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Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism

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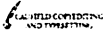
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Personhood and the Scope of Moral Duty¹

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Keywords

morality, personhood, abortion, ethics, religion

ABSTRACT

In this essay I craft a procedure for evaluating claims of moral personhood that would allow us to answer ethical questions raised by issues like abortion, animal rights, artificial intelligence, etc. I focus specifically on the abortion debate as a case study for applying my procedure. I argue that our moral instincts have evolved to promote group cohesion, a necessary prerequisite of which is reliable identification of other group members. These are “persons” in the moral sense of the word. However, while our moral intuitions may be good at picking out paradigmatic instances of moral persons, peripheral or putative instances of this category are a matter of intense debate. Further, I show that the attempt to clarify the boundaries of moral personhood by appealing to physical traits—what I characterize as the equation of moral personhood with ontological personhood—does not actually resolve the underlying ambiguity, nor does it answer the moral question why we ought to recognize moral rights in the first place. I argue instead for a three pronged inquiry that asks (1) whether the entity in question is capable of articulating its own entitlement to moral consideration; (2) if not, whether recognizing it as a moral person would facilitate the recognition of more paradigmatic instances of moral persons, or whether the failure so to recognize it would impede the recognition of more paradigmatic instances of moral persons; and (3) whether the entity’s moral personhood can be recognized without cancelling or substantially burdening the moral rights of paradigmatic instances of moral persons. I argue that, applying this test, abortion is morally permissible, at least in the early stages of pregnancy when the vast majority of abortions occur anyway.

The man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law in the way a word is used, and, trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against paradoxical results. (Wittgenstein 2009, 27)

1. A version of this article first appeared in Arand, Dustin. 2015. *Truth Evolves*. Charleston: Self-published (printed by Create Space).

[P]ersonhood [...] is a matter of decision rather than knowledge, an acceptance of another being into fellowship rather than a recognition of a common essence. (Rorty 1979, 38)

Introduction

To whom do we owe moral duties, what is their nature, and why? Growing up in a devout Catholic household and attending parochial schools, I was steeped the Church's teachings about the sanctity of life, as contrasted with what the Church called the Culture of Death, a culture that tolerated abortion and euthanasia. In the 1980s, in the Midwest, the battle over abortion was the more salient of the two, and consequently this issue took centre stage in the development of my moral opinions. I took the immorality of abortion for granted for many years. It was, I believed, self-evidently wrong. All persons have a right to life, and foetuses are persons, so foetuses obviously have a right to life as well. How could you deny that without diminishing the moral worth of the unborn and, by extension, all of humanity? How could the Pro-Choice position not lead, as my parents, my teachers and my priests all told me, to the degradation of our belief in the sanctity of life? And of course, as a young child it never occurred to me to challenge the message trumpeted by the sign on our Church's front lawn: "GOD IS PRO-LIFE!" As the Bible says, if God be for us, who can be against us?²

But as I got older I grew dissatisfied with my parents' religion and, consequently, any ideas that appeared to depend upon it. I wanted to know, if abortion is wrong, *why* is it wrong? What is the *reason*? To say only that it is wrong because God says so is no answer. After all, what if there is no God? Should not our moral convictions depend upon more than an assertion that is, even by our own admission, unprovable? Furthermore, if we are not required to give reasons for our moral convictions, does that not mean I can assert anything to be morally good or bad, and no one can tell me I'm wrong? How will you refute me, if reasons are inadmissible? Indeed, though my parents and teachers seemed to believe that actions done according to moral principles were self-justifying, and that we could not look to their consequences or the goals sought for their justification, yet they never seemed to recognize that this view of morality ungrounded by reason was indistinguishable from the relativism they claimed to despise. Ultimately, then, I knew I would have to seek the answers to my moral questions elsewhere.

I began as any reasonable person would, just by looking around me. According to my fellow Pro-Lifers, abortion was essentially the killing of an innocent human being. In other words, it was murder. Yet a few zealots aside, they did not seem to really believe that. They did not argue that women who had had abortions, or that the doctors who provided them, should be tried

2. Romans 8:31

for murder. Most of them even agreed that women who had been victims of rape or incest should be allowed to terminate their pregnancies, even though the foetus's right to life, if it had one, certainly could not be contingent upon the circumstances of its conception. A recent poll by Gallup confirms that these views, and others that are hard to reconcile with the Pro-Life stance, are quite common in America. For example, even though half of Americans consider themselves Pro-Life, yet three-quarters of all respondents said that abortion should be legal in cases of rape or incest.³ More than sixty percent believe that a woman should have the right to an abortion for any reason in the first trimester.

I also found these views enshrined in the laws of most developed democracies. Most allowed abortion for any reason in the first trimester, in the second trimester in cases of rape or incest, foetal deformity, or other extraordinary circumstances, and at any time to protect the life or health of the mother.⁴ When I looked into the history of abortion, I was also surprised. My religious education had taught me that abortion had always been regarded as wrong, and that it was only with the rise of feminism and sexual liberation in the 1960s that social attitudes had changed. But I discovered that in fact abortion has been a common practice for millennia, going back at least to Ancient Egypt (Riddle 1992, 11). While the Church liked to point to the Hippocratic Oath's prohibition on providing abortion as proof of the ancients' moral judgment, I found that many of the works attributed to Hippocrates or his disciples contained numerous recipes for abortifacients (Riddle 1992, 153). Indeed, the ancients' knowledge of abortifacient compounds appears to have been passed down—even improved upon—during the Middle Ages, despite the Church's anti-abortion stance (Riddle 1992, 109). Even when the ancients expressed disapproval of abortion, it was based on the supposed violation of the father's right to an heir rather than the foetus' right to life (Riddle 1992, 63). For a long time the Church did not regard early abortions, those that occurred before quickening (when the foetus first stirs, believed to be the soul entering its body), as particularly morally troubling. It was not until 1869 that Pope Pius IX declared that ensoulment occurred at conception rather than quickening (Riddle 1992, 162).

Interestingly then, historical attitudes seemed to mirror those of the present. Across time and space we find a kind of rough consensus. Abortion is more morally acceptable when it occurs earlier, when the mother is blameless, when the foetus is deformed, or when the pregnancy imposes an undue hardship on the mother, or a risk to the her health. Abortion appears to grow less

3. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx#1>

4. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2011abortion/2011wallchart.pdf>

morally acceptable as the pregnancy advances, and the more the reason for it departs from necessity or victimization, and approaches mere convenience. The more I thought about this data, the more I felt it was impossible to reconcile this rough consensus, on the one hand, and a stark, binary concept of personhood—in which any given object, like a foetus, either does or does not belong—on the other. It is tempting to look at this evidence and say, well, all that shows is that people failed to grasp whether a foetus was or was not a person, but now we have the means of finding out, and there needn't be any moral ambiguity anymore. It is tempting because we have a strong tendency to assume that every object either does or does not fall squarely within some defined ontological category. We make this assumption because of the seductive but erroneous impression we have that a given word is applied to a group of objects because those objects share some common essence. But a word is merely a label we attach to a category of objects because it is useful for us to do so, not because every object in the category has some quality in common. Wittgenstein famously used the example of the word “games.” Try to find any one quality that all games have in common, and it will not be too difficult to find an example of something we call a game that lacks that quality. What makes us want to apply the same name to all the members of the category “games,” Wittgenstein argued, was not a common essence but more a kind of “family resemblance.”

With the word “person,” much of the challenge of determining what is a member and what is not arises from the fact that the word is used in two very different senses. On the one hand, “person” picks out certain objects based on physical criteria. On the other hand, it also designates the expected loci of moral emotions like empathy, guilt, anger, shame, and love. In what follows I shall use “person^o” when referring to the former, ontological category, and “person^m” when referring to the latter, moral category. We are tempted to think that the objects to which a word applies as an ontological matter are the very same to which it applies as a moral matter. In other words, we take for granted that the ontological and moral uses of a word coincide. But do they? We have already seen that for thousands of years, and in nearly every culture, foetuses have been treated differently from other persons. In our own day, when the case has never been stronger that foetuses are instances of “person^o” (they are genetically indistinguishable from other humans, we can see ultrasound images of them, etc.), there is, if anything, less willingness to treat them as instances of “person^m.” On the other hand, we protect other animal species with animal cruelty laws, we have nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving their lives, and we have millions of people who refuse to eat meat because they disapprove of killing them. In other words, we have beings that are not instances of “person^o,” but to which we accord, to some degree or another, the kind of moral consideration that “person^m” normally entails.

We could simply dismiss these and other instances of the seemingly inconsistent use of our concept of person as mere examples of muddled thinking or moral decay, but to do so would be to insist on fitting a square peg into a round hole. If the evidence, in terms of how people actually speak and act, does not fit our preconceived ideas about the relationship between meaning and reality, perhaps we should revisit those ideas rather than deny the evidence. In that vein, then, I would like to pursue a different tack. I would like to explore the question why we use the word “person” ambiguously, and whether the answer to that question can shed light on why human societies in all times and places have held much more ambivalent attitudes regarding the moral status of foetuses compared to other ontologically recognized instances of persons.

I think part of the problem stems from how easy it seems for us to identify those physical objects to which the word “person” applies. In other words, because it seems so easy to identify, as an ontological matter, what is a person and what is not, we assume that it must be equally as easy to make that determination as a moral matter. Indeed, if the two categories perfectly coincide, all that is required is to identify the relevant ontological trait and the moral imperative will follow. If a foetus is sentient, or viable, or has a beating heart, or has characteristic human brain wave patterns, or just *is*, then we have a person and all our moral commitments kick in automatically. But what if it were not so easy, as an ontological matter, to distinguish persons from non-persons? Imagine all your ancestors lined up one behind the other (in the male or female line, it doesn’t matter). Now imagine you are sweeping over that line, watching as the physical appearance of the figures grow less and less like modern day humans and more and more like *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, etc., all the way back to the australopithecines, about three million years ago. Which of your ancestors was the first “person”? It is clear the first individual in the line is a person, and just as clear that the last one is not.⁵ Yet it would be not merely arbitrary but absurd to hold that somewhere in that line the first person just magically appears. No two consecutive generations exhibit sufficiently dramatic differences to warrant saying, as a biological (and hence ontological) matter, that the child is a person while the parent is not. The kinds of physical differences that seem to matter appear only very gradually. But if you cannot clearly delineate the boundaries of “person^o,” and you believe that moral status depends upon recognition of the essence of a person (i.e. what makes this thing a person, as an ontological matter),

5. If you disagree, and believe personhood was an attribute of australopithecines, too, that’s fine. We can just extend the line back until we find one of our ancestors—perhaps some late Cretaceous rodent—that you agree is not a person. The question still stands.

then you have to admit that you cannot clearly delineate the boundaries of “person^m.” In other words, even if we accept that the moral and ontological referents of “person” perfectly coincide (and we have seen we have good reason for doubting they do), we would still have to admit that “person^m” is a fuzzy category.

But in fact their referents do not coincide, and there is a very good reason why they should not. Briefly, they do not coincide because they serve different purposes. Consider a group of animal rights activists who believe that all sentient creatures should be accorded the same moral consideration. Thus, not only humans but some species of primates and cetaceans, for example, would have the same right to life. Yet it will still be important for them to distinguish between all these different kinds of organisms, as an ontological matter, even if they make no distinctions between them as a moral matter, because it will still be the case that these different species will have different instincts, behaviours, diets, habitats, etc. In other words, drawing ontological distinctions between them will still yield useful inferences, even if in their estimation drawing moral distinctions between them would not. On the other hand, consider the members of a remote hunter-gather tribe. They may believe, for any number of historical or cultural reasons, that the members of another tribe across the river are not entitled to the same moral consideration they accord each other. Yet they will still find it useful to recognize that the members of that other tribe are the same kind of being, ontologically speaking, as themselves. They are beings with internal mental states, capable of planning attacks or practicing deceit, all of which is important information to know. To summarize, the scope of “person^o” is defined by certain, mostly physical, facts, and therefore the application of that term will follow those facts because doing so yields useful ontological inferences. On the other hand, the scope of “person^m” is defined by some, but not all, of these physical facts, as well as by other physical, social, cultural and historical facts, again because doing so yields useful moral inferences. Put differently, successfully identifying a member of an ontological category is vital to an individual’s successful interaction with his physical and ecological environments, but successfully identifying a member of a moral category is vital to an individual’s successful interaction with his social environment, i.e. with his community.

Does this imply that how an individual or community delineates the scope of “person^m” is purely arbitrary? I don’t think so. But to see why, we shall have to make a detour through the science of our moral emotions. Consider the classic trolley problem devised by the ethical philosopher Philippa Foot: you are standing on the side of a railroad track. You see a trolley coming down the tracks at full speed, its conductor lying unconscious over the controls. Down the track are five hikers, facing the other direction and oblivious to the trolley’s approach. There is a lever in front of you that will divert the trolley onto a

side track, but if you pull it the trolley will run over a worker working on the side track. Is it permissible to pull the lever? Now consider a slightly different version of this hypothetical. You are standing on a footbridge over the track. Again the trolley is flying down the track, again the conductor is unconscious, and again there are five hikers on the track, oblivious to their impending doom. However, there is no lever and no side track. Instead, there is a very large man standing on the footbridge next to you. If you push him over onto the tracks, he will stop the trolley, thus saving the hikers, but the impact with the trolley will kill him. Is it permissible to push the man onto the tracks?

If you are like the vast majority of participants in an internet experiment involving 200,000 people from all over the world, of all ages and religions, you said it was permissible to pull the lever but impermissible to push the man (Pinker 2008). Explaining these results by appealing to established theories of morality is difficult, if not impossible. Strictly speaking, a utilitarian cannot account for this difference. In either case, inaction results in five people dying, while taking action results in only one death. Therefore, from a utilitarian point of view, both pulling the lever and pushing the man should be morally permissible. A Kantian does a better job explaining the results. She would point out that the difference between the two hypothetical statements is that in the second we are treating the large man as a means to an end, rather than as an end in himself, while in the first hypothetical the worker is killed incidentally to an action that is primarily about saving the five hikers. But I don't think this explanation holds up, either. The distinction between direct and incidental harm feels forced. Why can't I regard the worker's death as a means to saving the five hikers in the first hypothetical? It seems the only reason for not doing so would be my own lack of comfort with my choice.

The philosopher and psychologist Joshua Greene posed a simpler explanation: we don't push the man because it just *feels* wrong. In an experiment using fMRI to scan people's brains while they thought about the trolley problem and other moral dilemmas, Greene and his colleagues discovered that the different hypothetical statements actually engaged different parts of his subjects' brains. When participants considered the hypothetical that required them to pull the lever to save the hikers, their dorsolateral frontal lobe "lit up." This is a region of the brain known to be active when we make rational calculations. On the other hand, when they considered whether to push the man onto the tracks, three separate regions lit up: the dorsolateral frontal lobe (used, as we saw, in rational calculation), the medial frontal lobe (known to be active when we think about the emotions of other people), and the anterior cingulate cortex (a part of the brain that recognizes conflicting impulses from different brain regions). In other words, what Greene found was that certain fact patterns prompt us to apply a more or less utilitarian calculation. One death is preferable to five deaths, so when our rational brain is in charge, we

choose the course of action that prevents the greatest number of deaths. On the other hand, other fact patterns—those that involve directly doing violence to another person—trigger an emotional response that basically stops the utilitarian calculation in its tracks (pardon the pun). Having this emotion is critical to reaching the “right” moral answer to the second trolley hypothetical. Indeed, neurological patients who have suffered damage to their frontal lobes answer both questions the same. For them, it is equally acceptable to push the man onto the tracks as it is to pull the lever (Pinker 2008).

These findings raise an important question. If the right moral answer to the second trolley problem doesn't follow from a rational calculation of costs and benefits, where does it come from? What reason would one part of our brain have for getting in the way of another, and is that reason a *good* reason? Let's consider some other facts. Children as young as four or five seem to understand that there is a qualitative difference between rules that prevent harm and other kinds of rules. In a study conducted by Berkeley psychology professor Elliot Turiel, children were told two different kinds of stories. In the first kind, there is a rule, for example, all students must wear a uniform to school, and a child who breaks the rule by wearing regular clothes. When asked, children say it was wrong of the boy not to wear his uniform. But when asked whether it would still be wrong if the teacher said he could wear regular clothes, the children changed their minds. On the other hand, the second kind of story involved a rule about harm, for example that one is not allowed to push another child, and a child who breaks the rule by pushing another child off a swing so she can use it. Here the children said it was wrong for the girl to push the other child, and they continued to say it was wrong regardless of whether the teacher said it was permitted. In other words, children recognize a fundamental difference between mere conventions, which to some extent are arbitrary and variable from place to place, and moral rules, which are compulsory and universal (Haidt 2012).

That this sensitivity to the harm suffered by others—particularly when we may be responsible—is instinctive rather than learned, is suggested by experiments conducted with other mammals. For example, in one experiment a rat was trained to push a button to receive a bite of food. Subsequently, another rat was introduced into a neighbouring cage. When the first rat pushed the button, not only was the food released, but his neighbour received an electric shock. After delivering a few shocks to his neighbour, the first rat ceased pushing the button, even though by doing so he incurred a material cost in the form of lost food. In another such experiment involving rhesus monkeys, the subjects behaved the same way, except that

unlike rats, most of the rhesus showed far greater restraint, far greater inhibitory control. Some individuals stopped pulling for five to twelve days, functionally starving themselves. The extent to which rhesus refrained from

pulling was related to two important factors: experience with shock and identity of the shockee. Individuals refrained from pulling for longer periods of time if they had the experience of being shocked, if they were paired with a familiar group member as opposed to an unfamiliar member of another group, and if they were paired with another rhesus monkey, as distinct from a rabbit. (Hauser 2006, 354–355)

These findings suggest an answer to the question we posed above: why shouldn't we all just be strict utilitarians? Why should our brains prevent us from making moral decisions based purely on a cost-benefit analysis? The answer, I think, is that strict utilitarianism is simply not biologically adaptive. Unlike a moral sense that can identify organisms that are genetically closer to ourselves, and accord them priority with respect to acts of altruism, a utilitarian morality draws no such distinctions. At first blush that may sound nice, but consider the consequences. In determining whether an action is conducive to more happiness than suffering, whose happiness and whose suffering should be considered? Just yours, your family's, your tribe's, your nation's, your specie's, a group of species to which you belong, all life? I don't think utilitarianism can provide a satisfactory answer, except perhaps to say that different beings have different capacities for suffering, and should therefore be weighted differently. But that just raises a whole host of other problems. For example, why should we assume the difference between humans and other species, with respect to our capacity for suffering, is quantitative rather than qualitative? Even if it is quantitative, how do we know that the suffering of a million ants does not add up to the suffering of one human? Moreover, how can mere balancing of suffering account for our intuition that, if forced to choose, most of us would prefer to save a comatose man from carbon monoxide poisoning, even though he would not suffer, than to save five healthy pigs from a fire? Again, I don't think utilitarianism can answer these questions.

But biology can. Natural selection operates on replicators, and while we have a tendency to equate reproduction with replication, in fact the two are distinct. An organism can reproduce, but unless it produces an exact copy of itself, it does not replicate. Genes replicate. Therefore, natural selection will select any gene that tends to get itself copied, regardless of where that gene is. If many of the same genes reside in multiple organisms, altruistic behaviour between those organisms is likely to evolve. Moreover, the degree to which organisms ought to be motivated to behave altruistically toward one another should be proportionate to the degree to which their genotypes overlap. That we may not be consciously aware of the ultimate effect of our altruism, in genetic terms, is irrelevant. "People love their children not because they want to spread their genes (consciously or unconsciously) but because they can't help it. That love makes them try to keep their children warm, fed, and safe. What is selfish is not the real motives of the person but the metaphorical

motives of the genes that built the person” (Pinker 1997, 400–401).

The foregoing suggest that our instinctive aversion to causing others harm is vital to promoting altruistic behaviour. Altruism, in turn, is the glue that binds communities together, beginning with the most basic communal unit—the family. But none of us is born with the capacity to calculate the genetic similarity between ourselves and anyone else, so how do we know who to love, who to like, who to trust? I think part of the answer is via the same kind of mechanism that lets hatchlings know which duck to follow. “[A]ttachment behaviours are prominent in every species of bird or mammal whose survival depends heavily on parental care” (Eliot 2000, 306). We take our cues from those stimuli that we encounter most immediately: the sound of our parents’ voices, their appearance, and their scent. It would seem, then, that we build our concept of “person” expansively, beginning with our parents and siblings and expanding to encompass others based on their similarity to these earliest exemplars. Indeed, given the choice of interacting with a person of the same race, or who speaks with the same accent, as their parents, or someone of a different race, or who speaks with a different accent, babies consistently prefer the former over the latter (Pinker 2011, 523).⁶ This makes sense if we assume, as was the case for most of the time humans have walked the Earth, that features like speech and physical appearance are roughly co-extensive with community membership. Only for a relatively short span of human history have we lived in multi-ethnic, polyglot societies whose membership is defined much more abstractly. Consequently, even among modern humans we find a tendency to centre our concept of “person” around membership in one’s in-group, and who belongs to our in-group depends on who we interact with in our formative years.⁷

Where language and culture invoke familial labels to describe the relationships between even genetically unrelated individuals, the altruistic behaviour resulting from kin selection can be extended beyond the immediate family, to a much larger community. Think of France’s motto: Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood. Think of the claims of nationalistic and jingoistic ideologues who spoke of a nation united by “race” or “blood.” In the most extreme cases, we might even hear a people described as a single organism, or a single Spirit. Again, because

6. Note, however, that speech is more important than race in determining who a baby will prefer to interact with. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/01/science/insights-in-human-knowledge-from-the-minds-of-babes.html?page-wanted=all&r=0>

7. For many of us, this often means people of the same race, same religion, same speech habits, and same political affiliation. But it need not necessarily be so. One of the virtues of diversity is its potential to shape our concept of personhood to be more inclusive, and may therefore be a means to eradicating prejudice.

we don't go around checking each other's DNA to determine who to behave altruistically toward, but take our cues from our environment, cultural beliefs and practices can extend our altruistic instincts beyond just our close relatives.

But kin selection is not the only way that organisms can evolve altruistic behaviour. Cooperation between unrelated individuals can be beneficial to both, if both follow through on their commitments to each other. But in the absence of an external authority to impose cooperation, why wouldn't one party always just take the benefit of the bargain and then renege on his part? It would seem that a stable, cooperative culture could not arise spontaneously for want of a means to check free riders and cheats. On the other hand, if people had the ability to keep track of each others' records of past cooperative or exploitative behaviour, and if we were emotionally motivated to shun or punish cheaters, a community-wide norm of cooperation could gain a foothold, and once it had, cooperators would fare better than cheaters. Indeed, among a group of individuals employing various strategies for interacting, a stable community of cooperators can arise and fend off infiltration by cheaters (Axelrod 1984). There is also evidence that human beings are better at drawing valid logical deductions from fact patterns where those fact patterns involve detecting cheaters, as opposed to fact patterns that lack a moral dimension (Cosmides and Tooby 1992, 181–184). And just as kin selection depends upon the emotion of love to motivate adaptive behaviour, reciprocal altruism also depends upon a suite of emotions including anger, gratitude, sympathy, guilt, and shame (Pinker 1997, 404–405).

Having concluded our detour through the science of our moral instincts, we can now return to the basic Pro-Life argument I stated in the first paragraph of this essay. A person has a right to life; a foetus is a person; therefore, a foetus has a right to life. We are now in a better position to understand just what is wrong with this argument, and why it cannot establish what its proponents believe it does. We have seen that we are moral beings because morality binds the communities within which individuals survive and thrive. But we have also seen that a being's possession of traits indicative of its membership in the category "person^o" are only suggestive, and not determinative, of its membership in the category "person^m," as illustrated in Figure 1. As we can see, some "persons^o" are "persons^m," but not all are, and vice versa. What makes something a "person^o" are just those objective, physical traits we associate with members of the species *Homo sapiens*. But what makes something a "person^m" is our sense that it is an appropriate object of moral consideration, and this is determined by a combination of our moral instincts and the cultural inputs that activate and give content to those instincts. Thus, rewriting the above syllogism to take account of this ambiguity, we have:

MP: A person^m has a right to life.

mp: A foetus is a person^o.

C: A foetus has a right to life.

But now the conclusion does not follow from the premises. For it may be the case that a foetus is the kind of person^o that is not also a person^m. The problem is even worse than this. It is now apparent that focusing entirely on the foetus' physical traits in an attempt to establish its personhood can never get us further than the determination that a foetus is a person^o, which I am perfectly willing to concede. But what we want to know is whether a foetus ought to be considered a person^m. So how do we determine that?

