

15 Common Themes

This chapter describes themes that are common in many religions, in practice if not officially. Most themes imply a stance or come from a stance but I do not go into the relation. The themes are not necessarily mistakes but can lead to mistakes. It is clear when I consider a theme likely to lead to a mistake. I frame these themes in terms of God. Feel free to substitute “Dharma”, Heaven, and “Tao” if that works. Most themes have a basis in evolved human nature. I do not speculate on that here.

Bigger than Me.

Everybody who is sane and has sensitivity feels, at some time, that the world is bigger than him-herself. This feeling is one of the high points of being human.

Some disclaimers: There are differences between the feeling, awareness of it, how we think about it, how we talk about it, and what we do about it. Illogical but true: What we do, feel, think, and say after feeling affects what we feel when we feel. In the human mind, sometimes cause works backwards. Awareness, thinking, and telling depend on: the fact that we evolved, our personality, religion, culture, class, gender, ethnicity, and personal history. People have the feeling of “bigger-than-me” while raccoons likely do not. Christians talk about Jesus or God while Hindus talk about Krishna or Dharma. A bitter person fears the Devil while a happy person loves everyone. One person might enlist in Habitat for Humanity while another might bomb abortion clinics. This section does not sift through these issues. It describes some implications of the fact that people have this feeling.

We likely evolved to have the feeling of bigger-than-me, to have it sometimes, but not too often. People differ in how often and how strong. These facts do not make true or false the idea that there is something bigger than we are, do not make true or false any of the particular forms that the idea comes in, and do not justify or condemn any acts we do on the basis of the feeling.

People who have the feeling almost always describe it as self-validating; they “just know” it is true. This certainty about the feeling likely also evolved as well as simply having the feeling. We have a feeling and we have a feeling of certainty on top of the feeling. The feeling of certainty does not make true or false the idea that there is something bigger than we are. Most people who buy a lottery ticket “just know” they will win, and, eventually, for one-or-a-few people, the feeling is true. We have to judge “bigger-than-me” on criteria other than its own self-assurance, but there are very few clear objective criteria by which to judge it.

Every religion uses the feeling of “bigger-than-me” as evidence to self-validate the religion as a whole. Christians use the feeling of God to validate Christianity and the idea of Jesus as God. Avoid that way. Just because somebody feels “bigger-than-me” and then says the feeling proves that Jesus loves him does not prove Jesus loves him. Just because somebody has the feeling and says Mohammad was the last and greatest of the prophets does not prove it is so.

Just because you have this feeling, and you read something into this feeling, does not mean other people should have the same feeling, or, if they do, they should read into it what you did. As much as you might think the feeling immediately self-validates some idea, such as that cats should rule the world, the feeling does not necessarily self-validate any idea. There are no hard rules for what you should, or should not, get out of the feeling.

It is not a good idea to try to invoke this feeling directly such as by fasting, drugs, extreme ascetics, diets, forced wilderness treks, group activities such as hazing, crazy road trips, political conventions, religious camp meetings, revival meetings, keening in church, going to anthropology conventions, etc. It is a better idea to do other things that are useful anyway, lead to learning, and are friendly to the idea of the bigger-than-me when it comes. Work to save the Alabama barrier islands, and see how you feel. Try to raise the educational level of American children. Try to understand the evolution of the universe. Go hunting without booze or drugs. Tend a garden.

Some particular places, times, or experiences tend to induce this feeling. Some people call this feeling the “Grand Canyon” experience. I used to live by the Columbia River Gorge, and more people have this feeling there than at a strip mall. Some people do have the feeling at a strip mall; I have. Some people have this feeling with art. Some people get the feeling while doing martial arts. I think the feeling is more common at dawn and dusk.

We should not draw too much from where and when we have the feeling. Think why you might have the feeling then and there, or, in contrast, think why then and there are not important and why God is telling you that the feeling transcends that particular situation. Think about messages in the feeling that do not depend on then and there. I used to have this feeling so often, in so many different venues, that I learned to separate the feeling from the venue while still looking at the venue to discover what I could.

While we are sorting out the feeling, we can think about what to do on the basis of the feeling. As long as you do something good, don’t worry about purity of motive much.

Think about how the feeling goes along with ideas that are common in many religions such as that we should “do unto others”, we should be kind to others, we should “pay it forward”, or that all rules apply equally. These ideas do not necessarily need the feeling to validate them, but it is not bad to take the feeling as support for the ideas. If we feel the bigger-than-me wants us to love each other, I see little wrong in that conclusion.

Think about how the feeling goes along with ideas that might be important in your religion but are not in other religions or are not as important in them. Does the feeling ask you to do the will of God without question? Would everybody draw the same conclusion? If doing the will of God leads you to do useful things, then you should probably go ahead. But do not think that everybody should do the will of God as your understand it even if they too have the feeling sometimes. If the feeling leads you to champion your religion without necessarily denigrating other religions, and you do good things as a result, then that result is probably fine as well.

If the feeling leads you to consider something wrong, then you should not do that wrong act. You should wonder why you drew that bad conclusion from the feeling. Leave yourself open to having the feeling

again. If you come to a different better conclusion, then fine. If you come to the same bad inference, then talk to somebody who can guide you to good action.

If the feeling leads you to think, "My religion is right while all other religions are wrong. I should follow my religion vigorously while also suppressing other religions." then you should not follow this train of thought based on this feeling. This thinking is a wrong act. Leave yourself open to the feeling again. If you draw the same conclusion, then talk to somebody who can guide you. Don't go to a religious bigot. You might conclude that your religion is best or that your religion is only one among many but you should not come to that conclusion based on the feeling of bigger-than-me alone.

The feeling of something bigger-than-me is one of the feelings that are common in mysticism. Although related, mysticism is a different topic that should be considered apart from this feeling. You can have this feeling while not having any other mystic feelings and ideas. It is good to have this feeling but not to have most other typical mystic feelings and ideas.

Mysticism and Metaphysics.

Below is an excerpt from "Everyday" by Buddy Holly and the Crickets. If you can, listen to the whole song because it is relevant here. I can't reproduce all of it for fear of copyright issues.

"Every day, it's a gettin' closer
Goin' faster than a roller coaster
Love like yours is sure to come my way"

The bigger-than-me feeling is typical of mystical feelings, and is one of about a dozen common mystical feelings. I don't write much about mystics and mystical feelings because, first, it takes a long time to sort out the topic. Second, most people do little out of mysticism even if they are fascinated by it. Most people know the feeling "we are all one" but really very few people act on that basis no matter how much they applaud it in theory. Third, I am somewhat prone to mystical feelings, and I found they are more of a hindrance than a help. They are useful as a source to get thinking going but they are not a good place to end up. To explain why requires going through a bunch of particular mystic feelings, and that is just what I don't want to do. I go through a couple below.

