a lesbian (a genetic tendency), there is very little, given what we today know about sexual propensities, that can be done to change one's nature, though sexual behavior surely can be repressed or controlled to some extent. If a person has a low IQ or lacks musical talent, there are certain professions that he or she could not enter with much hope of success. Many choices that we make may depend upon our deep-seated preferences and desires;

thus it may be difficult to resist our deep-seated tendencies and tastes, and insuperable efforts may be needed to resist them; we may be facing overwhelming temptations, as we are all too human.

On the other hand, human beings often are able to act contrary to their deep-seated psycho-bio-social personality traits and proclivities. Reason can at times redirect attitudes and modify emotions. Thus, human beings can resolve to do or not do something, even though underlying impulses and motives may be difficult to resist. We can respond to arguments and be persuaded by reasons, and we can act contrary to what is normally expected. We are, I submit, capable of voluntary choices in spite of the above, and we can act responsibly. We are not blind automata. We can master our own destiny, provided that we do not live in a rigid society that constrains freedom of choice.

Where there is choice, there is still some measure of freedom. *Soft* as distinct from *hard* determinism affirms that the behavior of human beings, including their decisions, are conditioned by a wide range of causal factors on many levels – genetic, biological, psychogenic and sociogenic – yet freedom of choice is a creative dimension of human behavior and can and does add something new to the human equation; not in an absolute but in a relative sense.

My inner beliefs and convictions are within my power to some extent (we always need to add a qualifier), and I can change them in the light of new evidence and reasons. Indeed, in some sense, who we are is the result of plans and projects that we have conceived and the motivations that we have summoned to achieve them. The wish is father to the fact; our goals are products of our desires and purposes, and cognition can control or moderate the things that I may like or dislike and create new ones. Human behavior often involves taking chances and undertaking risks, gambling on our hunches and resolving to bring them about. Some individuals are fearful of these opportunities; others may say, “What the hell” and leap in. Hard determinism, I submit, is akin to a religious faith, worshipping at the altar of hidden causes. It is contrary to who and what we are as resolute and responsible human beings. It is also a false doctrine often promoted by malevolent fools who may wish to control other people’s behavior.

In one sense, the strength of determinism or freedom depends on the society in which we live and the kind of personality we have developed. Highly authoritarian societies expect conformity and make it very difficult for individuals to act against social mores. Open libertarian societies, on the other hand, encourage ingenuity, individual initiative, entrepreneurial adventure, exploration and discovery, innovation, and experimentation, and above all free thought. And individuals *are*, I submit, capable, at least on some occasions, of resolute action...

Lazy, indifferent, conforming individuals tell us what cannot be done: creative, life-affirming, heroic individuals express the audacity to achieve what they wish, as far as they can. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Freedom of choice, in one sense, defines who and what we are as persons on the cutting edge of life. The great scientists, artists, composers, philosophers, statesmen, captains of industry, and builders of new futures look ahead, embark on uncharted seas, and are ready to exert bold efforts to realize their goals. They exude exuberance. And so do ordinary men and women in their own domains.

Thus *moral choice* is a key ingredient in a contingent universe, for what will be is not predetermined but rather is *post-determined* by what human beings *determine for themselves what they will do*. And this depends on freedom of inquiry, the discovery of new truths, artistic creativity, moral inquiry, and resolve. It is an emergent quality that has defined human civilization, a Promethean leap ahead, the courage to *become* who and what we are, at least in some sense: surely in regard to whom we make love to or marry, how we bring up our children, or how we choose a job or career. Of course *chance* plays a role, and who we meet and what we do depends on our opportunities and options, which may be wide open or limited; so *luck* is a factor, being at the right place at the right time.

Similarly on another plane, many collective decisions draw on the traditions, customs, or laws of a nation, the competing interests and rivalries and the cooperative opportunities that are available. Many people believe that societies are difficult to change and that reform is often impossible to effect. This allegedly constrains our freedom to act, without a violent revolution or war or total collapse. Be that as it may, does this preclude any and all sociopolitical movements from changing a society? I think not, for the historical record demonstrates that even the most authoritarian societies have been overthrown, and that unexpected historical contingencies have undermined ancient regimes and totalitarian systems, which may eventually capitulate if the people rise up in protest.

The question of determinism versus free will depends on one's conception of causality. To say that "X causes Y" means that "whenever X occurs, Y is a likely effect." In time we develop habits of expectation and come to depend on them. Thus our world is orderly; these *are* regularities that we can count on. The four seasons, if we live in a temperate climate, allow us to plant seeds in the spring, water them in the summer, and harvest them in the autumn, unless there is a heavy drought or flood that destroys our crops. Bees help to pollinate flowers; the honey cultivated in the combs is edible and sweet. The sap flowing in maple trees in the spring provides delicious syrup. If the harvest is plentiful, we can sell our crop or store it in silos for winter feed.

If I launch a rocket into space and if I know its direction and velocity, I can with precision calculate its path. In a total eclipse, the Moon will cover the Sun and block out light from it. By telescopic observations I can plot with precision the orbit of a comet. I can boil water at 212° Fahrenheit and freeze it at 32° F.

A body of knowledge is thus built upon that which we can comfortably rely. There is a kind of order that we can discern and count upon. Given certain causal conditions, all things being equal, certain observed effects will most likely ensue. Armed with knowledge of infectious disease, doctors can diagnose the cause and prescribe medication to control it. If a person has a tumor, it can be removed by surgery if it is not malignant; if it is, special precautions need to be taken. Knowing something about the stress of materials, engineers can construct bridges, bore tunnels, or erect skyscrapers to withstand collapse.