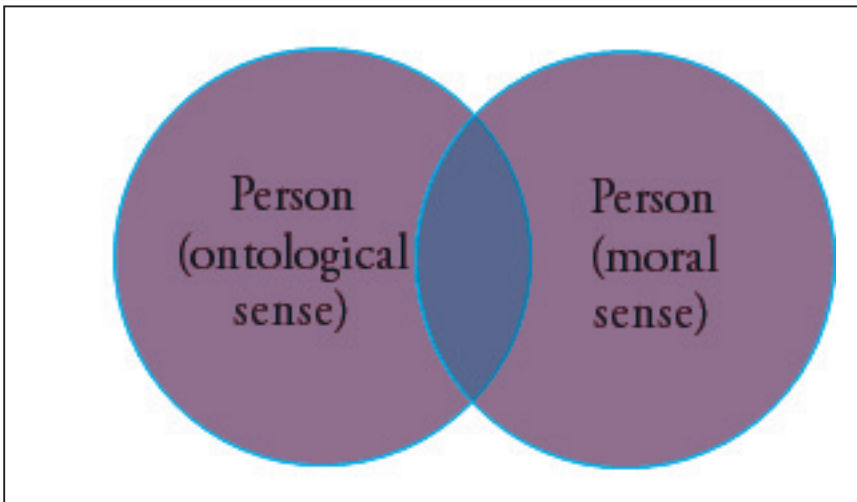


Figure 1: Person^o and person^m

The above diagram is misleading in one respect. The circles would ideally have somewhat fuzzy boundaries, the one on the right especially so. The fuzziness represents the fact that our moral instincts are such that some objects are self-evidently persons^m, some are self-evidently not, and others might or might not be, or might be only to a certain extent, or for certain purposes. Let us allow for the sake of argument that a foetus is at least among the last group. When something might or might not belong to the category "person^m," how should we decide how to treat it? My contention so far is that we cannot simply look to its ontological status, and more specifically at those traits that are suggestive of its ontological status, and think that, having established that we have a person^o, we must also have a person^m. If we are to decide the moral issue, we shall require a moral argument.

Remember that our moral instincts evolved to help bind the communities that allow individuals to survive and thrive. To perform that function, individuals must be able to reliably identify those beings with respect to whom

our conduct will have important consequences for social cohesion. Is it possible, where a being might or might not be considered a person^m, that how we treat it will affect how we treat other, more obvious persons^m? In other words, could denying personhood to a being erode our concept of “person^m” generally, essentially hardening our hearts, making us less moral beings? Could granting personhood fortify our concept of “person^m” generally, making us more moral beings? I believe it could. Moreover, I think this very concern is one of the most important motivators of the Pro-Life movement. The Church’s concern about the “Culture of Death” that would accompany legalized abortion bears a striking resemblance to the “brutalization effect” that has been said to accompany capital punishment, which the Church also vigorously opposes. The answers to these questions are vitally important, for as our morality goes, so goes our social cohesion, and with it the individual security we gain by being members of society.

Carl Sagan once wrote that “[h]uman history can be viewed as a slowly dawning awareness that we are members of a larger group. Initially our loyalties were to ourselves and our immediate family, next, to bands of wandering hunter-gatherers, then to tribes, small settlements, city-states, nations. We have broadened the circle of those we love [...] If we are to survive, our loyalties must be broadened further, to include the whole human community, the entire planet Earth” (1980, 283). Reason, argues ethical philosopher Peter Singer, has been the driving force behind the expansion of our moral circle. For even among our ancestors, who may not have regarded the members of any other tribe as having moral rights, yet within the tribe it would have been necessary to state one’s moral claim disinterestedly, or else there would be no reason for anyone else to accept it. It won’t do to say that it is fine for me to take some meat when you make the kill but that when I make the kill I should keep it all. The fact of social living means agreement will have to be reached on moral claims, and to reach agreement those claims must at least have the appearance of impartiality. Each of us must acknowledge that our interests hold no greater weight than those of anyone else in the community. But once we acknowledge this, reason compels us to ask why different tribes or different nations can be treated, by one another, in a way that individuals cannot. How can I justify a policy predicated on the assumption that the interests of my community matter more than the interests of another community, when it is invalid to assume that my interests matter more than those of anyone else in my community? Thus, Singer argues, we are led to see all human beings—and even some animals—as worthy of inclusion in our moral circle.

According to Steven Pinker, our moral circle has been expanding for several centuries, and this expansion has been responsible for a dramatic decline in violence over that period. Through trade we came to know people very differ-

ent from ourselves, and to depend, to some extent, upon good relations with them. Through literacy, and especially the novel, we got to inhabit the minds of others. The philosophy of the Enlightenment stressed the primacy of reason—as opposed to tradition—as the legitimate basis of human knowledge. Its great thinkers stressed the inherent and universal nature of human rights. And their preferred form of government—democracy—is founded upon the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Finally, the rights revolutions of the twentieth century further expanded our moral circle to more fully include racial and ethnic minorities, women, children, homosexuals, and animals.

Yet it would be a mistake to see in this trend some kind of historical destiny. Even Sagan, whose remarks above could be interpreted in this way, was careful to note that we may very well fail to live up to our moral commitments, with disastrous consequences. The path from the closed, tribal societies of the Middle Ages to the open, democratic societies of the present day has not been without its bumps. The philosophical currents of the nineteenth century represented a backlash against the Enlightenment. Hegel denied the universality of human nature, and instead claimed that different nations or races constituted different Spirits coming into being, and that war between them was not only unavoidable but *good*, since it furthered the dialectical process by which the World Spirit would arise. Nietzsche denied the equality of humankind. For him, the sufferings of millions would be justified if it allowed a “superman” to shine. We see in these philosophers the intellectual foundations of Nazism and Marxism, and under their influence humans have committed, and continue to commit, terrible atrocities (Shirer 1960, 97–101; Popper 1945, 272–288). Thus, we see that it matters a great deal how we conceive of ourselves and our communities. Human beings are capable of kindness and cruelty, and to a very great extent whether to be kind or cruel, and whom to be kind or cruel to, are things we learn from our culture. Some cultures do a better job fostering kindness and cooperation than others. Certainly the culture of the modern democratic state is an improvement over the feudal state of the Middle Ages.

But does that mean that we should continue expanding the concept of “person^m” indefinitely? Singer has argued that it should extend to all beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain, since those are the kinds of beings in whose skin we can imagine ourselves, and which can be said to have interests that matter to them, as opposed to, say, plants or inanimate objects, which need not be objects of moral concern. But even Singer recognizes that this may not be a realistic basis for ethics, given the evolutionary origins of our moral instincts. If we want to encourage people to be good, it would be better to make use of their pre-existing natural inclination towards kindness and cooperation. Singer quotes the British conservative thinker Edmund Burke:

prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature. (Singer 1981, 148–149)

By “prejudice” Burke means, not an invidious bias against a particular group, but rather a general inclination to behave in a certain way. So what he is saying is that where we are already inclined to behave in a manner that is desirable, our policies should encourage that inclination, rather than engage in full-scale social engineering to make our behaviour conform to some “rational” standard that, thought it may have the benefit of being logically consistent, fails to fully harness the better angels of our nature. Singer draws an analogy between a biologically informed ethics and town planning. Town planners in the early twentieth century found cities laid out in no apparent rational manner, with residential, commercial and industrial areas all mixed up, narrow roads clogged with traffic, etc. So they tore it all up and started fresh, with wide roads, clearly demarcated zones for residential, commercial and industrial buildings, green spaces, etc. But their plans backfired. The cities were no longer walkable, and all the new cars meant traffic was as bad as ever. Whole sections of the city were deserted after dark, inviting criminal activity. Generally speaking, the planners had failed to understand that, as irrational as the city looked at first glance, its original layout had made a certain kind of sense. “They began to see the city as a functioning, organic whole, something which cannot be created from scratch by rational planning.” Similarly, “a rational ethical code must also make use of existing tendencies in human nature” (Singer 1981, 154–156).

The political right makes effective use of our moral emotions, but channels them into narrow conceptions of the community that have tended to exclude racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Its most destructive incarnation—fascism—lies at the root of inter-tribal genocides of the twentieth century. The political left, for its part, has sought to rebel against our moral instincts, even to deny their very existence. But the futility of attempting to replace our moral instincts with a purely rational ethic can be seen in the failure of the Israeli kibbutzim, and the communal farms of Soviet Russia and Communist China, to abolish the family as the basic social unit. As well-intentioned as the Communists might have been, their denial of human nature resulted in terrible human costs. Between these two extremes there lies an ethical rule that will foster the kind of open, tolerant, and free society we want.

Here is how I would formulate such a rule. First, any being that can intelligibly assert a claim to our moral consideration is presumptively entitled

to it. The point of this first part is to guard against any tendency we might have to try to dehumanize those who very obviously are the kind of beings for whom our social and moral instincts evolved. Policies like slavery, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing, among others, require us to twist and stunt our moral instincts, and make it all but inevitable that the societies that embrace them will become more closed, more tribalistic, and more violent as a result. Second, if a being cannot itself assert a claim of moral rights, it should nevertheless be included in our concept of person if its inclusion will make us more likely to successfully identify, and behave appropriately with respect to, other more obvious cases of “persons^m,” or if its exclusion will make us less likely to do so. This is the crucial question, and the most rational basis, in my opinion, upon which a moral system can be based. Determining the boundaries of “person^m” in this way prevents its contraction back toward that of the closed, tribal society, while at the same time limiting its expansion to those beings, and those claims of rights, that most of society can reasonably be expected to respect and promote. Third, we must determine how, if at all, the inclusion of a being in the category “person^m” may conflict with, or require the curtailment of, rights already owed to other persons. This last step is important because by definition altruism requires us to bear certain costs, and clearly not all costs will be justified if we are looking toward the welfare of the community as a whole. Rights will necessarily conflict, and we must be prepared to decide which shall yield and why. Where a claim of rights is already recognized, and an unrecognized claim of rights would require its curtailment or outright abolition, we should tread carefully, for experience suggests we recognize those rights for a reason, even if it is not apparent to us. I believe that an analysis that proceeds along these three steps will satisfy both the conservative impulse to protect traditional concepts from being rendered meaningless by undue restriction or unfettered expansion, as well as the liberal sensibility that “person” is an open-ended concept, and that we always have room to evolve and grow as moral beings. Let’s see how the analysis applies to the question of abortion.

Clearly a foetus cannot intelligibly assert any claim of moral rights. That does not mean no foetus is entitled to rights, only that foetuses are in the same boat as babies, non-human animals, and, perhaps, artificial intelligence.⁸ Therefore, the question turns on what becomes of our concept of “person,” and thus the moral commitments that hold our society together, if we do or do not extend that concept to include foetuses. For many years the Pro-Life

8. We may note in passing that certain forms of government, like totalitarianism (whether in its fascist or communist manifestations) or authoritarianism, and certain institutions, like slavery, apartheid, and patriarchy, are presumptively immoral, since none can exist without denying rights to those who can and do intelligibly assert their claims on them.

movement has warned of the imminent arrival of a “Culture of Death” in the wake of legalized abortion. This is certainly a plausible hypothesis. Death penalty abolitionists make a similar argument when they point to capital punishment’s “brutalization effect” on society.⁹ But between 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* was decided, and 2008 the homicide rate in the United States fell by more than a third, even as the number of abortions per one thousand women per year increased slightly (Pinker 2011, 402).¹⁰ Moreover, around the world there does not appear to be any relationship between homicide rates and the relative permissiveness or restrictiveness of a country’s abortion laws.¹¹ Interestingly enough, within the United States there does appear to be a strong correlation between the restrictiveness of a state’s abortion laws and its use of the death penalty.¹² Based on these data, I do not think we can make a good case that excluding foetuses from our concept of “person” has in any way eroded the meaningfulness or functionality of that concept. Nor does it seem that extending to foetuses the rights and protections accorded to persons has translated into a broader cultural reverence for the sanctity of life in general.

Of course the Pro-Life side will object that the deaths of all those unborn foetuses are evidence of the arrival of the Culture of Death they prophesied. But this objection can be met on several grounds. First, whether the death of a foetus ought to be considered harm on a par with the death of any other person is precisely what is at issue. To simply assume that abortion causes harm, where you have defined harm to include abortion, is to argue in circles. Second, even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that abortion causes harm, yet it does not necessarily follow that we should expand our concept of person to include foetuses, for at least two reasons. The first reason is that, as the historical data above show, women have been procuring abortions for thousands of years despite much variation in the prevailing attitudes of cultural authorities, be they secular or religious. This suggests that including foetuses within our concept of “person” is not likely to have any broader impact on the meaningfulness and functionality of that concept. The second reason is

9. There may be some truth to this. Homicide rates in states that have the death penalty have consistently been higher than in those that don’t, and the gap has grown over time. See <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/deterrence-states-without-death-penalty-have-had-consistently-lower-murder-rates>

10. See also http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

11. Homicide rates actually appear to be higher in those countries with more restrictive abortion laws, but this may be due to other factors, like poverty, unstable government, civil strife or the presence of armed drug cartels.

12. Compare the grades given various states by NARAL Pro-Choice America (<http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/government-and-you/who-decides/>) with the number of executions performed per state since 1976 (<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/number-executions-state-and-region-1976>).

that we cannot expand our concept of person, and the rights it entails, to fetuses without curtailing the rights of women to control their reproductive capacities. Only by discounting or ignoring their claim of rights can we jump to the conclusion that the foetus is entitled to protection from harm. It is not surprising, then, that the countries that have the most restrictive abortion laws are also the countries most likely to have the largest literacy gaps between men and women, the lowest levels of female participation in the labor force and in government, and the greatest prevalence of gross human rights violations against women such as female genital mutilation and honor killings.

The foregoing analysis makes what I believe is a strong case that abortion is morally permissible, at least in the early stages of pregnancy (which is when the vast majority of abortions occur anyway). But what about abortions that are contentious even within the Pro-Choice movement, such as late-term and sex-selective abortions? As for late-term abortions, recall earlier we imagined a line of individuals representing all the generations of our ancestors from now to several million years ago, and we asked if it was possible to identify the first person in that line. Similarly, we can ask at what stage in a pregnancy the creature in its mother's womb is a person, in the sense that matters morally. A fertilized embryo does not engage our moral instincts without plenty of cultural training. The same cannot be said for a full-term foetus. So while it may do no damage to our moral sensibilities to deny the personhood of a newly fertilized embryo, yet it does seem that we must overcome our instinctive aversion to harming another human being in order to tolerate late-term abortion. However, because late-term abortions are so rare, and are already banned (except for therapeutic purposes) in most countries and in most jurisdictions in the United States, it's hard to gauge the effect, if any, of permitting late-term abortions on people's moral instincts. In any event, the point is probably moot since even most Pro-Choicers seem willing to concede that abortion should not be available beyond viability except when necessary to protect a woman's life or health.

Sex-selective abortions present a more interesting case, but one that can nevertheless be disposed of without reaching the issue of the foetus' moral status. The abortion of female fetuses in many parts of the developing world, but especially in China and India, is giving rise to a ratio of males to females that is dramatically out of balance. Consequently, we are already seeing, and we will increasingly continue to witness, millions of young men growing up to realize that they have no prospect of marrying and starting families of their own. According to political scientists Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer, the rise of a permanent sub-class of unmarried and unmarriageable men ("bare branches," as they are called in China) will have important domestic and international security implications. Hudson and den Boer point to sociological data indicating that young men like these will increasingly turn

to gangs and violence as a means to improve their status. Historically, governments have cracked down on the domestic threat from bare branches by imposing more authoritarian controls on individual freedoms, or by encouraging emigration or participation in military adventures (Hudson and den Boer 2005). Therefore, regardless of whether we view the foetus as a person or not, sex-selective abortion should still be considered immoral because it directly harms individual members of society, from the men who will never find wives to the victims of their eventual criminal behaviour.

But what about sex-selective abortion in Western societies, where parents would be just as likely to select for girls as for boys? For that matter, why stop at gender? Why shouldn't parents be allowed to select for any of a number of traits like eye colour, hair colour, or even, assuming the technology became available, for things like intelligence, musical ability, etc.? We already allow abortion in cases of genetic defects or abnormalities like Downs' Syndrome. The difference between the former and the latter is really one of degree and not of kind, is it not? I don't think so. To want healthy children, and to want those children to be able to have healthy children of their own, is our most primary biological imperative. It matters little whether those children have blue eyes or brown, or whether they are pianists or painters. Moreover, to desire good health for one's children is nothing more than what is expected of all parents, and most parents would gladly sacrifice whatever was necessary to give it to them. That is parental love, and any good society will encourage it. But to believe you have the right to control another human being's destiny, to make her in the image you envision rather than simply to assist her in becoming the person she wants to be, is sheer vanity. Only by diminishing our concept of "person^m" could we accommodate the absurd egotism of believing that our children are there for no other reason than to flatter our vanity. Thus, under the analysis I have suggested, abortions procured for no other reason than the foetus' lack of a particular physical trait or behavioural disposition should be banned, as they tend toward the erosion of our moral commitments to other, more obvious cases of persons: our children.¹³

The foregoing analyses may be instructive with respect to related ethical and legal issues. Beyond matters pertaining to the foetus, we could also apply this analysis to the use of the death penalty, the treatment of incarcerated felons, the ethics of eating meat, and the scope of our duty to protect other

13. I was alerted to this particular problem by the story of two deaf women who intentionally sought a congenitally deaf sperm donor in the *hopes* that they would conceive a deaf child. While I understand the desire of persons with disabilities to be respected and acknowledged as capable individuals, would none of us really object if this couple, having found out that their unborn child would be hearing, wanted to abort it for that reason alone? See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/1916462.stm>

animal species. However, these issues are beyond the scope of this essay, so I leave them to the consideration of the reader.

Our moral intuitions are biologically and culturally constructed, but that does not make them arbitrary. Nor does the acknowledgment of the non-existence of moral or ontological absolutes inevitably result in the dissolution of moral and logical order. On the contrary, it is the ideologue, with his plan to re-engineer society and the individual according to some set of eternal principles, that is the greatest threat to moral order. Human nature is malleable, but not infinitely so. Our moral sense has served us well, and we tinker with it at our peril. But that sense will not map perfectly onto every problem we face. In many cases we will have to decide how to interpret it, and reasonable people will disagree. In such cases we must look below the surface of our moral emotions to the evolutionary logic that supports them. We must determine what consequences may follow from the various applications of our moral instincts to novel situations, and we must do our best to objectively ascertain and analyse whatever data may assist in that determination.

There is much to recommend this view of morality. A religious person (or any ideologue) need only consult his spiritual authority. Having done so, he is absolved from thinking; indeed he may be enjoined from doing so. The view I advocate, on the contrary, requires us to take full responsibility for our moral beliefs. With respect to the question of abortion, both Pro-Lifers and Pro-Choicers would do well to recognize that each is ultimately fighting for the soul of humanity, to shape our consciences in ways that will make us better people. Were they to do so, they would see how to take their seemingly disparate values and translate them into a common moral language, the better to test them in the laboratory of democracy. Such a test should seek to answer one fundamental question: if we accept a class of beings into fellowship as persons, how, if at all, will that alter the nature of that fellowship in practice? What, in other words, would be the moral costs and benefits to the community the boundaries of which we contemplate extending? My view is that, in the case of foetuses, the costs would be great, the benefits negligible or non-existent. Women are already universally recognized members of the moral community. As such, they have a presumptively valid claim on the right to bodily autonomy. The advocates of foetal personhood have failed to rebut that claim with any evidence that our moral sensibilities will suffer if we do not recognize it.

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The Varieties of Religious Purpose

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *economic scarcity*, along with mankind's evolved propensity for *reciprocity*, are keys to understanding the origins and evolution of Western religion in all its varieties and purposes. Scarcity is religion's first cause uncaused. Eusocial cooperation and productive efficiency, which are mobilized by religion, are shown to be inherent and rational responses to scarcity. The reformation that began around 1500 CE represents the substitution of efficient secular (civil) religions for traditional theological varieties. The balance between traditional and secular religions is determined by cost, benefits, and the structure of economic payoffs.

Keywords

religion, metaphysics, spirituality, secularization, sociology, reciprocity, economics, entrepreneurship, markets, faction

Introduction

Plato's eponymous *Euthyphro* dialogue recounts a colloquy between Socrates and the title character regarding mankind's curious relationship with its gods. Socrates inquired about the nature of piety. Euthyphro smugly professed expertise in the matter, averring that "it is a considerable task to acquire any precise knowledge of these things, but, to put it simply, I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and [the] public affairs of state" (Plato 1997a, 14). Socrates interpreted Euthyphro as claiming that piety is "knowledge of how to give to, and to beg from, the gods [...] And to beg correctly would be to ask from them things that we need [...] And to give correctly is to give them what they need from us, for it would not be skilful to bring gifts to anyone that are in no way needed" (14). These interpretations prompted correlative questions: "piety would then be a sort of trading skill between gods and men? [...] There is for us no good that we do not receive from [the gods], but how are they benefited by what they receive from us? [...] Or do we have such an advantage over them in the trade that

we receive all our blessings from them and they receive nothing from us?” (14–15). Euthyphro ultimately asserted that the essence of piety is “honour, reverence, and [...] gratitude” (15). Perhaps, Socrates suggested in Plato’s *Apology*, piety entails merely acting as morally good and virtuous individuals.

Two veiled insights within this dialogue ground a comprehensive understanding of ancient, traditional, and modern religious forms. The dialogue first casts religion as a natural human response—partly inherent, and partly rational—to the natural *scarcity* of economic resources. Piety would be unnecessary in the absence of scarcity: in an environment of superabundance, piety would exist (if at all) merely as an affectation. The purpose of religious piety, in all its varieties, is to mobilize efficient behavioural responses to scarcity. As a product of rational choice, religion is economics all the way down. Lionel Robbins canonically defined the nature of economics as “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (Robbins 1962 [1935], 16). The biologist Richard Dawkins observes more broadly that “[n]atural selection is a miserly economist [...] It’s economics everywhere you look: unconscious calculations, ‘as if’ deliberately weighing up the costs and benefits” (Dawkins 2015, 53; 55). Religion, like economic science and evolution, is applied economics, and scarcity is its first cause uncaused.

Euthyphro’s second insight regards the significance of mankind’s inherent sense of *reciprocity*; that is, the moral and pragmatic obligation “to return good in proportion to the good we receive, and to make reparation for the harm we have done” (L. Becker 1990, 3). Piety, which is reciprocity occasioned by mankind’s awareness of scarcity, presumes to compensate Nature and Nature’s gods for their benevolence.

From these two obvious, yet profound insights flows not only a comprehensive understanding of religion’s origins, but also the basis for its evolution and spread, for its diversification away from saving individual souls, and for the trend of secularization.

This essay begins by unpacking *Euthyphro*’s insights. The next two sections characterize religion, as broadly conceived, from an economics perspective that transcends conventional philosophical, sociological, and “religion and economics” analytics (see, for example, Ekelund et al. 1996; Stark and Finke 2000; Witham 2010). The following section visualizes the varieties of religious purpose in the “private houses and public affairs” of human existence. The essay concludes in the final section.

Unpacking *Euthyphro*

Piety in the face of scarcity is the foundation of traditional religious beliefs and practices. We beg and bargain with the gods for the scarce resources that support life. The gods’ indulgence imposes reciprocal obligations upon us,

which we satisfy through worship and sacrifice. QED. *Euthyphro* exposes the weakness of this conventional thinking.

The universality of religion's anthropomorphic exchange relationship richly suggests that traditional religion is an aspect of mankind's evolved propensity for *eusocial* (highly social) behaviour (Wilson 2012). Reciprocal eusociability is both an inherent, and a rational response to the adverse consequences of resource scarcity. Reciprocity is logically prior to the eusocial propensities for cooperation and exchange. Cooperation without reciprocity would amount to pure *altruism*, which would be deleterious to individual welfare, and so could not have survived natural selection. Logical order notwithstanding, mankind's bundle of eusocial propensities most likely co-evolved in parallel with changes to the oxytocin (trust) system (Ridley 2010, 7).

Results from brain imaging studies establish that gods are anthropomorphic projections of mankind's eusocial nature. One study concludes that "praying to God is an intersubjective experience comparable to 'normal' interpersonal interaction" (Schjoedt and others 2009). Another study concludes that "the brain areas identified in [...] fMRI studies are not unique to processing religion, but [also] play major roles in social cognition. [This] implies that religious beliefs emerged, not as *sui generis* evolutionary adaptations, but rather as an extension [...] of social [...] behaviour" (Kapogiannis and others 2009). The gods are invisible, but otherwise they are all too human.