Contrary to popular misconception, mature major religions do not have much mysticism in them although they all recognize some supposedly mystical truths at their core, such as "Jesus saves", "Mohammad is the last and greatest of the prophets", and "all lives are part of a joyous system". Religions have dogmas and ceremonies now that came out of past mysticism or are related to past mysticism; but their current practices have more to do with success in this world than with mysticism. Mostly, religions bend mystic ideas to validate normal success such as being a merchant or soldier. Formal religions extol mystics in theory but ignore them in practice, as with the Christian John of the Cross or Muslim Rumi. Sometimes, religions kill mystics to silence them as with the Christian Giordano Bruno.

Mystics and scholarly metaphysicians don't often get along. Scholarly Metaphysicians almost always win in the long run. First comes one mystic, then comes a parade of scholarly metaphysicians who use his-her vision to justify their schemes, and so the metaphysicians have the last word. When you end up in

supposed mysticism, what you really end up with is not so much the original mystic insight but a dogma transformed by scholarly metaphysicians. Then we need a second mystic to shed the heavy dogmatic clothing so we can breathe again. Maybe that is why new mystics have to come over and over to say the same things in slightly different words. Common people are better at getting mystical ideas than we give ourselves credit for but we don't always get them. Metaphysicians happily step in to interpret visions for us. Metaphysics can be hard to understand and don't usually have much prestige in themselves. People might not get mystic visions fully but they get them enough so mystic visions are appealing, and mystic visions often have prestige even when people are not clear about what they mean. So, metaphysicians appeal to mysticism for support even when the mysticism is not the real source of their ideas. Dozens of schemes have used the Book of Revelations as justification. A lot of mysticism, and supposed mysticism, comes to us only through metaphysical filters.

"God is love" is a common idea in mysticism. What does it mean? What does it imply for doing? We have no trouble understanding the idea, we just don't believe it applies in simple blanket form, and so we need clarification. Using our desire for clarification, metaphysicians tell us that God created the world through love, and God created the Church through further love. So we should do what the Church says because it is a manifestation of God's love of his creation.

Mystics say, "Everything is connected to everything else. We are all connected to each other. We are all one great big being." The same issues crop up as with "God is love". Metaphysicians pick out which links we really have to pay attention to, and which we have to ignore. They tell us who among the other people are really like us and who are only approximately like us and so can be treated badly.

Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine, and said "This is my body and blood". For reasons that I don't go into, that saying makes sense to me, but not in the terms of any Church doctrine. Instead, a good idea from Jesus has been turned into the touching but unseemly sight of people lined up with open mouths to receive a thimble-full of wine and pinch of bread. The Church idea is supported by bizarre explanations such as "trans-substantiation" and "co-substantiation". If you belong to a church that still holds "communion" in this way then I recommend continuing, but, every once in a while, look at what is going on around you, and think if Jesus intended this.

Mystic Myth and Systems that Eat the World.

Mystics seem to operate apart from most standard religions, and apart from systems that eat the world. To the extent they recognize such standard religions and systems, they seem to jump away from them. Yet standard religions are able to co-op mysticism, largely by incorporating mystic vision into their version of a system that eats the world. Metaphysicians are amazingly adept at using mystic visions to bolster religious systems that eat the world. Mystic visions are often contradictory and fragmented. Religious scholars use those pieces to create the "splotches" in a world-eating system onto which people project what they need. Mysticism can provide the hole in the center. Then metaphysicians identify the hole in the center with cosmic principles that are useful to them such as Joy, Salvation, Buddha Mind, Dharma, God, and Emptiness. If we think of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God as a mystic vision, and the idea of Jesus saving people as a mystic idea, then this is what happened in Christianity. If we think of "awakening", the everyday world and the awakened world, "emptiness", and "Buddha mind" as mystic ideas, then this happened with Mahayana Buddhism.

The transformation of mystic ideas in this form as part of systems that eat the world is a big mistake, and leads us to overlook the value of visions. A person can have mystic visions without the visions leading to ideas of God's Descent, Suffusing the World, the ultimate unity of all beings, and Ascent. I don't know what to do to correct the mistake.

A Small Attack on the Critics of Mystics.

It is easy to make fun of mystic feelings. Not even most mystics think the world as a whole can run along the ideas that mystics have. All sane people know we cannot run the world according to ideas such as "love one another more than you love yourselves" and "we are all one, we are all equally children of God" even if those ideas are true. Right Wing Reactionaries of the 1980s and after had an easy time attacking the silly simple quasi-mystic ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, even as reactionaries tacitly injected ideas of their own that were just as impossible, such as an idealized free market.

Especially if you can see how odd mystic ideas are, but you are not a mystic, and you have never had a good jolt of mystic feelings, then it is better not to indulge in criticizing mystics; it is better to be quiet. If you see how the world cannot run according to mystic idealism, but you cannot supply a practical sound alternative along which the world can run much better, then it is better to be quiet. People who make fun of mystics usually are not criticizing mysticism so much as trying to puff up themselves. It is not enough to see how mystics are silly or impractical, you have to do better. If you can do better, then you will tend less to criticize mystics than to offer better plans without the criticism. Do that instead.

We need mystics and their impossible idealism. Without them, we would have none of the major world religions, and we would have no democracy. We also need to know that most of the world cannot run according to simply mystic feelings. Your job is to appreciate mysticism and practicality, and to come up with a compromise that actually works and that leads us to better humanity.

Heaven on Earth; It is All as It Should Be; It's All Good.

The feeling of "heaven on Earth" is similar to the feeling "everything is alright, everything is as it should be, I wouldn't change a thing, not even the bad stuff, and not even my stupid mistakes". We get that feeling sometimes at the end of our lives or after a big, often tragic, event. I separate the two feelings when needed but here mostly I take them as the same.

When most people think of heaven, they think of this world with only the good parts and without any of the bad parts: eating cake and ice cream all the time without getting fat; having sex without worrying about babies or commitment; having sex is always a mystical union forged in physical terms like a sacrament, and never just one person screwing another; love without heartbreak; adventure without dying; your team always wins with a last-minute score; every weekend you have a happy tailgate party; every fall you get your quota of deer; you find a great deal at the mall; you come up with the idea that unifies all physics; you find the key to the evolution of social behavior; all children are above average; all men are braver and taller than average; all women are prettier and make more money than average; and it all goes on and on without anybody ever getting any older and without getting bored.

We see this idea of heaven in Celtic stories of running off to fairy land or in the idea of Lake Wobegon. David Byrne captures the feeling in the Talking Heads' song named rightly enough "Heaven". Heaven is a place where each kiss is exactly like the first kiss. "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens." If the same thing happens equally well always, then nothing ever happens. In fancier words, another way to see Byrne's line is "nothingness happens all the time". The song is both "straight ahead" and satirical.

