

NIHILISM

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Preface

Nihilism is the end of the line for atheism. That's why atheism isn't worth fighting for. That's misplaced idealism. A dutiful truth for truth's sake sentimentality that makes no sense in a godless universe. Taking a bullet for the universe, the way some high-minded atheists talk, is absurd. Kamikaze atheism just isn't something anyone should take seriously—especially as an atheist!

That doesn't mean truth is unimportant. The paradox, though, is that truth is important in a Christian worldview. It can't be deployed against a worldview by naturalism.

If naturalistic evolution is true, then human beings are like the characters in *Dark City* who have false implanted memories. The characters have beliefs about their past, but their beliefs don't map onto reality.

Likewise, if naturalistic evolution is true, we've been brainwashed to value in altruism, but that's a projection which doesn't map onto reality. Nothing is actually good or bad, right or wrong. It's just how our brains were wired by blind evolution. The valuation is arbitrary. We could just as well be rewired to value cannibalism.

You need to get atheism out of your system. It's not a viable option.

Kamikaze atheism

Varieties of nihilism

There are different kinds of nihilism. Not coincidentally, these are all associated with atheism (or naturalism, to be pedantic).

Don't imagine this is a merely academic discussion. These ideas catch on. They translate into law and public policy, when secular progressives become politically dominant.

I'll be quoting verbatim from scholarly resources. In some cases the writer may disagree with the position he summarizes. But these are philosophical definitions. It's not something I made up.

MORAL NIHILISM

A broader definition of "nihilism" would be "the view that there are no moral facts." "Moral nihilism" is also often associated—though somewhat vaguely—with thoughts about how we should act in the more everyday sphere: as advocating a policy of "anything goes," as holding that with the removal of the moral framework restrictions on our behavior are lifted. It is true that if the error theorist is correct then there are no moral restrictions on our behavior...Camus writes: "If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important." And Sartre declared that "everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to" (1945/1973). Richard Joyce, "Nihilism," **INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ETHICS** (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013)

EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM

This nihilism is associated with the idea that “life has no meaning or purpose”—a realization that may sometimes lead to a loss of motivation and even depression and despair. Existential nihilism crystallized as an intellectual movement in France in the post-war period, associated especially with the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. For Camus, the absurdity of the human predicament emerges from the tension between our realization that we live in a purposeless and indifferent universe and our ceaseless propensity to continue as if our lives and decisions were meaningful. Richard Joyce, “Nihilism,” **INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ETHICS** (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

One straightforward rationale for nihilism is the combination of supernaturalism about what makes life meaningful and atheism about whether God exists. If you believe that God or a soul is necessary for meaning in life, and if you believe that neither exists, then you are a nihilist, someone who denies that life has meaning. Albert Camus is famous for expressing this kind of perspective, suggesting that the lack of an afterlife and of a rational, divinely ordered universe undercuts the possibility of meaning (Camus 1955; cf. Ecclesiastes).

We have a presumptive duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause vast amounts of harm. Extensive evidence is provided to show that human nature has a dark side that leads humans to cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death to other humans and to non-human animals. Some of this harm is mediated

by destruction of the environment. The resultant presumptive duty we have not to create new humans is very rarely if ever defeated. Not all misanthropy is about humans' moral failings. David Benatar, "The Misanthropic Argument for Anti-natalism," S. Hannan, S. Brennan, & R. Vernon, eds. **PERMISSIBLE PROGENY?: THE MORALITY OF PROCREATION AND PARENTING** (Oxford 2015), chap. 1.

Another fresh argument for nihilism is forthcoming from certain defenses of anti-natalism, the view that it is immoral to bring new people into existence because doing so would be a harm to them. There are now a variety of rationales for anti-natalism, but most relevant to debates about whether life is meaningful is probably the following argument from David Benatar (2006, 18–59).

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#Nih>

As an evaluative view in the philosophy of life, nihilism maintains that no lives are, all things considered, worth living. Prominent defenders of the view hold that, even so, it can be all-things-considered better for us to continue living than for us to cease living, thus endorsing a 'soft' nihilism that appears more palatable than its 'hard' counterpart. In support of an intuitive assumption about what nihilism implies, I argue that soft nihilism is incoherent. David Matheson, "The incoherence of soft nihilism," **THINK** 16 (47):127-135 (2017).

EPISTEMIC NIHILISM

Epistemic antirealism/nihilism, as it is termed, is committed to the claim that there are no epistemic facts. Terence Cuneo, **THE NORMATIVE WEB: AN ARGUMENT FOR MORAL REALISM** (Oxford 2007), chap. 4. Cf. Allan Hazlett "Anti-Realism about Epistemic Normativity," **A LUXURY OF THE UNDERSTANDING: ON THE VALUE OF TRUE BELIEF** (Oxford 2013), chap. 9; Alvin Plantinga, "The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism," **WHERE THE CONFLICT REALLY LIES: SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND NATURALISM** (Oxford 2011), chap. 10.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/#SKE>

Accessorizing atheism

Randal Rauser says:

A substance dualist might argue for their view that the human agent is a soul by arguing that we have free will and free will requires a non-physical agent to intervene in the chain of material causes.

<http://randalrauser.com/2011/01/im-good-enough-im-smart-enough-and-doggone-it-who-cares-if-people-like-me/>

This misses the point in two key respects:

i) The issue isn't physicalism v. dualism, per se. The issue is what underwrites the end-result.

What does substance dualism amount to in atheism? A human being is still the byproduct of a mindless process.

To take a comparison, suppose I'm having a business lunch. In the middle of lunch the waiter passes me a note which says, "Call home."

I will leave the table and call home.

Suppose I'm playing a game of scrabble, and on one throw the letters spell "Call home."

I won't call home. I attach no significance to that outcome.

What's the difference? You have the same result, but the process makes all the difference. Although the sentences are identical and, in that respect, equally meaningful, the

note is a message whereas the scrabble pattern is not. The scrabble sentence is accidentally or coincidentally meaningful. It's not a genuine message or communication. In that respect, it's no different than gibberish. The result of random chance.

Likewise, unless human beings are the product of a wise Creator, human life doesn't have the same value. It has no inherent dignity.

ii) Randal also disregards the issue of the afterlife. If human beings don't survive the grave, then that, too, radically affects the value of life.

Take one of those European villages that hasn't changed very much in 800 years. Folks have been living in the same cottages and townhouses for 800 years. But while the buildings are the same, the residents are not. Every 100 years, give or take, you have a total replacement rate.

Not only does this apply to individuals, but to an entire set of relationships. Parents, grandparents, children, spouses, siblings, lifelong friends—and even their pets. When they all die, that entire cumulative network of mutual affections and shared memories dies with them. Lost forever. A total loss to all parties concerned.

That's the standard atheistic narrative. And if you take that to heart, it makes a huge difference to your outlook on life.

Rauser doesn't begin to appreciate the unique and all-important value of the Christian vision. For him it's just a nice accessory. A dispensable add-on which enhances the value of life, but isn't fundamental to the value of life.

Life and death in the sandbox



There are many reasons why people hold on to their beliefs in supernatural things. Many of these reasons, I think, are psychological ones—people hold on to supernatural beliefs because not having them would be psychologically unacceptable in some way (or in many ways). In other words, they have—or think they have—certain psychological needs that could not be met if they did not hold on to some sort of supernatural belief. For instance, my stepmother has told me multiple times that she has to believe in God because she has to believe that she will see her dead parents again. A more extreme example here is the tendency for people to think that, without belief in the supernatural, they would not be able to have any hope whatsoever. Nonbelief, they think, is "a recipe for despair." This view of nonbelief probably stems from the belief that belief in God, or at least belief in some supernatural power, is the source or foundation of hope. For if this is believed, then the rejection of the supernatural amounts to the rejection of the source or foundation of hope, which makes hope impossible and despair the only appropriate reaction.

With this working conception of hope in place, I can now turn to the idea that nonbelief is a recipe for despair. I imagine that this idea is due, at least in part, to the fact that there is indeed no room for certain hopes without some sort of spiritual or supernatural belief to prop them up. For instance, if no belief about spiritual realms or entities is true, then there can be (a) no immortality of any kind (and thus no evil-free afterlife in Heaven, and no reunion with dead friends or loved ones) and (b) no guarantee that justice will ultimately prevail. If no belief about spiritual realms or entities is true, then death permanently ends our conscious experience—our own as well as that of our friends and loved ones. So even if we desire to live forever in Heaven or elsewhere, or to see our deceased friends and loved ones again, these are not live possibilities for nonbelievers. And if no belief about spiritual realms or entities is true, then there is also no supernatural figure or power to ensure that justice will ultimately prevail. So although we want to be sure that justice will prevail, this too is simply not a live option for nonbelievers. Consequently, condition (3) cannot be met for any of these desired outcomes, and thus nonbelievers cannot have any kind of hope in regard to them.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that there is no room whatsoever for hope if one holds a naturalistic worldview. For no matter how important the "lost" hopes might be, their exclusion does not entail the exclusion of all hope, just like the exclusion of 18-wheelers from the average residential garage does not entail the exclusion of all motor vehicles. In fact, there is plenty of room for both confident and fairly reasonable hopes on a naturalistic worldview: a nonbeliever can confidently or reasonably hope that he

or she will get that dream job, be admitted to a good doctoral program, make a positive impact on the lives of others or the community, recover from setbacks, find true love, live a long and fruitful life, and so on. When it comes to these sorts of things, nonbelievers are just as entitled to confidently or reasonably hope for them as believers in the supernatural are; for such things are definitely not desperately improbable in a naturalistic world and, in many cases, they warrant confidence in their realization. Therefore, it is patently false that nonbelief is a recipe for despair.

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/ryan_stringer/hope.html

Can atheism lay a foundation for hope? Take “making a positive impact on the lives of others or the community, recover from setbacks, finding true love, living a long and fruitful life.”

But if atheism is true, then we’re just sand people. What does a sandman “making a positive impact” on the lives of other sandmen amount to? What does the “fruitful life” of a sandman amount to?

Every generation is an Etch A Sketch generation. The passage of time turns us upside down and shake us up, reducing us to a pile of sand. Then the process begins all over again. A new generation of sand people. We live in the sandbox until the passage of time turns us back into heaps of sand.

Yes, you can fall in love with a sand woman, and you can father sand children. But the sand is continuously recycled.

Where's the hope in that? Does life inside the sandbox lay a foundation for hope? Hope is forward-leaning. Future-oriented. But what's your future in the sandbox?

Suppose an outsider walks by the sandbox every year. Every year he sees a new set of sand people as he passes by. New sand families where last year's sand families used to be. A new sand community where last year's community used to be.

It doesn't matter who existed or never existed. It doesn't matter in what order the sand people appear or pass away.

Nothing lasts. Nothing endures.

"Life's a bitch, and then you die"

Phil and I have already lived more than half of our lives. Life on earth faces the same dismal prospect...When you die, you're not going to be surprised, because you're going to be completely dead...Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear -- and these are basically Darwin's views. There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans, either. What an unintelligible idea.

Life may have no ultimate meaning, but I sure think it can have lots of proximate meaning...Since we know that we are not going to live after we die, there is no reward for suffering in this world. You live and you die. I've seen bumper stickers (very sexist ones, actually) that say "Life's a bitch, and then you die." Well, whatever life is, you're going to die.

<http://www.arn.org/docs/orpages/or161/161main.htm>

Many atheists make similar statements, although Provine is more austere than most. That's what they are stuck with.

What about proximate meaning without ultimate meaning? In a sense, that's a valid distinction. So let's play along with that.

There are movies—I don't have any particular movie in mind—where you have a rich hunter. He used to be a big game hunter, but he got bored with that. He's bagged all the big game. Since, moreover, humans are smarter than

animals, it doesn't take that much to outwit the quarry, so that's not terribly challenging.

Being rich, he takes it to the next level. He has his goons abduct young men, men in their physical prime (upper teens and twenties), preferably with survival skills. He has them brought to his remote compound in South America. There he will hunt humans. They will be more challenging quarry than animals.

He may give them tools or primitive weapons. Of course, he will be better armed than they. He doesn't want the sport to be *that* challenging! It's not a fair fight. He retains the advantage. But it's exhilarating.

He's an atheist. His life has no ultimate meaning. But hunting down humans for sport gives his life proximate meaning. A fairly stimulating way to pass the time. More interesting than gin rummy.

From a secular standpoint, there's nothing wrong with that.

On the Beach

I'm going to comment on a post by apostate Jeff Lowder. It's a mock dialogue between an atheist and Christian on the argument from evil, interspersed with Jeff's running commentary. Let's cut the dead wood and sample the core argument:

Natty: Let's take the hypothesis of indifference (HI), which says that nothing in our universe is the result of good or evil supernatural beings acting from outside our universe. Either there are no supernatural beings or, if they do exist, they are indifferent to our suffering.

Christi: Why does HI explain facts about evil and suffering much better than theism does?

Natty: To be precise, HI doesn't predict facts about evil and suffering, in part because HI doesn't even predict the existence of conscious or sentient beings capable of suffering. But HI also doesn't predict the non-existence of evil and suffering. That's just the kind of hypothesis HI is.

In contrast, theism predicts the non-existence of at least certain kinds of evil and suffering. So you could say that HI 'negative explains' facts about those kinds of evil and suffering much better than theism, in the sense that theism predicts the non-existence of those facts whereas HI makes no such prediction at all.

Christi: I'm not so sure I would agree with you about what you call "facts about those kinds of evil and suffering," but let's ignore that for now. Your argument presupposes that evil and suffering are, well, evil. But

you're a naturalist. How can you call anything "evil"? And if you can't call anything "evil," then how could facts about evil and suffering be any evidence against God's existence?

Natty: By itself, naturalism doesn't say that certain things like rape, murder, and theft are evil. (Notice also, however, that it doesn't say that those things are good.) That's just not what naturalism is about. All naturalism says is that there are no supernatural beings.

Natty: True, but the relevant issue is not whether a universal consensus exists, but (1) whether naturalists can consistently believe in objective moral good and evil, and (2) whether the answer to (1) even matters. I do believe there is objective moral good and evil and I think that's consistent with my naturalism. It's hard to see how a belief about morality could be inconsistent with another belief (naturalism) which says nothing about morality. But let that pass. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that naturalism entails there is no objective moral good and evil. Even then, you haven't given a good reason to reject the argument from evil, since that argument compares theism and HI, not theism and naturalism. But to be charitable, let's pretend that HI says there is no objective moral good or evil. (It doesn't say that, but let's pretend it does.)

Christi: Okay.

Natty: The argument from evil attempts to show that some fact about 'evil' (whether it be literal evil or some non-normative concept like pain or suffering) somehow undermines a theistic worldview. We're assuming, for the sake of argument, that HI entails there is no

objective moral good and evil ("nihilism"). How, then, is that supposed to affect the argument?

Natty: Agreed. But this isn't relevant to evidential arguments from evil, since such arguments don't require that "bad stuff" be bad in an objective moral sense. All such arguments require is that "bad stuff" happens, which it does. The upshot, then, is that even if HI did entail nihilism, that would do nothing to undermine evidential arguments from evil.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/09/26/the-irrelevance-of-naturalistic-metaethics-to-arguments-from-evil-against-gods-existence/>

When an atheist constructs a mock dialogue between an atheist and a Christian, there's not much suspense concerning which side will win the argument. I wasn't holding my breath. Even so, Jeff's argument is a conspicuous failure:

i) A key premise of the argument is that "theism predicts the nonexistence of at least certain kinds of evil and suffering."

a) To begin with, mere theism doesn't predict for the nonexistence of evil. In principle, mere theism is consistent with a malevolent god. So Jeff is tacitly defining "theism" to include divine benevolence.

Jeff has an odd habit of using generic "theism" when he really means Christian theism, or something analogous.

b) But even with that caveat, notice that he simply asserts that "theism predicts the nonexistence of at least certain kinds of evil and suffering." He offers no supporting

argument for that claim, even though it's a key premise of the argument.

c) In addition, the claim is vitiated by equivocation. On his own definition, his argument must show that the world contains the kinds of evil whose nonexistence theism (alleged) predicts. The fact (if it is a fact) that the world contains evil is insufficient to prove his point, for his claim is more specific. It is not enough for the world to contain evil; rather, it must contain "certain kinds of evil and suffering" whose nonexistence theism (allegedly) predicts. So he needs a supporting argument to show that the world contains the pertinent kinds of evil. Not just any kind of evil (or evils) will do.

So his argument fails on two counts:

d) He fails to show that theism predicts for the nonexistence of certain kinds of evils

e) Even assuming (d), he fails to show that the world contains the kinds of evils in question.

ii) In addition, he says evidential arguments from evil don't require that "bad stuff" be bad in an objective moral sense. All such arguments require is that "bad stuff" happens, which it does.

That, however, is yet another assertion in search of an argument. He is, in effect, claiming that theism predicts the nonexistence of "bad stuff" that isn't bad in an objective moral sense. But what reason is there to accept that claim?

iii) Then he says "All naturalism says is that there are no supernatural beings...It's hard to see how a belief about

morality could be inconsistent with another belief (naturalism) which says nothing about morality."

At the risk of stating the obvious, the question is whether God's nonexistence has implications for moral realism. In fact, many prominent secular philosophers admit that atheism leads to moral relativism, nihilism, or fictionalism.

To claim that naturalism says nothing about morality is intellectually nearsighted. A proposition which explicitly negates one thing may implicitly negate another.

iv) Finally, he says nihilism is irrelevant to the argument from evil.

That's a typical blindspot on the part of atheists. They treat moral and existential nihilism as a throwaway concession. "Let's grant that atheism entails nihilism. But that doesn't undermine the argument from evil. So having granted the nihilistic implications of atheism, let's get back to the business of constructing Bayesian arguments from evil.

Atheists like Jeff act as if nihilism is a red herring. But that misses the point. Atheism generates a dilemma: it's a losing proposition if false, but it's a losing proposition if true.

Suppose I'm 25. I go to the doctor complaining of back pain. He runs some tests and schedules me to return in a week. We then have the following conversation:

Physician: Well, Steve, I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?

Steve: I guess the good news.

Physician: On average, men your age have another 50 years ahead of you. Statistically, you have a high likelihood of living past 70.

Steve: That's great, Doc! So what's the bad news.

Physician: You have lymphatic cancer, so you will be dead in six months.

Now, the fact that this patient has lymphatic cancer doesn't invalidate the actuarial charts. It does, however, moot their relevance for *him*.

To take another comparison, consider the film *On the Beach*. In that movie, life in the northern hemisphere was annihilated by thermonuclear strikes and counterstrikes between Russia and the US. But the Aussies temporarily survived, because their country didn't take a direct hit.

However, they are doomed, for radioactive fallout will overtake Australia in about 5 months. The question, then, is what do you do with your remaining time when you know you soon will be dead? Does that make life more meaningful or less meaningful? Does civil order break down? Or do people continue going to work because they have nothing better to do with their time, and that structures their lives?

Jeff is like one of the doomed Aussies. He's a global warming activist. He won't let the impending demise of the human race deflect attention away from the cause. That's a distraction.

You see, the imminent extinction of the human race does nothing to falsify the evidence for global warming. Therefore, Jeff cycles to work every day to finalize his 10-year plan to counteract global warming. If you hope to have

a world to leave our kids and grandkids, you need to get ahead of this environmental crisis.

Likewise, he waters the lawn every day when he returns home. Trims the shrubs and pulls the dandelions.

Now, in a sense his position is strictly logical. The evidence for global warming is logically independent of evidence that the human race will cease to exist in 5 months.

However, the fate of the human race has a direct bearing on the relevance of his project. By the same token, why continue watering grass when the arrival of radioactive dust-clouds will permanently deaden the flora?

Atheists like Jeff suffer from such tunnel vision. If atheism entails moral and existential nihilism, then that's a lost cause—even if it were true.

The point is not that nihilism necessarily falsifies the argument from evil. You might be able to rehabilitate an internal argument from evil, assuming nihilism is true.

But even if it's not logically germane, it is existentially germane. If, according to atheism, human life has no objective value, then why keep smashing your car into that blind alley? Why hit the wall, reverse, then hit it again and again?

Would it not be more reasonable to say it's a position that disqualifies itself, and pursue the prospects of an alternative which, if true, is more promising? Why give atheism any further consideration once you realize it leads to moral and existential nihilism?

Apostates like Jeff have this lingering sense of duty. He's like a civil engineer who keeps the traffic lights operational after the city was abandoned decades ago. The streets are deserted, but the traffic lights still work. Most atheists suffer from terminal silliness. The value of their efforts is mooted by their conclusion. If they were reasonable, they'd begin with their conclusion, then give up, or explore something worthwhile instead.

Wittgenstein and the Cambridge spy-circle

Recently I was wondering about the potential connection between Wittgenstein and the Cambridge spy-ring. I'm not the first person to suggest it. Reviewing Cornish's controversial book, Antony Flew said:

Chapter 2 concerns "The Spies of Trinity" (College, Cambridge). Mr Cornish opens by pressing a question never previously asked: "What is the explanation for the fact that Wittgenstein was in 1935 offered the Chair of Philosophy in the University of Kazan?" An explanation is needed since Wittgenstein was very far from being a Marxist philosopher. And the Great Terror, which had been signalled by the assassination of S.M. Kirov in late 1934, was during 1935 in full swing. Mr Cornish contends that the reason why the government of the USSR treated Wittgenstein with such peculiar generosity was that he had been the recruiter of all the Cambridge spies.

