



Theist *versus* Atheist: What Should You Believe?

A seven-part debate series
between
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Table of Contents

Topic 1: Is Religion Worth Arguing About?

Topic 2: Are Reason and Faith Compatible?

Topic 3: Can the Existence of God be Proven (or Made a Reasonable Hypothesis)?

Topic 4: Is Religion Necessary for Personal Morality?

Topic 5: Does the Meaning of Life Depend on an Afterlife?

Topic 6: Is Religion Good or Bad for Politics?

Topic 7: On Balance, Has Religion Been Good or Bad for Humanity?

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Topic 1: Is It Worth Arguing about Religion?

Is Religion Worth Arguing About?

By Stephen R. C. Hicks

My answer is: *Absolutely, yes*, religion is worth arguing about.

We have all heard that in polite company we should not discuss sex, politics, business, or religion. Those topics are too troublesome, so we should stick to safer topics.

Of course such topics are inappropriate sometimes. One doesn't hand out business cards at a funeral. Teachers shouldn't hit on their students. And even if it's the day before a big election, one doesn't make campaign speeches at a four-year-old's birthday party.

But we are human beings. To be human is to grapple with the big questions and the crucial values of life. And we must decide—we all need to make up our minds what our lives will be about. Solo reflection is the most important part of this process. But discussing major issues with others can and should be a useful learning experience.

I sometimes think of it this way. Suppose you are approached by a 15-year old girl who knows and trusts you. Perhaps you are a family member, a coach or counselor, a teacher, or a good friend of the family. She knows that you are a thoughtful and decent adult, so she has come to you for advice.

What should I think about religion? she asks. *I've been reading and thinking a lot about it*, she continues, *and I know there are many answers—from atheist to agnostic to many kinds of belief.*

She pauses, which gives you a few moments to get your thoughts together. *And I'd really like to know your opinion*, she says.

How do you respond?

One might feel an impulse to avoid the question. The topic is uncomfortable. Or difficult. Or might lead to social unpleasantness.

All of that may be true. But it's also true that part of the pleasure of aging can be imparting one's hard-won wisdom to those starting out on their journeys. Especially in the case of parents and teachers who explicitly choose to become nurturers and guides of the young, preparing young people for life's big challenges—and being a role model for dealing with those challenges—is built into that choice.

So in this best-case scenario—with a thoughtful, questioning, open-minded young person who actually wants to talk seriously with you—those are the moments one should prepare oneself for, hope for, and look forward to.

We know how *some* adults have dealt with young people. They indoctrinated their children long before, making it clear what the child must believe and even undercutting the growing child's capacity for thinking about those beliefs.

Other adults react in authoritarian fashion. They tell children who ask questions that they are not competent to think about such things and that they should trust and believe what their elders tell them.

Yet others use threats and actual compulsion. They inflict verbal abuse upon questioners, and their harsh words may be backed up with a slap or a beating or confinement or threats of future pains for deviance.

But some adults—happily, in my judgment, a growing minority—reason with their children. From an early age, kids ask *Why?* and *How?*, and the grown-ups in their lives think through the issues with their children. They do their best to present the facts and explain the reasons in a way that the child can grasp.

Only the reasoning method is legitimate. Indoctrination is beneath contempt. Appeals to authority prove nothing. And to respond to questioning with threats or compulsion is a pathetic confession of intellectual weakness and an evil.

The truth about religion—or any issue—can be known only by a mind that assesses the evidence and judges it independently. As issues become more complex—that is, as the amount of evidence that must be considered grows and as the number of interpretive possibilities that must be evaluated increases—explicit attention to argument and counter-argument must be engaged in. The mark of a responsible mind concerned with truth is a commitment to going where the best arguments lead.

It is sometimes said that before the age of reason, children must be told what to do and that their cognitive and physical habits must be formed by authority. Why they need to bathe or eat vegetables or not run into the street—those cannot be explained to a two-year old. So adults must make them do the right things and develop good habits in their children by conditioning.

Fair enough. Sometimes. But the capacity for reasoning is developmental in a child from day one. So parents must also be sensitive to what the developing child can and cannot grasp. When the child *can* understand, then reasoning and not conditioning is appropriate. Simultaneously, the cultivation of the child's reasoning enables him or her increasingly to understand the reasons for the earlier conditioning. Part of coming to

intellectual maturity is re-evaluating for oneself the beliefs and habits one acquired from one's parents.

All of this is especially true on matters of religion. Religion is a kind of philosophy, with answers to life's questions about who we are, where we came from, and what really matters.

Answers to those questions are vitally important to each of us, and the adequacy of the various religions' answers is naturally a critical issue for all thinking human beings. But the only way to evaluate their adequacy is by looking at the evidence, by assessing the religious claims' fit with the evidence, and by comparing the competing religions' arguments with each other.

That is a lot of work.

Some people are put off by the difficulty of the task. So they fall back on an easy faith of believing whatever beliefs they happen to have been raised with. But obviously an accident of social geography does not prove or even make likely one's beliefs.

Some people are put off by the fear that they might discover that their beliefs are wrong. They might have to admit mistakes, and they might have to change their minds to a belief they currently find repellant. So they become subjectivists. But obviously believing something because you want it to be true or rejecting something because you don't want it to be true—both of those practices are anti-truth.

And some people are put off by the social difficulty of the task. Independent thinking can and often does put one at odds with prevailing beliefs, and others can make one's life a social misery by inflicting punishments for deviating from the crowd. So many people fall into a compliance with whatever most people in their social circle believe. But we are human beings, not sheep, and a follow-the-herd-mentality is also anti-truth.

We have likely all had the experience of trying to discuss religion reasonably with someone and learned that it does not often go well. The problem is that—to use a dance metaphor—it takes two to tango, and rare are the occasions when both dancers are good at it. Reasoning is a complex set of skills, and reasoning together is even more complex. Frustration along the way is also to be expected. But as with tango, when the skills are mastered the results can be beautiful.

In my judgment we are getting better at thinking about religion, individually and socially. Compared to generations and centuries past, more people now know how to think. More people are aware of the alternatives. More information is more easily available, and more discussion and debate forums are now used by increasingly more people. We are going up the learning curve—often messily, but upward even so.

A whole new generation of thoughtful 15-year-olds is also arising. What should we say to them, those of us who have thought much about religion?

We present the arguments clearly, passionately, and civilly. We do our best to assess their merits and demerits fairly. We encourage young people—and anyone who is still thinking through the issues—to do the same. And, in the final analysis, we respect their need to make their own best judgments.

So: What are the best arguments for and against religion?

* * *

Is It Worth Arguing About Religion?

By John C. Wright

This is the first in a seven-part debate between Stephen Hicks and yours truly covering the main points of disagreement between Catholicism and atheism, or, as I would with all goodwill characterize the matter, the disagreement between truth and emptiness. He and I hope to cover briefly questions that have baffled philosophers since the dawn of time, concerning the reality, ethics, politics, and history of monotheism in general and orthodox Christianity in particular.

While I doubt such a truncated format will allow either to put his full rhetorical force and persuasive powers on display, much less settle the questions finally, for myself, I hope merely to demonstrate that a rational and respectful colloquy is possible in the poisonous and irrational atmosphere of this sad era in which we live.

Therefore, with all due respect, I hold that the opening question is foolish. (But the most foolish questions hide a clever question at the core, as we shall see below.)

To ask if it is worth arguing about religion is the same as asking whether it is worth arguing about truth, virtue, beauty and all other real things of paramount significance in human life. The question should really be “Is anything other than religion worth arguing about?” or, better yet, “Is it or is it not true that all arguments ultimately are arguments about religion?”

But I am not a politician, so I will answer the question that was asked, as asked.

It is worth arguing about religion because we have no choice but to find such arguments worthwhile. Anyone unwilling to entertain an argument on the matter is not thinking about it, not willing to reason about it. This is the same as not having human existence, for man is the animal that reasons.

And this is the one matter—I am tempted to say the only matter—where it is impossible not to have a belief. In all other questions, there is perhaps a gray area or boundary of uncertainty, a spot where one can stand and view the opposing armies objectively, wearing the uniform of neither. Not here.

One is either madly in love with God or one is not. If one is lukewarm on this matter, God himself will spew you from His mouth. Far better to meet a fierce atheist (such as I once was) ready to do battle under the black banner of skepticism, worldliness, and remorseless logic, ready to give and to take mightiest blow unflinching, to unwind each thread of dialog to the last nuance, than to meet a bland and empty agnostic, neither cynical enough to be a skeptic, nor zealous enough to be a Christian.

If the two parties represent love for God and a lack of that love, there is no third party because there is no third option. One side marches under the banner of the Labarum; the other under the black banner without charge or figure that represents that anarchy of the mind called skepticism, disbelief, freethought.

That sad soul found standing in the spot where he views both armies and wears the uniform of neither, whether he wishes or not, is in fact under the black banner. The Christian army will not recognize any neutral parties: either you are with us or against us. Either you will live forever in the infinite and ecstatic bliss of paradise or you will not. And paradise is not available to those who present themselves at the Pearly Gates and explain to Saint Peter that they were tolerantly broad-minded on the question of being madly in love, but did not make any firm decision on it.

Again, one who says, that the question of God is unnecessary to his life, to truth, to beauty, to virtue, or to any of the profound question of life or the great issues of the day is in the same position as a numismatologist chasing down some rare and ancient drachma in London during the Blitz, ignoring the buzzbombs landing to the right and left of him.

If there is no God, it is of paramount significance to discover the truth of that fact, because it alters the outcome of all other significant questions in human life, including the meaning, the purpose, the value, and the ultimate fate of man and the cosmos. The question touches all other philosophical questions and ignites them; and philosophy sets the boundaries and context in which a man lives his life.

A man can chose to think, that is, to be human, or he can chose to elude and evade the duty to think, that is, try to shrug aside the glorious burden of being human; this means he either has a philosophy by which he lives his life and knows it, or he has a philosophy and does not know it, living by precepts and maxims whose origin he cannot imagine, and who justification, if any, he cannot articulate, drifting along with the main mass of slothful and indifferent halfwits of his age, parroting the popular opinions of his peers whose judgment he never questions.

But let us peel back the surface layer of the question and examine its pith, for the question asked is actually two questions: first, is the topic worth pursuing, and second, is argumentation, that is, a rational debate of the type these columns shall attempt, is the proper tool to open this particular puzzle box?

There are some, perhaps, who hold matters of faith to be mystical or irrational in nature, falling above or below the level of reason. I am not one of them.

I am Roman Catholic, and none of my answers here or ever speak for men of other denomination or other faiths. We hold, first, that every man must stand ready to give an answer for the hope he has within him, that is, every Christian must be ready to answer any honest questions from honest skeptics about the astonishing and shocking things we believe. And any Christian who does not think Christian doctrine is shocking has not yet touched the live wire of the love of heaven. Thus, the faithful Christian is required to argue and debate the matter when honestly called upon to do so. (When the call is dishonest, of course, he is forbidden to cast his pearls before swine, since swine cannot see their value, and will merely turn and trample you.)

We hold, second, as a matter of dogmatic faith (it is written into our catechism, see para. 35) that any man who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know Him. Both the cosmos and man's nature testify to God's existence. Hence, as a matter of faith, we hold that reason allows a man to know that monotheism in the abstract is a reasonable theory.

Here is the precise wording:

35 Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith.(so) the proofs of God's existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason.

Hence, the answer to our opening question is a delicate one. The matter is worth arguing depending on what the specific argument is about. Reason can lead one step by step to Monotheism, as it did in the case of such pagan philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus, but it cannot lead one all the way to Christ.

If the argument is about the being madly in love with God, obviously no one can argue you into being in love. Love is a madness, a divine madness.

But many a man is unwilling, wary, or repulsed with the idea of being madly in love with God. He thinks the matter contemptible, and the talk of love as absurd as talking about loving Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, or some other fictitious character; or he is repelled by tales he has heard of God; or

he annoyed or grossly offended at the demands made on his human dignity and liberty.

One cannot use reason to talk a man in to being in love. But one can use reason to correct errors that prevent that love from taking root. Reason can allow one to see that it is reasonable to fall madly in love.

Hence, for the theist, reason is a shield only, not a sword. No word of mine can grant faith. That is a gift of the spirit.

However, the unreasonable fallacies, follies and fears, absurdities and fatuous objections which uproot or prevent faith can be dispelled by a rational examination.

* * *

Topic 2: Are Reason and Faith Compatible?

Are Reason and Faith Compatible?

By Stephen R. C. Hicks

I appreciate Mr. Wright's opening essay and am in agreement with substantial portions of it.

If we array religions along a spectrum from most to least rational, his version of Catholicism is among the most rational. Many advocates *and* opponents of religion are animated more by angers, enthusiasms, and other psychological forces that make them unwilling to reason—either to present their own views clearly or to give the other sides' views a fair hearing. Reasoning can be a passionate or dispassionate activity, but no progress individually or socially can be made without it.

So I take it that Mr. Wright and I have agreed to set aside several versions of Christianity—Tertullian's "I believe it because it's absurd," Martin Luther's "Reason is the Devil's whore," and Søren Kierkegaard's "Faith requires the crucifixion of reason." And we agree to focus on the view, expressed well by Thomas Aquinas and others, that reason and faith are two legitimate and complementary ways of coming to belief.

Let me though focus on my substantial disagreements with Mr. Wright's position, which is that (1) religious belief can be demonstrated to a large extent to be rational, (2) that the arguments demonstrate a monotheistic god, and (3) that faith is a legitimate way to close the gap between what can be proved and a full commitment to religious belief.

I do not think any of the three parts of that sentence are true. Parts 1 and 2 will be taken up in our next articles, as we debate the merits of the arguments for and against the existence of God, so let me focus now on part 3.

Suppose we grant now, for the sake of argument, that evidence and logic make it 80 percent likely that a monotheistic god exists. One might disagree of course and find the arguments totally unconvincing—that is, one might judge that they make it zero percent likely. Or one might disagree and find the arguments totally convincing—that is, one might judge that they make it 100 percent likely.

But let's agree for now with Mr. Wright's claim that the arguments make it very likely that God exists but there is nonetheless a gap between what the arguments show and the full belief-commitment that most religions require. What are we to make of the gap?

Some analogies to other important areas of judgment can clarify the cognitive principles involved.

Medicine: Suppose that one consults a physician who, upon careful examination, says that the evidence shows that you are 80% likely to have Condition X. A consulting surgeon then adds that if he were to operate, you would have an 80 percent chance of survival. What should one believe and commit to in this circumstance?

Law: You are a judge in a criminal trial and your assessment of the evidence is that it's 80 percent likely that the defendant is guilty. What judgment should you reach?

The principle is that one's degree of belief should be tied to the degree of evidence. If there is a *little* evidence, then one should judge *It's a possibility*. If there is a preponderance of evidence, then one should judge *It is probable*. And if the evidence is conclusive evidence, then and only then should one judge *It's a certainty*.

We ask and expect jurors, for example, to be able to understand the differing standards of evidence required for conviction in civil and criminal cases: *preponderance of evidence* versus beyond a reasonable doubt. And in life in general, part of cognitive maturity is being able to assess evidence on a sliding scale and to adjust one's beliefs accordingly.

The same holds for all important matters in life, including religion.

So if one's best rational judgment is that the preponderance of evidence and logic show that God does exist, then one's belief state should be that *It's probable that God exists*. And one should not push out of one's mind the remaining 20 percent of doubt. One should remain *open-minded* to that extent—that is, one should remain open to new evidence that will increase or decrease the 20 percent margin of doubt.

Mr. Wright recognizes clearly that there are in fact two gaps to be filled. One is the gap between believing in a generically monotheistic god and the Catholic Christian God in particular. It is one thing to believe, as Deists do, that it's reasonable to believe that there's some sort of divine being out there. It's quite another to believe that it's exactly the Christian God with all of "the astonishing and shocking things" that come bundled with that belief.

The other is the gap between being convinced that God likely exists and being wholeheartedly filled with conviction.

Here Mr. Wright fills the gaps with emotionalism. One should be "madly in love with God" and love is a kind of "divine madness," for example.

Such language is, in my judgment, an accurate description of the most common type of faith strategy. *Faith* is properly used to describe a belief commitment made beyond the evidence. It is meant to be the gap-closer. Faith almost always is an emotion-driven process in which one *wills* oneself to believe that which one wants to be true.