Aside from logical problems – all the children are smarter than average – this heaven would get boring soon enough. I discussed the problem of boredom in the chapters on issues and I return to it later in the chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism. What do you do after you come up with the idea that unifies all physics once and for all time? What people really want is a place with some real risk but no real damage. They want the thrill without the true Great Risk of life. We can get hurt but we always heal even if we remember the pain. We want some risk and pain. We want the right amount of risk and pain. You are a race car driver; there is a terrible wreck on the track; two of your best friends die; their families are grief-stricken; but you get away with only a few burns and a broken leg; you have scars, but you can, and will, race again; and you contribute heavily to the fund that supports the families of your dead friends for their whole lives. Your girlfriend cheats on you with your best friend but, after a few years, you make a new best friend and find a woman who is true. Heaven on Earth is a continuing adventure. In the first movie of the "Matrix" trilogy, Agent Smith tells Morpheus that the machines created the first matrix as a paradise for humans rather than the sordid gritty world of 1990; but humans were unhappy because their primitive brains craved adventure; so that world failed; and the machines had to make other matrix-lands with hardship and striving. In the novel "Brave New World", the World Controllers tried making the island of Crete into an isolated egalitarian paradise but the people there ruined it with their striving and conniving. The debased world of difference, ranks, striving, and conniving better fits human nature.

We want this real scary world here to be the heavenly world of continuing beauty, goodness, manageable risk, and near-certain success. We want to turn badness and ugliness to good use. This yearning adds to the visions, dogma, and practice of major religions; I do not spell out how here. I share this desire, and I have felt that this world might somehow be that world. I have wanted this world to be heaven on Earth. But I had to conclude that this world is not heaven on Earth and it is not the case that everything is as it should be.

Strictly speaking, the only way to have heaven on Earth as ongoing beauty and adventure is to have a system of multiple lives in which we forget the details of our past lives. If we always survive the car crash, yet our friends always die, and then we make new friends, then, sooner or later, we figure it out, and the world gets boring again. Sometimes we have to be the one who dies. But, then, for heaven on Earth to be really real, to continue, we have to be born again. We have to share in both the good and bad. We have to have both good lives and bad lives. This vision of heaven on Earth is another version of God forgetting himself so as to dream the world, in which God takes on the identity of individual persons in his dream. In previous chapters, I denied a system of many lives, God forgetting himself to dream the world, or God becoming us so that really we each are God. So I can't accept this version of heaven on Earth.

Still this idea of heaven on Earth is appealing. People look for the right balance of risk and reward on this Earth, hope they have found it, and hope that means this Earth is really heaven.

Most people don't get the feeling of heaven on Earth from logic or from a system of many lives. Most people get the feeling from an overwhelming experience of beauty-and-rightness. Even people who live in a system of many lives such as Hinduism or Buddhism likely don't get the feeling that this world is really a heaven on Earth from the idea of many lives but get the feeling first through a direct sense of beauty-and-rightness, and then the feeling of beauty, the idea of many lives, and the idea that this world is really a heaven on Earth, all support each other.

Mystics often see this world as surpassingly beautiful. Not everybody can fully share this mystic vision of this world but most people catch a glimpse at sometime. They catch a big enough glimpse, often enough, so they can get the sense of heaven on this Earth right now. I have had the feeling many times, in many places, for a long time many times, so I know better than to try to describe it.

When we have a feeling of incredible beauty-and-rightness about the world, we overcome what is bad and ugly about this world. We assimilate good and bad, beautiful and ugly, together into a higher beauty-and-rightness. We do not overlook the bad and ugly, they just don't matter as much, and we can see goodness and beauty in them too. A starving great painter who will not be discovered until long after he-she is dead, and who dies in despair, is as beautiful as a talented great painter who makes it in his-her lifetime; the life of Van Gogh was as beautiful as the life of Rembrandt. A songwriter hack with many hits of pop crap is as beautiful as the great songwriter who only has a minor hit; Tin Pan Alley is as beautiful as Townes Van Zandt, Warren Zevon, Alex Chilton, or Joni Mitchell. The bum lying in the alley besides Carnegie Hall is as beautiful in his-her own way as the great pianist playing inside tonight. In the movie "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly", the bad would be as much appreciated as the Good or the Ugly.

The world is not more beautiful-and-right despite its badness, ugliness, and heartaches but because of them. The world is not necessarily heaven on Earth because it all turns out well in the end, although, if it does all turn out well in the end, that is better. The world is heaven on Earth whether it all turns out well in the end or not. Badness, ugliness, and heartache make the world much more interesting, whether it all turns out well or not, whether we are in a system of many lives or not. Badness, ugliness, and heartache make the world full and round. Their value does not come because we need a contrast with goodness and beauty, so we can better appreciate standard goodness and beauty; ugliness and badness are part of it too; they are good and beautiful too in their own way. Cruelty by the shrike adds as much goodness and beauty as parental love by penguins. Drug abuse is as much a part of beauty as penicillin. A serial killer is as worthwhile to the world as a Scout leader. Faking love to get sex is just as good-and-beautiful as faking sex to get love, and both are just as good-and-beautiful as honest simple sex or true love. If you get cancer and will die for sure, it is bad but it is alright. The small minority of abusive priests is just as good and beautiful as the vast majority who work hard in obscurity for community benefit. If you lose your life savings to a Ponzi scheme, that is alright. Getting brutally raped and then contracting HIV and AIDS is just as good and beautiful as falling in love, raising a family, and growing old together. Without ugliness and badness, the world would be much less beautiful and good. This is how we find the balance between the right amount of beauty and ugliness, by assimilating the ugliness and badness. If ever once you feel this deeply, you can never quite get over the feeling. If you feel it several times, it haunts you. This idea lies behind "Lake Wobegon" but there the threats there are much milder and much easier to assimilate to goodness-in-the-end.

People who have this feeling only in glimpses use it to rationalize their lives and the modest badness and ugliness of their lives. I am not “putting them down”. What they do is normal and helpful. They use this feeling to make the world seem as good as it can be so they can do as well as possible.

When we can see this world right here right now on planet Earth this way, then we can think our world is a heaven on Earth, and that all planets, in their own ways too, might be heavens in the universe. We can think God did give us heaven if only we would open our eyes to see it in the right way, and God gives us many chances to open our eyes the right way. The banquet is all right here. The joy of a grand system is all right here. Once a person has this feeling, he-she forever looks at this world right now differently even if the feeling cannot be sustained.