The question is often raised, if we know the condition under which certain effects are likely to occur, could we in time develop a body of theories and laws that would enable us to predict with a degree of accuracy what is likely to ensue anywhere and everywhere? In wider applications, can we in time develop comprehensive theories that would enable us to explain and predict what will ensue? Mathematics enables us to

develop theoretical principles with precision and comprehensiveness. Can science provide us with sufficiently reliable knowledge to succeed in all of the endeavors we undertake? Scientific knowledge has developed rapidly in the past few centuries in the natural sciences (physics, astronomy, geology, chemistry), the biosciences (biology, genetics, etc.), and the social sciences (sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, politics, etc.).

Methodological naturalism has developed a set of methods and strategies for testing hypotheses and developing theories that are reliable. There are certain rules governing scientific inquiry: (a) We should look for natural causes, eschewing occult explanations; that is, causes that are amenable to intersubjective observation by the community of objective inquirers and/or that can be confirmed experimentally by their predicted effects. Replication and peer review are essential in any domain under investigation. Thus there is empirical/experimental/evidential corroboration; (b) Theoretical constructs can be introduced using mathematical extrapolation grounded in experimental data. These analytic tools are validated by logical inference, and they are modified in the light of new evidence or the introduction of more comprehensive explanations; (c) Scientific methodology is reliable but not infallible, and scientific inquirers are prepared to modify their hypotheses and theories in the light of new evidence or more powerful theories based on mathematical precision and comprehensiveness. Thus science is fallible, skeptical, probabilistic, ever seeking more reliable explanations. The role of contingency in nature accompanies fallibilism in human knowledge, because even the most airtight theories have been undone by the uncovering of new facts – the “damned facts,” by observing unanticipated eventualities, and by introducing new hypotheses and theories that provide more effective explanations.

The one implication that I wish to draw from this discussion is that if the world – our world – is contingent, then we have a role to play, and I (or we) can intervene in the natural order of things and affect our environment of interaction. Fatalism is mistaken, whether our fate is attributed to the “hidden hand of God” or to the underlying “causal network.” Thus our decisions and the behavior that ensues from them are causal. Our intentions, which lead to actions, can affect what happens and change things. This is sometimes known as motive-explanations or intentional causality. Given this rule for freedom of choice, our future destiny is not fixed, and I can and do have something to say about my future; similarly for collective decisions made from within by companies, universities, voluntary organizations, political and economic institutions. Whatever will be – in part at least – depends on what I (or we) choose to do.

Accordingly, we are the masters of our destiny, at least partially so. That is why the formulating of long-range projects and plans is essential if we are to succeed. We need goals, blueprints, and designs of what we wish to bring into the world; hopefully such planning can be rationally formulated. We need strategic planning, yes, but we also need to be aware of the best short-range tactics, to realize our long-range purposes and goals. Tactics refer to the means (i.e., our resources, instruments, technological tools) that we have to use. But we also need to evaluate them by *clarity* as to our ends and purposes. Actually there is no sharp distinction between the importance of means and ends; we need to be aware of our goals *and* the means that can be adopted to realize them. Accordingly,

there is a means-end continuum, and the means at our disposal or that we need to bring to bear or invent may modify our ends and vice versa. Both should be taken into consideration – in a cost/efficacy evaluation. Targets may need to be readjusted in the light of empirical inquiry. Both the cost *and* the consequences of our means in the world of affairs need to be examined honestly, because the means may be so destructive of other values that we may hesitate to apply them. The *risks* also need to be part of the appraisal process. The point is that human beings are capable of intelligent choices made after a process of deliberation. And although not all problems can be easily solved, we nonetheless can apply rational considerations to the decision-making process. In many cases we could have acted otherwise, and we learn from trial and error that some choices are indeed better than others. Our decisions are relevant to the concrete situations in which we make them.

Although there may be general guidelines that apply in situations – like the ones we now face – what to do depends upon the circumstances that confront us and the genuine options that we have. This emphasizes the contextual nature of the decisions that we make. No doubt there are general *prima facie* rules that are relevant in similar situations, but how they are evaluated often depends on the unique facts of the case; the person or persons involved; the consequences of alternative courses of action; the means at our disposal; our preexisting attitudes and values, desires, and satisfactions. Our decisions may be weighed on a comparative scale of better or worse. We balance competing factors in order to choose what seems most fitting in the light of a wide range of considerations. Our choices are very rarely absolute or categorical. Nonetheless they need not be capricious or subjective, and although they are relative to who is involved, where it occurs and when, they may in some sense be *objective*, especially if they are reached after a reflective process of inquiry. In many cases in life, *we could indeed have acted otherwise!* However, I agree that in some situations, choice may be very difficult and predilections may be so powerful that it may be very hard or virtually impossible to change what we will do.

Nevertheless, some confidence in our own capacity to change or redirect the course of events is essential if we are to get through life; some optimism about the likelihood of success is a vital ingredient of pragmatic coping intelligence, which, after all is said and done, is the only thing that we can rely upon in a constantly changing world.

Paul Kurtz, Atheology, and Secular Humanism

John R. Shook

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Paul Kurtz will be long remembered as the late twentieth century's pre-eminent philosophical defender of freethinking rationalism and skepticism, the scientific worldview to replace superstition and religion, the healthy ethics of humanism, and democracy's foundation in secularism. Reason, science, ethics, and civics – Kurtz repeatedly cycled through these affirmative agendas, not only to relegate religion to humanity's ignorant past, but mainly to indicate the direction of humanity's better future.