Here we enter into some rich and complex philosophical and psychological territory. Part of it is that as humans we do long for passion in our lives. Part of it also is our knowing that that life's greatest rewards usually require sustained commitment. And part of it is knowing that often we need to make weighty decisions and commitments in the absence of complete and accurate information. In more abstract language, the question is of the relationship between reason and emotion in making and sustaining commitments.

Some analogies may again help clarify the principles involved.

Hunting: A hungry hunter who loves rabbit stew judges that it is very likely that the rustling in a bush is the rabbit she's been stalking. Should her desire to make the kill so that she can feast upon tasty rabbit lead her to commit to the shot? (The rustling might merely be the wind—or a small child who was playing in the area.)

War: A general who seeks battle glory and whose nation is desperate for victory thinks it probable that his troops will prevail if he attacks now rather than later. Should his desire for triumph lead him to commit his troops wholeheartedly to battle?

Politics: Passions run high when judging political candidates. How many times during presidential elections do voters become filled with enthusiasm and express the conviction that *their* candidate will save the nation if only enough people believe in him? Should we encourage or discourage this psychological phenomenon?

Or perhaps we should consider only cases involving other kinds of passions. Seeking material blessings, triumphing over death, and wanting a messianic leader can be religion-motivating passions.

But the love and worship of a god is another, and one that Mr. Wright speaks directly to. So what of love?

In my opening article, I suggested the device of talking to a thoughtful 15-year-old girl who is sincerely asking for advice about religion. How would the love analogy help us here? 15-year-olds are certainly capable of forming intensely passionate commitments to particular love objects—e.g., to that 16-year-old boy in her Literature class. And it is likely true that one could not argue her in or out of her love. But her experience of mad love is hardly a guarantee that the boy really is the true love of her life. Perhaps he is, but the rest of us will be justified in reserving judgment and in advising her to keep an open mind and not to move too quickly.

So perhaps a better example is to imagine that the girl has grown into a 30-year old woman who has had some experience of love won and lost. She is now dating a man and is 80 percent sure that he is the great love of her life. She knows that she wants to be madly in love and to make a lifetime commitment.

But she also knows about the phenomenon of "love goggles" and how desires can distort perception and judgment. She knows that people can project qualities onto others that they do not actually have. She knows that people can make disastrous commitment choices that lead to suffering and divorce.

So, yes, she should be open to love and to making commitments, but as an older and wiser person she should also be alert to any counter-evidence (or warning "red flags"), and she should be willing to fall out of love should the object of her desire prove to be—despite initial appearances—a loser, a brute, or someone with other qualities alien to healthy relationship.

The same should be true of the religions we are considering.

The analogy of romantic to religious love does have a limitation. In the case of romantic passion, we already know that the person we're dating actually exists, and our question is about how much trust we can have in that person or how strong a commitment we should make. In the case of religion, however, we first have the problem of establishing that the Being actually exists.

Our next question then is: Do the evidence and arguments show that a God exists?

One final comment. Mr. Wright suggests that "For the theist, reason is a shield only, not a sword." With respect to the limits of such figures of speech, I suggest that martial metaphors do not capture the basic role of reason. Yes, in some social contexts, reason can function as an offensively or defensively. But more fundamentally, reason is a *tool* of investigation of reality, not a *weapon* of social conflict.

We should use the tool and rely on it for shaping our beliefs as far as it can take us. But no farther.

* * *

Topics 2 and 3: Can the Existence of God be Proven (or At Least Be Made a Reasonable Hypothesis)?

Can the Existence of God be Proven?

By John C. Wright

This column needs must be thrice the normal length, for I must answer two columns by Mr. Hicks, and address the subject matter of this week's question.

First things first:

There is nothing in the opening salvo of Mr. Hicks that need be controverted because he has said nothing controversial.

He has offered that it is not impolite or untoward to discuss religion; and so it is not, when it is kept at the level of polite conversation. Mr. Hicks has offered some parenting advice that children should not be indoctrinated. I am not sure what he means by this word, but from the context it seems he means taught to recite rather than understand their parents' beliefs. If so, I agree wholly.

By this definition, 'indoctrinating' children would mean that the children are not be properly catechized, hence not properly prepared to face skeptical questions against their beliefs (be those theist or atheist beliefs). If so, then we all agree children should be properly catechized rather than being indoctrinated.

Children must be taught to question authority because, if they do not, they will not know to whom to go for authoritative answers.

Now perhaps this advice applies more to theists than to atheists. Christian belief is a disciplined and organized study of thought, just as economics, physics, geometry, law or moral reasoning. It is like a tower built from the ground up from axioms and common notions, with conclusions resting atop earlier conclusions. The naysayer who merely says phooey when the topic arises knocks the tower down.

But Mr. Hicks and I are not discussing mere nasty-minded destructive naysayers. When he gives his advice about child rearing, he is not saying to say phooey to every question a child raises about religion. Theist and atheist alike agree it is best in children to awaken the curious spirit and love of wisdom.

Mr. Hicks and I are discussing, like engineers examining a building for weaknesses, the art of inspecting the soundness of the structural supports of thought in a rigorous, fair and unemotional way.

Because when the tower of an unsound doctrine collapses, as such proud towers are wont to do, the wreckage and rubble is just as terrifying as the fall of a skyscraper. Contemplate the wreckage left when faith in the Czar departed from Russia, faith in the Weimar Republic from Germany, faith in the Monarchy from France.

Every child must be raised to be the engineer of the tower of his own beliefs about the world, and the parent does him no favors by failing to teaching him where the weak spots are.

Mr. Hicks also does not raise the central question about the morality involved in discussions on this topic when it is not on the level of a polite discussion, namely, that very thing which makes discussing the Christian faith different from every other topic humans discuss.

To the degree and in the way that love of God is a question of fact, of course it must be discussed like any other question of fact. Either it is true or it is not, and neither the laughter of the scornful nor the tears of the gullible will make a truth false or a falsehood true.

But it is obviously more than a question of fact. A polite discussion about, say, a theory of astronomy has nothing at stake aside from a merely intellectual knowledge. There is nothing immoral involved in talking a friend out of believing in the Cosmological Constant of Einstein.

But if you are trying to talk a bridegroom out of marrying a bride you suspect will be unfaithful, or if you are trying to talk a desperate father out of continuing to search the wilderness where his missing child was last seen, then to press the topic or drop the topic becomes a moral question of some delicacy of judgment. It is a moral question because if you are in the wrong, and the bride was true or the child alive, you have done unrecoverable damage to the soul and life of your victim. The abstract discussion will leave real and permanent scars.

Unfortunately, part of the disagreement is the question of what is at stake. If Christ is true to his word, to talk a weakhearted believer out of his Christian faith imperils his immortal soul. If not true, the selfsame talk is an act of raising a lamp to banish the darkness of superstition, and striking away the chains of deceptive priestcraft. (Of course, if the atheist worldview is true, there is perhaps disutility and dishonor involved in believing falsehood, but it offends nothing but manmade moral law, for there is no law above that.)

Hence, for good or ill, even the question of how wise or negligent it is to talk the faithful out of his faith depends on the question of fact of whether Christ is true or not. Hence, as I said before, there is no neutral place to stand in this war. The decision is binary and absolute.

So between what Mr. Hicks said and what he did not say, I believe he and I are agreed on the basic point that the matter not only ought, but must, be discussed.

*

In his second salvo, Mr. Hicks falls into the lazy habit of misquoting what I so carefully said. The reader is asked to be on his guard against such negligence in thought, and note where my comment differs from Mr. Hick's summary of my comment.

First, I said nothing about 'my' version of Christianity. Let us not wander into the error of thinking I am discussing or defending a personal opinion. I am discussing and defending Catholic Christianity as it has been practiced and taught for two thousand years. While I have respect for Protestants and Mohammedans and other heretics, their thought is heterodox, and I suspect it cannot be defended rationally, due to the logical internal contradictions inherent in heterodoxy. Hence I am not qualified to defend their beliefs except where, by happy accident, they overlap with orthodoxy.

For that matter, I will defend paganism where it overlaps with orthodoxy, for the pagans are at least wise enough to know that the material world cannot explain the material world, and cannot account for life as we see it. They know there must be more to life than this life.

Second, Mr. Hicks claims I said:

"(1) religious belief can be demonstrated to a large extent to be rational"

I said nothing about any extent, large or small. Monotheism is rational and can be proved by reason; Christianity is rational and can be defended by reason, but its central mysteries of the Incarnation, Trinitarianism and Soteriology, cannot be proved.

Love, in one sense, is completely rational, and in another is beyond reason and is the only thing that makes reason possible—in the sense that philosophy is love of truth. If someone were to sum up my sentence here by saying "Mr. Wright says belief in love can be demonstrated to a large extent to be rational" that summary would be utterly misleading. So likewise here.

"(2) that the arguments demonstrate a monotheistic god"

Not quite. What I said was "Reason can lead one step by step to Monotheism, but it cannot lead one all the way to Christ." I did not use the word *demonstrate* for a reason: I was speaking of probative arguments, that is, arguments that lend weight to a proposition, not of demonstrative arguments.

The argument given by Euclid to prove the Pythagorean Theorem is deductive and airtight: it can only be denied by someone, let us call him Playfair, who denies one of Euclid's axioms. The arguments given in the Federalists Papers, on the other hand, showing the wisdom of the

Constitutional form of government, are probative, and rest for their persuasive force on the experience, horse sense, and knowledge of law, human nature, and history found in the educated men of that day.

“(3) that faith is a legitimate way to close the gap between what can be proved and a full commitment to religious belief.”

I am not even sure what this sentence means, and I do not recognize it as anything I said. Since I do not think faith and reason are opposites (indeed I deem them to be mutually interdependent) I do not propose that one is a substitute to be used to jump the last little gap when you run out of the other.

I had hoped my comment was clear. Love of God, like all forms of love, has some aspects that can be discussed as matter of fact and reason, such as whether the girl you love is legally married to another or not. Other aspects cannot be discussed as matters of fact, such as why you love her.

If your sister says she is in love with Oberon the Fairy-King, it is one conversation to convince her that fairies do not exist, but a second conversation to convince her to be true to Tom, the Baker’s Son, and ignore the horns of elfland dimly blowing in the west. The first is a question of fact; the second of faithfulness.

The role of reason is to shoot down the objections which a timid gut or arrogant heart or a foolish mind concocts, which may bewilder and mesmerize the unwary, tempting him to disbelieve in the truth he at one time correctly saw, when his mind was clear. Faith is not a substitute for reason but a defense of reason against the powers of unreason.

This is the same in atheist as theists. When the atheist walks alone in the graveyard at night, he must summon his faith to remind himself of the argument against the possibility of ghosts which he knew without doubt at noon in the school common room, surrounded by scoffing friends. Likewise, the Christian when he sees the grave eat his children must be faithful to what it was easier to believe while kneeling at mass, being touched by the holy spirit. Faith is just a word that means fidelity.

To be sure, the word has an additional technical meaning in Christian theology, since we regard that steadfastness of fidelity to require a divine grace to sustain, but Mr. Hicks did not raise that issue, and it is irrelevant here.

In a column this short, I very much dislike repeating myself. The proposition I am defending is this:

Man’s faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith.

Ergo the proofs of God's existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason.

Man's faculties include his reason, his wisdom, and all his wits. Intimacy is beyond the reason's unaided faculties. Intimacy is not merely knowledge. The devil has knowledge that God exists, but has no intimacy, no fellowship, with Him.

The philosophical argument to prove God exists cannot grant faith, which is that intimacy, any more than a syllogism can make you fall in love.

But such proofs are worthwhile, as they can predispose one to be accepting of faith, that is, once false and fallacious reasons for disbelief are cleared away; and second they can show that faith is not opposed to reason.

Mr. Hicks then quotes some heretics who disagree with the Catholic teaching on the matter. I am not sure to what avail he expends that ink: I do not deny that other people regard faith and reason as antithetical. Obviously they do. I deny that orthodoxy so regards it.

The quote from Tertullian is wrong. The quote "Credo quia absurdum" (I believe, because it is absurd) is ascribed to Tertullian. But Tertullian never wrote this: what he wrote (*De Carne Christi*, V, 4) was "Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est" (It is wholly believable, because it is incongruous).

Here is the exact quote: *The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is incongruous.*

For the record, he is arguing against the Docetism of Marcion, the heresy that Christ could not have suffered because it is incongruous for divine beings to suffer (a Greek idea, one we find also in the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius).

Tertullian is talking about the fact that if the evangelists were lying or telling fables when they depicted Christ as able to suffer, they would have made the lie believable, and said Christ suffered no pain. That is, they would have made the lie seem like life, to accord to the expectations of the audience of the time. Tertullian believes it because the account of the Passion of Christ is incongruous, therefore unlikely to be a lie, therefore true. Tertullian is using the word *ineptum* ironically, to mean those things that a liar would never say for fear of not being believed.

This is why no one should quote matters out of context.

Since I said nothing about faith providing a proof or faith bridging a gap between reason and reality, the core of Mr. Hick's argument is irrelevant, and need not be addressed.

Mr. Hicks then makes the false claim that I am filling these gaps with emotionalism. Alas for his windy statement, I made no such appeal, nor do I feel the need to answer such a cheap strawman argument.

He then defines “faith” to mean “a belief-commitment made beyond the evidence.”

That is a false definition, childishly so. It would be just as silly if I were to define “skepticism” as “a cowardly inability to see God”. If Mr. Hick was foolish enough to accept the definition of skepticism to mean cowardly, the argument would be over in a trice. Likewise, if I am foolish enough to accept his definition of faith as either emotionalism or as a lack of evidence, the argument would be over.

The word *faith*, fidelity, means truth. It means trustworthiness, it means keeping your emotions under control by your reason when they are in rebellion.

When a mountain climber is terrified by a drop and his teacher—just out of reach above him—asks him to make what seems an impossible or dangerous shift of his grip, it is not emotion that is the climber’s ally. He must have trust, faith, in the teacher. More to the point, when he stood safely on solid ground and measured the climb and counted the steps, his reason told him whether it was possible or not. In midair the panic strikes. At such time as this, the climber must have trust, faith, in his own judgment and skill when he inspected the rock before he decided to climb. Faith is the ability of the Christian to push aside the temptation and lure of irrational doubt.

“Faith almost always is an emotion-driven process in which one *will*s oneself to believe that which one wants to be true.”

Stuff and nonsense. I most solemnly assure you that I do not will nor want it to be true that I must love my enemies, turn the other cheek, or die a martyr’s death singing joyful hymns. My *will* is that I do so out of obedience to a God whom I love and fear, and I obey Him in these things because I am trustworthy and loyal, like a Boy Scout. My *will* is not that these things be true.

No one asked me, but, given a choice, I would far rather that Odin had been the High God, so that I could rape and pillage to my heart’s content.

But I did not make the reality in which I live. It made me. I did not choose which God was real. He chose me. The only thing I chose to do was, once I saw, very much against my will and inclination, that God must be real, to be faithful to my philosopher’s oath to face the truth and believe the truth no matter how absurd-seeming or unpleasant, merely because it was true.

No rational person draws his conclusion about which model of the universe is the most useful and reasonable and fit on the basis of his personal will or preferences. Needless to say, that is a Nietzschean belief, a core atheist doctrine, and thus the mere opposite of what Christ teaches. He did not say “YOU are the way, the truth, and the life, baby.”

As for calling it an emotion-driven process, Mr. Hicks has no doubt found it too difficult to argue with me, and is inventing some emotion-driven person with whom to argue. I would say that his emotions are driving him to find someone who made a different argument than I did, and one easier to overcome than mine.

* * *

On the Proofs of God's Existence

Stephen R. C. Hicks

As we enter the third round of our debate series, our first major point of disagreement about religion has been identified—about the nature and legitimacy of faith.

My view is that faith is a type of subjectivism—a willing of oneself to believe something that goes beyond or conflicts with the evidence. Instead, I argue that one should always believe objectively—that is, according to one's best rational judgement of the evidence.

Mr. Wright protests that this badly mis-states his view and ascribes a variety of unsavory motives to the mis-interpretation (apparently disagreements with him can only come from the "timid," the "arrogant," and the "foolish").

In clarifying his position he says, first: "Reason can lead one step by step to Monotheism, but it cannot lead one all the way to Christ" (emphasis added). I agree partially—faith begins with a recognition that there is a gap between what reason might suggest and what a religious person comes to believe.