The question whether or not this hypothesis is true or false can be definitively settled only if and when the relevant Soviet archives are examined. But I am myself as confident as without such knock-down decisive verification it is possible to be that Mr Cornish is right. For people who during the crucial years between Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge in 1929 and that 1935 offer were attending his classes and/or enjoying other personal contacts with him have given me accounts both of the extraordinary and overwhelming force of Wittgenstein's personality and of the absoluteness in those years of his Stalinist commitment.

<http://www.seangabb.co.uk/freelife/flhtm/fl32few.htm>

My theory is different. Is there a homosexual connection? Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Anthony Blunt were homosexual. So was Wittgenstein. Indeed, they were part of a homosexual subculture at Cambridge that also included John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, and Alan Turing.

I'm not suggesting Wittgenstein was a spy or KGB recruiter, although that's possible, I suppose. But you have several mutually reinforcing elements in play.

The Cambridge Apostles and Bloomsbury Circle reveled in a sense of intellectual superiority and contempt for average men and women. Both cultivated a libertine lifestyle and attitude. Homosexuality fostered sense of alienation from the general culture. Finally, atheism and homosexuality both foster a carpe diem attitude. Youth is fleeting. There is no afterlife.

It becomes a question of sharing a common outlook on life. All you have are friendships. No sense of solidarity with humanity in general. Or the wellbeing of future generations. So your ultimate loyalties will be subversive.

Atheism and existential nihilism

I'll comment on a post by Jeff Lowder:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/07/09/naturalism-theism-and-the-meaning-of-life/>

Jeff's analysis is dependent on Erik J. Wielenberg's **VALUE AND VIRTUE IN A GODLESS UNIVERSE**.

intrinsically meaningful life: a life has intrinsic meaning if the life is good for the person who lives it overall.

Take the head of a Latin American drug cartel. He enjoys the best of everything. Sexy women, gourmet food, yachts, mansions, sports cars, &c.

He has business rivals murdered. He has their family members murdered as a deterrent. He bribes judges and police. Those who can't be bribed he has tortured and murdered.

It's a very good life for him. He enjoys the perks. In fact, due to his sadistic streak, he even enjoys the vicious policies necessary to sustain it.

Doesn't that meet Jeff's definition?

If Jeff objects that it isn't "good" in the appropriate sense, does Jeff have a noncircular definition of "good"?

intrinsic value: something is intrinsically valuable if the thing's value is inherent to the thing's own properties, as opposed to its value being derived from the properties of another thing.

extrinsic value: something is extrinsically valuable if the thing's value is derived from the value of another thing.

Is it that cut-and-dried? Take a facsimile of Da Vinci's The Virgin and Child with St. Anne.

In one respect, the reproduction is valuable in its own right. If the original was destroyed, the reproduction would still be valuable. In that regard, the reproduction has a value independent of the original.

But in another respect, its value derives from its correspondence to the original—as an accurate reproduction of the original. So its value is, in that regard, relational. If the original is valuable, and the reproduction closely resembles to the original, then the reproduction is valuable.

By the same token, the original is a reflection of Da Vinci's artistic vision. A concrete expression of his visual idea. Although the painting has properties that make it precious in its own right, there's another sense in which its value is derivative. It derives from the mind of the artist. If it was destroyed, Da Vinci could, in principle, produce another original from memory. The painting is a concrete representation of his mental image.

First, if, as I think, life has intrinsic value, its intrinsic value does not derive from God's existence. This follows from the definition of intrinsic value: if life is intrinsically valuable, its value lies in its own intrinsic

properties, not the properties of God (such as God's valuing life). Second, if value realism is true, then it seems highly plausible that life is objectively intrinsically valuable and, again, this value doesn't come from God.

i) That suffers from some of the equivocations I just noted.

ii) In addition, it doesn't show that life has intrinsic value in a godless universe. At best, it attempts to show that whether or not life has intrinsic value is irrespective of God's existence.

iii) I, for one, am not arguing that life has value because God values it. To recur to my illustration, Da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* isn't valuable because Da Vinci values it.

iv) Let's take a different comparison. A father played football in junior high and high school. He has nostalgic memories of his experience. He wants to give his son an opportunity to share the same enjoyment.

He spends time alone with his son. Takes his son places. Takes his son to a playground where he can teach him the basics of football. It's one way of expressing affection for his son. And his son, in turn, loves doing things with his father. That's an emotional bond.

But from a secular standpoint, is that good? From the standpoint of naturalistic evolution, paternal love is instinctual. Filial love is instinctual. Evolutionary psychology has brainwashed us to feel that's meaningful. To feel that's good.

And yet, from a secular standpoint, that's an illusion. There's nothing objectively good about it. For one thing, the evolutionary process is mindless and amoral. There's nothing benevolent about naturalistic evolution. Nothing intentional about naturalistic evolution.

Natural selection favors behavior that contributes to reproductive fitness. That's by process of elimination. Adaptive behavior serves no purpose. Evolution is blind. Rather, that's an incidental outcome. Organisms with certain traits survive and thrive.

In addition, the instinct is arbitrary. Evolutionary psychology could just as well brainwash us to have very different instincts.

In some species, the mother cannibalizes the runt of the litter. Or his siblings cause him to die of malnutrition by squeezing him out at nursing time. Lions kill the cubs of a rival male. Drakes rape hens. Ever see ducks at mating season?

In evolutionary psychology, there's no underlying good to back up our sense of good. No reason it should be that way. There's just the groundless sense of good. Although we have an instinctual sense of good, once we begin to reflect on our evolutionary programming, we realize that our sense of good is delusive. We've been manipulated by an evolutionary process. Yet evolution isn't good or bad. It simply *is*.

Oblivion

I'll make another comment on Jeff's post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/07/09/naturalism-theism-and-the-meaning-of-life/>

1. A basic problem with his post is that he barely engages the issue of oblivion. Drawing distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic value is a separate issue.

Most atheists believe that brain death entails the irreversible loss of consciousness. The extinction of personality.

I'm not suggesting that immortality is a sufficient condition for a meaningful life. The question, rather, is whether immortality is a necessary condition for a meaningful life.

It's possible to take an Epicurean view of death, where death is not a deprivation, based on the alleged symmetry between nonexistence before conception and nonexistence after death.

It is, however, arguable, that if we cease to exist when we die, that's the most drastic deprivation imaginable. We lose everything at one stroke. We lose the present. We lose the future. We lose the past. We lose hope and memory, love and happiness.

The question is whether human life can be meaningful if death zeros out our existence. That's not merely a Christian view of oblivion. Rather, that's an intellectually serious issue

for atheists. Not something they can just wave aside with hortatory rhetoric.

2. For several reasons, I think many atheists wax impatient about the charge of existential nihilism:

i) Most atheists aren't intellectuals. Most atheists aren't deep thinkers. In addition, some people are temperamentally upbeat. It takes an intellectual effort for them to consider the despairing consequences of their position.

ii) Atheists have a disincentive to give existential nihilism much consideration. Because they don't believe in the afterlife, they think it's pointless to obsess about something we have no control over. It would be a lot better if we didn't pass into oblivion at the moment of death, but since that's the reality of our situation, there's no point despairing over that fact. Better to ignore it. Make the best of the hand you've been dealt.

But there are basic problems with that response:

iii) If atheism makes life meaningless, then you can't make the best of it. There is no good to salvage from that prospect. That superficial response reflects a failure to come to terms with the grim implications of existential nihilism.

iv) It's a mistake to duck the depressing consequences of atheism. If atheism entails moral nihilism, then that's a powerful reason to reexamine your commitment to atheism. Atheists cling to atheism with pigheaded pride, but that's irrational. You have nothing to lose by abandoning atheism if it nullifies the value of your own life, as well as the lives of your loved ones. By avoiding the bleak consequences of atheism, the atheist has no overriding incentive to question

his toxic belief. He needs to appreciate the unredeemable badness of atheism to motivate a change of heart. Once you know it's poisonous, why keep injecting toxins into your veins? How is that rational? If atheism isn't good for you, if atheism *can't* be good for you, then jettison your virulent atheism and consider something more promising.

3. From a secular perspective, what advantage does a dead atheist have over a dead Christian? If atheism is true, then when you're dead, it makes no difference to you if your corpse is a Christian corpse or atheist corpse.

And if living a fantasy makes you happier, why not live a fantasy? In a godless universe, no one can say it's wrong for me to live a fantasy. What I do with my little life is up to me.

The death of God

1. In his recent book, **THE AGE OF ATHEISTS: HOW WE HAVE SOUGHT TO LIVE SINCE THE DEATH OF GOD** (Simon and Schuster, 2014), Peter Watson, himself an atheist, endeavors to illustrate how it's possible for atheists to lead meaningful lives.

2. Watson's analysis is focused on philosophers, poets, playwrights, and novelists. One oversight is his failure to note the way in which music, with its unique emotional power, can be a persuasive medium to propagandize atheism, viz. Berlioz, Wagner, Debussy, Ravel.

Wagner was influenced by Feuerbach and Schopenhauer. Not to mention the tangled relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche. Another example is where a secular composer (Debussy) sets to music the text (*Les fleurs du mal*) of a secular poet (Baudelaire).

3. In another oversight, one common thread which Watson fails to note is the number of artists who were both homosexual (or bisexual) and atheistic, viz. E. M. Forster, Gide, Keynes, Henry James, Jean Cocteau, Thomas Mann, Proust, Poulenc, Santayana, Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thompson, Oscar Wilde, Wittgenstein, Woolf. There's a natural affinity between homosexuality and atheism inasmuch as the amorality of atheism liberates the homosexual. Put another way, it's not surprising that homosexuals are antagonistic to traditional Christian ethics, and the religion that sponsors traditional Christian ethics: it condemns their lifestyle.

Of course, the same could be said for heterosexual libertines, viz. Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells, D. H.

Lawrence, Edmund Wilson, Hemingway, Yeats, Sartre, Camus. Indeed, the Bloomsbury Group was notorious for its sexual libertinism, be it straight or gay. As Dorothy Parker quipped, the Bloomsbury Group "lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles".

4. In yet another oversight, there's the connection between Jews and atheism, viz. Freud, Kafka, Proust, Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein. This reflects the plight of the European Jew. Once Jews were freed from the ghetto, they no longer had that artificial solidarity. Unmoored from their religious roots, they had to navigate in a nominally Christian, antisemitic environment. Their hereditary religious identity became self-alienating, leaving many spiritually estranged.

5. Ironically, Watson's documentation sabotages his thesis that atheists and can and should lead meaningful lives. That's because, in so many of his examples, the artists and their fictional characters are abjectly miserable, and that's directly connected to their acute consciousness of living in a godless universe. To quote a few examples:

As he [James Joyce] expressed himself to Arthur Power...In realism you get down to the facts on which the world is based; that sudden reality which smashes romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable misconceived idea. In fact, you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to the fact, as primitive man had to, we would be better off. That is what we are made for. Nature is quite unromantic (264).

Valéry felt that disappointment "inevitably" arose in all earthly experiences because "they are never quite adequate to what the self might hope to derive from them" (161).

In all of his later plays the dominant theme is the protagonist's search for a moral order *within* him- or herself, to counter the "cosmic emptiness" and the chaos around him or her. For this Ibsen there is no order and no God—except insofar as his characters conceive of him...His later plays are inevitably dramas of "spiritual distress," describing his character's search for consolation in the shadow of death and their attempts to manufacture some form of Paradise here and now. "Redemption from cosmic nothingness, from meaninglessness—this is the nature of the Romantic quest which Ibsen's people share with those of Byron and Stendhal.

Hardly any of the main characters in Ibsen's later plays fail to conduct themselves on the basis of a *deus absconditus* (a hidden God) or lead lives that are not governed by that awareness. These characters are either pagan acolytes of Dionysus or self-declared apostates, defrocked priests or freethinkers; they are atheist rebels or agnostics. In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda dreams for being a free spirit, "irradiated by the orgiastic religion of ancient Greece"...And in *Little Eyolf*, "Allmer's predicament seems the paradigm of the romantic dilemma in Ibsen's drama, which, to state in its simplest and crudest terms, is to be trapped between a traumatic sense of existence as process, change and death in a world devoid of consistent value, and a longing for a lost world of static hierarchies where death has no dominion. And in order to resolve this dilemma, the atheist/agnostic/apostate will fashion out of the raw material existence his analogue of that lost Eden—a Symbolic Paradise which promises eternal life, and which he seeks to possess, not as *metaphor* but as *fact* (92-93).

This is highlighted and countered in the plays not just by the lurking presence of death (often in the form of terminal illness—syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer) but also in the fact that those who die are the last of their line: this is not just death, but extinction. In a famous article, "Symbols of Eternity: The Victorian Escape from Time," Jerome Buckley grouped Ibsen with Coleridge, Rossetti, Wordsworth, Pater and William Morris in their attempts to "fashion worlds of artifice beyond the reach of change...What Ibsen's plays explore are the pain and tragedy almost inevitably involved in trying to create something of lasting value amid the flux and ceaseless flow of change, the experimental nature of life and reality (93-94).

After Eyolf, the crippled and thus half-unwanted son, is drowned, lured into the sea by the Rat-Wife, Alfred and his wife, Rita, resolve to do more for the poor children in their area. To help these children in a way they never helped their own infirm and less-than-perfect child brings them together in a way they have not been together before. The value they now see in their lives—to help the children—is an absolute value, in *this* world, the small world that is theirs, that surrounds them (95).

"The characters in [Henry] James's novels seem to pay little heed to articulated religious belief. Indeed, they often seem to inhabit a moral world in which absolute measures of value such as those associated with God are no longer available" (132).

For James, shared fictions take the place of more traditional religious beliefs...whether the protagonist will tell a "necessary lie" in order to maintain the

illusion in which a community would prefer to live"...We can act *as if* there were a God. In other words, faced with a world without God and at the same time an ostensible moral base deriving from God, if we are to live together we must maintain fictions—even if, on occasion, they are lies—if they oil the wheels of the community to which we wish to belong..."In the fallen world of James's novels, the shared fiction seems to be the only remnant of faith that can allow James's characters to live together. The problem for James, his characters, and his readers is that these shared fictions can hardly be distinguished from lies"...James's characters, especially in *The Golden Bowl*, are both conscious of evil and aware of the absence of supernatural intervention in the modern world (133-34).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, places the poet centrally in the death-of-God narrative at least in France...All the poets of the mid-century (in France, that is) were unbelievers, he says, though not without a nostalgia "for the reassuring symmetry of a God-ordered universe"... Sartre therefore concluded that poets, more than anyone else, are "God's orphans," and even here Mallarmé stood out because his mother had died when he was five and his sister when he was fifteen, so that they "fused" together into a single absence—"absence" being the crucial term..a "commanding absence," or a "hovering absence"...For Mallarmé, says Sartre, "his mother never stops dying," and it left a "pathological gap in his "being-in-the-world." This was important for Sartre, who saw Mallarmé as the herald of the twentieth century and someone who "more profoundly than Nietzsche, experienced the death of God" (148-49).

"The most tragic thing about the war [WWI] was not that it made so many dead men, but that it destroyed the tragedy of death. Not only did the young suffer in the war, but so did every abstraction that would have sustained and given dignity to their suffering"...And, as Edmund Wilson noted about Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned*: "The hero and heroine are strange creatures without purpose or method, who give themselves up to wild debaucheries and do not, from the beginning to end of the book, perform a single serious act: but you somehow get the impression that, in spite of their madness, they are the most rational people...in such a civilization, the sanest and most credible thing is to live for the jazz of the moment... There was [Idema] said, an "extraordinary increase" in neurosis, in divorce, in sexual and emotional conflict, which was reflected in both the literature of the time [the Twenties] and in the personal lives of the authors. Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* was originally to be called *No God* (240-41).

What [Eugene O'Neil] is saying is that there *is* no reality; there are no firm values no ultimate meanings, so all of us need our pipe dreams and illusions (our fictions, if you like)...and that brings with it the necessity of the "life-lie, the idea that a man cannot live without illusions...men's lives "are without any meaning whatever, human life is a silly disappointment, a liar's promise, a daily appointment with peace and happiness in which we wait day after day, hoping against hope (252, 254).

Elsewhere, one brother says to the other, "I love you much more than I hate you"... (253)...The love-hate within a family, the closeness-distance, the loneliness within a togetherness, the guilt and need for

forgiveness, the knowing and not knowing a loved one, the bewilderment in the face of a mysterious determinism—this is the human condition...they are sharing the death of hope...Families, for O'Neill, are full of private spaces, secrets and concealments in which, despite all, understanding and forgiveness must be found..as the site where our illusions cannot be maintained because fellow family members know too much, were excuses can never be offered or accepted as explanations (253,255-6).

6. Atheism leads to existential nihilism along at least two different paths:

i) The problem of mortality. How things end really does make a difference to how we evaluate what went before. Suppose an accountant for the mob embezzles his employer, then skips town. For a time he lives well. One day takes his family on a picnic. It's a glorious summer day. But he can see a car shadowing him in the rearview mirror. The mob tracked him down.

In a park, by the lake, everything is outwardly idyllic. His wife and kids are oblivious to the fateful denouement. All the time, he can see the hit-man's car in the parking lot, just waiting for him. When the picnic is over, and he must return to the parking lot, he knows ahead of time that he will be abducted, taken to a remote location, and shot in the head. That advance knowledge casts a wee bit of a pall over the proceedings. He can't be happy foreknowing how the story ends.

ii) Atheism is like the characters in *Dark City*. They have false memories, implanted by aliens. That gives them an ersatz sense of community and rootedness. They imagine they have a history with each other, as friends, lovers, spouses. Fond childhood recollections. But some of them

come to suspect that their identity is an illusion. Their memories are delusive.

Likewise, according to naturalistic evolution, we've been brainwashed to be altruistic. But like false memories, once you realize that the significance you attach to things is conditioned and arbitrary, there's nothing to fall back on. Life was a cheat.

7. Atheism has a silver lining. The bleak backdrop of atheism intensifies the value of Christian hope. When honest atheists, by their own words and deeds, live in despair, they bear witness to the irreplaceable value of the Gospel. Ironically, if everyone was Christian, we'd fail to fully appreciate the surpassing value of the faith, which shines all the brighter in outside the shadow of atheism.

It's up to us!

It is up to us to decide how we wish to live our lives to make life worth living to us. It is this self-directedness that makes life meaningful. Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk, **50 GREAT MYTHS ABOUT ATHEISM** (Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 34.

There are many things wrong with that claim. To begin with, it simply begs the question. Whether that's sufficient to make life meaningful is the very issue in dispute.

But here's another problem. The claim is so elitist. It presumes that people have freedom of opportunity. But what about a slave-state like North Korea? Apart from the ruling class, do individual North Koreans get to decide how they wish to live their lives to make life worth living to them? We could easily multiply analogous examples.

And even apart from totalitarian regimes, many humans just don't have a great menu of options to choose from. Their circumstances force them to eke out a grinding subsistence existence.

Yet atheists typically deny the afterlife. So this is your one and only shot at life. If we grant how the authors frame the necessary conditions of a meaningful life, hundreds of millions of humans, maybe billions, never get to enjoy a meaningful life. And there won't be any compensations for anyone in the world to come, since there is no world to come. Therefore, the "myth" that "Atheism Robs Life of Meaning and Purpose" is often true even by their own lights.

Neo-noir

Atheists sometimes stump for secular humanism—an idealistic version of atheism. However, a more realistic outworking of atheism is represented in neo-noir films like *Serpico* (1973); *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973); *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975); *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976); *L.A. Confidential* (1997); *Mulholland Dr* (2001), &c. Some characters in these stories are rotten to the core. Others have residual common grace virtues, but they are cynical. They wish they could intervene more often to make the world a better place, but they don't stick their neck out because they know a godless world won't reward heroic virtue.

Characters in a neo-noir film believe there is no transcendent reality. This is it. Like gerbils who live and die in the confines of the aquarium. Eat, sleep, excrete, and copulate. That's all there is to look forward to.

An even more authentic depiction of godless existence is *Sin City* (2005). I've read reviews. I saw a few minutes of the film when it played on TV. That was the cleaned up version. Despite the brilliant cinematography, which reproduces the comic book cityscape of the original, the content was too deranged for me to keep watching.

The Psychopath Inside

Most atheists are physicalists. The brain generates the mind. So morality is located in the brain. Consider this example:

James Fallon admits he has a lot in common with serial killer Ted Bundy and Columbine assassin Eric Harris. He is aggressive, lacks empathy and is a risk-taker.

Fallon, a professor of psychiatry and human behavior at the University of California Irvine, accidentally discovered what friends and family have suspected for years -- he has all the genetic traits and brain scan patterns of a psychopath.

"I don't have special emotional bonds with those who are close to me -- I treat everyone the same," he said. "I am involved in a lot of charities and good works, and my intentions are good for the world. But I don't have the sense of romance or love I am supposed to have for my wife. It's not there."

For years Fallon has worked with criminologists and other legal experts to evaluate the brain for abnormalities. But while volunteering with his own family for a study of Alzheimer's disease, Fallon learned on his PET scan that he has all the features of a psychopath.

"The last scan in the pile was strikingly odd," he writes about the 2005 discovery. "In fact it looked exactly like the most abnormal of the scans I had just been writing about, suggesting that the poor individual it belonged to was a psychopath -- or at least shared an

uncomfortable amount of traits with one. ... When I found out who the scan belonged to, I had to believe there was a mistake. ... But there had been no mistake. The scan was mine."

"Looking at my genetics, I had lethal combination, but I just had the happiest childhood growing up," he said. Fallon's mother had four miscarriages before his birth and, as a result, he said he was, "treated well because they didn't think I would be born."