The shadow of nihilism or cynicism never dimmed Paul Kurtz's bright enthusiasm for positive ways to enhance the lives of people everywhere. His many manifestos and editorials along with his full-length books, in concert with his organizations' agendas and projects, continually sought a forward-looking and comprehensive vision for grappling with the planet's urgent problems. He was an atheist knocking down superstitions and faiths with his philosophical "atheology" in order to clear the way for humanist plans about more intelligent ways of secular living. Kurtz never left religion in peace, and he surely never rested easy in atheism. He was even more interested in activating and guiding the energies of liberated peoples than he was determined to liberate them in the first place.

Kurtz more clearly understood his immense challenge to combat ignorant belief in superstition, the paranormal, and religion than most of faith's critics before him. Nothing is more tediously familiar to any critic of religion, for example, than to thrust a logical paradox about god at a believer only to receive a response about how worship services are so enjoyable at church. Or the tiresome disappointment at warning a religious person about the Bible's questionable morals without having any effect whatsoever, because that person responds with praise for their own denomination's admirable charities. Or pointing out how science must put a theological creed in severe doubt, just to hear the faithful reply that their God made the universe anyways. Religion is intelligently designed as a vast cultural system providing endless feel-good rationalizations – tear a hole in it somewhere, and it always finds a way to patch things up some other way.

There is no single reason why a person remains religious, and there's no simplistic way to make religiosity evaporate or make a religion collapse. That's why atheology must be complicated and sophisticated to challenge religion on all fronts. That's also why atheology must aim towards forging a comprehensive worldview, such as secular humanism, to ever have a chance at replacing religion.

Kurtz was never impressed with simple explanations why people are religious or why religions persist. That's why patiently explaining (or stridently asserting) the rationality of atheism has never been enough. The things that religious people are inspired to believe without reason won't be deflated with reason. Theologians know why: all faithful people need are rationalizations, not reasons. So long as each believer has some sort of rationalization for faith, reason isn't relevant and remains impotent against faith. For example, a conviction that the Bible is God's Word is rationalized by the ethical excellence of Jesus, or a personal spiritual experience, or the fellowship enjoyed among congregants, and so forth. Or, the conviction that one's church is above reproach gets rationalized by its devotion to rules of righteousness found in the Bible, or that church's role in social progress last century, or the founder's unimpeachable spiritual purity. The fact that no logical connection holds among these religious matters tells us that we are dealing with psychological rationalization, not logical reason.

"Magic bullet" theories hopeful about religion's downfall abound in secular thinking. Atheists upset over faith's foolishness seem to expect anger and ridicule to erode religion. Atheists unimpressed by theological arguments appear to expect a list of fallacies to eviscerate belief. Atheists tired of scriptural tales expect everyone to wait for science to explain it all. Atheists appalled by religious immoralities and atrocities put their hopes in a list of moral platitudes to close all the churches. Atheists frustrated by religion controlling government place their faith in a single constitutional provision to send preachers back to their pulpits.

Religion's defenders profit immensely from these narrow atheist agendas, because each one invites caricature and skewering as convenient targets. You've heard what those religious counter attacks sound like. Those scornful atheists are more fanatical and hateful than believers. Those science-loving atheists foolishly suppose science explains everything. Those moralistic atheists can't explain morality and they overlook humanity's evils. Those political atheists would love to kick religion out of politics so that government can destroy religious liberties. Exaggerations and caricatures, all of them – but they make an impact on popular opinion. Atheists love to say that they don't have to prove anything. Yet simplistic notions about religion's vulnerabilities burden atheism with the responsibility for explaining why religion shrugs off these single-minded atheist attacks. Perhaps "magic bullet" atheism arouses more doubts about atheism than about religion.

The history of atheology, going all the way back to the Greek philosophers, displays four primary methods of critically evaluating religion. The rationalist methods of skepticism casts doubt on the 'evidence' for gods, miracles, and the like. The scientific methods of materialism (or naturalism) explain the cosmos without any need for gods. The moralist methods of humanism set standards of human welfare and moral progress unassisted by divine inspiration or revelation. And the civic methods of secularism justify

democratic republics whose governments are above religious control. Each method of atheology can be devastatingly effective against religion, but no single method suffices. If the design argument for god seems weak, theology exalts conversion experiences or applauds upright congregants. If priests and ministers aren't as ethical as expected, then theology points at scriptural commandments behind the nation's laws, or compiles lists of scientists who believed in god.

All four methods of atheology must be simultaneously effective to keep up the critical pressure, and each method must support the others instead of tearing them down. What good does it really do for 'agnostic' skeptics to announce their disdain towards 'atheist' naturalism, even if they are technically correct that one needn't accept naturalism before detecting fallacies in theology? How does it help when ethical humanists embrace soft existentialism over hard naturalism to secure "free will" or moral responsibility? Further inconsistencies can arise all over the place. The promotion of humanist ethics about equal dignity and rights could welcome in people of all faiths, only to upset atheists unwilling to set aside objections to faith just for the sake of pleasant harmony. And the spectacle of civic atheologians calling for peaceful accommodation between science and religion just to stabilize the separation of church and state can't be overlooked. Atheology's four methods for mounting secular agendas against religion don't automatically support each other, or even cohere together.