Mr. Wright then says, second: "But such proofs are worthwhile, as they can predispose one to be accepting of faith." Again, I agree partially: arguing for the existence of God plays at best a supporting role, and faith is accepting a set of beliefs beyond what reasoning supports.

In his latest piece, Mr. Wright emphasizes one further factor—the grace of God. As he says, third: "God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith."

So what we have in Mr. Wright's version of faith are three factors: (1) Some reasoning that partially supports belief and "predisposes" one for more, (2) an "accepting" of the rest of the belief-package, and (3) assistance from God in the form of "grace" given to the believer. In other words, reasoning takes one part of the way to where one wants to be, a leap of faith closes the gap, and God seals the deal, so to speak, with a dispensation of grace.

That takes us immediately to the next essential topic. Mr. Wright and I disagree about the second factor—whether the leap of faith is legitimate. The third factor—the claim of divine grace—cannot be utilized in support of religious belief until one first shows that there actually exists a God who dispenses grace. So much hangs upon the first factor—determining how much the arguments for the existence of God prove.

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Let me start with two initial points. One is a journalistic point about the big brains in the history of philosophy and theology and their assessment of the traditional proofs of God's existence. The great (and perhaps the greatest ever) era of debate over the proofs was in the 1700s and early 1800s. Three famous names stand out: David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Søren Kierkegaard. They stand out not only for their influence, but also because they represent a wide range of opinion about religion: Kierkegaard was a strong *theist*; Hume was a strong *atheist*; and Kant tried to work out a middle ground. But all three agreed on one crucial conclusion: *all of the arguments for the existence of God are failures.*

Further journalism: that negative judgment has been the view of the majority of professional philosophers in the two centuries since, including the philosophers in our own generation, myself included. But absolutely do *not* take my word or their word about the weakness of the proofs. Every thinking person should spend time with the arguments and assess their worth independently.

This leads to the second initial point, about methodology. In the context of the long history of debate over the proofs, Mr. Wright may have some new point or some way of presenting the arguments that highlights their overlooked power. But what I see instead is that Mr. Wright has chosen the hunting-with-a-shotgun strategy—that is, to fire the shotgun into the air and hope that one of the rapidly scattering pellets hits something. In his article, I count approximately eighteen possible arguments mentioned in passing—but none of them is actually developed or defended against the thoughtful objections that can be raised.

Mr. Wright's strategy is, first, to list a series of features of the natural world: time, causation, beauty, morality, logic, ghost stories, brotherhood, and so on. His second step is to raise a hypothetical question: If there is no God, how can we possibly explain time, causation, beauty, and so on? There is no third step in Mr. Wright's analysis—with the possible exception of the assumption that it's obvious that only religion can answer those questions.

Those *are* all fair questions to raise—but raising them is where the arguments *begin*, not where they *end*. The naturalist arguments must be presented at this point and refuted. The religious arguments must be presented and defended against objections. Unfortunately, Mr. Wright leaves us only with a series of assertions and rhetorical questions.

Throwing out a bunch of weak (or at least undeveloped) arguments and hoping that something sticks—that's not a serious strategy. A serious intellectual will pick the one or two most compelling arguments, develop them, and respond to the standard intelligent criticisms.

So let us now take that next step by looking more closely at the most important argument ever for the existence of God. The Design Argument is the most appealed-to argument for the existence of God ever, and its strengths and weaknesses are representative of the other arguments. (We will return to some of the other arguments—e.g., about history, morality, and the meaning of life—in forthcoming articles in this series.)

*

The core idea of the Design Argument is that in order to explain the cause-and-effect order of the natural world, we must appeal to a divine Designer. The complexity of reality cannot be the product of random chance, so there must be a powerful intelligence behind it all that brought order into existence and keeps the operation of the universe on track.

Mr. Wright includes this argument in his list: "I myself am a man who had a direct and divine experience of God. How do I explain me, if there is no God?" He is echoing St. Augustine from 1,600 years ago: "Where could a living creature like this have come from, if not from you, Lord? Are any of us skillful enough to fashion ourselves?" (*Confessions*, 6:10).

Here is a version of the argument in step-by-step development:

1. The natural universe is orderly—the regularity of the seasons, the consistency of chemical processes, the biological development of organisms' capacities, and so on.
2. Complex order cannot have arisen from within the universe itself.
3. So complex order implies the existence of an external orderer that imposed order upon the universe.
4. To do so, the external orderer must be very intelligent and powerful.
5. So, a very intelligent and powerful orderer exists.
6. For brevity's sake, let's call the very intelligent and powerful orderer "God."
7. So God exists.

Anyone can see why the argument has some logical force and must be taken seriously. At the same time, it is properly judged to be weak due to the following objections (and others).

About step 2: Here the entire evolution-versus-creationism argument must be engaged. Evolutionary accounts claim that complex orderly systems can evolve bottom-up from simpler systems. If so, then assuming that complex order can only occur from external and top-down sources is illegitimate.

About step 3: This step infers that only *one* external order exists. But it could be that there is any number of orderers, each with its own specialty. That is to say, the argument makes polytheism as reasonable as monotheism.

About step 4: With this step we cannot show that the orderer is *infinitely* intelligent or powerful. In fact, we might look at the world with all of its "mistakes" and "inconsistencies"—useless organs like the human appendix, or the floods that wash away carefully planted fields, etc.—and infer that a semi-competent god or a number of warring gods are behind it all.

About step 5: This step assumes that the orderer *still* exists. But it could be that the orderer had one great metaphysical reason for being—to create order in the universe—and having fulfilled its purpose went away or faded into non-existence.

About step 6: Here we have to be careful not to import all of the baggage that goes with the "God" label. Giving it an upper-case G is to give it a proper name and assume it has a personality, while the argument at most supports an impersonal ordering force. The argument also does not show that the orderer is good or bad, involved in our day-to-day affairs, or even cares about us particularly.

About step 7: If we grant for the sake of argument that *God exists* follows, then we can raise the following question about God: Is he a complexly orderly being? Either he is or he isn't, and in either case we are caught in a dilemma. If we say that God is a simple and/or disorderly being, then it seems hard to see how such a being could create a complex, orderly universe. But if we say that God is a complexly-ordered being, then we must remember step 2 of the argument which says that complex order cannot emerge from beings themselves. So following the logic of the Design Argument, we'd have to infer that God's complex order was imposed upon him by a Super-God that was even more intelligent and powerful. And that a Super-Duper-God made possible the Super-God, and so on into an absurd regress.

Of course, we might try to avoid the regress by saying, "God does not need an external power to impose order upon him. He is an exceptional being and is self-ordering." But if we are going to start making exceptions—then why not make one right at the beginning and assume that the universe is self-ordering?

*

All of the above is only a beginning to some deep investigation about causality, and it is only to look more closely at one argument among many that must be considered.

In my judgment, the Design Argument is the best of a bad lot of arguments that attempt to prove the existence of God. Even so, showing that the arguments for the existence of God are weak does not mean that the

naturalist accounts of causality, time, human nature, and morality are automatically true. Those are ongoing projects in the natural sciences and humanities as we human beings attempt to grow out of our intellectual infancy.

So in the next articles in the series, we will continue with more hard questions about religion versus naturalism in ethics, politics, and the march of history.

* * *

Topic 4: Is Religion Necessary for Personal Morality?

On Natural Morality and Religious Amoralism

By Stephen R. C. Hicks

In my judgment, issues of morality are the most difficult in philosophy. They are intellectually challenging, as everything about the human condition is relevant to them, and they are emotionally gripping, as our highest values are always at stake.

So it makes sense that religious philosophies often make morality the center of their appeal, and it makes sense that disagreements about religion can easily become tense and even emotionally overwrought.

Our question in this article is whether morality is natural or whether it can only be explained by reference to a supernatural being that issues moral rules and enforces them.

Each of us as individuals decides what our core values are and how we will act to accomplish them. In selecting the content of our value beliefs and deciding our methods of action, we almost always confront at some point this complex question: Should I choose my morality *religiously*, e.g., (a) by seeking direct communication from the gods or a God, or (b) by accepting an established religious system's moral code—or should I choose *naturalistically*, e.g., (b) by going with my society's prevailing norms, or (d) by deciding independently what I judge to be good and bad?

Social science data can bear upon that question. We can point to many historical examples of virtuous atheists and viceful theists, and vice versa, and we can work to collect such data points into useful statistics:

- * Do theists or atheists more often end up in jail?
- * Are crime rates lower in more secular or more religious nations?
- * Are atheists or theists more likely to be psychologically depressed?
- * Are those who put together happy and flourishing lives more likely to be naturalistic or religious?

Some of the statistics are suggestive but still a work-in-progress, so let us instead here focus directly on the philosophical debate. Here is how the argument goes:

1. Humans can make choices.
2. Reality gives us a standard by which we can distinguish good and bad.
3. Therefore, morality is a real phenomenon.

Determinists, whether religious or naturalist, will deny the first premise, but in these articles our focus is on the second step: Where in reality we should look to find such a standard?

The religious position then argues:

4. Naturalism cannot account for morality.
5. Therefore, we must believe in moral supernaturalism.

The fourth premise is the controversial one, as among naturalists there are lively debates and many competing approaches. I agree with Mr. Wright that many of those non-religious moralities are intellectually weak—and that he shot a few barbs nicely at some of the weaker ones. But he has not touched upon any of the stronger contenders.

I'll also argue below about the fifth premise—that as weak as the grounding for *some* of the naturalist moralities is, the grounding for *all* of the religious moralities is even weaker.

One preliminary point about labeling, as Mr. Wright speaks too casually in listing atheism as one of four possible explanations for morality. Atheism is *not* an explanation, as it is *only* a rejection of one kind of explanation—the theist one. Being an a-theist is like being an a-fairyist or an a-gremlinist or an a-horoscopist: it says only that one does not believe that fairies or gremlins or horoscopes explain anything.

As for what actually *does* explain morality, many naturalist theories are contenders. What we need, according to the second premise, is a fact about reality that grounds a distinction between good and bad. With such a standard to appeal to, we can go on to make judgments about everything else involved in human life.

* One naturalist approach notes that humans are distinctive in the power of their *rationality*, and that there is a fundamental distinction between living rationally and living irrationally. Just as eagles, chipmunks, salmon, and other species have a distinctive set of capacities they should exercise to live according to the kind of beings they are, human beings should live by the guidance of their distinctive cognitive capacities. Aristotelians and Kantians, for example, argue in this broad way.

* Another naturalist approach bases itself upon a different fundamental fact: the difference between *life* and *death*. That distinction too can ground good and bad—the good is the life-promoting and the bad is the death-causing. Nutritious foods, productiveness, and certain political systems are then good because they enhance life, while poisons, chronic laziness, and certain other political systems are bad because they undermine life. Objectivists argue in this broad way.

* And there is the distinction between pleasure and pain. Traditional Hedonists and Utilitarians will argue that this fundamental natural

difference provides a basic standard for morality: that which maximizes overall pleasure is the good and that which causes overall pain is the bad.

My point is not to advocate but to note that each has explanatory power: each is based in real, observable phenomena, and each provides a standard that can be used to make decisions in life's countless matters. Their ultimate adequacy is a matter of ongoing investigation.

Against those three, we need to compare the adequacy of grounding morality in *A god says so*.

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Many points can be made here, but I will make only four.

The first is that if one is going to ground morality in religion, one needs to choose among the many religions and their competing moral messages. Here, interestingly, religious belief is often autobiographical. That is, all religions have many of messages and practices—some peaceful, some violent, and so on—and individuals choose among them to put together a personal religion that reflects the morality they already judge to be more or less good.

That is, in my judgment, more morally healthy than those who accept wholesale a pre-existing religious package of beliefs uncritically. For example, the major Western religions incorporate the Bible, and much in that text is barbaric and written by and for barbaric peoples.

The healthier are those who pick-and-choose. The deist Thomas Jefferson is famous for literally cutting out only the passages in the Bible he approved of and pasting them into a separate notebook for his personal reference. Most people do the same, less systematically, and one does not need to agree with all of their selections to respect that they are thinking for themselves and that they are rejecting many immoral beliefs and practices required by the religious texts. That is an honorable path to moral development.

The picking-and-choosing, though, means that *morality comes before religion*. One *first* already has a personal standard of morality, and one *then* selects the religion that one independently judges fits best with it.

That, of course, is precisely why orthodox religions *condemn* the above practice, and this is my second point. Every major institutional religion in the West and most in the East urge—sometimes by means of threats or bribes, e.g., of hell or heaven—that one accept package-deals chosen by others. In my view, this is a profound *cognitive* immorality. Morality is about making choices based upon independent judgment, and any belief systems that undermines that core responsibility is immoral.

The key example to reflect upon here is the story of Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac. All major versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam uphold

Abraham as a moral hero for having passed God's severe test. Yet what Abraham is being praised for is his willingness to kill an innocent boy, without understanding why, knowing that it would cause him and his wife immense pain, knowing only that he had been ordered to do so, and deferring all responsibility to God. That is obedient faith—and that is profoundly immoral.

Only when an institutional religion explicitly rejects the lesson of Abraham can it be considered to have reformed itself minimally in the direction of human morality. Then we can discuss its credibility on other moral issues.

My third point: Sometimes in response to the above, theists ask a hypothetical question: But what if there really is a God and you find yourself in Abraham's sandals? Mr. Wright answers that question this way: "If God is real, then by definition he is rightfully owed our adoration, gratitude, and love"

This is to gloss over a deeply problematic point about the foundations of religious morality. Suppose for the sake of argument that there really is a god. Suppose he reveals himself to you directly and shows that he is immensely powerful and intelligent. You ask him to lift an ocean liner out of the water and put it back, which he does successfully. You ask him some really hard math questions, and he answers correctly and effortlessly. He then says to you, *Now that I have demonstrated great power and intelligence, you should do whatever I say.*

But why does that follow? It doesn't follow that what the god is telling you to do is *moral*. The god could be very powerful and intelligent—and evil. So if you are to base your morality on the sayings of a god, you need first to assure yourself that the god is moral.

How are you to accomplish that? Religious moralities tell us that we humans are ignorant of morality until a god tells us what morality is. But if we are ignorant of morality, then we are in no position to judge whether what the god is telling us is good or bad. On the other hand, if we *are* able to judge for ourselves whether the god's sayings are good or bad, then we must already know the difference between goodness and badness—which means we don't need the god to tell us what it is. (For more on this classic problem in religious ethics, see Divine Command Theory.)

My fourth and final point is this: Religious morality is very often, unfortunately, actually based upon deep pessimism and sometimes even deep cynicism about the natural world.

Mr. Wright's religion is a clear case in point. Witness his dark view of the natural world: "Here is the paradox of the human condition: man both wants the beauty of moral perfection, and knows *he will never find it in this life*" (emphasis added). Why not? Is no one *ever* honest or just or self-responsible or persevering or committed to integrity?

Or is it that such goodness is too infrequent and fragile in the face of depravity? This latter seems closer to Mr. Wright's actual position—note his candid true-confession: "No one asked me, but, given a choice, I would far rather that Odin had been the High God, *so that I could rape and pillage to my heart's content.*"

Here we have a man saying he would prefer to damage and destroy other people rather than create and cooperate with them. But he *acts* morally—not because *he* wants to—but because he has been ordered to. And he blithely assumes that every one else is just as depraved and so is willing to slander the rest of the human species.

I agree entirely with Mr. Wright that such self-loathing and cynicism about human nature often is the basis for religion. (Please note: I do *not* claim that *all* advocates of religion are in this category.)

And I note a connection here between Mr. Wright, theist and pessimist, and Sigmund Freud, one of history's major pessimists and an atheist. In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud argued that religion was an infantile illusion that was difficult to take seriously—but that given the irrational beastliness of human nature some sort of widespread religious belief was essential. Just as Mr. Wright seems to need to believe in a God to keep himself in line, Dr. Freud wanted most people to believe so that the fear of God would keep them in line.

What this final point suggests is that much of the religion-versus-naturalism debate about morality turns on an accurate assessment of human nature, and our next articles in the series take up directly such issues of human nature and their implications for the meaning of life.

