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THE CASE FOR UTTER HOPELESSNESS

Why Atheism
Leads to Unyielding Despair

Austin C Brown

“I have seen all the things that are done under
the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing
after the wind.”

Solomon

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Other works by the author:

Walking with the Mailman

Satan's Awful Idea: A Biblical Theology of Satan's Fall and its
Implications Upon the Unfolding Human Drama

The XY Dot

Vengeance in the Paling Light

Dentin White's Fabulous Tale of Wiggling and Loss

To my sons and daughter who bring me great joy.

Chapter One: The Choice

Chapter Two: The Aquarium

Chapter Three: The Game of Ethics In a Godless World

Chapter Four: The End of All Endings

Chapter Five: The Futility of Reason

Chapter Six: The Dignity of Man

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Chapter One

~ The Choice ~



See the gun in its case. Black foam surrounding it. A single clip by its side. Hear the sound of it being loaded. The safety being switched off. There it rests on the table. Heavy against the wood. Eager to dispense its duty. One pull of the trigger and all will go silent.

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Some stand on the crumbling edge of life and throw themselves down on the terrible rocks below. Others creep up to the edge and peer over the lip, horrified, wondering why anyone would fling themselves off. Even as this is being written, another is tipping forward, falling, spinning in the air, silently fading out of sight. Attempts are made nearly every second. Successful ones every forty.

For many, it's hard to comprehend the grim pull of suicide. But it's not absurd. Not in the least. It's entirely sensible given certain views of reality. It all hinges on implications, on consequences, on what follows in the wake of certain ideas. Beliefs can instill hope or they can compound despair; they can brighten awful circumstances or they can darken otherwise sweet moments. What we believe matters.

But however ill-defined someone's worldview might be, or however close one might be to the crumbling edge, we're all confronted with the

same fundamental question. We must ask ourselves whether or not life is worth living. That is the central question. As the French philosopher, Camus, once wrote,

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”¹

Writing a short while later, he added,

“Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.”²

So what are we to make of this? Should we feel the sting of life's ridiculous character? It all depends, doesn't it? It depends on our view of things. The degree of misery. The level of pain. The depths of hopelessness. The biting tedium.

In the present volume, we are going to focus on a particularly insidious form of hopelessness—one that cuts to the root of the habit. Life is not going to be viewed as merely a series of disappointing events, a conglomeration of isolated moments that contribute in some way to one's overall sense of sadness—like a person hearing that their spouse has cancer, their dog has died, or their favorite politician was just voted out of

1 *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Vintage International, page 3.

2 *Ibid.*

office. That is far too myopic. The kind of hopelessness in view here is all-encompassing, deep, and pervasive; the type that not only tempts a person to end their life but calls even the significance of the suicide into question. It is the worst kind of hopelessness.

Allow an illustration.

Not terribly long ago there was a professor of philosophy, an atheistic existentialist, who was growing more and more agitated with the ridiculous character of life. Instead of following university norms, he began to skip his own classes, showing up only sporadically. Sometimes he would take his students to a bar, or to his house, instead of teaching them on campus. The man was tired of capitulating to authority structures. Eventually, the university fired him. As the man continued to slump more and more into the morass of daily agitation, believing that the universe was ultimately devoid of meaning, he looked to suicide. Several years later, a newspaper headlined: "University Professor Commits Experiment in Suicide." In his quest for purpose in an otherwise meaningless world, the man wondered if suicide wouldn't provide some kind of point to life. Slashing his wrists and watching the blood flow out his body, the philosopher took notes. He said, "These notes are for my students. And in case I find no meaning in this suicide, and I doubt I will because there is no meaning in anything, maybe they will find some irrational, mystic meaning in my thoughts as I am dying and taking notes."

This is the kind of meaninglessness and hopelessness in view here.

But, of course, none of this is going to be explored in a vacuum. It can't be. A particular worldview will be adopted, one that provides a lens through which to consider Camus' question.

The worldview which shall be taken up might be called naturalistic materialism, or, more commonly, atheism. The exact word isn't terribly important. Only the essence matters. Insofar as the purpose of this work is

concerned, we'll adopt the basic tenets of atheism. We'll accept its outlook of reality and draw forth its bitter implications, particularly those that engender a sense of hopelessness. In this respect, mere atheism, as it might be called, will suit us just fine.

This is the belief that we are living on an infinitesimally small speck of rock in an otherwise very large, cold, impersonal universe that doesn't care whether we live or die, are happy or are full of despair, live the good life, or die tragically. There is no God. No spiritual realm. No angels or demons. Nor any place called heaven. Physical matter constitutes the sum total of reality. It is quarks and electrons from top to bottom.

The process by which we came to be what we are today is best explained by Darwinian evolution. "We are here," writes Stephen J. Gould, "because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher answer'— but none exists."

We are an accident, a biological curiosity, an animal born from the adaptive processes of natural selection.

More could be said, and more will be said, but this simple sketch should suffice. Atheism is the worldview. And it is atheism, that, when consistently carried out, ought to produce within a person an all-consuming sense of hopelessness. The reason for this is that when the various implications of the view are added up, they have a way of compounding beyond what the human mind can shoulder. At the risk of flirting with redundancies, I am saying that there are degrees of hopelessness and that atheism scores exceedingly high marks. It is not simply hopeless. It is utterly hopeless.

Another illustration is in order.

If you picture a man in the middle of a vast ocean treading water, with the nearest island no closer than a thousand miles away, with no boats anywhere to be found, no planes flying overhead, one might describe the situation as hopeless.

But note that the situation isn't, perhaps, *utterly* hopeless. Maybe the man is a Christian, who, upon dying, will be delivered to the courts of heaven. In this sense, such a man, though lost at sea with essentially zero prospects of being saved, might still have hope. Death is not the end. He looks beyond his watery grave to eternal life, and this provides a ray of light in an otherwise bleak circumstance.

Now a truly hopeless situation would not merely consider the immediate problem. It would look beyond it—far beyond it. In this respect, suppose the whole world was an ocean, and that this man was the only person left on the planet. Struggle as he might, death is going to consume him. When he sucks in water for the last time and sinks to the dark bottom, he will slowly decompose and never again be. The man has no soul. There are no souls anywhere. Nothing but physical matter makes up the totality of reality. When this man's brain ceases to function, it will be the end of all endings. Eternal nothingness engulfs him.

Here the degree of hopelessness multiplies.

Now it would of course be absurd to directly compare our situation with that of the watery world described above. But that isn't the point. The point is that hopelessness can come by way of degrees. And in our world of freeways and office spaces, sprawling cities, and quiet farmsteads, hopelessness compounds all the same. Despair may not come in quite so dramatic a fashion, like that of the drowning man, but it comes nevertheless. Sometimes the hardest things in life affect us while sitting in our living room when all is reasonably still and quiet. In this respect, one of the central aims of this book is to explore how atheism undermines the

most important facets of life. If, for example, atheism necessarily entails an absence of an afterlife, an awareness of that fact affects us now, thus causing the arrow on the scale of hopelessness to tick one number higher.

Now if there are other aspects of atheism that instill within us a sense of despair, the problem continues to escalate. In the present volume, it is my contention that atheism turns the dial far to the right, not just to hopelessness, but to utter hopelessness. The absence of ultimate meaning, the illusory nature of ethics, the chimera of human worth, the unsettling awareness of impermanence—all of these press upon our emotions an unbearable weight.

On a more personal note, this is something I have truly felt myself, this chilling touch of despair. Having spent the better portion of my life thinking about this question, listening to countless voices, searching high and low, all in an attempt to understand what must follow if there is no God, I do not write as a dispassionate observer, as if this were some kind of philosophical game. Sophomores might play with the concepts in an essay assigned by their professor, but this is no such plaything. I am deadly serious.

I once told a few people close to me that if I believed atheism to be absolutely true, I would walk into the other room and kill myself. My saying this shocked them, not only because such an action seemed rash but unnecessary. Why not eat, drink and be merry? Why not continue on in life all the same? “Might as well make the best of it,” so it was suggested.

It's hard to know what one would actually do, of course. Would I really blow my brains out?

I think so.

The reason why is because of what will be said in the coming chapters.

This book, therefore, is my argument for utter hopelessness, a defense, if you will, why I could not bear to live, given atheism. It isn't the

warmest of invitations, but for those interested in thinking seriously about the implications of life in a godless universe, I invite you to keep reading.

Chapter Two

~ The Aquarium ~



Picture an aquarium partially full of rocks and dirt. Imagine that it represents the sum total of reality. There is no mind beyond the walls of the aquarium, no watching eyes, nothing. Life is utterly absent within and without. There is only the stuff of matter.

Granting this, let us ask a question: Does the aquarium contain morality? If so, where might it be? Under a rock? Hidden deep in the dirt? Perhaps it is floating in the air?

Search as one might, digging holes all across the barren waste, morality is nowhere to be found. It doesn't exist.

But now imagine a creature suddenly forming in some mysterious, ineffable way. It is a slithering thing, long and reptilian, devoid of consciousness. Might morality be found in the aquarium now? Nothing has fundamentally changed, save the creeping creature, and that essentially changes nothing. Morality is still absent.

Picture another scene. Suppose the slithering reptile splits into a variety of other organisms, and these in turn evolve into a startling array of other life forms. Imagine plants sprouting forth and rain falling and entire colonies of scurrying critters forming, ducking into holes and chattering from tree limbs.

Peering through the glass wall, it is evident that these creatures do not get along. They bite and kill. They devour one another, not only for food, but because it is in their nature to do so. Those that are stronger tend to prevail. Those that are weaker fall by the wayside.

None of these actions could be called into question, however, as if some kind of moral standard is being upset. The standard is nowhere to be found. The actions of these violent creatures are just actions. In a very real sense, all their biting and clawing is no more moral than rain pelting a rock.

But now imagine a new scene. Picture a curious shift in evolution, whereby the once slithering creatures acquire two legs, stand upright, and come to possess brains capable of rational thought. They are conscious beings. They are humans. And they are now writing books, building tools, contemplating reality, and forming cities.

Given this new context, what might be said about the question of morality? Does it exist?

It does exist.

But where? Somewhere “out there”?

No.

It exists only in the brains of the humans.

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Once a person begins to truly appreciate this fact, grasping the implications in all their bitter finality, the scales of hopelessness tip irreversibly. Life is a board game without a rulebook. There are pieces and players, but nothing instructing us how to behave. Most people instinctively prize morality, as if it was something meant to be deeply respected or cherished, or a binding concept that ought to be obeyed and

taken seriously. But if we are living in an aquarium full of only rocks and dirt, morality is at root nothing more than a human convention. It exists only in our thoughts. Our brains hoist upon us a sense of rightness and wrongness, but such rightness and wrongness is little more than emotions flowing out of personal preferences.

Michael Ruse explains,

“Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Hence the basis of ethics does not lie in God’s will—or in the metaphorical roots of evolution or any other part of the framework of the Universe. In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate. It is without external grounding. Ethics is produced by evolution but is not justified by it because, like Macbeth’s dagger, it serves a powerful purpose without existing in substance.... Unlike Macbeth’s dagger, ethics is a shared illusion of the human race.”³

Everything we do is neither right nor wrong. It is just something we do. It is an action. A movement. Lions tear apart their prey. Sharks forcibly copulate with females. Female mantises eat their partners. There is no morality in any of this. It is merely biology in motion.

We are no different. We perform actions similar to the lion, or shark, or mantis, and such actions carry only a perceived moral significance. It’s true that many will feel as if certain behaviors are bad. But so what? Does the sudden arousal of a feeling in a person’s brain objectify anything? It does not. It cannot.

³ *Religion and the Natural Sciences: The Range of Engagement*, edited by James E. Huchingson, page 310.

We carry around in our skulls a complicated mass of neurons and synapses. If our brains didn't possess the connections which produce within us a sense of right and wrong, we wouldn't care about rape, extortion, lying, or murder. We would be like everything else. No sense of injustice. No moral concerns. But it just so happens that our brains (through a purely accidental process) are wired in such a way so that when we perceive or think about certain behaviors an emotional reaction is triggered. If the emotional reaction makes us feel offended, or disgusted, or angry, we naturally attribute badness to it. But it doesn't actually make it bad, not in any objective or universal sense. Nothing about the current structure of our brains should lead us to believe that it is the right way to be wired. It could have been quite different. If it were wired so as to find rape permissible, even commendable, the standard of morality would shift to accommodate the belief. We wouldn't think it was wrong.

In this respect, the spectrum of potential moral beliefs exceeds comprehension. What we currently view as morally reprehensible could have been (or might in the future be) seen as magnanimous. If, for example, a certain ethnicity was deemed worthy of being eaten, and if the moral intuition was such that it struck the cannibals as a very great good, the lectures on ethics would reflect that deep-seated belief. Eating particular humans would fall under the category of virtue. Similarly, if torture was collectively viewed as the appropriate penalty for, say, theft or drunkenness, television networks would air the graphic torture for the viewing public. And they'd think it was perfectly normal.

Darwin himself recognized this grim fact. Writing in *The Descent of Man*, he penned these insightful words,

“If... men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried

females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.”⁴

When viewed from the perspective of the universe, we carry around within us an infinitesimally small organ that happens to create moral intuitions. It is a curious case of hubris to think that these chemical reactions carry universal weight, as if anything outside of the emotional matrix of our own being should care about what transpires between our ears. It’s just an emotion: a tiny, neurological, fleeting, subjective feeling. If it didn’t strike us as being so potent—something significant demanding our attention—which is itself another happenstance product of evolution—we would never be tempted to elevate it as highly as we have. However, it does strike us as being very important, and so we go to great lengths to make it more than it really is. We argue and debate. We point fingers. We write complicated works of philosophy. We produce detailed codes of law. But in the end, such things are all imaginary. Morality is ultimately an illusion; a game; a contest between competing preferences as each brain looks to gather unto itself enough supporters to win a majority, whereby it can declare what is right and what is wrong, and feel good about it, as if it stands on the side of the angels. But there is no “side of the angels.” Morality is relative. It shifts with the whimsical tides of chemical reactions.

Some will find this hard to believe. But it is the inescapable conclusion of atheism. There are certainly a few atheists who would argue for objective morality, but they engage in a contortion of philosophical gymnastics. And I think they know it. As for those who remain true to the facts, accepting the dire conclusions without resorting to chicanery, they are far more honest. And right. If the aquarium is utterly devoid of

⁴ *The Descent of Man*, Volume 1, New York, American Home Library Company, page 187, 1902

morality, then the inescapable conclusion of atheism is that objective morality is an illusion.

Writing with painful clarity, Professor Alex Rosenberg, a “nice nihilist,” as he might want to be called, sums it up well,

“Is there a God? No.

What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.

What is the purpose of the universe? There is none.

What is the meaning of life? Ditto.

Why am I here? Just dumb luck.

Does prayer work? Of course not.