Atheology's wise reliance on reason, science, ethics, and civics working together is unfortunately the exception rather than the norm across the history of irreligion. The major works in atheology by the most prominent unbelievers, from Democritus and Epicurus through Hume, Marx, and Russell, only rely on a single method, or at most two methods. Quite rare are thinkers whose atheological writings comprehensively cover all four methods. The logical skeptic may not be a scientific worldview builder, the scientific mind may not be a sage moralist or a social reformer, and a political revolutionary may have no patience for metaphysical disputations. Comprehensive atheologies are evidently possible. The treatise *On the Nature of Things* by the 1st century CE Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius is an exemplary model of comprehensive materialism. The atheist priest Jean Meslier composed his *Mémoire* (1729) to be an impressive humanistic vision without any place for religion.

Rarer still are treatises coherently uniting all four methods to ensure that they cooperate together on entirely rational-naturalistic-secular grounds without any lingering hints of reliance, positively or negatively, on religious ideas or sentiments. That high degree of coherence and independence is not easily achieved. For example, skeptical reason may deny the scientific realism needed for naturalism; naturalism may deny the moral agency required for secular ethics; and political rights may require other foundations besides reason and nature. Appealing to metaphysical necessities, cognitive aprioris, and fixed absolutes, whether in the guise of reason, science, or ethics, has also remained a powerful secular temptation. If those powerful temptations can be avoided, then a comprehensively coherent atheology can become a "complete atheology."

Complete atheology had been beyond the grasp of Western atheism for a long time since Lucretius. The stirrings of the Enlightenment were heralded by rationalism, which produced two great atheologians who approached completeness: Thomas Hobbes's

materialism in his *Leviathan* (1651) and Baruch Spinoza's pantheism in *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677). The foundations of modern science soon provided the resources for a genuinely complete atheology. Isaac Newton's theories of motion and gravity in *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), later followed by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), eliminated god's jobs of guiding all the heavenly bodies and creating all the organic bodies. Atheists had suspected that nature provided for everything. Julien Ofray de La Mettrie's book *L'Homme machine* (Man the Machine, 1747) was in many ways the first treatise to be comprehensively materialistic and secular since Lucretius, and Baron D'Holbach's *La Systeme de la Nature, ou Des loix du monde physique et du monde moral* (The System of Nature, or The Laws of the Physical World and Moral World, 1770) achieved a complete atheology.

Only the scientific-minded atheologians proved capable of producing comprehensive atheologies after the Enlightenment. Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter, 1855) was the first in a lengthy series of volumes in which he elaborated a materialist natural philosophy. Comprehensive atheology in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to follow the schematic organization laid down by Büchner: appeal to science for the self-sufficiency of nature, deny ultimate teleological ends to the world or to life, reject vitalistic or mentalistic forces inexplicable by science, and tell humanity's story using natural evolution and a history of culture's progress.

Biologist Ernst Haeckel was the next great atheologian, publishing his *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (The History of Creation, 1868) and then *Die Welträthsel* (The Riddle of the Universe, 1895–99). Friedrich Nietzsche promptly announced the "Death of God" at the hands of humanity, yet he doubted evolutionary atheological schemes. He also perceived how atheism may stand transfixed in the "shadows" of god that linger after the death of god, continuing to seek its own necessities, absolutes, and finalities. The four volumes of his middle period represent his great effort at a comprehensive and unified atheology: *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). At the start of the twentieth century, there appeared another ambitious attempt to satisfy the highest atheological standards, in the five-volume work of Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana titled *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (1905–06).

Falling short of comprehensiveness and unified coherence leaves any atheology vulnerable to accusations of philosophical incompleteness and dependency on religion. Atheology since Nietzsche and Santayana has regrettably remained vulnerable to these failings. Most atheologists during the twentieth century couldn't help pursuing their humanism religiously (by yearning for transcendence, like Erich Fromm), resigning themselves to naturalism nihilistically (leaving only subjectivism, like W.V. Quine), discerning their ethical ideals existentially (involving no science, like Martin Heidegger), or grounding their political systems idealistically (ignoring biological nature, like John Rawls).

The vulnerabilities that arise when atheology stays at a level below comprehensiveness or coherence are currently on display in New Atheism. Critics complain about low levels of sophistication, but ordinary religious believers can't follow theological

obscurities anyways, instead expecting that their god would have straightforward reasons for existing, creating, intervening, and communicating. New Atheism, like any “old” atheism, is directly addressing what billions of faithful followers actually believe, not what dozens of cloistered academic theologians happen to believe (if they still believe in god at all). All the same, the works of New Atheism authors haven’t been comprehensive or cohesive. One author exalts naturalism only to announce that morality is illusory. Another author decries religion’s immoralities while faulting the faithful for irrationality, making logical or scientific criticism of religion pointless since the faithful can’t understand anyways. Yet another author designs a political liberalism so religion-free that no one enjoys the right to their own ethical conscience anymore.

After Santayana, very few examples of comprehensive or complete atheology are available. John Dewey’s trilogy of primary works – *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) – achieve a complete atheology. A sketch of a comprehensive atheology was assembled by American philosopher Corliss Lamont in *Humanism as a Philosophy* (1949), later retitled *The Philosophy of Humanism* (8th edn, 1997). British philosopher Antony Flew’s work *Atheistic Humanism* (1993) is also a single-volume comprehensive atheology.