(One final side point about intellectual morality and method: If one claims that there has been a misquoting, it is important to *show* the misquotation so that readers can see for themselves. This is more than professional courtesy but a matter of intellectual workmanship. In my previous articles, I've regularly quoted Wright's words and given links that readers can follow to their source. I take it, by contrast, as revealing that Wright accuses a lot but does not quote. For example: Mr. Wright is angry (5th paragraph) about my use of Tertullian, as I distinguished Wright's account of faith from Tertullian's (3rd paragraph) and in doing so used this quotation from Tertullian. By using the links, readers can judge for themselves whether I was (a) accurate or (b) "contrived," "cowardly," "foolish," and the rest—or whether Mr. Wright (c) needs to be more careful and/or (d) is substituting rhetorical bullying for argument.)

* * *

Is Religion Necessary for Personal Morality?

By John C. Wright

Our story so far: Mr. Hicks and I have agreed to debate seven questions concerning theism and atheism. The topic [now] is whether religion is necessary for personal ethics.

Before turning to that question, a brief recap in is order.

The first question was whether it is worthwhile to reason about religion. Mr. Hicks and I agreed that everyone should reason about his position that he might learn its weaknesses.

I further said that reason could allay fallacious objections to faith in God, in order to remove an intellectual obstacle to love, albeit obviously was not sufficient to persuade one to love God. No one is talked into falling in love. I also mentioned that deductive reasoning sufficed to prove monotheism in the abstract, but was insufficient to prove specifics of revealed religion (such as Trinitarianism, Christology, and Soteriology), where discursive reasoning was needed instead. The distinction was between two types of reasoning, not between reason and willful self-deception.

Mr. Hicks contrived to misquote both myself and Tertullian, pretending we claimed that some bizarre mental operation of willful self deception was necessary for faith in God, and was the definition of faith. To the contrary, “faith” is a word that merely means trust in an authority or trust in the testimony of a witness, and maintaining consistency with that decision when despair, but not evidence, tempts you.

This is no more an act of willful self deception than when Mr. Hicks tells the date of his birth. It is not irrational to trust the testimony of your own mother on the point.

When I pointed out I had not said such willful self-deception was any part of the Christian religion, he simply and stubbornly claimed I had, inventing misquotes as needed. He performed this cowardly and foolish antic over and over and over again, never once coming to grips with the argument presented to him.

The next question was whether God’s existence was a reasonable hypothesis. My argument was that the arguments for and against were discursive rather than analytical.

An analytical argument is like the Pythagorean theorem, which must be true if the axioms of Euclidean geometry are granted as true. A discursive argument is like the theory that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow. While it is possible—in the sense of not involving a contradiction in terms—that the sun could rise in the west tomorrow, common experience and modern astronomy demand some farfetched explanation to justify a theory of a future western sunrise. The more farfetched an explanation is

needed to support a theory, or the less it explains, or the more and deeper the objections that can be raised to it, the more deserving it is of skepticism.

This is called the principle of parsimony, or Occam's razor. Discursive reasoning does not deduce certainties from certainty, but it does find the most robust yet parsimonious explanation. Current theories of history, astronomy, or evolution not on certainties deduced from certainties, but discursive judgments of which theory is least open to serious objection. Darwinism is not certain, but it is less open to objection than *Lamarckianism*.

Hence to answer the question that was asked, namely, whether theism was a reasonable hypothesis, my argument listed briefly the three serious objections to theism, and the ten serious objections to atheism.

Mr. Hicks objects that the arguments do not irrefutably prove God's existence with an analytical argument, thus showing he never understood the question we were discussing.

Mr. Hicks decided to baffle me this time by pretending I had not said something I had said, namely, the simply pretending he need not answer any of the arguments. He then berates me for failing to be intellectually rigorous. I trust the reader notes the irony.

Instead he invents a strawman version of the first of my ten, the Argument from Design.

His argument is weaker than the real argument, to be easy to thrash. I am a little bemused that his own strawman trounces him.

The real argument about design is whether intent exists in nature. If you discover a pocketwatch on the sands of Mars, it is reasonable to assume that there is a Martian watchmaker, who designed the instrument with the intent to keep time. The idea that the watch fell together by an unintentional process, and just so happens to be useful for its use, is the weaker theory, because it is preposterous. Intentional effects cannot arise from non-intentional causes.

Likewise, if you see an organ, such as the wing of a bird or an eyeball, it is reasonable to assume that these organs were designed with their purpose in mind, namely, vision or flight. Hence the argument is that a design of a purposeful instrument presupposes a designer, who had that purpose in mind. Nature is non-purposeful because nature is non-deliberate. Hence evidence of design in nature is evidence of a designer of nature, which could only be supernatural.

Instead, Mr. Hicks says that the argument is about complexity. He says that theists argue that order cannot arise from disorder without an orderer. Instead of discussing how it is possible for disorder to give rise to the order of the universe (which includes, physical, mental, spiritual, ethical and

aesthetic order), he pulls a bait and switch, and speaks only of biological evolution, which is not an example of order arising from disorder at all.

A child species may have more moving parts than its parent if the pressures of its environment favor multiplicity of parts, or may have less, but neither is more orderly than the other. A bicycle has more moving parts than a unicycle, but not more order.

Mr. Hicks objects that the number, power and benevolence of the divine being or beings ordering the universe is not proved beyond doubt by this argument. Alas, the argument from design only is meant to prove the designer exists, not what his nature is. Mr. Hicks seems not to realize that polytheist or a pantheist is still a theist, and if theism is true, atheism is false.

The final remarks flounders on the question of infinite regress. He says that if we assume the universe lacks the power to create itself from nothing, hence needs a creator, we may assume likewise that the creator of the universe lacks it as well. Hence the creator must have been created by a father creator, and he by a grandfather, and so on. This is a schoolboy argument, to which every schoolboy should know the answer.

Consider the example of a train car being pulled by the car ahead of it to define its speed. There line of cars in a train cannot be infinite, for if it were, the train would be motionless. The first car of the train must be an engine, something which gets its speed from its motors, not from a previous car. It is an unpulled first puller. To argue that the unpulled first puller must have a puller that pulls it is to misunderstand the argument. It does not contradict the argument, it merely ignores the point.

Likewise, if the standard model of physics is true, then the Big Bang is a natural event, but it cannot be said to have arisen from natural causes, that is, historical causes inside the ambit of time and space, simply because time and space arose from the Big Bang. If so, whatever brought the Big Bang into being could not be inside time, and could not be a historical cause nor a natural cause. Another type of causation is needed, which can only be supernatural.

Since it is not an historical cause, it must be a final cause, that is, an intentional act seeking a deliberate goal. And only minds can have intentions. A supernatural mind, one able to create the universe, is a god of some sort. As for the number and nature of the god, another argument must address that.

So that is the story so far, and it is, alas, a sad one for any atheist who wanted to see his position staunchly defended.

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The most obvious reason for believing in God is a simple observation of the ethical nature of man. We all are aware of the authority of the conscience

which condemns wrong action when we do wrong, or fail to do right. We all are aware that we know the difference between right and wrong and that we commit wrong acts, say wrong words, think wrong thoughts, or omit right, all too often.

There are two salient facts that separate men from other animate creatures met on Earth. First, every toddler is taught how to talk; but no one teaches toddlers how to lie.

Second, even when contemplating a simple lie, such as when you told your boss you were sick when you merely wanted a day off, a justification springs to your lips instantly, even if you are alone. But it is logically impossible to have an exception without a law from which one seeks to be excepted. The quest for justification is logically impossible except when an authority who would otherwise impose a valid condemnation exists.

Men, in other words, all have some dim sense of righteousness and some dim craving for it, and all men fall short. Beasts evince no such thing. Now this is a peculiar fact indeed, and is the central mystery of human existence.

Now, there are four possible explanations for this: polytheism, pantheism, atheism, monotheism.

The evils done by the polytheistic gods is sufficient testimony that they cannot be the source of this disquieting sense of having violated the fundamental ethical laws of the universe. It is not as if Jove can criticize adulterers or parricides, or Odin condemn thieves.

Pantheism supposes all beings to share equally in the godhead, which implies all acts are likewise equally divine, including things obviously sins. If the cosmos is god, equally divine in all parts, there is no source for this sense of violation. It is an illusion best cured by Buddha.

Atheism cannot suppose that these ethical rules of the universe are sovereign, for if they are the product of biological evolution or social conditioning, they have no authority man cannot justly overthrow. If so, the appearance of sovereign authority of the conscience is an illusion rightfully banished, and the main problem of human ethics hence is not how to urge men to live as their consciences dictate, but how to eliminate the guilt which comes from violations of the conscience, usually described as being merely a reflector of arbitrary social convention.

Each of these explanations can be defended, depending on how far into the realm of *ad hoc* the defender is willing to go. The question is which provokes the fewest or weakest serious objections.

I submit that the most elegant and logical explanation for a universal sense of guilt over having violated a nonmanmade law is a superhuman lawgiver who put the faculty of the conscience into human nature; but this is not possible unless this lawgiver has universal authority hence universal

sovereignty, and created both universe and man. A universe-maker is a god, and if he is also the source of law, that law must be divine and his nature lawful.

The divine source of law cannot also be the source of lawlessness. Man's lawless nature hence can only be the outcome of a defect, a primal catastrophe posterior to creation, rightly called a fall. If man were not fallen, he would not be aware, perhaps not even able to imagine, the purity and righteousness he left behind. If the lawgiver gave laws that none could abide and none could abide by, he is merely a sadist, and therefore hardly the source of authoritative universal moral law.

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This leads to the question of whether religion is necessary for personal morality?

Before answering the question, it must be stated and in the strongest possible terms that the question is one of supreme indifference to the truth of the matter.

If God is real, then by definition he is rightfully owed our adoration, gratitude, and love, whether this leads to an ethical code or not, or creates an orderly society or not. One must believe truths because they are true, not because they are useful. One only judges lies in the scales of utility.

I note in passing that the question contains a weasel word. Why personal morality? Why not the morality of the family, the clan, the tribe, the nation? I suspect that answer there is too obvious. The imponderable and mystic bonds on which families, clans, tribes and nations rely for their existence have never existed in the absence of religion.

Nonetheless, the question was honestly asked, and merits an answer:

The answer is obviously no, if we are talking about any personal moral code based on self interest.

Men seek their own self interest by nature, and a rational man will also seek what it is his long-term self interest. It is not in his long-term self interest to live in a family whose children he teaches to deceive, cheat, hate and destroy him, nor could he propose in a clan or society lacking that sense of honor and love and civic duty deception corrupts and violence deters.

Only a sociopath is unable to see the beauty of correct moral action; only a fool or an intellectual cannot deduce by plain common sense that the standard which applies to one applies to all, or else is not a standard. One need not believe in any god or gods to have a love of goodness, a sense of reason, and loyalty to self interest.

But an examination of what is usually called a moral code based on self interest turns up the rather startling and rather obvious truth that such a thing is not a moral code at all. It is a set of rules for coming up with excuses

for violating the moral code, particularly when the moral code calls on you to make an act of self abnegation or self sacrifice.

Self interest, no matter how enlightened, can neither explain, nor condone, a soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his squad, or a mother who directs the doctor to save the baby in childbirth at the sacrifice of her own life. And yet without the loyalty of soldiers or the self sacrifice of mother love, families and clans cannot exist and society cannot prosper.

Only if life after death is real is the sacrifice of one's life, or even of one's time, rational. Only if there is a judge who can neither deceive or be deceived standing at the gate between life and afterlife, is it rational to fear and obey the laws of the conscience instilled by that judge.

Too many outrageously evil men have died happily in bed, paying no account for their crimes, for life to be tolerable, absent some form of judgment after death. If we live in a world where life is simply and incurably unfair, then we are poorly evolved to live in it, because the desire for justice, although it can be smothered under layers of studied cynicism, cannot be killed.

Hence, absent the supernatural, human nature does not fit nature, and this includes his ethical cravings, his love of all that is bright and just and holy, his craving for sin and self indulgence, his quiet and persistent conscience, his outrage at the injustice of seeing evil men prosper.

The atheist cannot regard the conscience as supernatural. If it is natural, it is non-deliberate, since all natural things are non-deliberate, in which case it has no authority over him. It is merely a natural resource, an irrational object to be manipulated. If it is manmade, then man can unmake it, hence to obey or to disobey is an arbitrary decision. Hence the atheist has no rational justification to bow to the conscience, for it is either an irrational or arbitrary. Since all men are uneasy at the knowledge of their guilt, and since no supernatural means are at hand to wash that guilt away, the sole tactic left to the atheist is to smother the conscience, that is, to redefine the conscience as a source of bigotry, and redefine sin as a source of self-actualization and liberty. Hence in secular society we see the inevitable result: all moral judgment is condemned as judgmental, and every day new perversion which yesterday was unthinkable is added to the list of what we must tomorrow tolerate, and the day after that celebrate.

Here is the paradox of the human condition: man both wants the beauty of moral perfection, and knows he will never find it in this life. Hence, there are only two possible alternative tactics to take toward this paradox:

One is to turn to a stronger power than any human power for aid in the quest, which he knows will only be consummated in the next life, when all sin will be sloughed away; the other is to eschew the desire for perfection as a dangerous illusion and suppress the craving, and surrender to one's fallen nature, and wallow in sin.

This surrender can be done in the name of authenticity, or in the name of removing inhibitions and neurosis, or in the name of civility and pluralism, or in the name of liberty and rebellion, or in the name of tolerance and broadmindedness, or in the name of diversion and being no sort of spoilsport, or in the name of the Wonderful Wizard of Oz. The name does not matter, because they are only excuses. No one means them, and everyone knows they are merely morphine to benumb the nerve of morality.

The choice is stark, binary, and absolute. There is no third alternative. By definition, the atheist cannot even admit the possibility of the first in his worldview.

For these reasons, no matter what good fellows atheists themselves might be, they are good only to the degree that they ignore or betray their own code of ethics and work against the only tactic of dealing with sin their worldview allows.

Atheism means dumbing down morality.

Atheism means deterring morality, and praising, lauding, applauding and rewarding sin, deviation, selfishness, and perversion.

Those atheists who cling for sentimental reasons to their religious upbringing and uphold morality, self-sacrifice, and condemn sin and all filth that demeans the sacred soul of man have no rational reason within their worldview so to do.

But with the supernatural, a moral code is possible where the self sacrifice necessary for families to exist and civilization to prosper is not at odds with human nature and human self interest, because the self persists beyond death.

In atheism, only the moral code of self interest, that is, a moral code without self-sacrifice, is justified. Any self-sacrificing atheist are certainly noble creatures, but they can give no rational explanation of their actions.

Nor is an irrational code, a code one cannot justify, able to serve as a basis for culture, custom, law, that is, communal as well as a personal standard of ethics—it was precisely to avoid mention of this point that the weasel question about ‘personal standards’ was worded in the weasel way it was.

The only openly atheist societies in history were socialist or national socialist, run by Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot and the other most atrocious monsters in history, and the avowed standards of these societies were not ethical but pragmatic, treating humans as objects, and as vermin subject to extermination in astronomical numbers. The sheer acreage of the mass graves of the innocent victims of atheist ethical pragmatism should silence any further discussion on this head.

For purposes of comparison, socialism has killed roughly 100 million human beings in this century through proactive social engineering, plus

another 30 million killed in their wars and conquests. Mao killed 40 million people in the twenty-six years of his reign, whereas all four Crusades together killed one million people between AD 1096 to AD1204. Mao averages roughly 1,530,000 per year, overtopping a century of Crusade by than 500,000. Again, the Spanish Inquisition in two hundred years killed 350,000. Mao in three months overtopped that total.

You may add in the Wars of Spanish Succession, or the Troubles in Ireland, or any other war which arguably used Christianity as a motivation. Even so, there is no comparison: atheism is deadlier than any crusade or inquisition in history, deadlier than all of them put together.

One can speak theoretically of atheistic cultures with atheistic moral codes and laws that are not nightmarishly and grotesquely deceptive, sadistic, satanic and morbid, but then again one can speak theoretically about virgins capturing unicorns. Just because no virgin in the history of the world has ever captured a unicorn, does not prove unicorns do not exist theoretically speaking.

But as far as untheoretical and unicornless real world goes, history has spoken, and condemned atheist ethics unambiguously as the greatest robber, deceiver, slaver, betrayer and mass-murderer in history.

If an atheist regards any unborn child or retarded boy as anything other than one more animal in the animal kingdom, he can give no rational account for his conclusion. A Christian can prove with logic from his principles what a softhearted atheist can only assert as sentimentality from his. In the world view where nothing is sacred, human life cannot be sacred.

