A Beautiful Fun Good Life

David Bishop
Independent scholar, Cambridge, Massachusetts
wheelofideals@gmail.com

abstract: Starting with good, we're led to God, the ultimate standard of good. Then, realizing that even this absolute, God standard can't be absolutely pinned down, we swing back toward the good standard. Some rules seem self-evident. Through a combination of reason, intuition, and observation—as we learn to understand them—they sound reasonable. Humanism is not physicalism. Free will shaping events, mind moving matter, violates no physical law. Some people lack free will all the time; all people lack free will some of the time; but all people can't lack free will all the time or people would not be people. Is a beautiful fun good life all we have to have?

keywords: good, physicalism, free will, reason, intuition.

1. From God to Good

Humanism grows from the same roots as religion—reason and intuition—but adds careful observation. As humanism rises, more people share the pain, and the great awakening, of losing their faith. If you grew up believing in God, the news of his death may come in a born-again experience: a revelation like Paul's on the road to Damascus. But for most people, that's not how it happens. More often, the balloon of faith deflates not in a loud pop but through a slow leak. Even as it leaks it can still reinflate, at least temporarily, when danger, suffering, and death get so bad we need hope for supernatural help to get through. Or it may be revived by awe, wonder, and gratitude.

Saying you've been born again normally means you've gone from nonbelief to belief, or from the wrong belief in God to the right one. Most believers wouldn't call being converted to nonbelief a born-again experience. Maybe a dead-again experience. But going from belief to nonbelief, suddenly or gradually, is like being born into a new life. This new faith in God's nonbeing may cut you off from friends, family, and community. If you grew up believing that morality is built on God's commandments, you may feel that when God dies, morality dies with him—especially as religious communites that teach, enforce, and reinforce morality die out. To lose your faith may convince you that all is permitted and lead you into a life of crime. But as nonbelievers come out of the closet, and become respected members of society, many prove as dependably moral as the most faithful believer. What is their morality? Where does it come from? What makes it right? How do we disagree about what our moral rules, our commandments, should be? Can this more open questioning help bind us in a common quest?

Finding out that you've made a mistake is like waking up from a dream. You see you were mistaken, and you now see reality as it truly is. Plato's cave was a place of mistaken views, where people saw shadows and thought they were real beings. Plato saw how we make progress by discovering our mistakes, seeing the truth we were missing before. He envisioned this progress as an upward climb. You climb out of the cave of ignorance into the sunlight of knowledge. But the metaphor also points the other way: finding out that what you thought was true really wasn't can be taken as a warning: no matter how clearly you now seem to see the truth, you could be wrong. You don't emerge into the full sunlight of absolute truth. With our modern humility about truth, we realize that others may know something we don't. Values like tolerance and open-mindedness are easier to sustain in rich countries with a history of free debate. In the rich west, as we become more secure, we become more pluralistic: we unite in pluralism. We climb higher, toward more wealth, peace, and knowledge, including knowledge of our own fallibility. When we step on a loose rock and fall down, we learn from that false step, as best we can, to get back on the upward climb.

It may take time to realize you've made a mistake. Some never do. From an absolute truth, like Plato's, we jump to an absolute God, in the person of the one God. Logic leads us to look for absolutes. When we see good people, good acts, good things, our minds climb upward to what good is, and whether what seems good to us is really good. Starting with good, we're led to God, the ultimate standard of good. Then, realizing that even this absolute standard can't be absolutely pinned down, we go from God back to good. Plato's idea of the form, or absolute meaning, of good gives way to Wittgenstein's fuzzier picture: a spectrum of family resemblances among the uses of the word. The rock bottom foundation, or the absolute peak of the mountain, may disappear from the humanist view, yet somehow the humanist still has a sense of direction—of up and down. A believer who tries to better follow God's will, and a humanist who just tries to do better, can be hard to tell apart. What do they see? What is this ideal of good that shimmers before us like a vision? What gives the mountain its slope, so we know which way is up? Somehow we imagine—we help create—an idea, somewhat fuzzy, of good.