Eusocial cooperation, reciprocity, and exchange constitute universal "passions" that represent both efficient adaptations and rational behavioural responses to scarcity constraints. Gods are imagined as being perfect cooperating partners that appear not only to provide for our essential needs, but also to accept whatever payment we choose to offer in return. Elementary economic theory provides an insight regarding the appropriate level of reciprocal payment (but not necessarily the appropriate level of "honour, reverence, and [...] gratitude" to which *Euthyphro* referred). Within an economically efficient cosmos, *prices* (payment) would equal the marginal cost of production. Accordingly, omnipotent gods that satisfy mankind's needs and wants *ex nihilo*—at zero marginal cost—would neither require nor demand payment for their services. More perfect exchange partners cannot be imagined. Faith in such perfection, Anselm argued, is the gods' defining characteristic: "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. [...] And it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist" (Anselm 1939 [1078], 8). This faith rests upon "assurances of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 18:1), but it also corresponds with the experience of scarcity and reciprocity.

Mankind's fundamental propensity is reciprocity, which *Euthyphro* associated with piety. Experience teaches that few, if any, good things in life are free, apart from Nature's raw bounty. Most good things must be acquired

through individual effort, sacrifice, and exchange. (One exception is *suffering*, which some Catholic sects revere as a gift from God. Christians more typically imagine suffering as a duty owed to God, for which divine reciprocity is an afterlife reward.) Nothing comes from nothing where scarcity and competition prevail. The Nobel economist Milton Friedman (1975) labeled this the “TANSTAAFL Principle: “There Ain’t No Such Thing As A Free Lunch,” contrary claims by hucksters and demagogues notwithstanding.

Friedman argued from a rational economics perspective. Evolutionists and sociobiologists argue instead that Darwinian natural selection internalized reciprocity as an aspect of mankind’s inherently eusocial nature. Instinct and reason together instruct individuals that something of value must be surrendered as the price for acquiring highly valued things. The sense that reciprocal exchange is *fair* arises partly from a cluster of cortical spindle cells that is dedicated to judging conditions of fairness (Newberg and Waldman 2006, 118). This cluster contributes to mankind’s conceptual “moral module” (Hauser 2006).

Reciprocal fairness is an essential aspect of the exchange process. Economists study exchange as rational individual action. Sociobiologists, by contrast, describe an evolved propensity for reciprocal dealing that arises from within a brain module that the zoologist Matt Ridley labels the “social-exchange organ”:

We invent social exchange in even the most inappropriate situations. It dominates our relationship with the supernatural, for example. We frequently and universally anthropomorphize the natural world as a system of social exchanges. ‘The gods are angry because of what we have done’ we say to justify a setback in the Trojan war, a plague of locusts in ancient Egypt, a drought in the Namib desert or a piece of bad luck in modern suburbia. [...] If we please the gods—with sacrifices, food offerings, or prayer—we expect to be rewarded with military victory, good harvests or a ticket to heaven. Our steadfast refusal to believe in good or bad luck, but to attribute it to some punishment for a broken promise or reward for a good deed, whether we are religious or not, is idiosyncratic to say the least. (1997, 131)

Piety’s evolutionary provenance shields it (and traditional religion generally) against rational explication, as Euthyphro and Socrates discovered. The philosopher of religion Huston Smith believed that piety’s universality is the strongest evidence for religion being a natural impulse (Rosemont and Smith 2008, 75; 80). Smith imagined that mankind possesses both a hard-wired sense of the divine, and a complementary capacity for acquiring religion (56–73). Lacking an evolutionary basis for these claims, Smith’s theory requires that a specialized brain module be implanted directly by God (73). Brain imaging studies so far have discovered no such module, although the brain’s anterior cingulate cortex is known to play a significant role in spiritual

practices, among many other things (Newberg and Waldman 2009, 42). Fortunately for theory, mankind's inherent propensities for reciprocity and fairness in the face of scarcity explain piety's universality fully and parsimoniously, and without circular resort to divine intervention. In sum, a theory of piety and religion that is grounded upon scarcity and reciprocity does the best job of answering the "how" and "why" questions surrounding religion's traditional purpose and varieties.

Euthyphro touched as well upon some collateral aspects of conventional piety. Plato's dialogue is set near the law court where Euthyphro levelled murder charges against his father for causing the death of a servant. By exhibiting his piety publicly—behaviour that nowadays is called "virtue signalling"—Euthyphro conspicuously demonstrated, not only to the gods, but also to society at large, the depth of his reciprocal sensibility. Socrates thought Euthyphro had acted rashly by prosecuting his own father. However, reciprocal and cooperative signalling must be costly in some respect in order to be credible. This is because low-cost, deceptive signalling is commonplace in nature, and natural selection has evolved instincts for detecting it (Barkin, Tooby, and Cosmedes 1992). The faithful performance of high-cost religious obligations, rituals, and good works radiates cooperative signals that are credible precisely because they are difficult to fake. Piety is an efficient mechanism for signalling virtue, which helps to explain its universality and durability, as well as its socially cohesive effects (Montanye 2009 and 2012).

Christian doctrine encourages private piety and nominally discourages virtue signalling by individuals, like Euthyphro, who act piously so that "they might be seen by men" (Matthew 6:5–6). Churches nevertheless dominate the public sphere in Western societies. Public piety in the form of church attendance benefits individuals by providing a forum for signalling virtue in a manner that binds individuals into cooperative communities (about which more later).

Since early antiquity, entrepreneurial individuals who, like Euthyphro, imagined that they had accomplished the "considerable task to acquire precise knowledge of [piety]," have specialized in providing priestly intermediation services to less astute individuals, like Socrates. Priests often earned comfortable livings by propounding scriptural rules governing prayer and sacrifice for "both private houses and [the] public affairs of state." Priestly pronouncements and predictions often were wrong on the *facts*, and patently self-interested besides, but they typically were right on the prevailing *spirit* of things, as the ancient theologian Origen of Alexandria observed in the *Gospel of John* (Pagels 2003, 37). I shall return to the matter of religion and entrepreneurship.

Scepticism about the nature of piety fuels agnosticism and atheism. Humanists in particular respect universal human values while denying supernatural explanations for them. They trust instead to such scientific claims as “God is unnecessary—or at best redundant” (Krauss 2012, 185), and that “[f]rom an evolutionary standpoint, the reasons why religion shouldn’t exist are patent (Atran 2002, 4), and that religion is “an unfortunate by-product of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful” (Dawkins 2006, 174). And yet, Humanists often practice faith-based secular (civil) religions without qualm, as when they support aspects of conservative and liberal political agendas. The reasons for this apparent contradiction warrant consideration.

Conceiving religion, then and now

“What is religion?” asks the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007, 427). “If one identifies [it] [...] with the great historic faiths, or even with explicit belief in supernatural beings, then it seems to have declined. But if you include a wide range of spiritual and semi-spiritual beliefs; or if you cast your net even wider and think of someone’s religion as the shape of their ultimate concern, then indeed, one can make a case that religion is as present as ever” (2007, 427). Taylor, a practicing Catholic, accepts that “[r]eligion for us consists of actions, beliefs, and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of either supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers or processes of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs” (429, quoting Steve Bruce). The sociologist of religion José Casanova is less optimistic that a comprehensive definition can be constructed: “[t]here is no consensus, perhaps there will never be, as to what counts as religion. Furthermore, even when there is agreement on the object of study, there is likely to be disagreement on what it is that one ought to be counting, that is to say, on which of the dimensions of religiosity [...] one should measure and how various dimensions should be ranked and compared” (Casanova 1994, 26).

Relevant measurement standards are essential to inquiry. The philosopher and psychologist William James noted that the study of religion, like the study of social sciences generally, requires “[t]wo orders of inquiry [...] First, what is the nature of it? How did it come about, what is its constitution, origin, and history. And second, what is its importance, meaning, and significance now that it is once here?” (James 1920 [1902], 4). Evidence of James’ approach thinned as a diversity of scholars began venturing opinions about religion’s nature. The situation calls to mind a familiar cartoon (see Figure 1).

Departing from James’ bifurcated methodology, scholars often study the elephant of religion without inquiring too deeply into its purpose and importance.

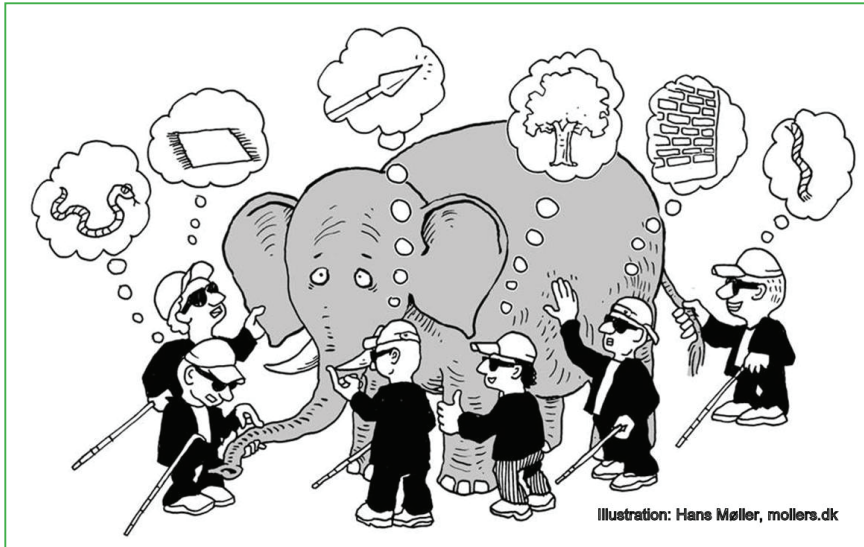


Figure 1. Blind Men Studying an Elephant (Møller 2017).

Some examples of scholarly attempts to apprehend religion complete the cartoon. Karl Marx famously imagined religion to be an opiate. The essayist Christopher Hitchens (2007) thought it was a poison. Theoretical physicists and cosmologists often equate religion with “the conviction that creation requires a creator, which is the basis of the world’s religions” (Krauss 2012, xi). Dawkins imagines religion to be a misfiring: a “propensity that was naturally selected in our ancestors [but] was not religion per se; it had some other benefit, and it only incidentally manifests itself [presently] as religious behaviour” (2006, 176). Neurologists find that religious “transcendence borrows from the neural circuitry of sexual response” (Newberg, D’Aquili, and Rause 2001, 139). William James imagined that religion was a fanciful psychological adaptation for making life bearable and meaningful in the cold and often cruel world of reason. James also drew from Saint Paul when writing that religion “for the great majority of our own race *means* immortality, and nothing else” (1920 [1902], 524). Immanuel Kant similarly claimed that “no religion can be conceived of which involves no belief in a future life (Kant 1960 [1793], 117). Sigmund Freud thought religion reflected both a concern with death, and the need for a steadying father figure. Other psychologists argue instead that religion represents a comforting mother figure. Evolutionists “biologize” religion by invoking a “multi-level group selection” theory that posits religious groups operating as adaptive biological units (Wilson 2002). Economists argue, *contra* evolutionists, that cooperative group behaviour (religious and otherwise) manifests individual rationality (G. Becker 1976).

“For the Israelites” writes the psychologist Kevin MacDonald, “there was really only one purpose for god—to represent the idea of kinship, ingroup membership, and separateness from others” (MacDonald 1994, 64). The biologist Richard Alexander concluded that “the concept of God must be viewed as originally generated and maintained for the purpose—now seen by many as immoral—of furthering the interests of one group of humans at the expense of one or more other groups (Alexander 1987, 207). Each of these reasoned interpretations embodies more than a germ of truth, although none fully apprehends religion as a fundamental behavioural response to scarcity.

The many religious vehicles that have arisen to convey the varieties of religious purpose complicate matters further. The philosopher Steven Cahn provides a sampling of such vehicles:

Judaism believes in a unitary god, Zoroastrianism in two gods, Christianity in a triune god, Shinto in gods too numerous to count; Theravada Buddhism, Samkhya Hinduism, and Mimamsa Hinduism believe in no gods at all. The Confucian Mencius teaches that human nature is essentially good; Christians view human nature as tainted by original sin. Hindus consider the soul immortal; Buddhists view it as impermanent. Christians place a heavy emphasis on an afterlife; the central concern of Judaism is life in this world. Moslems practice *pardab*, the seclusion of women; in Shinto female priests conduct religious ceremonies. The Sikh religion is unique in requiring its members to have long hair, a bracelet, a dagger, a comb, and short pants. (2017, 65)

The great variety of traditional religious experience indicates intrinsic confusion regarding its underlying nature.

A third complication lies with religion’s transformation over time. Casanova describes the ongoing process of change as “deprivatization,” by which he means that

religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them [...] Religions [...] are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and to set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society, between family, civil society, and state, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system. (1994, 5–6)

Religions, like biological organisms, social institutions, and economic systems evolve over time in response to changing environmental conditions and disruptive entrepreneurial forces. These changes often are misinterpreted as teleological, rather than as rational responses to shifting scarcity constraints.

A case in point is “secularization” theory, which once was accepted without question by philosophers and sociologists. This theory holds that moder-

nity necessarily erodes traditional religious beliefs and practices, gives rise to post-Christian nations, and perhaps heralds a Hegelian-style end of history. The influential European social philosopher Jürgen Habermas remains perplexed by “the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2009, 63). The sociologist Peter Berger, once a stalwart defender of secularization theory, now claims that “[w]ith some exceptions, notably Europe and an international intelligentsia, our world is anything but secular; it is as religious as ever, and in places more so” (Berger 2014, x). But how are Berger’s “exceptions” to be distinguished from a general rule? And how, then, are they to be explained in a principled manner that avoids recourse to social science equivalents of Ptolemaic epicycles and deferents, except perhaps by applied economic reasoning? Berger argues instead for a theory of pluralism to replace secularism. Casanova simply notes religion’s changing nature:

Social movements have appeared which either are religious in nature or challenging in the name of religion the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state[,] and the market economy. Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise question about the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations. One of the results of this ongoing contestation is a dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and reformativization of the public economic and political spheres. (1994, 5–6)

Religion’s extension beyond the care of individual souls is not entirely a recent phenomenon. Taylor notes that “the Christian church which arose in the ancient world was a new kind of religious association, that it created around itself new ‘service’ institutions, like hospitals and hospices for the needy. It was heavily engaged in the practical works of charity. This kind of activity remained important throughout the long centuries of Christendom, until these institutions have been taken over by secular bodies, often by governments. Seen within the history of Western civilization, the present-day welfare state can be understood as the long-term heir to the early Christian church” (2007, 737). Secularization by this light can be understood as the Church’s inability to exclude competitive entry into its traditional bailiwicks.

Traditional definitions of religion cannot cover all evident realities. Religion’s first cause uncaused—scarcity—remains unchanged, and yet remains largely unrecognized. The balance of this essay conceives of religion as being *any bundle of metaphysical beliefs, values, and related actions that are directed toward alleviating scarcity’s adverse effects by means of eusocial cooperation, reciprocity, trust, and exchange.*

Religion as a rational response to scarcity

The demand for, and the supply of religion in private and public life arise from scarcity concerns. The sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke consider “[w]hat are the benefits; why do people want religion at all? They want it because religion is the only plausible source [or perhaps the most efficient means] of certain rewards for which there is a general and inexhaustible demand” (2000, 85). The economist Robert Nelson quotes fellow economist and philosopher Ross Emmett regarding the broader point: “Despite the fact that modern economists often forget it, their investigations of the universal problem of scarcity and its consequences for human behaviour and social organization is a form of theological inquiry; in a world where there is no God, scarcity replaces moral evil as the central problem of theodicy; and the process of assigning value becomes the central problem of morality” (qtd. in Nelson 2010, 291). Scarcity, rather than gods, emerges as religion’s essential focus. Cahn notes that “nothing in the theory or practice of religion—not ritual, not prayer, not metaphysical belief, not moral commitment—necessitates a commitment to theism. In other words, just as one may be a non-religious theist, so one can be a religious agnostic or atheist [or Humanist!]” (2017, 69). Scholars across many disciplines note that traditional religious beliefs and practices have become syncretised into “civil religions” (following Rousseau), wherein statecraft complements and often displaces soulcraft (see, for example, Bellah and Hammond 1980; Bloom 1992).

Secular civil religions are distinguishable empirically from their traditional counterpart by the degree of prosperity and flourishing they afford. To wit, human prosperity remained flat between the years 500 BCE and 1500 CE. Furthermore, only trivial growth occurred through the end of the sixteenth century. By comparison, between 1500 CE and 2000 CE—the era of increasing secularization—per-capita prosperity is estimated to have grown by the astonishing total of 4,638 percent (DeLong 1998). The economic stagnation that preceded secularization did not pass unnoticed. Machiavelli famously excoriated Christianity for limiting prosperity and flourishing by endeavouring to destroy the wisdom of the wise (1996, 132). This sentiment was echoed by the historian Edward Gibbon, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the sociologist Max Weber, and by many economic historians.

Christianity’s modern defenders, by contrast, attribute to religion much of what is best about Western Civilization: “[w]hile other world religions emphasized mystery and institution, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guide to religious truth” (Stark 2005, x). This claim echoes widely. Stark notes in particular that twelfth and thirteenth century theologians supported private property and commerce, two institutions that underpin modern prosperity (2005, xv, 79). However, the observable lag

between Christian literary support and the prosperity growth that occurred after 1500 CE suggests that it was secularization and civil religion, rather than Christianity, that allowed Western Civilization to overcome historical scarcity constraints. Human flourishing followed prosperity's growth.

Secular civil religion

Modern religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Taylor observes that

religious belief now exists in a field of choices which include various forms of demoral and rejection; Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options. But the interesting story is not simply one of decline [of traditional religious beliefs and practices], but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God. (2007, 437).

Nelson associates secular religion with human prosperity and flourishing:

our leading contemporary theologians thus speak publicly in the languages of economics, natural resource management, conservation biology, ecology, sociology, administrative science, and other forms of official policy discourse. [...] If religion is to be understood [...] as a person's way of framing his or her basic perception of the world and its meaning, as leading theologians such as Paul Tillich have understood the matter, then these basic perceptual orientations are actually religions in a genuine sense [...] In retrospect, it now appears that the dismissive attitude of the social sciences toward religion was actually the disdain of one faith expressed toward a religious competitor. (2010, x–xii)

Nelson (echoing Stark in part) concludes that

the leading secular movements of our times are essentially religious in character, drawing on the various Christian traditions that produced Western Civilization. The two most important secular movements of the late twentieth century were 'economic religion' and 'environmental religion,' both of them "religions" in the sense that they have comprehensive worldviews and myths that provide human beings with the deepest sense of meaning. The story of "economic religion" is that human beings can produce an ideal world, or heaven on earth, by ending material poverty through productivity, efficiency, and scientific management. [...] It is time to take secular religion seriously. It is real religion. In the twentieth century it showed greater energy, won more converts, and had more impact on the Western world than the traditional institutional forms of Christianity. (2010, 348–349)

The philosopher Ronald Dworkin concludes that "[w]hat divides godly and godless religion [...] is not as important as the faith in value [overcoming scarcity effects] that unites them" (2013, 19). Scholarly analysis now proceeds freely along lines first suggested by the philosopher Hugo Grotius: "*esti Deus*

nondaretur”—as if God does not exist: “that there is no God, or that he takes no Care of human Affairs” (2005, 38).

Religion, economics, and evolution

The argument of this essay—that religion, broadly conceived, is a behavioural response to scarcity—flows easily from the convergent views of evolutionary biology and economic science. As noted in the introduction, both disciplines address the efficient allocation of scarce economic resources. Charles Darwin observed (perhaps in the writings of David Hume) that “as the reasoning powers and foresight of [individuals] became improved, each man would soon learn from experience that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return” (Darwin 1871, 157). The biologist E. O. Wilson adds that religion promotes human survival and reproduction by mobilizing mankind’s eusocial nature: “[a] kind of cultural Darwinism [...] operates during the competitions among sects in the evolution of more advanced religions. Those that gain adherents grow; those that cannot, disappear. Consequently, religions are like other human institutions in that they evolve in directions that enhance the welfare of their practitioners” (Wilson 1978, 174).

Evolutionists term eusocial cooperation and reciprocity “reciprocal altruism” (Trivers 1985). Beginning with Darwin:

it must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children of the same tribe, yet an increase in the number of well-endowed men and advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many members who, possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, who were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. (Darwin 1871, 500)

Ridley echoes Darwin: “[o]nce cooperators segregate themselves off from the rest of society a wholly new force of evolution can come into play: one that pits groups [factions] against each other, rather than individuals,” although “very few animals ever put the interest of the group or species before the individual. Without exception, all those that do are actually putting family first, not group” (Ridley 1997, 147; 176). Economists note that cooperative groups emerge rationally in order to overcome “collective action” problems (Olson 1971), and to manage scarce common resources efficiently (Ostrom 1990). Not to be overlooked, however, is that individuals often form into socially deleterious groups called factions. I return later to the problem of religious factions in particular.

Evolutionists who elaborate Darwin’s line of thinking argue that cooperative behaviour constitutes “multi-level group selection,” by which groups

(religious groups in particular) operate as adaptive biological units (Wilson 2002). Long before the advent of sociobiology, Immanuel Kant foreshadowed Darwin et al. by distinguishing between two forms of religions: those “which are endeavours to win favour (merely worship), and moral religions, i.e., religions of good-life conduct” (Kant 1960 [1793], 47). The Old Testament, by Kant’s lights, consisted essentially of prescribed rituals and rules of conduct: “a collection of mere statutory laws upon which was established a political organization [...] [by] a number of people who, since they belonged to a particular stock, formed themselves into a commonwealth under purely political laws, and not into a church [...] merely an earthly state such that, were it possibly to be dismembered through adverse circumstances, there would still remain to it (as part of its very essence) the political faith in its eventual reestablishment” (116). Islam similarly is characterized as being “less a religion of faith than a religion of Holy Law and of observance [...] [which] brooks no distinction between what we think of as religion and political rule” (Rahe 2017, 24). Religious groups of this sort pursue prosperity collectively along the rational lines explained by evolutionists and economists. Conversely, “among all the public religions which have ever existed, the Christian alone is moral” (Kant 1960 [1793], 47). Moral religions pursue normative goals that, as shown earlier, historically constrained human prosperity and flourishing.

Pace group selection theory, the battle against scarcity is not among rival groups and factions per se, but between individuals and Nature. Individuals benefit from eusocially cooperative action, but “groups” do not. The Nobel economist Gary Becker aptly concluded that “models of group selection are unnecessary since [quasi-]altruistic [and by implication moral, ethical, and religious] behaviour can be selected as a consequence of individual rationality” (1976, 284). Individuals within cooperative groups are unlikely to originate new biological species by means of Darwin’s “natural selection,” notwithstanding that groups often discourage intermarriage, and that some religions imagine themselves as comprising a separate *race*. At bottom, distinguishing between eusociability and “multilevel group selection” either double-counts mankind’s inherent and rational propensities for cooperation, reciprocity, trust, and exchange, or else seeks merely to “biologize” rational individual action in “group” terms. The present appeal of group selection theory arguably lies in its contribution to the collective-choice rhetoric of communitarian and entitlementarian political agendas (Montanye 2016a). Alfred Russell Wallace, the co-discoverer (with Darwin) of natural selection, was both an avid proponent of nascent group selection theory, and an ardent socialist (Ruse 2001, 173).

Nelson describes how the work of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and others transferred to natural science much of religion’s traditional authority. Natural science has relatively little to say about human affairs, allowing the social

sciences to acquire religious authority over all aspects of private and public life. With this arrogation came responsibility for overcoming the collective action problems that traditionally required theologically-based social bonds. Nelson writes that “from the mid-nineteenth century onward many people sought a secular salvation through abolishing economic scarcity and arriving at a state of complete material abundance on earth—economists became the preeminent social scientists, the proselytizers of those forms of secular religion that in fact served as the main religious focus for efforts in the West to defeat opportunism, to establish strong implicit contracts, and to resolve other transaction cost and collective action problems” (Nelson 2001, 266). The economic consequences of this transformation are astonishing, as noted earlier.