The next great atheological effort came from philosopher Paul Kurtz (1925–2012). In a trilogy of works during the 1980s he offered a comprehensive and coherent atheology in exclusively secular terms without subjectivism, nihilism, or a “god’s eye” view of the world. These three books were *In Defense of Secular Humanism* (1983), *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (1986), and *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (1987). This trilogy stands as the last complete atheology produced in the western world. His rationalist skepticism grounded his account of scientific inquiry; his capacious naturalism avoided the reductionisms eliminating meaning, value, and freedom; and his humanism prioritized the moral progress of free nations erecting governments for the people instead of the gods.

Kurtz set an ambitious rational, scientific, humanist, and civic agenda for this life, so that this affirmative secular humanism would be far more than disbelieving atheism could ever be. His later books re-affirmed this secular humanism with bold confidence.

Secularists do not look to salvation and confirmation of the afterlife as their overriding goal, but rather focus on temporal humanist values in the here and now – happiness, self-realization, joyful exuberance, creative endeavors and excellence, the actualization of the good life – not only for the individual but for the greater community. The common moral decencies, goodwill, and altruism are widely accepted, as are the civic virtues of democracy, the right of privacy, the belief that every individual has equal dignity and value, human rights, equality, tolerance, the principles of fairness and justice, the peaceful negotiation of differences, and the willingness to compromise. (*Multi-Secularism: A New Agenda*, 2010, p. 3)

These are worthy beliefs for nonbelievers. Yes, nature is enough, if we know where to set our gaze upon its horizons and how to live within its habitats.

As Kurtz urged, in the end we can only control our response to nature's beckonings, but that all-too-human response can be magnificent:

The universe is what it is, and there is no evidence of a supernatural realm made especially for us. That illusion is finally shattered by the skeptical eye: these ancient gods are mere fragments of our imagination. Yet there is still deep promise within the human adventure, if we would only unleash our response to the challenges, and open up new potentialities for the good life. Thus whatever we do, we must never forget to look up and stargaze, and this can but only arouse a new sense of awe about nature and a kind of profound reverence for the life that is born of it. The best response we can give is not supplication but buoyancy: to enjoy every moment we can, to exult and extol the natural world; and to live as fully as we can, realizing our highest talents for creativity and fulfillment. (*The Turbulent Universe*, 2012, p. 251)

Emotions and Rationality as a Basis for Humanism: Can Humanism Encompass Both Intellect and Spirit?

Frank Friedlander

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Two primary philosophical underpinnings of humanism are rationality and emotionality. Rationality along with a focus on reason, logic, and an empirical brand of science fortifies our skepticism toward belief in God, and promotes our theories of evolution. Emotionality provides the deeper feelings and compassion we have for one another. These two, rationality and emotionality, are symbolized by the head and heart of ourselves as individuals. They also, to varying degrees, underlay the religions and institutions of which we are a part.

1. Imbalance in Humanism

I suspect a serious imbalance in our Humanist movement. Our heads do most of the talking and our hearts remain mute. We are justifiably proud of our head. If, however, we hold our heads too high, they will become detached from the rest of our body. Rationality far outweighs the recognition, development, and expression of emotions and feelings.

As I live within the Humanist movement, I become increasingly concerned about this imbalance, about the stigma attributed to emotions, about the confusion of irrationality and emotionality. I am concerned about the impact of these concerns upon our humanist system of beliefs, and even the way we think. I am concerned with how our focus on rationality effects our view of the millions of religious people whose emotions form the basis for their faith.

Like emotions, spirituality and religious behavior are important, if not essential ingredients of the human condition. Edward O. Wilson, in his acceptance speech for the Humanist of the Year award from the American Humanist Association, declared that we have a compelling instinct for religion and spirituality even if these assume an atheistic rationale. He declared that the inability of secular humanists to satisfy this instinct surely is part of the reason that there are only a few hundred members of the American Humanist

Association and sixteen million members of the Southern Baptist Convention. There is more to life than rationality. Our sense of hope, of love, of sadness, joy, rejection – these are valid and authentic feelings. So, I can say how I feel hopeful, or sad, or rejected, and each of these has an important and valid meaning. To deny or suppress these feelings is both unfortunate and unhealthy. Our awareness and expression of these feelings are important.

We can legitimately claim, “I feel, therefore I am.” People experience themselves more deeply as an individual, and more alive, after a deep emotional experience.

2. The Person as Central to Humanism

Underlying any philosophy is a set of values and beliefs. Embedded deeply within our philosophy of Humanism is the centrality of the individual human being.

As a member of the Humanist movement I have often been asked questions like, “what is unique about Humanism that differentiates it from all religions and philosophical positions?” The difference is not that we take a scientific position in regard to evolution and the existence of God. The difference is not that our values are humanitarian; nor is the difference that we are practitioners of social justice. All of these are part of humanism, but they are also practiced by some other religions.