Is there a soul? Is it immortal? Are you kidding?

Is there free will? Not a chance!

What happens when we die? Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us.

What is the difference between right and wrong, good and evil?

There is no moral difference between them.

Why should I be moral? Because it makes you feel better than being immoral.

Is abortion, euthanasia, suicide, paying taxes, foreign aid, or anything else you don't like forbidden, permissible, or sometimes obligatory? Anything goes.

What is love, and how can I find it? Love is the solution to a strategic interaction problem. Don't look for it; it will find you when you need it.

Does history have any meaning or purpose? It's full of sound and fury, but signifies nothing.

Does the human past have any lessons for our future? Fewer and fewer, if it ever had any to begin with.”⁵

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Let’s press the point further.

Picture two men on an island.

They are the only two people on the planet.

There they sit on the sandy beach under a canopy of palm trees, coconuts scattered around them. They are cracking the coconuts open and lazily drinking the sweet contents. One of the men, a large burly figure, suddenly stops and considers the sharp rock in his hand. It occurs to him that he could have all the coconuts to himself if his neighbor was dead. As he looks at the man hunched near the shoreline, he imagines hitting him hard on the head. The thought doesn’t produce within him a negative, emotional reaction; it doesn’t strike him as being bad at all. In fact, it elicits a sense of pleasure. He doesn’t particularly like his companion, and he wants more coconuts.

Walking toward the hunched man with the rock gripped tightly in his hand, he brutally kills his companion. As the man lies crumpled in a pool of blood, the burly man picks up a coconut and sips from it, feeling pleased.

If the burly man is the only intelligent creature in the world, is the act of killing his companion immoral? No. How could it be? Not only does morality not exist in any objective sense “out there,” but the notion of murderous wrongdoing doesn’t exist in anyone’s mind. As a result, nothing wrong has transpired. No binding moral standard has been broken.

5 *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions*, W.W. Norton and Co, 2011, pages 2-3.

Let's tweak the situation and ask another question.

Suppose the burly man does harbor a sense of murderous wrongdoing. He feels bad on some level but nevertheless murders his companion. Perhaps his conscience tells him he did something wrong, but he pushes the thought aside. Maybe he justifies it on some level. Maybe he doesn't.

Would the sudden awareness of wrongdoing fundamentally alter anything? No. Why would it? Not only is his sense of wrongdoing relative, functioning in accordance with his randomly evolved brain, but given the nature of reality in the aquarium, where morality simply doesn't exist on any kind of objective plane, the burly man hasn't done anything wrong. It makes no significant difference either way. Either he feels bad, but it doesn't really matter, or he doesn't feel bad, and it doesn't really matter. The first involves breaking a made-up rule. The second doesn't.

The end result is the same.

Now imagine that the island is full of hundreds of people, or millions of people, even billions. The situation will no doubt grow more complex given the increase in population, but an increase in numbers doesn't essentially change anything, so far as morality is concerned. The cherished convictions of one man, or the cherished conviction of a vast population doesn't make it any more right, only more proliferate. Nor does it matter if there is broad agreement or fierce disagreement. A million people may think one thing. A million another. Since morality is relative none of this should be surprising. It isn't as if each brain is required to believe X, Y, or Z moral convictions.

The point is that when we look at our world, the increase in numbers doesn't somehow improve the situation. It's just more of the same, and it is all morally vacuous.

Before turning to the question of how this affects us emotionally, an objection should be anticipated. It has to do with utility. Some will no doubt want to argue that we don't need objective morality in order to be moral. They will content themselves with cause and effect, looking to those ethical norms that most facilitate progress. Throwing battery acid on another person's face or eating one's offspring undermines progress. In this sense, science and a fair bit of common sense can tell us what we should or shouldn't allow in society, particularly the kind of society that is going to advance and mature, thereby creating a more fertile context for happiness. We all want happiness, and some things plainly undermine it. Therefore, the sensible path forward is to applaud ethical standards and codify laws that promote the greater good. In this sense, objective morality isn't necessary. One need only establish reasonable norms that promote human flourishing. If that's the best we've got, then it's good enough, so goes the thought.

This is the approach of many atheists today. They recognize that morality is relative but maintain that it can serve a useful purpose. It can function as a means to an end. Happiness is good. Therefore, maximizing those norms that promote the greatest happiness is the greatest good.

This is all fine and dandy, except that it doesn't work.

Brains do not agree about what constitutes the greatest good. Just think of the two men on the island. The burly man could very well have been thinking about the greatest good, namely, maximizing his immediate pleasure. I suppose the man who was about to be murdered could have turned around and tried to convince the burly man to stop. He could have said, "My friend, listen! Imagine what the two of us can accomplish if we but work together. Think of all of the things we can build on this island. Or

what if we want to try to leave? Two of us working on a ship would be better than one. Or what if you become sick? I can help take care of you. Bring you food. And what about my jokes? You've always laughed at my jokes! You'll miss them! Can you not see that your murderous desire isn't promoting human flourishing?"

What shall the burly man do? Is he obligated to more highly esteem another man's conception of the greatest good? Is he somehow morally obliged to maximize the happiness of the greatest number of people? The answer is clearly no. The man about to be murdered may view the burly man as immoral, but when the jagged rock shatters his skull, thereby ending his thoughts, the only brain left is the one that doesn't share his vision of human flourishing. The burly man views the matter quite differently. And since he is the only one left, his view is the only one that counts. It reigns supreme.

Now it may be the case that the burly man's conception of the greater good fails to obtain the rich variety of other pleasures that would have come about had he not killed his companion. But so what? It's not as if there is a moral duty to see those other pleasures come to be. They don't have to exist. There is no *ought* here. It is but only a preference. And brains are capable of all kinds of preferences.

Moreover, elevating one preference over another in order to advance a better, more prosperous vision of human life proves ultimately question-begging. The "better" results are assumed to be good. They're infused with meaning by the subjective preferences of the advocate. Now it's true that such results may entail a certain measure of utility (promoting health or wealth or pleasure), but the very concept of utility is an imagined good. It isn't as if society ought to advance in that way (whatever the notion of advancement happens to be). You can desire for it to go a certain direction, but there is no moral compulsion requiring it.

In the end, the concept of happiness, or human flourishing, or pleasure, or the greatest good, is defined by each brain. If someone holds to a seemingly horrific conception of human flourishing, so what? They may be a minority. They may even be a small minority. But it doesn't fundamentally change anything. To each his own.

Ted Bundy, the infamous serial killer, understood this frighteningly well. When asked why he committed such terrible crimes, he expressed the following,

“Then I learned that all moral judgments are ‘value judgments,’ that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.... I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable ‘value judgment’ that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these ‘others’? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog’s life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as ‘moral’ or ‘good’ and others as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my

education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.”⁶

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Such dire facts are emotionally burdensome.

Everything we do rests in the cradle of moral indifference. All of our greatest acts. All of our greatest sacrifices. Our most sublime moments of charitable giving or altruism. They are all morally benign. When weighed in the scales of the universe and placed in the balance of eternity, our so-called good acts amount to nothing.

The same is true with evil. Every last heinous murder or terrible injustice ever committed against the most innocent among us amounts to nothing. Even the denunciation of this viewpoint is pointless. From top to bottom it is all empty, a mere illusion of significance.

A person dedicates their life to helping the sick and elderly.

No moral significance.

A tyrant overthrows a neighboring country.

No moral significance.

A man cheats on his wife.

No moral significance.

A racist spews forth invectives.

No moral significance.

The temptation is to jump in with a rejoinder of hope. It might be urged that it doesn't matter if it is ultimately pointless on the other side of the curtain. We *do* feel the weight of perceived goodness and badness now.

⁶ A statement by Ted Bundy, paraphrased and rewritten by Harry V. Jaffa, *Homosexuality and the National Law* (Claremont Institute of the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1990), 3–4.

We *do* value the efforts of the doctor who finds a cure. Why minimize what is so obvious to vast swaths of humanity?

It is strange to think that those who most prize rationality and realism, and who castigate the religious for foolishly believing in fairy tales, would then turn around and fool themselves. Shall we erect a mirage and satisfy ourselves with it? Surely not. Some news is bad. And this is very bad news. There is no getting around it.

Perhaps we should set our chins like flint and carry on; tell ourselves that it is just the way it is. Push on. Life is still pretty enjoyable, right? But that's just the very thing in question. It's Camus' question. Without morality a crucial component of life's worth is lost. I may feel like I'm doing something valuable, but on another level, I know that it isn't significant. I may have a biological urge to do "good" sometimes, but when I ponder that urge while in the grip of nihilism, emotions and reality collide. Pointing a finger is pointless, even hypocritical. But then again being hypocritical is pointless.

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The agitation of life compounds with sickening potency once we recognize that our moral judgments are empty. The consumption of the news suddenly becomes something akin to a masochistic exercise in futility. As the talking heads discuss the latest happenings with feverish passion, denouncing one another with pointed gestures and sharp looks, they act as if a real ought is at stake. Their sixty seconds of outrage presupposes it. Or consider the endless stream of comments flowing across the web, the millions upon millions of people continually voicing their disapproval about every imaginable thing. There is no end to it all. The voices clamor endlessly. Everyone acts as if it matters. But it is a

cacophony of insignificance. Like a squawking herd of animals. And yet nearly everyone continues to act as if their comments carry weight. As if *they* should be taken with the utmost seriousness.

Such back and forth is both exasperating and exhausting. Every day we have to put up with people whining and pointing their fingers. They complain about what their bosses did to them. They jeer the duplicitous practices of government. Curse drivers for cutting them off. Criticize co-workers. Bark at their spouse. Yell at their kids. Condemn foreign countries. Demand services. Expect rights. Write scathing reviews. Scoff at blog posts. Snipe public figures. Denounce public policies. Judge the past. Condemn the present. Despise the future.

When we see kids playing outside, bickering and fighting over the rules of some imaginary game, with each demanding how it ought to be played, the arguing proves grating. Why is that? While all the screeching is certainly irritating, the deeper problem extends beyond the mere proliferation of noise. It's the foolishness of it all.

Life is like that. All the brains are in competition, bickering and quarreling, jockeying for their preferred rule-set, squabbling over how the game ought to be played, when the game has no prescribed rules—when it is at root baseless, subjective, egotistical.

All this leads to a perpetual swirl of frustration. Someone disturbs our moral intuitions and we feel inexorably compelled to utter a denunciation; to correct them; tell them how they have erred. But it is ultimately hollow. A grasping after the wind.

Flipping someone off might prove cathartic on some level, but when we know that we're merely appeasing our feelings by engaging in a superficial act of retaliation, it doesn't satisfy the longing within us. We want the wrong to be really wrong, and we want the person to know that

what they've done is *really* wrong. Anything less falls into the bog of futility and frustration.

So, yes, we might feel better if we blow off steam. But what is a person to do when their perception of everything is the problem? What then? Shall such a person spin around with erect middle fingers and vainly curse at the world? "Curse you, reality. Curse you for making me care about things that are an illusion. Curse you for making me think it is all so significant. Curse you for making my emotions war against my mind."

What is the point in that?

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I know that if I were to meander through life with this knowledge, I would become dejected and cynical, the kind of person prone to scoff at the foolishness of the masses. My heart would grow cold, and I would despise myself for it, but then exonerate myself with stern reminders that I am not really doing anything wrong. I could try to change. But I know it wouldn't work. Upholding an ethical line requires moral conviction, the very thing I doubt. I could try to operate out of sheer duty, summoning altruistic resolutions to live by, but the continual drip of frustration would sooner or later unhinge me. I know it would. People are too annoying. Life is too hard. My own moral frame is too weak.

Knowing what I would eventually become, I can't help but think it would be better to end it at the start. Why slip into depression or anxiety? Why continue to drink the tedium? Why become a selfish cynic?

But when faced with the end of a gun, I might not possess the grit.

I don't know.

The faces of family would come to mind. I'd picture the pain they'd experience. That would make me pause. But then I'd think about the grim

fact of reality again, and how my caring matters so very little. I'd picture that part in my brain labeled "I care" and remind myself how that little fleshy node is nothing more than the random collation of atoms cheered on by the whimsical currents of evolution. The way I currently care need not be that way. In fact, it need not be like anything at all. It really doesn't matter whether or not I pull the trigger. Both results rest in the cradle of pointlessness, which makes pulling the trigger ever more enticing.

Chapter Three

~ The Game of Ethics in a Godless World ~



But let's suppose I don't go through with it. I set the gun down and decide to embrace life. What then? How should I live?

No, seriously. In a world of ethical illusions, what is the path forward?

Some time ago, the American Humanist Association launched an advertisement campaign. They plastered signs on the sides of buses in the D.C. area. The message provided a bit of advice for the godless. The signs read, "Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness' sake."

There's the advice: just be good for goodness' sake. Never mind the illusion. We have our largely shared intuitions. So be good.

But why? Or what good? Or how much?

Naturally, behaving badly can lead to a loss of desirable things in one's life. If you're overly rude, your friends will avoid you. If you get caught stealing, the police will lock you up. If you fake being sick too many times, your boss will fire you. Illusion or not, these are the cold hard facts of living in modern society.

This means that the path forward is a balancing act, a kind of calculus of gains. How do I maintain what I enjoy in this world? Here we might think playing by the rules, by and large, will help contribute to the overall stability of society, thereby preserving a measure of happiness we couldn't experience in a land full of anarchy; and so we play along. But our playing

along is just that. Evil isn't really evil. The truth is that certain actions lead to *undesirable* results. Undesirable results negatively affect us. Therefore, negative results are bad. *That* is the bad. It all comes down to crappy results.

Take for example the oath of marriage. Suppose a man finds himself drawn to another woman. He desires to have sex with her, and she seems quite interested. The enlightened man knows that there is really nothing to his promise. They are just words. People may not like being lied to, but it's not as if lying is intrinsically evil. Neither is cheating. But the enlightened man nevertheless pauses. He imagines the hurt it would cause his wife if she learned of his infidelity. Maybe enduring the tears of his distraught wife make it not worth it. Or perhaps he imagines the annoyance of having to go through a divorce. Or maybe he doesn't want to bear the stigma of being a cheater.

The question before him isn't ultimately one of transgressing a moral law. It can't be. He decides what is right for him. He is the arbiter. If he would rather indulge in the pleasures of an adulterous affair, that is his decision. Certain consequences will follow. But it's not as if he's really done anything wrong. It is ultimately a matter of acceptable or unacceptable consequences.