Visualizing the varieties of religious purpose

The paleontologist Steven Jay Gould famously characterized science and religion as representing separate and non-overlapping magisteria, with “[s]cience [dealing] in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives” (Ruse 2001, 11). Natural science addresses “how” questions. Theology, and the social science of economics, answer “why” questions. No clash between science and religion is possible by this dichotomized reckoning, Andrew Dixon White’s (1896) two-volume account of “the warfare of science with theology in Christendom” notwithstanding.

Evident overlaps between the natural and social sciences arise because both magisteria entail the allocation of scarce resources. As competing explanatory and behavioural paradigms, the natural and social sciences inevitably clash, often oozing naturalistic fallacy by conflating *is* with *ought*. The relevant scholarly challenge lies with discovering how overlapping magisteria relate to religion’s essential nature. This entails consideration of *Euthyphro*’s three explicit magisteria: (i) the private; (ii) the public; and (iii) the metaphysical. Overlaps between and among these magisteria create four conceptual realms that govern religion’s varieties of purpose within the “private houses and [the] public affairs of state.” The realms are: (i) the spiritual; (ii) the religious; (iii) the market; and (iv) the factional. Together they constitute a virtual super-realm of entrepreneurship. Patterns of scarcity determine both the extent of magisterial overlaps, and the relative significance of the derivative realms.

The magisteria and realms are depicted conceptually in Figure 2 below.

Description of the three magisteria is relatively straightforward. Greater complexity (and interest) lies with the realms created by their overlaps.

The *Private Magisterium* comprises the individual’s private world, within which “[h]uman society must primarily be considered something pertaining to the spiritual” (Vatican 1995, art. 1886). Here the individual interacts

with gods, family members, friends, and like-minded acquaintances for the purpose of alleviating scarcity's adverse effects. Interactions take the form of efficient, *non-market* forms of cooperation, reciprocity, and exchange via informal reciprocity instead of formal pricing. Interpersonal relationships are fostered and maintained through moral and ethical behaviour, and by social norms (Posner 2000).

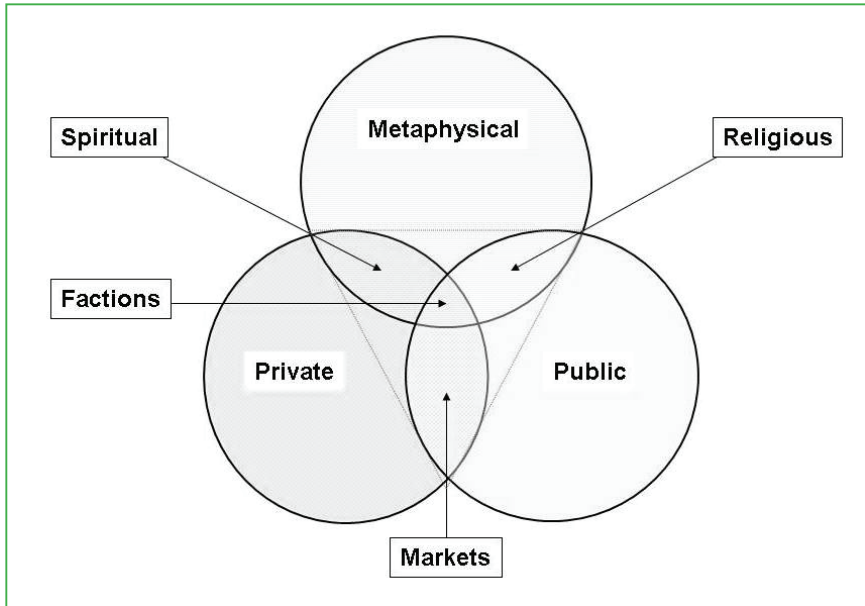


Figure 2. Religion's Constitutive Magistera and Overlapping Realms.

The *Public Magisterium*, by contrast, comprises a social commons of formal rules and institutions. Taylor describes it as “a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet though a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these” (Taylor 2007, 185–186). Within the Public Magisterium “[w]e live together because social organization provides the efficient means for achieving our individual objectives and not because society offers us a means of arriving at some transcendental common bliss” (Buchanan 1975, 1). Individuals interact impersonally through economic institutions, laws, and contracts instead of warm and fuzzy interpersonal relationships. The Public Magisterium is a commons where joint costs and benefits are collectively managed and shared by all members of a society. A small number of goods and services (like a common defence) are provided collectively because they cannot be supplied efficiently (if at all) by private means. Economists term goods of this sort “public goods,” which by definition serve the interests of all individuals, even

within pluralistic societies. The religious realm, as described below, is a quintessential public good.

The *Metaphysical Magisterium* comprises the universe of mankind's inherent propensities, philosophical, social, and political ideals, ideologies, romantic myths and histories, rituals, moral and ethical values, virtues, sundry memes, etc. These resources, combined with reason, are employed entrepreneurially, both privately and publically, in the ongoing battle against scarcity.

The overlaps between and among these magisteria create the four discrete realms and one virtual super-realm depicted in Figure 2. These are described individually in the subsections below.

The spiritual realm

The overlap between the Private and Metaphysical Magisteria creates the conceptual *spiritual realm*. William James viewed this realm as comprising “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude” (1920 [1902], 31). For the theologian Thomas Aquinas, it was the seat of natural law: “[t]here is in people an appetite for the good of their nature as rational, and this is proper to them, that they should know the truths about God and about living in society [...] whatever this involves is a matter of natural law” (Aquinas 1952, 222). For the philosopher John Locke, this realm contained that “which God hath given to be the Rule betwixt Man and Man, and the common bond whereby humane kind is united into one fellowship and society” (Locke 1988 [1690], II: §172). This realm also harbours individual piety, where “God rewards worshippers who pray in secret” (*Matthew* 6:6). The spiritual realm fosters and enforces adaptive norms of non-market cooperation and reciprocity that often trump formal legal arrangements (Ellickson 1991; Posner 2000).

The theologian Helmut Richard Niebuhr distinguished the spiritual realm from “the gangrenous corruption of a social life in which every promise, contract, treaty, and ‘word of honour’ is given and accepted in deception and distrust. [...] The massive law books and the great machinery of justice give evidence of the vast extent of fraud, deceit and disloyalty among men” (1989, 1; 81). Non-market cooperative relationships require trust, and the spiritual realm excels at generating it at low cost. The sociologist Robert Putnam, who studies the ebb and flow of “social capital”—which he defines as the “connections among individuals: social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”—concluded that “[f]aith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. [...] nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context” (2000, 19; 66). His subsequent research revealed that “communities of

faith are more important than [the underlying religious] faith itself,” and that “religious Americans are more trusting and (perhaps) more trustworthy” than other individuals (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 66; 443). The reason why traditional religion did not disappear with the rise of secularism (as Habermas expected) is attributable to the efficiency with which it facilitates the creation of value from scarcity within the Private Magisterium.

The “New Atheists” misconstrue the purpose of religious faith within the spiritual realm, often interpreting it as the antithesis of reason rather than recognizing its contribution to individual prosperity and flourishing. The atheist Sam Harris argues that “it must be possible to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world. This would be the beginning of a rational approach to our deepest personal concerns. It would also be the end of faith. [...] Mitigating this problem [of religion] is not merely a matter of reining in a minority of religious extremists; it is a matter of finding approaches to ethics and to spiritual experience that make no appeal to faith, and broadcasting this knowledge to everyone” (2004, 221–224). Harris accepts that “spirituality can be—indeed, *must* be—deeply rational” (Harris 2004, 7), and yet denies that his desiderata is achieved within the spiritual realm with traditional forms of faith fully intact.

The religious realm

The word “religion” is a cognate of the Latin verb *ligo, ligare*, whose figurative meaning is “to unite.” The *religious realm* is formed conceptually by the overlap between the Public and Metaphysical Magisteria. This realm reifies the philosophies, rules, and rituals that bind individuals into communities and nations, and which foster cooperative political and commercial institutions. The religious realm addresses aggregate values that the more narrowly self-interested spiritual realm cannot. It does so by synthesizing cooperation reciprocity, trust, and exchange relationships by means of statutory law, property rights, and contracts. The philosopher Robertson Smith described this realm as creating the “relation of all the members of a community to the power that has the [temporal and eternal] god of the community at heart” (qtd. in Casanova 1994, 44). Applying the Nobel economist Douglass North’s description of “institutions,” the religious realm comprises “the rules of the game in society or, more formally, [...] the humanly devised constraints that shape human interactions. In consequence, they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is key to understanding historical change” (North 1990, 3). The process of institutional change is fundamental to understanding secularization in particular.

The religious realm constitutes a quintessential public good, as defined earlier. Traditional religion once fit this characterization. It no longer does,

having largely been displaced by secular religion in the public sphere. The spiritual and religious realms, like the overlapping Public and Private Magisteria that spawn them, once were essentially synonymous. The objects of worship, whether divine or secular, mattered little, if at all. What mattered instead, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes noted, was merely “the declaration of our opinion of whom we do worship. [...] [“divine” and “civil” worship] are words of the same action in degree” (Hobbes 1949 [1642], 192). The historian Charles Freeman notes, with reference to ancient Roman civilization, that [r]eligious practice was closely tied to the public order of the state and with the psychological well-being that comes from the following of ancient rituals. Religious devotion was indistinguishable from one’s loyalties to the state, one’s city, and one’s family” (Freeman 2003, 8), the lone exception being slaves, whose loyalty ran strictly to their masters. Casanova explains the religious realm’s role in maintaining social cohesion within ancient pluralistic societies: “The Roman imperial state, which had abandoned all its old republican civil religions, which had incorporated all kinds of foreign gods into its pantheon, which permitted its subjects to pursue privately the most exotic of religions and mystery cults, could not allow that the most private, world-indifferent, and humble of religions, Christianity, would refuse to participate in the only community cult left, the worship of the emperor. Thus, Christianity had to meet public persecution” (Casanova 1994, 50). Centuries later, but before the emergence of nation-states,

the Roman Catholic Church served as the unifying (and monopolizing) central presence in Western Europe. For centuries, after attaining secular power commensurate with its spiritual aspirations, the medieval Christian Church functioned as a quasi-government, providing public goods, as well as private goods, by mainly establishing guidelines and standards for individual behaviour—from kings to peasants. The Church dominated medieval society. As the most important organization and institutional force in the Middle Ages, the Church could not help but be a key economic player. (Ekelund et al. 1996, v)

The historian Michael Burleigh (2005 and 2007) provides vivid examples of secular shifts that occurred following the French Revolution. He documents in particular how nationalism became “the most potent church to emerge [in Europe] during the nineteenth century” (2005, 199). The same can be said of later secular religions, including Marxism, Communism, Fascism, National Socialism, Zionism, Liberal Democracy, and American Democratic Fundamentalism in the twentieth century (Montanye 2000 and 2006b), and “radical Islam” in the twenty-first century. The economist Joseph Schumpeter foreshadowed both Burleigh and Nelson by explaining that “Marxism is a religion. To the believer, it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge

events and actions; and secondly, a guide to those ends which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved. [...] [It] belongs to that subgroup [of 'isms'] which promotes paradise this side of the grave" (1942, 5). The economist Ludwig von Mises characterized secular officials and bureaucrats as acting out of a desire to emulate, if not to *be* gods: "the terms 'society' and 'state' as they are used by the contemporary advocates of socialism, planning, and social control of all the activities of individuals signify a deity. The priests of this new creed ascribe to their idol all those attributes which the theologians ascribe to God—omnipotence, omniscience, infinite goodness, and so on" (Mises 2008 [1949], 151). As secular societies became self-defining, covenants that once were symbolized by the rainbow, cross, and crescent became symbolized instead by flags, slogans, all-to-human deities, and re-imagined enemies.

Historians question whether deified civil power constitutes a "substitute religion" or a "substitute for religion" (Burleigh 2007, 197). Either way, the debate correctly characterizes traditional and civil religions as substitutable public institutions whose ebbs and flows reflect relative, costs, benefits, and economic payoffs.

The market realm

The *market realm* emerges from the conceptual overlap between the Private and Public Magisteria. It forms between the magisterium of cooperative interpersonal relationships and social norms, and the formal and impersonal magisterium of public laws, contracts, and institutions. This realm joins anonymous individuals into formal relationships via the spontaneous economic laws of private consumer demand and public commercial supply. It operates where neither the spiritual nor religious realm produces goods and services efficiently. The spiritual and religious realms shrunk in significance as the market realm, driven by successful secular ideals, amplified by the transformation of personal *ambition* from vice to virtue (King 2013), delivered prosperity most efficiently. Societies that remain mired in traditional revelation do not prosper nearly as well (Inglehart 2000, 90).

Institutional safeguards are an important source of the trust and trustworthiness that supports the market realm. The philosopher Adam Seligman notes, however, that "in the current [market] situation we are more dependent on trust (and less on familiarity) to supplement those interstitial points where system confidence is not sufficient" (1997, 160). The importance of trust and trustworthiness is timeless, and has spawned a thick scholarly literature that includes Putnam's sociological research quoted earlier.

Ancient traders on the Greek island of Delos during the second and first centuries BCE generated trust by organizing their professional lives along

religious lines, and using sacred oaths to facilitate transactions. Religious temples, shrines, statues, and alters devoted to patron deities “functioned as important pieces of commercial hardware that facilitated the completion of commercial activities” (Rauh 1993, 126). The Nobel economist George Akerlof explains why such trust-enhancing practices were necessary: “Consider a market in which goods are sold honestly or dishonestly; quality may be represented, or it may be misrepresented. The purchaser’s problem, of course, is to identify quality. The presence of people in the market who are willing to offer inferior goods tends to drive the market out of existence [...] for dishonest dealings tend to drive honest dealings out of the market” (1970, 495). Nelson notes that “[s]ociety will always require the services of some kind of priestly class, economic or otherwise, in order to assist in fending off the widespread *rent seeking* [the systematic pursuit of windfall gains] and other multiple forms of opportunism that always threaten the bonds of social obligation. [...] [It has] fallen to a new priesthood in the economics profession to provide a normative foundation for the market, now necessarily taking a secular religious form. [...] in the public life of our day, real heresy can now take only secular forms” (2001, 13; 10; 296). Real heresy nowadays ironically entails enthusiastic support for the market process and, conversely, staunch opposition to the politically-correct, re-distributional policies and programs that distort markets.

The factional realm

The *factional realm*—a region of socially wasteful and non-productive activity—lies conceptually within the three magisteria’s common overlap. Putting Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy in perspective, it is this realm, rather than the Public Magisterium or the religious and market realms, that is the essence of untruth. This realm fosters individuals and cooperative groups that pursue public agendas that are privately beneficial, but socially deleterious. Factional gains occur at the expense of other individuals (Montanye 2016b). Each of the other realms, by contrast, foster *productive* cooperation, reciprocity, trust, and exchange that is both privately and socially beneficial (Montanye 2015). The factional realm prevents the Private and Public Magisteria from performing up to their productive potential. It corresponds with the evolutionists’ darkest conception of “multi-level group selection theory,” as described earlier. Hobbes aptly characterized it as existing like “a city within a city [...] an enemy within the walls” (Hobbes 1949, 149–150).

MacDonald (1998) aptly attributes modern anti-Semitism to majority concerns about religious faction. Anti-Mormon, anti-Freemason, anti-Catholic, and various anti-racial and anti-ethnic movements similarly represent fears that insurgent groups might come to dominate at the polls, and could distort markets by monopolizing the supply of essential goods and services. The plat-

form of an 1843 anti-Mormon convention articulated these concerns: “[w]e believe that such an individual [Mormon leader Joseph Smith], regardless as he must be of his obligations to God, and at the same time entertaining the most absolute contempt for the laws of man, cannot fail to become a most dangerous character, especially when he shall have been able to place himself at the head of a numerous horde, either equally reckless and unprincipled as himself, or else made his pliant tools by the most absurd credulity [the Mormon religion] that has astonished the world since its foundation” (qtd. in Bushman 2005, 510). The deleterious effects of religious faction concerned Hobbes greatly, as expressed in his works *De Cive* (1642) and *Behemoth* (1662). Hobbes’ Westphalian sensibility required that “God must be worshiped not privately only, but openly and publically in the sight of all men; because that worship is so much more acceptable [...] [u]nless others therefore see it, that which is most pleasing in our worship vanisheth [...] The city therefore by right [...] shall judge what [...] doctrines are to be held and professed concerning the nature of God and his operations” (Hobbes 1949 [1642], 187–188). Certain limitations on religious liberty remain appropriate (Montanye 2011).

More general concerns about factions were expressed by the philosopher David Hume:

as much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honoured and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated; because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws. Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other. And what should render the founders of parties more odious is, the difficulty of extirpating these weeds, when once they have taken root in any state. (1876, 58)

The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau echoed Hume: “Let us suppose now a state in which the social bond has begun to wear thin. It has, we assume, entered upon its decline; particular interests have begun to make themselves felt in it, and narrower associations to affect decisions of the wider group. The common interest, in such a state, is clouded over, and encounters opposition; votes cease to be unanimous; the general will is no longer the will of everybody” (Rousseau 1954, 164).

The views of Hobbes, Hume, and Rousseau, which continue to resonate, culminated in James Madison’s treatment of faction in *The Federalist* No. 10. Madison defined “faction” as being “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of

other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. [...] a religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961 [1788], 78; 84). Madison recognized that religion cloaked factional interests especially well, but (following Locke) believed that small and widely dispersed congregations posed little threat to the new American society so long as religion and government were held constitutionally separate. Madison anticipated neither the modern expansion of traditional and secular religious factions, nor the improvements in communications and transportation that have amplified the power of small and dispersed factions.

The virtual super-realm of entrepreneurship

In the eponymous *Timaeus* dialogue, Plato’s philosophical alterego voiced a bit of the day’s conventional wisdom: “everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause” (Plato 1997b, 1234). Plato ascribed the first cause uncaused to a “craftsman” called *demiurge*. Today’s craftsman is called the *entrepreneur*. Mises explained that “[t]he various complementary factors of production cannot come together spontaneously. They need to be combined by the purposive efforts of men aiming at certain ends and motivated by the urge to improve their state of satisfaction” (2008, 249).

The four realms depicted in Figure 2 constitute a virtual triangle—a super-realm—of entrepreneurial responses to scarcity. The spaces formed between the straight-sided virtual triangle and the curved realms have no intrinsic meaning. They are akin to “spandrels”—the unintended architectural spaces that exist where domes meet their supporting structures. This term’s meaning was broadened and popularized by Steven Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin to denote evolution’s chance and often imperfect creations, as well as the “chance” emergence of religion (Ruse 2001, 30).

This essay ascribes “entrepreneurship” to the spandrels that appear in Figure 2 (see Montanye 2006a). The four discrete realms could neither form nor function without entrepreneurial effort. Entrepreneurship stimulates productive interpersonal relations, pioneers religious movements, constructs cathedrals, forms governments, builds businesses, and creates the social institutions that are synonymous with secular Western prosperity. Entrepreneurship also is key to understanding how the factional realm corrupts the religious and market realms, and coopts the spiritual realm (Smith and Yandle 2014).

The gods often communicate with mankind through a priestly class of entrepreneurs. Knowledgeable, clever, and charismatic individuals since antiquity have overcome scarcity in their personal lives by providing sacred intermediation services. They do so despite having no better knowledge than Euthyphro regarding the gods’ needs and wants. Their revelations tended

therefore to reflect and serve their own priestly self-interests. Ancient priests (the Sons of Aaron), who were among the first to codify into scripture the ostensible word of God, provided generous compensation for themselves in perpetuity: to wit, “the priests’ due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach. The first fruits of your grain, of your wine and of your oil, and the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him. For the Lord your God has chosen him out of all your tribes, to stand and minister in the name of the Lord, him and his sons forever” (Deuteronomy 18:3–8; see also Leviticus 1–14). Incidental tipping was encouraged as well: “Take heed that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land” (Deuteronomy 12:19). Among budding Christians, Saint Paul was an accomplished fund-raiser. Early patterns of donations and bequests to the Church expanded over time to include tithes, along with the sale of indulgences and holy relics. *Magna Carta’s* (1215) first substantive clause, which most likely was drafted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, provided that “the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired.” The Church was sufficiently powerful by 1199 for the entrepreneurial Pope Innocent III to decree that the property of “heretics” henceforth would be confiscated by the Church, which then shared the spoils with an emergent class of mercenary accusers (Harris 2004, 84). Unlike Innocent, most popes and high church officials acted as managers rather than entrepreneurs, despite living like royalty.

All religious foundings are entrepreneurial, although not all founders have sought pecuniary enrichment for their efforts. Martin Luther, Buddha, Confucius, Mother Theresa, and Mormonism’s founder Joseph Smith exemplify the economist’s contention that entrepreneurs often pursue non-pecuniary rewards. By contrast, Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard, fits the contemporary model of entrepreneurship, having left behind a thriving, tax-free religious organization along with heroic portraits of himself (Hubbard 1950; Church of Scientology 1998).

Personalities aside, traditional religion becomes an entrepreneurial input when it is used to secure productive property rights, and also when it is used by factions to claim non-productive, redistributive entitlements. Native peoples assert religious creation myths to strengthen claims to “sacred” tribal land. In one recent episode, opponents of development by Navajo entrepreneurs on tribal land near the Grand Canyon argued that “[if] development comes [...] the Holy Beings won’t hear our prayers.” Supporters of development argued instead that development “will make the land out there even more sacred” (Roberts 2015, 68–69). Sacred burial grounds add strategic weight to land claims. So persuasive are such myths that religious groups can come

to worship scarce resources more intensely than they worship the gods that ostensibly created and bequeathed them. The Israeli historian Shlomo Sand (2010, 127; 2012, 194) raises this point with respect to Zionists who worship ancient tribal land above the worship of God, evincing Judaism's shift from being a spiritual and theological religion (if not a Kantian "moral" one), to being a factional secular religion. Many Jews ascribe religious significance to the Holocaust, and so claim Nazi extermination camps as sacred ground, despite having failed "to win for the Holocaust a major place in formal Jewish liturgy and theology" (Novick 1999, 269). These efforts prompted historian Peter Novick, when writing about the Holocaust in American life, to consider "why now [decades after the fact]," "why here [in America]," and "what is the payoff [why bother]" (1999, 1–2, 14). The overarching answer, not fully perceived by Novick, is that the Holocaust represents an entrepreneurial attempt by a religious faction to alleviate the effects of scarcity constraints on members of its group (Montanye 2016b, 75–81).

Conclusion

Traditional religion is grounded upon a piety that emerges from mankind's inherent and universal propensity for reciprocity in the face of economic scarcity. Religion's purpose, in all its varieties, is the alleviation of scarcity's adverse effects. It achieves this end by fostering reciprocity, cooperation, trust, and exchange. The universality of religious piety is attributable not only to its grounding upon mankind's inherent and rational propensity for eusocial behaviour, but also to its efficiency as a means for signalling private virtue, and to its usefulness for pursuing factional objectives.

Traditional religion's significance in public life waned, along with piety, as mankind's secular faith in reason, property rights, economically efficient laws, public goods, markets, contracts, and entrepreneurship, along with human ambition and ingenuity, delivered prosperity and flourishing more efficiently than did supernatural revelations. A significant portion of every individual's prosperity and flourishing nevertheless continues to arise in life's private sphere via cooperative non-market activities among family members, friends, and like-minded acquaintances. *Pace* Habermas, traditional religion is unlikely to disappear in the face of economic secularization, although its relevance will continue to ebb and flow.

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World-viewing Dialogues on Precarious Life: The Urgency of a New Existential, Spiritual, and Ethical Language in the Search for Meaning in Vulnerable life

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ABSTRACT

In the last sixty years the West-European religious landscape has changed radically. People, and also religious and humanist communities, in a post-secular world are challenged to develop a new existential, ethical and spiritual language that fits to their global and pluralistic surroundings. This new world-viewing language could rise out of the reflection on *contrast experiences*, positive and negative disruptive experiences that question the everyday interpretations of life. The connection of these articulated reflections on contrast experiences with former world-viewing sources and practices with regard to precarious life could provide new meaning and orientation for individuals and communities. Four different sorts of dialogues can be distinguished, which together I call *world-viewing dialogues*: contrast experiences and the dialogue with oneself, contrast experiences discussed in small groups, contrast experiences and values in our nowadays society and contrast experiences in dialogue with philosophical and religious traditions from different cultures and ages.