The top of the mountain is obscured by the cloud of unknowing. Yet we can see the upward path ahead of us. We see the slope and we feel the difference: gravity pulls down and therefore points up. It takes more effort to follow the upward path. We have reasons for believing this way is up, yet somewhere reasons come to an end. Reasons get weight from their rightness and also from feeling, emotion, intuition. And intuition can go wrong. We can step up onto a loose rock, and fall down.

Many believers think God's absolute commandments defend us from the false step of relativism, where right and wrong depend on the situation. Adultery might be normally wrong, but sometimes right. You could say the glass is half empty: if you allow exceptions to the rules, the rules will collapse, and society will degenerate into a naked struggle for power: a world of gangs. Or the glass is half full: relativists allow possible exceptions to any rule, but most of the time they agree with believers about what the situation calls for. And when they don't agree, they can always find believers who disagree too. In practical life, believers and nonbelievers share a common core of moral faith, subject to endless arguments through which values evolve. We may not agree that an act is murder, but we almost all agree that murder is wrong.

For humanists, moral value, in a way, is like the value of money: a pledge of faith. Once money got its official value from the gold standard. Paper money could buy a certain weight of gold. When we went off the gold standard, and let our currencies float against each other, some warned that that way lay chaos. But floating values, despite their fluctuations, have not caused chaos. The fact that we don't expect to revive the gold standard suggests that overall the economy works better without it. Will morality work better if we take it off the God standard?

Gold gets value from being beautiful, rare, and weighable in exact measures—an ultimate money we can agree on. But we still debate how much it should be worth right now: we make our bids. Why, aside from our judgment, should gold be the ultimate standard of value, and why should God be the ultimate standard of good? If God commands you to do something, like sacrifice your firstborn son, does that make it good?

If God commands us, "Thou shalt not kill"—or "Thou shalt not murder"—does that show us murder is wrong, when we didn't know it already? Or did we know it was wrong, but not absolutely wrong, its wrongness guaranteed—and enforced—by God? Sometimes when children ask why they have to do something parents say, "Because I said so." For believers, God saying so stopped the infinite regress of whys.

Then as a nonbeliever, what do I say when a child asks me why murder is wrong? It's wrong because I say so? Or it's wrong because we say so? Or it's wrong because its being wrong is good for us? Or it's just wrong, as you'll realize when you get older—if you don't know already? It may be more convincing, and more comforting, to say it's wrong because God, our superfather, says so. Teaching children to believe in God should help teach them to believe in good. But is that value outweighed by the wrongness of lying to a child? Many parents teach their children to believe in Santa Claus, who, like God, knows if you've been bad or good and will punish or reward you as you deserve. But even those parents want their children to grow up. Beyond the age of reason, believing in Santa Claus starts to seem wrong. With education, and peer pressure, children rarely go on believing, but if they did, most parents would try to teach them not to believe—or to see Santa Claus as a symbol: a mythical figure who stands for the spirit of giving. Is God the standard of good, or is God a mythical figure who stands for good? Does it matter? A real God rewards and punishes justly; who's afraid of a mythical figure?

Like God, a loved parent is looked up to and followed. Most young children obey orders, and overall that's probably good. They start by taking their parents' values at face value. Our parents tell and read and show us stories where the good guys win. We see characters do things that are mean and unfair and evil, and awesomely good, and we absorb the values as we follow the story–though there are always those who like the bad guys best. But if parents are normally our first source of value, values also come from other people we love and respect, sometimes more than we love and respect our parents. Parents who go wrong may take their children with them, as allies in wrongness. Or they may spark a rebellion encouraged by others who say the parents are wrong—if this chimes with the child's growing sense of right and wrong. Conservative parents have liberal children, and sometimes vice versa. But most children stay reasonably close to their parents' outlook, as they stay in or near the religion they grew up in, until it fades away, leaving its values to be judged for themselves.