Despite having the spirit of infinite beauty sitting on my shoulder whispering in my ear, I have come to see that this world is not heaven on Earth. Things are not just as they should be. There is too much evil of the wrong kind. Some evil cannot be assimilated. We cannot explain away all evil even if we embed it in a system of many lives; and I don't want that path anyhow. Some evil is too evil to be good, and too ugly to be beautiful. Some ugliness is too ugly to be beautiful. I might see a robbery as beautiful but I cannot see child abuse as beautiful. I might see war as glorious but I cannot see turning ten-year-old children into soldiers and camp prostitutes as beautiful. I can appreciate a brave person dying while climbing a mountain but not a child dying of long slow cancer. I know God can turn horrible evil into great good but even God cannot cancel all evil, and, in fact, much evil does not turn into good. I have seen this world as a heaven on Earth, and I have tried to sustain my vision; now I can screw myself up to see this world as heaven but I can no longer do it naturally or sustain it for long. So I am left with this real world mixed as it is, and I have to figure out what to do in the face of beauty, goodness, badness, and ugliness.

If we don't see this world as “heaven on Earth”, if we don't think everything already is as it should be, then we should feel a duty to work to make things better. A person who does see “heaven on Earth” also sees the feeling and involvement of “do gooders” as part of the total package in which we altogether do have “heaven on Earth” and “everything is as it should be”. The “do gooders” are as necessary as the indecent criminals, both are needed, and both contribute equally to the end result of “heaven on Earth” and “it is all as it should be”. Our feeling in doing good and fighting evil is part of what makes this place heaven on Earth. If all people everywhere felt this world were bad and stopped trying, then maybe the place would not be heaven on Earth. But, as long as some people see the need and keep trying, then the world is still heaven on Earth, and the people who try to change what can't be changed too are part of what makes it heaven. I understand this “re-contextualizing”, this “new and bigger framing”, but I disagree. The good and bad are not equal, equally necessary, and together make this world heaven and together make it all as it should be. At some point, you have to stop re-framing and have to take things as they appear. Then you have to decide if what you see is heaven and is exactly as it should be. Despite having the feeling, I decided this Earth was not heaven.

Mystics might say my inability to see the world as all-beautiful all the time is my fault. I am not mystic enough. I do not go deep, far, or long enough. I don't know how to respond to the charge other than to report what I see. This world is as it is for me.

To argue this topic more is not useful. Here, you either see these points or you do not. To argue more is to re-argue the problem of evil, and that topic has its own chapter.

The Humongous Sanctity of All Life.

John Lennon: "I am of the Universe, and you know what it's worth".

I wish everybody could have a deep long feeling of the value of all life, how wrong it is to hurt any living creature, how much we should help all life, and how much we should love all life. This feeling is in all major religions although usually, except for Christianity and some versions of Hinduism, this feeling is not the central teaching. Even though it is not the central teaching of the founders, mystics in all religions have had this feeling, and the great teachers of all religions have tried to weave it in to the core teachings of the religion. Few people, of any religion, live up to it.

It is easy to criticize this feeling and to make fun of it. Without exception, the people I have met and read who make fun of this feeling have never really had it. Everyone has twitches of this feeling and glimpses of the truth that lies behind it, but few people really have it. Rather than wisely criticizing something that they understand, the people who make fun of this feeling make fun of it as a defense against how it would change their lives if they took it seriously. Don't make fun of what you don't understand.

A few people who have this feeling try to really live by it. They cannot live ordinary lives. A few people who have this feeling try to do as best they can and try to teach it to other people. They can succeed partially but not fully. I wish them well. What I say here applies to them only obliquely.

The majority of people have this feeling a little bit, but only a little bit, because we can't live by this feeling and we can't expect other people to have this feeling and to live by it. Maybe natural selection made sure that most of us can have this feeling only a little bit.

Animal life cannot run according to this feeling. Human life cannot run according to this feeling. If life is sacred as in this feeling, and life goes on apart from this feeling, and life has to go on anyway, then the sanctity that is captured by this feeling cannot be all that is going on. Even if you have this feeling deeply, perhaps especially if you have this feeling deeply, you want life to go on, and you want life to go on as it should, then you need also to see that most life has to carry on apart from this feeling. Tigers and deer are both sacred but tigers still eat deer. Humans are sacred but flesh-eating bacteria still kill children. You have to see that people need to develop other feelings and ideas apart from this feeling. You should encourage people to develop other feelings and other ideas to live by well, and you should not worry too much about accord of other ideas with your sense of the preciousness of all life. You should encourage people to develop moral and wise ideas.

People who make fun of this feeling without understanding it use the fact that people-who-do-have-this-feeling-know-that-not-all-of-us-can-live-by-this-feeling to bolster making fun of this feeling. People who make fun of this feeling agree on a superficial level with people who have had this feeling and who are wiser than they are. So they take superficial agreement as ratification of their own shallow wisdom and of their right to make fun of this feeling. They should stop doing that.

If you have this feeling and want to live by it, then I salute you. But don't think you automatically know all that is going on and automatically can advise other people how to live. Use the sensitivity that this feeling

gives you as energy to help as much as you can, including helping other people who do not know this feeling and cannot live by it.

“Everything is beautiful in its own way”.

I forgot who sang that. “Everything” includes things, events, and situations. This feeling is like the feeling that all life is sacred. This feeling is true but only partly true, and the false part fully undermines the true part. Just because everything is beautiful does not mean we should cherish and support everything. We have to choose. For life to go on, life has to nourish some things while letting go of other things and while actively putting down yet others. You can see beauty in a thing yet still not nourish it or can still actively put it down. Crime can be beautiful but I refuse to nourish it and I will put it down. Cholera is beautiful in its own way but I refuse to tolerate it – I know because I had a serious vibrio infection. Tsunamis can be beautiful but I wish they would avoid coastal villages full of children. Tigers killing deer is beautiful but also ugly, and we hope tigers do not kill more deer than they can eat and do not kill young healthy pretty deer. What about your pet cat killing that mockingbird baby in the apple tree? Passive aggression might be beautiful in its own way but I dislike it anyhow. Is rape so pretty that we wish to support it?

To return to John Lennon: “Yellow matter custard dripping from a dead dog’s eye”.

It would be better if only the people who deeply appreciate the beauty of all things chose what to nourish, not to nourish, or to put down. Presumably they would make the best decisions. People who do not have this feeling, people who have this feeling only a little, and people who mock it, likely make mistakes. But even that plan won’t work. We can’t wait for everybody to have this feeling deeply for life to go on and for people to make choices.

If you have this feeling, then you need to put up with the fact that not all beautiful things can be saved, and that normal crude people make choices about what to save, what to discard, and what to put down. Once you accept this situation, then your own feeling for the beauty of all life, all things, and all events is enhanced rather than diminished. Try to rest in the satisfaction of knowing that. When normal people don’t feel they have to see and appreciate the beauty of everything, they are better at seeing the beauty of, and cherishing, some good things.