Again, it does not prove, or even matter, that religion has this useful side effect for human families and societies and ethical behavior. But it makes atheism ugly and unworkable as well as being false.

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Topic 5: Does the Meaning of Life Depend on an Afterlife?

Making Life Meaningful without Religion

Stephen R. C. Hicks

The quest for a meaningful life comes naturally to us. As infants we delight in exploring the world and developing our powers—hearing and seeing and tasting, crawling, eye-hand coordination, vocalizing, and social interaction with parents, siblings, and family pets.

As children our lives becomes more complicated, yet we continue to grow in the strength of our reason and we develop emotional resiliency and more powerful bodies to meet the challenges.

This natural process continues into adulthood until we are capable of embracing the adventure of life fully—with commitments to meaningful careers, romantic loves, becoming parents ourselves, experiencing the profundities of art and philosophy, traveling to exotic places, including to magnificent past cultures by means of history and to the vast reaches of the universe by means of science.

But along the way, bad things can happen to sabotage us.

One bad thing is *existential*—the experience of major failure in one or more of life's major values—crushing hurts in romance, the death of loved ones, careers that crash, social humiliations, the pain of disease. These can overwhelm our felt sense that life has meaning.

The other is *intellectual*—the acquisition of beliefs that undercut one's understanding of natural life as fulfilling in its own right—that is, cognitive errors that explicitly attack natural life or that do so implicitly by setting one up for frustrations and failures.

There's a half-serious taxonomy that divides Christians into three types: *Christmas* Christians, *Good Friday* Christians, and *Easter Sunday* Christians. Christmas is about celebrating birth, benevolence, and the bounties of life. Good Friday is about suffering, sacrifice, and destruction. Easter Sunday is about our hopes and fears about what happens upon death.

The point can be applied to the many varieties of religion. Some are more life-affirming and are devised to provide an intellectual and ritual support system for the good life on Earth. Others focus more on renunciation and sacrifice of this life, which their belief systems are designed to rationalize and motivate. And yet others emphasize an afterlife as the location of life's true purpose.

Our focus now is on the third type: Is meaning to be found in this life on its own terms—or in a state of existence beyond?

My view is that belief in an afterlife actually serves *worldly* purposes, those purposes being to motivate a certain kind of moral code or to help one deal with the reality of one's mortality.

My debate colleague John Wright's version of Catholicism seems to be driven by a particular moral agenda—for example when he says, "Only if life after death is real is the sacrifice of one's life, or even of one's time, rational."

C. S. Lewis's version of Protestantism offers a variation upon this theme: "I find in practice that when you are in trouble, the moment you regard it as 'punishment,' it becomes easier to bear. If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad" (*God in the Dock*).

Note the key moral concepts in play: *sacrifice, punishment, correction*. Life is not to be about happiness—but there is no natural reason why one would reject happiness and embrace sacrifice and punishment. So a belief in a supernatural life is necessary to motivate a moral code that wants sacrifices and punishments in the natural world.

The other major naturalistic concern is of course about death. How does process the sobering knowledge that some day one will die? A belief in an afterlife can then be motivated, although typically in two very different forms:

** I am going to die, but I enjoy life—and I want to believe it will be extended.*

** I am going to die, but my life has been a disappointment or a disaster—and I want another chance.*

Yet there is no evidence of a soul or spirit that survives bodily death, and there is no evidence of supernatural places such as Valhalla or Hades or Heaven or Hell. So we need to find a philosophically healthy way to think and feel about death without resorting to fictions.

Socrates, Epicurus, and others have argued that death is nothing to fear because if death is final, then *you are not there* to suffer or even be aware of your death. True enough.

But even so, our concerns about death are often about *now* rather than later. What we all grapple with is the realization *now* that we will someday be dead and what that implies for our *current* values.

For example: *I love my children, and how do I now live with knowing I will leave them?* Or: *I am passionate about music and art, so how do I now accept that such awesomeness will end for me?* Or: *I realize I cannot do-over or*

repair the past events of my life, so how do I now come to terms with my disappointments or despair?

Positing an afterlife, however, is usually a non-answer to all of the above questions. To see this, suppose we ask: What is supposed to make the afterlife so great? What does one actually enjoy?

Some religions speak of acquiring wings and harps and floating on clouds, but—as Mark Twain pointed out—how much harp music does one actually want to listen to? We also know what happens to the physical body upon death—decomposition—and one cannot listen to music without ears and a brain.

Other religions promise 72 virgins—but again it's hard to imagine how one would enjoy them when one no longer has the appropriate equipment.

Yet other religions promise immortality to people who have a hard time thinking of something worthwhile to do on the weekend. One point of [Albert Camus's meditation on the myth of Sisyphus](#)—who was condemned to push a boulder up a hill repeatedly for all eternity—is to push us past vaguely wishing for immortality.

The point is: positing an afterlife in which human valuing *somehow* continues is often a way of giving an answer that actually avoids answering the question.

But, by contrast, *the natural world is actually real*, and in it great love, passion, beauty, adventure, and accomplishment *are* both genuine and possible. So: how can we find meaningfulness in a finite, natural life?

It first takes an honesty to face the world as it is. We are human beings with a human being's needs and capacities, and we can choose to commit to the achievement of genuine values, both individually and socially.

It also takes effort. Failure is always a possibility. And, yes, it will come to an end. But the fact that life's experiences come to an end does not diminish their value. A sunset may last only minutes. Making love may be for an hour. Celebrating your child's birthday is only for a day. Those are all still real and meaningful.

And so on for all of the rest that can add up to a life fully lived, for however many decades it lasts—including, as you reach the end of your time, the self-reflective satisfaction with what you have accomplished and the knowledge that in some form your life will enable others to achieve meaning in their own.

Mortality means only that you need to live *now* and not push living off into an ambiguous future out of laziness, cowardice, or indecisiveness.

A life filled with creative work, family, friends, art, literature, science, exploration—and an occasional glass of wine while you reflect upon the wonder of it all. For a human being, what could be better than that?

* * *

Does the Meaning of Life Depend on There Being an Afterlife?

By John C. Wright

The question is whether the meaning of life depends on there being an afterlife.

Like most questions raised when discussing the topic of supernaturalism versus naturalism, the question contains a hidden and deeper question which must be first answered, namely, what is the meaning of life?

Naturally, that question depends on two yet deeper, namely (1) what is life? And (2) what is meaning?

The answer to the second question depends on what life is. In the modern age, there are two major contenders offering opposite answers, the theist and the atheist.

If human life is a gift from a divine creator, created for a purpose, it can have an innate meaning, that is, a point, a direction, a purpose, and a living message which exists whether we like it or not.

If human life is basically the same as animal life, except that a blind and unpurposeful process of natural eugenics accidentally inflicted on a certain band of hairless apes a number of convolutions of the brain which granted us not only the desire to search for meaning in life, but the ability to seek it. This, of course, was unintentional, caused by a hiccup during a genetic Xerox-process, and existence of this desire has no intrinsic meaning.

It is neither cruel nor kind that the Xerox-hiccup created this desire in the race; it is merely a fact with no innate meaning, like the number of potatoes in Dublin on the first Tuesday in January, 1961. Neither does the existence of the desire prove that the desire is fitted to any satisfaction to be found in nature.

While some might make the argument that the blind process of the survival of the fittest must have discovered some evolutionary advantage to this desire, this merely means, if the argument were proved, that there is an accidental utility to the nonhuman ends favored by blind Darwinian statistics to the fact that we have the desire, not that the desire itself is worthy of being pursued, worthy of being avoided, worthy of being noticed, worthy or being ignored. Indeed, it has no meaning of any kind whatsoever, except what meaning we and we alone grant to the Darwinian utility of fecundity and preservation of the selfish genes we carry as benevolent parasites within us.

Hence, under this view, the search for meaning is an illusion as meaningless as seeking for law higher than manmade law, as seeking beauty beyond manmade standards of beauty, or as seeking rules of reason and logic more fundamental than what emerges from arbitrary human linguistic patterns. The thing cannot be done. It is an illusion as meaningless as seeking for scientific regularity in the phenomena of the ever changing, ever degrading cosmos.

If such a case, the meaning of life is exactly nothing, aside from what human willpower arbitrarily imposes on it. Hence, in a godless world, by definition, human life can have arbitrary meaning, but not innate meaning.

Those terms need explanation, as does the answer to our second question. What is meaning?

A straightforward answer to the second question is to say that the difference between a garble of noise and a plain language is the difference between meaningless and meaningful. The difference between a remark clearly understood and a remark one is unready, unwilling, or unable to understand is the difference between meaningful and unmeaningful.

However, we must make two distinctions: first, we must distinguish innate meaning from the mere illusion; and second we must distinguish innate meaning from personal meaning.

If an owl hoots, and the noise to an English speaker reminds him strongly of the question *who?* this so-called question is meaningful in his ears only, and only for the moment of confusion before he turns and sees that an owl, and not a person, is behind him. The images seen in clouds or the inkblots of Rorschach are not meaningful properly speaking. They are something that looks, at first, like it might have a meaning, but which, upon examination, does not. So, here: when we speak of innate meaning, we do not mean a subjective impression that imposes a meaning on a chaos where none exists.

Again, it is clear enough that if a man addresses you in Greek, his words may be meaningless to you but not to someone fluent in that language. In that sense meaning is subjective, that is, the receiver must have whatever decoder ring of experience, wisdom, or inner knowledge to receive the meaning of what is being said to him in order to savor it and understand it. Wagner's Ring Cycle can rightly be said to be more meaningful to someone familiar with the conventions of opera, with the legends of the Norse (and with the German language) and European music than to an untrained ear, or unlettered eye. Also, someone who lacks poetry in his soul cannot receive the meaning of Wagner's work, for the same reason a eunuch cannot judge a beauty contest. He has no antenna to receive the radio waves, as it were. Such a eunuch can indeed apprehend with his reason that Wagner's work has an innate meaning, without being able to experience it. Let us call this a personal meaning.

Hence I ask the reader to draw a distinction between what is meaningless and what is unmeaningful. It may be unmeaningful to a young Benedict who scorns marriage all sighs and sonnets of love, for the language of cupid is closed to him. However, there is a meaning to be had, even though he himself might not be ready to receive it. Once he falls in love, he will understand, hence he will see the meaning. To the contrary, there is no question for him to understand when an owl hoots, or should the Humpty Dumpty ask him how mimsy are the borogroves, all mimsy or just somewhat?

The difference between unmeaningful and meaningless is the difference between an unanswered question and a nonsense question.

But here we reach the utterly implacable paradox of godlessness. If life has no meaning, then that is the truth. Reason demands we live in accordance with the truth, for anything else is contemptible self-deception. But this demand is one, by definition, by the very nature of the case, no one can ever satisfy. There is no meaning to be found.

And it is simply a matter of fact, and one hopes entirely beyond dispute, that man cannot live without meaning. Even in his attempt to avoid meaning, meaning is found. A man can cover over his conscience with calluses, and try to learn never to enjoy beauty in any thing, and say nothing but lies and believe nothing, but he cannot do so consistently nor continuously.

An honest attempt to avoid all meaning whatsoever in life would be something even the most devout nihilist beatnik or sociopath could hardly encompass. His every act would have to be motivated by the lowest form of unreflective instinct, his eyes and ears would have to reject every star or flower, lest he be struck dumb with beauty, nor ever look at a child nor hear laugh, and the single note of a lute would blast his pretense to nothing. And for what would this great effort be made? He cannot seek it as a means to an end, because the relation between means and ends is a meaningful relationship, and ends are meaningful in and of themselves. He cannot seek it because reason demands it, because in a meaningless universe reason makes no demands. There is no philosophy because there are no words; there are no words because there are no thoughts; there are no thoughts because there are no ideas; there are no ideas because there is no meaning.

Since no honest attempt can be made to live according to the true nature of the meaningless universe in which we are trapped, to stay alive at all is an act of unparalleled dishonesty. It means you don't believe what you think, you don't mean what you say. Indeed, it means that nobody believes what he says save only those simpletons too stupid to realize life is meaningless or those fools too unwise or too craven to admit it.

Even a moderate few steps along this paths makes his life miserable, himself a burden to the earth, not to mention a danger to himself and others, and a wretch best put out of his misery.

At this point, surely the objection will be raised that in a godless universe one can live quite happily devoted to some diversion or distraction, such as by honorable military service to one's country, or by entering the priesthood, or rearing a family, curing the sick, or by composing a symphony or writing a book of philosophy, or earning money by honest hard work, or stealing money by cunning fraud or brutal robbery, or hunting down human beings like game animals on an uncharted island to which your victims are lured, or abducting virgins to serve one's lusts in one's harem, or eating a ham sandwich, or smoking cigarettes, or cutting your own flesh with a knife, or chopping off your male member and calling yourself Caitlin, or strapping a bandolier of dynamite to one's buttocks and igniting it in the emergency room of a children's hospital in Jerusalem.

I trust the alert reader will notice what the difficulty is with all the items on this proposed list.

First, all of them, in a godless universe, are vain and pointless, mere distractions, because family, species, nation and planet alike will be eaten by entropy and dissolved into nothing. There is neither beauty nor truth in a meaningless universe, hence symphonies and philosophy alike must either be gibberish, or be arbitrary, merely expressions of personal taste.

Second, in a meaningless universe, there is no difference between the savior and a slaver, the man who lusts for money and the mad bomber who lusts for death. All these things can have no meaning—for there is none to be had—and they can only serve to distract the mind from that awful, terrible, soul-destroying and relentless final truth. It is all pointless.

This is not like the case of a man who learns Latin to read Virgil, and so gains the ability to understand a meaning that was there all along, merely hidden from him. This is more like the case of attempting to calculate the ultimate prime number, or trying to draw a four-sided triangle. The seeker turns the dial of the radio, as he experiments with his life, attempting one pleasure-seeking or duty-fulfilling devotion after another, but there is only static to hear, and no music.

The thing sought simply cannot exist, except as an illusion created by words with no meaning, thoughts with no referents.

The word 'meaning' by definition means 'intentional meaning'. If there is no God, then the coming into being of the race of man, and each and every member of the race, was an unintentional event, an accident.

If there is no one writing the book, the words in the book cannot form a story, except the way the cloud forms a face: in your eyes only, and only for so long as you can fool yourself. If there is no one speaking the word, it is not a word, but an owl screech you have mistaken for a word.

Yes, an atheist in a godless universe can have a happy life for a short while, that is, during the period while he successfully chases empty pleasures and

busies himself with empty projects, meaningless crusades, vanity and wind. He can devote himself to others or to himself. Both idols will disappoint.

Because there is only one possible sequel in the godless world of entropy, decay, and death, and that is failure. For the man devoted to empty pleasures or busied with empty philanthropy or social activism either he will die, or cause fail, or his nation will crumble, his wife will die or divorce him or cease to amuse him, his children will die or go away, his symphony be forgotten, his philosophy book be unfinished, and even the cigarettes or slave girls or gladiatorial games, the feasts and orgies and self mutilations he uses to distract himself will thrill him less and less, and the emptiness grow more and more.

His only comfort is that if he dies young, these things might outlive him for a season.

The honest seeker of meaning would see that there is only one meaning: Only love makes life tolerable.

In the atheist universe, the universe does not love us. Indeed not! The universe is not even paying us the compliment of ignoring us. To speak of the universe ignoring mankind is an unjustifiable anthropomorphism. The universe does not even have the capacity to ignore, that is, to turn its attention away from us as unworthy, for it has no intention to turn. The universe is our word for a mass of disconnected events forming a vast but unintentional, directionless, and dead machine built by nothing for no purpose running onward by inertia until stopped by entropy.

No, even to call it a machine is anthropomorphism, for machines are tools build by design. Chaos is the absence of design.

The godless universe is a meaningless sequence of meaningless matter contorted in meaningless motions.

In the godless universe, there is no one and nothing to love except for other men, or their institutions, or pets, or some other object of sentimentality. Such love is only as deep as any sentiment: it lasts for so long as one's digestion is sound. All such objects of love are changeable, fickle, mortal, and unreliable. In the long run they are unworthy, and a deep and sick self loathing, irony and cynicism pervades the lives of anyone who lives in this moral and mental atmosphere.

Love alone makes life worth living, and in a godless universe, mankind as a whole has no father, no king, no lover and no beloved.