"There were dark periods I went through, but they didn't bring me to a psychiatrist, but they told my sisters and teachers to watch out for me," he said. "My mother instinctively knew there was a problem."

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/scientist-related-killers-learns-psychopaths-brain/story?id=21029246>

Although psychos have abnormal brains, they don't have defective brains, since—according to naturalism—there's no way the brain is supposed to be. And psychopaths can be highly functional.

On this view, morality is arbitrary. Morality is an artifact of brain structures. If you change the wiring, you change morality.

In theory, evolution might have made psychopathic brains normal rather than abnormal. The majority might have psychopathic brains. Empathetic humans would be abnormal. From a naturalistic perspective, that's all there is to morality. Rewire the brain and you get a different moral code. There's no right or wrong way the brain is supposed to be wired. That's the outcome of the blind watchmaker.

Living and dying

What does a human death signify in atheism? Imagine a man (or woman) who keeps a diary. He jots down every important event in his life. From time to time he rereads portions of his diary so that he won't forget the precious memories, like growing up, or raising a child of his own. Evolving friendships.

All the little things that make a life add up to something. That layer a life with sentimental insights and attachments.

Then imagine burning the diary, one page at a time. Start on the very first page. Light the lower right-hand corner, then watch the flame move up the page, consuming every word, sentence, and dated entry. One by one, the flame unwrites everything the diarist wrote. It steadily overtakes the record of his life, from boyhood to old age. The pages smoke and curl into ash, then crumble into dust at the merest breath. His entire life reduced, in a matter of minutes, to a heap of smoldering ash.

But suppose, you say, that's not all. For he still lives on in the hearts and minds of his children.

Yet the same flame will repeat the same process in the entries of their own lives as well. A series of ash heaps, scattered by the wind.

On dogs, strangers, and atheism

Atheists often say that while human life has no ultimate meaning, our lives can be meaningful based on what we personally value. In a sense that's true—because the criterion is circular: it's valuable because I value it.

Dennis Prager often cites surveys in which some pet owners say they'd save their dog rather than a stranger. That illustrates the distinction between subjective and objective value. In that respect, it makes sense for an atheist to say his life is still meaningful. But by the same token, that evinces the nihilism of atheism. The choice between saving your dog or saving a child from a burning building. From a secular standpoint, there's no reason an atheist should prioritize the child over his pet dog. But so much the worse for atheism.

Fairies at the bottom of the garden

Randal Rauser is obsessed with Andy Bannister. A couple of preliminary observations before I delve into the details:

- 1.** I think part of the disagreement is due to the fact that Rauser is a "progressive Christian" while Bannister is far more evangelical. Biblical revelation isn't Rauser's benchmark. He only believes what he can justify philosophically.
- 2.** There's also the function of Bannister's tweets. Obviously, he's not attempting to provide a philosophically nuanced definition in a tweet. It may be that Bannister uses provocative tweets as conversation-starters. A way of getting a rise out of atheists in order to initiate a dialogue.

Many Christians feel guilty about their failure to witness to neighbors and strangers. But one problem is they don't know how to get the conversation going. One way is to wear a cap or shirt with a provocative religious message. That will prompt some unbelievers to quiz you about the message. In that case it's the unbeliever who initiates the dialogue, and you take it from there. It may be that Bannister's tweets are ice-breakers in that regard.

- 3.** In this post:

<https://randalrauser.com/2016/09/christian-apologists-need-lead-example-stop-caricaturing-opponents/>

i) Rauser accuses Andy Bannister of "caricaturing, misrepresenting, strawmanning atheism." One problem is

Rauser's idiosyncratic definition of a "strawman" or "caricature". Just recently, he did this post:

<https://randalrauser.com/2018/01/dear-christian-apologist-dont-cherry-pick-quotes-make-case/>

in which he accuses Christian apologists of caricaturing atheism by quoting prominent...atheists! But how is it a misrepresentation of atheism to quote prominent representatives of atheism? In that situation, you're letting atheists define atheism. How is that a strawman?

On Rauser's view, it's not Christian apologists who are caricaturing atheism; rather, atheists are guilty of caricaturing their own position! So whose fault is that?

ii) Perhaps what Rauser is laboring to say, in a clumsy way, is that when we attack a position, we ought to choose the most able spokesmen for that position. If that's what he means, there's certainly some merit to his observation. However:

a) It's important to distinguish between the popularizers and the high-level thinkers. Because the popularizers are far more influential than the high-level thinkers, they are fair game. They represent the position of many rank-and-file atheists. Although that may reflect a very crude, philosophically jejune understanding of their own position, it's a widely representative sample, so that's a legitimate target. There's nothing wrong with a Christian apologist who zeroes in on what many or most atheists actually believe. That may be a soft target, but it's important to destroy that target to make room for something better.

b) When, furthermore, Rauser defends atheism by taking the position that moral and existential nihilism is a

caricature of atheism, even though that's been espoused by some high-level atheists, that simply reflects his own bias. It isn't underhanded for Christian apologists who quote intelligent, sophisticated atheists who espouse moral and existential nihilism. Even if Rauser thinks that version of atheism is illogical, it's an authentic example of atheism.

There are, moreover, Christians and atheists alike who believe for good reason that this is, in fact, the most ruthlessly consistent version of atheism. And it's important from an evangelistic standpoint to rip off the mask and expose the secular alternative for what it really is, in all its bleak unredeemable vacuity. Too few atheists have the honesty or clarity to do that. It's diabolical for Rauser to deny the unmitigated evil of atheism.

First off, atheism isn't a worldview, it's a denial of the existence of God which can be part of many different worldviews.

<https://randalrauser.com/2016/09/christian-apologists-need-lead-example-stop-caricaturing-opponents/>

atheism is not committed to a reductionism about the human person. Atheism is simply the view that God does not exist. It is not the view that only random collocations of atoms exist. Nor does it entail that only random collocations of atoms exist. Consequently, atheism is consistent with many different views of the human person, dignity, and value.

<https://randalrauser.com/2017/04/human-rights-based-response-andy-bannister/>

i) To begin with, Bannister may just be using "atheism" as a practical synonym for "naturalism". And it isn't hard to

document that usage. For instance:

conversely, if you are considering suicide, this may be because you are depressed, and not for any rationally (i.e. morally) acceptable reason on any atheist worldview, consequently you have a strong moral obligation to find out (i.e. see a therapist to determine if you diagnose as depressed, or bipolar, or any other mental illness correlated with irrational suicide). A strong atheistic reason-and-evidence-based worldview is therefore a viable (and much less dangerous) vehicle for producing the effect this study claims to have found for religious affiliation (but only actually found for "having moral objections to suicide").

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/5181>

It is only because of historical accident that atheism is not widely recognised as a worldview in its own right. This worldview is essentially a very general form of naturalism, in which there are not two kinds of stuff, the natural and the supernatural, but one. The forces that govern this substance are also natural ones and there is no ultimate purpose or agency behind them. Human life is biological, and thus does not survive beyond biological death (Julian Baggini).

http://fritanke.no/index.php?page=vis_nyhet&NyhetID=8484

While identifying atheism with the metaphysical claim that there is no God (or that there are no gods) is particularly useful for doing philosophy, it is important to recognize that the term "atheism" is polysemous—i.e., it has more than one related meaning—even within

philosophy. For example, many writers at least implicitly identify atheism with a positive metaphysical theory like naturalism or even materialism. Given this sense of the word, the meaning of "atheism" is not straightforwardly derived from the meaning of "theism". While this might seem etymologically bizarre, perhaps a case can be made for the claim that something like (metaphysical) naturalism was originally labeled "atheism" only because of the cultural dominance of non-naturalist forms of theism, not because the view being labeled was nothing more than the denial of theism. On this view, there would have been atheists even if no theists ever existed—they just wouldn't have been called "atheists". (Baggini [2003] suggests this line of thought, though his "official" definition is the standard metaphysical one.)

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/#DefiAthe>

ii) As a matter of fact, "atheism" is often synonymous with a positive philosophy or worldview. Usage defines meaning. In fact, Rauser concedes that when he's not in his reactionary mode:

And Strobel definitely has a point. The popular idea that atheism simply consists of belief in one less claim than does the theist (or several less than the Christian) is misleading at best...Strobel is making a similar point: atheism is not simply a matter of subtracting one thing — God — from the ontological catalogue, for by making that subtraction one adds much else.

<https://randalrauser.com/2017/12/atheism-require-faith-christian-theism/>

By his own admission, atheism isn't "simply" a denial of God's existence.

iii) In addition, Bannister may be using "atheism" as a synonym for "naturalism" for the simple reason that almost everyone knows what "atheism" means whereas "naturalism" has a more technical, philosophical meaning that most folks haven't studied.

iv) Among western atheists, that verbal placeholder is typically filled in by naturalism. And here's a standard definition of naturalism:

Many ontological naturalists thus adopt a physicalist attitude to mental, biological and other such "special" subject matters. They hold that there is nothing more to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#MakCauDif>

In the final twentieth-century phase, the acceptance of the casual closure of the physical led to full-fledged physicalism. The causal closure thesis implied that, if mental and other special causes are to produce physical effects, they must themselves be physically constituted. It thus gave rise to the strong physicalist doctrine that anything that has physical effects must itself be physical.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/#RisPhy>

If there's more than one operating definition, it makes sense to pick a definition that represents the target audience. Sure, there are outre atheists like John

McTaggart, but that's so atypical that it would be pedantic to make allowance for his eccentric position (idealism, immortality). It's perfectly appropriate for a Christian apologist to focus on mainstream atheism.

If, say, Bannister was a Chinese missionary, he might make adjustments for philosophical Buddhist atheism. But that's not his target audience.

for example, that an atheist adopts a metaphysic according to which there are some metaphysical transcendentals like goodness, truth, and beauty which exist of necessity. And all creatures that have the capacity to exemplify those transcendentals have intrinsic value precisely in virtue of being the kind of beings that can exemplify goodness, truth, and beauty. In that case, if one believed that human beings have the capacity to exemplify those attributes, it would follow that human beings have intrinsic value.

That seems to me to be a perfectly possible metaphysic. (Whether it is plausible is a question that each individual must answer for themselves.) And given that it is perfectly possible, it is manifestly clear that there is no contradiction even in this weaker, colloquial sense.

<https://randalrauser.com/2016/07/andy-bannister-on-god-human-beings-and-intrinsic-value/>

Several problems:

i) When atheists appeal to Platonic realism, that's typically a stopgap explanation.

ii) There's the question of whether Platonic realism makes sense. What *are* abstract universals? If they're not mental or material, do they stand for anything intelligible?

How do they exist? What's the metaphysical apparatus?

How do causally inert abstracta instantiate themselves in concrete human beings? What's the metaphysical machinery that mediates that transaction?

How do impersonal entities obligate human behavior?

iii) To say "if one *believed* that human beings have the capacity to exemplify those attributes, *it would follow* that human beings have intrinsic value," is an obvious non sequitur. Merely believing that human beings have that capacity doesn't validate the belief.

Likewise, to say "whether it is plausible is a question that each individual must answer for themselves" is weaselly.

4. Finally, in what respect does atheism (i.e. naturalism) nullify the meaning of life?

A. MORAL NIHILISM

i) Moral and existential nihilism are intertwined to some degree. Let's take a few examples:

A New Jersey woman who set her newborn on fire and left her in the middle of a street was sentenced Friday to 30 years in prison.

The 23-year-old Pemberton Township woman doused her newborn with accelerant and set her on fire in January 2015, investigators said.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/n-woman-30-years-prison-setting-newborn-fire-article-1.2611249>

Also known as the “Darknet,” the dark web is an expanding virtual space where anything goes. Think of it like eBay designed by Caligula, where crypto currencies like Bitcoin can purchase any vice or horror man has dreamed up—drugs, stolen IDs, assassins, even webcam access to child dungeons. And if everyone does it the way they’re supposed to, it’s untraceable.

“In the old days, if someone was kidnapped, they asked for ransom. Now, these teams in South America abduct kids and women from areas that are poor, knowing the media won’t give a shit about them, and then hold them in dungeons with webcams. People then make requests using Bitcoin, as to what they want to see happen to the person.”

<https://medium.com/@jasisrad/journey-into-the-dark-8c7922a48265>

His treatment of his mother strikes a chill in the heart. In 1958 she was picked up by the Yorkshire police in a state of mental confusion, carrying a suitcase on which was written: "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm going to those who love me." Her only son, Kenneth, on whom she doted, showed little evidence of that love. Rose Tynan ended her life in a mental institution. "I could have postponed her death at the expense of my own self-absorption in self-advancement," noted her son coldly. "I chose not to."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4725850/Starstruck-critic-with-a-sting-in-his-tail.html>

On a table in front of Sacramento Superior Court Judge Steve White's bench sat the murder weapon: a microwave oven.

Jurors Friday morning silently filed past the appliance into which Ka Yang placed her infant daughter in the kitchen of her family's Robla-area home on March 17, 2011, and convicted the 34-year-old of first-degree murder and a second count of assault on a child causing great bodily injury leading to death.

Sacramento County prosecutors say Yang, a mother of four including her late daughter, 2-month-old Mirabelle Thao-Lo, was alone with her youngest child for but 11 minutes. Mirabelle was in the oven, prosecutors said, for as long as five of those minutes. Pathologists in proceedings leading up to trial said the child suffered burns covering 60 percent of her body, including radiation burns that penetrated her internal organs.

<http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article44774280.html#storylink=cpy>

If there's nothing blameworthy about such behavior, what makes a human life important? If there's no moral difference between doing or not doing that to another human being, what's the value of human life? If right and wrong can't make a difference, what can make a difference?

ii) Perhaps an atheist would say it makes a difference to the victim. The victim values their life and wellbeing.

But one problem with that explanation is that the perpetrator doesn't value the victim's life and well-being, so what's the tiebreaker? If it isn't wrong to do that to another person, then it comes down to who has more power.

iii) In fairness, I haven't attempted to demonstrate that naturalism is incompatible with moral realism. Mind you, many secular philosophers concede that naturalism negates moral realism, viz. Michael Ruse, Joel Marks, Alex Rosenberg, Quentin Smith, Sharon Street, J. L. Mackie, Massimo Pigliucci, Richard Joyce.

My immediate point is that if naturalism is incompatible with moral nihilism, then that already pans into existential nihilism.

B EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM

i) Mortalism

a) The claim is not that immortality makes human life meaningful, but lack of immortality makes human life meaningless. Immortality is a necessary but insufficient condition for a meaningful existence.

b) For one thing, many people lead utterly wretched lives. If this life is all there is, they never had a chance to enjoy it.

c) But it's deeper than that. Suppose we develop artificial intelligence. Suppose an inventor designs a video game with intelligent virtual characters. They have consciousness. Real feelings. They can experience simulated physical pain and pleasure. They remember the past. They look forward to the future.

But he gets bored with the game. Every few weeks he erases the characters and does a reset, as if they never existed in the first place. Did their lives have any significance?

ii) Cosmic surdity

According to naturalism, things happen for no reason at all. Events have causes but there's no guiding intelligence. Even human agents are in the stream of blind physical determinism. Our thoughts are reducible to chemical reactions. Who lives, who dies, who suffers, who thrives, is sheer luck.

It's like a subway train wreck in which all the passengers are crushed or incinerated. Who lived and died is ultimately arbitrary. If you arrived at the platform a few minutes sooner or later, you miss the fatal, fateful train. Maybe you were delayed because you spilled coffee or orange juice on yourself at breakfast, and had to change your shirt. Or maybe you were delayed because a delivery truck blocked traffic while the driver was maneuvering to back into the service entrance of the supermarket. A mindless chain of events led up to the moment when passengers boarded the train. Once the doors closed behind them, they were unwittingly doomed. Survival is random.

iii) Evolutionary psychology

In addition, natural selection has tricked us into altruistic behavior because that confers a survival advantage. We value certain things because we were conditioned to value them by a mindless, amoral process. So what we value or disvalue is arbitrary. We could just as well be programmed

by the same mindless, amoral process to value sadism. Indeed, some people do.

It's like a movie projected onto a blank screen. It appears to be real, but as soon as the projector stops, you're staring at a blank screen. Our values are projected onto a blank screen. The effect is illusory. And there's nothing behind the illusion.

According to naturalism, we're animals who evolved to the point where we're just smart enough to discover that we've been tricked. It's like *Dark City*. The aliens erased the original memories of the human captives and implanted false memories. John Murdock "remembers" summer days at Shell Beach with his brother.

But Shell Beach isn't real. His brother isn't real. The beach only exists as a postcard, billboard, or poster. Nothing in reality corresponds to his halcyon "memories".

Compare that to Jason Bourne, who suffered from amnesia, but begins to remember. That's because he *has* something to remember. He has a real past.

But according to naturalism, there's nothing to back up our moral instincts. Like Jason Bourne, we've been brainwashed, but unlike Bourne, there's nothing to fall back on. Although we have an instinctual sense of good, yet once we begin to reflect on our evolutionary programming, we realize that we've been hoodwinked. But like the hapless characters in *Dark City*, there is no true story. That's lost. That's gone. Indeed, that never was. It's delusive memories all the way down.

Richard Dawkins likes to quote Douglas Adams, "Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to

believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?" But the shoe is on the other foot. It's evolutionary psychology that puts airy-fairy values at the bottom of the garden.

This isn't just a Christian view of atheism. A few hardy atheists come clean about what their position amounts to. For instance:

How to Live a Nihilistic Life Quentin Smith

I do not believe my theory differs very much from that of many or most people. There is a sense that my life, actions and consequences of actions amount to nothing when I am considering the value of an infinite universe. Our emotional responses to acts or states of affairs we believe have positive or negative value occur when we are narrowly focused on "the here and now", on the people we interact with or know about, ourselves, and the animals, plants and material things that surround us in our daily lives. In our daily lives, we believe actions are good or bad and that individuals have rights. These beliefs are false, but we know this only on the occasions when we engage in second-order beliefs about our everyday beliefs and view our everyday beliefs from the perspective of infinity. Most of the time, we live in an illusion of meaningfulness and only some times, when we are philosophically reflective, are we aware of reality and the meaninglessness of our lives. It seems obvious that this has a genetic basis, due to Darwinian laws of evolution. In order to survive and reproduce, it must seem to us most of the time that our actions are not futile, that people have rights. The rare occasions in which we know the truth about life are genetically prevented from overriding living our daily lives with the

illusion that they are meaningful. As I progress through this paper, I have the illusion that my efforts are not utterly futile, but right now, as I stop and reflect, I realize that any further effort put into this paper is a futile expenditure of my energy.

http://www.qsmithwmu.com/moral_realism_and_infinte_spacetime_imply_moral_nihilism_by_quentin_smith.htm

I think I would still say—part of my position on morality is very much that we regard morality in some sense as being objective, even if it isn't. So the claim that we intuit morality as objective reality—I would still say that. Of course, what I would want to add is that from the fact that we do this, it doesn't follow that morality really is objective.

I'm saying that if in fact you're Christian then you believe you were made in the image of God. And that means—and this is traditional Christian theology—that means that you have intelligence and self-awareness and moral ability...it's a very important part of Christianity that our intelligence is not just a contingent thing, but is in fact that which makes us in the image of God.

What I would argue is that the connection between Darwinism and ethics is not what the traditional social Darwinian argues. He or she argues that evolution is progressive, humans came out on top and therefore are a good thing, hence we should promote evolution to keep humans up there and to prevent decline. I think that is a straight violation of the is/ought dichotomy...I take Hume's Law to be the claim that you cannot go from statements of fact—"Duke University is

the school attended by Eddy Nahmias”—to statements of value—“Duke University is an excellent school.”

Ed [Edward O. Wilson] does violate Hume’s Law, and no matter what I say he cannot see that there is anything wrong in doing this. It comes from his commitment to the progressive nature of evolution. No doubt he would normally say that one should not go from “is” to “ought”—for example from “I like that student” to “It is OK to have sex with her, even though I am married.” But in this case of evolution he allows it. If you say to him, “But ‘ought’ statements are not like ‘is’ statements,” he replies that in science, when we have reduction, we do this all the time, going from one kind of statement to another kind of statement. We start talking about little balls buzzing in a container and end talking about temperature and pressure. No less a jump than going from “is” to “ought.”

My position is that the ethical sense can be explained by Darwinian evolution—the ethical sense is an adaptation to keep us social. More than this, I argue that sometimes (and this is one of those times), when you give an account of the way something occurs and is as it is, this is also to give an explanation of its status. I think that once you see that ethics is simply an adaptation, you see that it has no justification. It just is. So in metaethics[4] I am a nonrealist. I think ethics is an illusion put into place by our genes to keep us social.

I distinguish normative ethics from metaethics. In normative ethics I think evolution can go a long way to explain our feelings of obligation: be just, be fair, treat others like yourself. We humans are social animals and we need these sentiments to get on. I like John

Rawls's[5] thinking on this. On about page 500 of his Theory of Justice book, Rawls says he thinks the social contract was put in place by evolution rather than by a group of old men many years ago. Then in metaethics, I think we see that morality is an adaptation merely and hence has no justification. Having said this, I agree with the philosopher J.L Mackie[6] (who influenced me a lot) that we feel the need to "objectify" ethics. If we did not think ethics was objective, it would collapse under cheating.

If we knew that it was all just subjective, and we felt that, then of course we'd start to cheat. If I thought there was no real reason not to sleep with someone else's wife and that it was just a belief system put in place to keep me from doing it, then I think the system would start to break down. And if I didn't share these beliefs, I'd say to hell with it, I'm going to do it. So I think at some level, morality has to have some sort of, what should I say, some sort of force. Put it this way, I shouldn't cheat, not because I can't get away with it, or maybe I can get away with it, but because it is fundamentally wrong.