Can we replace God with "the nature of reality" or some other "absolute" foundation of value? Maybe the closest we can get to that rock bottom is a stool with three legs: reason, intuition, and observation. Reason has not carved ten commandments in stone, but as if it had, some rules seem self-evident to us. Through a combination of reason, intuition, and observation—as we learn to understand them—they sound reasonable. Fortunately, we almost all agree that murder is wrong. Not that right and wrong just means taking a vote—but taking a vote can help. How much we believe what we believe because of our personal thoughts and feelings, and how much because our family and friends believe it, is hard to say. Our beliefs, and our feelings, must be shaped somehow by our life in our world. Many used to believe slavery was right. Then most learned better. Most of us call that progress. How do our values improve?

What should be against the law? We agree on murder, but what about adultery, or homosexuality, or burning the flag? We might agree that some things are morally wrong, but should not be illegal. Making something illegal is an experiment. The unforeseen effects of a law may convince most people to vote for repeal. Inflexible morality can lead to a tyranny worse than the original sins—if they are sins—like the war on drugs. But some sins are bad enough, or dangerous enough, to justify making them illegal, as there are cases where outlawing sins turns a reasonable social order hard and brittle. Unlike some on the more tolerant side, I don't believe sin is only weakness or disease. Guilt needs both correction and redemption.

With our core of common values, humanists might say we've really been on the good standard all along, though we thought it was the God standard. The God standard, those absolute commands from a father who knows best, felt like our faith in our parents, and the other authorities we trust and obey. But most of God's commandments seem good to us not just because God commands them. They also seem good to us. They meet the good standard. This standard points our way up the mountain. Whether going deeper, with no absolute rock bottom to reach, or higher, with no absolute peak to come out on top of, the humanist credo is: never all, ever more. This is humanism's practical absolute.

We start with the good standard, then with our propensity to generalize we extrapolate relative good into absolute good: we go from the good standard to the God standard. Now, as humanism takes root, we're moving back, in our reconsidered way, to the good standard. Is that the end of this kind of personal God, or will the pendulum swing back toward him?

2. Theism, Humanism, Physicalism

Can we live without making the leap from relative to absolute, from good to God? And do we want to?

Some say believing in God is good for us. Believing in God's commandments, and his punishments and rewards, helps keep us good, as Santa Claus helps keep children good. But it's hard to choose what you truly believe. Humanists want to believe what they truly believe is true.

Religion rose with stories and myths of superhuman power. It seems understandable that people would imagine higher beings as stronger versions of themselves. Gods can do things people wish they could. On the battlefield

Greek gods—and goddesses—could miraculously pluck their favorites out of danger. Among gods, as among people, some are stronger than others. Zeus is king of the gods. As parents, and other adults, are the first godlike figures in our lives—with strength children can't resist—kings and emperors rule a pyramid of power beyond any individual. Our imagination extends this hierarchy into the heavens, and then into heaven, leaping from the human pyramid to Olympus to the peak of absolute power. Judaism's God was the one true God of the world, and Christianity took the world to be everyone. Greek gods played favorites, but the one true God was just—showing only just favoritism: a favor meritocracy, whose supreme merit is faithful obedience. To the globalizing imagination everyone should worship the one true God of the world, who gives justice to all souls. Christians went on crusades to make the world worship their God. Missionaries, traders, soldiers, and settlers converted large parts of the earth.

Christianity extends the altruistic duties we owe family and tribe outward to all humanity and even to all life. Nietzsche thought the ideal of humbly turning the other cheek, and loving your enemy, was a religion of and for the weak: the humble shackle the proud by making humility a virtue, pride a sin. This pacifist ideal of the good can get you killed. It won't work as a guide for the warrior. The paradox of Christian crusaders conquering the world to spread the gospel of love and peace reveals a conflict in human nature. Some people gravitate toward love and peace as their highest ideal, some toward strength and domination. These clashing ideals combine, in theory, when love is God's command, but in practical life they go together like fire and water. We all love, somehow, and sometimes we all fight. Extremists may deny one side or the other, but most of us need both ideals.