Man cannot cease from seeking love, for it is his nature, and even he could, he ought not, for living loveless life is ugly and wrong. Driven to seek love, Man finds himself more alone than Robinson Crusoe. There is none to love him back. He can only love himself. Hence, Man can only perform acts that, in the end, are masturbatory, mere distractions, and fruitful of nothing.

The only reason why this vision of nothingness does not drive mad any atheist who contemplates is that he does not take it seriously. The sun still shines, he has work to do, a ball game to watch, a hot date to enjoy, or a hot ham sandwich to slake his momentary hungry him. No one lives as men in meaningless chaos would, nor attempts to. Hypocrisy is their shell and plastron.

In the theist universe, divine love created all, and will conquer all, and each life has more meaning that we can imagine, more than we dare imagine, for we shall outlive stars and galaxies by an infinite magnitude, in infinite joy, and bliss upon bliss.

In the theist universe, nothing is meaningless, nothing can be meaningless, because everything is a message from the creator via the medium of Creation itself to us, his creations. And the message is love.

* * *

Topic 6: Is Religion Good or Bad for Politics?

Is Religion Good or Bad for Politics?

By John C. Wright

The question is whether religion is good or bad for politics.

The wording of the question is charmingly misleading, akin to asking whether economic theory is good or bad for politics, without bothering to distinguish between the economic theory of the free market, which produced the industrial revolution, versus the economic theory of Stalinist Marxism, which produced the Ukraine famine, the gulags, and the endless fear and bloodshed of the Cold War.

Politics is the study of how to organize the laws and customs of the state to preserve the common good, maintain the social order, deter crime and win wars, and promote virtue among the citizens and subjects.

Reading the ancient and the modern literature on the topic, one soon realizes that every writer from Plato to Marx and beyond sees the sole mechanism of political control to be the abolition of liberty, with one glaring exception.

This exception is so obvious that only an intellectual would somehow contrive to overlook it.

Only in Christian commonwealths and kingdoms can the study of how to organize the state to achieve the common good and promote virtue be subordinated to how to preserve liberty. This is what politics properly so called is, and all that it is.

Only in Christian commonwealths and kingdoms is there even a logical reason to curtail the power of the king or republic to lawful objects, and to decree some matters, matter of conscience, to be beyond secular power.

A man who does not believe in the supernatural cannot believe in any law above human law.

He cannot criticize the race laws of Nazi Germany nor the property laws of Socialist Russia nor the criminal laws of Maoist China based on anything higher than personal sentiment, or a watery appeal to the utility of various human actions for ends not shared by these bloodthirsty tyrants.

There is no way to discuss politics except as power relations—who does what to home and gets away with it—absent a reference to a supernatural authority above all human authority from which human authority takes whatever legitimacy it possessed. Appeals to efficiency are woefully

inadequate to this purpose. The Socialists of Germany, Russia and China were appallingly efficient.

In no other worldview is there a logical reason to respect a man who thinks wrong things, comes to bad conclusions, indulges in vice, and leads other men astray, because in no other world view is the freedom of the conscience sacred and sacrosanct even when in the wrong. A Godfearing Christian would not remove the freedom of a man to damn himself to hell even if he could, because his God did not remove that freedom, not even from Adam.

The question of whether religion is good or bad for politics as stated is meaningless. There is no politics properly so called outside Christendom. The reason for this astonishing statement is there is no such thing as religion properly so called.

What is there, if there is no such thing as religion? It is too simple merely to divide matters into Pagan, Christian and Postchristian. We must take a more nuanced view:

(1) There is pre-Christian paganism (2) There is Catholic Christendom, which separates the spiritual from the secular power (3) There is Judaism, which separates the priestly tribe of Aaron from the royal lineage of David (4) There are various heresies and distortions of Catholicism which undo the Catholic separation of spiritual and secular power, from Anglican England to Mohammedan Caliphate (5) there is a corruption called laicism that starts from a healthy respect for all denominations and runs through sadistic communism and masochistic New Age mysticism or neopaganism, to end in unhealthy nihilism. (6) Nihilism is an end-state from which there is no recovery.

Please note that 'politics' as a study separate from 'religion' can exist only in the second condition, in Catholicism, where the spiritual and temporal powers exist in separate spheres.

No society on the surface of the Earth or the vast abyss of history ever tolerated alien faiths or rituals, except for one that is or recently had been Christian.

Likewise, anthropology does not exist outside of the Christian worldview, nor does respect for one's pagan ancestors, and a desire to preserve beliefs one believes wrong. It is typical of Islam to dynamite Buddhist statues, and inevitable for Leftists to obliterate and rewrite history, but it is not typical for Spanish Bishop Diego de Landa to burn the Popol Vuh. (Indeed, this one example has no obvious second in Christian history).

The reason for this is simple: no one except a Christian has a logical reason to respect the free will of other men, and no one else regards the free choice to love God as sacrosanct, even when the choice is to refuse that love and embrace hell instead.

Pagans believe in fate, in forces beyond even the control of the gods, and Postchristian believe either that men are no different than beasts, guided by instinct, or no different from machines made of meat, carrying out natural operations without choice and without dignity.

There is no such thing as “religion”. There is on the one hand the Christian faith, and on the other there is the default state of mankind, which hovers around a pagan fear of an implacable yet whimsical spirit world and a pagan worship of strength that adorns tyrants with divine honors, from Caesar to Pharaoh to the Brahmin of India to the Emperor of China.

The only thing in human history that ever erected a direct and vehement contradiction of this fearful worship of tyrants both of this world and the other world is the faith of Abraham.

Buddha rejects the world as an evil illusion, merely a source of pain; Lao Tzu dismisses the question as unanswerable; Confucius as impractical. (These men, it must be noted, are sages or philosophers. They are not the prophets or promoters of a religion and the cultic practices that sprung up in their names are nothing more nor less than the divine honors pagans are wont to pay to any great man or great sage. They are the brothers of Plato and Pythagoras, not of Moses and Elijah.)

The Hellenes held the world to have arisen from Chaos, the Norse from the roaring void of the Ginnungagap, and the modern atheist hold the world to have arisen from the Big Bang and the inexplicable advent of life from non-life, and intelligent life from non-intelligent life. In all such worldviews, the soul of man is an accident, a by product, and a gods either do not exist or are the toys of deadly fate. No one is really in charge of the universe. The Chinese sages are too wise and logical to have concerned themselves with the origins of the cosmos, since they ask, quite sagely, who might have been present to witness such a thing? In this they agree with Greek philosophers in dismissing the folk beliefs of the folk. The Hindu in a stance even more filled with despair hold that all the suffering of the countless eons of the universe have no beginning and no end: life is a purgatory without any endpoint of purgation. There is Karmic punishment for sin but not forgiveness. It is indistinguishable from hell. The Buddhist stance, in rebellion against this, is even more despairing, for it promises an end to the endless wheel of suffering in a type of enlightenment indistinguishable from obliteration.

Regard, for example, the Aztec who sacrificed hundreds of human souls to the steaming and blood drenched pyramids of Mexico in order that the sun would not go dark. To live in a world where you thought your ritual observances were all that kept the world from hideous obliteration would be as grim and hopeless as ... as ... as your average environmental activist.

The despair of the Buddha is reflected in the writings of the Gnostics and in the request of Socrates at his death that a bird be sacrificed to Aesculapius,

as if to die were to be healed of the material human condition. Many pagans believe in reincarnation or in elevation to a disembodied state, or a reunification with the world-soul. The Christians teach that the individual survives death and will be reincarnated in a glorified body at the end of human history (which is the beginning of real history, when the fun starts) in a new heaven and a new earth, cleansed of all sin and all stain.

Only in the writings of Moses is the world stated unambiguously to be the work of a benevolent creator, and the material world to unambiguously be good. Paganism is astonishingly grim and hopeless. And in a hopeless world where nothing is unambiguously good, there is no reason to recognize the liberty of foolish men as sacrosanct, something even the king may not touch. The pagan gods are worshipped because they are more powerful than men, not morally superior. Jupiter is a parricide and rapist, and Brahma destroys the universe in an act of cosmic genocide once every turn of the great wheel of time by opening his eyes and ending and restarting the meaningless dream of existence. The behavior of the gods of the Aztecs is too vile to repeat in public.

The modern rejection of Christianity is merely a return to pagan despair and this power worship, but retaining the Christian notions of the equality of man and compassion for the poor.

Unfortunately, absent God, there is no logical reason to believe in the equality of man or to believe in compassion for the poor. And, sure enough, when the modern atheist actually gains secular power, history displays that the logic of atheism is the same as the logic of paganism.

The adoration of the corpses and images of communist leaders in Russia or in the Far East differ from the adoration of the demigods and founding heroes of pagan empires only in a metaphysical nicety that rejects supernaturalism. There are naturalistic and secular gods. The Marxist belief in the ineluctable evolution of history toward a socialist utopia differs from the Buddhist belief in the achievement of nirvana only in its metaphysical trappings. One involves evolution and the other metempsychosis.

There are, to be sure, non-Christians and pagans who speak about the dignity of man and the sacred nature of human free will. One needs only look at history to see those speeches are not worthy of credulity. They are akin to the guarantee of the free practice of religion found in the written constitutions of socialist states in Asia or semi-socialist states in Europe.

In the first state, in paganism, the Caesar or Pharaoh or 'Son of Heaven' is both a proper object of worship and a source of divinely ordained social order. The slaves are at the bottom because such is the will of the gods, and the rulers are Brahmin and sons of demigods and culture heroes who are less sinful than their inferiors. Helping the untouchable poor is blasphemy, because the gods ordained their poverty. They are not the image and

likeness of God, nor does any Christ walk among them. Pagan sages and priests are found in palaces, not mangers, and certainly not on crosses.

Also, a certain study of politics is possible, at least for a season, in the first and healthy phase of the final corruption stage, where the secular power is forbidden from interfering in the spiritual authority of the various denominations living in a culturally (but not legally) Christian state. This is basically coasting on empty, that is, it is living with the moral maxims of a Christian worldview without any logical way to articulate why those maxims are true or should be followed.

In the fourth state, the Established Church is an organ of State power, with the results one sees during the reign of Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth, Bloody Mary and so on. My point here is that in all the states outside Christendom the study of politics is the study of religion, for the legislator is also the bishop, and the head of state is also the head of the Church.

In the fifth state, the laicist state, the state might at first permit or even encourage a nondenominational form of Christianity, or a form of Judeo-Christian Deism vaguely honoring the Supreme Being.

But it is the nature of power to expand. Where there is no universal, that is, Catholic and international church to counterbalance the imperial or national power, that power expands. Even in enlightened commonwealths like England or the United States, the members of unpopular denominations will find their right to worship as they see fit preserved only for so long as the default assumptions of the consensus of society as a whole are Christian, and hence respect with awe the terrifying power of the free will to chose freely to love Christ or to hate him.

If that default is ever overthrown, the results are either slow and terrible or swift and terrible. A swift example is the Terror in France, or the greater and longer lasting terrors in Russia and China after their laicist revolutions attempted to eliminate Christianity entirely from life. An example of the slower and more insidious terror is the current generation in Europe and America, where certain thoughts and ideas can be decreed by anonymous voice to be inappropriate, beyond the pale, unwelcoming, or politically incorrect. Social pressure is currently being directed against the free exercise of religion in this Postchristian and postrational generation, but the warning signs of intolerance and hatred for all Christian denominations, but especially for the Catholics, are clear enough for any with eyes to see.

It is almost not worth discussing the impact of Christianity on politics to those who refuse to read history and refuse to admit what causes what. It is practically unknown to those educated in modern public schools that slavery was wiped out of Europe during the so-called Dark Ages, so called by Protestant writers wishing to slander their Catholic grandfathers, and groping for some reason to attribute all progress and enlightenment to

themselves, and not to the previous generations which did all the work of progress and enlightenment.

The notion of the rule of law is found nowhere outside Christendom and makes no sense outside Christendom. The unique Christian worldview holds that all men are sinners, even the highest and noblest king or the wisest sage and scholar or the bravest hero. The unique Christian worldview holds that no man is unworthy of salvation, not even slaves. There can never be a caste of untouchables in a Christian commonwealth, nor can there be a class of people like the Kulaks or the Capitalists slated for extermination.

No Sultan of the Near East, no Emperor of the Far East or the New World ever walked barefoot in the snow in penance for having unjustly destroyed a city. No Postchristian can imagine their adored political leader of their party even being criticized by the press, much less walking to Canossa, as Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV did. The idea of Imperial power being itself bound by a spiritual power independent of his scepter is unimaginable outside Christendom.

There is no abolition of slavery outside Christendom, not even any discussion of such a notion, except among those who take the notion from Christian roots. And where there are Christians, there are always abolitionists, even as far back as St John Chrysostom, who lived and taught in the Fourth Century. Slavery made its great renaissance in Europe from Muslim Spain, who addicted the Spanish to the practice, and the other great powers during the Age of Discover copied them.

There is no struggle for Civil Rights except at the hands of men of the cloth like Dr. Martin Luther King. When agnostics and atheists take over this movement, it becomes a mechanism merely to expand state power by addicting the unwary poor to an endlessly expanding welfare state.

And so on and so on. Outside the Christian worldview, there is no such thing as politics because there is no such thing as politics separate from religion. Outside the Christian worldview, the secular and the spiritual power are, and always have been, one and the same, for there is no logical reason imaginable within a non-Christian philosophy to sever them. There is no logical reason imaginable within a non-Christian philosophy to respect folly, wrong choices, heretics, or the poor and weak and dispossessed. Only if man is sacred is his free will sacrosanct. Only if the will of man is sacrosanct, is the freedom of the conscience beyond even the power of earthly kings and emperors.

The atheist can neither account for the freedom of the will nor call anything sacrosanct.

Is Political Evil Built into Religion?

By Stephen R. C. Hicks

We live in good times for religion and politics. The great majority of us are free to practice or not religion as we choose. That has been rare in human history, as politicians have generally enjoyed using religion as a political tool, and as religious leaders have almost always tried to employ politics for religious purposes.

My assumption in this article is that some sort of liberal-democratic-republicanism is the best politics. So our question is: Does religion support or undercut such politics?

It is common in debates such as these for atheists to cite the long history of fanaticism, torture, and war that religion has caused and for theists to respond that such evils are aberrations and that their own preferred religion, properly interpreted, is innocent of such charges.

So: Is bad politics built into religion?

Free people have two basic needs. One need is *cognitive*: they need to be rational, independent, and confident in their thinking so as to be capable or running their own lives responsibly. The other need is *existential*: they need to be able to act on their own judgments and take responsibility, for better or worse, for the results of their actions.

By contrast, the fundamental injunction of the major Western religions is *Fear God and obey his commands*, as Ecclesiastes 12:13 puts it. Variations of that are basic to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At their very foundations, then, these religions build *commandments by higher authority* and *fear-based obedience* into the psychology of their believers.

The great danger of politics is its use of compulsion. The great danger of religion is its rationalization of compulsion. Any belief system that prizes first obedience to commands is a natural fit with a politics of compulsion.

Of course *many* political thinkers, religious or not, many will argue that people are too stupid or too depraved to live freely and so need to be controlled. Yet other core tenets of the major Western religions are alien to a free society.

Cognitively, the major religions put mystical *revelation* and *faith* above empirical investigation and logical thought. Claims of divine revelation and faith demand of us that we subordinate our independent judgment to that of others—namely, those who claim to have received such revelations and who are demanding our faith. Authoritarians throughout history have often found such religiously-minded people to be politically pliable.

Morally, the major religions undercut individuals' sense of their self-worth by asserting their sinfulness, weakness, and depravity. Those who doubt their own worthiness are unlikely to assert their rights and fight for their own interests and happiness.

Further, the major religions emphasize a supernatural world beyond this one and devalue the natural world. In their purest form they preach sacrifice and renunciation—poverty, celibacy, and self-inflicted physical pain. Religious texts and sermons regularly demand that one "love not the material world," that one feel guilty about enjoying sex, that one see the love of money as evil, and that anything other than abject humility is Satanic pride.

Such *metaphysical* other-worldliness combined with *ethical* anti-naturalism has *political* implications: people who believe will not demand the freedom to pursue happiness in *this* life. By undercutting people's fierceness in their commitment to the good life in this world, religions again make people more easily controlled politically.