We're like dogs, social animals, and so we have morality and this part of the phenomenology of morality, how it appears to us, that it is not subjective, that we think it is objective...So I think ethics is essentially subjective but it appears to us as objective and this appearance, too, is an adaptation.

Within the system, of course, rape is objectively wrong—just like three strikes and you are out in baseball. But I'm a nonrealist, so ultimately there is no objective right and wrong for me. Having said that, I am part of

the system and cannot escape. The truth does not necessarily make you free.

There is no ultimate truth about morality. It is an invention—an invention of the genes rather than of humans, and we cannot change games at will, as one might baseball if one went to England and played cricket. Within the system, the human moral system, it is objectively true that rape is wrong. That follows from the principles of morality and from human nature. If our females came into heat, it would not necessarily be objectively wrong to rape—in fact, I doubt we would have the concept of rape at all. So, within the system, I can justify. But I deny that human morality at the highest level—love your neighbor as yourself, etc.—is justifiable. That is why I am not deriving “is” from “ought,” in the illicit sense of justification. I am deriving it in the sense of explaining *why we have* moral sentiments, but that is a different matter.

I think ultimately there is nothing—moral nihilism, if you wish.

http://www.believermag.com/issues/200307/?read=interview_ruse

Extragalactic creators

In this post I'm going to interact with Robert Nozick's contention that even if there is a God, the value of human existence isn't conferred by God. I believe Nozick was a secular Jew:

One prevalent view, less so today than previously, is that the meaning of life or people's existence is connected with God's will, with his design or plan for them. Put roughly, people's meaning is to be found and realized in fulfilling the role allotted to them by God. If a superior being designed and created people for a purpose, in accordance with a plan for them, the particular purpose he had for them would be what people are *for*.

First, we should ask whether any and every role would provide meaning and purpose to human lives. If our role is to supply CO₂ to the plants, or to be the equivalent within God's plan of fixing a mildly annoying leaky faucet, would this suffice?...Clearly, what is desired is that we be important; having merely some role or other in God's plan does not suffice. The purpose God has for us must place us at or near the center of things, of his intentions and goals. Moreover, merely playing some role in a central purpose of God's is not sufficient—the role itself must be a central or important one.

Indeed, we want more than an important role in an important purpose; the role itself should be positive, perhaps even exalted. If the cosmic role of human beings was to provide a negative lesson to some others ("Don't act like them") or to provide needed food for

passing intergalactic travelers who were important, this would not suit our aspirations...

There are two ways we individually or collectively could be included in God's plan. First, our fulfilling our role might depend upon our acting in a certain way, upon our choices or cooperation; second, our role might not depend at all upon our actions or choices—willy-nilly we shall serve...About the first way we can ask why we should act to fulfill God's plan, and about both ways we can ask why fitting God's plan gives meaning to our existence. That God is good (but also sometimes angry?) shows that would be good to carry out his plan. (Even then, perhaps, it need not be *good for us*—mightn't the good overall plan involve sacrificing us for some greater good?) Yet how does doing good provide meaning?

How can playing a role in God's plan give one's life meaning? What makes this a meaning-giving process? It is not merely that some being created us with a purpose in mind. If some extragalactic civilization created us with a purpose in mind, would that by itself provide meaning to our lives? Nor would things be changed if they created us so that we also had a feeling of indebtedness and a feeling that something was asked of us. It seems it is not enough that God have some purpose for us—his purpose itself must be meaningful. If it were sufficient merely to play some role in some external purpose, then you could give meaning to your life by fitting it to my plans or to your parents' purpose in having you. In these instances, however, one immediately questions the meaningfulness of the other people's purposes. How do God's purposes differ from ours so as to be guaranteed meaningfulness and importance?

The purposes parents have when they plan to have children...do not fix the obligations of the child...He is under no obligation to cooperate, he is not owned by his parents even though they made him. Once the child exists, it has certain rights that must be respected (and other rights it can assert when able)...Nor do children owe to their parents whatever they would have conceded in bargaining before conception (supposing this had been possible) in order to come into existence. Since children don't owe their parents everything that leaves their lives still a net plus, why do people owe their ultimate creator and sustainer any more?...We don't cost an omnipotent God anything, there's nothing to pay back to him and so no need to.

Once you come to feel your existence lacks purpose, there is little you can do...The task required all of my knowledge, skill, intuitive powers, and craftsmanship. It seemed to me that my whole existence until then had been merely a preparation for this creative activity, so completely did it draw upon and focus all of my experience, abilities, and knowledge. I was excited by the task and fulfilled, and when it was completed I rested, untroubled by purposelessness.

But this contentment was, unfortunately, only temporary. For when I came to think about it, although it had taxed my ingenuity and energy to make the heavens, the earth, and the creatures upon it, what did it all amount to?...For my sole purpose then was to give meaning to my existence...Such questions press me toward the alternative I tremble to contemplate, yet to which I find my thoughts recurring. The option of ending it all...To imagine God himself facing problems about the meaningfulness of his existence forces us to

consider how meaning attaches to his purposes...For if it were possible for man and God to shore up each other's meaningfulness in this fashion, why could not two people do this for each other as well?

Nor will it help us to escalate up a level, and say that if there is a God who has a plan for us, the meaning of our existence consists in finding out what this plan asks of us and has in store for us.

What is it about God's purposes that makes them meaningful? If our universe were created by a child from some other vast civilization in a parallel universe, if our universe were a toy it had constructed, perhaps out of prefabricated parts, it would not follow that the child's purposes were meaningful. E. Klemke & S. Cahn, eds. **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), chap. 19.

1. Nozick fails to distinguish between purpose, gratitude and/or obligation. In some cases they're separable and in some cases they can be combined.

For instance, suppose a country is in a fight for national survival. It sends a special ops unit on a suicide mission. If the unit succeeds, that will turn the tide in the war effort. However, the military doesn't tell the unit that they are going on a suicide mission.

On the one hand, their mission is clearly purposeful. They won't die in vain. Their actions saved their nation.

On the other hand, the fact that they were used and deceived as expendable pawns means they have no grounds to be grateful or dutiful to their superiors.

In principle, they might still be grateful for the opportunity to save their nation. And they might have knowingly volunteered for a suicide mission, if it had a good chance of success and was pivotal in the fortunes of the war effort.

ii) A sense of indebtedness is essential to social life. That intuition runs deep. But it's complex.

If a doctor or a lifeguard saves my life, I'm grateful, yet my gratitude is limited by the fact that he was just doing his job.

If a stranger saves my life, I'm inclined to be more grateful.

If a stranger risks his own life to save mine, I'm even more grateful.

To take another comparison, teenage boys have been known to perform dumb pranks. Suppose a student squirts water into the locker of another student. Suppose that after the prankster turns around, he sees a security camera trained on that bank of lockers. He's now afraid he'll be expelled.

In panic, he seeks out a classmate who's a computer whiz to hack into the system and delete the incriminating footage. This is a classmate he normally makes fun of as a hopeless nerd.

Suppose the geeky classmate agrees. The prankster should be grateful for several reasons:

i) He got out of trouble

ii) He got out of trouble even though he did something wrong

iii) A classmate did him a favor

iv) The classmate who did him a favor wasn't his friend

It's possible to get into trouble even when you did nothing wrong. In that situation, it's a relief to get out of trouble.

If, however, you deserve to be punished, but you're given a second chance, then that's a reason to be grateful.

Likewise, if someone treats you better than you treated them, if they help you out in a bind, then that's a reason to be grateful—since you're getting better than you deserve.

2. Filial duty is limited for a variety of reasons: Parents are humans just like us. They're just a few steps ahead of us on the lifecycle. But they're not superior beings. Moreover, that's how they came into the world, too.

3. Are the alien creators intellectually superior or merely technologically superior?

i) Even if they're intellectually superior, they're still finite beings who exist on the same continuum we do.

ii) More to the point, superior intelligence doesn't imply superior wisdom.

iii) Furthermore, obligation and gratitude depend on whether a creator is benevolent or malevolent. Take engineers (bionics, genetic engineering) who make a race of supersoldiers. The engineers aren't acting in the interests of the supersoldiers, who are expendable by design.

4. I don't think the significance of individual human lives depends on being at the center of God's plan or having a central role to play. Rather, it's sufficient that we be occupied by things that are suitable to the nature God has given us. Fixing drippy faucets hardly fulfills our social, emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic capacities. It has to be at the level of our natural endowment and potential.

5. Nozick's denial notwithstanding, why can't the meaning of our existence consist in discovering God's plan for our lives? For predestinarian traditions, God is like a novelist who creates the characters, setting, and plot.

In the case of the elect, although life in a fallen world may be full of anguish, we are buoyed by the hope that eventually the worst will be behind us with nothing but good in store for all eternity. Every day I wake up with that expectation. Another day on the journey towards that destination. So long as I know God has a good plan for my life, then that gives me something to look forward to. Each day has its surprises. God wrote that role just for me. It's a far more satisfying life than I could improvise on my own.

6. The specter of a god who creates in order to make his own existence meaningful dovetails with the anthropomorphic god of open theism.

Cosmic theater of the absurd

I'm going to comment on some statements by Thomas Nagel, in. E. Klemke & S. Cahn, eds. **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), chap. 13.

Most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually. Yet the reasons usually offered in defense of this conviction are patently inadequate; they could not really explain why life is absurd. Why then do they provide a natural expression for the sense that it is?

Consider some examples. It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years. But if that is true, then by the same token, nothing that will be the case in a million years matters now. In particular, it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter. Moreover, even if what we did now were going to matter in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered a million years from now?

Whether what we do now will matter in a million years could make the crucial difference only if its mattering in a million years depended on its mattering, period. But then to deny that whatever happens now will matter in a million years is to beg the question against its mattering, period; for in that sense one cannot know that it will not matter in a million years whether (for example) someone now is happy or miserable, without knowing that it does not matter, period.

What we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space or time...Our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what makes life absurd, if it is absurd. For suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?

i) It isn't clear to me if Nagel thinks these are different reasons or variations on the same basic reason.

It's true that a life that's *intrinsically* absurd if it lasts seventy years will still be absurd if it lasted through eternity. This, however, doesn't mean that how, whether, or when something ends is irrelevant to its absurd or meaningful status. For instance, some movies and TV dramas have a plot that's initially and deliberately puzzling. The point is to stimulate the viewer's curiosity. The plot intentionally raises more questions than it answers. At that stage of the plot, multiple interpretations are possible. If the plot is well-crafted, it will eventually tie up the loose ends, in logical, yet unexpected ways, with clever, surprising plot twists.

If, however, the series is canceled before the director has time to develop the various plotlines and bring them to culmination, then the series would be absurd. The abortive ending didn't allow the plot to achieve its telos.

Or take a composer who dies in the middle of a composition. The musical fragment is tantalizing, but absurd because we don't know where it's going.

By the same token, the future is not irrelevant to whether a human life has significance in the present. Any cutoff may be arbitrary. Any termination may frustrate its telos.

ii) This also goes to the distinction between temporal ends and teleological ends. If the pattern lies in the whole rather than the parts, then a teleological end may be temporally unending. Take a flower garden as it passes through the four seasons. Because that's a cyclical process, there's no logical starting-point or end-point. You can break into the cycle at any point in the cycle. You can visit the garden at any time of year. Spring and fall may be the prettiest. Sometimes summer is just as pretty. Winter is more austere, but a necessary preparation for spring.

If, by the same token, the significance of a human life lies in the whole, in the overall pattern, then oblivion may nullify its value. But this also goes to the difference between secular and Christian anthropology. From a secular standpoint, human life doesn't exist for a reason. It just so happens that life is cyclical. Life evolved in such a way that once you reach sexual maturity, create and raise offspring, you've outlived your usefulness. You created your replacements. You dwindle and die. It's just repetition for repetition's sake—the byproduct of a mindless, mechanical process.

From a Christian standpoint, by contrast, the lifecycle is somewhat artificial. We're created for eternity. Although that generally includes a family life, that doesn't exhaust human destiny. God is a storyteller with infinite imagination. He never runs out of good ideas. The plot continues to unfold...forever.

Since justifications must come to an end somewhere, nothing is gained by denying that they end where they

appear to, within life...

That simply begs the question. In fairness, this was an early essay (1971). He wrote it in his mid-30s. In his mid-70s, he expressed dissatisfaction with atheism (**MIND & COSMOS**).

It would be different if we could not step back and reflect on the process, but were merely led from impulse to impulse without self-consciousness. But human beings do not act solely on impulse...Each of us lives his own life—lives within himself twenty-four hours a day. What else is he supposed to do—live someone else's life? Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed...they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*...We see ourselves from the outside.

That's the conundrum for atheists. According to naturalistic evolution, we're the only animals smart enough to realize the absurdity of human existence. We lack the blissful ignorance of other animals in that regard. Our intellect is our curse, because we're just smart enough to be conscious of our utter irrelevance. Like a cruel hoax which the universe played on us. That's our great discovery.

Sisyphus

A perfect image of meaninglessness, of the kind we are seeking, is found in the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, it will be remembered, betrayed divine secrets to mortals, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a stone to the top of a hill, the stone then immediately rolled back down, again to be pushed to the top by Sisyphus, to roll down once more, and so on again and again, forever. Now in this we have the picture of meaningless, pointless toil, of a meaningless existence that is absolutely never redeemed. It is not even redeemed by a death that, if it were to accomplish nothing more, would at least bring that idiotic cycle to a close...Nothing ever comes of what he is doing, except simply more of the same...a repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything.

Now let us ask: Which of these pictures does life in fact resemble? And let us not begin with our own lives, for here both our prejudices and wishes are great, but with the life in general that we share with the rest of creation. We shall find, I think, that it all has a certain pattern, and that this pattern is by now easily recognized.

We can begin anywhere, only saving human existence for our last consideration. We can, for example, begin with any animal. It does not matter where we begin, because the result is going to be exactly the same.

Thus, for example, there are caves in New Zealand, deep and dark, whose floors are quiet pools and whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light. As one

gazes in wonder in the stillness of these caves it seems that the Creator has reproduced there in microcosm the heavens themselves, until one scarcely remembers the enclosing presence of the walls. As one looks more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness. As from time to time one of these insects draws near it becomes engaged in a sticky thread lowered by the worm, and is eaten. This goes on month after month, the blind worm lying there in the barren stillness waiting to entrap an occasional bit of nourishment that will only sustain it to another bit of nourishment until...Until what? What great thing awaits all this long and repetitious effort and makes it worthwhile? Really nothing. The larva just transforms itself finally to a tiny winged adult that lacks even mouth parts to feed and lives only a day or two. These adults, as soon as they have mated and laid eggs, are themselves caught in the threads and are devoured by the cannibalistic worms, often without having ventured into the day, the only point to their existence having now been fulfilled. This has been going on for millions of years, and to no end other than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another millions of years.

All living things present essentially the same spectacle. The larva of a certain cicada burrows in the darkness of the earth for seventeen years, through season after season, to emerge finally, into the daylight for a brief flight, lay its eggs, and die—this all to repeat itself during the next seventeen years, and so on to eternity. Robert Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," E. Klemke & S.

Cahn, eds. **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), chap. 12.

That's reminiscent of the famous opening to Ecclesiastes. That narrator was an existentialist 3000 years ago.

This has seemed to many human observers to be the very model of absurdity, an utterly pointless existence...The best response to this argument is that it projects human needs and sensibilities onto other species. The human observer simply does not have the salmon's point of view. Joel Feinberg, "Absurd Self-Fulfillment," E. Klemke & S. Cahn, eds. **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), 163-64.

i) There's an element of truth to Feinberg's observation. Atheists who contend that a good God wouldn't create a world characterized by predation commit that fallacy. Animals don't share the viewpoint of the human observer, who's aghast at the law of the jungle.

ii) But in another respect, Feinberg misses the point. The comparison is based on dramatic irony: the fact that human observers are aware of something that insects and other animals—even higher animals—are not. And from a secular standpoint, we're chained to the same Sisyphean predicament as other organisms.

iii) From a Christian standpoint, there are similarities as well as differences. There's a robotic repetition to the lifecycle of plants and animals. If there was nothing behind it, no benevolent intelligence, then universal nihilism would

reign. Likewise, if humans suffer the same fate. If we make our replacements, then pass into oblivion.

iv) From a Christian standpoint, the cycles of nature illustrate boundless divine ingenuity—as well as benevolence, by providing a stable environment in which humans can live and flourish. And they furnish a point of contest. We share many things in common with animals. Yet God has set us apart by the gift of consciousness and immortality. Animals are ephemeral in a way humans are not. Animals are a means to an end, whereas humans are an end in themselves.

Clinging to nihilism

I'm going to quote and comment on some statements in David Benatar's **THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT: A CANDID GUIDE TO LIFE'S BIGGEST QUESTIONS** (Oxford 2016).

Debates about the existence of God are interminable, and I cannot hope to settle them here (39).

Of course, there are those who remain resolute in their belief in either resurrection or the immortality of the soul. In this sense, at least, the issue is unresolved. However, merely because a view has (even vast numbers) of adherents does not mean that it is a reasonable position worth taking seriously. Thus, while I cannot pretend that my comments constitute a full refutation of their view, I do not intend to engage any further with the beliefs that we are immortal in either of these senses (144).

I'm struck by Benatar's intellectual impatience. That would be understandable if he had something better in the offing, but Benatar has such an acidic outlook on life that he deems it an unmitigated tragedy that anyone even exists! Given that frame of reference, wouldn't just about anything be a huge improvement over his dyseptic, despairing antinatalism? Why not invest more effort into investigating the evidence for Christian theism? Does he have something better to do with his time? Why does he cling to nihilism for dear life?

However, human nature tends to abhor a meaning vacuum...Arguably, the most ancient and also the most pervasive of the coping mechanisms is theism and

associated doctrines. Many theists believe that even if our lives *seem* meaningless from a cosmic perspective, they are not in fact so. This, they say, is because we are not an accident of purposeless evolution, but rather the creation of a God who endows our lives with meaning. According to this view, we serve not merely a cosmic purpose, but a divine one.

This is a seductively comforting thought. For that reason alone, we should be suspicious of it, given how easy it is for humans to believe what they would like to believe.

A related objection notes that not merely any divine purpose would give us the kind of meaning we seek (36-37).

i) While it's true that not just any divine purpose would give us the kind of meaning we seek, that would only undercut the theistic "coping mechanism" if, in fact, the actual divine purposes are of that unenviable kind. So how is that hypothetical observation germane unless there's some reason to think that would be the case?

ii) There is, moreover, a difference between a meaning vacuum and the kind of meaning we seek. Existence would still be meaningful rather than vacuous even if it's not the kind of meaning that some people seek. Need it be equally meaningful for everyone to be meaningful for anyone?

iii) How many Christians believe our life *seems* to be meaningless from a cosmic perspective? Is that really *their* viewpoint and experience—or Benatar's?

Many people have raised the objection that theism cannot do the meaning-endowing work it is purported

to do here. For example, it has been suggested that serving God's purposes does not suffice, as this makes people "puppets in the hands of a superior agent" or mere instruments to the goals of God.

The theist could say, there is no problem in being a means to any end set for us by such a God; better to be a means to a supreme being's beneficent purpose than neither to be an end of cosmic significance nor to have any (cosmic) purpose at all.

The problem with such a response is that, insofar as it provides any reassurance about life's cosmic meaning, it does so by providing a hand-waving account of what that meaning is. The account is as mysterious as the ways in which the Lord is often said to move. We are told that serving the purposes of a beneficent deity provides (cosmic) meaning to our lives, but to be told that is not to be told what those purposes are. "Serving God's purposes" is a placeholder for details that need to be provided.

When the details are provided, however, the results are unsatisfactory. If, for example, we are told that our purpose is to love God and serve him, we might reasonably ask why a being as great as God is said to be would possibly want or need the love and service of humans at all—let alone so badly that he would create them to serve that purpose. If loving and serving God is our purpose, the act of creating us sounds like that of a supremely narcissistic rather than a supremely beneficent being. This alleged purpose is thus unconvincing (37-38).

i) I don't know how Benatar (or Ayer) is using "puppets". What's the precise point of objection?

ii) It's not a question of what God needs. If God is the supreme good and source of all finite goods, then loving and serving God is equivalent to loving goodness and acting accordingly.

iii) Perhaps Benatar thinks that to say our purpose is to serve God or serve his purposes implies that humans are only a means to an end: God uses us to achieve his goals. We are pawns on a cosmic chessboard. Pawns are expendable. You sacrifice a pawn to checkmate your opponent. Something like that.

If so, this assumes that humans are simply instrumental to the realization of God's purposes rather than the *object* of God's purposes. If, however, God's purpose is that humans, or at least a subset of humanity, enjoys eternal felicity, then we don't exist primarily to facilitate God's objective; rather, we are the intended beneficiaries of his designs.

iv) Likewise, we don't have to know God's purpose for our lives to benefit from his purpose for our lives, assuming that's a beneficent plan. To take a comparison, consider a father who takes his young son on a camping trip. The purpose is to have a shared experience. His young son may not be privy to the details of the excursion. And his father can contrive enjoyable pursuits for his young son which his son lacks the imagination and ability to contrive on his own. His son needn't be told ahead of time what fun plans his father has in store for him to find their time together meaningful. Indeed, an element of surprise might make it more enjoyable. His father's goal isn't separate from their time together; rather, that *is* the goal.