The all-embracing love taught by Jesus appealed to powerless people sick of war and oppressive rulers. God, Jesus said, loves even the lowest of the low. You never know when he might appear in the form of a beggar. This altruistic ideal gives haves a duty to help have-nots. But how did Christianity convince the powerful? Why did Constantine convert the Roman empire? The Christian ideals of love and peace seem all the more beautiful when your life is nasty and brutish. But even for the healthiest emperor, life is short—and most lives used to be a lot shorter. Christianity serves the self-interest not only of the humble but of all human beings. It gives life a potentially beautiful ending: our souls live happily ever after. Heaven appealed even to Constantine.

Since death is a natural law of life, eliminating death takes a miracle: a breaking of natural law. Here is where humanists abandon the theistic ship: miracles are not allowed—not individual ones, beyond the miracle—or the wonder—at the frontier of knowledge. We don't believe miracles happen for the same reason we were told they did: we want proof: the evidence of our own eyes and ears. Doubting Thomas wanted the evidence of his fingers. He would not believe Jesus lived again until he felt his wounds.

The stories of miracles, and the word of Aristotle, were joined and in part displaced by careful observation. Conscious experiments germinated the scientific revolution, whose seeds go back to the first tools. To study the physical world, and learn to use its forces, like fire, for your good, opens a future of progress. Technology transforms life, every invention revealing more about how to observe and harness the forces of nature. Technology is spurred by understanding, which has its own kind of power. Copernicus and Darwin shaped our humanist understanding of where we live and where we came from.

The spectacular wonders of science show us what seem like miracles while telling us there's no such thing. We learn, most of us, to have faith in the airplane and the doctor. Science gains respect, and religious scientists lose some respect among their colleagues: faith without evidence violates the code—even if they go by the code in their work. But science can't prove that God does not exist. Can you prove that an event was not a miracle? Maybe beyond a reasonable doubt. Even if you can't prove this absolutely, nothing undermines faith in miracles like prediction. Mark Twain's time-traveling hero, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, saves the day by predicting an eclipse. The ancient onlookers think his knowledge is power.

If scientists outrun the public in losing their religious faith, they replace some of it with scientific faith, which says the laws of nature cannot be broken, or miraculously changed. They will be the same tomorrow as they are today. This faith can't be proved any more than faith in God or miracles, but the power of science and technology—with their modern "miracles" incomprehensible to the uninformed—changes our sense of how things happen. Reason itself changes. Intuition changes. Gradually we convert to a new world view: we come to see that we can understand, and shape, the world. Like Christianity, science is a democratic and globalizing force. Anyone, anywhere, can learn and do science—and contribute to our common knowledge. Physical scientists build their scientific morality on the commandment that real causes must be physical. Though they haven't yet reduced biology, or psychology, to physics, inspired by science's past successes, some believe it will happen soon.

Some think that as complexity grows, new laws emerge at higher levels of organization. Yet that emergence must also obey the laws of physical nature. Scientific faith tells us it is not a miracle. As we learn more about how original laws evolve emergent ones, we may learn to bring matter to life, and make life last longer—maybe indefinitely.

Losing their belief in God turns theists into born-again humanists. Humanism, or secular humanism, as it used to be called, in this respect means atheism. What it does not mean is the faith, modeled on science, that only physical nature—matter and energy—really exists: physicalism. Mind is only our primitive, unscientific way of describing patterns of physical forces in which we are somehow enmeshed. Or is what's primitive, in this case, primal? Mind seems at least a necessary—or indispensable—metaphor. Yet physicalists have faith that when science eventually boils it down, all mental activity will be recognized, and understood, as purely physical. Who is the understander? A metaphor? For physicalists, there's no room in the universe for mental forces, any more than there's room for miracles or God.

I would call this an overreaction: throwing out the humanist baby with the theist bathwater. In my humanist faith, mind moves matter, and matter moves mind. It seems like a kind of miracle, yet not quite like the old miracles of God. When the pendulum swings from God to good, from theism to humanism, it can swing too far, and get hung up in physicalism. To cross that line, to become a physicalist, you have to renounce your belief in mind moving matter, also known as free will. Physicalists think free will is a myth, like God. It means an immaterial mind can intervene in a material world. This belief, for a physicalist, is heresy. For a humanist, this heresy is an article of faith—a faith based on reason, intuition, and observation.