Keywords

Contrast experiences, vulnerability, existential and ethical reorientation,
world-viewing dialogues

Introduction

In the last sixty years the Western religious landscape has changed dramatically. Nowadays many children no longer know what Easter or Pentecost means, or who Judas or Peter was; they also have not the slightest notion about the psalms.¹ We live in a time in which religion has become incom-

1. In the Netherlands 50% of the people born after 1990 were brought up in a non-ecclesiastical family (De Hart 2014). A recent study about religious life in Switzerland indicates that 17.5% belong to a religious institution, 13.4%

prehensible and meaningless to many. Quite a few people view religion as suspect and dangerous (Nussbaum 2012). At the same time globalization has brought new options, you can choose between Buddhism, Sufism, Islam, and all kinds of yoga. The individual and the subjective experience form the central focus. Everyone is obligated to tinker together a philosophy of life after his or her own liking and insight. Restlessness drives us forward. Hellemans (2010) speaks of “longing without belonging.”

Of course, we can still study institutional (religious) worldviews as separate phenomena with strong boundaries. However, especially in Western, so called post-secular societies these boundaries loose significance as people enter an eclectic search for meaning in life. Alma and Anbeek (2013) speak of “worldviewing” in this regard, and explore whether a new existential, ethical and spiritual language rises out of the reflection on concrete, particular experiences people have. The tool of world-viewing dialogues about vulnerable life could offer a promising and rich life perspective in this endeavor.

World-viewing dialogues invite believers from different traditions and non-believers to participate in structured conversations about what gives meaning and orientation in life, especially after being confronted by disruptive experiences that shake the everyday well-known, meaningful world. During these dialogues original perspectives will open, in which old and new vistas melt into each other, and thus a new horizon of existential, spiritual and moral orientation can find form.

In this article I will introduce the tool of world-viewing dialogues. To be able to do this I will discuss the following items. First, I will introduce the concept of contrast experiences. Second, I will elaborate on the need for reorientation these contrast experiences evoke and the role of articulation herein. Then, I will explore how the changed religious landscape has brought forward special challenges with regard to the uncertainties of life. Finally, I will introduce the world-viewing dialogues of vulnerable life, which consists of four different sorts of dialogue.

Contrast experiences

Many philosophers of religion and also anthropologists point to basic human experiences as the most important source for religious interpretations of (human) existence. According to Taylor (2007) several kinds of deep experiences can play a role in people’s existence: they give insight into what it’s like to live as a believer or as a non-believer. These experiences make life fuller, richer and more worthwhile. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of something special, sometimes we are touched deeply by something. An experience like

belong to an alternative spiritual group, 57.4% have distanced themselves from religion, and 17.4% are secular (Stolz 2014).

that can take place in different ways, but always lifts us beyond ourselves. As Taylor observes,

there may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock. (2007, 6)

These experiences help us to situate a “place of fullness,” for our moral or spiritual orientation. In current times several sources that give meaning to these experiences have become available to us besides religion. The experience of fullness can be explained in a Humanistic or Buddhist fashion, from the perspective of the Philosophy of Nature and from many other points of view. This makes the interpretation of the experience truly ambivalent, because people realize that our view is but one in an array of possible points of view.

Everyone looks for meaning within the boundaries of their own existence and the daily concerns. Happiness, fulfilment and joy are important for finding meaning, but the here and now—this moment—is not enough, because it is over before you realize. According to Taylor death is meaning breaking. In these times death is even more dreaded. This has everything to do with the role that love relationships play. Never before were they of such importance in our existence. We surround ourselves with loved ones who give our lives colour, scent, flavour and grip. Hell has disappeared, but has been replaced by the great pain of “*la mort de toi*” (Taylor 2007, 721). We search for meaning and according to Taylor, we are not nearly ready for disbelieving. The brokenness and fragility, but also the wonder of existence, makes us look for more.

Taylor reflect that,

all this is true, and yet the sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wild and unpredictably. Our age is far from settling into a comfortable unbelief. Although many individuals do so, and more still seem to on the outside, the unrest continues to surface. Could it ever be otherwise? (2007, 727)

According to Taylor, two sorts of deep experiences drive people to search for meaning: on the one side fleeting experiences of wholeness and wonder, on the other side the fundamental experiences of brokenness and fragility. In this article we use for both experiences the term *contrast experiences*—they shatter the everyday interpretation of existence and an unknown area appears.

Vulnerability, fragile life and the need for re-orientation

In those moments when the self-evident is no longer self-evident in life, and one experiences the vulnerability of existence, we speak of contrast experi-

ences. Because of such a contrast experience people start searching for new meaning that fits to their experience.

Life reveals itself as beyond ratio and beyond control. We are not able to create enduring love, beauty and happiness. In spite of all our efforts our life is not coherent, and we are less autonomous than we would like to imagine. In contrast experiences the otherness of “beyond myself” breaks in, sometimes in the shape of wonder and beauty, many times in the shape of fragmentation, mourning and loss, and other times in the shape of injustice and immorality (Geertz 1993). Many times these three limits go hand in hand in creating openness to the unknown. In this openness something of deep importance reveals itself, a person feels it bodily, and intuits that something of strong value is at stake. This intuition is clear and evident and at the same time elusive and obscure.

Butler (2003, 2010), Pulcini (2013), Walker (2007) and Anbeek (2013) plead to take experiences of fragile and vulnerable life as the source for an existential and moral re-orientation. Anbeek emphasizes that in real life the so-called positive and negative contrast experiences cannot be distinguished from each other so easily. Although a positive experience of wonder, beauty, love, harmony, unity, feels very different from the experience of brokenness, loss, injustice, violence, fragmentation—that what becomes visible in both sorts of contrast experiences is the same. Life manifests itself as fragile, fleeting, transient, beautiful and chaotic, tragic and full of wonder at the same time. In contrast experiences the self-evident and well-known world is broken through.

Taylor, Anbeek and Butler point to the need of articulation to make the contrast experience a meaningful experience that can guide us to a moral re-orientation.

The articulation of contrast experiences

Many philosophers emphasize that in order to become meaningful contrast experiences need to be articulated. The implicit understandings need to become explicit in order to be able to function as a moral and existential orientation in life (Taylor 2011, 2007) Arendt (1998) Butler (2003, 2011), Anbeek (2013b). At the same time contrast experiences and their moral values escape full theoretical articulation—this is why looking for other dimensions of expressing is so important. Besides expressing ourselves verbally, people can use images, actions, practices, rituals, and arts to demonstrate what is of value to them.

Taylor, and also other philosophers, point to another difficulty by trying to articulate the strong evaluations that become manifest in contrast experiences. The practice of language itself is constitutive of meanings and new

realities. The articulations are not simply derivative and secondary. Each way of giving expression to what appears modifies and develops it. This makes that the background of the different persons resonate in their articulations of strong values. The expressions of the meaning hidden in contrast experiences will always be plural, there is no single truth. This makes that no single articulation can ever be complete. They leave a gap where the mystery intrudes, where the claims to truth are not fully grounded, where seeming refutation or contradictions lie half visible (Taylor 2011, 299). Uncertainty remains a characteristic of all our efforts to ground ourselves in a “beyond ourselves.” We cannot escape this human condition of precariousness.

Another significant issue by searching for giving an account of deep and impressive experiences of vulnerable life is that this is not about thinking and thought, but anchored in corporal experience and bonds with other people. Articulation is not activity of an isolated philosopher or theologian, but it is an *inter-human activity*. This inter-human activity is based on dialogue, it means appearing to others and exposing your self to others. Hannah Arendt speaks here of the “miracle of life,” a second birth: “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (1998, 176). We must tell the story of our life, then, before we can ascribe meaning to it.

Especially when these dialogues concern deep personal experiences about the fragility of bodily existence, goodness, happiness and the disruptive moments that take these all away, we have to realize that exposing ourselves to others makes us extra vulnerable. This is why *acknowledging* is crucial. People need to be respected and recognized—otherwise the search for the values (strong evaluations) that manifest themselves in these experiences will collapse and harm will be done. Arendt underscores the equal worth of each human beings: “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them- that is, in sheer human togetherness” (1998, 180).

Butler observes that this equal worth is quite problematic. Not everyone counts in the same way as a human being, some people are not seen as human beings, but as enemies, living shields of weapons, untouchables, illegals: “there are “subjects” who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are “lives” that are not quite—or, indeed, are never recognized as lives” (2010, 4). She argues that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care and legal status (2010, 13).

For our project, giving an account of impressive experiences of fragility and vulnerability in order to be able to articulate strong values in them, this acknowledging and recognizing of each other as a unique and treasured person is of ultimate importance.

Meaning under pressure

The fragmented religious landscape has resulted in the lack of a clear, transcending meaning-frame that can help interpret important experiences. “Freedom and happiness” is perhaps the greatest common denominator. In the media and public discussion neo-liberal values are dominant. Autonomy, liberty, independence, self-determination, being successful, being active, healthy and forever young are presented as the highest goods and basic for human dignity. This freedom and these values may become a significant challenge when people come up against the boundaries of existence. When life is upside down, less self-evident than it seemed to be, and places us before moral dilemmas, exactly then the question of purpose and meaning arises. How can we find direction and what is the right thing to do?

That is not an easy task. Especially not when we realize that “purpose or meaning” encompass several dimensions of existence. Meaning is not just about a view of life, but more important *a way of life*. Meaning is about ways of behaving, about community, an ethic on which you can base your choices and about rituals in order to restrict the chaos. Welch comments that “we need practices, disciplines and aesthetics that enable us to perceive the world and our place in it differently. We need practices that can enable us to bear rage, pain and loss, and open our minds to what is fitting, beautiful and audacious” (2011, 366).

Secularization has had the effect of reducing the number of traditional religious helpers. Moreover, because of their commitment to one particular religious belief, they often miss the connection with the majority of the population, who no longer expects to find answers in a traditional life-view. Even though regular aids in health care and in social services are open to their client’s life questions, they lack the knowledge, methodology and time to adequately address problems of purpose/meaning. They also often don’t know where to refer their clients (Hulshof 2012). Ever more often the religious and philosophic language is replaced by a medical or psychological discourse, which makes it hard for people to articulate what it is that makes them restless and insecure. Research within several care practices shows that clients as well as helpers have difficulty naming life questions (De la Hayze 2012; Anbeek, Schuurmans and Palmboom 2013).

The sociologist Gabriël van den Brink (2012) shows language problems with giving meaning. He researched idealism of people currently and con-

cludes that they are still driven by ideals, but that there are some changes of focus to be observed. Where formerly God, fatherland and work were central, this has moved via our neighbour, society and mankind to love, the body and nature.

Brink notes that present day activists often lack a language in which to express, communicate, judge and defend their actions. In his opinion a civic talk could be of help here. A public conversation that connects people's everyday experiences to societal views and political standpoints. In this public conversation citizens develop their opinions about the "good life," in which also one's own concepts about the Higher need to be addressed (Brink 2012, 103).

Not only at the micro-level do people look for inspiration in ideals and act accordingly, Van den Brink ascertains. At the meso-level this also sometimes happens, for example when people support their sports-club, or when they dedicate themselves to the work that they do. However, there is no language to articulate these ideals, which means that the real communication about it is lacking, and so also the value-orientation at meso- and macro-levels.

New resources

The public conversation for which Brink appeals, where people plan together what makes a good life for them is already taking place. An important resource in modern secularized countries is the philosophy of the art of living. Existential philosophers like Heidegger and Nietzsche play a large role with this movement, but also philosophers of antiquity like Plato, Aristotle, Epicure and Seneca. The philosophy of the art of living not only comprises thought, but also action. It is about turning your life into a work of art. Within the Dutch language area the philosophers of the art of living Joep Dohmen Wilhelm Schmid and Irvin Yalom can frequently be heard. In their work they emphasize the tragedy of existence. Life is fundamentally insecure and fragile, many things can befall us—illness, death, psychological suffering, violence, betrayal—this calls forth fear. The art of living cannot get rid of the vulnerability and the fear, but it does offer a way of handling it, by confronting it. The attitude in life that she advocates, is characterized by the values "self-care," "moderation," "autonomy," "freedom" and "authenticity" (Anbeek 2010).

According to the philosopher Paul van Tongeren the philosophy of the art of living underestimates our powerlessness, our inability, our weakness and our vulnerability. With this failure to understand there is too little attention for the measure in which suffering is inevitable in human life. Van Tongeren (2012) is surprised that the ethics of virtue no longer plays a role in the modern philosophy of the art of living. This ethic is also one of self-realization,

but he does more justice to human vulnerability and powerlessness than the art of living. According to the virtue-ethics one has no say over happiness, happiness is fragile, just like good. He advocates consulting Christian art of living more often, which takes the human shortcomings more into consideration.

World-viewing dialogues on vulnerable life

In world-viewing dialogues we are not only consulting the Christian art of living, but also other oriented arts of living. World-viewing dialogues consist of several elements that I will introduce her.

The shared foundation of world-viewing dialogues is not a sacred source or a theological document. It is molded from the vulnerability of life. Contrast experiences manifest this fragility of life, they can turn your existence upside down. Life as it had been up until then ceases to exist. A new, unknown reality announces itself. Different experiences can be involved, experiences of wonder and wholeness and experiences of fragmentation. In many cases there will be a loss: loss of health, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, a view of the loss of your own existence.

In order to be able to enter the adventure of world-viewing dialogues, and to articulate and connect with deeds the strong evaluations that reveals themselves in contrast experiences, we need a deep sense of humility, respect to otherness, and also an openness and eagerness to learn from life, from ourselves, from other people and from cultural and religious traditions.

In world-viewing dialogues on vulnerable life we will first zoom in on the concrete experience of loss, the breach and the abyss or the empty country that then becomes visible. Zooming in on loss means being willing to face the feelings that accompany loss: sorrow, despair, sharp physical pain, tiredness, exhaustion, resignation, resistance, sometimes relief, and guilt. Facing this and feeling the vulnerability is hard and not at all pleasant, but it is a step that cannot be left out.

World-viewing dialogues start with being mindful to beautiful and painful vulnerability, being open, touchable, tender. The first phase of the dialogues is without words, we dare to be silent and just look, no speaking and no doing. Then the dialogue starts and this dialogue consists of four steps. The dialogues are within small groups, but the first dialogue is a conversation with oneself.

Every participant of the world-viewing dialogue group is asked to write down a list of contrast experiences in his or her life. Then, he or she is asked to elaborate on one contrast experience and write it down in fifteen or twenty sentences, and to reflect on the following questions: What becomes manifest? Which beauty, what pain and which discoveries? What role does uncertainty

play? What dreams were lost? What came in place of it? What makes a day worthwhile? Why is it sometimes unendurable? What makes you sometimes longing for death? What is needed to turn this longing? What new perspectives are found?

Characteristic for world-viewing dialogues on vulnerable life is that it takes concrete experiences as a starting point, not general treatises of abstractions about vulnerability. The Italian philosopher Elena Pulcini, who also takes vulnerability as a starting point for her care ethics, says that imagined vulnerability can also trigger a turnaround. We can imagine that many events that are mutually connected take place and threaten all of humanity with extinction. This awareness of global vulnerability, in which one's own vulnerability and that of others merge, can form the base for a new exploration of our responsibilities (Pulcini 2013, 184ff). Although Pulcini touches on an important point with her global vulnerability, I do not agree with her resorting to a mind-experiment. The concrete reality of our own physical, vulnerable life and that of others around us, offers enough for us to have firmly in our minds what fragile life entails in depth. World-viewing dialogues on fragile life start with the practical, lived through, experience and the wisdom that can become visible here.

The second step in world-viewing dialogues is a conversation with each other. This dialogue is most interesting and promising when the participants are diverse in age, education, and cultural and world-viewing background. This second step starts with a round in which each participant reads his or her contrast experience to the others. No comments are allowed, just reading and listening. This reading to each other of disruptive, open breaking experiences is like a ritual. The participants open up to each other in a fundamental and very vulnerable way. First by exposing themselves with their contrast experience to the others, and second by listening respectfully, without words and deeds, to the contrast experiences of the others. This first meeting is followed by a series of meetings in which the contrast experiences are explored more deeply. These meetings are structured by eight fundamental questions on which I will elaborate below.

Discussing together what went wrong, broke away, wasn't possible, didn't succeed, hurt, wounded us, belittled us, where freedom was lost, how we lost ourselves, is not a popular activity. We'd rather keep silent. That, however, is a choice with political consequences.² Keeping quiet about dependency and

2. Opening ourselves to feelings, especially those that happen in the context of relationships that we cherish, means we are capable of enduring dependency and fragility, and that is difficult because we live in a world in which dependency is seen as inferior. Feelings are personal, but not private, you can communicate them with others. The British psychologist Stephen Frosh (2011) writes that the ability to feel other's feelings, or at

vulnerability, a “discourse of silence,” causes these personal experiences to fall out of the picture, have no name, to not exist. That means we are delivered unto a one-sided story about success, self-development, freedom, health, independence and self-determination. But when we speak of that which hurt us and was broken, we also speak of what was valuable to us, made us wonder, gave us strength, what was helpful, how we bounced back, where new possibilities arose, where we discovered something that we had not seen before. It makes visible a shared human condition and invites us to take responsibility for each other’s physical, practical life. It opens the eyes to underlying questions that surpass the individual domain. How do we as a society handle vulnerability and dependency? Why are we so quick to think they mar the human dignity? What exactly is human dignity? An ethical appeal can be heard in these questions.

It shows and makes tangible that we are far more deeply and fundamentally connected with each other than we normally think we are.

According to philosopher Judith Butler one can question the much-loved story of our autonomy based especially on experiences of grieving and violence. According to her these experiences break down the illusion that we master ourselves. We become who we are through relationships, but we do not belong to ourselves, we are also “undone” by others (2003, 24).

Pulcini, who earlier said that human imagination is large enough to envision our vulnerability, sees a risk in stressing the personal events. We can indeed get stuck in the trauma and the isolated episode, and not see vulnerability as something shared that is fundamental to the human condition. Exactly envisioning global vulnerability makes us consider our responsibilities (Pulcini 2013, 185). With that, Pulcini underlines why it is important to tell each other our stories and listen to each other. In this way a discourse of vulnerable life can commence at the macro-level, in which we articulate and so make visible the shared human condition of vulnerable life and the accompanying individual and common responsibilities. Human life is valuable, vulnerable, dependent, and thoroughly relational. Based on shared insights new value-orientations can arise, so that we also see mutual openness, responsibility and solidarity, as necessary to protect life, allow it to blossom and bring it to a good close.

A topography of fundamental questions

World-viewing dialogues are structured by seven fundamental questions, together they present a topography of important roads, cross-overs, borders and networks of different articulations of vulnerable life. The original backgrounds of these questions are the different themes (*loci*) of the Christian sys-

least understand them, could be the pivotal point of our humanity.

tematic theology. These *loci* present a fine systematic order in which numerous aspects of human life are treated. However, before we could use these items in a multi-faith, plural group we need to translate the items back to the underlying human experiences and search questions.

I made a first effort in translating the *loci* in *De berg van de ziel* (*The Mountain of the Soul*), which I wrote together with Ada de Jong, who is a non-believer (2013). In this book Ada's story is pivotal. In the summer of 2008 she lost her husband and three children in an accident in the Italian Alps. The eight fundamental topics of systematic theology are used to explore her experiences of loss and her search for meaning and orientation. The topics serve as signposts for wayfinding. First, we tried to discover one or more existential questions behind a certain chapter. Then we figured out how this question is formulated in other life-philosophies. In *De berg van de ziel* they are Buddhism and Humanism. The choice for these two traditions is not a matter of principal, but has to do with our own knowledge and experiences. Other traditions also, like Islam and Judaism, need to be incorporated in translating back of religious insights to the underlying human questions and search for meaning and orientation.

At this moment the method is further developed by organizing several pilots; for example, students of the University of Humanistic Studies, post-academic courses for interfaith chaplaincy, a group with members and non-members of a local church.

Until now, we are working with the following re-translations of systematic theological topics to the underlying human experience:³

God

What shows itself as of ultimate importance in the process of relating yourself to your contrast-experience? What appears to be sacred? What is not to be given up, especially when you are confronted by vulnerable life?

Take something from home—a picture, a photo, an object—that illustrates this preciousness.

Creation

What is, from the perspective of your contrast-experience your place as a human being in the midst of everything there is? What is, in the light of your contrast-experience, your destination as human beings? How can you feel at home in the midst of beauty and destruction?

Take something from nature with you that illustrates your place among, and relation with everything there is.

3. See for a more detailed description of the re-translation of the topics of the systematic theology see Anbeek 2013a and 2013b.

Human being: Value and mystery

Noticeable for the human condition in many religious traditions is its tragedy. The longing and striving for wellness and happiness are inextricably connected to boundaries, with impossibilities and frustrations. Many philosophers also inform us about this double identity. Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger described human existence as free and yet bound, determined—by this and that—yet responsible. Hannah Arendt writes about “natality” as the most characterizing aspect of human existence. With this she means the uniqueness of every human birth, but also another “miracle of life.” Characteristic of existence is starting over again and again, in words and deeds. This active life is like a second birth, with which we confirm the naked fact of our original birth (Arendt 1998).

From the perspective of your contrast experience: When and how did you start anew? With which words and which deeds?

Reconciliation: Acceptance and protest

How can you as human beings relate yourselves to the incomprehensible, the unendurable and with evil? How can you live with the things that go wrong, with illness, loss, mourning and unrighteousness? Which keys are handed to you? Which examples impress you? How can you learn to accept that things are as they are, or rather, isn't that the road we need to travel? How can you reconcile with disruptive beauty and dispossessing brokenness? What is needed? What if you cannot?

Bring a picture from someone who inspired you to reconcile yourself with your contrast-experience or to stand up against it.

Re-breathing and rebirth

The Spirit is the work of God in the here and now, present and yet elusive. She blows wherever she chooses. She cleans that which is dirty, sprinkles water on that which is dry, softens that which has become hardened, warms that which is cold. She is the comforter, fills up the dark heart with light.

Buddhism also has comforters and innovators, bodhisattva's, heavenly beings who aid people and uplift them. Humanists seem to be dependent on each other, but perhaps it just looks that way. The spirit, the light-heartedness of existence, has an unexpected side. The question is: where do you find her? What does she do to you? How did she breathe new life into us? And what was made possible because of that? How did she make you laugh at yourselves and at your fate and how did she then lift you above yourselves? How did she make you whole?

Community of friends

How can we organize our communities in such a way that vulnerable life is protected and can fully blossom? Which responsibilities do we have to prosper all living beings, and how can we make this happen?

In many communities meals have a special place. Bring with you an element of a meal that has a special meaning for you in the light of your contrast-experience.

The end of life

The last chapter of systematic theology is about the last things, the end of the individual life and the end of history. Translated to the human situation it is about our future, individually and communally. What do we dream about, when we realize how vulnerable and finite our life is? How do we judge ourselves, and the life we lived? What leaves to be hoped for? How do we want to travel the road towards the end?

Conclusions

World-viewing dialogues are still “work in progress.” The idea of world-viewing dialogues is presented in the book *Berg van de ziel (The mountain of the soul)*; Anbeek and De Jong 2013). The guiding question of the book is: what could be of help if everything meaningful to you has gone? The book, which consists of a dialogue between the two authors, is structured by the seven fundamental questions presented above. After the publication of the book several world-viewing dialogues were organized, which consisted of five to eight group meetings and eight to fourteen participants from different age and different religious backgrounds. Although the tool is still in the process of further development, I could make already some conclusions.

The coupling between contemporary narratives about vulnerable life with the seven fundamental questions of life-philosophies offers a special perspective with regard to human disorientation by disruptive experiences and the quest for new meaning. These structured dialogues evoke a new existential, spiritual and ethical language. This new language, based on the own contrast-experiences and the values that intuitively were felt and are now articulated, can quite easily be connected to former expressions, narratives, practices and ethical guidelines from different (religious) traditions. By practicing world-viewing dialogues we can find new meaning and orientation and at the same time connect ourselves to our ancestors from different times and cultures, who also were challenged by disruptive experiences and the search for new meaning and orientation that followed from these experiences.

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Naturalistic Theism

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ABSTRACT

Many modern theological debates are built around a false dichotomy between 1) an atheism which asserts that the universe was created by purposeless mechanical processes and 2) acceptance of a religious system which requires both faith in the infallibility of sacred texts and belief in a supernatural God. I propose a form of naturalistic theism, which rejects sacred texts as unjustified, and supernaturalism as incoherent. I argue that rejecting these two elements of traditional organized religion would have a strongly positive impact on the beliefs and practices of religion, even though many religious people feel strongly attached to them. It is belief in sacred texts that is responsible for most of the evil done in the name of religion, not belief in God. Many of the strongest arguments for atheism work only against a supernatural God, and have no impact on the question of the existence of a natural God.