By the same token, Christians discover God's purpose for their lives by...living. It's not something they need to know

in advance. They find out by experience. That's how it works. These aren't separable things.

Another possible suggestion is that our purpose on earth is to prepare us for the afterlife. That does not explain what the purpose of the afterlife is. If it is eternal bliss, it might be thought not to require any further end. However, if religious doctrine is to be believed, then for a great many people, the afterlife is not a final good but rather a final bad—hardly the sort of meaning people yearn for (38-39).

i) Must it be eternal bliss for *everyone* to be eternal bliss for *anyone*?

ii) A bad end is meaningful if that's their just desert.

Even in the best-case scenario, it is hard to understand why God would create a being in order to prepare it for an afterlife, given that no afterlife would be needed or desired if the being had not been created in the first place. It is much like a parent creating a child for the purpose of that child's having a satisfying retirement. Satisfying retirements are worth aiming at if one already exists, but they hardly provide grounds for creating people who will have such a retirement. The sort of meaning that the afterlife provides cannot explain why God would have created us at all (39).

But that's a reflection of Benatar's thankless, venomous antinatalism. In a "best-case scenario," God makes rational beings out of sheer generosity, to experience happiness. Benatar acts as though, since a nonentity can't desire happiness, that it's better never to exist than to be happy.

As all this illustrates, it is not easy to specify a divine ordained meaning that convincingly and non-circularly explains the cosmic meaning of human life in a way that affirms rather than demeans humanity (39).

The blind irony of an antinatalist who frowns on "demeaning humanity".

Upton Sinclair famously remarked that it "is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it". It is similarly difficult to get somebody to understand something when the meaning of his life depends on his not understanding it (39).

What's the value of understanding that life is worthless?
What's the point of promoting that outlook?

Imagine you were to visit a country in which the evidence of repression is pervasive: There is no freedom of the press or expression; vast numbers of people live in squalor and suffer severe malnutrition; those attempting to flee the country are imprisoned; torture and executions are rampant; and fear is widespread...When you muster the courage to express skepticism, citing various disturbing facts, you are treated to elaborate rationalizations that things are not as they seem.

It would be wonderful if North Korea were led by an omnibenevolent, infallible, and incorruptible ruler, but if it had such a leader, North Korea would look very different from the way it does look. The fact that many people in North Korea would disagree with us can be explained either by their vested interests in the regime,

by their having been indoctrinated, or by their fear of speaking out.

Not all of earth is as bad as North Korea, but North Korea is part of "God's earth"; so are Afghanistan, Burma, China, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, and Zimbabwe, to name but a few appalling places for many to live...My point is that they all occur within the jurisdiction of a purportedly omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (41-42).

- i)** That's just rehashing the problem of evil. It makes no effort to engage Christian theodicies.
- ii)** Moreover, the comparison is tendentiously one-sided, as if life on earth is unmitigated evil with no compensatory goods.
- iii)** Why does Benatar cling to nihilism? He clutches nihilism to his breast. Don't you dare take my misery away from me! I live to be miserable! That's my purpose in life!

Consider, first, the denial of our mortality. One form this takes is belief in physical resurrection at some future time. If this belief were true it would make death a kind of suspended animation rather than annihilation. Assuming that the resurrected person would either not die a second time...this promises a kind of immortality.

Perhaps more common is the belief in an immortal soul. The comfort sought here is that though our bodies may die, we shall continue in some—preferably blissful—disembodied state despite our corporeal death and decay.

Such beliefs are instances of wishful thinking. We have no evidence that we shall ever be physical resurrected or that we shall endure as disembodied souls after our physical deaths. Religious texts may speak of these phenomena, but even when they are not waxing poetic and metaphorical, they do not constitute evidence. Indeed, it is much more reasonable to believe that death is annihilation of the self (142-43).

If there's evidence that the texts are true, then that's evidence for the truth of what they say.

Are we really to believe that decomposed, cremated, atomically incinerated and ingested bodies are to be reconstituted and reanimated? The challenges in understanding the mechanics of this dwarf even the other notable problems, such as the logistics of physically accommodating all the resurrected (143).

I don't see any difficulty in principle. A body is a specific organization of matter. God can recreate a particular body by reproducing that particular pattern of atoms and molecules. A body is a concrete exemplification of an abstract pattern. God has the power to replicate a specific configuration of atoms and molecules.

These practical problems do not confront the belief in an immortal soul, but that belief faces no shortage of other problems. We have plenty of evidence that our consciousness is a product of our brains. When we are given general anesthesia—administered to our physical bodies and affecting our physical brains—we lose consciousness. When our brains are deprived of oxygenate or when we suffer a sufficiently powerful blow to the head, we similarly lose consciousness. It seems unlikely that consciousness, so vulnerable even

during life, could then survive the death and decay of our brains (143-44).

i) Of course, those are cliché-ridden objections to dualism. But it's not as if dualists are speechless in the face of stock objections. On the one hand, based on the receiver view of William James and the filter view of Aldous Huxley, physicalism and substance dualism are empirically equivalent.

On the other hand, there's positive evidence (e.g. veridical near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, terminal lucidity, apparitions of the dead) that the mind can function independent of the body, so that tips the scales in favor of dualism.

ii) So long as the mind is coupled with the brain, that coupling will affect transmission—in both directions. We'd expect that given interactionist dualism.

Fried earthworms

As I enjoy a break from my writing projects to watch the World Cup I've taken to spending my evenings after my son goes to bed lying on the sofa watching 22 grown men running around after a piece of inflated leather. My wife thinks it's really rather pointless, lacking any important goal. What does it matter? Who really cares who wins? Will it make any difference to the world whether Brazil or Argentina or Holland wins?

And of course there seems to be something innate in us which makes us ask this very question of our own existence and take a shot at an answer. We're born. We engage in years of intensive education. We try to get the best job we can, earning as much money as we can, and get a bit of enjoyment along the way. All the time we age, our bodies weaken, and before we know it it's nearly all over and all that's left is a young person inside an old body wondering what the hell happened. Before we know it our lives have taken a dive and we're in a box. And is that it? Are we just worm food after that? What if atheism is true and there is no greater purpose to life? If atheism is true isn't life just as meaningless and purposeless as watching 22 grown men chasing a ball?

What if atheism is true.....

We know that eventually our sun will burn up our planet. We know also that the universe itself will "die" as, in all probability, it expands and becomes more dilute, cold, desolate and pitch black. All the genius of humanity will be forgotten. Every witty invention will have gone to the wall. Everyone cured of illness by the

finely honed skills of a doctor will have succumbed to death, and their doctors along with them. Every piece of art destroyed. Every building turned to dust and scattered. Every river dried up. Every mountain flattened. Every star burned out. The Milky Way galaxy will have spiralled out of existence. The sombrero galaxy will be ripped apart and broken. The Big Dipper will have dipped. Taurus hunted down and destroyed. The Gemini twins torn asunder never to be reunited. The universe will end in blind pitiless indifference to everything humanity ever was or did or saw. And there is no one to save us.

Of course, this rather foul picture is true on atheism only. This will almost certainly be the end of all things if there is no God to intervene. I'm no fan of atheism and therefore I don't believe this will be how it all ends. But what if atheism is true? Is life therefore meaningless, purposeless and valueless? Can we do nothing but despair? So much of existentialist literature can be summarized as the despondent cry "God does not exist! What on earth are we to do now?!"

Some theists even attempt to make arguments from the meaning of life to the existence of God, which typically take the form:

1. If God does not exist then life does not have any meaning.
2. Life does have meaning.
3. Therefore God exists.

As a theist whose belief in the existence of God is amongst the strongest beliefs I hold I have to confess I don't find arguments concerning the meaning of life to be of much value. The first half of this argument

doesn't appeal to me. True enough if God does not exist then there is no "transcendent" meaning, no eternal purpose to life. If, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever," then in the absence of God our lives no longer have this purpose. But what is supposed to follow from this? Does it follow that nothing has any meaning or purpose or value? William Lane Craig reckons that because – on atheism – man ends in nothing then he is nothing. But is that correct?

It strikes this theist as flat out false to say that if atheism is true then nothing has any meaning, purpose or value. I can imagine someday waking up after an argument with the World's Most Intelligent Atheist" who has managed to help me see the error of my theistic ways. I pay the penalty of the encounter and I'm forced to admit that there is no God after all. Now, would it follow that in this new universe I inhabit that nothing has any meaning or value or purpose? I really don't see how. On my first day on team atheist I wake up and go to see my son in his bedroom. He's no longer fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, but he's still my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. I read him the next thrilling chapter in Harry Potter and the enjoyment we both get from that time together remains just as strong. I don't see why such moments require an external source to give them meaning or value or purpose.

It seems to me that much of what we experience in the world is experienced by us as intrinsically good; meaning good for its own sake and not for some end. I might go for a stroll along a sunny seaside. I walk on particles of sand scattered randomly by a universe that didn't have the pleasures of my feet in mind when it

threw the beach into existence. The sun warming my skin isn't there for my benefit. The wind blowing through my hair doesn't care if I find it annoying or pleasant. And yet as I stroll along the experience may well be an incredibly pleasurable one. Moreover, this isn't an experience for some end. It's not that there's some transcendent meaning behind it. It's simply pleasurable. It's enjoyable. I like it.

In the same way if atheism is true and there is no greater purpose to our life, nothing that stretches into eternity, no divinely given mission or goal, there still remains this phenomenon which we might call the joy of mere being. This is the enjoyment we derive simply from being alive, from living in and enjoying our little corner of the universe. From watching a sunset, or hiking up a hill. It's the sheer intrinsic pleasure of sitting with my son in a tent in the back garden and listening to the rain outside while we eat chocolates and sweets in abundance. We have an entire universe at which to marvel, and no prohibition on the extent to which we may explore it.

Moreover most of us are blessed with family and friendships. I'd hazard a guess that for the vast majority of human beings on the planet the greatest moments in life are shared with other people. And again, these experiences needn't have any transcendent meaning. We simply enjoy them for their own sake. I don't see why such experiences would be meaningless or somehow devoid of meaning or value in an atheistic universe. Most of these experiences are completely self-contained – they don't require anything external to them to make meaningful or valuable.

And whilst it's true on atheism that some day it will all end and be forgotten, it is still very real to each of us. As Marcus Aurelius reminds us we live only in the present; the past has gone, the future is not yet with us. All we ever really possess is the present moment and thus it doesn't matter whether we live for eternity or merely 70 years. Even if one day I will be extinct and forgotten by a universe that doesn't care, my life now is worthwhile – to me and to many others. Life is worth living for its own sake.

Which brings me back to the World Cup. It might be nothing more than a bit of rather pointless play. But like life itself it's enjoyable, it's engaging, and even inspiring. So even if it might all really be for nothing in the end it was worth it at the time, and if you're reading this you can be glad that the final whistle has not yet sounded.

<https://stephenjgraham.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/football-atheism-and-the-meaning-of-life/>

- i)** Someone with his attitude has a very weak hold on Christianity if he thinks there's so little to lose in case secularism is true.
- ii)** If this life is all there is, that promotes a ruthless, dog-eat-dog competitiveness.
- iii)** Yes, walking barefoot in the sand feels just as good to the touch whether or not God exists. By the same token, having intercourse with a sexbot may feel just as good to the touch as intercourse with a real woman, but isn't there something seriously lacking in that experience? It does matter what lies behind appearances.

iv) Is he really that upbeat? Just recently he said:

I'll be turning 40 this year, which means that the best part of my life is almost certainly behind me.

<https://stephenjgraham.wordpress.com/2018/02/14/why-im-largely-abandoning-philosophy-of-religion/>

Yet only four years ago he was extolling the joys of fatherhood. Does a man with a growing son normally say the best part of his life is almost certainly behind him? Isn't fatherhood supposed to be one of the high-points of life? So how much of his 2014 post is rhetorical bravado he doesn't actually believe in?

v) What about people who are condemned to lead lives of abject misery through no fault of their own? What does atheism have to offer them?

vi) When I go for walks I sometimes see earthworms writhing on the sidewalk. They made the fatal mistake of crossing the sidewalk, but they become disoriented and burn up on the hot pavement. The universe is indifferent to their plight. The sun incinerates their living flesh. Usually there's no observer to even see them as they twist and thrash into dried up bits of protoplasm. They perish alone. If secularism is true, then past and future generations are just so many fried earthworms littering the sidewalk.

Ephemeral streams

Professing Christians commit apostasy for a variety of reasons, but here's one reason: I think that, in a nutshell, this is all a lot of Christians are taught: we are sinners, for God to forgive us, we must put our faith in Christ. That's the only way to avoid damnation.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that message as far as it goes. Indeed, mainline denominations fail to preach that fundamental truth.

But there's a limitation to that message. The rewards and sanctions are internal to the theological paradigm. If you come to reject the paradigm, you may feel that you have nothing to lose since the stakes are defined by the paradigm. For the prospective apostate, Christianity offers a make-believe solution to a make-believe problem. Sin is a theological category. If you don't believe in sin, if you don't believe in God, then there's no need for the Cross, no need for divine forgiveness. No heaven or hell.

To take a comparison: in traditional Catholic theology, we are born hellbound due to original sin. Baptism shifts us from the hellbound lane to the heavenbound lane. But that's just temporary since we can slip back to the hellbound lane at any time. Therefore, we need a lifelong maintenance program of Penance, Communion, and Last Rites to stay in a state of grace. The reason Luther posed such a threat to Catholicism is that when he rediscovered the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, that implicitly nullified the entire Catholic paradigm. (Mind you, Catholicism had fudge factors, and it eventually ditched the traditional paradigm. The priesthood and sacramental system is an empty shell.)

Christianity is often presented in such a way that the rewards and sanctions have no significance outside the Christian framework. If you reject the framework, you have nothing to fear since the rewards and sanctions take the framework for granted, and have no reality beyond it.

But Christians need to understand that naturalism has its own sanctions, without any compensatory rewards. Christians need to consider the cost of naturalism.

Is human life of any value if we pass into oblivion when we die?

If naturalistic evolution is true, then the things we value are the arbitrary result of how the mad scientist of natural selection wired our brains. Like in the animal world where some mothers defend their young while other mothers eat their young. Or the Terminator which is programmed to kill John Connor the first time around, then reprogrammed to protect him the second time around.

If naturalistic evolution is true, there is no right or wrong, just winners and losers.

Part of enlightened self-interest is to consider the consequences of different positions. Suppose you stood before three doors. Suppose you know that if you pass through door 3 there's a 70% chance you will be electrocuted. Suppose you don't know what will happen if you pass through doors 1 & 2. For all you know there might be a 100% chance you will be electrocuted. Even so, it makes better sense in that situation to opt for the unknown danger rather than the known danger.

Suppose for the sake of argument that the evidence for Christianity and naturalism was about the same. But the

consequences are not the same. It would be foolhardy to bet on naturalism, because there's no payback. This is why I collect statements by atheists who are candid enough to admit what naturalism represents:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/sisyphus.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/hampster-on-wheel.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/disenchant-ed-naturalism.html>

Atheists say we should follow the truth. But what if the truth is a door that will electrocute anyone who goes through that door? Isn't that an option you should scratch off the list?

Atheists are like a suicide cult where you mustn't disappoint the team. You go first!

Now I'm not suggesting that Christian faith is just about playing a role or acting as if it's true. At some point there needs to be genuine conviction.

Suppose you have a choice between living in the desert or living by an ephemeral stream. Either way, you may die of thirst, but if you live in the desert you're bound to die of thirst!

A Christian whose faith is wavering should keep on doing Christian things. That's the only source of hope. Naturalism

is hopeless.

Bored to death

I'm going to revisit a statement by atheist philosopher Michael Tooley:

Finally, there is the brief span of human life, and the inevitability of bodily death. This feature of human life seems very unsatisfactory from a moral point of view, as it both places a severe limit upon the possibilities for personal growth and intellectual development, and ends relationships between people that are often deep and enduring. In a well designed world, surely, the lives of people, and the relationships between them, would be completely open-ended, free to develop indefinitely, with no terminus imposed from without. Michael Tooley, "A brief catalogue of some notable evils", **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD** (Blackwell 2008), 113.

Fact is that for many people, the problem is not that life is too short but that life is too long. Many people already find life tedious decades before they die. They don't have enough to live for. They turn to drugs and alcohol. They pad their lives with frenetic busyness and ephemeral entertainment to stave off the sense of emptiness, pointlessness, deadening repetition. That's especially problematic for unbelievers. But even for believers, much of what they hear in church is so repetitious that it palls. Many people are restless because there's not enough to look forward to from day to day. They lack a theological imagination.

Does life matter?

Does life matter? Surely there's no more important question in ethics.

1. According to nihilism, including antinatalism (which is a paradigm version of nihilism), it's better not to exist in the first place. And that's not just a hypothetical position to fill out the logical continuum of possible views, but a live option. Nihilism regards human existence as irredeemably tragic.

2. According to Epicureanism, existence and nonexistence are equivalent. Prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are interchangeable. Although nominally heathen, the Epicurean view of life and death, as well as the nihilist, are essentially atheistic. We're on our own.

It would be interesting to see a debate between an Epicurean and a Christian annihilationist! An Epicurean doesn't think oblivion is bad.

There are some people who say postmortem nonexistence is significant in a way that prenatal nonexistence is not. They only agree with one side of the Epicurean comparison.

3. Here's one way to view the issue: Suppose you're the proud father of a teenage son. I offer you \$10 million to step into a time machine and contracept his existence. If you take the offer, you will travel back to point shortly before he was conceived, and do something to preempt his conception.

I doubt most fathers would accept the offer. For one thing, they couldn't stand to lose their son. But over and above that, they couldn't bring themselves to do that to their own son. To deprive him of existence.

Yet on the time-travel scenario, by taking that preemptive and retroactive action, the father made it the case that his son had no existence to begin with, for the new timeline replaces the original timeline. It's as if he never existed. He has no counterpart in the new timeline. And the father may or may not remember the original timeline (depending on how we detail the thought-experiment).

On Epicurean grounds, his nonexistence is insignificant. Yet I expect most fathers would balk at the prospect.

And that's germane to the question of whether God, if there is a God, ought to intervene more often to prevent evil. Is that a reasonable expectation?

Problem is, whenever God intervenes, that's analogous to a time-traveler who changes the past to change the future. Which doesn't mean that God never intervenes. But there are tradeoffs. When people imagine a better world, an improvement over the status quo, they men

Is God a postulate?

Oppy is arguably the smartest philosophical atheist of his generation, so he's a useful foil:

Theoretical virtues:

Simplicity: If everything else is equal, we should prefer the theory that postulates fewer (and less complex) primitive entities.

It is clear that Naturalism is simpler than Theism: it postulates fewer kinds of entities...According to Theism, there are two kinds of entities—natural and supernatural—whereas according to Naturalism there is only one kind. Graham Oppy, **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave 2013), 7,19.

Several problems with that argument:

i) I'm not sure what he means by "primitive entities," but I assume he means something other things derive from, that's not derived from other things. If so, then Christian theism has just one primitive entity: God. But in that event, Christian theism meets the condition of simplicity. You can't get much simpler than only one primitive entity.

ii) What makes less complex primitive entities a theoretical virtue? A violin is simpler than a violinmaker. A toy is simpler than a toymaker.

Perhaps Oppy is operating with the notion that complicated things are composed of parts. That complexity is reducible to simpler and ultimately simple constituents. A planetary

biosphere is more complex than the early stages of the universe. A body is composed of parts, composed of molecules, composed of atoms, composed of elementary particles. That's a bottom-up model of reality. Reality constructed from the smallest or simplest building blocks.

But what about topdown models of creativity? Da Vinci's mind is more complex than his paintings. Bach's mind is more complex than his music. Dante's mind is more complex than his fiction. On that view, artifacts are simpler exemplifications of mentality. Instances of something more complex.

Or take an abstract object like the Mandelbrot set. Infinitely complex, although it can be represented in finite instances.

iii) I don't know what in particular he has in mind by supernatural entities. Plausible candidates include God, angels, demons, and ghosts. If so, his methodology is eccentric. The way we usually establish if something exists is not by whether that satisfies a theoretical virtue like simplicity, but whether there's any direct evidence, indirect evidence, or counterevidence.

iv) Apropos (iii), supernatural entities aren't necessarily or even generally postulates. Although they can sometimes be invoked for their explanatory value, in many cases, people say that supernatural entities exist because they claim to experience supernatural entities. Not a postulate but a direct encounter. Not a posit but an observation. Now, Oppy can dispute the credibility of such reports, but it's a different category than a theoretical postulate. Reality is something we generally discover rather than intuit.

Gerrymandering naturalism

Ultimately, determination of the comparative theoretical virtues of theories is a global matter: what counts is which theory does better overall, on an appropriate weighting of theoretical commitment, explanation of data, predictive accuracy, fit with established knowledge, and so forth. In particular, then, when it comes to questions about data, what matters is which theory does better at explaining total data.

Roughly speaking, it seems to me that, while there are no particular theoretical commitments of naturalism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, there may be particular theoretical commitments of theism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe.

On the one hand, there is no natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theory of naturalism that prompts questions, or worries, or issues related to the distribution of suffering or flourishing in our universe. On naturalistic accounts of the origins and evolution of life on earth, there is nothing surprising about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. In particular, there are no theoretical commitments of naturalism—no ontological or ideological commitments of naturalism—that are keyed to the data about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth; there are no special hypotheses that naturalists introduce to accommodate or to explain the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth.