3. How Free We Are

Even physicalists know our actions are not absolutely foreordained, in the old mechanistic way, since the determinist chain of physical causation dissolves into quantum randomness. But despite its uncertainties, science makes a lot of exact predictions. How does this macro-determinism of predictable forces influence our actions, and does micro-randomness also play a part? But whether a cause is determined or random, it's still physical: the only kind of cause a physicalist recognizes as real. Some libertarians think there's wiggle room for freedom between determinism and randomness, and both are needed for free will. Yet they still mean physical determinism and randomness.

If physical causes gave us freedom—somehow—then a physical freedometer could tell us the degree of freedom in every act. Examples of physical limits on freedom, like being in prison, can make freedom seem separate from will, and lead us to overestimate how cleanly we can divide the fact of freedom from the act. But the degree of freedom is part of the moral argument: not just a discovery, or a measurement, it's also a decision.

Suppose you invite me to a party and I say I'm not free to come. What kind of unfreedom would you take as a good excuse? Maybe I've already accepted an invitation to another party. I might say, and believe, that I have to go to that party. You might still see your party as important enough for me to cancel the other acceptance. It's not that I can't come, you think, but that I won't. Where is my true degree of freedom, on the spectrum between can't and won't? How do reasonable people disagree?

In his trailblazing "Freedom and Resentment" P.F. Strawson says he does not know what the thesis of determinism is. He doesn't know because no one can know. It does not make sense. It assumes we can avoid what's unavoidable: participating in human life. We resent hostile attitudes and actions and most of us aren't about to get over it. Did you step on my toe because you were pushed or on purpose? We hold people responsible for their good and bad acts—up to a point—unless they have an excuse.

One good excuse is that they're mentally, or psychically, disabled. They can't help offending, so to some degree we excuse them. To that degree we also try to control them more than reason with them. A trusted participant in our moral community knows the difference between right and wrong. If you sin, you may be pressured and persuaded to return to the fold of the more or less trustworthy. How much more or less is an evolving question. What can you fairly expect from someone not very good at seeing what others mean or feel, or from those with autism and personality disorders—and on to the end of the person-blind spectrum, of limited participation, limited reasonability: those who just don't get it? When is blindness negligence?

Some are so bad we give up on them—though who knows if we should have done more? Bad shades from corrigible to incorrigible to incomprehensible. Our feelings and attitudes mix and shift. Toward growing children we move from more controlling to more participating. As they pass the age of reason, we give them grown-up credit, and blame, for their personal actions. But we still often see grown-ups act like children.

Earlier versions of the participate-control dialectic, like Kant's rule that we should treat people as ends and not means, or Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship, normally consider manipulating someone a sin. But the I-It relationship, the control, appears in both a con man and a therapist. Strawson says that taking an objective, if not controlling, attitude toward someone may be reasonable, even unavoidable. We manage, in some ways, children, employees, friends, and enemies. Those we love we love partly because they're predictably lovable. Lovers can manipulate—they know the path to each other's heart.

Determinists suggest that we could and should take a more objective, utilitarian attitude toward everyone, all the time, as we do our best to steer society upward. But we still think, and argue, about what the best course would be—for society and for ourselves. Even determinists make arguments they believe should convince reasonable people. They go on participating with people they know and love, or know and hate, and everyone in between. Morality wouldn't be so socially useful if we didn't believe in our moral judgments, most of the time. We, or most of us, participate in moral life—we don't just observe it from an insulating distance. We can do that sometimes, but not all the time. We also have to take part. In general, we can't imagine life without participating, or people without free will. Free will is an essential capacity of human beings, a fact of human nature. Susan Wolf calls it the ability to do the right thing for the right reasons. Maybe we should add, on the aesthetic side, to do my thing for my reasons. Both mix with the unfree will: my unconscious reasons. When the unconscious dominates, conscious reasons are rationalizations.