Knowing this changes the world. It changes everything. We often hold ourselves in check because of a perceived awareness of genuine fault. When the blinders are lifted and reality is seen for what it truly is, the enlightened man cannot help but approach things differently. Goodness is defined according to him. Guilt is an internal reality that can be assuaged through knowledge. In those instances where a societal taboo is at stake, the enlightened man is free to evaluate the circumstances surrounding it to see if he can do as he pleases without suffering ill effects. He simply needs to run it through the calculus:

- Will telling someone off result in bad consequences? No problem in this instance. Proceed.
- What about ending a relationship poorly? No problem in this instance. Proceed.
- Cheating on a test? No problem in this instance. Proceed.
- Lying? No problem in this instance. Proceed.
- Taking advantage of the weak or ignorant? No problem in this instance. Proceed.

And on it goes.

I cannot see how this doesn't taint the human "soul." When life becomes a calculus of gains, a mere cause and effect of utilitarian means, the ethical voice within me recoils. I could silence the voice and lessen the emotional turmoil, but in so doing it makes the voice grow louder. It screams at me. It tells me that I'm taking a very wrong turn. But here rationality steps forward and gags it, "The calculus is real. Focus on the calculus."

I can tell myself that I won't care once I reach moral indifference, but then the thought of attaining moral indifference merely heightens my already unsettled sense of immorality. I don't want to not care. But then again, why care? Why yearn after a nebulous, illusory goodness out there? Just go for the consequences that, on balance, please me the most, the very ones that inevitably collide with my sense of moral uprightness.

And so it spins. Round and round and round.

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It doesn't stop there. Living a virtuous life doesn't merely consist in the restraint of evil. A virtuous life involves the promotion of good. Attributes like loyalty, honesty, charity, patience, kindness, fairness, love, mercy, and humility are intimately bound up with the traditional notion of goodness. Hope as we might, these qualities do not come naturally, at least not to the degree one might wish. They must be diligently sought. It must be asked, however, whether or not there is sufficient motivational power to cause a person to deny himself in the aquarium. Self-sacrifice is hard, after all. Very hard.

Where is the motivation for philanthropy when it calls upon me to sacrifice my own comforts? Why inconvenience myself so that the life of another can prosper a little more? It is true that an altruistic act may make me feel good on some level, but so does vacationing, or buying the latest gadget. Does the feeling of being good really outweigh the pleasure of fulfilling my own self-maximizing desires? If virtue is at root a human convention, the task of convincing one's self to be good for goodness' sake proves more than a little problematic, especially when the act of goodness is fraught with challenges.

Here I suppose one could view altruism in a more comprehensive sense, maintaining that self-sacrifice builds character, thereby improving one's overall emotional state. The problem is that the very notion of "better" rests wholly on my own conception of improvement, and when I know that the "better" version of myself is rooted in an illusion that may or may not accrue emotional benefits, it's hard to summon the drive to begin the hard process of character development. Looking after the disabled, or taking care of foster children, requires tremendous purpose of will. It isn't fun. So what principle will compel me to embark on this toilsome path? Sheer determination? A monetary reward? An attaboy?

The truth is that most of us are quick to play the role of “good guy” when it’s convenient. Holding the door open for an elderly woman, or helping someone change a flat tire, makes us feel sufficiently heroic. But I cannot see how the truly daunting works of altruism could ever come to fruition. Why sacrifice so much for another? Because it makes me a good person? No, thank you. I don’t need that trophy. Let others do it. Besides, doing the truly hard work of meeting the needs of others doesn’t necessarily elicit warm fuzzy feelings. Genuine self-sacrifice is fraught with sorrow and frustration. People disappoint. They annoy. They are thankless. They die. So if you do receive recognition for sacrificing so much time and energy, the applause will inevitably be mingled with melancholy. Every saint has felt the pain of *weltschmerz*.

In the end, the smarter approach is to do just enough little acts of kindness to appease my own (and others’) fairly low standards of do-goodism. No need to go crazy. That’s the smartest way forward.

But when I think about the calculation in this way, I feel a deep sense of disappointment. The calculation is cold and uncaring. And yet when I actually think about remedying the feelings of guilt by really going for the “do-good trophy,” I am immediately confronted with the reality of my own selfishness. And it wins. And why shouldn’t it? It’s better to tell myself that I’ll get around to doing good someday than to sacrifice my own comfort. That seems like the win-win situation. Plan on doing good. Be prepared to do good. But just go on all the same, maybe tossing a twenty in the Salvation Army container during the holidays.

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But there's another side to this coin. A genuinely horrific side. It occurs when a man doesn't feel the need to maintain any standard of

morality. Recognizing the brutal truth in all its indifferent glory, he feels no need to restrain evil, nor promote good. At all. His delight blossoms in the willful promotion of cruelty.

Richard Wurmbrand, a man imprisoned under the terrible rule of communist Romania, experienced the horrors of nihilism for over fourteen years. Writing of his torturers, he said,

“I often asked the torturers, ‘Don’t you have pity in your hearts?’ They usually answered with quotations from Lenin: ‘You cannot make omelets without breaking the shells of eggs,’ and ‘You cannot cut wood without making chips fly.’ I said again, ‘I know these quotations from Lenin. But there is a difference. When you cut a piece of wood it feels nothing. But here you are dealing with human beings. Every beating produces pain and there are mothers who weep.’ It was in vain. They are materialists. For them nothing besides matter exists and to them a man is like wood, like an eggshell. With this belief they sink to unthinkable depths of cruelty.

The cruelty of atheism is hard to believe. When a man has no faith in the reward of good or the punishment of evil, there is no reason to be human. There is no restraint from the depths of evil that is in man. The Communist torturers often said, ‘There is no God, no hereafter, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish.’ I heard one torturer say, ‘I thank God, in whom I don’t believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart.’” He expressed it in unbelievable brutality and torture inflicted on prisoners.⁷

⁷ *Tortured for Christ*, Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1967, chapter 2

Here is where the terrible, consistent truth plays out. The communist torturers recognized and embraced the logical implications of atheism. No good. No evil. They could indulge in whatever they liked. If they enjoyed seeing men break like eggs, or chip like wood, no external moral framework compelled them to do otherwise. They saw straight through the illusion to their own self-gratifying desires. No brakes at all.

Everything within me wants to call this an unconscionable evil. But it isn't. It isn't anything but pure sanity; the express fulfillment of desires; the maximization of pleasure. It doesn't matter what kind of pleasure it is. A pleasure is a pleasure.

This is the unbearable truth. We're a violent species that sometimes holds its cruel intentions in check. Sometimes we don't. And the difference between willful restraint and willful indulgence is utterly arbitrary.

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In a world where the cold calculus is real, and hormones steer morality, and ethics dance like dreams in the minds of men, it is hard to feel passionate about social causes. This is because ideas and ethics are inexorably intertwined.

Think of any social cause you feel passionate about. Try to argue for the position without invoking morality. It can't be done. At some point you're going to say that you're defending what is "right" or "good," or that competing perspectives are "bad" or "wrong," or at least not as good as yours.

Take an issue like animal rights. What is it about jamming a bunch of fat, hormone-filled chickens together in a dark, confined space that so upsets the liberal mind? Is it mistreatment? If so, are we saying that

mistreatment (or at least this kind of mistreatment) is evil? Who cares if chickens live bleak, suffocating lives? They are delicious and fill our bellies. What's the problem with that?

Here the advocate of animal rights may very well want to launch into an impassioned reply. So be it. The point is that the argument is laced with ethical assumptions. A moral standard is being invoked. Denunciation and advocacy imply it.

But as we've seen, the idea of an objective moral standard is nothing more than a phantom. This doesn't preclude people from making moral judgments. The advocate of animal rights can, and no doubt will appeal to their creed. It's just that it doesn't mean anything. It's one amoral act infused with moral significance competing against another amoral act infused with moral significance. This is how it is with all of our social causes. We create our own meaning and paste it onto reality. It can be no other way, ultimately.

This fact unsettles a person's passion. When zeal is rooted in a sense of moral uprightness, and we feel like we're defending what is right, it fuels us. It spurs us on. But if we are consistent and recognize the illusion for what it truly is, the fire fueling our zeal inevitably wanes, if not extinguishes entirely.

This means that when the enlightened man looks at the world, he does not see just and unjust causes. Righteousness exists only on a sliding continuum of absolute subjectivism. He sees, rather, myriads upon myriads of people jostling for preeminence. They want *their* ideas to win. They want others to take *their* cause seriously. It is one person's conception of the greater good versus another person's conception of the greater good.

Many will no doubt marshal impressive sounding arguments in favor of their position, citing statistics and invoking authority figures, but it

amounts to nothing more than the promotion of *preferences*. Some like bananas. Others do not. Some like to be nice. Others do not. Some choose to play well with neighboring nations. Others like to march soldiers into their neighbor's backyard and take things.

At root, it's really that simple.

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So it's all a mad game, a competition of preferences, where individuals who share enough common interests gather to promote their ideas—all in the hopes of gaining enough traction to enact change and codify their preferences into law. This makes them feel right. It provides a sense of security that bolsters the illusion of moral justification. They can gesture towards books filled with detailed instructions telling them how things ought to be done, and feel good about it.

But so what? So what if one particular group gathers enough supporters to form something as large as a nation? Size doesn't matter in this instance.

Consider a few of the issues dominating the news at the time of my writing this. The United States Supreme Court has penned into law, by a vote of 5-4, the legalization of gay marriage in all fifty states. Planned Parenthood has been caught on tape discussing the sale of human body parts. A man apparently linked with Islamic terrorism gunned down four American marines. ISIS continues to saw off heads. Paris is attacked.

In each instance, the story leads to an explosion of opinions. News commentators, and bloggers, and government officials, and factory workers, and every other average Joe weigh in, waving their arms about the "right" course of action. But what is the point of weighing in? Is it to

show everyone how sensible you are? How smart you are? How finely-tuned your moral standards are?

The stakes are no doubt high. Dignity, and life, and justice are on the line. The problem is that people fall squarely on both sides of what promotes dignity, and life, and justice. Just ask an Islamic Jihadist. Or in the case of abortion, ask a KJV only fundamentalist, or conversely, a lesbian feminist.

Each person represents one peculiar, socially and biologically determined set of possible states of affairs for a brain. They, no doubt, fill their heads with knowledge and facilitate a particular outlook, but each and every conclusion is couched in the unalterable fact of preference. One brain prefers a certain set of ideas. Another doesn't.

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Picture the world with all its inhabitants standing in a large circle. All of humanity is there, arms extended, fingers waving, a moral denunciation on the tip of their tongues. They point and blame. They accuse and demand correction. But to what end?

In order for someone to take seriously another person's complaint, they need to take seriously the conditions that must exist in order for them to take the complaint seriously. One of the necessary conditions includes the existence of a binding moral standard obligating everyone. However, since atheism cannot account for that necessary condition, the moral complaint falls flat. It proves self-referentially contradictory. It's logically incoherent.

This doesn't require people to shut their mouths. They can still point and shout. But it cheapens the whole enterprise; it makes it feel like a pile of plastic spoons. Without a genuine sense of justice, who among us can

continue to labor after their “righteous” objectives with the same passion and zeal as before? It is a pursuit destined for a cul-de-sac. Worse than that. It is futile from the start.

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So how shall I live when every cause I might pursue proves morally benign? Such awareness cripples my desire to strain ahead, to engage in the hard, toilsome work of change. It maims it, really. When I roll out of bed and consider the things ahead of me, and I realize that the tasks of the day cannot be situated in some larger, morally significant storyline, my sense of purpose, and therefore pleasure, sours. The very thing undergirding my impulse to press through the struggles of life (that sublime sense of truly making a moral difference) evaporates. The floor disappears from beneath me, and I fall headlong into an undefined emptiness. Every direction is the same. Every direction is hollow.

Where is the joy in this? I ask again, where is the joy?

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So what are we to do? A few options present themselves. The first would be to just ignore it all and press on. Plenty of people do this. They meander through life only half aware of reality, deluding and distracting themselves, playing the game with only a dim sense of direction. Stare at the cell phone more. Climb higher on the corporate ladder. Play more video games. Have more sex. Stay distracted. Aim for busyness. Press it all down.

All this is akin to writing a fairy tale in order to believe it. You know it is fictional. You know it isn't real, so you can't really believe it, not without

becoming delusional. This tactic is rather pathetic, not to mention unrealistic. I know what I know. And the knowledge is too potent to sweep under a rug.

If someone told me that a fine cuisine was laced with poison, I could not enjoy the meal, no matter how delicious it tasted. The knowledge of the poison would sour the experience. The same would be true if I suddenly learned that I had terminal cancer with only three months to live. Could I really suppress the awful knowledge and enjoy the rest of my time as if all was good? I could pursue simple enjoyments during those three months, but it would all be tainted with the terrible prospect of pain and death.

Another option is to aim unswervingly for pleasure. Recognize the futility for what it is and choose to maximize pleasure. Just do whatever it takes, pursue whatever form. Most of the time this leads to the world of narcotics. Consider the counsel of Dr. Rosenberg,

“So, what should we scientific folks do when overcome by Weltschmerz (world-weariness)? Take two of whatever neuropharmacology prescribes. If you don’t feel better in the morning... or three weeks from now, switch to another one. Three weeks is often how long it takes serotonin reuptake suppression drugs like Prozac, Wellbutrin, Paxil, Zoloft, Celexa, or Luvox to kick in. And if one doesn’t work, another one probably will.”

This too is depressing. But more than that it isn’t enough. The yearnings of the heart cannot be overcome so easily. Not by a little pill. You need a larger one—a more potent one. Heroin, or cocaine, or strong liquor more aptly suits the situation. Many go this route to get their high.

They pop their pills and obtain their unfiltered, manufactured pleasure. But it doesn't last. Sooner or later the grip of futility resurfaces, and when it does, they are forced back into the deleterious embrace of drugs. Soon the law of diminishing returns works its woeful effects and the addict finds himself bankrupt, jobless, and desperate.

So what is the best way forward? Grit and determination? Nah. Drugs? The dire outcome is predestined. Purposeful distraction? The drumbeat of tedium is too loud in this cursed world.

The most sensible path forward is death—that quiet, numb nothingness where you cannot reflect on the sorrow of your non-existence.

Chapter Four

~ The End of all Endings ~



Bertrand Russell wrote, “Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness...”

Mankind has no hope. There awaits each one of us the eventual disappearance of the self, that awful moment when the accumulation of all our memories and failures and accomplishments give way to irredeemable nothingness. In this, we see that death is the end of all endings. It is when we breathe our last and our eyes stop drinking in the sights of this world. Thinking stops. Reflection ends. There will be no fretting over the darkness, no discontentment with the loss of everything, no joy of any kind. It is absolute, unyielding nothingness, an unimaginable silence where everything stops and nothing matters anymore.

It's strange how we can act like this isn't awaiting us. The single most significant moment in life is our eventual death, and yet we continue to plod along largely unfazed as if our infinitesimally small existence amounts to anything. But it is the single most important truth—the only truth that matters. What is, after all, twenty or ninety years in comparison to eternity?