“Seek and You Will Find; Knock and the Door Will Be Opened for You”.

Jesus said that. Other people in other religions say similar things. Muslims believe God helps people who sincerely believe and who are open to having their eyes opened. Taoists believe the Tao will find them if they seek it, and then they can live in accord with the Tao.

This feeling is not the same as the feeling that everything will turn out right and well. This feeling is not the same as divine providence. The three feelings often go together, and I do not sort them out here. I do comment on the feeling of divine providence below. What I have to say in this section applies to that feeling as well. This feeling of “seek and you will find” is not the same as having all the answers or being able to explain evil. It is not the same as “heaven on Earth” or “everything is as it should be”. This feeling can be misused to serve the feeling of “heaven on Earth” but it should not be misused that way.

Rather, this feeling is that, if we open ourselves up to God (Dharma, Tao, the Universe, Mind, etc.) then we can put things in perspective, see how much or how little we matter, see how little most problems are, see what is important, see connections that we did not see before, see how important it is to work with goodness, see what we can contribute and cannot contribute, and we can explain better to other people. Things do not have to all turn out right and well. We can understand most of the time when things do not turn out all right, and we can cope most of the time. We can learn to see opportunities for enjoyment and for spiritual success, and we learn to take them. We just “get it” better. We “get it” enough. We can live by what we get. When stated in this way, it sound obvious and trivial, but, in fact, few people ever open themselves up to “get it” in this way, and few people ever “get it” well enough.

The real question is why we so often “get it” when we open ourselves up to “getting it”. The standard answer in theistic religions is God reaches down to help us out. The standard answer in non-theistic religions is: the world is Mind (Dharma); we are part of the Mind; because we made the world, we can figure out how it works; when we open ourselves up to Mind, then we see what we are part of, and we “get it”. To me, the two answers are similar. Both see God or the system intervening to help those who wheedle up a special relation. Both are wrong.

Instead, I think something like this: What you seek and find is not wealth, power, or family success. You seek and find spiritual adeptness. God does not reach down to help each of us in particular to “get it”. We are not the local manifestation of the great system that is the world. When God made the world, he made it so that people who do relax a little, who do seek, who open themselves up a little, can find much of what they seek. We can find enough most of the time even if we don't find it all. We can find enough when we learn to recognize enough. That does not mean we have to lower our sites to be happy with whatever meager crumbs come our way. It means we learn to recognize that we cannot have the whole world and that we are adept at getting a lot. God set it up this way. All we have to do is go along with what God already set up. The world is scary and dangerous but it is also wonderful, good, and a lot of fun. If we go along with what we can, take a few chances, and deal with the dangers that are within our power, then we learn enough to go on. God is happy that we take advantage of what he set up for us, but God does not re-arrange creation so every seeker gets all the answers or that creation ensures success for each particular person in his-her own particular desires. You do not learn how to cure your brother's cancer just because you want to learn and you go on the Internet. If you are a medical researcher, and you work hard, then you can contribute a small part to helping cure cancer for other people; that amount is enough. You do not write the Great American Novel just because you want to but you might write some good stories along the way. You might not reform all of Christianity but, with a lot of scholarship and hard work, you might help a few people clear their heads, and you might clear your own head too. That is all I can say.

Hell on Earth.

From “Paint It Black” and “Flight 505” by the Rolling Stones:

“I see a red door; I must have it painted black
No colors anymore; I want them to turn black
I see the girls go by dressed in their summer clothes
I must turn my head until my darkness goes”

“He put the plane down in the sea,
The end of flight number 5-0-5”

Listen also to “Behind Blue Eyes” by Pete Townshend and The Who.

The idea that this world is really hell on Earth might be related to depression and other mental issues. I have had deep dark depressions that lasted years, so I get a sense of how the two go together. Yet you can decide the world is really hell on Earth without being depressed, and you can be depressed but still know this world is not hell on Earth. Likewise, you can feel that humanity ultimately will fall far short of our potential, and we will ruin this world, and yet still not feel this world is hell. You can feel we will achieve a lot of material success, and still decide this world is hell. I do not sort out the issues here. Again, I merely describe some points about the feeling.

The idea that this world is really hell is akin to the vision of a greatly fallen Earth from Christian, Muslim, Gnostic, Manichaeism, Dualistic, and similar mythology. Everything stinks. People never do anything right. People can't do anything right. It is already bad and getting worse. All that people do on their own, without God, is evil. Good only comes into this world through God; and that not very often. All this is wrong.

I am not sure if this way of seeing is an inversion of seeing this world as heaven on Earth. I am not sure if the two views share some brain chemistry. The two visions can go together, as in some Buddhism and Hinduism, but I do not go into that topic here. When Buddhism sees this world as not worthwhile, that is not the same as seeing this world as irretrievably bad, as hell on Earth.

This view of seeing the world as fallen, ugly, and bad is more wrong than seeing this world as heaven on Earth. To see this world as hell on Earth, you have to willfully blind yourself to overlook all the goodness here. You have to make yourself see the world blackly whereas the image of the world as heaven on Earth comes of itself. I understand sometimes being overcome by evil but I do not accept wallowing in it, and I do not accept pushing that vision onto other people. (I am not talking of people with depression, bipolarity, or other illness. That is a separate question.)

People who see the world as entirely fallen, bad, and ugly differ in an important way from people who see the world as heaven on Earth. People who see the world as beautiful do not often try to manipulate other people to act as they wish. They do not use other people. At worst, they encourage other people to act well, kindly, and, sometimes, stupidly. People who see the world as bad, ugly, and fallen do try to control other people. Bad visionaries get people to act as they wish for the benefit of the bad visionaries. They instill guilt and ugliness into the hearts of others. They do not encourage other people to act with simple kindness and decency. They offer elaborate schemes for redeeming the world in which they play a big role. Luckily, because they are wrong, we don't have to pay attention to them.

We do have to pay attention to common sense about the badness and ugliness of this world. We can do that without getting carried away.

Imagination.

From the song “Imagination” by Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen:

“Imagination is funny,
It makes a cloudy day sunny
Makes a bee think of honey,
Just as I think of you”

Although some of the themes described in this chapter lead to mistakes, they are still fun. We should not be afraid of our imaginations. Imagination is fun and natural, and we should enjoy it as long as we do not abuse it. If we deny imagination, we get sick. We can imagine what is exaggerated, false, unrealistic, or misleading, such as witchcraft, sorcery, magic, dragons, and conspiracies – and that is not usually bad. We personify ideas such as demons to represent selfishness and lust for power, or magical beasts to represent goodness such as the luck dragon of “The Never Ending Story”. We get lost in imagination for a while as when a star ship goes faster than the speed of light or as in video games where actions break many laws of physics.