Our philosophy is straightforward: Within a Humanist philosophy, *we believe in the centrality of the person, in mankind and in womankind* – we believe *in people* as opposed to a supernatural being. This expression is important for the following reasons:

1. This philosophy focuses on human beings as central in this world, as sources of love and hate, and as friends to share emotions and knowledge. It claims that the individual and the social community are powerful in and of themselves. It not only acknowledges the individual as most central and powerful, it also states that no other being is more so.
2. The belief by the Humanist community in the centrality of the person is surely *a belief*. We often label ourselves erroneously as nonbelievers. We are indeed believers. We believe in our fellow human beings. Just as theorists believe in God, humanists believe in the person. We have faith in human beings. Faith in this sense means moving ahead without ever having enough data. It means that each person is responsible for himself or herself and for others. It means that we relate and communicate with our fellows, rather than to a supernatural being (as in prayer).
- 3, Many of the expressions directed to the supernatural can be communicated directly with other people. These include such feelings as the desire for celebration, and needs for help, forgiveness, and guidance. In other words, our primary relationship is with other men and women rather than with a deity. *All we have is each other!*

4. Our belief is a positive statement. To call ourselves “atheists” is to only state what we are not. The concept of atheism states a cause, a belief, an image which is negative. It creates an image as primarily *against* (against the existence of God). Atheism allows nonbelievers to avoid specifying their purposes, their beliefs, and their values. Our concept of Humanism confirms our purposes as constructive and positive.

3. Rationality and Emotions

If we are to believe in people, we must include everything about a person, both the rational and the emotional, and the acts of thinking and of feeling. Rationality and emotions are not opposite poles on a single dimension, since a person or an institution may have much or little of either. To think and to feel are two separate functions, operating concurrently and interdependently. Both are essential for a fully functioning person.

Rationality stems from ideas that result from reasoning, logic, definitions, and the search for certainty. Emotions are feelings such as love, fear, insecurity, joy, and anguish. While both are essential for a fully functioning person, Humanism, as it is practiced, deals with thinking and reasoning predominantly. Emotions, many of which govern our behavior and influence our thinking, are somewhat unseen and unspoken. This is much like a puppet show, in which a puppeteer (emotions) is invisible, yet controls the show. In fact Antonio Damasio, one of the world’s leading neurologists, finds growing evidence that emotions are essential to rational thinking. Far from interfering with rationality, research by Damasio indicates that the absence of emotion and feeling can break down rationality and make wise decision making almost impossible.

Many of us have learned to repress or ignore our emotions. We have thus left behind much of who we are. We must optimize access to our own personal resources. The feelings that influence our behavior and our relations with others must be known and utilized.

4. Emotions and the Construction of Reality

The paradigm used in most traditional science stems from positivism. The emphasis is on definition and clarity of variables, adequate controls from extraneous factors, on accurate and reliable measurement, and the repeatability and consistency of results. Positivists believe that we can only study what can be directly observed. Since we cannot directly observe emotions (although we are able to measure some of the physical and neurological accompaniments), emotions were not legitimate topics for scientific study.

Reality based upon positivism is essentially a physical reality. Our everyday human experience, however, is based primarily on a social reality. In 1967, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman published their groundbreaking work on the social construction of knowledge. They claimed that we construct this reality through interaction and discourse with others. This is how we make sense of the behavioral world we live in. According to

Karl Weick, reality is thus socially created, and reinforced through discourse in groups, neighborhoods, tribes, organizations, communities, etc.

Emotions have played an “undercover” role in science as well as humankind and Humanist expression. It is tempting to say that it has been the rationality of positivism that has kept emotions captive and focused solely on the physical construction of reality

The philosophy of Humanism is based primarily on a physical reality. This hinders the development of emotional and social relationships that might come from a greater emphasis on social reality.

5. Are Emotions Irrational?

We must pursue this question of whether emotions are irrational, and more specifically, we can ask if the belief in God is irrational. If we explore the meaning of irrationality, we can see irrationality as having purpose, and providing much-needed hope and support.

Several years ago Alan Greenspan used the term “irrational exuberance” to describe a frothy stock market in which prices had risen to “unreasonably” high levels and were no longer supported by the reality of earnings. Here, irrational exuberance meant letting your emotions take over, of being unreasonable. Although the immediate response to his comments was a downward market, prices soon exceeded this negative condition. An important part of the stock market is, in effect, emotion. Part of the price of any investment is its emotional basis – composed of fear, greed, hope, skepticism, and dreams, to mention just a few.

Most gambling is in this sense “irrational.” But it is the “irrational” part that is particularly appealing. A person may find it compelling to buy chances at a state lottery with a 1,000 to 1 odds of winning. A poker player realizes that the house is the major winner, and yet takes the gamble of winning. The greater the hoped-for payoff and the lower the odds of winning, the greater the emotional basis for the decision. It is the emotional lift from the hoped-for possibilities that is, at least temporarily, satisfying.

My point is that emotions are a legitimate part of most of our lives. What we call irrationality represents strong needs and desires that are for the most part unfulfilled and perhaps not fulfillable. They are essential to our life. To deny or dismiss them is to miss out on a major source of behavior.

One of the most well-known studies in management theory occurred back in the 1930s in a Western Electric Division of American Telephone. A group of scientists from Harvard were measuring the effect of varying the lighting conditions on worker productivity. When they raised the level of lighting, productivity went up. This was repeated several times. When they subsequently lowered the lighting, productivity went up further. Workers were responding to the attention they were receiving, not the amount of light.

What then might we think when we say that the belief in God is irrational. Might a subtle rationality underlie this belief. Might people believe in a God for reasons similar to those mentioned earlier: to cope with feelings of anxiety and insecurity which result from a life limited in both quality and quantity, from poverty, from fatal disasters, and from other misfortunes of life. Similarly, the need for a God may stem from a need to be more

successful, to win an otherwise unobtainable treasure or gift, or to simply be more successful in life.