There you are. Sitting. Reading this text. If your heart were to suddenly stop, you would lose consciousness and soon die. From that moment forward, everything would cease to matter. Obligations would disappear. Heartfelt desires would melt away. There would be no sense of the countless eons of time rolling by. Trillions of years could pass and it would mean nothing. And yet, here we sit with this thin, fragile line situated in front of us. It's right there. So easily within our grasp. With one pull of the trigger pure nothingness awaits. The gunshot wouldn't even be heard. You wouldn't even know you did it. You would never know if you did it. It's simply a click followed by utter absence.

This is the terrifying fact of our existence. Death is traveling alongside us at every moment. It's like we're walking down a hallway lined with doors, and on the other side of each door non-existence quietly waits. At any moment, we could choose to step through one of them and end it all, or we could wait until the door at the end of the hallway. It doesn't really matter. It's all the same. All of the events that transpire before death are equally swallowed up, and they all amount to nothing in the end. Absolutely nothing.

Think of it this way. Suppose you died yesterday. Would anything matter to you today? No. You wouldn't exist. Now imagine that you are going to die tomorrow. Would anything you are doing today matter one second after you die tomorrow? Not even a little. It would all be wiped away. So what difference does the accumulation of a few more conscious minutes make? Not much, if any.

This is the problem of death. Whether we live a thousand years or three years, if non-existence awaits us, everything prior becomes meaningless. It need not have happened, and it doesn't matter if it did.

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I could argue with myself, try to tell myself that it isn't so bad now while I am alive. But what would I say? What line of reasoning would I take? Any argument I marshal will be quickly met with a simple question: If you die right now, will any of your arguments matter?

Non-existence hovers right next to me. So as soon as I begin to esteem my life, maintaining that it amounts to something, I look to my left, and then to my right, and I feel the cold presence of unending darkness. It is right there. Always. Just waiting to begin. An unavoidable eternity. No restart button. No glimmer of hope. Just nothingness. Forever.

Concepts like nothingness and endlessness bear stressing given their sheer incomprehensibility. It's similar to how cosmologists talk about light years of time. We toss out the phrase "light years" but cannot really hope to fathom such staggering distances. And yet, the relative comparison between walking a mile and traveling a thousand light years pales in comparison to our brief moment under the sun and the endless eons ahead of us. It utterly defies comprehension. Our short stint of existence is so unimaginably small, so unimaginably insignificant, we cannot hope to grasp the meaninglessness of the situation.

Sometimes I am particularly struck by the consequences of this dire condition. I sit and slide into a state of deep reflection. All becomes still and the idea of eternity washes over me. I don't merely say "forever," but I feel it. I feel it deep within me. And I ache. My inner voice gone forever. No more me. No nothing.

When the conclusion washes over me like this, running deep into my core, I shudder. The whole notion seems impossible, because I can't imagine not existing. I can't think about me not thinking. And yet I can. I catch a whiff of eternity's real meaning and it unsettles me in ways that can scarcely be conveyed.

These rare moments are like flashes of light. They last but only a second. But when they do occur, I know something of the true absurdity of life—our pitifully small moment of existence in an otherwise ocean of nothingness. In such moments, I can see through the illusion, and I can see that it's all a joke.

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Oddly enough, most atheists recognize this grim fact but choose to keep on smiling, claiming that it doesn't make that big of a difference now. Just live life to the fullest while you have it. That's the approach. Set your jaw, grab a beer, and soldier on all the same, maintaining that it is actually poetic on some level. Don't lament the situation. Turn it around. See it another way. Announce to yourself that this brief life is not one ounce the worse, but can actually be quite good.

This approach is sad, really. Consider a few quotes by way of illustration. Lawrence Krauss, well-known physicist and atheist, who, after describing our cosmologically bleak future in a talk on the universe, said,

“And by the way, that’s the second of the two things I wanted to remind you of. The first is that you’re insignificant. And second, the future is miserable...”

Why is there something rather than nothing? The answer is quite simple: there won't be for long. We have this cosmic hubris that makes us think the universe is always going to be the same. If we wait long enough everything we see will disappear... And so when you look out at the night sky and remember the fact that you are insignificant and the future is miserable, you

shouldn't be depressed. You should be excited because here we are at this random moment in time, 13.7 billion years after the big bang, and this random place in the middle of nowhere, but we're endowed with a consciousness which has allowed us to ask these questions and learn about the evolution of the universe back to the first second and to the far future. So instead of being depressed you should enjoy your brief moment in the sun."⁸

In a similar vein, George Herob, during an interview on *Point of Inquiry*, after denying the reality of an afterlife, said,

“There is no other thing. It's what we have is what we have and there is no magical stuff. And that's not a bad thing. That's actually a really good thing... Everything is going to be gone. Isn't that great? That's so leveling. We're all in the same boat. No matter what, we're all destined for the same thing. To me that just seems like a positive thing. I read Phil Plates book, *Death in the Skies*, and he talks about how at the end of the universe everything just kind of stops. And just sort of cools down and slows down and cools down, slows down and just stops. And I read that and I thought that was just so beautiful—like this watch kind of stopping. And it's the idea of that's it. You know? That's it. It reaches its dénouement. And that's fine. You know someone else might think of it as cold or dark or whatever. To me there's a certain beauty in that—in that inevitability—that understanding that we are all on the same team. Regardless we're all on the same team. And not just this

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNfaduuan9c> I have slightly edited his words so as to smooth out the speech for reading purposes. The substance of the content has not been changed.

planet, but every atom will eventually—it's all going to stop. And it's like, "Ok. What do we do in the meantime?" That's the issue."⁹

More succinctly, philosopher Thomas Nagel quipped, "Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it and just go on as before."

It's a strange twist of cognitive dissonance to advance the utter futility of the future while simultaneously praising the joys of our precarious present. The shape and scope of the future is inexorably intertwined with the now. Who among us would dare enjoy the sights of the beach if a tsunami could be seen on the horizon? Or if a plane was plummeting to the earth, would any of the occupants pull out their phone and play a game of solitaire?

If there is no overarching meaning to anything, but only that which we paste onto our lives for a brief moment, the coming void of nothingness utterly eviscerates the present. To say otherwise requires a wildly delusional outlook.

Think about it, Mr. Horeb. Consider what you say, Dr. Krauss. It makes no difference whether or not we're on the same team if that team is on a plane spiraling towards the ground.

"The future is miserable!" But enjoy our brief moment? What foolishness! What utter foolishness! Shall I enjoy your stupid statements or feel annoyed? Because if the bitter end is coming, such baseless, myopic fantasy sours my sensibilities. It's asinine. All it does is add to the compounding agitation of life. It's just another pointless statement at another pointless moment in an otherwise pointless universe.

9 May 14th, 2010

But let's suppose you disagree, dear reader. So what? In a very short period of time, your perspective will disappear forever. It will be swallowed up in the greatest and longest conceivable form of nothingness. Agree or disagree, it won't soon matter.

If we are nothing more than an accident, formed unintentionally in an aquarium full of only rocks and dirt, we have been dealt the unenviable hand of perceiving our dire situation. It can scarcely get any worse. If your life is terrible, fraught with untold pains and disappointments, its bitter end will simply continue to reflect the pointlessness of what came before. If your life is exceedingly enjoyable, filled with delights and benefits, the coming cessation will hover before you like a specter that cannot be avoided. Either way, the end is the same. And it is horrible.

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Woody Allen comes closer to the truth. Speaking candidly, he owns up to the terrible state of the situation:

“I firmly believe, and I don't say this as a criticism, that life is meaningless. I'm not alone in thinking this – there have been many great minds far, far superior to mine, that have come to that conclusion. And unless somebody can come up with some proof or some example where it's not, I think it is. I think it's a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing, and that's just the way I feel about it.

I'm not saying that one should opt to kill oneself, but the truth of the matter is, when you think of it, every 100 years, there's a big flush, and everybody in the world is gone. And there's a new

group of people. And that gets flushed, and there's a new group of people. And this goes on and on interminably — and I don't want to upset you — toward no particular end, no rhyme or reason.

And the universe, as you know from the best of physicists, is coming apart, and eventually there will be nothing, absolutely nothing. All the great works of Shakespeare, and Beethoven, and Da Vinci, all that will be gone. Now, not for a long time, but shorter than you think, really, because the sun is going to burn out much earlier than the universe vanishes, so you don't have to wait for the universe to vanish. It'll happen earlier than that. So all these plays and these symphonies, the height of human achievement, will be gone completely. There'll be no time, no space, nothing at all. Just zero.

That's why over the years, I've never written or made movies about political themes. Because while they do have current critical importance, in the large scheme of things, only the big questions matter, and the answers to those big questions are very, very depressing. What I would recommend — this is the solution that I've come up with — is distraction.

That's all you can do! You get up, you can be distracted by your love life, by the baseball game, by the movies, by the nonsense. Can I get my kid into this private school? Will this girl go out with me Saturday night? Can I think of an ending for the third act of my play? Am I going to get the promotion in my office? All this stuff, but in the end the universe burns out. So I think it's

completely meaningless, and to be honest, my characters portray this feeling. Have a good weekend.”¹⁰

More succinctly, and in another context, Mr. Allen summed it up this way,

“This is my perspective and has always been my perspective on life. I have a very grim, pessimistic view of it. I always have since I was a little boy; it hasn’t gotten worse with age or anything. I do feel that’s it’s a grim, painful, nightmarish, meaningless experience and that the only way that you can be happy is if you tell yourself some lies and deceive yourself.”¹¹

Distraction. Deceit. Lies. That’s the more honest coping mechanism.¹² Shut your eyes to reality. Force upon yourself entertainment. Distract with frivolity. The “grim, painful, nightmarish, meaningless experience” is too potent a drink to knowingly consume. You have to fool yourself. Trick your mind by ignoring the truth.

10 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonwillmore/woody-allen-believes-that-life-is-meaningless>

11 <http://the-talks.com/interviews/woody-allen/>

12 Alom Shaha, author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook*, states the matter thus, “Yes, of course I know that life is ultimately without meaning or purpose, but the trick is not to wake up every morning and feel that way. Cognitive dissonance? Embrace it. Create a sense of meaning and purpose by doing something useful with your life (I teach), being creative – I don’t mean that in a poncey hipster way, I mean make a curry, build some bookshelves, write a poem. And most importantly, find people you like and love and spend lots of time with them. I regularly have people over for dinner, throw parties for no other reason than I just want to spend time surrounded by the people I love. And if you’re really stuck, eat rice and dal. Physically filling yourself with the food you love really does fill the emptiness you may feel inside.” Found at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomchivers/when-i-was-a-child-i-spake-as-a-child?utm_term=.iwxBX5DAX#.pjAGg5j3M

‡

But can it really be done?

In theory, I suppose it is possible for the human mind to so compartmentalize its thoughts, to so thoroughly sequester the unpleasant facts, that it ushers in a kind of blissful self-deception. A fair number of folks seem to have achieved this disconnected state of nirvana.

There is also the matter of drugs, as was suggested earlier. If one can successfully alter the chemical state of the human brain so as to secure and maintain a sense of euphoria, the emotional problem will dissipate. Reality remains the same, but you won't care. The whole world could be on fire, but so long as your chemicals are adequately tweaked, you'll laugh at the carnage.

But the gap between trickery and psychedelic drugs, on the one hand, and a simple awareness of the true state of affairs is immense. I simply cannot see how one can distract themselves enough. The knowledge is always there eating away at the edges of busyness. If you can adopt a hopeful lens through which to see the world and thereby comfort yourself, it will work on some level. However, it is exceedingly hard to maintain the illusion when you know the lens is just a psychological strategy.

But who knows? Perhaps someone can achieve this detached state. If so, good for them. But all one has to do is think, "It doesn't matter if I fool myself. The end game is exactly the same." After that reality comes crashing back in.

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But is *this* life, at the end of the day, really worth living? That's the assumption behind the atheist's call to march happily forward.

What is our life, really? In its basic form, it is a succession of events accompanied by feelings. Events transpire and we feel a range of attendant emotions. One might want to dress this outlook up further, but at its most basic level, that's the sum of life. We are organisms that experience things. Sometimes the experience produces within us a sense of well-being, while at other times it elicits a sense of sorrow. Or frustration. Or anger. Or whatever other negative word we affix to the unwelcome feeling. There are good feelings, bad feelings, and those states of affairs that might be more neutral or inconsequential, like sleeping. We continually live in the present, but the present is always informed by the past, as well as our perception of the future. So it isn't as if the exact “now” of life is the absolute determination of happiness. What transpired in our past carries over, and what we anticipate flows back onto the present.

So what are we all aiming for, ultimately? Happiness. We want to be happy. Not sad. Not ticked. Not filled with pain. We want to be pleasantly joyful, feeling at ease with ourselves and the world. If we feel sufficiently loved and at peace, content and secure, we often describe ourselves as being happy—not necessarily in the happy-clappy knee-slapping sense—but in the sense of well-being. One might think here of the term *shalom*.

Now the funny thing about life is that there are many well-worn paths that can be traveled, and the truth is that every path from birth to death has been essentially explored already. There's the rebellious path with a grand turnaround, the selfish path, the highly productive path, the do-good path, the boring path; these and a hundred others have all been played out many, many times. There's nothing new under the sun. A series of events are added up to a brief whole. And then it ends.

This means that the path we are heading down isn't new. Someone's life might be unique in the sense that it hasn't been *exactly* duplicated, but the basic plot line has been played out countless times over. As a result, my life carries with it a certain inevitability. I can take what appears to be interesting twists, but it's all mundane from the standpoint of history. We can think of our lives as being meaningful, but they are scarcely any different from the long list of forgotten lives that resembled our own.

I picture plastic bins full of little stick people with each container representing a particular trajectory of life. When death visits us, we'll be tossed into one of the bins. "Ah, yes, this one goes in bin C," or again, "This tragic death goes in bin H." Nothing particularly new. Nothing particularly exceptional. Both the great and the small are soon discarded and forgotten.

Did you valiantly fight cancer? Did you live a life of extreme sports? Perhaps you worked at a factory six days a week for forty years only to die of a heart attack after retiring?

My awareness of this fact has a way of dampening my overall sense of happiness. It's as if I can see the outcome before it transpires. The sensation isn't entirely unlike the feeling I experience after watching a movie that sweeps over the lives of a few key characters. They live out their days quickly on screen. Their youth. Their family. Their trials and accomplishments. And then their end. They are then followed by another life. Then another. Then another. Each new tale feels like it is doing something new, but it is all remarkably similar. Just different personalities facing similar hurdles.

I know my life is no different. At the age of forty, this is more apparent to me than when I was twenty. Life is moving along very quickly, and the container in which I'm going to be thrown is coming more and more into focus.

The atheistic worldview offers no hope here. We try to thread together a series of events that elicit good feelings within us. But even in the case of those who are monumentally successful, their lives are filled with painful, emotionally tearing moments. It is joy mixed with struggle; satisfaction filled with melancholy, achievement littered with disappointment, peace marked with discord, hope dashed on the rocks of death.