Additionally, the collectivism of much traditional religion militates against the individualism of liberal democracy. Note that the doctrine of Original Sin is thoroughly collectivistic—we are all responsible for the sins of humankind. Other elements of collectivism are prominent: we are all called to worship God together and in exactly the same way. And in many versions we do not reach God individually but will be reunited only as part of humanity or a chosen group as a whole. Therefore, *your* sinning becomes a threat to *my* salvation—your deviance from what everyone else is doing becomes a threat—and your asserting your individuality undercuts our collective salvation. Consequently, we will feel not only entitled but morally impelled to interfere with your lifestyle. Toleration is alien to such religious mindsets.

There is *no way* to get political liberalism from religious psychologies based on obedience, submission, mysticism, faith, sin, collectivism, and other-worldliness. Instead, what follows from them is exactly what has occurred in history in times and places where such tenets have dominated—various combinations of dictatorship and communalism.

Here my debate partner John Wright's reading of history is flatly wrong. For the first one thousand years of its existence, Christianity practiced two basic models of politics. One was happily authoritarian—the Christian leadership worked with caesars and kings and the various feudal hierarchies in which everyone was supposed to know his and her place. Religious minorities were suppressed and religious heretics were persecuted.

Also during that millennium, many Christians would withdraw from society at large and set up their own communities devoted to living purely according to their precepts—monasteries, convents, and so on. Invariably they organized themselves into small "c" communist societies: there was no

private property, everybody worked together, everybody ate, prayed, and often slept in communal halls—all of it with an overlay of obedience to higher authority as manifested in the Church. Authoritarian communalism is pretty much the exact opposite of liberal democracy.

That was 1,000 years of history when Christianity had almost complete domination over the intellectual and cultural life of Europe.

Yet in the early modern world there *was* a transformation of European politics. Some republics and democracies emerged, and there was a re-introduction of liberal individualism. To give Christianity credit for any of this, we'd have to suppose that its leadership suddenly said to itself, *Wow, we've been interpreting Christianity all wrong for a millennium!"*

Or we could say, more accurately, that the rediscovery of classical Greek and Roman (and perhaps some Germanic) political models convinced the humanistic thinkers of the Renaissance, who began re-experimenting with liberal political and economic ideas.

Against the rise of humanism, the major Christian voices fought a rear-guard battle. The Catholic Church was a backward-looking institution of conservatism, fighting to retain its status. Leading Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were politically authoritarian. Modern liberal democratic-republicanism finally emerged from the centuries-long battles begun in the Renaissance, but very little of that was due to factors internal to religion. The factional viciousness of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation—Catholics against Protestants, Protestants against Protestants, everybody against the Jews—led to widespread death and misery.

What ended the torture and slaughter was not a *religiously*-principled stand. Rather, it was a prudential realization that the fanaticism was unsustainable. The principle of toleration was supplied by the *humanists* of the Renaissance and Enlightenment who argued that each individual's life and soul was his own responsibility and that we must respect each individual's judgment about how best to exercise it. That principle was grudgingly accepted by the strongly-religious and, if not accepted, forced upon them by the humanist-inspired principle of separating religion and politics.

Once those modern humanist principles of individual rights to life, liberty, property, toleration, and the pursuit of happiness were in place, they were extended to eliminating slavery and the subordinated status of women. (To my knowledge, there is not a single word in Scripture in principled opposition to slavery or against treating women as second-class citizens or semi-chattel.)

The point is that the most cherished and fundamental principles of the major Western religions have consistently and accurately been used by religious leaders for authoritarian political purposes. And they have been

used by politicians, whether religious or not, who have found them to be useful tools for asserting authoritarian control.

Obedience to God is easily transformed into obedience to God's representatives on Earth. Incentives of an afterlife are useful in getting people to accept their lot in life—or in getting them to sacrifice themselves so as to get their supernatural rewards. Accusations of sin and demands of humility are helpful in making people defensive and compliant.

Supernatural other-world-ism, mystical faith, collective guilt, and the worship of self-sacrifice are and have been the core and cherished principles of the major Western religions. Renounce those principles, and you can have a modern free society. But renounce them, and you have also renounced religion.

* * *

Topic 7: Has Religion Been on Balance Good or Bad for Humanity?

Has Religion Been on Balance Good or Bad for Humanity?

By John C. Wright

The question for this final column of the debate between Catholic and Atheist is this: Has religion been on balance good or bad for humanity?

Alert readers may have noticed in previous columns that nearly every question contains a hidden assumption, or slant, which must be brought to the surface before the question is answered. It will surprise no alert reader to learn that Mr. Hicks proposed the questions, hence they contain his unspoken foundational assumptions. But fair is fair, and I agreed to answer the question that was asked, as it was asked.

It is, however, also my part to address any unspoken assumptions or leaps of logic the answer might provoke, hence also to answer the unspoken falsehoods the question provokes.

The question as phrased is meaningless.

It is like asking whether the sexual drive, the maternal instinct, passion for war, the love of peace, the craving for beauty, the need for comedy, or the appetite for food and drink have been on balance good or bad for humanity? There is no way to answer the question because these drives, instincts, appetites and cravings are so basic to all mankind and so universal that they can be found in all men, all institutions, and in all times and places. These things define what it is to be man.

Religion properly so called means the rites of petition, thanksgiving, worship and adoration offered in their many guises in many lands to divine and supernatural entities, but also includes institutions formal and informal, touching theology, morality, laws and customs, art and poetry related to divine beings, or man's relation to them.

Good means approach to the divine truth. It means virtue, beauty, and truth.

But to ask a question about goodness as a whole implies a standard of measurement, a goal, and the way to measure whether religion is moving us closer or farther from the goal. The subjective atheist so-called standard is manmade and man-centered whereas the objective and rational Catholic standard is divinely ordained and Church-centered. I can imagine no way to answer the question about goodness across so wide a gap of disbelief.

And, more to the point, to ask a question about 'religion' without making any distinction between primitive and advanced religions, civilized or uncivilized, and making no distinctions between worshipping good and gentle gods or horrid and beast-faced devils is like asking a question about whether marriage is better than celibacy, without distinguishing between marrying one's true love, marrying a shrew, marrying one woman, many woman, or marrying the volcano god by being tossed in chains into the lava crater.

The question as it stands does not mean anything because there is nothing outside religion with which to contrast it. The religious impulse is part of human nature, and even atheists and agnostics treat some matters with the awe and reverences theists offer gods. There are still things an atheist treats as sacred—his sense of honor, for example, or his love of reason—even though in his worldview technically nothing is sacred.

The question is the same as asking whether being human, on the whole, has been good or bad for humanity.

Now, the question might be trying to ask something deeper than this. It might be trying to ask whether or not the religious impulse has been the cause of more harmful and unhappy historical events than of events of benevolence, civilization, and progress.

There is no standard. If the number, frequency and severity of wars, there is an insufficient number of purely atheist or pure theist motives for war to make any determination. Likewise, the length a society stands might be a measure, or the fairness and justice of its law, or how well it treats the poorest among them, but then the selfsame objection arises. When a man does evil, how can any mortal know which of his motivations was paramount? For in every war, aside from the World Wars and thereafter, religion was as much part of the culture, both at war and peace, as were all other cravings, appetites, drives and instincts of the human condition.

But, again, since the word 'religion' refers both to the blood-smeared and steaming stepped pyramids of Mexico, where thousand died under the obsidian knives of painted priests dressed in flayed human skin, and also to the ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta washing the limbs of lepers, it is again like asking whether the sexual impulse has led to more harm than good, without distinguishing between happy marriages and grotesque adulteries.

Mere toting up the happy marriages of CS Lewis and GK Chesterton against the treason of Lancelot, the rape of Lucretia, and the polygamy of Solomon will tell you nothing worth knowing.

No balance can be measured. I would consider my own happy marriage to be of such significance that even if every other expression of the sexual impulse for all of time were tragic and wretched, the balance would, in my judgment, still fall favor of being a sexual rather than an asexual creature.

And since human biology does not allow for asexual humans to exist at all, the question is moot no matter whose judgment is called upon for this answer.

Likewise, if an evil genii offered that all the sacrificial victims of the Aztecs would be saved from the religiously-motivated human sacrifices of their devil worshippers, if in return one leper who was comforted by Mother Teresa would be ignored and damned and die in the gutter with no human hand to touch him, I would refuse the offer with contempt. When a rather shallow newsman saw Mother Teresa laving the limbs of the leper in water, he said 'I would not do that for all the money in the world!'

She replied with a smile that she also would not do it for all the money in the world.

So let us talk no more of judging on balance whether something that is part of human nature is, on the whole, good or bad for human nature.

However, despite all this, the meaningless question can be answered meaningfully, if we look at what is its hidden assumption, explore and answer that.

We are dealing with thing worth more than all the money in the world. That is what the question should be about. If the human soul exists (and rational argument and the testimony of experience firmly affirm that it does) then the question of what is good for man is really a question of what is good for the soul.

Little can be known of that mystery called the soul. But we all know we have one, and we know that we have it on good authority, and buttressed by rational argument, that souls must be indivisible and simple, hence eternal.

This immortality has an immense implication for the question we address. It changes the whole model of the universe.

The least important person you meet tomorrow is more important than every republic, empire, and kingdom, every law and institution, every human work of art or engineering, and every triumph or loss, war or peace, in all human history. The reason is simple and shocking:

The least important person you meet tomorrow is immortal and supernatural. He will be alive forever in the bliss of eternal light or screaming forever in the outer darkness. All these other things are temporary and mortal and will pass away and be forgotten. Between the finite and the infinite there is no ratio. The mortal world and all its works and all its pomp and glamour, all the victories and defeats of history, are not merely lacking in meaning, they are infinitely lacking in meaning. But the soul of the beggar you ignore will outlast the stars and galaxies and the cosmos itself.

So says the true view of the universe. By way of contrast, the atheist view holds that no one you meet tomorrow will outlast the century, and the human race will be replaced by superhumans or subhumans as evolution blindly sponges us away, or catastrophe obliterates us, or entropy and decay rots all human things to nothing. And then all animal life will eventually die, and then the world will eventually die, and then our sun will eventually die, and then our galaxy, the cluster in which our galaxy is found, and the supercluster, and the cosmos.

The hidden assumption of the question, when an atheist asks the question, is that churches and cults last longer than people and therefore human history is to be judged on how peaceful and comfortable religion have made the greatest number of mortal men (all religions, devil-worship as well as divine worship).

But when a Catholic asks the question, he knows that all paganisms, cults, heresies and falsehoods will not outlast Judgment Day, and all men will.

He knows the purpose of pagan religions is to uphold the tyrannous and soul-crushing social order of inhuman, unfree, and cruel civilizations. The Egyptians bowed to the Pharaoh as the son of heaven, as did the Japanese to their Emperor, and the pagan Romans to theirs. Tyrants were divine. The Brahmins are superior to the Untouchables of India based on divine and merciless karma, or fate. Whimsical lawless brutality was god. The cruelties of the world were settled in place by the gods and demigods who founded the cities out of whim, and due to fate, from which there is no escape.

The social order of the pagan worldview is helpless and hopeless, because it is part and parcel of the cosmic order. The demigods who founded Rome, for example, or the Nymph who showed Numa the Twelve Tablets of the law, have no more choice about the inferiority of the slave and commoner than they have about the courses of the stars or the coming twilight of the gods, or the turning of the wheel of the Kali Yuga. All things are fixed; all things are fated; all things are predetermined.

And likewise the self-anointed elite of Soviet Russia or Red China are superior to the proletarians and slaves and unenlightened traitors to the class struggle due to their moral and intellectual superiority.

And this most recent manifestation of the ancient cruelty and hopelessness of paganism, of course, erected the same system of coercion, slavery, and public ritual as their ancient counterparts, except without the myths of gods to give them any glamour or lightness.

Communism is all the sacrifices in the endlessly burning human-eating furnaces of Moloch, without the poetry of Virgil or Homer.

In both the modern and the ancient melancholy and darkness of paganism, the single repeated note is one of hopelessness, and the sacrifice of the individual to the bloodthirsty gods who maintain order.

Every evil done, every lie told, every turn of the screws of the torturer, is done for the same reason: the ends justify the means. Julian the Apostate, last pagan Emperor of Rome, sacrificed a slavegirl to have priests read her entrails to tell if his campaigns in Persia would be successful. Her name is not recorded in history. At Odessa *the Cheka* (Bolshevik secret police) tied enemies of the state to planks and slowly fed them into furnaces. The true numbers of all those killed by the Cheka is not recorded in history. In both cases, the remorseless gods of Olympus or the remorseless material dialectic of class struggle required sacrifices. Pity and compassion and those other weak Christian virtues unknown to pagans old and new never are mentioned.

The purpose of Christianity is to overthrow that social order erected in the mundane and mortal world by means of the power of the kingdom not of this world, which does not play by the rules of his merciless world, and does not accept that the ends justify the means.

We Christians overthrew the iron brutality of Rome with the one weapon no atheist, no pagan, and no worldly man can never understand: the exorbitant excess of love called martyrdom.

Imagine the scene where Jesus Christ, a rebel and the child of a despised and conquered race, beaten and humiliated, tortured and forced to wear a clowning mockery of a regal coronet, is taken before the cynical, educated, powerful and superior Pontius Pilate.

It is nearly impossible even for the most intelligent of modern agnostics to look at the scene with pagan eyes, because modern agnostics have so entirely adopted the Christian worldview that you are unaware of it even during your rebellion against it.

What the pagan sees is this: Christ is one of the Three Stooges. He is not Sancho Panza, the low peasant more cunning and goodhearted than his crazy master. The low class figures in Greek Dramas were not there to inculcate the subversive and Christian message that all men are equally the sons of God and judge on their faith and works. The low class figures in ancient drama were there to show the superiority of the superiors.

Look, for example, at the treatment of Thersites in Homer. When Odysseus beats him with the gold studded rod that served the gathered kings and chiefs as a chairman's gavel during the public debate over the issue of returning Agamemnon's slavegirl to her father to remove a curse, the poet does not expect anyone his pagan audience to have any sympathy with the turnip-headed and loose-tongued Thersites. He is the only figure given a visual description in all of Homer's epic, and it is an absurd one. He is comically ugly. Odysseus was the hero, and the job of pagan heroes is to beat underlings into line, to protect the city, and to burn with the brilliance of battle that awes even the gods, and to die young.

Rescuing damsels in distress is the profession of the chivalrous Christian knight, and he does not take slavegirls as loot for his growing harem of concubines. Then he seeks the Holy Grail, to return light to the darkness of the world, and hope to the helpless.

Let the scoffer say what he will about how well or ill the stoic Myrmidon or the devout Paladin lived up to his ideals or betrayed them, but no scoffing can hide the fact that the ideals are very different, and that the Christian ideals are brighter, cleaner, and finer.

Christ, bruised and torn by the whip, was Thersites, and Pilate was Odysseus. For the Christians to see the scene as once where Christ is king and Pilate a bewildered and pathetic figure, as bruised and battered by the contrary demands of Roman tyranny and Jerusalem mobs as Peter the poor fisherman, is remarkably and unthinkably subversive. Or perhaps a better word is superversive. The Christian view uplifts even the humblest above the greatest.

The pagan view of life is one where the cross is an instrument of torture so disgusting and so humiliating that no contemporary account whatsoever exists detailing how it was used, or what it looked like—the Romans were too ashamed to write it down.

The Christian view flips the universe on its startled head, and the crucifix is turned into a sign of glory at which the demons of hell scream and tremble and the brutal and capricious gods of Olympus, with all their fornications and father-murders, are reduced to babyish images on postcard on Saint Valentine's Day.

The modern atheist cannot argue about the harm and the good done by religion, because he does not know what religion is.

There is no atheistic explanation of religion, or, rather all such attempts at explanation of merely sneers and emotional tirades, lacking the precision of science and the cold clarity of philosophy.

For what possible atheist explanation of religion could there be? Animals have no such thing, and there is no god to breathe a spirit into an animal to make him man, so religion must have evolved in all men equally. But it is not something that could evolve naturally, for it serves no natural purpose, it gathers no food, fends off no predators, discourages the fecundity of animals who mate without marriage rites.