We should suspect ideologies that require us to stifle imagination, such as atheism that insists there is no God, or zealotry that insists it knows all about God and we must follow its ideas.

Eventually we have to return to reality. We should know about the laws of physics that get broken on TV and in movies. We need a sense for what kind of beings can really evolve or not. We should know which institutions really work or don’t work. We should know that the happy utopia is not real and that we can’t model our own government on it. We should know that most demons are really people pushed to a bad place. As long as we do this, then we are fine.

Not Leading to Being Useful.

Buddhists classify ideas in ways besides the usual true and false. We can assess an idea by how useful it is in mental-spiritual progress. Some ideas might be important if we could decide true or false, but we have a hard time judging them true or false, such as the existence of heaven and free will. We can waste much time and energy on ideas that we can’t decide. Pursuing those Ideas obstructs the pursuit of other more useful ideas. The ideas of salvation and heaven get in the way of following Jesus. When we run into a not-decidable-worrisome-obstructive idea, we should stop thinking about it and instead get on to more useful ideas.

Buddhists label not-decidable-worrisome-obstructive ideas as “not leading to enlightenment”. C.S. Lewis told the character Eustace (“Useless”) in “Voyage of the Dawn Treader” to be useful instead of annoying and useless. That is what we need of ideas. The Christian version of this attitude toward ideas might be “by their fruits you will know them”. An American version of this attitude toward ideas is “Pragmatism”, which took inspiration from the Christian attitude. Sometimes to chew on not-decidable ideas can be fun, and even useful, but, until you get a taste for the game, be wary.

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Good Wins

Please see Chapter Five, the second chapter on issues. Like love, sweets, beauty, and a strong arm, goodness compels us. Morality has power. Goodness has power both through its intrinsic goodness (its logic) and because we evolved to feel the appeal of morality just as we evolved to feel the appeal of ripe berries and a well-shaped young person. If morality did not have power to appeal, then morality would not have endured in our evolutionary history. In addition, often as a result of both its intrinsic and evolved appeals, goodness is able to muster physical force, as when individuals and nations fight for good. So goodness has three kinds of power: intrinsic, evolved appeal, and the ability to muster force.

Most people and religions want goodness to win and to prevail in the world. Ideally, good should be able to win only because it is good, based only on what is right, only on intrinsic appeal. In practice, good has to use evolved appeal, and good has to be backed up by physical force from people who can sense and assess good and bad, right and wrong.

Goodness matters, it is important. Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi, among many people, felt goodness would conquer all in the long run; goodness had appeal in itself based on its goodness alone, the appeal of goodness was qualitatively different than other evolved appeals such as for sex and fatty food; and good would conquer only through its intrinsic appeal as good, and not by its evolved “sweetness” or by use of force. Gandhi distrusted any victory of goodness that needed force. If people do not voluntarily go along with good for its own sake, then they will not go along with good for long. When force is removed, they return to self-interest even if it is not bad self-interest. If good wins in the end through physical force, then good did not win, power won. A victory by good that is not based on good alone is tainted and is not really good. If good wins because it has more evolved appeal than other tastes, if good wins because it is “sweeter” than sex, then good did not win, sweetness won. When good tastes less sweet, then people find another candy such as Romanticism, justification, salvation, martyrdom, nationalism, glamour, or bravery. All this is why Gandhi insisted on non-violent civil action. He insisted that people who disobey the law believe in non-violence and goodness in themselves, and that they do not use non-violence only as a tactic. Gandhi insisted on honesty. If you believe in force to serve good, it is better to act honestly on the basis of force than to use non-violence as a “front”. If you do good for the sake of honor, then seek honor instead and hope that good comes along. If you do good because it feels good, then eat a big dinner instead. The novel “The Once and Future King” is a long fun meditation on doing good for the sake of good, and whether that can lead to the victory of good in a real human world, and can lead to a good government.

It is too hard to separate the evolved appeal of goodness from other evolved appeals such as for sex and chocolate. I focus on the play between goodness and physical force and “power”.

If people want good to win even if it needs to be backed by force, then they also want to be on the side of good, participate in the victory of goodness, and affect the outcome. People want to feel on the side of good, want to feel they fight for good, and want to feel that they participate in a power that brings victory to goodness. To feel all this is to feel good in both senses of the word. If we think we can win, and likely can win, then we are more likely to act on what we think matters, and we are more likely to get personally involved.

Ironically, in many ways, it is better if we think good-likely-will-win-but-are-not-sure than if we know for sure that good will win or lose. If we know for sure good will win, we tend to get lazy, and then we act as if neither good matters nor our participation matters. In that case, we personally lose even if good wins for everybody else. If we feel good will lose, we tend to despair, and then good definitely will lose. If the question is unresolved, we keep hope, we keep active, and good stands a better chance of winning.

Not all people despair when they think good really might lose. A hard fight for good in the face of evil can matter as much as good itself; it is part of goodness. This is a theme of Norse mythology, and it is what J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis tried to get across in their fiction. This is not self-indulgent martyrdom. It comes of facing the truth, realizing what your convictions are, realizing where your convictions lead, and going there anyway. It is what drives resistance movements, such as the French resistance. It is what drives genuine good-at-heart guys to stick to their codes.

If we think good matters and we want people to commit to fighting for good, the best scenario seems to be much like what most of us think we already have: Good is slowly winning, with a lot of setbacks. The final victory of good is not yet foreseeable but it is imaginable. We achieve little victories that add up to real progress. Evil wins sometimes too but usually we can overcome the victories of evil. As we fight for good, we also become better people. I doubt the world is really like this but I wish it were.

Suppose good will never finally win or lose, evil will never finally win or lose, and that things never really do get better or worse. We only think they get better because we try hard to make them better and only when we try hard to make them better. We only think things will get worse if we stop trying to make them better. We live in an illusion that makes us happy even through most hardship. Suppose this situation was all set up by a supreme intelligence for the sake of us and-or for the amusement of itself. This world is much as with the metaphysical cosmological interpretation in the Bhagavad Gita. Part of the joy of the world is continually overcoming a never-ending different set of serious but manageable problems. Even in this case, striving for good still matters; and we still have to appreciate selves and the growth of selves in the striving for good. We also have to appreciate the cunning of the powerful being, and wonder about his-her final motive for selves and the world.

Even though, like Gandhi, great thinkers have insisted we not see morality as having force like the force in sex, normal people do see morality this way. Morality has power based on the fact that the ability for it evolved. We feel morality as an appeal among others such as the desire for food, sex, and wealth. It makes sense to ask how powerful morality is compared to other evolved appeals. It makes sense to ask if the power of morality will win in the long run. This is like asking if good will win in the long run but phrased not in terms of its intrinsic appeal but in terms of the power of its evolved appeal. If morality has evolved appeal, and morality is worth working for, then it is worth using the evolved appeal of morality to win even if to do so is not ideally pure. Go ahead and mix appeals to family and bravery with the call to goodness. If morality has more power, then it will win in the long run, otherwise another more powerful tendency might win.