Keywords

atheism, theism, agnosticism, naturalism, supernaturalism, sacred text, Shook, Dennett, Dawkins, Kuhn, Quine, Neurath, Koran, Bible, Islam, Buddhism, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, miracles, Marxist atheism

I agree with many of the criticisms of established religions voiced by prominent Atheists. That is why the only form of Theism I could accept would be what I call Naturalistic Theism. For many Atheists, this will appear to be a contradiction in terms, but I will argue that this kind of theism is as compatible with science as nondogmatic Atheism.¹ As far as I can tell, Naturalistic Theism is essentially identical to what John Shook calls either Religious

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1. I mean something slightly broader by this term than the description on p. 18 of Shook 2010. By Nondogmatic Atheism, I mean Atheism that claims only that it is the best of several arguably viable alternatives, rather than dismissing all forms of theism as delusional or unworthy of serious consideration. I would put in this category Pat Churchland's claim that there is only a "preponderance of the evidence" for Atheism, and John Shook's position that "God probably does not exist" (Shook 2010, 22) coupled with his acknowledgement that there are "many creative ways to intelligently design fair compromises between science and religion" (Shook 2010, 25).

Humanism or Religious Naturalism, (Shook 2010, 209), but I think it will avoid confusion to acknowledge my debt, then coin and define my own term.

I should also add that I will be arguing for a position I do not necessarily accept. I have taken philosophical indecisiveness to a whole new level by declaring myself to be a Meta-Agnostic i.e. I do not know whether I am an Agnostic or not. I think that Naturalistic Theism, Nondogmatic Atheism and Agnosticism are equally legitimate choices, and that I have an epistemic right to choose any one of them. I find Atheism distasteful, largely because of its association with dogmatic Atheism, but find it difficult to choose between Theism and Agnosticism. Perhaps this is because Buddhism, which is my spiritual practice, does not clearly make such a choice. Nevertheless, I do feel the need to defend Theism from what I feel are unjustified attacks by dogmatic Atheists. If there is at least one god, perhaps he will reward me for my altruism, but I am not counting on it.

However, whatever aid and comfort I can give Theists requires them to accept Naturalism, and requires me to define what I mean by that term. The word “Naturalism” has two distinct but closely related genealogies, which must be both related and distinguished if we are to understand the contemporary meaning of the term.

Quine’s naturalism

The movement in modern philosophy called Naturalism was first clearly expressed in Quine’s classic paper “Epistemology Naturalized” (1969). Naturalism maintains that the best philosophy is done by studying the relationship between philosophy and science, instead of separating them. Naturalism accepts Kant’s point that our experiences are shaped by our philosophical presuppositions, but it also believes that philosophy and science are constantly shaping each other. The Naturalist philosopher’s favourite metaphor is that our knowledge is rather like a boat that we have to rebuild while staying afloat in it. Kant thought that our philosophical assumptions shaped our experiences. The Empiricists, in contrast, think that experience shapes all our (legitimate) philosophical beliefs. The Naturalist’s reply is “You’re both wrong and both right. In the words of Otto Neurath, philosophy and science are in the same boat, which we are constantly rebuilding while still at sea. Our experiences shape our philosophy, our philosophy shapes our experiences and neither one can ever be fully independent of the other.” This is why scientists and philosophers need to communicate with each other constantly in order to decrease confusion and error.

Questions that can’t be answered by experiments or observations must be answered by dialectical speculation and/or conceptual analysis, which often produce multiple and contrary conclusions. But that doesn’t enable us to

claim that the speculative and the experimental disciplines are somehow independent of each other. On the contrary, it is impossible to do science without some sort of speculative assumptions about the nature of reality. This is all Quine meant by his somewhat scary statement that physical objects are epistemically (but not ontologically) on the same footing as the gods of Homer. The philosopher's job is to see how metaphysics and science are related—to paraphrase Wilfrid Sellars, to see how “things” (in the broadest sense of that term) “hang together” (in the broadest sense of that term). This goal cannot be accomplished if we separate science and philosophy into what Stephen Jay Gould called “non-overlapping magisteria.”

Naturalism vs. supernaturalism

Recently, however, the term “Naturalism” has taken on a less pluralistic and more ontologically puritanical streak. The call for epistemic and epistemological Naturalism is no longer primarily a declaration that philosophy, science, and other attempts at understanding our place in the world are all in the same boat. Instead, it is a demand that certain of these enterprises be thrown overboard, because they claim to deal with what they call the supernatural, and thus allegedly violate fundamental principles of naturalism. I am sympathetic to some of these allegations. Nevertheless, we need to be careful that we do not conflate essential principles with contingent metaphysical beliefs. Although it is important to expunge unnecessary detritus from Neurath's boat, we must not throw out the baby with the bilge water. I think there are only two principles of Abrahamic religion that Naturalism must reject: Sacred Texts and Supernaturalism. Theism and Atheism are both compatible with Naturalism, because neither is decisively supported by Naturalism.

Sacred texts

Naturalism must renounce the concept of Sacred Texts as it is currently understood in the Abrahamic tradition. Dennett is quite right to insist that “No text can be conceded the status of ‘gospel truth’ without foreclosing all rational inquiry” (2006, 241). This does not mean these traditions should not revere and respect those texts, or refrain from carefully reading and thinking about them in hopes of finding profound truths. However, it does mean that no one should believe anything simply because it is written in a book. Naturalism requires that all texts be evaluated critically in terms of their ability to make sense of life as we experience and study it. To say that a claim must be true simply because “it is written” is to give up on the principles of inquiry that are the basis of Naturalism. This does not necessarily require denying the possibility that God might have spoken directly to mankind through a particular book or books. But it does require rejecting the idea that this fact or any other would give a text unconditional authority over the truth. Natu-

ralism strives for the truth by examining nature itself, and texts get their value only from their ability to further this goal.

For many people, faith in sacred texts is one of the most comforting components of the Abrahamic intellectual tradition, and it is likely that most followers of those traditions will not give them up easily. Nevertheless, they are relatively late additions to that tradition, and not essential to its fundamental message.² There is no contradiction in believing, as many modern Christians do, that Jesus died and rose to save us from our sins, but that our record of that occurrence is a fragmented jumble of documents that was compiled as a result of jury-rigged tangle of compromises. Christians of this sort still read the Bible carefully, and see it as a guide for living. But they will also read it critically, rather like an archaeologist sorting through trash for treasures, rejecting the frequent violence, homophobia, and male chauvinism, and accepting only the moral and metaphysical principles that help them make sense of their own lives.

These Christians are probably few in number, and are certainly less likely to grab the spot light than the fundamentalists and traditionalists. But there is nothing in the essential message of Christianity that says there shouldn't be more of them. Christians often have highly developed argumentative skills, especially Catholics who have been heavily exposed to Aristotle. Reasoning always has to start somewhere, and those of us who question premises

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2. The one Abrahamic counterexample to this is Islam's relationship to the Koran. Christian faith is primarily centred on Christ himself, and the books are merely reports of his deeds and teachings. For Islam, however, Muhammad is only a man who served as a conduit for a sacred book. I think it is possible for modern Muslims to accept that God spoke directly to Muhammad without also accepting that the Koran is what I am defining as a Sacred Text i.e. an algorithm for proper behaviour for everyone for all eternity. Just because God needed Muhammad's people to do X at time T does not necessarily imply that he would want all people to do X forever. The principle of Abrogation, which in effect says that God no longer wants people to do X, even though he once said he did, might be useful for constructing a more liberal form of Islam. (Unfortunately, these days that principle is used by fundamentalists primarily for suspending the Koran's most tolerant teachings.) A naturalist Muslim would have to accept that modern people could use their own intuitions to abrogate teachings that didn't fit modern realities. Muhammad was a very pragmatic reformer, and he and/or Allah were, in my opinion, obviously aware that it would not be prudent to demand full equal rights for women in a society that practiced slave concubinage and female infanticide. This would explain why the Koran bans the latter, but only regulates the worst abuses of the former. It is plausible that were he alive and receiving teachings today, he would be abrogating many of the verses that he received in the sixth and seventh centuries. I don't think it would be easy to get rank-and-file Muslims to accept these changes, but such an Islam could be made internally coherent, I think.

like “the Bible contains direct commands from God telling us how to live”, should still acknowledge that reasoning from those premises can be valid given those premises. The naturalist need not tell the Christian to stop reading the Bible or reasoning from its assertions. Instead she urges Christians to use their reasoning skills to question those assertions as carefully as they now reason from them.

Catholics also have another principle which enables them to more closely approximate the naturalist ideal of inquiry while maintaining faith in sacred texts. Because both scripture and nature are seen as God’s creations, it is accepted that when scientific discoveries contradict scripture, the scripture must be reinterpreted (often metaphorically) so that the two can be harmonized. This is preferable to the fundamentalist Protestant belief that every word of the Bible is literally true, but it still falls short of the Naturalist ideal. The true Naturalist must be willing to say of any text “The best available arguments and evidence show that this text is just plain wrong about this particular point.” This will not stop us from acquiring profound insights from those religious texts. We can acknowledge that Kant or Hume or Marx are wrong about a lot of things and still worth reading. There is no reason we can’t do the same with the Torah, the Koran, or the Gospels.

Some religious people might be terrified by the uncertainty that comes from downgrading their sacred texts this way, but it seems to me that those with faith in sacred texts do not really have significantly more experience of certainty than the rest of us. Instead of worrying about which parts of which text are correct, the religious faithful have to deal with the question of which interpretation of the sacred texts is correct. There is essentially equal amounts of uncertainty in either controversy. There is a strategy for resolving the latter sort of uncertainty, but it is not pretty. If there is only one sacred text that points the way to salvation, and only one legitimate interpretation of that text, it is both rational and humane to not only obnoxiously confront people who have not yet received (and/or have misinterpreted) “the Word”, but to use war and torture to compel acceptance of the one true faith.³ Most of the

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3. Islam has two ingenious ways of avoiding this conclusion while keeping its faith in sacred texts. a) It acknowledges that other traditions have their own sacred texts, which are also capable of leading people to salvation. This is why medieval Islam had a much better record than medieval Christianity for tolerance of religious minorities, especially Jews, who were usually discriminated against but rarely persecuted by these Muslim empires. Some Muslims in India have even argued that non-Abrahamic texts such as the Vedas were received by Adam, who is called the first prophet by the Koran. b) The Koran also forbids compulsion in religion, even when the disbeliever is in danger of damnation. Involuntary conversions are seen as incapable of leading to salvation, so Muslims are told that they must only act as messengers, and leave it to Allah to

evil performed by sincere believers in the name of religion can be traced back to this inference.

This inference is also an important presupposition of Dennett's plausible claim that there are only five possible futures for the world's religions (2006, 35–36). Only two of his five possibilities enable religion to survive without divine intervention. His first possibility enables religions to keep their creeds, but renders toleration of other creeds impossible "Eventually [...] One major faith sweeps the planet". His third possibility enables religions to be both tolerant and thriving, but only by becoming "basically creedless." Once we separate religions from belief in the sacredness of texts, however, a sixth possibility emerges. Religions do not degenerate into mere social clubs, but retain their primary function of providing teachings about metaphysical and moral issues. However, because these teachings are acknowledged as flawed approximations, rather than infallible sacred texts, religious leaders agree to disagree about many important issues, and encourage members of their congregations to look elsewhere if they are not satisfied with the answers offered by any particular religion. Religions thrive as powerful and active voluntary associations of people who believe similar but not exactly identical creeds. Toleration of diversity of opinion, both within and among religions, is accepted because everyone acknowledges that their creed is only the best approximation they can come up with, not an unshakeable truth revealed by a sacred text.

The fact that Theism and sacred texts are separable is also vividly illustrated by the historical example of Marxist Communism. Marxists used an Atheist sacred text to justify the same agenda of conquest and slaughter that has given religion a bad name. The Communist crimes against humanity were not just crimes committed by Atheists. They were crimes committed in the name of Atheism, for the express purpose of propagating an Atheist world view and agenda. This is strong evidence that it is faith in sacred texts, not theism, which is responsible for most the evil done in the name of religion, and that those who claim otherwise are confusing correlation with causation. Marxism is, as it were, the control group that isolates sacred texts from theism, and reveals that it is sacred texts, not theism, which are the real problem.

The separation of the religion meme from the sacred text meme would probably decrease the virus-like spread of religions like Christianity and Islam. (The two world's largest religions.). The fact that Buddhism has only revered texts, and no sacred texts, is probably why it is only the world's third

decide who gets saved and who doesn't. The first argument seems too Procrustean, and the second too smug, for my tastes. But hey, if it stops them from killing people, it works for me. Needless to say, these verses are considered to be abrogated by modern fundamentalist Muslims, and by those who want to use Islam as a justification for military conquest.

largest religion.⁴ Nevertheless, 360 million members is not chopped liver, and there is no reason to assume that the world's religions will shrivel down to minor cults if they abandon the aggressiveness that comes from the belief that they possess the only true sacred text. Although it is obviously an effective proselytizing strategy to “exploit and exacerbate social conflict whenever possible” (Dennett 2006, 196), it is not the only effective strategy.

Supernaturalism

Faith in Sacred Texts is one manifestation of a more fundamental mistake that Shook and Dennett label Supernaturalism. Supernaturalism is by definition at odds with any form of Naturalism, and is arguably self-contradictory. Many of the theological claims of the Abrahamic tradition, such as the existence of miracles and creation *ex nihilo*, are in effect saying “the explanation for this is that there is no explanation”, which has the logical form of “P and not P.” But is supernaturalism essential to the Abrahamic tradition? Dennett defines religions as “Social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought” (2006, 9). He admits that this definition might exclude many social systems that call themselves religions: “perhaps [...] Buddhism and Islam, for all their similarities, deserve to be considered two entirely different species of cultural phenomenon” (2006, 8). This definition certainly excludes Buddhism, in which rewards and punishments are seen, not as expressions of the approval or disapproval of a divine being, but rather the effect of an impersonal process called Karma. But even religious systems that believe that this kind of justice is supervised by some sort of agent need not claim that this agent is supernatural, in the technical philosophical sense which Shook rightly criticizes as paradox-inducing.

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4. Buddhism rejects the concept of sacred texts, because it teaches that truth is something that can only be directly experienced, not captured in a set of propositions. There is a Zen saying that confusing reality with a verbal description is like pointing at the Moon, and confusing your finger with the Moon. This view about language does not lead to the vulgar relativist view that “anything goes.” One of my meditation teachers was insistent that the elaborate techniques he taught be followed in every detail. His reason for insisting on this, however, had nothing to do with their allegedly being The One True Path to Enlightenment. He instead gave a rather Burkean argument that these methods had worked well over the years, and therefore we had good reason to trust them. He also said that many other traditions had equally impressive lineages, and that we had the freedom to choose among them, rather like choosing from items on the menu at a restaurant (his metaphor). This man was an elderly Tibetan who spoke no English, not a Westernized progressive striving to make the tradition more flexible. Buddhism—as practiced by the rank and file traditionalists, not just what Dennett calls “the elite forms” (2006, 198)—does not worry about heresy or false prophets, and this has not stopped it from becoming one of the world's most widespread religions.

Undeniably, most of the religious eggheads of the past millennia have insisted on showering God with incoherent honorific adjectives like Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Omnibenevolent. But as far as I can see there is little or no Jamesian “cash value” in these adjectives. That doesn’t mean that Christians won’t miss these ideas after two millennia of being comforted by them. James Hall (2003) even insists that a God who does not possess all of these attributes is not worthy of worship. The ancient Greeks did not agree with Hall on this point, however. As Shook rightly points out (Shook 2010, 23), downsizing our concept this way might be disconcerting, but it does not lead to Atheism. Shook and Dennett are quite right in insisting that rational people should reject these “Omni” prefixes because they are self-contradictory. (God can’t make a stone that’s too heavy for her to lift etc.) This rejection is almost certainly a heresy according to many who care about such things. Nevertheless, it is still compatible with a kind of theism, and in practice this brand of Theism would not be significantly different from Christianity as we know it. Rank-and-File Christians want a God who is wise, powerful, and loving, or perhaps more wise, powerful, and loving than they could ever imagine. There is no reason that their commitment to the ethics and rituals of Christianity should be compromised because these virtues are not “omnified.”

Naturalism also requires the rejection of miracles, if miracles are defined as supernatural occurrences which are in principle inexplicable by any possible natural laws. Naturalism does not, however, necessarily imply that the resurrection did not take place. Nor does it require us to reject the healing of the blind, walking on water, the multiplying of the loaves and fishes, or any of the other biblical events commonly called miracles.⁵ All the Naturalist has to do is say is that there is an in principle comprehensible explanation for

5. I should add that my defence of the Christian’s right to believe in these extraordinary events does not mean that I accept either their truth or their significance. William Craig claims that the historical evidence for the resurrection is as good as for any other accepted historical fact of that period, and therefore it is irrational to deny that it took place (a claim disputed in Shook 2010, 36). I am sympathetic to his rejection of the maxim of “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof” which is often used by so-called sceptics as an excuse for moving goal posts. Nevertheless, I have not bothered to evaluate Craig’s data, because I believe that Jesus’ teachings should be evaluated on their own merits, not on his ability to perform astonishing magic tricks. Reports of these kinds of tricks are quite common in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, where they are known as siddhis, and in that tradition they are considered a distraction from spiritual growth. I have read testimony that attributes siddhis to some contemporary religious cult leaders who have also been accused of fraud, sexual predation, and irresponsible greed. Even if these people actually can perform siddhis, it would give me no reason to believe that they deserve to be taken seriously as moral or spiritual teachers.

each of those events. That explanation does not have to be comprehensible in terms of contemporary science. There was a time when it was plausible that there were certain events that science had proven could not possibly happen. However, now that we know that science often progresses in revolutionary leaps, there is no particular event which can be dismissed this way. The fact that an event appears miraculous to us indicates only that no available explanation is compatible with our current scientific theories. Secondly, no event is ever miraculous in itself. All we can make is the much weaker claim that an explanation of a particular event is miraculous. To label any event as miraculous because it is incomprehensible to us is to make the same kind of mistake made by Intelligent Design theory: i.e. To infer something about the world from our ignorance of the world.

Some scepticism about events which appear to violate contemporary versions of science is justifiable to maintain what Thomas Kuhn calls “The Essential Tension” between Normal and Revolutionary science (YEAR, 19) But this does not permit us to dogmatically assert that any particular kind of event could not possibly take place. This would require us to say that there are kinds of events which could never be explained by any future science. We will never be justified in making such a claim because--well, the science of the future is not here yet, nor will it ever be, because tomorrow never comes.

Naturalism requires us to say that if God (or anything else) is real, there must be in principle comprehensible laws and reasons that account for God’s ability to interact with the world. These laws may never be discovered, or even be discoverable, by the cognitive systems of *homo sapiens*. But the fundamental principle of Naturalism is that it makes no sense to say that anything is intrinsically incomprehensible. This means that Naturalism cannot permit a yawning miraculous gap between God and her creation. This gap is just Cartesian Dualism applied to the entire universe. Cartesianism says that the spiritual mind floats independently over, and yet magically controls, the physical body. Supernaturalism says that God the spirit floats independently over, and yet magically controls, the physical Universe. The primary objection to supernaturalism is thus the same that Dennett raised against Mind/body dualism: it is a form of giving up on the epistemic enterprise (1991, 37).

Supernaturalism, however, is not identical to theism. The two positions are orthogonal, despite their long intimacy, and it is high time they were amicably separated. Although Naturalists do not permit talk about persons as explanatory devices, they obviously do not deny the existence of persons. They merely deny the dualist claim that persons are irreducible and fundamental components of the Universe. Persons are a particular kind of mechanism, which we might call a mindful motivated mechanism. We are such mechanisms, and Naturalists must believe that God, if she exists, is also a

mindful motivated mechanism. Those who find that claim blasphemous and/or preposterous should remember that this claim has far less content than it appears to have. We are totally clueless as to what sort of processes, devices or mechanisms might constitute or embody God.

For all we know, God could be embodied by Dark Matter, or entire Galaxies, or incomprehensible items that exist outside the range of things that emerged from the Big Bang. God might change her embodiment from millisecond to millisecond, like a ripple that supervenes on different water molecules as it travels through the ocean, making her every bit as disembodied as a radio wave or a gravitational field. We do know, however, that God is not pure miraculous spirit for the same reason we know that God is not a four-sided triangle: because neither idea makes any sense. This assertion does not diminish or limit God in any way whatsoever. It is a statement about our language and/or concepts, not about God.

The discoveries of evolution do wreak havoc with supernaturalism, because they destroy the plausibility of the venerable “argument from design.” This argument posited a kind of dualism between the physical world and mind of God because, despite its many paradoxes, it once seemed that this dualism was the only thing that could account for the emergence of life on Earth. By showing that it was possible for all life to emerge from purely mechanical process, evolutionary theory rendered dualist supernaturalism unnecessary. This argument has no effect on Naturalistic Theism, however. The fact that everything in the Universe is a mechanism tells us nothing whatsoever about whether these mechanisms are mindful or mindless.

How do we tell the difference between mindful and mindless mechanisms when we are not doing theology? How do we know that *homo sapiens* are conscious, clocks are not, and frogs might be? The fact of the matter is, we really don't know how we know. I am not referring here to old sceptical complaints that the process is unreliable some of the time, because it is easily fooled by robots, Teddy bears, and complicated devices which don't exist but could. We know that it is reliable often enough for most of our daily social interactions, and to at least begin a scientific study of consciousness. I am instead pointing out that the process is subconscious, because we do it instinctively with no understanding of how we do it. This is why the only scientific attempt to determine the presence of consciousness—the Turing Test—is only a public opinion poll, and makes no attempt to explain the decision-making process of those who are polled. This is also why it is very difficult to retool this ability to answer questions it wasn't designed to answer. We probably have some chance of success when we extrapolate from ourselves to other medium-sized biological creatures. However, we have no reason to believe that these instincts will ever be reliable in classifying an evolutionary process that takes place over

millions of years, of which we can only observe a tiny part. There is no theological equivalent to the Turing Test that can be applied to millennium-long natural processes and determine whether they are conscious or not.

Our close-up view of biological history does not limit our ability to observe and classify mechanical processes. On the contrary, that is where the analytical tools of mechanical thinking do their best work. However, our goals and purposes are invisible to this kind of inquiry because they are emergent properties of a much larger system. You can't find the "chairness" of a chair by analysing it into parts. The legs are not chairs, the back is not a chair, the molecules in the wood are not chairs. And similarly you can't see the purposes of a purposeful organism if you analyse it into neural firings and muscle contractions. But that doesn't prove that we don't have goals and purposes, any more than the fact that chairs are made of molecules proves that they aren't really chairs, or the fact that Oxford University is made up of buildings and people proves that there is no Oxford University. Our neural firings do not have our purposes in mind,⁶ but that doesn't prove that we don't have our purposes in mind. This was Gilbert Ryle's reply to both reductionism and dualism, and it works as well for Theology as it did for Philosophy of Mind.

Once we accept this, however, we can no longer infer Atheism from the fact that we see nothing but blind motiveless mechanisms in the evolutionary process. With *homo sapiens*, and possibly other higher organisms, we can somehow "step back" in some sense of that metaphorical phrase, and observe the patterns that reveal the goals and purposes of conscious agents. It's not easy, which is why those sciences that study purposeful agents are thought of as "soft sciences". But it is doable, more or less. With the entire evolutionary process, however, we simply cannot step back far enough in either space or time, to see whether this evolutionary process is appropriately described as happening for a purpose. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but as far as I can see, that question will never be answered by scientific experiments or observations.

Consequently, there is no reason for the Naturalistic Theist to feel threatened by scientific progress, or take comfort from gaps in scientific knowledge. If God exists, he is above and beyond our knowledge. God isn't hiding in the gaps in evolutionary history, any more than our mind is hiding in the gaps inside our brain. This is why filling a gap (or all gaps) does not provide evidence for God's non-existence. When compared to the perspective we would have to take in order to determine whether the Universe possessed or lacked purpose, any possible scientific perspective is analytical, provincial, and focused on the trees rather than the forest. That does not, however, give us scientific proof that there is no forest, only trees.

6. This argument is developed in greater detail in Rockwell 2008.

When a question cannot be answered with the scientific method, it is perfectly legitimate to cautiously and humbly speculate about Blind Watchmakers and/or Cosmic Processes striving towards an Omega point. Nevertheless, although Naturalistic Theism can legitimately dismiss concepts like “bearded patriarch made of ghost stuff” because of Occam’s Razor and the principle of non-contradiction, neither atheists or theists should pretend that we can reduce the number of possible theologies to one. The concept of sacred text violates the epistemic principles that make naturalism possible. The concept of the supernatural is a contradiction in terms, given how we understand the concept of naturalism today. But rejecting these two incoherencies does not eliminate the possibility of a naturalistic theism.