Though someone may be in a coma, or insane, and have no free will, we normally live with a mixture of freedoms and constraints among which we make our ever-choosing way. An essential capacity of people in general can sometimes be missing from an individual, but not from all individuals. Some people lack free will all the time; all people lack free will some of the time; but all people can't lack free will all the time. By saying that all people lack free will all the time, determinists contradict themselves. They imply that people are not people. Libertarians, who take determinism as possible, fall into the same contradiction: they imply that people might not be people. That's why we need an argument to prove that they are.

Asking if we have free will is like asking if we exist. To say we don't exist you have to distort the word. It might be a metaphor, or a joke, but it's not literally true. We ask, so we exist.

In arguing about whether all people are always free, or not, determinists and libertarians jump from relative to absolute, and from sense into nonsense, in a quantum leap. Their "absolute freedom"—which implies that people might not be people—is different from the relative freedom we argue about in normal moral life, the freedom we can have more or less of, depending on the situation. From asking how free someone was in this case, we climb up the generalizing ladder—or jump off the top of it—to ask what freedom really is, and whether we really have it. We jump from relative to absolute freedom as we jump from good to God.

How can you not jump? How can you stop without answering this necessary question? Without absolute freedom, can relative freedom be real? In practical life, our everyday arguments about moral responsibility—who's to blame and who isn't—have relativism built in: a particular situation follows the rules in its own way, we chafe under the rules, and they evolve responding to us. This, normally, is how we live. Some values, for most of us, are as real as we are. If you see a child playing on the train tracks, and a train coming, you pull the child out of danger because of moral, not physical, determinism.

Free will's moral weight matters in moral life, while absolute "free will" has lost the moral weight that made most of us care. If nobody has free will, ever, you can't have more or less in another situation, so what does it mean to argue about how free we are? Some think that losing your belief in free will makes you more forgiving: to understand all is to forgive all. But when you understand all, by seeing how all is determined, there's nothing to forgive: forgiveness has lost its moral meaning. Can you forgive a machine? Determinism and libertarianism have no moral consequences: they won't help you on a jury. The jump to absolute "free will" jettisons free will's relativity and its moral weight. Without relativity and morality, why care about free will?

We know we can sometimes lose free will: we know how our freedom is limited, and lost. Our general, normal freedom stays linked to particular situations, where we argue about the freedom we might have in this case but not another. This general freedom is not the absolute top of the mountain. It's our sense of up and down. Trying to make moral judgments sure we push toward the absolute, toward God, or a substitute for God, as the foundation of absolute morality and absolute meaning. Reason, intuition, and observation give us morality and meaning, within human limits. But human limits keep stretching in a restless imagination.

We act for reasons conscious and unconscious, in a current of mixed feelings and mixed motives. Up to a point we normally know why we do what we do: we know our reasons. And we know other people's reasons, sometimes better than they do. We see people do things for reasons as immediately as we see a falling tree break a roof—like seeing the tree fall and jumping out of the way. We want to know how and why objects and people do what they do. People reason, objects don't. Maybe gravity and the other physical forces can be unified in theory, but that theory would not encompass the force of reasons. I would call these two forces—reasons and physical causes—apples and oranges, but apples and oranges are too alike.

Reasons sometimes cause us to move. When they do, mind moves matter. To deny that this is a real fact, and accept only physical causes as real, is to express a faith in a noumenal reality beyond our grasp. Quantum mechanics offers a precedent: we can't understand, or imagine, what the mathematics says about the world, but the predictions are correct. Reality goes beyond our imagination, and a theory which seems, in ordinary terms, nonsensical can prove, with successful predictions, that inside its black box of mystery it comprehends the truth: a truth beyond our understanding.