I can chart my course and raise the flag of “personal meaning” high above my head, waving it vigorously, but when I know that others have done exactly the same thing, a million times over, only to die suddenly, or slowly wither away in the corner of an assisted living complex, my arms grow weak, and I feel compelled to set the flag down and toss myself into the bin entitled, “Enlightened modern man who grew tired of the pointlessness.”

Death is the culprit here, meaninglessness is its power, and the two are wed together in an indissoluble union. If non-existence awaits us, self-imposed meaning is at best a temporary illusion that may or may not foster a few good feelings during the otherwise bleak succession of events we call life.

If this is what the atheist champions as a remedy to our brief, ultimately meaningless existence, I cannot see how such an antidote can even begin to deal with the knowledge of what is coming.

‡

I know there are some who will faithfully maintain that since this life (however brief it might be) is the best we've got, we might as well make the most of it. Fair enough. As has been said, distraction is a real strategy. So is denial. Or delusion. Or drugs.

At the end of the day, I suspect that the line separating those who can enjoy life, even in the face of such dire facts, and those who are overtaken with despair, can be boiled to two essential factors: biology and circumstances.

If your biological makeup is such that you can embrace cognitive dissonance with flying colors, then you'll probably be able to meander through life with a large enough grin, finding enjoyment in walking your dog, or caravaning your children to the next event, or running the corporate rat race. Of course, if one pauses long enough to ponder the shallow nature of such persevering impulses, which are ultimately rooted in the lottery of genomic code, their little bubble of happiness will wander dangerously close to the needle of triviality. We're just bags of flesh that happen to value particular things. But since such impulses are pure happenchance, we're just doing what good old biology compels us to do.

If for some reason a person values stacking grains of sand, years on end, and for no particular purpose other than it makes them feel good, it would be due to DNA. Most would view this monotony as painfully trivial, having no lasting or redeeming quality. And yet, at root, what is the difference between shuffling grains of sand around and any other activity we might esteem? Our values and delights hinge on what our brains find appealing.

Now while this revelation won't necessarily change our values and delights, it just might cause us to view our values and delights in a far more hollow, or cheapened sense. Oddly enough, we humans *do* value meaning and purpose. And we *do* happen to have brains capable of seeing the illusion. This results in a strange dialectic of pleasure and dissatisfaction. We like hanging out with friends, and we certainly enjoy a good drink, but we don't like to think of these activities as being trivial or deeply insubstantial. We want it to amount to more than lining up grains

of sand. Our feelings say one thing, our rationality another, and the two together create discord.

Now if you think long enough about this state of affairs, and how this little quandary is itself the unfortunate by-product of chance, it just might lead one to feel, to put it mildly, a bit gloomy. We're not special. And what we do is not special. It is one randomly valued priority standing in a forest of other randomly valued priorities.

If a person can push past this intellectual tar pit, they will be, I suppose, all the better for it.¹³ They'll feel better. But while firmly situating blinders on one's face helps remedy the problem, the act of placing blinders on one's face feels shallow. We value intellectual honesty. But if we are honest and own up to the true nature of personal meaning, an uncomfortable duplicity rears its ugly head.

Here the words of Stephen King come into focus. When asked "If there's no afterlife or reason for the universe, how do you make your life matter," he said,

"When we reject the imagined supernatural meaning from our existence, what we're left with is far from a consolation prize. Sure, it'll be messy at times, sometimes joyous, sometimes miserable, but it's all we'll ever know. And it's ours. We invent comforting lies to distract us from one simple truth: Oblivion looms. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I choose to live, laugh, love, travel, create, help others, and learn. And I'm going to do as much of this as I can manage, because the clock is ticking. We create our own meaning, and

13 Let's not forget that biology will largely determine, if not entirely determine, whether or not you are able to persevere. As Sam Harris likes to say, "It's tumors all the way down."

there's more than enough to be had. Seize it where you can.”¹⁴

So there you go. Just seize it where you can—your made-up, vacuous, fleeting prioritizations that make you feel good sometimes.

Sure. Right. No disconnect at all.

‡

What are you going to do when you can't travel or laugh with friends? The unspoken assumption behind living the good life is that the life you have avails such opportunities. But when you are too weak to walk your dog because of starvation, or when you walk your dog to find a moment of respite in a war-torn country, or when those around you hate you and wish for your demise, what then? Where is the made-up meaning? Where is all the laughter and creativity?

A young girl left to die on a dung heap in ancient Rome, only to be picked up by a greedy slaveholder and prepped for the backstreet brothels, is not afforded the luxury of blissful self-meaning. In situations like these, the heavy hand of reality crushes all such hopes. When the young prostitute is dying from a debilitating disease, and hated for it by her master, being beaten and neglected for poor performance, what shall she think? “I choose to live, laugh, love, travel, create and help others?” The notion is absurd. She is a cosmological accident thrust into a situation where such brutality is not only morally relative, but in the eyes of the world around her, benign. She has no rights. She *deserves* no rights. She is a brief blip of consciousness that will soon be snuffed out. Never remembered. Never significant. Gone forever.

¹⁴ https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomchivers/when-i-was-a-child-i-spake-as-a-child?utm_term=.nbpQLyWJ4#.uqWDX47va

Where is the self-esteem here? Where are the encouraging words? There are none. They have to be made up. But from where do they spring? Her own self-crafted approbations? From some artificial conception of her own making?

It's infuriatingly absurd for someone to advance such glib, superficial notions. We are mere beetles wandering aimlessly on the sidewalk of the universe, and it doesn't care one bit if it steps on us. So playing the mental game of self-meaning might afford a measure of comfort, but when the boot begins to crush you into the ground, the mirage dissipates. You blink and look at the wasteland surrounding you, knowing with perfect clarity that all is hopeless.

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In the end, our friends can encourage us to carry on. We can tell ourselves to carry on. We can surround ourselves with self-esteem books, listen to inspirational music, and journal every morning, but the game of self-created meaning is just that. It's a game. Whether we play the game or choose to end the game, the end result is exactly the same. All of the meaning vanishes into that unimaginable state of non-existence where nothing matters any longer.

H. G. Wells' vision of the future depicted at the end of *The Time Machine* is coming. When the main character in the story pressed forward into the future, millions of years, drawn on by the mystery of earth's fate, he beheld a terrible sight. I leave you with the image.

“I looked about me to see if any traces of animal life remained. A certain indefinable apprehension still kept me in the saddle of the machine. But I saw nothing moving, in earth or sky or sea.

The green slime on the rocks alone testified that life was not extinct. A shallow sandbank had appeared in the sea and the water had receded from the beach. I fancied I saw some black object flopping about upon this bank, but it became motionless as I looked at it, and I judged that my eye had been deceived, and that the black object was merely a rock. The stars in the sky were intensely bright and seemed to me to twinkle very little.

Suddenly I noticed that the circular westward outline of the sun had changed; that a concavity, a bay, had appeared in the curve. I saw this grow larger. For a minute perhaps I stared aghast at this blackness that was creeping over the day, and then I realized that an eclipse was beginning. Either the moon or the planet Mercury was passing across the sun's disk. Naturally, at first I took it to be the moon, but there is much to incline me to believe that what I really saw was the transit of an inner planet passing very near to the earth.

The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into

blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black.

A horror of this great darkness came on me. The cold, that smote to my marrow, and the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me. I shivered, and a deadly nausea seized me. Then like a red-hot bow in the sky appeared the edge of the sun. I got off the machine to recover myself. I felt giddy and incapable of facing the return journey. As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shoal—there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing—against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about. Then I felt I was fainting. But a terrible dread of lying helpless in that remote and awful twilight sustained me while I clambered upon the saddle.”

Chapter Five

~ The Futility of Reason ~



The challenge of this chapter is to convey the futility of human rationality in not only a brief space of time, but in a way that will prove persuasive to those unacquainted with the long tale of philosophical discourse. For those who have not felt within themselves the bitter disappointment of man's philosophical strainings, especially as it has manifested itself in the history of philosophy, the average reader will likely harbor the false belief that there's a good answer “out there;” that there's some expert hidden away in a cloister who could point us in the right direction, if we could but find him. Such wishful thinkers walk through the library of an old college and marvel at the heights of learning, thinking that the presence of so many volumes suggests a sure grasp of reality. It often doesn't occur to them, however, that such voluminous tomes actually mark the failure of human thought; that the mounds of books are filled with countless contradictions; that it represents generations of scholars critiquing and decrying the errors of others. They fail to see the continual spiral towards nothing—the pretense of having an answer when no answer is to be found. Their expertise, if it is to be found at all, is in cataloging missteps.

This is the truth of the matter: man has been bent over reality, toiling for centuries, his spectacles clinging for dear life to his nose, trying to

discern the meaning of it all. There is no consensus. No agreement. Only theory after theory, world without end.

The student of philosophy knows this, unless of course, he is still frolicking in the initial stages of inquiry when all seems fresh and hopeful; when the books still glow with the promise of advancement. But as he wanders further into the twisting labyrinth of human thought, trudging forward with each increasingly laborious step, the once hopeful song of academia grows dim, and he cannot remember why he set off on the journey.

For all its pomp and sophistication, philosophy has thrown fetters around the feet of men and wrapped a thick cloth around their eyes. Cling to whatever teacher you like—Aristotle, Plato, Kant, Hume, Descartes, or any of the other landmark thinkers—and you will be ultimately led to the same sad place: self-consuming agnosticism. No one knows. Not really. Not in the aquarium. It is all theory. From top to bottom. A big fat maybe.

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Demonstrating this is fairly simple. All that needs to be recognized is man's finitude and the rest falls into place.

Without an infinite reference point or an omniscient source of knowledge, man cannot hope to escape the clutches of skepticism. Every conclusion he draws harbors a question mark. Every single one. Take any cherished idea we might hold, take any seemingly indisputable fact, and probe it for certainty. Those most honest among us will concede that they don't know it to be true with absolute certainty. For what conviction of ours cannot be called into question? Is anything, after all, *utterly* indisputable? Is anything beyond all *imaginable* doubt?

The philosophers in their quest for certainty have disassembled the inner mechanics of epistemology, and in the process of laying bare the cogs and springs of human thought, they found a creature lurking within. That creature is uncertainty. There is no idea, or concept, or conviction, or perception of fact, that can escape the simple question: Do I know this with absolute certainty? Men may puff their chests with intellectual bravado, and thump the lectern with all the conviction of a cult leader, but when pressed as to how they know the simplest of truths, they must lean on supposition. They have to plop their conviction down on the table of dogmatism and claim to know no other way. But as with all seemingly settled beliefs, this “plopping down” rests in the cradle of possibility—that place where finite man knows that what he takes to be unswervingly true is not true beyond all doubt.

The only way to know that an idea isn't *possibly* wrong, after all, is to be in possession of all the facts. And not only must the person be in possession of all the facts, but he has to perfectly understand the relationship between all the facts. As a result, ignorance is inexorably linked with finitude. If we do not know everything perfectly, then we do not know anything perfectly. And if not perfectly, then tentatively, for a new fact could come along and fundamentally alter our conception of reality.

How much undiscovered data may be lurking around the corner waiting to revolutionize our cherished paradigms? We don't know. We can't know. We are finite and left to wonder where we stand on the spectrum of knowledge. Do we barely crest the halfway mark? Are we wandering hopelessly near the start? In comparison to some alien species watching us, we might be little more than ants in relation to their grand intellect, and if we could somehow understand just how far we fall short,

and how incapable we are of ever attaining their peaks of insights, we would immediately bemoan our pride and slump into eternal humility.

Think about it this way. We can all look at a small child and at once recognize the gulf that exists between their intellectual capabilities and that of an adult. There are concepts that simply elude the youngster's mind, and even if one were to explain it to them, the child would no more grasp the idea than if it were told to a beetle.

We naturally congratulate our intellectual achievements by comparing and contrasting such merits with other humans. But this is woefully myopic. It is easy for the big fish in the tiny pond to feel heroic while swimming next to his slightly smaller companions. But if he could imagine the ocean in all its fullness, and all the other creatures that lurk in its deeper regions, he would immediately recognize the foolishness of his audacity.

This is part of the problem facing us. All the great philosophers, in one way or another, have been capsized on the jagged shoreline of the noumena.

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But it gets worse. Suppose a man wanted to crack this conundrum by calculating the depths of our ignorance. How would he go about figuring this out?

In order to discern the relative probability of some particular belief, we need access to the requisite background variables, like knowing how many sides are on a die. But this is precisely the thing in question. We don't know how far the canvas of reality stretches and are therefore unable to plug in any meaningful figures. This means that we not only don't know, but we have no way of knowing how much we don't know.

We can guess. We can draw arbitrary lines in the sand and feel good about ourselves. But in order for us to know the answer with any kind of certainty, we have to be able to get behind the curtain of reality and observe its limits, the very thing we're unsure about.

This is agnosticism. Men are destined to feel as if they have a purchase on reality, but they do not. At every turn, we do not know if we are a brain in a vat experiencing a vivid hallucination, the experiment of some alien race, a tiny cog in an infinite multi-verse, or the product of an inscrutable anomaly. It is all equally likely and unlikely from our vantage point, a brute possibility lost in the ineffable depths of mystery.

Many dismiss global skepticism with a wave of the hand and cling to their axioms, arguing that we can do no other. But of course, cavalier dismissals flap just as easily from the other direction. The decision to ignore skepticism is utterly arbitrary. We cannot say that our view is more likely when we're staring down the barrel of ignorance and possibility.

‡

If agnosticism is the problem and uncertainty is its sure effect, then human autonomy is its bedfellow and self-deification is its cackling sister. Men in the aquarium become the measure of all things, the rule by which all things are judged. They are like noisy gods determining what is and what is not.

Physical laws may seem to constrain us, holding men accountable to physical forces, but even these are constants that need not be. When the universe was a pulsing dot of near infinite energy it could have spewed out an entirely different set of physical constants. There is no need to bow before such laws. We can manipulate them. Harness them. Try to retool them. They aren't binding “oughts.”

Epistemic norms fare no better. When our brains drink in the outside world, it collates the data according to its own peculiar, mental structures and defines it to suit our conception of what is, what can be, and what should be. Much like a waffle iron. The batter of reality is poured in through our senses and our brains organize it in accordance with a prefabricated mold. As a result, our perception of reality is tethered to the ways of brains; yet none of that stops us from exercising dominion over such perceptions.¹⁵

Nietzsche was quite right when he observed,

“The noble type of man regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgment: ‘What is injurious to me is injurious in itself.’ He knows that it is he himself only who confers honour on things; he is a *creator of values*. He honours whatever he recognizes in himself: such morality is self-glorification.”¹⁶

Nothing ultimately constrains autonomous man. Morality is relative in his hands. Physical laws serve as little more than obstacles to his goals. Rationality is no victor either. It is wonderfully malleable and functions as a kind of tool by which so-called facts can be either accepted, or dismissed, or redefined. Men claim to be striving after the truth, but the game of finding truth always plays out according to the rules and assumptions they have deemed sacrosanct. Is man mortal? Is Socrates a man? Premises are mere play things. They rest upon agreed boundaries and definitions. But why agree upon the boundaries? And why accept the definitions? Because

15 I believe it was Emo Philips who once quipped, “I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body. Then I realized who was telling me this.”