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From Compulsive to Persuasive Agencies: Whitehead's Case for Entertainment

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ABSTRACT

Western societies currently face the backlash of violent and militant extremisms practiced in the form of tribalistic-phobocratic politics. The battleground is set between advocates of self-centeredness and those who entertain a world-centered self. To entertain concerns what Henri Bergson calls “zones of indetermination” and assumes A. N. Whitehead’s dictum: “in the real world it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. The importance of truth is, that it adds to interest” (1978 89, 92, 259). Cultural agencies, processes, and aims that we take an “interest” in have the power to be more influential, encouraging norms of persuasion. Such openness to the persuasion of entertainment is propositional in character, or acts as “lures for feeling” of proposals to be felt without mandates. The first section will discuss the way in which to take up the daunting task of reading Whitehead. The second and third sections will address those aspects pertinent to a philosophy of entertainment that present the cultural-aesthetic underpinnings for the emergence of persuasive agencies. The goal of cultivating tolerance and freedom for civilized societies hinges upon institutional methods and practices that are legitimated more by way of persuasive coercion rather than coercive persuasion.

Keywords

virtual integration, persuasive agencies, entertainment,
genetic/coordinate analysis, lures for feeling, transmedia

The importance of Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophical contributions continues to be of keen interest and discussion in a world dominated by fast-paced, cyber-tech, hyperrealities of experience (Baudrillard 1988). Whitehead’s philosophy can account for the sensibilities of the twenty-first century. It is not only that his philosophy is pragmatic, but it is also rooted in process and, therefore, has the tools necessary to engage the dynamic and nuanced character of our daily experiences. What gives added leverage to Whitehead’s philosophical swagger lies in his reliance on aesthetic categories rather than

the preferred natural or biological categories found in Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey, for example. Whitehead's philosophical temperament captures well the factors most readily associated with those publicly informed activities we identify as pop culture and entertainment. Entertainment rituals continue to pervade much of what we produce and consume in our personal and social interactions, while institutional networks in their aesthetic, legal, scientific, political, or economic modes of intensity have interchangeably guided many of the cultural aims and interests that have either contributed to or resulted from the realization of this volatile order.

Whereas artists, journalists, bloggers, and other non-academics have emphasized the worth of expressivity, creative imagination, and the social capital of entertainment, scholars of the academy have been reluctant to acknowledge how many of our daily rituals or efforts to generate meaning stem from this traditional "underbelly" side of society; and in certain respects, rightly so. But expression, imagination, and cohesion turn out to be key factors in Whitehead's sociological and historical analysis of these poetic relations as I will show. How could a thinker of Whitehead's calibre *not* be relevant and helpful to understand better the complexities of social conditions entertainment presents? There is a great deal to be gleaned from the activities of our cultural significances once we explore the lessons and orientations of Whitehead's philosophy as a transformational means of investigation. For our purposes, I will read Whitehead as a "radical empiricist" in the manner of William James and Henri Bergson (Auxier and Herstein 2017; Auxier 2010; Auxier 2009; Auxier 1999). Of the reasons why scholars ignore Whitehead and his poignant interpretations has to do mainly with the technical Whiteheadian vocabulary, found to be cryptic and poetic. The fault, I believe, lies more with the reader rather than with Whitehead himself. The first section of this paper will discuss the way in which to take up the daunting task of reading Whitehead, which is different from the architectonic approach philosophers often employ too hastily. The second and third sections will address those aspects pertinent to a philosophy of entertainment that present the metaphysical underpinnings for the emergence of persuasive agencies.

In the final section, I will deal with David L. Hall's treatment of Whitehead's social philosophy in, *The Civilization of Experience: A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture* related to these issues. Hall articulates a theory of cultural interests and aims that is not only consistent with Whitehead's orientations but leaves us with a conceptual scheme broad and robust enough to have a greater appreciation for entertainment as a meaningful cultural form. Whitehead writes: "By this term *aim* is meant the exclusion of the boundless wealth of alternative potentiality, and the inclusion of that definite factor of novelty which constitutes the selected way of entertaining those data in that process of unification. The aim is at that complex of feeling which is the enjoy-

ment of those data in that way. “That way of enjoyment” is selected from the boundless wealth of alternatives. It has been aimed at for actualization in that process. Thus the characteristics of life are absolute self-enjoyment, creative activity, aim. Here aim evidently involves the entertainment of the purely ideal so as to be directive of the creative process” (1968, 152). Hall’s analysis of Whitehead’s theory of “persuasive agencies”, as desirable for civilized societies establishes the role entertainment plays as a constructive force of culture. I will emphasize the importance of “civilized society” for Whitehead’s cosmology as presented in Austin Lewis’ reading of Hall’s interpretation, which he calls “a highly competent and generally successful study” (1991).

It may not come as a shock to many that there are disparities between the ways Americans portray themselves through the cultural economy of entertainment and how they actually live. What I call “virtual integration” is a more nuanced explanation, I believe, of how Americans symbolize to the world a commitment to diversity and freedom. By virtual integration I mean to include the nexus of relations we loosely engage with others through sports, movies, music, and so on. In the spreading and maintenance of such polythematic images along with acceleration in the consumption and production of cultural icons and artefacts, entertainment rituals provide ways in which the importance of race, for example, can be exhibited and interpreted creatively or even made negligible. We live in a time where our practical and virtual worlds increasingly overlap. Americans do not rely on the significance of “the place,” in order to express the “ideal” of being American. After all, to be American means that you come from somewhere, but it does not really matter where you come from—the togetherness rather consists in shared emotions, rituals, and values that symbolize freedom. Togetherness in the American sense strives to be radically persuasive! Solidarity based on the soil or territory represents an older, more exclusivist myth which requires conformity on the level of the “natural compulsion,” that Whitehead argues civilized societies aim to transcend.

It is through these cultural dynamics that Americans entertain the world, while appropriating their lives in modes consistent with socio-dramas, competition, metaphors, and other popular tropes. Entertainment is one of the great “adventures” of the American epoch and Adventure is one of the five cultural aims in Whitehead’s social philosophy. He states in *Adventures of Ideas*, “a civilized society is exhibiting the five qualities of Truth, Beauty, Adventure, Art, and Peace” (1967a, 274).

It is my overall contention that American entertainment contributes to each one of these aims in the constituting of culture, which I hope to show in a larger project. My goal in this article is to argue that entertainment can help alleviate or minimize social tensions and sustain patterns of relationships that motivate us to, or generate norms of persuasion. With such a radical empha-

sis on the contingency and precariousness of reality, there is the intellectual burden to accept an irreducible pluralism in Whitehead's philosophy. The nature of actuality is "incurably atomic" and "the universe is always one, since there is no surveying it except from the perspective of an actual entity which unifies it. Also the universe is always new, since the immediate actual entity is the superject of feelings which are essentially novelties" (1978, 231–232). Whitehead's organic sociology presupposes a theory of societies and individual efficacy that is conducive with the complexities of American society, as Austin Lewis explains:

civilized societies do come to manifest various socially peculiar characteristics, in some cases extremely divergent and seemingly strange, as do some Societies, but no social characteristics can ever be more fully exhibited than in the individual persons who enact those peculiarities, and thus the identity of a civilized society is always relative to those enactments. Commenting on American society, Whitehead writes: 'here is no one American [social] experience other than the many experiences of individual Americans.' (Lewis 1991; Whitehead 1947, 53)

Carlin Romano nicely captures the nature of this cultural character in his recent provocative study *America the Philosophical*. It is Romano's claim, and I agree, that Americans exemplify the independent attitudes that popular culture and entertainment symbolizes which is historically unprecedented and

the openness of its dialogue, the quantity of its arguments, the diversity of its viewpoints, the cockiness with which its citizens express their opinions, the vastness of its First Amendment freedoms, the intensity of its hunt for evidence and information, the widespread rejection of truths imposed by authority or tradition alone, the resistance to false claims of justification and legitimacy, the embrace of Net communication with an alacrity that intimidates the world: all corroborate that fact (Romano 2012, 5).

Together with their objects, interaction, and maintenance cultures find their ground of meaning in the world through the "incurable particularity" of the individuals of that society. As Whitehead wrote it is the nature of any grouping that "the composite group illustrates its qualities passively. The activity belongs to the individual actualities" (1967a, 213).

The lexicon and inquiry of reading Whitehead

Reading Whitehead is not a boring endeavor, but it can certainly be challenging. Scholars and specialists alike have found his terminology, style, or textual focus to be foreign and are left with the kind of perplexity that generates more questions than answers. Trained early on as a mathematician, Whitehead always very carefully qualifies the parameters and scope of each inquiry within his philosophical works. Philosophers have developed the sloppy habit of systematizing thought to the grand-stage of an *ism* or worldview. It is

normally assumed that *all* developments in a thinker are meant to be an enlargement of a truer programmatic agenda that encapsulates a response to everything! And each approach eventually comprises a whole magnum opus. This makes sense in an intellectual culture that struggles to take philosophy seriously and thinks in the catchy jargon of popular science and the quest for a GUT or a TOE, which are heavily ideological in their efforts to evade the laborious task of thinking. But as Whitehead warns in the introduction to *Process and Reality*, this procedure is an example of the “overstatement” which is the “chief error” of Western philosophy. He states: “the aim at generalization is sound, but the estimate of success is exaggerated” (1978, 7).

Each inquiry is different and has to be respected in its unique aspects and conditions. Whitehead scholar Randall Auxier explains the common frame of analysis that guides each of his inquiries:

he [Whitehead] carefully qualifies the project and suggests its limits. Each book is an individual inquiry into some important domain of experience. Each book proceeds along the same basic line: he offers a description of the phenomena under investigation—how they *may* be seen (not how they must be seen)—and then subjects that description to a systematic analysis. In no instance does he claim that the initial description (what in *PR* he calls their ‘genetic account’) is the final or the only way of describing these phenomena. In every case he notes that their more detailed and systematic analysis (what in *PR* he calls the ‘co-ordinate account’) is dependent upon and a derivative of the genetic account. In this he follows standard mathematical methods: one must specify the entities and rules before proceeding to their systematic interrelations. There is a great deal of freedom in specifying the entities genetically, but the test that it has been done well is whether interesting systematic relations come to light in the co-ordinate phase of the inquiry. The whole inquiry, both genetic and co-ordinate, is measured against the ways in which it illuminates experience. (2008, 562)

The details of genetic and co-ordinate analysis will be discussed momentarily. What needs to be stressed here is how in typical mathematical and *logical* fashion, Whitehead treats each inquiry as its own “proof” that generates a standard of necessity, coherence (logical rigour), and adequacy as they emerge within the inquiry itself. When reading any of Whitehead’s texts not only are we to let it stand on its own accord but we cannot assume a static or homological use of terminology. The words and phrases, which have become notoriously “Whiteheadian,” are meant to be taken as developmental—the same term may convey different meanings both within and across texts—even when the same word is evoked in alternative inquiries.

It is not to be presupposed that the same forms and structures can be cross-referenced despite the similarity in meanings they may share. Meanings taken in any ontological or scientific sense are tentative. Whitehead’s

philosophy is an open cosmology—fallibilistic, hypothetical, and convinced by the need for multi-realistic revisions. He explicitly subscribes to what he calls the “pragmatic method” as a way to guard against the “chief error” that philosophers commit in their “overstatements.” The method is hypothetical and does not in itself entail any particular ontological position. The search for “first principles” always bumps up against the fact that “words and phrases must be stretched toward a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap” (1978, 4).

Whitehead's method of genetic and co-ordinate analysis stems from his life-long concern with mereotopology, or the relations between parts and wholes. By genetic account Whitehead intends to deal with the description of experience and its initial specifications. As Auxier notes,

genetic *specifications* (or suggested proximal units, relations, or rules) function as what mathematicians call “implicit definitions,” which become more explicit as analysis proceeds. They are “axioms,” not formally but in the original sense of that word, i.e., “thoughts worth thinking.” Once these genetic specifications are adequately explicit (or “definite” in Whitehead's language), the principles of their determination are co-ordinated to create a model of the whole from which the genetic divisions were taken. (2017, 82)¹

Co-ordinate analysis (concrecence of the whole) assumes a unity of relations and terms that the genetic account (transitory determination of the parts) stands to account for as evidentiary justification. Some of the most interesting aspects of Whitehead's philosophy of organism lie in the power of this genetic and co-ordinate methodology! The genetic task pertains to the initial spatializations that involve descriptive principles. As a way of stabilizing the flux of experience, the genetic analysis is a kind of outside-in approach—it concerns itself with the “transition” of actual entities or societies in the mode of causal efficacy. Concrecence relates to the satisfactions or “accretions of value” enjoyed by actual occasions. It is concerned with the inside-out process that involves how an actual entity achieves a certain intensity of feeling. “A satisfaction/superject is some mode of active feeling together of diverse feelings under conditions of contrast productive of the overall intensity that has become possible just here and just now in the creative universe, and does not mean the *demise* but the *relocation* of the activity of patterning contrast originating in the subject whose superject it is” (Jones 2010, 265). Compared with its genetic counterpart, co-ordinate analysis concentrates on the experience of actual entities from a holistic perspective and “sets the scope of the

1. The history of the term “axiom” and its varied meanings is explained in the opening chapters of Goetsch, James R. 1995. *Vico's Axioms: The Geometry of the Human World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

inquiry and their genetic description is limited by that scope” (Auxier and Herstein 2017, 136).²

Whitehead does not follow the customary practice that seeks to establish an architectonic consistency of thought which applies to every analysis pre-determinedly. The task of Whitehead’s radical empiricism is to get at the vitality of experience, in its radical individuality and rhythms of “perpetual perishing” and “objective immortality.” Unlike Rorty’s use of irony as an internal check meant to limit the “final vocabulary” in the narratives we find “edifying,” “Whitehead’s irony is a function of the recognition of the limitations of one’s grasp of philosophic evidence in the construction of systems, the chief point lies in the recognition of irony as a substantive part of the enterprise of thinking” (Hall 1994, 133–134).³ Given the open-ended nature of Whitehead’s thinking there is a strong personal emphasis on open-ended reflection and the life of self-examination. It is no mistake that Whitehead famously said that Western philosophy can be read as a series of footnotes to Plato. From this standpoint, Auxier is correct to suggest that “philosophical knowledge of a subject allows one to recognize important possibilities within the adventure of living which will be overlooked without it, to the great diminishment of life. Human progress, to the extent that it is possible, has always involved the sort of recognition of possible connections that philosophy brings” (Auxier 2008, 563).

The aims of philosophy are of great cultural implication, and not meant merely as epistemological or ontological puzzles to be solved. It is a quest to “promote the art of life,” as a three-fold function of “(i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better” (qtd. in Herstein 2007). Whitehead highlights that “we must distinguish life from mentality. Mentality involves conceptual experience, and is only one variable ingredient in life. The sort of functioning

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2. A little further down they write: “Experience comes together, genetic description specifies, and co-ordinate description restores some portion of the togetherness we lost in specifying, but does so according to some (narratively informed) *purpose*. The effect of the process is to produce a co-ordinated description that approximates our original experience, but as adapted to the aims for which the inquiry was undertaken. The co-ordinate description should exhibit just those characters in experience which are relevant to the defined purposes which produced the inquiry” (Auxier and Herstein 2017, 7, 8–9).
 3. Hall adds: “From Whitehead’s point of view, it would be impossible to make the metaphysician’s assault upon the infinite without a sense of constitutive irony. Further, Whitehead’s process metaphysics depends upon the notion of “cosmic epochs”—cosmological orders defining the general character of the world which change over time and thus relativize the order and structure of things, making it necessary for the metaphysical realist to remain ironic not only about his contingent beliefs but about the contingent cosmos as well” (1973, 134).

here termed *conceptual experience* is the entertainment of possibilities for ideal realization in abstraction from any sheer physical realization. The most obvious example of conceptual experience is the entertainment of alternatives. Life lies below this grade of mentality. Life is the enjoyment of emotion, derived from the past and aimed at the future. It is the enjoyment of emotion which was then, which is now, and which will be then. This vector character is of the essence of such entertainment" (1968, 166–167, emphasis original).

Enjoyment and the prereflexive structures of entertainment

Entertainment involves the common content of cultural energy that adds to our aesthetic, economic, and semiotic experiences through various instruments, rituals, and genres. Its spread has contributed to the differentiation and polycentric production and consumption of social agencies, artifacts, and values. As concerned with expression, entertainment has spawned a kind of "cultural economy" that is irreducible to any of the traditional "symbolic forms" as expressed in Cassirer's or Whitehead's philosophies of cultural interests.⁴ As a personal partaking in the drama of such a cultural economy, entertainment represents those interests that defy being reduced to simply amusement or consumerism. It can be better defined as a "cultural poetics." "Any culture possesses a common set of models prescribing our ways of seeing, of thinking, and of relating to ourselves, to each other and to the shared surroundings. Living in a culture very much amounts to having acquired this common repertoire of narratives and cognitive forms that can be used to configure facts. These collective techniques and principles enabling the production of cultural images of reality may be called with Louis Montrose's felicitous term, a 'cultural poetics'" (Montrose 1989, 15; Tygstrup and Holm 2012, 200).

According to Langer it was Whitehead who defined entertainment "as what one does with one's freedom" (Langer 1953, 405). Entertainment is today a popular form of contemporary culture conveyed through the rituals of sports, movies, music, video games, and so on as a symbol of freedom. Entertainment is grounded on the contrast between high and low culture and, in the past half century, these domains have engaged each other in subtle and novel ways with the contemporary "artist," as defined by Andy Warhol, being an example of this dynamic sense (Danto 2008). Langer explains at the end of *Feeling and Form* the peculiar nature of this freedom that entertainment embodies. She writes,

entertainment is any activity without direct practical aim, anything people attend to simply because it interests them. Interest, not amusement, nor even pleasure, is its watchword. Social conversation, table talk, is entertainment.

4. I am referring to language, myth, religion, science, art, history, economics, and so on. See Cassirer 1968; Hall 1970.

It may be the gross humor of the smoking room, the chatter of the cocktail party, the famous breakfast conversation of Oliver Wendell Holmes or the more famous table talk of Mohammed. Entertainment is not in itself a value-category. It includes both pastime and the satisfaction of imperious mental needs; but, trivial or serious, it is always the wok of the mind (1953, 405).

This “work of the mind” involves relations of meaning at the level of feelings and emotions, what Whitehead calls “prehensions.” How we take in and appropriate our experience is not primarily cognitive, that is to say it does not depend on the use of concepts or the formation of language. That is why Whitehead complains in *Process and Reality* about the “overintellectualist bias prevalent among philosophers, [who] assume that emotional feelings are necessarily derivative from sensations” (1978, 141).⁵

Entertainment rituals are “propositional” in character, in Whitehead’s peculiar sense of that term (1927, 65–68), acting as generic contrasts and “lures for feeling” (1978, 25, 87). Generic contrasts are of two types for Whitehead, those that are specific to the experience and others that are without exception in any experience. Unlike “ultimate contrasts,” such as one would find in traditional substance metaphysics, there is the potential that the generic contrasts will *not* be a part of the experience itself (it is “negatively prehended”). As pervasive as they might appear in contemporary society, high and low culture come together to form such efficacious generic contrasts. In the sense of *enjoyment* regulative of an actual occasion, Whitehead deals with these generic contrasts while emphasizing the importance of self-determination or authentic freedom.

Enjoyment is something that can only be ontologically accounted for on the level of individuation, given the predicament of the entity coming to the experience. Common characteristics of entertainment do not wholly determine the experience at even a generic level. The emotional content in the experience integrates with transmuted forms as additional components to be (self)-determined (1978, 85, 101–102, 251–254). What a percipient entity brings to an experience, by means of its inherited historical route, conditions the intensity of the enjoyment felt. Therefore, the percipient’s value of enjoyment is an open question, depending in part on the role of self-valuation as aversions and aversions.⁶ In vernacular language, there are no wholly novel

5. See Lewis: “Thus rooted in human emotional and instinctive experience, human social relations are not principally rational or artificially instituted, but instead are founded on natural feelings of accommodation and mutual beneficence” (1991, 17).

6. In her introduction to *Religion in the Making*, Judith Jones writes: “thus, every entity is an occasion of experience whose existence is fundamentally a self-valuation, or, better, the emergence of self out of a scene of valuational feeling [...] The “self-value of the creative act” is both creativity and creature, agency and

perceptions; all are shot through with the inertia of past valuations. Enjoyment refers to the way concrete experience leaves open the “might-have-been” of experience. Entertainment can fulfil a larger role of achieving higher levels of aesthetic intensities or unities under contrast that cannot be captured in the language and commodification of crass economics. Unconscious or spontaneous changes in the rituals of entertainment, for example, contribute to more intense variations of the same forms. This transformation to more sophisticated forms of entertainment is a type of “partaking” in the pursuit of cultural “enjoyment” through “adventure,” to express it in Whitehead’s language.⁷ Whitehead adopts the phrase “twilight zone” in the section on propositional feelings in *Process and Reality*, while giving an account of the kinds of valuation discerned in realizing the subjective forms:

the subjective forms of propositional feelings are dominated by valuation, rather than by consciousness. In a pure propositional feeling the logical subjects have preserved their indicated particularity, but have lost their own real modes of objectification. The subjective form lies in the *twilight zone* between pure physical feeling and the clear consciousness which apprehends the contrast between physical feeling and imagined possibility. (1978, 263; emphasis added)

The function of enjoyment (in the ontological sense) through entertainment lies in enhancing the subjective intensity of actual entities, adding novelty to their predicative patterns. In terms of social institutions, this novelty can encourage us to reinterpret and redesign those rituals that may or may not be fundamental for the formation of our personal identities and values. Experiences of entertainment may improve on sustaining levels of individual enjoyment necessary for our cultural development. In this light, entertainment is assumed to be a crucial aspect of civilizational development within societies, where “the members recognize each other as individuals exercising the enjoyment of emotions, passions, comforts and discomforts, perceptions, hopes, fears, and purposes” (Whitehead 1968a, 10). There is an authenticity which is spawned not only in the subject enjoying the entertainment but in the mediums or gadgets through which it is conveyed. When talking about

outcome of process as described in the present work (1996, 102). The key to understanding how this conception in any way meets the need for an explanation of the agency of creative synthesis is Whitehead’s claim that “There is no such thing as bare value” (1996, 103). It is hard to see how “bare value” would mark any advance over “bare fact” or “mere fact” in explaining the activity of synthetic unity which yields character for any actuality. The “specific mode of concretion of the diverse elements constituting any actual entity is a function of the specific diversity involved” (1996, xxvi-xxvii).

7. These two notions play a crucial role in the matters addressed in *Adventures and Ideas* (Whitehead 1967).

the “tameness” or “vagueness” found in artistic attempts to conform Truth and Appearance, Whitehead observes qualities which are applicable to entertainment. The percipient of strong experiences ignites a network of other empowered entities, similar to a technological function. In entertainment, new rituals and genres emerge setting established interests into unfamiliar movements to which they would otherwise not be exposed, that present the possibility of being improved by re-transformation.

High and low culture in themselves develop “system[s] of objects that as entertained in a succession of occasions adapted for its enjoyment, quickly builds up a system of apparent objects with vigorous characters” (Whitehead 1968a, 267). Prior to the formation of novel hybrids cultural tropes stand in their own originality where, as Whitehead notes, “its conformal subjective form is the freedom of enjoyment derived from the enjoyment of freedom” (1968a, 258). Entertainment is a cultural form of expression that articulates itself largely in a non-cognitive manner and generates a wide-ranging scope of expressions and meanings that as a potential template for human experiential valuations. Satisfaction or enjoyment “are not conscious phenomena for Whitehead, they are *subjective*; and for him the goal of creative process is the achievement of a drop of subjectivity: an event whose structure is internally self-conditioned as well as externally other-determined” (Kraus 1998, 8). Entertainment has the potential to foster a mythic consciousness of poly-thematic rituals in humanistic ways through the mediation and use of technical-functional applications of enjoyment.