There is no proof that God exists, but there is ample evidence that the vast majority of people believe in a God. We can assume that these believers are meeting important needs or receiving rich rewards – feelings of comfort, success, security, and hope from this belief. I personally do not believe in a God, but I do believe in their belief. I believe that those who are comforted by their God should not be challenged by us. I do not want to take away their faith. It is essential to their existence. I believe that science-based expressions which cast doubt on the existence of God are poor substitutes for people experiencing destitution, poverty, hunger, and disease.

It is only through arrogance (similar to the arrogance of Christian missionaries) that we can believe we are doing theist believers a favor by pointing out to them that there is no evidence for the existence of God. I remember watching the destitute after the Haiti earthquakes pray to their God for comfort. It would be insensitive to interrupt them to say that there is no God.

6. Emotionless Mystery, and Secular spirituality

The concept of spirituality includes a sense of mystery, uncertainty, and wonderment, that reaches our deepest emotions. After a spiritual experience, one may feel moved by the event, but also confused about its (rational) cause. An example might be helpful. I was watching a program on PBS in which Paul Simon received the first Gershwin Prize for music. Simon and other musicians from his era were playing and singing songs from the 1960s and 1970s, mostly from the soundtrack to the movie *The Graduate* – songs such as Homeward Bound, Rosemary and Thyme, Like a Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and Mrs. Robinson. I found myself feeling emotional, sentimental, choked up, and teary. I asked myself “Why?” I had no answer. Perhaps it reminded me of my youth, my own rebellious days, my early loves. I don’t know. And it is the very mystery of not knowing that defines this as a spiritual experience.

Mystery, deep passion, sentimentality, and uncertainty are also the antithesis of rationality. The rational approach favors definition, it values objectivity, and it strives for certainty.

Humanism, with its emphasis on rationality, generally limits manifestations of spirituality. There is a dearth of music, poetry, art, dance, and of most aesthetic experiences. For example, through music we often express deep emotions that are otherwise difficult to express: the depth of love, the glory of war, the yearning for peace, the joy of nature, the fortitude to overcome. Poetry and dance are similarly expressive.

7. Ethics as a Belief in Relationships

Both rationality and emotions underlie and influence ethical behavior. The more popular term, “doing the right thing,” is a wonderful simplification of these complexities. The person in transition to atheism may ask: Who now is going to tell us the right thing to do? How will I know the right way to behave? These questions may arise especially if the

person is in transition from a religion which is highly prescriptive, such as Catholicism or Conservative Judaism.

Acting as a virtuous person is the only way one can live with himself or herself and fulfill the goals of one's life. A second view of ethics focuses on the consequences of one's behavior. Since ethics always involves a relationship, this approach raises questions about the impact of one's behavior upon others and upon the relationship itself. A third view is that ethics must be based on a set of principles that are knowable and universal. This approach calls for rationality and obligation.

We can infer that the first view is dependent upon character building and training, the second on insightful analysis of one's action upon the others, and the third is dependent upon an external list or commandment of what one should and should not do. It would seem that the latter is more typical of traditional religion and a bit unappetizing for Humanists. The first two of these call for clear efforts toward understanding one's emotional self, and a candid analysis of one's impact on others.

8. Personal Growth and Development

If our Humanist belief is in the person (as opposed to a supernatural entity), one of the goals of Humanism must be to advance the development and growth of the person according to the needs of that person. Arthur Jackson, a noted Humanist, uses the term "the good life" to describe the experience of individuals who actualize their yearnings and dreams, the values and passion in their lives. Abraham Maslow proposed an hierarchy of needs starting with lower levels (such as physiological and security needs), social needs (such as friendship, a feeling of belonging, acceptance by the group), esteem needs (self respect, recognition), and self actualization (maximizing self potential). Methods for fulfilling these would include participative discussions, lectures, and personal growth sessions. Such an endeavor suggests that opportunities be offered to promote human growth and development.

My initial exposure to personal growth sessions was in the 1960s. They were held at remote resort hotels for periods of a week or two, and generally in groups of about a dozen people. Although these sessions have been modified and shortened over the years, they still emphasize candid expressions of feelings, personal expressions beginning with the word "I" rather than with "you," "we," or "they," and expressions in the "here-and-now" which all members had experienced in the group about the group. The group was guided by an experienced trainer who played a non-directive role. Group members were in charge of the group process, with the trainer occasionally pointing out how the group was developing.

The result for me was a vastly increased sensitivity to the impact I had on others, and the impact they had on me. Specifically, I was seen as analytical and relatively uninvolved. This was not the person I thought was nor wanted to be. I have amended ways since, but life is a work in progress!

Note that the focus is on growth and development rather than therapy. Therapy suggests ways to remedy or resolve personal problems often developed from past

experiences. Human growth focuses on new opportunities, new insights into oneself, new paths for fulfillment, and new ways of relating to other people.

9. Building Community

Personal growth is a difficult and complex process. It proliferates in a community of mutual support, caring, cohesion, trust, and common interests. The common interests can be philosophic, academic, social action, health-oriented, political, and so on. The effectiveness, attraction, and satisfaction of the community will be partially dependent on the emotional ties among its members, and not just the common interest.

Further, communities have a structure and a culture which help implement or deter the best of our human qualities: encouraging participation and democratic governance, and fostering a culture of engagement and constructive behavior. These ensure wide participation and a focus on building the community.

We become a community when we share with each other our deeper feelings and thoughts. A community can discuss a social issue as a debate, as an intellectual topic, or as the beginning of an action program. The development of the discussion into an ongoing action project will often depend in part upon the sets of relationships or social structure of the group.