On the other hand, it is pretty much universally recognized that the same is not true for theism. In this case, there may be natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theories that do prompt questions, or worries, or issues that are related to the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, and, in particular, to the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. If we suppose—as theists typically do, that, in the beginning, there was nothing but a perfect being—omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so forth—and if everything else is the creation of that perfect being, then what explains the presence of evil in our universe? If we suppose—as theists typically do—that God exercises strong providential control over everything that happens and that God would prefer that we do not suffer, then why is it that we suffer as we do?

Furthermore, it is pretty much universally recognized that there may be theoretical commitments of theistic worldviews that are keyed to the distribution of suffering in our universe. Some theists suppose that the distribution of horrendous natural evil is a consequence of the activities of demons and other malign supernatural agents; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there *are* demons and other malign supernatural agents is that this supposition *explains* the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe. Some theists suppose that God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil that is found in our universe is, in part, due to God's recognition that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being an at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous

moral evil is that this supposition *explains* God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe. Graham Oppy, "The Problems of Evil," N. N. Trakakis, ed. **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: EIGHT VIEWS IN DIALOGUE** (Cambridge 2018), chap. 3.

i) Oppy's basic strategy, which he's expressed in numerous venues, is to use simplicity as a criterion to eliminate philosophical contenders. Yet he admits that while a particular position may be simpler in one respect, the final grade relies on the overall explanatory power of competing worldviews, rather than isolated cases of superior simplicity.

ii) The immediate objection is that naturalism requires no special explanation for the distribution of evil or suffering in the world. Naturalism is, in itself, an explanation. An atheist doesn't believe in naturalism in spite of suffering and evil. Rather, that phenomenon is easily accounted for given naturalism. By contrast, a Christian believes in Christian theism despite suffering and evil. A Christian is forced to posit additional hypotheses to save their religious theory from falsification. Naturalism doesn't need these epicycles. In naturalism, nothing extra is needed over and above naturalism itself to account for the distribution of suffering and evil.

iii) One problem with Oppy's analysis is the way he uses "suffering" and "evil" as synonyms. But "evil" has ethical and teleological connotations that "suffering" does not. For instance, suffering in the sense of "moral evil" is irreducibly ethical or teleological. Something went wrong.

iv) You can take naturalism or atheism as a starting-point, but move to Christian theism from that secular starting-

point. Many atheists act as if the world is not the way it's supposed to be. So that's not just a point of tension generated by a Christian outlook. Many atheists are profoundly disturbed by the world as they find it.

Likewise, consider Buddhism. That's a useful frame of reference because Buddhism is pre-Christian and naturalistic. It wasn't influenced by Christianity and Judaism. Yet it reflects a fundamental disaffection with the world as it stands. Life is so irredeemably bad that we must practice radical emotional detachment.

Ironically, most atheists, even though they think this world is all there is, are alienated from the world as it is. And they often turn to utopian schemes to rectify the problem. Therefore, Oppy's contrast between Christianity and naturalism is deceptive.

v) Then there's the question of whether physical organisms are even capable of suffering. Eliminative materialists argue that an arrangement of particles can't generate psychological states. So naturalists like Oppy do posit something extra ("suffering") to accommodate phenomena. That's not a feature of naturalism, but a grudging concession in spite of naturalism. Hence, many naturalists are guilty of gerrymandering to accommodate recalcitrant data consistent with their physicalism.

vi) Which theists attribute natural evils to demonic agency? Unless I'm misremembering, Plantinga floated that in response to the logical problem of evil. But that's a question of consistency rather than plausibility. In folk theology it's common to attribute natural evils to vindictive gods or demons.

However, belief in demonic agency isn't primarily an apologetic postulate to explain the distribution of horrendous natural evil on earth. Rather, many people claim to experience the activity of malevolent spirits. Belief in evil spirits has, in the first instance, an evidential basis. Indeed, that's well-documented. Sometimes it is then pressed into service as an apologetic explanation for certain natural evils—yet theologians don't appeal to demonic agency to explain natural evils in general, but only limited range of natural evils whose specific characteristics invite that supernatural diagnosis.

vii) The reason for believing there are second-order goods is religious in one respect but independent of religion in another. It is dependent on religion in the sense that good and evil are normative concepts which make no sense in a naturalistic paradigm. However, the principle of nested relations isn't essentially religious, but a matter of logically inclusive paired relations, viz. you can't be somebody's grandson unless you're somebody's son.

Secular neutrality

On Twitter, Jeff Lowder attempted to respond to my post (unless his tweets are sheer coincidence):

Did you know that "I (the speaker) exist" and "It's hot on the surface of the sun" are both consistent with nihilism? No one worries about that, so why do some apologists think it's a big deal that atheism is consistent with nihilism?

For the glaringly obvious reason that logical consistency with the surface temperature of the sun has no bearing on whether human life is important or worthwhile—which is hardly analogous to the logical consistency of atheism with nihilism.

To take a comparison, suppose I'm a churchgoing member of the Khmer Rouge. Suppose I defend my behavior by saying Christianity is neutral on the Khmer Rouge. It's theologically consistent for a Christian to support or oppose the Khmer Rouge.

Or suppose I'm a churchgoing Stalinist. I helped Stalin plan the forced famines. Suppose I defend my behavior by saying Christianity is neutral on Stalinism, It's theologically consistent for a Christian to support or oppose policies that starve millions of men, women, and children.

Would that be "uninteresting"? To the contrary, it would be extremely discrediting.

While atheism is consistent with nihilism, that fact is uninteresting because an atheist can consistently hold

other beliefs which entail that nihilism is false. (Again, atheism doesn't entail nihilism.)

Aside from the fact that Jeff is begging the question (since it's arguable that atheism does entail nihilism), his response illustrates his persistent blindspot. Is it really uninteresting to say a consistent atheist can be or not be a moral and existential nihilist?

Suppose we said Buddhism is neutral on nihilism, so that a consistent Buddhist may rape little girls and torture elderly women while other Buddhists may, with equal consistency, disapprove of that behavior. Buddhism is indifferent about raping little girls and torturing elderly women.

Would that be an uninteresting fact about Buddhism? Or would that be a revealing and disreputable fact about Buddhism?

Is the appeal to consequences a fallacy?

For many Christian apologists, a stock argument in their gallery of arguments is the claim that consistent atheism commits the atheist to moral and/or existential nihilism. I myself deploy that argument. Some atheists respond by claiming that's a fallacious appeal to consequences.

1. Sometimes this involves the angry accusation that Christians are misdefining atheism. Atheism is not a philosophy or worldview but simply disbelief in a god or gods—so we are told.

i) There's no official definition of atheism. There are multiple definitions of atheism:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/#DefiAthe>

ii) In popular usage, atheism is often a synonym for naturalism. And usage drives the meaning of words.

iii) But even in philosophical usage, atheism can be equivalent to naturalism, viz. "naturalism lies at the core of atheism," J. Baggini, **ATHEISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION** (Oxford 2003), 5.

iv) I'd add that the word "entail" has a popular definition as well as a philosophical definition. You need to distinguish between ordinary usage and technical usage. Both are legitimate in their respective domains.

2. There are several sites on the Internet that list and define fallacies. But I can't help noticing that most of them seem to be run by atheists. These sites exist for the specific purpose of attacking Christianity. That's often obvious from the examples they use to illustrate a fallacy (or alleged fallacy).

Another question is how many of these sites are run by professional logicians, or even professional philosophers. Why would I rely on someone who's not a professional logician, or even a professional philosopher, for definitions of a logical or informal fallacy?

Moreover, I can't help noticing that these sites define fallacies with Christian theism as the target. The obvious danger that presents is a tendentious definition custom-made to single out the opposing position. That's a made-up fallacy masquerading under an impressive-sounding label. A philosophically serious category of logical or informal fallacies doesn't begin with what you oppose, then invent a corresponding fallacy to invalidate the opposing position.

If you Google "appeal to consequences," and peruse the sites where that's discussed, there's a lack of uniformity as well as a conspicuously amateurish quality to the analysis. It would be more impressive to quote from up-to-date academic textbooks on logical or informal fallacies. Or articles in journals by professional logicians.

3. It also depends on what precisely the Christian apologist is claiming. Is he claiming that the consequences of atheism disprove atheism?

Even at that level, there's nothing necessarily fallacious about contending that certain kinds of consequences falsify a position. For instance, it's often said that global

skepticism is self-refuting. Related examples include alethic nihilism or epistemic nihilism. These can be formulated in terms of per impossibile counterfactuals. There's nothing fallacious about that kind of argument.

4. However, even if we grant for discussion purposes that the appeal to consequences is fallacious when employed to show that something is false, it doesn't follow that it's fallacious to take consequences into consideration when we evaluate the merits of a position. After all, atheists routinely appeal to consequences as part of their standard attack on Christianity. They gleefully quote "offensive" passages from the Bible. They rail against Christian ethics. They rail about how Christianity forces believers to commit intellectual suicide. They complain about how Christianity is at war with science. And so on and so forth.

5. The fact that many atheists are so defensive about the claim that atheism entails moral and/or existential nihilism demonstrates that they do think that's damaging, if true. Otherwise, they'd shrug it off by saying, "What's the big deal?"

6. As I've documented in detail, many atheist thinkers are moral and/or existential nihilists. In my reading, moral nihilism is more common. Some atheists edge right up to existential nihilism, but blink. Is that because their position doesn't commit them to existential nihilism—or because it's too unbearable to go there, so they slam on the brakes artificially short of that outcome?

Misplaced zeal

It's revealing to see atheists passionately defend atheism, as if that's a wonderful cause. Even if they think we live in a godless universe, why act like that's something to celebrate rather than lament?

Many people need a cause to live for, and that can be a good thing. But lots of people settle for the wrong cause. They back the wrong horse. But because that's their only cause in life, they defend it to the death as if their life depended on it, as if it was a worthy cause. Having made a bad pick, they devote the rest of their time defending their bad pick. Since that's all they live for, even though it's stupid, they cling to it for dear life.

Escapism

Suppose you're awaked from sleep by a sound. Say you were dreaming. Only you're not sure if the sound occurred outside the dream or inside the dream. Probably outside.

So you're lying in bed, in that twilight condition where you could either will yourself to get out of bed, become fully awake, or just lie in bed until you drift back to sleep. Maybe you were having a nice dream, and if you fall asleep, the dream will resume.

Should you prefer reality or fantasy? Atheists frequently act as though we have a duty to face up to reality, no matter what. And all things being equal, I agree, although I don't agree on atheist grounds.

On the cusp of adolescence, I saw *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1971). It's about a political prisoner in the gulag. Suppose I wake up in a gulag, or POW camp, or concentration camp. I was having a nice dream. Maybe an erotic dream. Or maybe I was dreaming about my family. I have real family, but I'm cut off. The only chance I have to be with my family is when I dream about them. Sure, that's not real. Wistfully blending memory and imagination. But it's a whole lot better than my grim reality.

Do I have a duty to embrace my unbearable reality behind the razor wire? Or is it okay for me to continue dreaming about a better life?

Even from a secular standpoint, why shouldn't I prefer my fantasy life in dreams to my grinding, despairing existence in the reality of the gulag, or POW camp, or concentration

camp? For that matter, how many disapproving atheists idle away their leisure time on escapist video games?

Suppose I'm a Christian. If I die in my sleep, I pass from hell on earth to paradise. The dream was the portal to heaven.

God, soul, and the meaning of life

Recently I was reading Thaddeus Metz, **GOD, SOUL AND THE MEANING OF LIFE** (Cambridge 2019). I'll comment on some statements in the book:

this Section articulates the view widely accepted by those party to debates about the role spiritual considerations play in life's meaning, viz., that meaning is not reducible to any other single final value. For most these days, talk of 'life's meaning' (and of synonyms such as 'significant existence' or 'important way of being') signifies a cluster of conditions that are good for their own sake and that can come in degrees. In particular life is usually taken to be meaningful by definition to the extent that it makes sense, forms a narrative, merits 'fitting' reactions such as esteem or admiration, manifests value higher than animal pleasures, realizes a purpose or contributes positively to something beyond itself. Few believe that any single one of these properties exhausts the concept of meaningfulness, although some do (e.g. Nozick 1981: 574–612; Martela 2017). Instead, for most in the field, when we think or speak about life's meaning, we have in mind at least one of these features and quite often more than one as an amalgam.

That's a useful distinction. Something maybe a necessary condition for life to be meaningful without being a sufficient condition.

When it is claimed that God, for instance, is 'necessary' for life's meaning, this is shorthand for 'identical to' it (in part). The claim is not merely that there would be

no meaning without God, but rather that there would be no meaning without God because meaningfulness essentially consists of human life relating to God in a certain way. Hence, it will not support extreme supernaturalism to argue that because the universe would not exist without God having created it, there would be no human life at all and hence also no meaning either in or of human life. At best this reasoning would show that God is instrumentally necessary for life's meaning, i.e., that God is merely a means to the production of meaning, but this is not the relevant claim, which is instead that God must constitute life's meaning as an end.

That's another useful distinction. In my experience, that's a limitation with Jewish ethicists/culture warriors (e.g. Dennis Prager, Michael Medved, Mark Levin, Ben Shapiro).

A soul is taken to be an immortal, spiritual substance that contains our identities and that will survive the deaths of our bodies. A supernaturalist is one who maintains that either God or a soul (or the pair) is central to life's meaning. At least one spiritual condition is deemed to be necessarily constitutive either of meaning as such or of a great meaning, where the relevant life is either that of an individual or of humanity.

i) If the brain was capable of generating consciousness, then in that respect, the soul would be unnecessary. If, on that view, God recreated our brains and memories, then in that respect the soul would be unnecessary. The soul is necessary if there's no functional equivalent. Hypothetically, there could be a substitute for the soul. But if, given the

hard problem of consciousness, that's not possible even in principle, then the soul is indispensable.

ii) That would still be insufficient to form a bridge between death and resurrection. There'd be no intermediate state. It would be like undergoing general anesthesia, not remembering what happened in-between, coming out of sedation and picking up where you left off. The intermediate state is a fringe benefit of the soul.

The standard objection to a purpose-based account of why God is necessary for meaning is that not just any purpose assigned to us is intuitively meaning conferring, and that it is the content of the purpose, not the fact that it has come from God, that makes it meaningful to fulfil or not. Consider, for example, the difference between serving as food for intergalactic travellers (Nagel 1971: 721; Nozick 1981: 586–7) or committing rape (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009: 106), on the one hand, and donating money to the poor, on the other. If God were to assign the former purposes to human beings, they would not confer meaning on our lives, or so most readers will think. If not, then the mere fact that God is the source of a purpose is not what makes it meaningful; it is rather what the purpose would have us do, making the fact that it has come from God irrelevant.

The meaning or purpose is indexed to the nature God endowed us with. It's not an arbitrary assignment. Some actions are improper given the way we were designed. But in naturalism, nature can't be normative. It's just the random byproduct of a mindless, amoral process. We could be wired differently.

It is worth pressing to ask why death is sufficient for there being 'no real value under the sun' (2.11). Sometimes the claim is that it is meaningless for good people to face the same fate as the wicked, where the latter deserve to die (Ecclesiastes 2.14-2.16, 9.2-9.3). Other times, the thought is that nothing is worth doing unless it will have some ultimate consequence for oneself or the universe (Tolstoy 1884).

A world in which everyone shares a common oblivion means nothing we do makes any ultimate difference. So why be good?

More recently, some have suggested that, insofar as a meaningful life is a worthwhile one, a worthwhile life would only be one that enjoyed happiness for all eternity (Goetz 2012).

One way to develop that principle is to argue that life is too short to develop our human potential.

Regardless of the exact reason for thinking that having been created only by God would be sufficient for the meaning of life, there are at least two major concerns for this position. One is an analogical objection to the idea that humanity's source is crucial to its meaningfulness. Just as an individual person's life can be meaningful, even if his parents had created him accidentally, so the life of the species can be meaningful, even if it had arisen by chance. Consider, for instance, the life of Albert Einstein, often taken to be an exemplar of meaningfulness in the philosophical literature. 'In judging whether his life was meaningful, no one would ever ask "Was his existence intended?"' (Trisel 2012: 400). By analogy, if the existence of the

human race as a whole can be significant, it is probably not its origin that is essentially at stake.

It doesn't follow that because your life is meaningful even if your mother got pregnant by "accident", your life is meaningful if we inhabit an accidental universe. On a Christian worldview, an "accidental pregnancy," even if unintended by the parents, was intended by God.

To take a comparison, a game of chance has a random element. But it also has rules. There's more to a game of chance than randomness. There's a structure that underlies the element of chance. But if it was random all the way down, it wouldn't even be a *game* of chance. It needs more than sheer chance to be challenging or entertaining.

Here is a second reason for doubting that humanity's source is the key to its meaning. Suppose that the human race had been created by God, where such creation is alone constitutive of its meaning. In that case, there would be nothing to be done on the part of humanity in respect of its being meaningful. No matter what human beings were to do, considered as a collective, humanity would be meaningful for having been created by the right agent and for the right purpose. However, most enquirers into life's meaning, including into the meaning of the human race, believe that what is crucially at stake is what shape that life should take upon having come into existence.

But that just means the nature of the source is a necessary rather than sufficient condition for life to be meaningful.

Some arguments advanced against having a soul or otherwise being immortal appear, upon reflection, to be best construed as objections to having a belief in it.²⁶

Consider, for instance, the claim that if one would live forever, then one would not prioritize or be motivated to do very much, in the expectation of another tomorrow in which to get everything done (James 2009; May 2009: 45–7, 60–72; Scheffler 2013: 99–101).

But that's circular. To a great extent, prioritization is a virtue in a world where time is at a premium. But is it still a virtue in a world where there's all the time in the world?

Mind you, some things remain more important than others even if immortality is true. Not having to meet a deadline doesn't mean all activities become equally important or unimportant. The relative importance of an activity is independent of the order in which you do things.

The same concern applies, at least to some degree, to the suggestion that if we were immortal, our lives could not display an important sort of virtue (Nussbaum 1989: 338–9; Wielenberg 2005: 91–2). If we cannot die, then we cannot risk our lives for the sake of others, and if others cannot die, then we cannot save anyone else's life. It seems that the meaningfulness of being a doctor, lifeguard, firefighter or the like depends on our not having a soul and instead having only this earthly, mortal life.

A third prominent argument for thinking that more meaning would come from an atheist world²⁸ turns on the impossibility of making certain kinds of moral sacrifice in a world with God (Wielenberg 2005: 91–4; Hubin 2009; Maitzen 2009; Sinnott-Armstrong 2009: 114). In at least one atheist world, people could face the prospect of undeserved harm, where substantial meaning in life intuitively would come from an agent

making a sacrifice so that others do not suffer that. It would, for instance, confer some meaning on one's life to suffer some pain in order to prevent an innocent child from being burned alive. However, by a standard conception of God, He would always compensate any undeserved harm suffered while on earth.²⁹ That means that a mother who undergoes pain in order to prevent her son from experiencing intense suffering makes no real sacrifice, since God will make it up to her.

That's an interesting objection to Christian immortality, but in that regard, naturalism generates an empathetic or moral dilemma. Is there something ignoble or improper about having an ineluctable element of self-interest? Should I be morally obligated to make the ultimate sacrifice? Or is that unreasonable? What if there's too much to lose?

If you think this life is all there is, isn't it foolhardy to squander your unrepeatable opportunity? If the price of moral heroism or heroic altruism is oblivion, why would you risk it? And if everyone passes into oblivion, why sacrifice your life for theirs? What makes their life more valuable than your own?

And not just oblivion. What about the danger of being horribly maimed? Living in chronic excruciating pain or disability, with no hope of restoration? In a godless universe, how is that obligatory?

Christianity liberates us to hazard our life and health because it relieves the unbearable empathetic dilemma, where we want to get involved, but intervention is too risky, too costly. As social creatures, we find meaning in life in part by sharing our lives with others. But there have to be some situations in which it's safe to let your guard down.

If repetition is unavoidable, might meaning reside in the ability to display certain attitudes in the face of an eternal recurrence of the same (suggested by Nietzsche)? Or might substantial enough meaning be available from the parts of one's life considered in themselves, even if they repeated some millions or billions of years down the road?

Another argument against having a soul or otherwise living forever also invokes considerations about the pattern of the life as a whole. Some maintain that essential to a particularly meaningful life is some kind of narrative, where there could not be a narrative to an eternal life (Scarre 2007: 58–60). At the core of a narrative is a beginning, a middle and an end, and the suggestion is that a life that never ends would be incapable of forming a narrative. An existence without a life-story could be happy or moral, so the argument goes, but would be missing meaning in it, or at least one key sort.

i) What makes life interesting and fulfilling depends in part on a dialectical dynamic between continuity and variety, stability and change. Too much repetition is mind-numbing, but too much fragmentation is alienating. Take the proverbial army brat who never lives long enough in one place to form lasting friendships.

Pauline Kael never saw a movie twice. But there's something shallow and desperate about that, as if life is just about living in the moment, experiencing something new, never looking back, never savoring the past. Squeeze in as much as you can before time runs out. Some people come back to a book or movie after a long absence, and discover new things they didn't notice the first time. It may have a

resonance it didn't have the first time, because life changes them. They didn't get it the first time around. They weren't ready for it. Memory becomes more layered over the course of a lifetime, with increasingly dense associations.

ii) In *The Last Picture Show*, most of the characters are restless and unfulfilled. Ironically, the only happy character is Billy. Due to his cognitive disability, sweeping a dusty street or playing a hat game with Sonny is enough to make him happy. He doesn't need closure. He isn't bored by repetition.