One of the underappreciated achievements of Whitehead’s philosophical contributions is the pivotal role he recognizes that entertainment plays, both metaphysically and aesthetically. It has been the case—I believe to its detriment—that philosophers have largely dismissed the power of entertainment as insignificant or an unphilosophical activity of human experience. In a personal testimony, Whitehead suggests that philosophy start from the “simple-minded notions issuing from ordinary” social relations. Whitehead wants to appreciate and understand the complex intricacies of social engagement in ways that do not overmoralize the important relations to be derived therefrom. “The point that I now wish to make is that our enjoyment in the theatre was irrelevant to moral considerations applied to the performance. Of course smugglers are naughty people, and Carmen is carefree as to niceties of behavior [*sic*]. But while they are singing their parts and dancing on the stage, morals vanish and beauty remains. I am not saying that moral considerations are always irrelevant to the stage. In fact, sometimes they are the very topic of the play, especially of modern plays. But the retreat of morals in the presence of music, and of dancing, and the general gaiety of the theatre, is a fact very interesting to philosophers and very puzzling to the official censors” (Whitehead 1968, 13). This is good advice for a culture saturated in tabloid

gossip or salacious scandals about the mega-tragedies of its heroes and stars. We do well not to exaggerate the sensitivity and gravity of moral principles being dressed up under the guise of media hype and sensationalism. Besides, Whitehead understands the dangers of “hypermorality” acting as a form of *compulsion* that aggressively “plays into the hands of defiance and moral entropy” (Sloterdijk 2016, 433). To remain open by means of self-persuasion is to entertain, in the active mode of hospitable fashion or reserving judgment. Entertainment is to “imagine alternative illustrations” of the concrete data, which includes comparing “a variety of issues” (Whitehead 1968, 76). Although it is beyond the scope of this article, I contend that Plato’s rich, broad notion of Appearance is more clearly articulated by Whitehead’s use of the concept entertainment.

Consistent with Whitehead’s philosophical orientation, German philosopher and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk’s moral imperative to enter a life of practicing or training exercises guided by the motivations of self-improvement and self-redesign puts a heavier emphasis on persuasion than compulsion. Indeed, Sloterdijk recognizes how compulsive-persuasive contrasts are required equipment in the ascetically committed workouts of personal discipline. But one of the primary goals of advanced civilized societies is to multiply and enhance self-directed initiatives, which includes the power to accept or reject—in a word, to question!—established traditions of morals, mannerisms, and so on. The tension between the two is never exhausted but must be rearranged and continuously negotiated. The forcefulness of outside change, should be overcompensated by responses driven by the internal drives and desires of the trainee (Sloterdijk’s term for subject in the modern philosophical sense). In his book *You Must Change Your Life*, Sloterdijk contends that Nietzsche is the “rediscoverer” of this science of General Ascetology and provides an initial account of what the shift looks like from compulsory to “non-dominatory” agencies, albeit through a genealogy of morals.

The sports athlete is the prototype of the current cultural scene which Sloterdijk calls an era of “athletic renaissance.” From a philosophical vantage point, there is a double stimulus that drives the motif of our age that must go “beyond Wittgenstein, by moving on from the language game theory to a universal theory of practice and asceticism, and beyond Foucault, by developing his analysis of discursive forms further into a de-restricted disciplinics” (2013, 132). There is a call for the “expansion of the practice zone” that concern how and why humans “have an effect on themselves, work on themselves and makes examples of themselves” (Sloterdijk 2013, 110). Ascetics pertains to the individual’s “acrobatic programme,” which entails the self-purposive techniques of “training, discipline, education, and self-design” (Sloterdijk 2013, 113). We find a similar approach in Whitehead’s theory of cultural value since his philosophy appreciates how we are compelled to deal

with problems, then seek out short-run solutions: “it appears that to resolve a given conflict may not be the Good; indeed, it may be better to have conflict than to resolve it. It may well be the case that a feeling of change (as in the recognition of a problem and the interest in its future solutions) is more satisfactory than the feeling of the resolution of the difficulty” (Goheen 1951, 456). Cultures are being increasingly viewed as immunitarian complexes for individual acrobats engaged in educational, moral, political, and many other forms of self-operation. The distinction between “own and foreign” is the broad characterization Sloterdijk employs to define and divide sacred (friend) from profane (foe) conditions and activities. From fascists to neo-liberals, and all who are in between, everyone is committed to personal projects that seek to design, implement, and secure global immune networks which are “co-operative, transactional, convivial dimensions of human existence: the solidaristic system guarantees legal security, provision for existence and feelings of kinship beyond one’s own family; the symbolic system provides security of worldview, compensation for the certainty of death, and cross-generational constancy of norms” (2013, 449).⁸

Entertainment as ritual and cultural transmutation

To appropriate our experiences through entertainment fosters an imaginative free-play between our actual and possible selves manifested in our factual lives. Thought struggles and fails to capture fully the degrees to which entertainment involves the transmission of feelings. The effect goes below the level of consciousness, but not below the level of imagination. Imagination trades on feeling as well as conscious decision. This is why Whitehead is in agreement with Kant’s move in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, despite Kant’s own cognitive bias, to account for the pre-cognitive and affective relations of experience.⁹ In our imaginative capacities there is nascent hope that more people will be able to resonate with the suffering of others through empathy.

8. The allusion to medical and biological terminology is not accidental, as Sloterdijk goes on to explain: “at this [cultural] level too, the definition applies that “life” is the success phase of an immune system. Like biological immune systems, the solidaristic and symbolic systems can also pass through phases of weakness, even near-failure. These express themselves in human self-experience and world-experience as an instability of value consciousness and an uncertainty as to the resilience of our solidarities. Their collapse is tantamount to collective death.”

9. Whitehead comments: “thus in the organic philosophy Kant’s “*Transcendental Aesthetic*” becomes a distorted fragment of what should have been his main topic. The datum includes its own interconnections, and the first stage of the process of feeling is the reception into the responsive conformity of feeling whereby the datum, which is mere potentiality, becomes the individualized basis for a complex unity of realization” (1978, 113).

Social capital is more adequately realized with not just the commodification or moralizing of entertainment but also in emphasizing its cathartic powers to provide an emotional cleansing and possibly even a sense of fulfilment. People usually speak of music as therapeutic and certainly it can be, but there is more. The various tropes of pop cultural icons and images stimulate discourses and activities, creates the complexes of symbols and interpretations that can help to ease social apathy and ignorance. From the richness of transmuted entertainment rituals, we will be better able to navigate a more pluralistic cultural terrain. The social process of experiencing entertainment can be used as a soundboard to consider the inherent limitations in our own premonitions and views. Those who are entertained are engaged in a particular modality that may or may not lead to a conscious alteration of those who consume it, but it alters the culture. Americans, regardless of differences in backgrounds and talents, can contribute to entertainment rituals and the distribution of cultural hybrids.

American identity in the twenty-first century is still haunted by racial consciousness, including blind hatreds and ideological creeds. Most American cities remain divided and mirror overwhelmingly segregated demographics. While attending schools in which most of the students come from similar backgrounds, students living in monolithic communities, it will be very difficult for such students to resist a crude parochialism. My aim is to suggest that this is very much the case for American minorities as well. As a global image, Americans represent a cultural capital second to none from the coolness of style and dress, to the precariousness of social status—just as quickly as one can become bankrupt and forgotten, it is similarly as easy to gain fame and success, even multiple times over. Given how various social conditions shape the US, the importance of entertainment cannot be overlooked in maintaining the pluralism that Americans claim to value so highly. I interpret entertainment as a type of “partaking” in cultural rituals in ways that allow for freedom and do not press for an over-investment of selves as participants or spectators. It appears that the sharing of culture occurs more through virtualizations of high and low cultures spawning novel hybrids in entertainment, as Americans—minorities and the status quo alike—serve the causes of freedom, openness, and tolerance.

When it comes to touting an orientation toward the world as open, many exaggerate the extent to which they live out a commitment to the love of freedom. How Americans actually live and socialize may be misconstrued, given the richness of its varied symbolisms and values. Appearances often do not match the realities. Racial stigmas persist more in Americans’ actual experience, but ironically less in their virtual integrations. There are both positive individual effects of such experiences, and various groups are also enfranchised from the sense of contributing to the total cultural worth. One’s

own ethnic or national pride can be channelled in modified and healthier ways through popular culture. And in the case of minorities, such rituals give them a genuine claim of participating in their respective cultures. Catharsis in such cases does not mean that we follow some type of fixed pattern.

In achieving the catharsis we are able to bring out the hidden relations within the experienced duration. We are able to make explicit what is implicit in the process, giving us a transformative claim. Despite being unknown there is the possibility that it can be foreseen within the aesthetic satisfaction for the betterment of the enjoyer. Not just looking at the moral judgment interpreting one's actions, my analysis is concerned also with aesthetic contingencies in the mode of what I call *aesthetic* irony. The cathartic effects from entertainment rituals cannot be calculated nor are they necessary for the outcome of the process. Instead they can be hauntingly precarious, bordering on the strange or the bizarre involving contingent as well as necessary factors transforming felt expectations. When one attends a movie or a sporting game there is a sense in which what is supposed to happen is generally known and largely predictable. The enthusiasm or excitement lies in what "might be", or the mode of the possible prevalent in the partaking of the ritual.

Just as one can watch any sports event from the comfort of their palm, so too do we just as easily enter the lives of stars and identify, empathize, and even mourn with would-be strangers. In the throes of entertainment, pastimes like reality TV have risen to the level of public consciousness. From Pawn Stars to Hoarders and Hollywood Housewives, Americans appear to have a knack for turning anything into entertainment, even things we would otherwise not find amusing. But more importantly, I believe entertainment rituals as externalizations of our collective imagination become bearers of moral ideals. Debates over social values or historically polarizing issues are dealt with in multidimensional ways through social media and popular culture. Images, both audio and visual, permeate our ways of communication and interpretation. A book will always do, but it will be hard pressed to avoid being turned into a movie with a soundtrack to boot. If the impact is really felt we may even rise to the anticipatory mood that suspects "when and how are they going to make the sequel(s)?" A medium like the internet has given us a window, a large and perhaps one the most penetrating throughout human history, to glimpse into the civilized world and all its immediacy. This has unquestionably led to the aggrandizement of the trivial and superficial in the eyes of many and this may be an adequate characterization for all we know. But under the conditions of cultural hybrids social values become "warped," so to speak. Traditional high and low cultures historically generated stable structures of novelty and balanced complexity that mirrored more the natural processes. It took time for things to catch on, become popular, and once they did there was a legacy they achieved. The social pioneers of yes-

terday built libraries and engaged in other philanthropic enterprises to build stronger communities with a lasting impact for generations to come. But what we find in today's world of pop culture and reality TV are wider degrees of influence giving way to possibly less stable and more dynamic forms of intensity, which tend to be short-lived.

As William Irwin rightly observes: "Much high art [and low too] seems to be written or created "for the ages," whereas popular art seems to be written simply for the age, or, really, the moment, like a sandcastle to be enjoyed before the tide wipes it away" (2007, 10). The flux of our world impresses on us the sentiment that it may have been good when it lasted but it doesn't last very long and is usually quickly forgotten. The expansion of cultural tools and agencies, along with the precariousness of social relations has enhanced the anxiety that calls upon us to negotiate and seek out ways to be to persuade and be persuaded by others.

Whitehead's philosophical orientations encapsulate the qualities of innovativeness and "the recognition of finitude as inherent in the ever-not-quite character of existence allows for the confrontation with a fundamental fact of cultural existence in contemporary society" (Hall 1973, 195). The use of aesthetic processes as the lens for the study of culture and its impetus to persuasion shares many features with the nature of experience in general. Hall rightly observes: "Art proclaims what Whiteheadian philosophy proclaims: existence is transitory; individual attainments are beyond complete enjoyment; beauty is tragic—but beyond the ephemerality of the aesthetic experience, beyond tragic beauty, there is the sense of Peace [via persuasion] which prevents cynicism and overcomes despair" (ibid.). It is in this sense that Whitehead's aim of Peace can be grasped in the forms of entertainment which convey a trust in the efficacy of Beauty and the Truth that life does not come without pain, loss, sacrifice (1967a, 285).

This is an issue which Whitehead takes up in addressing art as a cultural function and the challenge of how to balance novelty and germaneness when so much emphasis is placed on the importance of technique. The social worth of entertainment can be interpreted in many ways but what is of interest here is how it brings together traditional and progressive forms or values in novel ways, which adds to our aesthetic intensity of cultural data, processes, and satisfactions.

Hybrids emerge in the negotiations or compromises between the transitions and concrescences of the individual components as built from their past instantiations. Entertainment contributes to the actualizations of peace through the way it presents opportunities to confront or release our emotions by way of the cathartic, tragic, and other types of artistic modes of rhythmic enlivening. There is an emotionalizing affect that may be nurtured by song, movie, or competition in ways that temper violence, or solicit anti-social and

destructive forms of aggression by more civilized and peaceful means. People turn to the rituals of entertainment for more than pleasure or enjoyment, they also seek to act in ways that transcend the limits of nature conveyed by force and to rely upon the powers of persuasion, which is the focus of the final section.

Virtual integration and the role of persuasive agencies

Compulsion is two-fold: the “iron compulsion of nature” and the compulsion of the “ruler-ruled relationships.” Under such crude alternatives the determinations must either be accepted or rejected as when we act on a presumed fate. This interpretation assumes nature to have limited and thereby necessitated rather than novel possibilities. It explains natural processes that exhibit a minimization of freedom as it is realized in the valuation and action of subjective forms. Whitehead views the development of civilization and culture as the way we overcome human ignorance of nature and make possible a stronger sense of freedom.

Persuasion, on the other hand, is not guided by outside or external influence as the primary source of motivation. It is the rather the other way around. Persuasion emphasizes the inside-out relations respective of the dignity of persons, which leaves us with the freedom and responsibility to propagandize ourselves. Whitehead looks to the importance of intensity and harmony as required but never guaranteed conditions for the upsurge of civilization, which seeks to overcome the compulsion. As Hall notes, “there is no complete transcendence of these compulsions, but the growth of persuasive agencies leads to cooperative efforts to co-ordinate activities so as to achieve a conquest over the compulsion of nature” (1973, 104).

In his discussion on Commerce, Whitehead says, “in its most general sense, the commerce of mankind involves every species of interchange which proceeds by way of mutual persuasion.” And later on, he applies his broad notion of commerce to the community of “intercourse between individuals and between social groups [that] takes one of two forms, force or persuasion. Commerce is the great example of intercourse in the way of persuasion” (1967a, 70, 83). Clearly, Whitehead is talking beyond the commercializations and moralizations so common today to something more like the maintenance of a “cultural economy.” The practice of commerce came about once “large-scale societies arose.” At this stage of development vast levels of cultural objects and processes interconnect in trivial, novel, or subtle ways.

Under such infiltration emerge the structures necessary for the diversification of persuasive agencies to organize and express the intellectual and physical adventures that unfold into rhythmic novel patterns. Seen from this perspective of overcoming the compulsions of nature, Hall writes of Whitehead’s philosophy of culture: “The history of civilization is the story, if it be

told from a grand perspective, of self-surpassing perfections serving as the goal for the civilizational process" (1973, 104). Persuasive agencies intensify our subjective forms into a strong sense of freedom that seeks to overcome the "compulsions of nature." In these publicly shared institutions and groups, individuals not only find a means to express themselves, but the categories of class, race, or mythic consciousness are made to act as "lures" instead of commands that one must obey or rebuke, or based on some inflexible conception of the natural order. The transmedia of American entertainment mediates these activities through the negotiated autonomy of individuals—it signifies "the slow development of the dominance of persuasion over force in man's self-understanding" (Hall 1973, 104).

One may be able to *coerce* others politically, economically or religiously, through influence, money, or dogma but this results in static transformations of psychosocial attitudes, rather than in dynamic, longer-lasting changes. One will have to be able to *persuade* culturally—that is, whether coolness or some other popular fad be accepted or rejected solely on the merits of an individual's preferences regardless of influence or agenda which demands a mutual respect of equal worth. Entertainment is the vessel that serves this aim, as pointed out above in Langer's quote from Whitehead. "What one does with one's freedom" recognizes an excess of meaning and energy that is the ground of culture and the adventures and satisfactions of these agencies culminate in new types of relationship, that were previously unforeseen. Cultural hybrids and virtual integration convey the importance and worth of entertainment to the new order of social networks of persuasion being established globally. A Go-Fund-Me charity drive for hurricane victims or the use of social media platforms by foreign governments to manipulate and *coerce* voters into delivering desirable election results provide contemporary erotic and tragic examples of how persuasive agencies can be employed or performed. In the aim of persuasion there is enormous potential for relations that were previously negatively apprehended, or excluded to be transformed from incompatibles into contrasts, which signifies "growth" for Whitehead (1978, 100). It exemplifies the reality of change or "creative advance" in the universe as "the realization of what is not and may be" (1978, 32). One can test new roles and come in contact with others in novel ways due to the radically altered conditions that virtualized experience entails.

Persuasion occurs in the sense that socially we are lured to enfranchise the historical "have-nots," while they too are moved to reconcile animosities and work to solidify the aims of cultural inclusion and opportunity. Mainstream accounts of American history usually fail to attribute adequate recognition of the contribution from marginalized and disadvantaged groups. But minorities remain at the frontier of media, such as sports, movies, music, and so on. The entertaining semblance of inclusiveness has sustained a hope and healing

reflective of American identity. We cannot account for this identity on the basis of social factors and demographics alone. Economically, politically, or even militarily there may be no difference between our virtual exchanges. There is a strong sense in which these areas of communication and technology interpenetrate each other, stimulating enhanced social interaction. The cultural matrices of American entertainment promote wider nexūs of possible identities and values which are contributing to a less estranged or alienated people.

Media outlets, sports teams, or the cinema industry do more than just entertain. They act as persuasive agencies whose meaning or message can be aestheticised or moralized. It is left to the percipient to propagandise from shifting modes of interpretation through an internal dialogue and dialogue with others. Expressions of these stories get conveyed through various mediums, agencies, and for precarious purposes. The values expressed may differ between artistic tropes or ritualistic processes. Solidarity is then built in ways that aim to be expansive rather than contractive. Such categories as race, language, soil, or creed are minimized under this cultural economy of transmedia compared with the historical significance they were granted. They are not taken to be determinations of nature, but “lures” that persuade us as a symbolic-function that can either be accepted or rejected. These categories are not read under a substance-based or “subject-predicate” logic and metaphysics in Whitehead’s philosophy, where they act as “compulsions of nature.” Rather they are presented as live options we can choose to emulate, such as lifestyles or sets of values that convey the identities and interests of Blackness or being a Red Neck, for instance. One’s loyalties may be justified because of certain associations, but at this level of cultural appropriation there is a sincere effort at self-formation and self-enjoyment—it is the orientation of personal and social adventure and peace. Entertainment plays a key role in this regard and it is no mystery why American culture has such wide appeal despite its hypocrisy or faults. The unique aspect of entertainment rituals tends to be its willingness to promote, much in the same way as does art, new forms or genres and it encourages others to practice or perform the same rituals in whatever way a group or institution sees fit. This recognizes the importance of custom to every community and seeks to realize the freedom which will allow for each to decide according to its own discretion how these activities of emotional and aesthetic social interaction should be conducted.

Segregation in American schools, neighbourhoods, and prisons is still widespread. In practical life, Americans often self-segregate. The segregated practices amongst different groups attest to a lack of openness in this regard. When it comes to the equality for all people, Americans may promote this politically or economically, to the rest of the world, but they live differently. US demographics and the resulting race relations lag far behind their cultural

objects on this matter of integration and the related cultivation of freedom. But this persisting segregation seems to be more a result of inherited social conditions and premonitions rather than a result of deliberate efforts—unlike traditional discrimination these forms of social alienation seem to be more self-imposed.

Entertainment displays a sort of “saving power” because, as Langer contends, “we give ourselves up to their contemplation spontaneously, eagerly, without any other intent than to hear and see and be enthralled” (1953, 405). It can reveal these paradoxical senses of being American and more. This gives us the ability to put ourselves in the place of the other intensifying emotional depth, at the conscious and unconscious levels. Popular culture attests to the increasing sacrifices and successes of minorities as indispensable pioneers in furthering the causes of “America” (the ideal, not the place). Without the growing enthusiasm for music, movies, and sports opportunities, for example, how would African Americans and other non-whites believe it really is possible to make something for themselves? These rituals have brought pride to the disinherited, to people otherwise excluded from the privilege surrounding them. Historically, issues such as racial relations had been settled authoritatively without any meaningful widespread debates or interpretations. It was left to tradition or the leading customs of the day to decide and sanction the legitimate practices. Not something that is left to be worked out publicly. That such stern and rigid enforcement of cultural norms have been relaxed is evidenced in a recent *Duck Dynasty*-A&E controversy, or Paula Dean’s fallout for her use of the N-word around past employees and efforts to organize a plantation-style wedding, and countless others. We stand at a crossroad where volatile issues like racism or gay marriage are brought to the fore of public discourse through a plurality of persuasive agencies. And we are forced to look anew at our preconceived identities and loyalties when strangers come together in heterotopic places, which manifest high and low cultural status as co-conditions, and allow for the exchange and appropriation of them under the possibilities of entertainment. As we integrate and distinguish those multifaceted aspects of our cultural terrain we can only hope to find some who may emulate or inspire the examples set by one of the greatest entertainers the world has ever known. “Shakespeare fully understood that art should entertain as well as move us, frighten us, educate us and so forth. Half his audience were illiterate! His plays beautifully combined the high *and* the low” (Evans 2013).

I have attempted to argue that entertainment not only increasingly makes up the rituals of our daily lives, but it also serves as a wider source of cultural rituals, aims, and meanings. It adds to the notion of Whitehead’s theory of cultural interests by contributing to and making “a great deal of room for expansion and differentiation *within each* interest” (Hall 1973, 153, empha-

sis added). Entertainment pertains to the complex of cultural expression in the various modalities of human experience and in our sports, movies, or music we “evoke a continuing interest in the criticism and revision of concepts based upon novel experiences and more subtle rationalizations” (ibid. 127). This is the impact entertainment has at the cognitive levels of consciousness, what Whitehead calls the “higher phases of experience” (1978, 266-280). But its impact can be felt at the pre-cognitive stages of charged or discharged emotional feeling and the imaginative feeling for (self-) valuation. There can be a sufficiency of satisfaction that is experienced as a pre-reflexive mode of subjectivity.

As we have seen, the symbols and artefacts of cultural data, which entertainment enhances, are “lures for feeling” that symbolize persuasion and different levels of generality. All cultural objects have this character with the general aim to promote or narrow the intensity of experiences that produce instances of (dis-) harmony. The narrow versions of traditional high and low cultures are being challenged through the growth and peace of entertainment rituals. Too often historically, when nations or people have exported their rituals it was in hopes of assimilation or outright imperialism. Superior or rituals and symbols revered exceptionally are traditionally produced by authorities who claim exclusive ownership over how they must be felt, practiced, and propagandised. These sentiments are expressed from both the high and low cultural strata. But if a people or culture takes itself too seriously they will verge on cultivating exclusivist myths, substituting the love of freedom as fundamental for some predestined requisite, some *eschaton* immanent in an epic account of itself. Unlike the openness cherished in pluralistic entertainment, such cultures will take excessive pride in rituals, which will be seen as aggressive all-or-nothing stances over others, and not simply a personal partaking by the individual in its “solitariness.”

The reiteration of habits, customs, or traditions without adventure or the propagation of intensity manifests weak or germane forms of freedom. The exclusivist myths mentioned above seek to secure the redundant rhythms of the natural order in deterministic fashion, as *compulsions* of nature. They see the free exchange of cultural enactments and information as a threat to this stale order. Whitehead’s progressivism is not as “naïve as it might seem,” however because he recognizes many “barren periods of existence” in the history of civilization. “The progressivism of Whitehead is *metaphysically* significant and is, of course, of some significance to the individual contemplating the entire span of human existence. *But there is no guarantee that one’s life can possess the intensity and harmony of civilized experience*” (Hall 1973, 104–105, emphasis added). Such a view would be inconsistent with Whitehead’s treatment of permanence and persuasion rooted in process and creativity. The civilized aim of Adventure entails not only an emphasis on novelty, but enter-

tainment and “wandering” are equally as conducive to the persuasive way of life:

mankind has wandered from the trees to the plains, from the plains to the seacoast, from climate to climate, from continent to continent, and from habit of life to habit of life. When man ceases to wander, he will cease to ascend in the scale of being. Physical wandering is still important, but greater still is the power of man's spiritual adventures—adventures of thought, adventures of passionate feeling, adventures of aesthetic experience. A diversification among human communities is essential for the provision of the incentive and material for the Odyssey of the human spirit. Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. Men require of their neighbours [*sic.*] something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration. We must not expect, however, all the virtues. We should even be satisfied if there is something odd enough to be interesting: (Whitehead 1967c, 207)

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