Community is a social structure. It is the set of functional relationships that community members build with others. It may be collegial or hierarchical, and it may be in person or on the internet. It may be loving or hateful. But the functional or rational qualities of the relationship certainly affect each other.

The core links for building any community are relationships that are based on both common interests and on close friendships. Not all communities have both of these qualities. Common interest gives the community purpose and the comfort of similarity. Intimacy among members gives the community the attraction of friendship, of support, of caring for one another. This is the emotional component that is essential to Humanism. Without the emotional appeal and emotional ties without intimacy, Humanism becomes a scientific society with particular interests in evolution. Without a devotion to science and rationality, Humanism becomes a social club. I believe that both strong rational interests and strong social ties are essential to the growth of Humanism.

Building relationships, then, is the first step and underlying fabric for building effective community.

10. Centrality of the Person

The centerpiece of Humanism is the person – men and women. In contrast to traditional religions, Humanism looks to no “middleman” to whom to pray, to express regrets, to bow down, to love, etc. For these emotional needs, we have each other.

Humanism must expand to encompass its emotional values and content so as to become a richer offering. Its focus on rationality, reason, logic, and science serve it and society well. This focus provide us with a solid empirical base for our behavior and our beliefs. The more timid provision that Humanism makes for emotional needs is

unfortunate. Rationality needs its companion, emotion, to ground it, guide it, and humanize it.

There are many paths in this direction. They intersect with each other. Among these are increasing our awareness of our emotions, better expressing these emotions, acknowledging the legitimacy of feelings, understanding irrationality as a broad human need, allowing the mysteries and spirituality of life to exist in people's mind, encouraging people to work on higher level needs such as self-actualization, and encouraging artistic, poetic, dance, and musical expression.

Can we build communities having such norms and values to support these behaviors and activities? Can we build communities in which participatory structures encourage the full expression of Humanism? Can we build inter-community relationships which share our values and expose us to contrasting beliefs? How might we launch this endeavor?

A Commentary on Ronald Dworkin's *Religion Without God*

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Ronald Dworkin's posthumous book *Religion Without God* searches for the possibility of atheistic religiosity. Rather than clarifying the situation, this book does more to confuse it, and succeeds in undermining his expressed humanitarian goals.

In *Religion Without God*, the just published last book by the recently deceased distinguished Professor of Law and Philosophy at New York University, Dr. Ronald Dworkin, he seeks to address the vital question of the possibility of atheistic religiosity. His intention is to show that “what divides godly and godless religion ... is not as important as the faith in value that unites them.” Unfortunately, however, rather than clarifying the situation, this book does more to confuse it, and undermine his expressed humanitarian goals, and that for essentially four reasons.

First, he defines religion as presupposing a belief in the supernatural, “in a ‘force’ in the universe ‘greater than we are’.” But that is clearly an error. Of course, one might choose to stipulate any definition one wishes, but that would be far from convincing. Or one might try to extract a credible definition from an interpretation of the history of religions. However, any such interpretation is sure to be quite contentious. Thus he accepts as a working model the decision of the United States Supreme Court that recognized the existence of, among others, the religion of “secular humanism.”

However, as a member of the Board of a recognized secular religious organization, the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island, I can tell you that we do not believe that “the religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value.” Rather, as we often begin our Sunday service, we state that “we *choose* to attribute value to all human beings,” thus making quite explicit that we do not claim that there is any “transcendental and objective value [that] pervades the universe,” which, for example, Dworkin approvingly attributes to Einstein in support of his position.

This definitional error follows from a deeper philosophical error. He mistakenly asserts that “the religious attitude rejects all forms of naturalism.” Not only does my work disprove that – in my *Critique of Western Philosophy and Social Theory*, for example. But

more significantly, so does that of John Dewey, to mention only one, who in his *A Common Faith* clearly develops an entirely naturalistic interpretation of religiosity, which he clearly distinguishes from the ossified structures of most traditional religions. Dr. Dworkin, in fact, shows no understanding of the metaphysics of natural emergence that undergirds these positions.

Thirdly, he simply asserts the truth of 'Hume's principle', "that one cannot support a value judgment ...just by establishing some scientific fact about how the world is or was or will be." But that principle has come under quite convincing attack in recent times by numerous distinguished philosophers, often "naturalists," including Hillary Putnam and Roy Bhaskar, to mention only two. But Dworkin uses this dubious principle to sustain an absolute distinction between values and facts in order to free traditional religious views and institutions from the problems created by their belief systems.

Finally, and worst of all, these confusions result from his effort to reduce scientific knowledge to simply another circular belief system that has no more solid grounds on which to rest than that of faith, just as religions do. He claims that "there is no finally noncircular way to certify our capacity to find truth of any kind in any intellectual domain." But that is both intellectually confused and morally disastrous. It fails to address the independent role of experience and the operation of replicable experiments that establish warrantably assertable objective truths. The consequent capacity of established science to predict events, often with astounding levels of accuracy – as in the case of the magnetic moment of the electron to the twelfth decimal place – as well as to develop astounding levels of technological proficiency and practical effectiveness, certainly marks off scientific practices and belief systems from the essentially subjective faiths of most traditional religions.

By thus "leveling the intellectual playing field," Dworkin can, no doubt unintentionally, give a good conscience and intellectual legitimation to the most outrageous and dangerous beliefs and practices. Those beliefs and practices, many of which are threatening to the rights and dignity of individuals, and may even threaten the very survival of civilization, effectively undermine the admirable goals to which he sought to give expression.