But these predictions, however precise, are statistical correlations: the sense of direct causation we began with in constructing our theory has been lost. Physical causation dissolves into mathematics, numbers representing what we can't imagine. Does mental causation also dissolve when we try to pin it down? It's true that we can't completely comprehend the force of reasons. At best, we get our reasons into the clearest state we can, then we just act, in a way that is more or less understandable. The ultimate link between mind and body eludes us, as intuition leapfrogs reason. We build a bridge of reasons that reaches as close to the shore of action as we can get, and then we somehow jump—leap—across the gap. Sometimes the gap is so wide that no one believes our reasons explain our action. Clinical depression is clinical because it's unreasonable. Science, like philosophy, takes moral and personal judgment.

Our knowledge of objects and our knowledge of people, even ourselves, is statistical: no matter how well I know you, you can always surprise me. Human relativity says you can't see through another person's eyes, even if you can get close, as if watching a video they're shooting. Even then, what you see depends on what you pay attention to. The whole scene is visible, like the fuzzy overall view of an impressionist painting. But as the in-focus fragments of a cubist painting suggest, we focus on one detail, or pattern, at a time. Perception is sensation plus attention.

Two people can see the same design, but one sees a rabbit, the other a duck. We can share the same viewpoint relatively, and get closer to another person, without ever becoming them. Never all, ever more.

Within these absolute limits we often see how reasons cause actions, and even sometimes see ahead of time how a person will act and why. We can't absolutely guarantee that we're not making a mistake, though in most cases we can be sure enough. We need some certainty to live, so we spread our certainty over our whole life, allowing a sliver of absolute doubt in any one case, while believing that in most cases we know what's really going on.

Studying our bodies and brains, we learn how our freedom can be increased and constricted. Matter also moves mind. Brain chemistry has statistical effects. Getting drunk may change your thinking, and your behavior, in generally predictable ways, and a genetic marker may show that you have a tendency toward alcoholism. But individuals depart from the norm. Some give in, some resist. We can know ourselves better by knowing more about our statistical profiles, and also by understanding why in this case we decided to do something different.

The quest to reduce reality to the physical grows from the awesome unfolding of scientific explanation and the power it gives us to make life better—or worse. Physicalist faith that science is the archetype of real understanding of reality is intensified by seeing how religion causes suffering and war, as believers claim authority with stories of God's miracles. But faith in scientific explanation rests mainly on the appeal, and success, of the wonderfully beautiful and useful scientific method. It's a faith in experience, and experiments, that says virgin births and risings from the dead just don't happen. The laws of nature don't change because some superhuman being decides to change them.

This apparent miracle, of mind moving matter, which we immediately observe, as much as we immediately observe physical causation, is not like parting the Red Sea. We don't have a physical trajectory mapped out for a person which is then contravened by an act of free will. Free will shaping events, mind moving matter, violates no physical law. Maybe we should call the causal power of reasons persuasive force.

When we see people acting for reasons, or mind moving matter, "There's no way it can do that" is not as persuasive as the fact that it does. If there's no natural way it can do that, and yet it does, that sounds like a miracle. But the miracle is in the mind of the beholder. We can study the brain and learn ever more about how it influences the mind, but as long as individuals live together, and reason together, we will not understand how reductions of individual free will can go to absolute zero, where our theory finds that people are not, or might not be, people. This is not a mystery that arbitrarily limits scientific investigation. It says there's a limit that can't be reached, at least while we remain finite beings. But if absolute knowledge does not exist, that doesn't mean knowledge never improves. Top or no top, climbing the mountain expands our view.

The quest to go deeper than metaphor and personal stories and reach the physical rock bottom of reality, the pure literal truth, hits a wall, or a floor—or a border—where the literal and the figurative merge. Some of the old religious language may still have a usable meaning, if it's used without contradicting the laws of nature. A soul doesn't have to be an ectoplasmic body for you to read these words and make contact with my mind and soul, even after I'm dead. Is that kind of life after death only figurative?