We can say morality wins in some situations while other forces win out in other situations. Morality wins when we help out a neighbor in public while lust wins when we seduce the neighbor's spouse in private. This view is certainly true and it does allow us to avoid the issue of which is the most powerful tendency

overall. But this resolution still leads us to think of morality in terms of power rather than in terms of pure goodness, and it does not tell us if we should be on the side of good generally.

I understand moral purity and I understand Gandhi's mistrust of other forces such as evolved appeal and well-meaning force. Yet purity is hard to achieve, sometimes we have to take our chances with a mix of motive, and sometimes we have to accept victories based on mixed forces. If morality wins through power, is that outcome always so bad? When morality wins through force, has power always won in the same sense as if a tyrant took over the world? Isn't James Bond really a better option than the criminals who want to rule the world? Is it impossible that power serve goodness? Thinkers other than Gandhi have decided that practical victory it is not always so bad. You can help goodness without totally tainting it and without having people lapse back into selfish badness. In the real human world, sometimes that is the best we can do. That is why we fight just wars.

I think goodness is not likely to win completely in the end. Certainly it will not win just because it is good. Bad will not win decisively either. Rather, we will have a planet lacking in grace but full of normal selfish people, annoying compromise, many transient material goods, natural degradation, and conflict based on class, ethnicity, nation, and belief. This outcome does not mean good is not good in itself, good is not good enough, good-and-evil-need-each-other-forever, fighting for good despite inevitable evil is Romantically heroically grand, we should not fight for good because fighting for good taints good, and we should not fight for good because good will not win decisively. This outcome does mean the evolved appeal of good is not strong enough compared to the appeals of wealth, toys, stuff, sex, reproduction, power, food, appearance, etc. Good is good, it is worth fighting for, enjoy the appeal of good, enjoy victories when you get them, and be sure it will be much worse if you do not fight for good.

The Next New Israel.

This idea applies mostly to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it also applies to other religions enough. I come back to this idea. Almost all nations and religions see themselves as so special that they deserve permanent privilege and they have the right to lead morally and physically. This is not true. No group is that special now. All groups have qualities that deserve attention and sometimes deserve emulation. Some groups are good in many ways and so deserve consideration, such as successful democracies and economies, and societies that take care of the planet. But no group is so special that it deserves to be the unequivocal leader of the world and is the obvious favorite of God.

The idea of being really special got a boost in the West with Israel, which considered itself chosen by God, morally superior to other societies, likely to be militarily superior, and destined for moral and political leadership of the world. Whether that was true of ancient Israel, I do not say. When Christianity took over from Judaism, it took over the idea of itself as like Israel but extending beyond the boundaries of any particular nation state. When Islam became powerful, it thought of itself in these terms even if it did not call itself the new Israel. When particular nations became powerful in Christianity or Islam, they thought of themselves in particular as the new Israel, as, for example, England in its colonial crest and Iraq under the caliphs. As the United States got economically and militarily powerful, Christians thought of it as the new Israel destined to be the moral and military leader of the world and the instrument of God. They still do, and their ideas cause much mischief. Sometimes Egypt and Saudi Arabia think of themselves as the new Israel, and look to God to give them power. Although it does not think in terms of Judaic religion,

China now thinks of itself as the new Israel which will dominate the world first economically, then militarily, and finally morally. If India rises far enough economically, it will develop a similar ideology put in Hindu terms. No nation or religion is the new Israel. Nations and religions should stop this rhetoric.

In the Jewish Tanakh (Old Testament), The Ark of the Covenant is a special box in which the tablets with the Ten Commandments reside. Only special people can touch it. In Ark lore, Israel cannot be defeated if it carries the Ark into battle. In the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark" (Indiana Jones 1), Hitler wanted the Ark partly as a way to insure victory. At the end of the movie, the Ark is stored in a vast warehouse, the property of the United States. The United States and its allies won the war. Although the movie probably didn't intend to do so, the movie unconsciously promoted the idea that there is a New Israel and that the United States is the current New Israel. This idea is wrong but the fact that it fits in so well with the movie shows how accepted the idea is. You should not feel guilty about enjoying a great adventure movie just because it accidentally promotes a widespread wrong idea.

If the current Israel is the continuation of the old Israel and so destined to become the moral and religious leader of the world, I cannot say. I doubt it.

Thinking this way goes along with being powerful. It is part of using morality as a tool of power. It can help power to arise and can help maintain power. That does not mean it is right. In fact, it more likely means this way of thinking is wrong.

Divine Intervention.

Divine intervention is a good example of an idea that appealing but not useful. The real question is not whether there is intervention but whether divine intervention makes any difference in what matters, what is worthwhile, and how we act. I assume God intervenes very little but he might intervene a bit. If God intervenes a little, it is not enough to count on. God does not change the basic Big Real Risk of the world. I can't think of any intervention that changes what matters, what is worthwhile, or what we should do.

However much God might intervene, there is not enough intervention so we can count on God to set it all straight for us. God will not make the world uniformly good, and will not make it worthwhile for everybody. Even if there has been a lot of divine intervention, it has not changed the basic character of the world, and the world seems to be now much as for the last several thousand years. I assume that will continue to be so until we play around massively with our DNA.

It is reasonable to say that God "sent" important prophets such as Jesus, Mohammad, Moses, the writers of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Confucius, and Chuang Tzu. I might include Newton, Gauss, Darwin, Einstein, more scientists, some artists, and some philosophers such as David Hume. We might include a few politicians such as Jefferson and Franklin.

Despite having sent prophets, the basic character of the world still seems much the same. The game is the same. It is odd that God would send us teachers but not send us enough teachers to change the basic game. To send enough prophets to change the basic character of the world is not to take away free will any more than making sure we have quality teachers in good schools takes away free will from children. If God did not intend to change the basic character of the world through sending prophets, then

it is not clear why he sent them. It confuses the situation to intervene almost not at all, intervene a little through the prophets, but not really intervene enough to change the basic game. Maybe the prophets did change the basic game enough for God's purposes but I don't see it. Maybe sending the prophets was the good education that some of us needed but could not get on our own. We do not expect school to change the basic game of society but we do expect it to help the students who are open to its lessons. Certainly I have gained from the prophets.