This goes to a distinction between happiness and fulfillment. His cognitive disability means he has a potential that's never realized. In a sense, he's unfulfilled, but he doesn't know it.

But isn't the difference between raking leaves for fun and playing sports for fun a difference of degree rather than kind? We're finite creatures. The ceiling for human fulfillment isn't stratospheric.

Along with (or part of) a lack of independence has been a concern regarding a lack of privacy that would be unavoidable if God existed (Kahane 2011, 2018; Loughheed 2017). God's being all-good and hence a perfect moral judge means that He would be apprised of all our mental states. God's being all-knowing likewise appears sufficient for Him to know everything about us.

i) What if that's a necessary price for existing? To be a creature is to be contingent on another.

ii) In terms of Calvinism, God isn't an eavesdropper. Rather, he wrote the script. It's not embarrassing for God to know

what I'm thinking if God caused my thoughts in the first place.

iii) Naturalism doesn't avoid radical dependence. It simply relocates the issue. Humans are now dependent on a universe that's indifferent to their needs and aspirations. Everything they think and feel is the end-product of physical determinism. Brain chemistry.

Moral without God

Many notable atheists thinkers are avowed moral relativists or nihilists. However, there are atheists, especially pop atheists, who say we can be moral without God. Indeed, we can be more virtuous without God because Christian ethics is so deplorable.

Christian philosophers and apologists usually counter that atheists who say we can be moral miss the point. They concede that people can be moral without believing in God. The point, rather, is that morality can't be justified apart from divine creation and revelation.

That's true, but it lets atheists off the hook too easily. From a Christian standpoint, the examples of virtuous atheists are typically atheists raised in a culturally Christian nation. Even though they repudiated Christianity, their social mores were conditioned by Christian values. When, however, we look at social ethics in pre-Christian cultures or secular regimes, or the modern Democrat party, we witness massive cruelty.

Supercentenarians

In the horror genre there are supercentenarian humans or humanoid monsters who maintain virtual immortality by sucking the vital juices out of the young—or purloining their organs. In some versions this is a cyclical process in which they need to rejuvenate every few years. They have a narrow window of opportunity, and become increasingly frantic. Due to the conventional Christian morality of the genre, they typically come to a bad end. When their effort to find fresh young victims to suck dry (or harvest organs) is thwarted, they age centuries in a few minutes.

But what used to be horrific fiction is becoming horrific reality. You have the recent story of Planned Parenthood hawking baby corpses.

You also have a movement to harvest the organs of patients declared to be in a persistent vegetative state. This despite the fact that some comatose patients wake up years later, with mind and memories intact.

In addition, if the society becomes increasingly secularized, some rich folks might endeavor to extend their lifespan having their vital organs replaced with organs harvested from healthy young men. There are parts of the world where you can procure anything if you have enough money. Just bribe the authorities to look the other way.

Of course, you can't replace the brain, but perhaps having newer organs would retard the aging process of the brain.

To be sure, there are medical complications, which are magnified by multiple organ transplants. But desperate people do desperate things.

The Possessed

There are arresting and alarming parallels between the cultural elite in 19C Russia and the pop culture in contemporary America. An incongruous amalgam of moral nihilism, existential nihilism, and utopian totalitarianism.

From what I've read, Peter the Great and Catherine the Great opened Russian high society to the French Enlightenment (e.g. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot). This, in turn, dovetailed with the restless decadence of the idle rich. Something Tolstoy knew firsthand and memorized in novels like **WAR AND PEACE**. In his **CONFESSION**, he documents nihilism among the Russian upper class. And nihilism is a recurring theme in the novels of Dostoyevsky.

Up-to-a-point I think European anti-clericalism was warranted. The venality of the Roman Catholic church was glaring. Both Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky became deeply religious, albeit eccentric. Russian Orthodoxy was a flawed paradigm, so they had to fumble for something more satisfying. The novels of Dostoyevsky, as well as **THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH** (Tolstoy), are a quest for meaning. Notice the parallels between 19C Russia and the liberal establishment in 21C America:

From then onwards he realised that human life was not a movement from a backward past to a better future, as he had believed or half-believed when he shared the ideas of the radical intelligentsia. Instead, every human being stood at each moment on the edge of eternity. As a result of this revelation, Dostoyevsky became

increasingly mistrustful of the progressive ideology to which he had been drawn as a young man.

He was particularly scornful of the ideas he found in St Petersburg when he returned from his decade of Siberian exile. The new generation of Russian intellectuals was gripped by European theories and philosophies. French materialism, German humanism and English utilitarianism were melded together into a peculiarly Russian combination that came to be called "nihilism".

We tend to think of a nihilist as someone who believes in nothing, but the Russian nihilists of the 1860s were very different. They were fervent believers in science, who wanted to destroy the religious and moral traditions that had guided humankind in the past in order that a new and better world could come into being.

Dostoyevsky's indictment of nihilism is presented in his great novel *Demons*. Published in 1872, the book has been criticised for being didactic in tone, and there can be no doubt that he wanted to show that the dominant ideas of his generation were harmful. But the story Dostoyevsky tells is also a dark comedy, cruelly funny in its depiction of high-minded intellectuals toying with revolutionary notions without understanding anything of what revolution means in practice.

The plot is a version of actual events that unfolded as Dostoyevsky was writing the book. A former teacher of divinity turned terrorist, Sergei Nechaev, was arrested and convicted of complicity in the killing of a student. Nechaev had authored a pamphlet, *The Catechism of a Revolutionary*, which argued that any means (including blackmail and murder) could be used to advance the

cause of revolution. The student had questioned Nechaev's policies, and so had to be eliminated.

Dostoyevsky suggests that the result of abandoning morality for the sake of an idea of freedom will be a type of tyranny more extreme than any in the past. As one of the characters in *Demons* confesses: "I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion directly contradicts the original idea from which I start. From unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism."

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30129713>

Chinese organ-harvesting

Communist Chinese organ-harvesting is a diabolical, but clarifying illustration of consistent atheism. Human beings are just meat machines with an expiration date, manufactured other meat machines. The stronger machines strip the weaker machines for spare parts. There is no good or evil, right or wrong, just the powerful and the powerless. Unsentimental atheism.

An atheist dilemma

Militant atheists are duplicitous on what makes life worth living. On the one hand they say you don't need God to have a meaningful life. What makes life meaningful is what's meaningful to you. What you personally value.

On the other hand, they attack Christianity for giving believers false hope. Christians waste the only life they have by banking on the deferred reward of a nonexistent afterlife. They fail to make the most of the only life they will ever have in the here and now through time-consuming religious devotions and prayers and anxieties over sin and sexual inhibitions, because they're staking their ultimate fulfillment on a future payback that will never happen. There is no hereafter, so it's now or never.

Notice, though, that their objection is diametrically opposed to how many atheists justify the significance of their own existence. Many atheists say subjective meaning is sufficient to make life worthwhile. But then, why can't Christians have meaningful lives as Christians, even if (from a secular standpoint) Christianity is false? Sure, it's subjective meaning. It doesn't correspond to objective reality (from a secular standpoint). Yet the same atheists insist that your sense of purpose in life needn't correspond to objective value. Rather, value is what is valuable to each individual.

So why do militant atheists make their mission in life talking Christians out of their faith, or dissuading people from ever considering Christianity in the first place? Is it because they think Christianity is based on wishful thinking? But what if wishful thinking is what makes you feel that you and your loved ones are important in the grand scheme of things? An

atheist can't object on grounds that that's a sentimental projection, for he that's how he defends his own position.

So the atheist has a dilemma on his hands. If subjective meaning is good enough for atheists, why isn't that good enough for deluded Christians?

Disposing of the dead

How a culture disposes of the dead is a cultural interpretation of what human lives mean. It's said that contemporary American culture is post-Christian, but that's simplistic. There's a vibrant, influential Christian presence. But America is highly polarized on the religious question. Many Americans are misotheists.

That's an opportunity to examine what had been unquestioned Christian customs. For the average atheist, a corpse is just a dead body. Even when alive, humans were nothing more than their bodies. Why not treat a corpse as fertilizer? But even from a Christian standpoint, are traditional ways we treat a corpse rationally unwarranted sentimentalism?

Let's take a comparison. Many people take pictures of friends and relatives. They have family pictures at work, on the desk in their office (or cubicle). Or at home on the nightstand or the fireplace mantle. They used to carry family pictures in their wallet. Nowadays, they have family pictures on their smartphone.

Would they stomp on a picture of their mother? No. Although a picture of their mother is not their mother, it represents their mother. In one respect it's just a piece of paper. But it's more than that. If the object represents something, then the action of stomping on the picture represents something as well. For instance, vandalizing the picture of a hated dictator is a symbolic gesture.

So we need to strike a balance. Symbolism isn't everything, but symbolism isn't nothing.

The corpse of your mother (or father or grandmother or wife or brother) isn't your mother, but it still represents your mother. So it's proper to treat it differently than a dead rat.

On the go with nowhere to go

In-between writing, I go for walks. I walk later when sunset is later. I'm struck by the number of cars on the road well after rush hour. It's striking how many people are on still the road when they don't need to be. They aren't driving home from work. Although some drivers pick up a few items at the supermarket after work, I see lots of cars on the road later than that.

And that's just the work week. As a night owl, I also have some awareness of drivers coming home or *leaving* home at midnight, 1AM, 2AM on Friday and Saturday nights.

It's striking in part because lots of people say they hate fighting traffic, yet they spend so much time on the road when they don't have to. It seems as though many people just can't stand to be still. Even in an age with so much home entertainment (music, movies, TV shows, video games), they are fidgety. They have to get in the car and go somewhere, at all hours of the day and night. They have to be on the move. They need the distraction. They have more hours in a day than they know what to do with.

These appear to be people who have nothing better to live for. Driving is filler. Hopping into the car and going somewhere, *anywhere*, is a way to kill time. They can't stand to be alone with their own thoughts. They require constant physical activity. Not to mention the opiate of smartphones.

Ironically, if they were diagnosed with cancer, most of them would undergo any treatment, however painful, however poor the odds of survival, to eke out another five or ten years of life. Yet look at what they do with the time they

already have. Just driving and going places to pass the time. If they had another ten or twenty years, they'd squander the extra time on the road to idle away the extra hours.

I understand that some folks have to be on the road at odd hours of the day and night. But in my anecdotal observation, it seems to be more prevalent than that. Insatiable restlessness.

Living for the moment

Arguing against atheism can pose a bit of a dilemma for a Christian philosopher or apologist. You're having to probe the consequences of a false position. A counterfactual critique. If atheism were true, these would be the consequences (per impossible counterfactuals and reductio ad absurdum conditionals). If, however, atheism is false, then it's unnatural to have a consistently atheistic outlook. It takes an effort of the imagination to project yourself or immerse yourself into that mindset and take it seriously. To the extent, moreover, that atheism is depressing, there's a disincentive for atheists to take their own position as seriously as they ought.

Some atheists honestly admit that they dread the prospect of personal oblivion when they die. But other atheists say, or at least feign, no fear of death. Indeed, some assert that the brevity of life and finality of death are what makes life precious. An unrepeatable opportunity.

Of course, from a Christian standpoint, human beings don't face oblivion when they die. So a Christian apologist is having to explore the consequences of an unreal outcome. And it can be a challenge to fully enter into that artificial perspective.

Some atheists maintain that our ultimate oblivion has no bearing on what makes life significant, important, or meaningful. What matters is what we do in-between.

Let's take a comparison. Suppose a 20-year-old goes to the doctor for an unrelated ailment. After some routine diagnostics, he finds out that he has an inoperable brain aneurism. He feels normal. Feels healthy. But he could drop

dead tomorrow. He won't have a normal lifespan, and he's liable to die sooner rather than later. So that suddenly interjects into his outlook on life a combination of uncertainty and inevitability. He is fated to die young. He has a ticking timebomb in his head. It can detonate at any time, and it will explode.

Or suppose he's diagnosed with a genetic defect which will become a degenerative illness, like MS, ALS, Parkinson's, or Huntington's disease. At the moment he's healthy and asymptomatic. He has several good years ahead of time.

But in both cases, a dire future casts a baleful shadow on the present. Even though he's healthy now, he knows that he's doomed, and his pitiless foreknowledge can't help but change his outlook on life. Unlike animals, humans psychologically occupy past and future as well as the present. What we think awaits us powerfully affects our capacity for happiness at present. Given a choice, we'd rather be miserable at present but with a happy future than be happy at present but with a miserable future. We'd trade a present good for a future good. And that's not irrational. That's because the present will soon be gone. We can't hold onto the present. It is constantly slipping away. But as long as we last, we will always have the future—for better or worse. When it comes to the value of life, we view the present as an backward extension of the future rather than the future as a forward extension of the present.

Which side has the most to lose?

1. There's a perennial dispute between Christians and atheists, where each side thinks the other side has fundamentally mistaken priorities. Both sides think the other side suffers from an irredeemable lost opportunity. Atheists think Christians fritter away the only life they're going to get in their vain hope for a pipe dream that will never materialize. Given that there is no heaven, hell, resurrection, or world to come, the only rational course of action is to make the most of our one unrepeatable opportunity rather than wasting time lamenting our mortality.

Conversely, Christians think atheists fritter away the opportunity to gain eternal bliss by clinging to this fleeting life. They think atheists suffer from a massive lack of perspective. Who's right?

2. On the one hand, it's hard to see what Christians have to lose even if they're mistaken. I say that for the sake of argument, not because I think there's a realistic possibility that they are mistaken. I'm just addressing the atheist viewpoint on their own terms.

i) What exactly, are Christians missing out on? The cliché example is promiscuous sex. But bracketing morality, what's so great about promiscuous sex? Is promiscuous sex more fulfilling than monogamous sex? Was Hugh Hefner's life characterized by contentment and joy? Or was it more like drinking salt water, where you're more thirsty after you had a sip than before, and every time you have a sip, you're increasingly thirsty? The very fact that highly promiscuous men are so promiscuous is evidence that their sexual lifestyle is chronically unsatisfying.

ii) Moreover, most guys never have the opportunities of a Hugh Hefner or Warren Beatty. Even if you'd like to sleep with every beautiful woman you see, that doesn't mean every beautiful woman would like to sleep with you. You must be able to bring something extra special to the table to have that kind of entree. The buy-in for a seat at that table is way above the pay grade of most lumpen.

iii) In addition, isn't there something ridiculous about rampant promiscuity? If you could cover her face, could you tell the difference? Does the sex feel different from one babe to the next? Aren't they essentially interchangeable?

iv) Furthermore, male sexual prowess declines with age. Erogenous zones become less sensitive. So that at a strictly sensual level, sex offers less and less.

v) Finally, do atheists generally lead happier lives than Christians? Not that I can see. So it doesn't seem like a big sacrifice to be a Christian on that score.

vi) Admittedly, there are duties that atheists can shirk off. They can abandon an ailing family member if that crimps their style. But that means the appeal of atheism is nihilistic.

3. On the other hand, having convinced themselves that this life is all you get, I think most atheists are impatient or irate at Christians who fixate on the meaning of life questions. What's the point of harping on how bad it is if that's the undeniable reality? There's nothing you can do about *that*.

But by cushioning themselves from the full implications of their position, by pushing that into the back of their minds,

by refusing to allow the implications to become unbearable, they deny themselves the incentive to consider the possibility that atheism is false and Christianity is true. Because they don't push their own position to the limit, there's no overriding motivation to change course. They can muddle along because they never really take it to heart. They pull back to spare their feelings. The issue loses urgency because they sedated the pinched nerve of nihilism.

In their own words

Ultimate questions

In his book, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (1997), which is a history of Western philosophy told through his own intellectual journey, Magee offers what could be a partial answer to these questions when he describes how in his late thirties, despite having a passionate attachment to life, he was driven to the edge of mental illness, even suicide, by metaphysical terror. He learned to control his terror, which, though he did not say so, recalled Blaise Pascal's fear of "immensity of spaces which I know not and which know not me", through reading the writings of others, notably Arthur Schopenhauer. "I think the feeling of meaninglessness is worst of all, worse than the fear of death itself," Magee said. "The feeling that nothing matters, that there's no point to anything. Certainly, I have experiences, in the forms of extreme existential terror, states of mind that bordered on the intolerable." He also published a novel in which he explored his existential terror, **FACING DEATH** (1977).

The final paragraph of *Ultimate Questions*, in which Magee speculates on how he might feel at the point of death, is especially haunting. "I can only hope that," he writes, "when it is my turn, my curiosity will overcome my fear – though I may then be in the position of a man whose candle goes out and plunges him into pitch darkness at the very instant when he thought he was about to find what he was looking for."

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/04/even-old-age-philosopher-bryan-magee-remains-wonder-struck-ultimate-questions>

A Pig satisfied

Yes you say, but what is the alternative? What about the troubles with atheism? Probably the biggest worry about atheism—leaving aside now truth or falsity issues—is that it seems such a cold and unfriendly sort of business. You may eke out a life, but given atheism, you can hardly have a very joyous life, and any sense of a life with some kind of meaning seems impossible entirely. If there is

no God to make sense of things—if death is death and there is no hereafter and eternity—is anything worthy anything? "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Who cares about standards! That is to play the Christian's game. Just enjoy yourself, or at least indulge your senses to and beyond the full. That is meaning enough to life. When you are dead, you are dead. The ethics of belief really don't come into the equation because either you were right that there is a hereafter or you were wrong and it no longer matters... You might as well start drowning your sorrows in alcohol before you slip off to Belgium to have yourself put down.

Let us grant that you can have a worldview that is not religious in any sense. Does subscribing to such a view mean leaving behind much that makes life worthwhile and renouncing the world rather like a Cistercian monk entering a monastery of a virtually spartan kind? John Stuart Mill's answer would be that even if this is so, if you really believe there is no God, you have no choice but to go this way. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.

I don't mean there won't be times when you are overcome by the existential worthlessness of it all... Don't kid yourself, if you become a nonbeliever, then you have left the security of your childhood. There is no ultimate meaning. And secular attempts to find a substitute, like relying on progress, simply aren't going to do it. It's gone forever. M. Ruse, **ATHEISM: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW** (Oxford 2015), 236-237, 243-45.

When atheism crumbles

My father was the philosopher and political polemicist David Stove. During his undergraduate years, he fell under the spell of the militantly atheistic guru John Anderson of the University of Sydney's philosophy department.

Shortly before Christmas 1993, my mother—who for decades had drunk heavily, smoked compulsively, and eaten hardly at all—suffered a massive stroke. At first she was not expected to live. Gradually, the truth emerged: the stroke, while not powerful enough to have killed her, had robbed her of all speech and nearly all movement.

To watch an adult abruptly transformed before one's eyes into a paralyzed, whimpering vegetable, all too conscious (at least in a general fashion) of what had befallen her, yet as powerless to rectify anything as if she had been six months old, is in a way worse than losing a loved one to Alzheimer's. There, at least, the decay is gradual. This was as abrupt an assault on life as if it had been a homicide. But a homicide can instill in you justified wrath; how can you feel wrath against as impersonal a cutting-down as befell my mother?

From the day of her stroke to the day of her death, almost eight years afterwards, she was in twenty-four-hour-a-day nursing care. By that time my father had long since left the scene. Diagnosed with esophageal cancer, and convinced beyond all reason that his announcement of this diagnosis to Mum had brought about her stroke, Dad simply unraveled. So, to a lesser extent, did those watching him.

All Dad's elaborate atheist religion, with its sacred texts, its martyrs, its church militant; all his ostentatious tough-mindedness; all his intellectual machinery; all these things turned to dust. Convinced for decades of his stoicism, he now unwittingly demonstrated the truth of Clive James's cruel remark: "we would like to think we are stoic...but would prefer a version that didn't hurt."

Already an alcoholic, he now made a regular practice of

threatening violence to himself and others. In hospital he wept like a child (I had never before seen him weep). He denounced the nurses for their insufficient knowledge of Socrates and Descartes. From time to time he wandered around the ward naked, in the pit of confused despair. The last time I visited him I found him, to my complete amazement, reading a small bedside Gideon Bible. I voiced surprise at this. He fixed on me the largest, most protuberant, most frightened, and most frightening pair of eyes I have ever seen: "I'll try anything now."

Eventually, through that gift for eloquence which seldom entirely deserted him, Dad convinced a psychiatrist that he should be released from the enforced hospital confinement which he had needed to endure ever since his threats had caused him to be scheduled. The psychiatrist defied the relevant magistrate's orders, and released my father.

Within twenty-four hours Dad had hanged himself in his own garden.

<http://whyimcatholic.com/index.php/conversion-stories/atheist-converts/96-atheist-convert-rj-stove>

Woody Allen

WA: Well, you know, you want some kind of relief from the agony and terror of human existence. Human existence is a brutal experience to me...it's a brutal, meaningless experience—an agonizing, meaningless experience with some oases, delight, some charm and peace, but these are just small oases. Overall, it is a brutal, brutal, terrible experience, and so it's what can you do to alleviate the agony of the human condition, the human predicament? That is what interests me the most. I continue to make the films

because the problem obsesses me all the time and it's consistently on my mind and I'm consistently trying to alleviate the problem, and I think by making films as frequently as I do I get a chance to vent the problems. There is some relief. I have said this before in a facetious way, but it is not so facetious: I am a whiner. I do get a certain amount of solace from whining.