16 *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1907), 228.

it feels like a good thing? Or because it befits one man's conception of progress? Uncertainty calls everything into question and autonomy ensures dogmatism. "I do not know," says the would-be god, "but I know because I have said so—because it has passed the bar of my reasoning."

In all this, moral norms are not all that different than epistemological ones. We choose to accept norms of ethics. But one need not. In the case of rational norms, the skeptic can always question the definition. The boundary of reality can always be denied with a dubious eye; and if not its boundary, then certainly its binding nature. Does $2+2 = 4$? *Should* you believe it? *Ought* you to believe it? Are you morally bound to believe it? Like a drunk fumbling through the night, morality always slips in the back door. In this way, moral norms and epistemic norms share the same crumbling foundation. We are not morally obligated to believe anything. Without a sure moral foundation, every so-called fact floats anchorless in a sea of relativity. And without an indisputable foundation holding autonomous man's feet to the ground of reality, he can go any direction he likes. If from chaos we sprang, then unto chaos we can continue. It is possibility from top to bottom. No boundaries. No limits. It is everything and nothing all at once, a boundless "what if" that never actualizes, save in the whimsical convictions of men.

David Hume lamented all of this. In a candid moment of frustration and intellectual impotence, he wrote,

"Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition

imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty. Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. But notwithstanding that my natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent belief in the general maxims of the world, I still feel such remains of my former disposition, that I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy."¹⁷

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All of this plays out in obvious ways. Merely consider your own assessment of what I am saying. If you agree, then the chaos swallows us both whole, and my point stands. Futility reigns supreme. If you think I am mad, or that there are innumerable flaws in what is being advanced, we will have reached an impasse. In the manner of men, we might discuss

17 *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1896), 269.

the differences and try to come to some kind of agreement. This will mean convincing one or the other that they are wrong. Given the level of our sophistication, we will stack up various bits of evidence and make our appeals, all in an attempt to somehow, and in that oddly mysterious way, sway the other person's opinion. Journals will be cited. Syllogisms will fill the chalkboard. Lectures will be exchanged. But I will remain firm. And you probably will as well. What then? We will part ways, muttering with all the conviction of a con, "We'll just have to agree to disagree."

The truth is that both of us will bump against the edges of uncertainty in our disagreement, many times over, but will quickly invoke our dogmatic rights as autonomous men and leap down a certain intellectual path. That choice will no doubt feel right to us, as if it bears greater likelihood, or accords more fruitfully with the scientific data available to us, but it is no more a guess than the other. At the end of the day, leaps are made, and they are made towards a thick fog.¹⁸

Compound this problem a billion times over and you have humanity. Billions of would-be gods roam the planet, weighing and judging the data according to the standards that seem most congenial to them. Some debate their ideas, others dismiss the seemingly obvious with a grunt, and yet still more abandon discourse altogether and convey their thoughts through the use of sleights and swords. The scholar wearing a suit and tie can decry the foolishness of the masses, and he can hurl insults toward the barbarian, calling the brute "unscientific" or "unsophisticated," but such pretensions make no final difference. The scholar doesn't know, not ultimately. He can spew forth his contempt, arguing with all the vigor of a

18 I can hear the loud retort of scientists saying that science provides us with demonstrable evidence, and, therefore, truth. But again, the noumena looms over us shrouding reality, leaving us with, at best, a kind of localized pragmatic truth, or utilitarian function. If, for example, we are living in "The Matrix," then our conception of reality (and our cherished science) is woefully misguided. As limited creatures, we cannot penetrate to true reality, whatever it might be.

philosopher-king that the brute should be more scientific, or that he should subscribe to his journal, but the truth is that so long as the brute has *his* reasons, which are good enough according to *his* own standards, a terrible parity obtains. No one is more right than the other. No one can say, “You *have* to do it this way. This *is the right* way! Reality says so!”

Reality does not say so. And even if it did, why listen to it? There are no rules. Human brains formulate the rules, not the universe. We are the ones who construct theories and sculpt meaning. We are the ones who suppose that rocks and dirt wish to tell us a tale. We assemble the data and imagine conclusions. The world is full of observable objects, but it is not full of prescriptions. The world seems to be full of facts, but all facts must be interpreted. Am I bound to my current gender? Shall I reproduce as nature currently subscribes? Who is to say how I should use my sexual organs? What force binds my outlook? The laws of physics are not moral boundaries, they are mere physical hurdles. Math is not a constraining doctrine but a mechanism for change. The laws of life need not be the way they are.

Atheists of all people should understand this. They often recognize the awful truth of their worldview but dismiss the dire consequences with all the ease of a god. Just create new values and meaning. It's that simple.

‡

The world of men is an exceedingly frustrating place. Place ten people in a room and inquire into their worldview, asking why they believe the way they do. One will hear all manner of strange ideas. Some will lean on the visions of eastern prophets. Others will repeat the mantra of society with little or no thought. Others will cling to the creed of a particular denomination. Some will invoke the deliciously ambiguous term “science”

as their authority, and then promptly speak of things they do not faintly understand.

Mendacity and error prevail. Evolution has outfitted man with a brain that continually bends towards error. The sheer facts of statistics demand it. Nine out of the ten people in the room are wrong. If not all ten. This places us in the unenviable position of championing human rationality while simultaneously admitting that the evolutionary process has filled us with glitches. Merely consider the religious impulse. This is no small error. Even now one can picture Dawkins leaning ominously over the faithful with a disapproving glare. And yet just think of the millions upon millions of people who bow down to blocks of wood, or stone made to look like gods, and who spend their lives meticulously defending and explicating the arcane ideas of some mystic. Humanity is stark mad. Man creates gods by the dozens. And if that weren't enough, he condemns and fights, even kills those who conjure other false deities. All on the basis of what? Certainty? No. The vast majority are woefully wrong and painfully ignorant. They believe they are right, yet are so terrifyingly wrong.

But it goes far beyond religiosity. Men flounder over the simplest expressions of truth. But is it any wonder? Monkeys are playing with reality. Monkeys are writing textbooks. Our recent ancestors hooted among the branches, picking at lice for hours on end, humping and fighting with little to no thought. We were not made to figure out the deep truths of the universe. We are biological machines running the codes embedded in us. Transcendent truth has little to do with this.

Darwin himself knew this. Writing perceptively, the aging biologist wrote,

“But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the

mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

‡

In the course of my life, I have met men who will pontificate with all the authority of a Cambridge professor, even though they have not held a book in their hands since grade school. They sit around with other nodding heads solving the world's problems, barking and roaring, denouncing domestic and international leaders with exquisite confidence. They read a newspaper clip, raise their finger and educate those around them, certain they have the answer. They don't even know enough to know how much they don't know, and yet they think they are brilliant.

I have likewise listened to professors spill forth their ideas for hours on end, with all the erudition of a Greek sophist, only to trip and fumble over the simplest of questions. They present their ideas and unfurl their arguments, citing other voices—both the sympathetic and hostile—until all hope of discerning the truth becomes dim and confusing. They straw man other positions. Engage in gross mischaracterizations. Make mental missteps. Overlook valuable information. Purposely twist the data.

And trailing behind these professors in a long, clamorous line are their followers who likewise mischaracterize the data, but in new and freshly maddening ways. They misunderstand their mentor. They further twist. Further befuddle. Further fill the internet with misinformation, clouding it until what was initially dim and confusing becomes altogether hopeless.

Trying to navigate this tumult of conflicting voices leaves one feeling exhausted. There are too many voices. Too many articles. Too many tweets and blogs. Trying to filter fact from fiction in polling, in citations, in

history, in experiences, in memories, and a hundred other things prove daunting beyond measure. All with something very much like a monkey's brain. All with limited resources. With limited time. And with a very limited point.

At best our views are roughly correct but lost in a jabbering crowd. At worst, and what is wildly likely, is that we are but another wrong idea vying for attention; merely another virus trying to spread itself among the brains of men.

Assuming some measure of victory in our quest for approval, what does winning another fresh convert accomplish? For an infinitesimally brief moment on an infinitesimally small rock, our idea sways the opinion of another thereby causing a shift in the neurotransmitters of one human brain. Such persuasion might lead to a different lifestyle in the newly converted, one we deem relevant to our notion of goodness, but its significance weighs no more, nor less than any other.

Where is the meaning in this? Where is the trust and joy in human rationality? It is all flimsy and capricious. Why try to change minds? Why try to form deep convictions? What is the point of my even arguing here? Is it meant to convince someone of the truth? But what is that truth? That there is no truth? Or that it cannot be discerned with any measure of certainty?

Yes, that is the point. This is the self-contradictory, frustrating spiral of life in the aquarium where we continually live on the dialectic edge of rationality and irrationality. With one breath we utter truths that appear incorrigible and beyond all dispute, but we then turn around and uproot those truths, knowing that they are planted in air.

It is a terrible state of affairs, one evolution has foisted upon us. It has made us smart enough to feel the despair of not knowing. It has given us biological equipment to see and experience the world on some level, and to

create gadgets that can provide interesting measurements, but it does not care how right or wrong we are. Senses deceive. Minds fail to grasp. We are bags of flesh designed to reproduce. Little more in its eyes.

‡

This isn't lost on atheists. After a sharp skirmish with Daniel Dennett over the question of free will, Sam Harris, in a candid moment of open reflection, wondered aloud at this universal predicament. He said,

“In recent years, I have spent so much time debating scientists, philosophers, and other scholars that I’ve begun to doubt whether any smart person retains the ability to change his mind. This is one of the great scandals of intellectual life: The virtues of rational discourse are everywhere espoused, and yet witnessing someone relinquish a cherished opinion in real time is about as common as seeing a supernova explode overhead. The perpetual stalemate one encounters in public debates is annoying because it is so clearly the product of motivated reasoning, self-deception, and other failures of rationality—and yet we’ve grown to expect it on every topic, no matter how intelligent and well-intentioned the participants.”¹⁹

None of this stops him from continuing to dance with the chaos. Sitting in front of adoring audiences, he continues to drink in their praises. He cracks jokes and receives their laughter. Pours forth his vituperative comments. Slams the ignorant and foolish with reserved glee.

So be it.

¹⁹ *The Marionette's Lament, a response to Daniel Dennett*. Feb 12th, 2014, samharris.org.

He can have his moment in the sun.

But it shouldn't be forgotten that while he is sitting on stage, entertaining and amazing the crowds with his wit, scores of others throughout the globe are engaged in exactly the same project, though with radically different messages. They too are convening conferences where reverent onlookers swoon under the empty rhetoric of their impassioned speeches, feeling confident and emboldened, knowing with perfect assurance that all the world is lost without their enlightened message. History will soon wipe them all away like leaves tumbling in the night.

It is the same dance over and over again. Men gathering their followers, believing they have something important to say. Each raising their voice with a commanding shout, "This is the moment! This is the time to act!" And, "Here is our cause! Fight for the cause!" But they all disagree. Vehemently. Passionately. Groundlessly.

Chapter Six

~ The Dignity of Man ~



This chapter need not be long. Much will have already been touched upon in some measure. Nevertheless, a few particulars bear stressing. Human dignity and human rights would be two such things. That is the question. What are we worth? And why? Or, to put it more provocatively, what is my *neighbor* worth? And why? The latter, after all, usually tells a fuller story.

‡

We begin with a line. A simple black line against a white background. The line represents a continuum of value and worth. On one end, to the far right, we see words like “infinitely valuable,” and “profoundly precious,” and “inviolable human rights.” On the other end, to the far left, we see “valueless,” and “woefully mundane,” and “no human rights.” If we were to press a little flannelgraph image of a man onto the line, where would he be situated? And similarly, how would everything else relate to his position?

The answer, quite naturally, will depend on man's origins. That informs the “what are we?” question. So to ask it directly, what are we? The word “human” spills out of our mouths easily enough. But what is

that, really? If we allow our minds to drift back to the primordial past and imagine the early stages of microbial life, what would we see? Tiny, mindless specks of life floating in a sea of sightless darkness. From there worms, and sponges, and fish, and other strange swimming things began filling the ocean. Plants spawned, then crabs emerged, then reptiles lurked in the grass. Birds took to flight, zebra crossed dry savannas, chimps hung from trees. Soon a monkey stood erect and his kin dwelt in caves, painting images of their precarious lives on the stone walls. They grunted and ate. Had sex and fought. Traveled far and sharpened stones. Eventually, a brain sparked and a wheel was made, and the rest is history.

However I might try to romanticize what I am, I am nothing more than an animal born out of the evolving slop of primordial matter. Differentiation between the species hinges, in large part, therefore, upon anatomy, complexity, and behavior. Snails and men are made up of the same stuff. Men and dogs share equivalent origins. But we look different. And we act differently. Divergence spins off this basic axis yielding few fundamental differences.

Value, therefore, ends up turning on a highly preferential dial. Cats care for their young, as do chickens, but they do not care at all about the other. A kitten could be injured and writhing in agony on a sidewalk, and a passing chicken would pay it no attention—perhaps only twitching its head in the kitten's general direction. And if the reverse were true, the cat might eat or toy with the dying chick, and it would feel no worse for it. It would just be one entity acting upon another entity.

Humans may want to dress up this description, but at root, it is biology at play, movements of cells, the marionetting of flesh via DNA. Additional layers of description do not emerge from the matter itself, as if there were little signposts requiring us to understand it in a certain way. Such interpretations arise from *our* view of things, which is pasted onto

that which just is, or more accurately, what appears to be so to us. Language attributes meaning to things that do not cry out for meaning.

It is, therefore, incumbent for us to recognize that we are no more valuable or invaluable than anything else. We just are. Men will surely want to situate us on the right-hand side of the value spectrum, but that choice is rooted in arbitrary evaluations. They flow from what we bring to the table. But the truth is that there is no real table. It is made up. As are the preferences we set on it.

In this way, dignity and human rights are made-up things. They're ideas that naturally form in the brains of *Homo sapiens*. It is not unlike other animal impulses. A bird feels compelled to form a nest. A bat longs for the flavor of insects. Humans like to rate things. Is it any wonder then that when we come to the spectrum of value, we naturally favor ourselves? Of course not. Due to our ability to engage in complex thought, we naturally gravitate towards elevating intellectual prowess and pin a blue ribbon on our shirts. But what is it about human intelligence that privileges us? Does it reside in our ability to subdue other creatures? Our ability to outwit cows? Is it because we sit at the top of the food chain? Or is it because we just have that warm Mormon burning sensation that we are obviously better? Any one of these reasons is preferential in nature, and to the degree that we privilege these factors, to that same degree we engage in speciesism.