How can we tell determinists and libertarians that they can't really imagine what they think they imagine so clearly: all people absolutely having, or not having, free will? Would they say we don't have strong enough imaginations? Does the argument come down to "Yes I can imagine it" versus "No you can't"? Or maybe it's not that they can't really imagine things, but that we're imagining things: they might say, "I look for mind and see nothing at all, yet all that is, I see." If we recognize that the cloud of unknowing obscures all views, no absolute, clear, irrefutable argument can be made. Our idealizing minds will keep looking upward, searching for the peak. But though some of us can't help wondering what absolute peak we might find in the cloud, to complete the mountain, the more down-to-earth question is not if we are free, but how we are free, and how free we are.

4. A Beautiful Fun Good Life

Once there were three general ideals: the good, the true, and the beautiful. Then, in the rich west, the twentieth century added a fourth ideal: the fun. We always had fun, but it was frivolous—the icing, not the cake.

For most people before us, life was a lot tougher. When you were having fun you weren't working, and you weren't alert to the dangers around you. Outside of organized celebrations, fun was irresponsible, and led you toward sin. Then came science, with its antiseptics, anesthetics, and antibiotics, lengthening our lives, making them easier, healthier, and more enjoyable, with more free time. Along with leisure came boredom, and the great defense against boredom, fun.

You can also defend yourself from boredom with purpose, meaning, and interest: the good, the true, and the beautiful, which at their best include some fun. Fun creates an appetite for more fun that raises the threshold of boredom, producing more and better fun—and more and worse boredom. But a lot of fun comes from laughing at the dumb and dumber. Is some fun always unkind? Wicked fun. Is unkindness always bad? Should you make fun of those who deserve it?

For most people—at least in the rich west—an ideal happy life includes fun. Fun is even a moral responsibility: you have a duty to be fun, or at least interesting—not boring. Religion, being very serious, is not traditionally a lot of fun. Jesus didn't crack many jokes (though maybe more than you might think). As life became easier, for many Christians the social climax of the week shifted from Sunday morning to Saturday night. Will we follow fun's siren call into decadence—the frivolous life of pleasure? Maybe far enough to spark a reaction. Religion not only causes hate and war, it also helps people. Maybe the clergy will evolve into social workers, as we learn to help people better. The pendulum swings toward fun, and swings back again. The other ideals are just as strong, and natural, as fun.

We have these four ideals that refuse to fuse. It's hard to focus on more than one, or maybe two, at a time. Comedy is not pretty. Beauty is not always good. Satan steals *Paradise Lost*. What's good, like praise for a gift, is not always true. Life has hard truths, like death, and pain, that we normally find neither good, beautiful, nor fun.

When we move from God to good, we give up the absolute solution of death: the certainty of eternal life, and the loving God who gives just rewards. Yet with all our health and leisure we still suffer, and we still die. Is this life enough for us? For all we know we may be caught between the spiritual immortality of the past and the physical immortality of the future: the first and last to simply die. Will we keep searching on both sides, spiritual and physical, for an absolute eternal life that can never be lost?

Not long ago, life was not only tougher, it was also more mysterious, a mystery faith helped solve. Humanists now again face the mystery of death, but the mysteries of smallpox, or eclipses, or the growing season, though not eliminated, have been mostly tamed. Progress has given us a beachhead of security, where we have time to think about our lives in relative comfort, not constant fear and trembling. We have heat and air-conditioning, good food, music, refrigerators, cars, tv, computers, showers. A shower gives you a fresh start every day, washing off dirt the way baptism washed off sins. One of the beautiful experiences of civilized life is flushing a toilet. Cleanliness, like knowledge, makes it easier to live without God.

Humanism is a human way to climb toward good, though we may never stop the pendulum that swings from God to good to physicalism and back. Will the ever-searching human spirit be content to die? I doubt it. But in the meantime most of us may eventually find that a beautiful fun good life is all we have to have. It's not perfect, but it's good enough—and can get better. Instead of following an absolute God, we make our unending climb toward more and better good: never all, ever more. God plus o: no limit.

References

Strawson, P.F. 1974. “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays.* London: Methuen.

Wolf, Susan. 1993. *Freedom Within Reason.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.