WA: I feel that is true—that one can commit a crime, do unspeakable things, and get away with it. There are people who commit all sorts of crimes and get away with it, and some of them are plagued with all sorts of guilt for the rest of their lives and others aren't. They commit terrible crimes and they have wonderful lives, wonderful, happy lives, with families and children, and they have done unspeakably terrible things. There is no justice, there is no rational structure to it. That is just the way it is, and each person figures out some way to cope.... Some people cope better than others. I was with Billy Graham once, and he said that even if it turned out in the end that there is no God and the universe is empty, he would still have had a better life than me. I understand that. If you can delude yourself by believing that there is some kind of Santa Claus out there who is going to bail you out in the end, then it will help you get through. Even if you are proven wrong in the end, you would have had a better life.

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/woody>

Pale Blue Dot

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader,"

every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

<http://www.planetary.org/explore/space-topics/earth/pale-blue-dot.html>

Self-reproducing robots

We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.

What are all of us but self-reproducing robots? We have been put together by our genes and what we do is roam the world looking for a way to sustain ourselves and ultimately produce another robot child.

For the first half of geological time our ancestors were bacteria. Most creatures still are bacteria, and each one of our trillions of cells is a colony of bacteria.

– Richard Dawkins

Deleting files

Whenever an animal treats something as an agent, with beliefs and desires (with knowledge and goals), I say that it is adopting the intentional stance or treating that thing as an intentional system.

So powerful is our innate urge to adopt the intentional stance that we have real difficulty turning it off when it is no longer appropriate. When somebody we love or even just know well dies, we suddenly are confronted with a major task of cognitive updating: revising all our habits of thought to fit a world with one less familiar intentional system in it...A considerable portion of the pain and confusion we suffer when confronting a death is caused by the frequent, even obsessive, reminders that our intentional-stance habits throw up at us like annoying pop-up ads but much, much worse. We can't just delete the file in our memory banks, we wouldn't want to be able to do so. What keeps many habits in place is the pleasure we take from indulging in them. And so we dwell on them, drawn to them like a moth to a candle. We preserve relics and other reminders of the deceased persons, and make images of them, and tell stories about them, to prolong these habits of mind even as they start to fade.

– Daniel Dennett, **BREAKING THE SPELL: RELIGION AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON** (Penguin 2006), 110, 112.

Dionysian pessimism

One question that often comes up with so-called pessimist thinkers like Schopenhauer is, if it's all for naught, life has no purpose, and non-existence is preferable to existence, then why bother writing it all down? So the first thing one has to grapple with is space of uncertainty and unresolved-ness that marks out the terrain of this kind of philosophy. There's a bit of irony or hypocrisy in a lot of the thinkers and writers I look at in the book, because they start by trying to figure things out and somewhere along the line it all falls apart. Some of them try to seek some sort of redemption from that,

perhaps through the act of writing or documenting it, but a lot of them just throw up their hands. Sometimes you sense that they know going into it that it's futile, but other times it's unintentional and that's equally interesting.

Nietzsche often called it a 'pessimism of strength' or a 'Dionysian pessimism', which would be a kind of pessimism that would take the world as it is, in all its ugliness, its error-proneness, and foreclose any possibility of a better world – there's no afterlife, no reincarnation, no utopia, there's not even a better tomorrow, you just have to take this with all that it is and then affirm that. Which is a tall order! But that's his reply, if you like, to that sort of pessimism.

One thing that's remarkable is that if you list all these writers, music seems to be an exception for them. They are really grumpy and rant on about human nature, but suddenly when it comes to music they become giddy and almost euphoric – Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Huysmans, Adorno, Cioran – down the line it's an interesting exception that they make.

<https://thequietus.com/articles/25509-eugene-thacker-infinite-resignation-interview>

How to live a nihilistic life

Quentin Smith

I do not believe my theory differs very much from that of many or most people. There is a sense that my life, actions and consequences of actions amount to nothing when I am considering the value of an infinite universe. Our emotional responses to acts or states of affairs we believe have positive or negative value occur when we are narrowly focused on "the here and now", on the people we interact with or know about, ourselves, and the animals, plants and material things that surround us in our daily lives. In our daily lives, we believe actions are good or bad and that individuals have rights. These beliefs are false, but we know this only on the occasions when we engage in second order beliefs about our

everyday beliefs and view our everyday beliefs from the perspective of infinity. Most of the time, we live in an illusion of meaningfulness and only some times, when we are philosophically reflective, are we aware of reality and the meaninglessness of our lives. It seems obvious that this has a genetic basis, due to Darwinian laws of evolution. In order to survive and reproduce, it must seem to us most of the time that our actions are not futile, that people have rights. The rare occasions in which we know the truth about life are genetically prevented from overriding living our daily lives with the illusion that they are meaningful. As I progress through this paper, I have the illusion that my efforts are not utterly futile, but right now, as I stop and reflect, I realize that any further effort put into this paper is a futile expenditure of my energy.

https://web.archive.org/web/20100104044622/http://www.qsmithwmu.com/moral_realism_and_infinte_spacetime_imply_moral_nihilism_by_quentin_smith.htm

Sisyphus

A perfect image of meaninglessness, of the kind we are seeking, is found in the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, it will be remembered, betrayed divine secrets to mortals, and for this he was condemned by the gods to roll a stone to the top of a hill, the stone then immediately rolled back down, again to be pushed to the top by Sisyphus, to roll down once more, and so on again and again, *forever*. Now in this we have the picture of meaningless, pointless toil, of a meaningless existence that is absolutely *never* redeemed. It is not even redeemed by a death that, if it were to accomplish nothing more, would at least bring that idiotic cycle to a close...Nothing ever comes of what he is doing, except simply more of the same...a repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything.

Now let us ask: Which of these pictures does life in fact resemble? And let us not begin with our own lives, for here both our prejudices and wishes are great, but with the life in general that we share with

the rest of creation. We shall find, I think, that it all has a certain pattern, and that this pattern is by now easily recognized.

We can begin anywhere, only saving human existence for our last consideration. We can, for example, begin with any animal. It does not matter where we begin, because the result is going to be exactly the same.

Thus, for example, there are caves in New Zealand, deep and dark, whose floors are quiet pools and whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light. As one gazes in wonder in the stillness of these caves it seems that the Creator has reproduced there in microcosm the heavens themselves, until one scarcely remembers the enclosing presence of the walls. As one looks more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness. As from time to time one of these insects draws near it becomes engaged in a sticky thread lowered by the worm, and is eaten. This goes on month after month, the blind worm lying there in the barren stillness waiting to entrap an occasional bit of nourishment that will only sustain it to another bit of nourishment until...Until what? What great thing awaits all this long and repetitious effort and makes it worthwhile? Really nothing. The larva just transforms itself finally to a tiny winged adult that lacks even mouth parts to feed and lives only a day or two. These adults, as soon as they have mated and laid eggs, are themselves caught in the threads and are devoured by the cannibalistic worms, often without having ventured into the day, the only point to their existence having now been fulfilled. This has been going on for millions of years, and to no end other than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another millions of years.

All living things present essentially the same spectacle. The larva of a certain cicada burrows in the darkness of the earth for seventeen years, through season after season, to emerge finally, into the daylight for a brief flight, lay its eggs, and die—this all to repeat itself during the next seventeen years, and so on to eternity. Robert Taylor,

"The Meaning of Life," E. Klemke & S. Cahn, eds. **THE MEANING OF LIFE: A READER** (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), chap. 12.

Farewell to the purpose-driven life

The fact that the mind is the brain guarantees that there is no free will. It rules out any purposes or designs organizing our actions or our lives. It excludes the very possibility of enduring persons, selves, or souls that exist after death or for that matter while we live. Not that there was ever much doubt about mortality anyway.

It is the source of at least two other profound myths: that we have purposes that give our actions and lives meaning and that there is a person "in there" steering the body, so to speak.

Since there are no thoughts about things, notions of purpose, plan, or design in the mind are illusory. Farewell to the purpose-driven life. Whatever is in our brain driving our lives from cradle to grave, it is not purposes...Scientism enables us to stop worrying about these meanings along with meanings of our lives-and the meaning of human life in general. As we'll see, it helps us see through the snake oil sold to those of us who seek meaning, and science shows why none of their nostrums really work for most people. It's because the nostrums are built on illusion-usually self-inflicted illusion.

When you consciously think about your own plans, purposes, motives, all you are doing is stringing together silent "sounds" or other markers into silent "sentences" (or fragments of them) in your head...Our conscious thoughts are very crude indicators of what is going on in our brain. We fool ourselves into treating these conscious markers as thoughts about what we want and about how to achieve it, about plans and purposes. We are even tricked into thinking they somehow bring about behavior. We are mistaken about all of these things. Meanwhile, our brain's input/output circuits are working, behind the curtain so to speak, creating these illusions by

playing markers out in a (quasi-)grammatical or syntactical order though consciousness.

We love Homer's Iliad, Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji, Styron's Sophie's Choice, Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War, Churchill's History of the Second World War, Boswell's Life of Johnson, and Shakespeare's Henry V. We love them because they are so good at exploiting the brain's taste for stories with plots. We mistakenly think-or rather feel-that only plots can convey understanding of human affairs. Our literature, too-from epic poems to stream of consciousness-is the search for motives and meanings in thoughts about things. Once it becomes evident that such thoughts are poor guides to the neural causes of what we do, much of the mystification and frustration of the humanities becomes clear.

Once you recognize that there is no way to take seriously both what neuroscience tells us about the springs of human action in the brain and what introspection tells us about it, you have to choose. Take one fork and seek interpretation of human affairs in the plans, purposes, designs, ideologies, myths, or meanings that consciousness claims actually move us. Take the other fork, the one that scientism signposts, and you must treat all the humanities as the endlessly entertaining elaborations of an illusion. They are all enterprises with no right answers, not even coming closer to approximating our understanding of anything. You cannot treat the interpretation of behavior in terms of purposes and meaning as conveying real understanding. It often allays the intermittent feeling of curiosity, of course. The ability stories have to allay that feeling is what natural selection exploited to solve the design problem of getting us from the Pleistocene to the present.

It's a lot harder to do science than it is to spin out stories about why people do things in terms of their possible or plausible thoughts about stuff. Experimental science and abstract mathematical theorizing are difficult-boring drudgery for most people. But both are required to produce a neuroscientific explanation of human behavior. So, even many of us who endorse scientism will continue to read

and watch and listen to the histories, biographies, memories, novels, films, plays, and broadcasts that employ the illusory approach of finding meaning and purpose in human affairs. It's easier to follow and much more entertaining than science because it comes packaged as stories, and science never does. Fortunately for us, being scientific doesn't require we become scientists. Alex Rosenberg, **THE ATHEIST'S GUIDE TO REALITY** (W.W. Norton & Co., 2012), chap. 9.

Best not to be born

This has seemed to many human observers to be the very model of absurdity, an utterly pointless existence...The best response to this argument is that it projects human needs and sensibilities onto other species. The human observer simply does not have the salmon's point of view. Joel Feinberg, "Absurd Self-Fulfillment," E. Klemke & S. Cahn, eds. *The Meaning of Life: A Reader* (Oxford, 3rd. ed., 2008), 163-64

We are born, we live, we suffer along the way, and then we die—obliterated for the rest of eternity. Our existence is but a blip in cosmic time and space. It is not surprising that so many people ask: "What is it all about?"

The right answer, I argue in this book, is "ultimately nothing." Despite some limited consolations, the human condition is in fact a tragic predicament from which none of us can escape, for the predicament consists not merely in life but also in death. It should come as no surprise that this is an unpopular view to which there will be considerable resistance (Preface).

There is an obvious dilemma in defending a pessimistic view. If the human predicament is as bad as I shall argue it is, is it not cruel to rub people's noses in it by highlighting just how bad it is? If people have coping mechanisms, should we not indulge them rather than pull the carpet out from under them by telling them just how terrible things are? (chap. 1).

We are ephemeral beings on a tiny planet in one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe (or perhaps the multiverse)—a cosmos that is coldly indifferent to the insignificant specks that we are. It is indifferent to our fortunes and misfortunes, to injustice, to our hopes, fears, values, and concerns. The forces of nature and the cosmos are blind.

One's very existence is an extreme contingency. The chances that a particular human—oneself—would come into existence are remote. One's ever having come into existence was dependent on a string of contingencies, including the existence of all one's progenitors. Even if all of them, down to one's great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents existed, the odds are still against one's existing. One would not have existed if one's parents had never met, or if they had met but never reproduced, or if they had reproduced but not precisely when they did. In the last case, a different sperm would have united with the ovum of the month to produce some other person.

As unlikely as coming into existence is, nothing could be more certain than ceasing to exist. We can sometimes stave death off for a while, but there is no avoiding it entirely.

Moreover, it is thought that there is something absurd about the earnestness of our pursuits. We take ourselves very seriously, but when we step back, we wonder what it is all about. The step back need not be all the way to the cosmos. One does not need much distance to see that there seems something futile about our endless strivings, which are not altogether different from a hamster on its wheel.

There is plenty of scope for questioning the significance of even the broader goals of one's life. This (personal) cycle continues until one dies, but the treadmill is intergenerational because people tend to reproduce thereby creating new mill-treaders. This has continued for generations and will continue until humanity eventually goes the way

of all species—extinction. It seems like a long, repetitive journey to nowhere. In this regard we seem to be like Sisyphus...

Thoughts of these kinds can be triggered in many ways. The prospect of one's own death, perhaps highlighted by a diagnosis of a dangerous or terminal condition, tends to focus the mind. But the deaths of others—relatives, friends, acquaintances, and sometimes even strangers—can also get a person thinking. Those deaths need not be recent. For example, one might be wandering around an old graveyard. On the tombstones are inscribed some details about the deceased—the dates they were born and died, and perhaps references to spouses, siblings, or children and grandchildren who mourned their loss. Those mourners are themselves now long dead. One thinks about the lives of those families—the beliefs and values, loves and losses, hopes and fears, strivings and failures—and one is struck that nothing of that remains. All has come to naught... Someday, somebody might stand at one's grave and wonder about the person represented by the name on the tombstone, and might reflect on the fact that everything that person—you or I—once cared about has come to nothing. It is far more likely, however, that nobody will spare even *that* brief thought after all those who knew one also died.

Once we know what we are asking, the broad contours of the answers are reasonable straightforward, at least if we are prepared to be honest with ourselves. This honesty is rare because it requires facing up to some unpleasant truths (chap. 2).

Many atheists, while critical of theodicy, are themselves engaged in a kind of secular theodicy—an attempt to reconcile their optimistic views with the unfortunate facts about the human condition (chap. 4).

A terrorist has an Epicurean tied down. He forces a gun into the Epicurean's mouth and keeps threatening to pull the trigger. If the threat is acted upon, it will kill the Epicurean instantly. Either (a) the Epicurean remains true to his belief that "death is nothing to us" and sits there unperturbed, or (b) he is unable to conform his emotions to

his beliefs and is filled with anxiety, perhaps to the extent that he soils himself.

These are very big bullets for the Epicurean to bite (at point blank range). There are people who say that they accept these implications. We could put them to the test, but it would be unethical to do so (at least if I am right)...Arguments that death is not bad... are fine for the seminar room, but one seems to have lost perspective if one genuinely accepts the conclusion—if one thinks, for example, that killing somebody (painlessly) is never bad for that person.

Annihilation is the sort of misfortune that, absent any overriding consideration, is best delayed as long as possible. This is because it is not the sort of misfortune one can "get over," for the obvious reason that (unlike diamonds, which are only for a very long time) death really is *forever*.

There is a tendency to admire those who manage to retain their composure in such circumstances and stare death in the face. This tendency may be explained in part by an implicit knowledge of just how difficult that is. However, it is difficult to escape the thought that praise of such stoicism is also aimed at discouraging those who cannot face death the way we like to see it faced—namely, "bravely." Seeing people fall apart in the face of their imminent death, or the threat thereof, only highlights our own mortality and makes us extremely uncomfortable.

There is a generational march from womb to grave. The oldest people are at the front. In the least bad circumstances, the Grim Reaper cuts them down with his bloodied scythe...Before long, one finds oneself in the front line staring death in the face.

The least bad circumstances are often not the actual circumstances. Those in the younger ranks are often victims of the Grim Reaper's snipers who pick out targets among those whose "turn" we feel should not yet have arrived...Younger people, at least in good health

and not facing any external threats, can cope by rationalizing that at least death may not be imminent. That is not a luxury in which the elderly can indulge. One begins to think that one cannot reasonably hope for more than another ten years. Then one's horizon looks more like no more than five years, and then one realizes that the chances of dying within the year are great. One lives knowing that one does not have much time left. The clock is ticking loudly.

Old age, it is said, is where everybody wants to *get* but nobody wants to *be*. The latter is partly because of the frailties that often accompany advanced age, but the increasing threat of death is another. There is thus a cruel irony here. We want long lives, but the longer we live, the more reason we have to fear that less life remains. This is yet another feature of the human predicament (chap. 5).

Being mortal causes many humans considerable anxiety. The shadow of death looms over our lives. No matter who we are, where and when we live, and what we do, each of us knows that he or she is doomed to die. We first gain this terrifying awareness as quite young children. Insofar as we can, we put this fact out of our consciousness, but it lurks beneath the surface, breaking through at times when we cannot but confront our mortality. This awareness is one of the chief triggers of existential angst, and it spurs attempts to find meaning. Our mortality is an unbearable limit that we seek to transcend...We are not the only mortals, but as far as we know, we are the mortals with the most acute sense of their mortality.

In the ordinary course of life, we typically lose our grandparents, then our parents, then our spouses, siblings, and friends. These are massive losses that we carry with us for the remainder of our lives. We avoid them only by dying prematurely, in which case, we cause others to be bereaved.

Substituting mortality with immortality, while holding other features of the human predicament constant, would extend the predicament temporally and would also introduce novel features unless we

impose the kinds of conditions I have discussed...It is possible that we are damned if we die *and* damned if we don't. Some predicaments are that intractable (chap 6).

The human predicament has a number of interlocking features. First, human life, as is the case with all life, has utterly no meaning from the cosmic perspective. It is not part of a grand design and serves no greater purpose, but is instead a product of blind evolution. There are *explanations* of how our species arose, but there are no *reasons* for our existence. Humans evolved and, in time, the species will become extinct...All human achievements—the buildings, monuments, roads, machines, knowledge, arts—will crumble, erode, or vanish.

...procreation, the sexually transmitted "virus" that spreads existence and also spreads the existential predicament.

Most people resist pessimistic views even when such views are appropriate. This is especially true with reference to a primarily pessimistic view about the human condition. The truth is simply too much for many people to bear...Few people like a grouch...There is plenty of social pressure, often implicit, to put on a grave face and be cheerful...the fact that pessimistic views are so often hidden from view only further reduces other people's exposure to them and makes those views seem more abnormal.

Every birth is death in waiting. When one hears of a birth, one must know that it is but a matter of time before that new human dies. Sandwiched between birth and death is a struggle for meaning and a desperate attempt to ward off life's suffering.

Each generation creates a new [procreative Ponzi scheme] in order to mitigate its own situation. Like all Ponzi schemes, this one will not end well.

It might be argued that there are excellent pragmatic reasons for accepting optimism even if the claims it makes are false. After all,

optimism makes life so much easier. It helps one confront all the horror of the human predicament. It thus mitigates or palliates the predicament.

We need to think carefully about what this pragmatic argument involves. It is most effective when offered in defense of the others' optimistic beliefs, because the beneficial effect is most marked if one truly believes the optimistic view, but anybody who advances the argument cannot entirely believe it because they know that the optimism is a kind of placebo...Optimism is not an innocent anodyne. While it soothes the optimist, it can also have noxious effects on others.

it is possible to be unequivocally pessimistic but not dwell on those thoughts all the time. They may surface regularly, but it is possible to busy oneself with projects...It allows for *distractions* from reality...

(chap. 8). David Benatar, **THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT: A CANDID GUIDE TO LIFE'S BIGGEST QUESTIONS** (Oxford 2016).

Double life

Liberal Christians have no difficulty saying what they don't (any longer) believe, but they find it hard to express a positive version of their message...

My colleagues and clergy friends would ridicule fundamentalists, but at some point I came to realize they are preaching and teaching what they believe. If you read the Bible, they are actually being consistent in what they're teaching or they're believing. We're the ones who are sugarcoating it and trying to contextualize it and put it in other language, and we don't really mean what we say. And at some point, that just felt kind of mentally weak.

Many commentators have noted a telling symmetry. Fundamentalists and other defenders of the literal truth of the Bible agree with the New Atheists on one thing: Truth claims need to be taken seriously—

which means they must be evaluated as true or false, not merely interpreted as metaphors and symbols. Liberal clergy, as noted, are squeezed between these two opposing adherents of the “put up or shut up” school of interpretation. The liberals think both extremes are simplistic; it’s complicated, they say. The New Atheists have shrugged off this charge, accusing the liberal apologists of creating a pseudointellectual smokescreen to cover their retreat, and here the symmetry is extended, since that is also the opinion of many fundamentalists and other conservatives.

I have a priest friend who says, "There's living in the myth, and there's living outside the myth". For me, when I'm in the myth, I totally believe the themes of the Resurrection and Ascension, and those mean a lot to me. And outside the myth, I don't think they're literally true. It's just not possible, based on what I know about science...And the point of this life—well, there is no point to this life, but you have to find *some* meaning, because we're meaning-making creatures. So we do a lot of things to make this a meaningful existence. Hopefully, that existence lasts beyond us to some degree, but probably not. That's what I really believe. And at the same time, the Christian mythology speaks to me at a cultural level—more [on that level] now than at a real belief kind of level. Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola, **CAUGHT IN THE PULPIT: LEAVING BELIEF BEHIND** (2013).