It really is that simple.

Atheistic scientists and philosophers have long wrestled with these questions, trying to figure out ways to “fairly” or “responsibly” adjudicate the predicament, as if fairness and responsibility aren't already mirages dancing before the eyes of men. But if mankind is part of the same lineage as the animals, and is but another animal himself, possessing only

different attributes, one must wonder how any particular trait, bestowed by the benevolent hand of chance, provides sufficient cause for triumph.

A few quotes will help convey the idea and dilemma.

Writing with his usual sagacity, Darwin simply states, “Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble and I think truer to consider him created from animals.”

Writing much later, well known philosopher and ethicist, Peter Singer, utters these shockingly transparent words,

“Once the religious mumbo-jumbo surrounding the term ‘human’ has been stripped away, we may continue to see normal members of our species as possessing greater capacities of rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and so on, than members of any other species; but we will not regard as sacrosanct the life of each and every member of our species, no matter how limited its capacity for intelligent or even conscious life may be. If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman infant, a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities, both actual and potential, for rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and anything else that can plausibly be considered morally significant. Only the fact that a defective infant is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* leads it to be treated differently from the dog or pig. Species membership alone, however, is not morally relevant. Humans who bestow superior value on the lives of all human beings, solely because they are members of our own species, are judging along the lines strikingly similar to those used by white racists who bestow

superior values on the lives of other whites, merely because they are members of their own race.”²⁰

Philosopher James Rachels swims in similar waters when he writes,

“Darwinism undermines both the idea that man is made in the image of God and the idea that man is a uniquely rational being. Furthermore, if Darwinism is correct, it is unlikely that any other support for the idea of human dignity will be found. The idea of human dignity turns out, therefore, to be the moral effluvium of a discredited metaphysics.”²¹

And with force of resolve, he reasons,

“Some unfortunate humans—perhaps because they have suffered brain damage—are not rational agents. What are we to say about them? The natural conclusion, according to the doctrine we are considering, would be that their status is that of mere animals. And perhaps we should go on to conclude that they may be used as non-human animals are used—perhaps as laboratory subjects, or as food.”²²

We can either choose to set everything on the same plane of value, value nothing at all, or introduce value distinctions. Those are the options. If I set out to value everything like some kind of stair-climbing monk, I'll fret over every step I take, wondering how many tiny creatures are being

20 *Pediatrics*, “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life?” pages 128-129.

21 *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*, Oxford University Press, 1990, page 5

22 *Ibid.*, page 186

massacred under my feet. If I value nothing at all, I will quickly join the ranks of the psychopaths. The more common approach, of course, is to engage in that wonderfully arbitrary and intellectually slippery game of value distinction. Here the highly educated don their lab coats, or stand before their lecterns, and privilege various qualities such as rationality, pain, and emotional sensitivity. If you don't feel especially bad about our eating you, then we'll eat you. Or if you are too young, or too handicapped, then we can dispense of you. There is usually a posture of sobriety when these notions are advanced as if they have sufficiently weighed the data and arrived at the only reasonable conclusion. They are the professionals, after all, insulated from the hysteria and foolishness of the masses. But it is all preference—pure preference rooted in what some humans value. Not *all* humans. But *some* humans. Not *logical* necessity. But *arbitrary* evaluations. Men adopt various standards of criteria and draw forth their enlightened dogmas.

It is hard to comprehend just how fickle this game we play truly is. Man is worth nothing and everything. There is no reason not to highly value our species. And there is no reason to think we are anything special at all. From the standpoint of the endless void, we are essentially worthless. From the standpoint of our own pedestrian interests, some of us are gods. We think the universe ought to bow down to us, but the universe does not bow down to anything. It doesn't care about anything. Let alone us.

The value game, therefore, functions on our level, where men, as with ethics and causes, champion their own conception of human dignity, creating and dispensing rights and values as easily as they print money. It works in reverse as well. Men disassemble and withdraw rights just as easily as they pen laws. In one era, the black man is considered sub-human. In another, the Jew is cast in a furnace. In one era, homosexuals

are deemed sick and perverse. In another, their sexuality is celebrated as lovely. In one era, fetuses are deemed babies. In another, they are wads of dispensable tissue. In one stream of thought, animals are meant for dinner plates. In another, their consumption is viewed as an atrocity. It all turns on the whims and ideas of men. Not the intrinsic, inviolable worth and dignity of human beings.

In the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, we read these familiar words, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is a glorious sentiment but terribly misguided in the aquarium. The real script handed down to us reads very differently, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are formed by chance, and that they are endowed by the blind evolutionary process with certain alienable privileges which may or may not be revoked at a later stage.”²³

We can value chickens like the liberals. Or we can devalue certain ethnicities like skinheads. Nothing stops autonomous man from moving the boundary markers. History is littered with the corpses of minorities, proving that human rights are pragmatic fictions that can appear and disappear with the winds of change.

‡

See the old man in his dilapidated home. He is filthy and thin, sitting in his stained recliner, boxes full of forgotten junk stacked all about him. He orders pointless trinkets off eBay and eagerly waits for the mailman each day. His lawn is littered with trash and deceased vehicles. Two dogs in a rear chain-link fence bark freely and often. Tall grass lines the house,

23 I recall Douglas Wilson saying something very similar, but I cannot locate the source.

and weeds grow in the gutters. When he emerges from his home, he limps and cranes, peering at his neighbors with a judging eye. Nothing pleases the old man. He complains and fidgets, eats and curses, and fiddles among the hopeless projects scattered around his forsaken yard.

What is the man's value? Where does he stand on the continuum? If it is in his quality of disposition, his yapping dogs fare better. If it resides in his rational capabilities, the man spouts agitated political nonsense for hours, believing insane conspiracy theories and tabloid cover stories. If it is to be found in his productivity, he has leached off the system for years, drawing unemployment while draining the health care system. If it has something to do with emotional capabilities, he certainly feels, but he feels little else but contempt for those around him. If it pertains to his ability to suffer, his pain receptors work well enough, when he is not drunk.

Considered in the abstract, why does this man deserve to live? Why care for him? Why attribute to him human dignity and rights? For the sake of civilized society, we endure such blights. But why? If man is just another animal, devoid of intrinsic worth, possessing no inalienable rights, we may feel a certain cultural tug towards niceness, and even repulsion at the idea of categorizing him as worthless, but at root, at the most painfully honest level, he is valueless—a biological machine consuming and contaminating the environment around him.

Set a fly next to him. Why is the one any better than the other? They are both annoying, and at their most basic level—at the basement level of ontology—they are the same. So why put up with the man but smash the fly? Why not view him as debris needing to be cleared out?

The western mind currently cherishes the notion of man's equality and self-worth, at least in part. He believes that moral progress is obtained by upholding ideals that contribute, over the long haul, to better and

brighter futures. For the good of the whole, the good of the undesirable need to be dragged along.

But isn't this a guess, this “for the good of the whole” talk? Has enough time elapsed in order to really know what will usher in a better future? The consequentialist looks into his crystal ball, trying to foresee a better future. He squints and presses in close, but he is not sure. The countless variables of human society are too hard to trace out. No man can confidently project what set of ideals will ensure “utopia.” As such, we do not know if the western ideal is the best road toward success. Maybe, but maybe not.

One can't help but wonder if ethicists ought to thoroughly partake of the sacrament of consequentialism and boldly declare that some piles of debris need cleared out. If evolution has created higher life forms through violence and suffering, does this not signal to humanity the proper strategy for success? Weak things need to die. Valueless entities need to be disposed. If in the hands of men the rules are made, then in the hands of men the rules shall be.

It's not hard to see where this goes. The sound of Nazi boots can be heard in the streets.

But what is it about such Aryan ideas—such eugenic notions of progress or Nietzsche's will to power—that is illogical or absurd, given who and what man is? Man is not free from change, as if he were frozen in stasis. He exists along a continuum of metamorphosis. What he was before is not the same as he is now. And what he can become may very well transcend his current status. It is man's squeamish constitution that currently holds this in check. But it need not be this way. None of the other animals value it. Man could grab evolution by the reigns and steer it to a future harboring pleasures untold. One need only make a few hard, bloody choices.

I know the reply. I feel it within me. Such a course is almost certainly fraught with misery. But when the facts are placed in the cold calculus of rationality, the solution appears straightforward enough. To do nothing is to remain in the current stream of misery. It is a halfway measure slowly going nowhere. Pressing forward with new measures will admittedly yield other forms of suffering, but at least it is actively seeking to solve a problem. We already set the rules to the game, dispensing certain rights to certain entities. Why not tailor them to suit global, or national, or familial, or personal interests? Again, if man is not born with inalienable rights, but is handed them, why not withhold some? We're already in the business of handing out rights arbitrarily, so that can't be what is stopping us. At the end of the day, does anything in this universe require us to apply a particular right universally? The answer is plainly no.

Here one is reminded of Dostoevsky's character, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*. After murdering an old, crusty pawnbroker, believing that extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime if they but have something profound to offer humanity, Raskolnikov slips into deep turmoil. He eventually confesses and is sentenced to a Siberian prison. Reflecting upon his actions, we find him justifying his theory by seeing through the illusion of life,

"How,' he pondered, 'how was my thought any stupider than all the other thoughts and theories that have been swarming and colliding in the world, ever since the world began? It's enough simply to take a broad, completely independent view of the matter, free of all common influences, and then my thought will surely not seem so strange. Oh, nay-sayers and penny philosophers, why do you stop halfway!

'Now, what do they find so hideous in my action?' he kept saying to himself. 'That it was an evildoing? What does the word 'evildoing' mean? My conscience is clear. Of course, a criminal act was committed; of course, the letter of the law was broken and blood was shed; well, then, have my head for the letter of the law... and enough! Of course, in that case even many benefactors of mankind, who did not inherit power but seized it for themselves, ought to have been executed at their very first steps. But those men endured their steps, and therefore *they were right*, while I did not endure, and so I had no right to permit myself that step.'

This alone he recognized as his crime: that he had not endured it, but had gone and confessed it."

‡

The fact is that while we may vociferously denounce all such measures, disavowing eugenics with all the passion of a pope, it isn't a stupid idea. It is an exceedingly natural suggestion. After all, and to stress it yet one more time, we already create fictions to suit certain goals. If we tweak the goal to accommodate a more progressive, evolutionary stance, then rights will be dished out more selectively. And when the disadvantaged retort, the strong need not concern themselves, because the weak aren't afforded a voice. They are defined out of the equation. And evolution is perfectly happy to oblige.

If this seems horrible, I understand. It is all remarkably similar to the swirling frustration of embracing the cold calculus in chapter three. We don't want to be moral monsters, but when the choice to cling to the

illusion is seen for what it is, the heart crumbles in on itself. Reality and emotion collide, at least in some brains.

But let's set aside this more “nefarious” idea and focus on something more pedestrian. Let's return to the old man. Enacting laws that would spell his demise is one thing, but what about our personal interactions with him? How nice are we going to be? What level of respect will be shown? Should we love him?

If a man is essentially no different than a termite, in terms of his objective value or moral worth, it is profoundly hard to see why one should be nice to other humans, especially those that do not live up to our standards. Or perturb us in some way. Or simply disgust us.

Set the termite and the human next to each other again. From the vantage point of brute reality, both are organisms crawling around this planet. In and of themselves, they have no special worth or dignity. They are just things. The notion of worth and dignity only arises in certain brains. If a brain happens to create categories of worth and worthlessness, that same brain will attribute value in accordance with its made-up standards. It is random brains with random preferences attributing made-up notions (like value) according to subjective standards. Think hard about that. It is gray matter accidentally structured so as to prize certain concepts that are weighed on a scale that is rigged.

Most of our intuitions naturally privilege humans over termites. But when we come to see that the scale is fundamentally contrived and rooted in bias, the rose-colored glasses fall off. When that happens, we begin to see that the old man is in no way worthy of our love, respect, or care. There is no obligation. Only social pressure.

Free from the constraints, we can hate, loathe, and curse all we want. Like the chicken passing by the dying kitten, we can walk right past the old

man, if he were lying unconscious on his front lawn. We don't have to attribute value to him.

But it goes much deeper than this. It's easy to pick on a crotchety old fart. The terrible (or is it terribly freeing?) truth is that we can relegate any human to the trash-bin of disrespect, so long as they don't pass our bar. And what is that standard?

Anything we want.

If our criteria for love favors a certain skin color, so be it. If our criteria for respect favors a certain body weight, so be it. If our criteria for care hinges on a certain age group, so be it. The range of possibilities is as endless as the imagination of man. We can be single-voter lovers, as it were, or lean on a combination of factors. It's up to us as autonomous men. It is up to us in a universe devoid of objective morality. It is up to us in a world full of only animals. It is up to us in our brief moment under the sun.

If billions of people are gathered together with this knowledge, hell will be unleashed. Come to think of it, the world is very hellish. Billions of would-be-gods, with all their varying standards, are loving people ever so poorly. Dissension, war, family splits, prejudice, racism, murder, and neglect are all alive and well. We can decry it, but given who and what man is, it shouldn't be surprising. It is all perfectly natural.

And dreadfully awful. Perhaps even utterly hopeless...

Chapter Seven

~ The Decision ~



Imagine the gun resting on the table. Heavy against the wood. Eager to dispense its duty. One simple action and all will go silent. So easy. So profoundly easy.

The question throughout this book has been whether or not to do it, whether to persevere to the bleak end or end it all suddenly. I just can't see how I wouldn't do it. How I wouldn't feel utterly hopeless. Absolutely and utterly hopeless. Like I was living in a kind of materialistic hell of desire and disappointment. Where the mind yearns for so much more but starves for lack of substance. Or where the heart continually gropes after joy but cannot find enough air to enjoy what little it has. Where personal meaning roams blindly in a maze of sorrows. The problems are too encompassing. Too pervasive. Too fundamental. Reaching down to the very bottom of reality and to the very edges of everything. Maybe others can suppress the implications. Or delude themselves. Or distract themselves.