The argument that religion evolved as a social mechanism contradicts itself, since social mores and customs are deliberate, not instinctive, and in any case the clear evidence is that social mores are a response to a religious impulse, not the other way around. In order for this argument to work, we would have to see evidence of a religious and a nonreligious social order, and see the nonreligious one fail due to some innate drawback with atheism and social unity, and confirm that the religious one spread and over-swept

the world. What anthropology shows us instead is that the earliest and most primitive of men, centuries and millennia before some Stone Age Moses wrote their first law or Caveman Jefferson their first Constitution, had burial rites and rituals. Religion is older than society, and so cannot be a byproduct of it. It does not show a single culture controlling all Neolithic men from pole to pole with a single unified religious order.

Atheists from time to time offer other windy theories as to how religion arose and what religion means, but crippled by the foolishness of their starting point, they cannot explain why men of old worshipped demons, because the atheist does not believe the demons exist. It would be like asking an insane marriage counselor who thought your wife was imaginary to explain your love for her, or asking a delusional cop who thought all crimes were imaginary why the frightened store owner paid a protection racket. All they can conclude is that religions are irrational, and this for the same reason why the insane marriage counselor and the delusional cop cannot render any sound advice about crime or marriage: they do not think the subject matter of the discussion exists.

Moreover, thanks in part to modern education, and in part to willful ignorance, the ability to judge the good and bad of history is crippled and perverted. He cannot tell what he is looking at.

When one looks at Christendom, and sees the things that only Christians have ever made or inspired imitative pagans following in Christian footsteps to make, the testament of history is overwhelming.

What we call civilization, everything from the rule of law to the equality of women to the exploration of the globe, the scaling of Mount Everest, industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the signing of the Magna Charter, the American Revolution, and planting a flag on the Moon, was all done by Christians, for Christians, and in the context of Christianity.

No one ever wrote a science fiction novel outside Christendom, or before he first met Christian civilization.

The contributions of the Jews from Karl Marx to Ayn Rand to Maimonides to Spinoza were made possible only by the surrounding Christian society, and were possible only within the surrounding Christian metaphysical, moral and philosophical outlook. The utter lack of any record of Jews living under Muslim rule, or farther afield, making such startling and innovative breakthroughs is sufficient to arouse the suspicion that their culture without ours is insufficient to achieve a growing, modern, industrial, and democratic civilization.

The case for the contributions of medieval Spanish Muslim mathematicians and doctors is even more lopsided and obvious. The Near East fell behind the Christian West in science, in art, in the law and liberty, in wealth and power, because and only because their heretical copy of the Christian

religion did not keep the essentially Christian elements of the worldview which make such progress necessary.

While the faithful Mohammedan retains some elements of the Christian unity and equality of man—for example, all the faithful of all ranks in a mosque pray in the same way and at the same time, and, for another example, charity to the poor is one of the Five Pillars of Islam—on the whole, as all heresies eventually do, it became part of the worldly system of power, part of the social order Christ opposes, and turned into a mechanism to retain the Sultans and Shahs on their thrones, or elevate the Imams to their divans of power.

As far the Far East, the social order of India and China before the coming of the West speaks for itself, and the Mesoamerican Indians and their mass human sacrifices is very nearly the closest thing we have ever had to hell on Earth, up until socialists in Germany, Russia and China excluded or subverted religion to their programs of mass extinctions, mass expropriations, mass exterminations, mass murders, mass slavery.

The question of the impact of Christianity on history is too obvious to bear debating. Western civilization is Christianity. Christianity is Western civilization.

All the desperate attempts to claim that the achievements of, say, the Wright Brothers or the Apollo astronauts were of no greater value than the men of Easter Island denuding their island of trees to build their great tiki idols, thus trapping themselves for generations with no ability to cross the sea, is so foolish that words fail.

Civilization is not without its drawbacks, and surely there are many fine things in primitive life that civilized man has lost, and many vices civilization not only permits, but invents: but modern thinking merely equates civilization with its absence. In effect, modern thinking says zero equals one on the grounds that 0 and 1 are both digits.

Without this modern unwillingness to note the astonishing accomplishments of the West, the question of whether Western civilization has been good for civilization would be a question too obvious to ask.

The accomplishments of the Far East are roughly equal to those of the classical world, and were outstripped handily during the so-called Dark Ages, which was one of the most rapid periods of scientific and cultural progress history has ever seen until the 1950s. It would weary me just to list the inventions and breakthroughs, from the stirrup to the fuller's mill to the abolition of slavery to the scientific method, the subjection of kings to baronial and parliamentary power, and, at the tail end of this so called dark period, the invention of the printing press.

The accomplishments, such as they are, of Near Eastern scholars are all taken from the Christian Roman Empire which they conquered and

destroyed, while falling out among themselves into endless deadly squabbles and wars. The only truly native accomplishment is the creation of the harem and the belly dance, the minaret and the wailing prayer-call, and the poetry of Omar Khayyam, in all its hedonistic bitterness, cynicism, and blank despair.

Despair is what is found outside Christendom.

From the melancholy of Omar Khayyam to the cynical pragmatism of Confucius to the mind-obliterating mysticism of Lao Tzu and the Buddha there is not one ray of hope, and no surety of human happiness. The zealous Muslims of the modern jihad are strapping bombs to their own children in hopes of blowing up Jewish schoolgirls at play. These are acts of stark and terrifying despair.

And the atheist has even less than these heretics, pagans, and bloody-minded cultists. He does not even have a devil to worship. He thinks himself a cunning animal who by accident learned to speak and think, or a machine made of meat.

From all this we can see the answer to the question, both the one that was asked, and the one that was implied.

Whether religion as a whole has been good for humanity is a meaningless question, because religion is the major part of what it means to be human, ergo it is like asking whether being human is good for humanity.

The real question is whether the Christian religion has been good for civilization. The answer is so obvious that it cannot be answered by anyone with even the smallest scintilla of honest learning about all the miseries and hopelessness of history.

All other civilizations outside Christendom are stagnant by design. Ancient China, Ancient Egypt, Ancient India were meant never to change. Even the Republic of Rome changed only by growth through conquest, and that came to a halt after the government devolved into an Imperium. After emperors arise and become divine, the legions were used merely to stop civil wars and tumults. The laws of Rome forbade that sons should enter other trades from their fathers', and in this followed the stagnant path of India with its caste system, Egypt with its ossified theocracy, and China with its Mandarin bureaucracy.

The idea of progress and change for the better, the idea of evolution to higher and finer things, is an idea not found outside the Christian worldview.

History outside Christendom is merely one damned thing after another, a flux of meaningless events, one tragedy after and the next. History within Christendom is a story, and a march of progress from pagan darkness to law and equality, happiness, technical advancement.

However, a far better answer to the question of whether, on the whole, Christianity is good for man exists than mine, and it is meet that I end this column, and this whole debate, on this note:

The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) records the story of King Edwin of Northumberland at the hands of the missionary bishop Paulinus. Edwin called together a meeting of his council of elders, which included his pagan high priest, Coifi, to debate the wisdom of converting to this new faith.

Bishop Paulinus presented the gospel to him, and one of the chief advisors replied with this observation:

“Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thegns and counselors.

“In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a moment of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came.

“Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.”

* * *

Religion and the Verdict of History

By Stephen R. C. Hicks

To evaluate religion’s track record we need to specify our evaluative benchmarks and identify whether we are evaluating religion generically or a particular religion.

A religion is a set of beliefs and practices, and my primary benchmark is this: *Does it foster or hinder healthy and happy living in the natural world?*

All of the many thousands of religions are false, but they are not all false in the same way or to the same degree—so the destructive effects of their falsity come in degrees.

Theme 1: Nature-friendly and Nature-hostile Religions

Immediately we have to divide the religious into those who accept that benchmark and those who reject it. Some religious people believe fundamentally in the goodness of human life in the world, but they make an

intellectual error in believing that the supernatural helps with that project. Others fundamentally despise themselves or the world, and religion is used to rationalize that.

It's the difference—to take one very particular example—between those who believe, as Benjamin Franklin did, that *Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy*—and those who believe that *Alcohol is a demonic tool of Satan*.

The one celebrates the natural world and its pleasures and believes in a benevolent god as a cause—while the other shuns the world out of weakness and guilt and invents a god to reinforce its negativity. Both mistakenly assert that a god exists, but the destructive effects of the more pessimistic religions is much greater.

Theme 2: The Three-way Philosophical Debate

But we can also speak of religion in general and contrast it to non-religious belief systems in general.

Religion is a type of philosophy, one of three basic types—naturalist, supernaturalist, and nihilist. All three types offer answers to the big questions: What is the nature of reality? What is knowledge? What is human nature? What is the good life, both individually and socially?

In broad strokes, the three philosophies answer this way:

The naturalist says, *The meaning of life is to be found in the natural world*. The nihilist says, *The natural world is empty of meaning*. The religious say, *Meaning is to be found beyond the grave*.

The naturalist says, *Human beings are rational animals*. The nihilist says, *Humans are merely meat in motion*. The religious say, *Humans are meat plus a ghost*.

The naturalist says, *Ethics is about the objective requirements of natural living*. The nihilist says, *Ethics is merely about our subjective whims*. The religious say, *Ethics is about obeying the gods' subjective whims*.

The naturalist says, *Knowledge is acquired by evidence and reason*. The nihilist says, *We're all irrational*. The religious say, *Reason is limited or pointless so we should seek mystical revelations or believe on faith*.

And so on.

These three characterizations define the extremes, and many thoughtful people attempt to blend their beliefs into more moderate packages. Whether that can be done successfully is an ongoing matter of debate.

But a key point is that it is always a mistake to characterize the debate as only two-way—e.g., as my debate colleague Mr. Wright does by regularly asking us to choose only between a religious-supernaturalist model that

believes in *something* and an atheist-nihilist model that believes in *nothing*. That false alternative leaves out entirely the atheist-naturalist model.

In my judgment, it is more fruitful intellectually to put the naturalists on one side and *both* the nihilists and the supernaturalist religions on the other.

Nihilism and supernaturalist religion are intimately related. Both look at the natural world and see degradation, seething conflict, and emptiness. The religious person recoils from it—but wants to believe in something positive—and so wills himself into believing the supernatural as a refuge and corrective. Meanwhile the nihilist cannot make himself believe in religion's fairy tales—and so accepts the negativity and meaninglessness.

Note that *both* are opposed fundamentally to the naturalists who affirm the positive value in the world and seek to understand and further it on its own terms.

Theme 3. Religion's Role in Our becoming Conceptual and Principled

Religion does get credit for aiding in human cognitive development.

In the most primitive stages of human life, we live range-of-the-moment and often savagely. But we have developed a powerful capacity to be principled and long-range in our thinking and action, and many religions were early attempts to do so.

The development of medicine is an example. In early times humans would get sick, but they would not understand why and make no consistent attempt to do so. They would suffer and die as an animal suffers and dies.

Some humans then attempted to understand. They grasped the difference between health and disease. They came to believe that health and disease are *effects* of causes. They understood that effects can be changed by influencing their causes. Yes, they would often locate the key causation in a supernatural realm—the will of the gods, hopefully influenced by sacrifices and prayers—and while that is an error, religious medical theories *are* an advance over primitivism because they attempt to understand the world conceptually and in terms of causal principles.

But just as continued human progress required the rejection of the early false religious medical theories, it requires the continued development of naturalist theories in the other areas of investigation—psychology, ethics, cosmology, history, and everything else. Religion is a halfway house between primitivism and the fully-realized intellectual framework needed for full human living.

Theme 4. The Best Religion Ever

Contemporary civilization has already achieved much in the direction of realizing that intellectual framework. Our science and technology are

impressive, as are our (genuinely) liberal politics, economics, and philosophy.

If the first philosophies were religious—as it seems actually to have developed in human history—then the religion that most made possible the development of the naturalistic philosophies deserves credit for having done so.

The best religion ever, accordingly, was the ancient Greek religion, which opened the cognitive space for natural philosophy and science. Why—of the thousands of cultures across the globe and tens of thousands of years of human living—did philosophy begin and flourish in Greek city-states around 600 BCE?

Part of the story involves the worldly Greek religion, with its many gods and goddesses with their *humanistic* strengths and weaknesses, goals and passions. The gods' powers made intelligible the causal order of the natural world. Their limitations made it possible for mortals to question them and not to worship them uncritically. The gods' wisdom, strengths, and beauty gave humans something realistic to aspire to. Much more can be said, but the one religion in history that clearly enabled philosophy and science deserves much credit.

Many other religions, by contrast, deserve blame for positing gods that are mysterious and unknowable and that demand only fear and cowering—and for consistently suppressing questioning and adding loads of undeserved guilt to the human psyche.

A few words about Christianity are relevant here, as it was in a Western Europe that was mostly Christian that modern civilization was born. One of two leading historical positions argues that, in contrast to all other religions, Christianity contains some elements that can support a modern free, scientific, and artistic culture, and that those elements generated the Renaissance and modernity.

A second position argues that Christianity's role was mostly to retard the reintroduction of Greek and Roman ideas. Christianity's leaders tried many times to squash early humanism, but humanism succeeded in earning a place in Western culture. Once established, humanism tamed the Christians, who have been fighting a rearguard battle ever since and engaging in after-the-fact accommodations of humanistic culture.

My view is that the second position is closer to the truth, but that there are elements of the first position that are arguable. A standout feature of some versions of Christian theory, for example, is the unique and infinite value of each individual soul. So one could argue that that germ of individualism eventually sprouted in the early Renaissance and developed into the modern world's robust respect for individuality.

At the same time, the belief in the infinite value of the individual's immortal also supports St. Augustine's influential doctrine of benevolent torture. If one's eternal salvation depends on believing truly, then what matters a few days of bodily agony if being tortured can cause disbelievers to embrace the truth? The consistent use of officially-sanctioned torture across centuries is also part of Christianity's legacy—and that absolutely militates against the respect for individualism embraced by the Renaissance and modernity.

So the best reading of history—with many sub-arguments yet needing to be addressed—is that Christianity did let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, but from *its* perspective that was unfortunate and the development of modern civilization was an unintended consequence.

Theme 5. The Track Record of Atheism

While religion's record is mixed, perhaps it is better overall than the alternatives. My debate colleague, Mr. Wright, characterizes it this way: "The only openly atheist societies in history were socialist or national socialist, run by Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot and the other most atrocious monsters in history."

Definitely they were monsters. But for both varieties of socialism, national and international, the history and philosophy are more complicated.

While the Communists were atheist, the Nazis were pro-Christianity. An affirmation of generic Christianity is in the National Socialists' founding party platform (see its point 24). Goebbels identified the Bible and Jesus's martyrdom as among his top moral influences. Hitler frequently said that he was doing the Lord's work.

Yet when trying to explain the mass killings of the Communists and the Nazis, the important point is this: To do politics well *many* principles and practices must be gotten right. Believing in gods or not is only *one* issue. Believing that humans are by nature *evil* or *good* is another key issue. Believing that people are basically *rational* or *irrational* is another. And believing that humans are primarily *individuals* or members of *collectives* is yet another.

The Nazis and Communists were killers, but not primarily for religious or non-religious reasons. They were killers because they were *collectivists*, and collectivism can be religious or not. Political collectivism brings with it a willingness to use and sacrifice individuals for the good of the group. And if one believes that the collective is embodied in the State, then the State comes to be an object of worship and the collector of sacrifices.

Collectivist religions have killed many throughout history, while more individualist religions have been more likely to adopt live-and-let-live tolerance policies. The same holds for non-religious belief systems.

Theme 6: Looking Forward

The many religions' track records of squashing artists, scientists, and other free-thinkers in economics, politics, and philosophy is terrible. All religions have great stains of immorality upon them, and human decency requires that their apologists acknowledge them.

Yet even now, *in the twenty-first century*: In the fight against AIDS, the Christian Pope tells Africans not to use condoms. Islamists destroy art and historic artifacts. Magical religionists continue to kill women for witchcraft. So we still have humanist work to do.

Meanwhile, advocates of the many religions continue to insist that their conflicting old texts are true and that their leadership is the best authority.

But if there really is a God, he could just show up and say, *Look, guys, here I am. Here is what I meant, and here is why that is the best policy*. He could even use social media to keep us abreast of the latest.

The silence of the gods means that religion is really about *our* hopes and fears and projecting a belief system that supports them. The silence also means that we are on our own—and that it is time that we take full responsibility, happily, for our own destinies. No crutches.

I say *happily* because if there are no gods, then that means *we* have lifted ourselves out of the caves. The achievements of civilization—in the arts and sciences, in technology and philosophy—it was *human beings who did it* and who get the credit.

We *can* be pretty awesome, we have much to build upon, and we have an open-ended future to explore and create.

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