For myself, I simply can't imagine how I wouldn't be propelled toward the gun. Not when I know every denunciation I utter is hypocritical. When I know that men will continue to propound their ethics. When I know that men will continue to ignore such ethics. When I know that men will continue to pulse with groundless rage. And fight their wars. And destroy

their self-proclaimed enemies. When I know that the mindless process of evolution has made me think my moral intuitions are significant. That they deserve to be heard. That reality ought to conform to such visions of uprightness. When I know that such visions of uprightness are nothing more than instincts spurred on by DNA. When I know that what occurs in my brain is merely another domino falling in the long string of material effects. When I know that dung beetles like to roll feces and men like to stack bricks. When I know birds push their young out of nests and women abort their children. When I know pigs eat their offspring and fathers abandon their families. When I know dogs hump in public and men grope women. When I know lions love the taste of fresh meat and men love to eat fresh steaks. When I know that ants swarm passing insects and men despise different ethnicities. When I know that my love is little more than a strategy of nature to propel me to procreate and esteem my children. When I know that my feelings of worth are anthropocentric illusions. When I know that a man is no more valuable than an ant. When I know that a crushed ant means nothing. When I know that I have sprung from the apes. When I know that the apes are violent. And tribal. Filthy. And godless. When I know that I am a cosmological orphan, knowing the impersonal and hearing nothing in return. When I know something of my smallness. When I know that I am smaller than the smallest speck in an uncaring ocean of physical hostility. When I know that death is crouching at the door. When I know that the things I cherish will soon be reduced to ash. When I know that I will stare into a coffin and never again talk to my dear friend. When I know I will be lying in a coffin unable to hear the tears of those standing over me. When I know that I will never again hear any tears, nor anything. And countless eons of time will pass with no awareness. And the earth will fade away. And the sun will burn out. And everything will grind to a halt. And that this will go on forever and ever,

empty, lonely, pointless and cruel. When I know that my self-created meaning is little more than a band-aid placed on my meaningless existence. When I know that my meaningless existence stares at me at night. And when I wake. And when all the world seems unhinged and broken. And the day is going very poorly. Or mildly well. When I know that all the songs of men will disappear. And the books will turn to dust. And the oceans will evaporate. And the plants will wither. When I know that my greatest pleasures will soon fade. When I know that I cannot make the most of my short time. When I know that my short time cannot sustain the joys of my brief pleasures. When I know that I cannot fool myself. When I know the clock is ticking. One second into the next. And the next. Each moment drawing nearer the silence. When I know that men will continue to publish their ideas like soundless oracles tolling in the night. When I know that men will blindly follow these illusions, studying them over a lifetime, only to have their books shelved and lost in an endless sea of dust jackets. When I know that the convictions of men are capricious. Illogical. Unreasonable. Volatile. Juvenile. When I know that men are like gods unto themselves, decreeing what shall be so. When I know that when these would-be-gods collide violence will ensue. When I know that man cannot overcome the constraints of his nature. When I know that men will continue to think that mere ideas can change their nature. When I know that man will need to evolve into something higher to overcome these shackles. When I know that this “something higher” is yet another illusion. And that our preferences establish our standards. And that our standards are no more substantive than the violence we decry. When I know that man will endlessly debate and growl like cats in heat. When I know that man will demand rights that do not exist. And demand to be heard. Demand to be respected. Demand to be loved. Demand to be preserved. But will not. When I know that man will continue to indulge in

social taboos. And that man will continue to act outraged. And that both will revolve in an endless cycle until man is no more. When I know that men will ignore the plainest of truths. When I know that the plain truth is not known. When I know that men will continue to believe that science will save them. And that science will be their god. And that this god is a sightless idol in the grip of autonomous man. And that man is not fit to be God. When I know that intelligence and education do not ensure sane beliefs. Or secure right conclusions. Or entail clear thinking. When I know that the unintelligent and uneducated will promote their dogmas like medieval clerics. When I know that the next breakthrough in technology will increase our comfort but not secure our peace and contentment. When I know that the next technological achievement will further equip evil men with more destructive power. When I know that I might be possibly wrong. And that the endless possibilities of possibility itself almost certainly means that I am always wrong. When I think about liberals trying to understand the terrorist's mind. And terrorists understanding the liberal mind. When I know that men will brazenly claim to know things they do not know. When I know that I live in a kind of solipsistic dream where all of reality will disappear in a dying whimper. When I see men play with truth like a toy. And I see paradigms shift like tectonic plates, grating and cracking, spawning cultural earthquakes. When I know that my beliefs are momentary flickers of biological activity. And I think they adequately capture reality. Or can stand alongside the endless trail of time. Or survive the yawning depths of space. When I know that I will have to endure another inane political debate. When I know that nine black robes will steer the course of a nation. When I know that tragedy ever looms on the horizon. And there will be another 9/11. Another outbreak. Another tsunami. Another shooting. Another lost child. Another refugee crisis. Another starving body. Another beheading. Another tyrant. Another war.

Another economic collapse. Another endless cycle. When I suspect that I will brush my teeth another twenty-eight thousand times. Or buy socks thirty-eight more times. Or eat another seventy thousand meals. Or ten thousand meals. Or one hundred meals. Or one more meal. When I know that men are molded by society. When I know that society is made by man. And that neither really matters in the face of destiny. When I know Muslims will continue to circumcise little girls. And Roman Catholics will continue to defend the Immaculate Conception. And Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to ring doorbells. And Mormon boys will continue to ride their bikes. And that rats will continue to be revered at the temple of Karni Mata. And that Latinos will continue to pray for the departed during the Day of the Dead. And that religious devotees will continue to roll in food during Made Made Snana. And that Shamans will continue to reach out to the spirit realm. And that Hindus will continue to burn their incense. And that man will continue to create gods by the millions. And that men will follow these illusions like nameless lemmings. When I do not know if my love of music is an adaptation or an accident. When I do not know if any adaptation is more than an accident. When I know that hundreds of thousands commit suicide each year. And that someone is doing it right now. And that we do not care. When I know that nature is cruel beyond imagination, devising means of torture that knows no bounds. When fingers turn black from cold. When ravens peck at dying bodies. When an insect kicks and slowly rotates in a pool of water. When mosquitoes bite and transmit perilous diseases. When the microbial world teams with malevolent viruses. And to nadoes rend homes. A d worms infest. And bellies bloa And eyes lo e their sight. And cats toy w their captiv s. An sharks d tect blo d. nd foods poiso And oce ns envelope meteors blacken. An fires bur . d fevers hill. abies breach. nd brain alform eeth rot. intestines c og. An cancers gro A d hear s fai sthma

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Chapter Eight

~ Another Choice ~



I have not pulled the trigger, because I do not believe that atheism is true. Others have. But not me. And it pains me that they have. That any do.

I have not pulled the trigger, because I believe there is real hope. Real meaning. Real love. Because Christianity is true. Unswervingly and absolutely true. I believe that the sixteenth verse in the third chapter of John's Gospel forms the bedrock of reality. It reads, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Many will find this ridiculous, saying that it is just another fairy tale. Or wicked. Or full of contradiction. Or unpalatable. Or just a slice of the truth. I do not. I believe it is true in the deepest and most profound sense, and I rest my soul on it with all my mind and heart.

Of course, in saying that I believe it to be true, many will want to know why that is so. It's an exceedingly fair question. Leaps of blind faith tumble down a dark hole, after all, and plummet into the cauldron of agnosticism. So, yes, faulty foundations are no good. We must stand on solid ground. Otherwise, everything is utterly hopeless.

Exploring the reasons for the truth of Christianity, however, can fill a lifetime of study—more than a lifetime of study. Naturally, nothing of the sort can be crammed into this brief conclusion. One will have to pass beyond the walls of this volume and embark on a another journey. That being said, it would be fair to ask for something, a bread crumb, if nothing else. After all, if a crucial truth cannot be stated simply, then what hope is there for those who cannot search the libraries of academia for years on end? Or what hope is there for someone who isn't able to digest all the technical discussions? Or who isn't intellectually gifted?

The good news is that God's truth has a built-in solution to this problem. It is a twofold solution. To state it as simply as possible, God has spoken to us through the created world and His word, the Bible. We innately know there is a God through creation. And we hear His voice through His written word. There we see Jesus.

Consider two representative verses from the Bible:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed *it* unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” (Rom 1:18-21)

And,

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”
(John 20:30-31)

The situation is complicated by a nasty problem. Namely sin. Our hearts are dull and our minds are hostile. Not only against other men, but preeminently against God. It all starts there. We are like broken radio receivers. The signals from God are coming in clearly enough, but we twist it. We miss it. We dislike it. We suppress it. The fault resides in us.

There's another point to be made in this regard. It should be remembered that there were a host of angels who rebelled against God. They knew He existed, and yet still rebelled. So God's existence is not the central issue. Let me say that again. The question of God's existence is decidedly *not* the main issue. Other factors *had* to have played a pivotal role. Therefore, when it comes to the debates among men, convincing someone that God exists does not land them in the Promised Land. Knowledge is only one side of the coin. The other side is all about the heart. But as has been noted, the heart is decidedly corrupt. Knowing that God exists does not mean that a person will love Him who exists.

This points us to another divinely crafted solution. God Himself causes light to shine in our hearts so that we can see and appreciate the truth. It is like a man standing in a dark room not knowing where he is. When another turns on the light, the man suddenly sees. God does this. He flips the light switch. As Jesus once said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” God speaks right into the heart.

There is another metaphor. It turns on the image of a hard, stony heart being transformed into flesh. God changes the sinner's heart. He softens it. He draws it in like a romantic wooing his future bride.

This means that finding the truth involves more than mere study. Studying is important, and you need to read God's word, but as you read, you need help. From Him. Otherwise, you will not hear aright, and you will not like it.

Proof, therefore, functions on multiple levels. The intellectual foundations of autonomy eviscerate certainty. I trust we have seen that in part. I am saying that God is the sure foundation for everything good and right, and that one must not only dig into this foundation, learning and searching with all the effort of a man seeking after a treasure, but they must seek humbly and prayerfully.

‡

I leave you with eighteen statements of fact. They will help provide something of a counterbalance to the problems we have seen throughout this short volume. The statements will be structured in an "If Christianity is true, then such and such will follow" fashion. Hopefully, the juxtaposition will speak both to the heart and mind, and carry with it the ring of authenticity.

‡ ‡ ‡

If Christianity is true, then it means the aquarium is not all there is. The rocks and dirt are created things, made by a God that is gloriously creative and beautiful; who thought up the color green, and clouds, and music; and who made man to feel and enjoy and experience; who established all the

connections of physical experience, so that when a mother holds a small baby, the feeling is pleasurable beyond imagination; or when a child touches a kitten, the hair is ever so soft against his skin; or when the sun hits a winding stream, countless reflections of light twinkle in man's eye; or when a strawberry touches the tongue, the joy of taste bursts into existence.

If Christianity is true, then it means that God is the source and foundation of love and goodness. Infinite in His Being, love is therefore infinite, knowing no end, eternity past to eternity future. Since He is personal, love is personal—acting, and demonstrating, and lavishing.

If Christianity is true, then it means that God has made man in His image. We are meant to reflect Him. To experience His joy. His love. His goodness. His righteousness. His warmth. His creativity. His rationality. His meaning. And we are to reflect this not only back to God, but to our neighbors, and all creation, forever and ever. He is the bedrock of ethics, the One to which we look for guidance; He is the straight line that we seek to emulate, the One who defines the boundaries of right conduct, Himself being the very definition.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man carries within himself infinite value, having been made like the One who is Himself infinitely valuable. In all this man possesses profound dignity, and is endowed with inalienable rights, the likes of which cannot be expunged by any human edict. We are made to be free, and to experience liberty, and enjoy happiness untold.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man committed treason against God, thinking he could be like God in an unlawful way, chasing after that which appeared to be good, but proved to be the antithesis of God. Not life, but death. Not goodness, but evil. Not justice, but injustice. Not holiness, but unholiness. Not wisdom, but foolishness. Not love, but malice. Not glory, but ignominy. Living on the tilting balance between heaven and hell, man now experiences both sides of reality, the one hellish, the other blissful. This is why life is both terrible and great.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man in his fallenness is horribly confused and confusingly obstinate, hating God and men, thinking he knows best, and doing that which is right in his own eyes. By rejecting God, man has become the awful standard, defining and determining what can and cannot be, capriciously and sinfully, having some sense of right, but in woefully blurred ways.

If Christianity is true, then it means that men will naturally pervert the truth, creating gods and religions by the millions.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man has lost his epistemological footing. Claiming to be wise, he has become a fool, knowing with unmistakable clarity certain truths, but because of his Godless foundation is unable to ground such truths. Instead of knowledge, agnosticism; and he is forced to live with the frustrating dialectic of rationality and irrationality; ever seeing, but never perceiving; hearing, but unable to hear, and blaming God for his own blindness.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man's autonomy will enthrone possibility. It will reign supreme, swallowing and ravaging everything in

its path like an omnipotent idol, leaving men grasping for logic, but unable to make sense of it.

If Christianity is true, then it means that there can only be one Absolute. Not billions of absolutes. But One.

If Christianity is true, then it means that God has fashioned the world to be understandable, predictable, and suitable to man's senses. Here science flourishes. Technology proves possible. But in the hands of fallen men, who, while using science well enough, will not be able to account for it according to their godless worldviews.

If Christianity is true, then it means that our meaning will be rooted in God's story, one that is infinitely complex, infinitely wonderful, and eternally unfolding; where every page turned begins another tale that relates and expounds upon all the others. Ever increasing. Every thickening. Wonder without end.

If Christianity is true, then it means that reality is shrouded in mystery, but not in an uncaring, impersonal mystery that does not wish to share its depths, but one where the pace of the story resides in the hands of God, not men. And so we wait patiently, expectantly, joyfully, hopefully.

If Christianity is true, then it means that all of the injustices of the world will be righteously adjudicated at the proper time. Unchanging in His equity, no bribes will influence His decision. Unchanging in His goodness, fairness will reign supreme. Omniscient in His knowledge, no facts will be overlooked. Unchanging in His wisdom, no misconstrual of the data will occur. Unchanging in His righteousness, no miscarriage of justice will

transpire. Unchanging in His holiness, the purest standard will be used. Eternal in His duration, the right sentence will never fade.

If Christianity is true, then it means that God Himself entered into man's terrible mess in order to fix it. There the Author of Life gave up His life for sinners, but in so doing secured the cure; the just for the unjust; the godly for the ungodly. Bearing the penalty of sin in Himself, He purchased a redemption that will transform the world and all those who fall before this Savior, Jesus Christ, with thankfulness, trust, and love. The stamp of its certainty is as sure as His conquering the grave by rising three days later.

If Christianity is true, then it means that the saints, those once-lost-but-now-found men and women will be made new, like a new creation flashing in the distance, altering everything from the smallest atom to the largest universe; or like a new song that can be heard hovering over the plains and down the mountains, sweet and inviting. Even now the process has begun, with the forgiven struggling against sin; where the upright of heart fight against the evil within and look to heal the evil about.

If Christianity is true, then it means that man's greatest stories of love and redemption, of good overcoming evil, and hope dawning on the horizon, find their anchor and reflection in that one great and true story of love, redemption, and life everlasting. The impulse is as real as the Fountain from which it flows.

If Christianity is true, then it means that it is right there for the taking. One need only a mustard seed of faith to begin to walk after Jesus. Humble reliance upon inextinguishable grace will carry one through.