Whether from direct divine intervention or otherwise, we often feel as if we are guided into seeing more, being a better person, and following a better path. "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will open for you". I think we are guided, but not by direct divine intervention. If we don't refuse to learn the lessons of life, if we do open our eyes and ears just a little, then we do become better. People who grew up in theist religions believe this is because directly God guides them in particular and in detail. For the overwhelming majority of cases, I don't think that is true. Instead, I think God set up the world so that it would teach us, much like a good teacher sets up an interactive computer education system so that it teaches receptive students. God set up the world so that it would be our teacher. This is indirect divine intervention. With it, there is little need of direct divine intervention, and so I see almost no cases that I would call direct divine intervention. When we feel we are being guided and learning from life, we are, but not because God is doing it directly. Of course, an atheist can argue that this ability of this world is an accidental feature of this world, and might not be true in other worlds. I cannot say for sure about other worlds. I think it strains rationality to see how much we can learn in this world if we are not stubborn and to think that is not a design feature of this world.

If God does intervene to help people, it cannot be because the person is worthy or because the cause is worthy. If God does intervene to help people because the person is worthy or the cause is worthy, then there is no system to it that I can understand, and I have never read any account that I can accept. Too many worthy people and causes go unaided. If God aided worthy people, then no child would ever get cancer or be forced into sex slavery. No evil dictator would ever win a battle, no corrupt lobbyist would ever get a bill through Congress, and no PAC would ever elect a candidate. If God aided right causes, good nations would never fall to bad nations, and people would give to charity instead of pissing away their money on debt, booze, bad politics, and gambling. There would never have been a Holocaust of the Jewish people, mass murder of Chinese, or mass enslavement of Greeks. The best conclusion is that God only very rarely interferes. I am not sure how God can stand by and watch bad things happen, but that is not the subject of this section.

We have to be careful about invoking divine intervention. Even a little too much divine intervention, far below what most people hope for, would completely invalidate free will and so take away much of what it means to be a human self. Either we get freedom or we get divine intervention, but we can't have both. God chose for us to have freedom. We have to make the best of that.

A more interesting question is why we have the feeling that God does intervene when the evidence is so strong to the contrary. There are many other similar delusory feelings, such as that justice prevails when it so often does not, or that democracy actually works. The feelings must have an evolutionary basis. It is clear that we can have feelings that don't match reality but that are still useful. As of not, it is not clear to me what the evolutionary basis must be for feeling that God intervenes. I am not sure how thinking this is so could help us unless it somehow spurred us to efforts that we would not otherwise make and that

were likely to lead to success we might not otherwise achieve. It is hard to see how belief in God's aid could lead us to those efforts and success when simply trying harder would not.

God Has a Detailed Plan.

The Big Bang and Evolution leave a lot to chance. It really could have turned out differently not only on Earth but all through the Cosmos. Even with natural laws as they are, and set as they are, life need not have evolved as it did in Earth. We need not have had the dinosaurs or warm-blooded birds. Even with the general outlines of life as they are, humans need not have evolved – that was as much accident as fate. Even if humans evolved, there need not have been Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, Jesus, Mohammad, Socrates, Leonardo Da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, me personally, or you personally. It seems as if God has something more detailed in mind. He wanted all this to happen. He wanted all those people to come along, or people very similar to them. He might have wanted you personally and me personally to come along. He wants the world to do well. He wants humans to be good stewards of the planet and to succeed in self-government. He wants us to find a sustained decent gracious way of life. He wants us to avoid turning the Earth into a giant ghetto slum. God wants us to grow morally and in wisdom. He wants to see a few trees ten million years from now. God might not interfere directly to make sure all details of the plan come about but he did set it up and he will interfere to make sure it gets the best chance of coming about as it can.

I think God had a vision and a hope, and he did send prophets in some way, but I doubt the rest of this dream is true. God made a lot of worlds. God wants all of them to succeed in the sense given above. Still, I doubt God has a specific plan for each world, and I doubt he intervenes often enough, and deep enough, to make sure each world succeeds. I doubt God sent the particular person Mohammad although God might have used the person once he saw that Mohammad did come along. I do not know the limits that God sets himself on intervening to make sure any given world succeeds. If any given world fails, then apparently God can deal with that failure. God does not have a detailed plan for this world or for any other world.

God Has a Detailed Plan for You, Me, and All Events.

God wants you to be a good computer programmer. God wants you to run for city council. God wants you, an Afghani, to fight to get the Americans out of Afghanistan. God wants you, an Afghani, to fight to make Afghanistan a good country, and has sent the Americans to help you. God wants you to succeed as a car dealer, professor, waiter, pilot, plumber, movie star, or dental technician. God made sure you would find this particular church, house, or beautiful campsite. God wants me to write this book to help people. God wants you to be the particular great Darwinist who finally proves that God does not exist and thus rids the world of the evil of religion. God gave you that flat tire so you would not be killed in the 200 car pileup on the freeway; it is not clear what he had in mind for the 20 people who did die. God led you to pick the winning lotto ticket for 100 million dollars so you would put a new roof on the church. God let terrorists destroy the WTC so all good Americans would unite behind George W. Bush, a born-again Christian, and avoid the godless atheistic Democratic Party. God gave us all a destiny, and God helps us to find it again if we stray from it too far. Karma guides us to exactly what we need.

I doubt much of this is true. I imagine God can see what opportunities would be best for us, and what might tear us apart; and God hopes the best for us. But I doubt God guides us into exactly what would work best for us and into exactly how we might best help the world. If God did that, there would be no free will. It can be a comfort, and it can spur our efforts, to believe we have a God-given destiny, but it is not likely true.

God likely does intervene and guide some people a little bit. It is extremely unlikely that he does so for people in general to the extent that the Tanakh (Old Testament) said he did for the prophets and leaders of Israel, or that the New Testament said he did for Jesus. I do not know how much God allows himself to intervene, especially since God does not undermine free will. It is extremely unwise to rely on God's help in finding your destiny. "God helps those who help themselves".

Usually the idea that God micromanages our lives and events does little harm but, when combined with bad religion or bad politics, it can do a lot of harm. The suicide bombing of innocents comes immediately to mind but there are more insidious cases. In 2012, Richard Murdock, a Republican Congressman, declared that, when a woman is raped, God intended something good for any resulting baby, and so God intended the rape. Murdock wished to stop all abortion, and so he wished a rationale for all pregnancies. I am not sure of Murdock's full intent in the original statement because a flurry of "corrections" appeared afterwards; but I stand by this understanding of his statement. I am sure God hopes the best for every child born but I cannot believe God intends rape. We cannot use the ideas that God intends good for us, and God could interfere if he wants to, to excuse bad behavior or to manipulate other people. We have to see heinous behavior and bad events for what they are. We have to understand the many responses to bad actions and bad events, including that some women choose abortion when they are raped. That is part of the free will that people have in responding to the good and bad of the world.

Collective Punishment and Reward.

Collective punishment and reward was a common theme not only in the Tanakh (Old Testament) but in many documents of traditional religion. There are enough instances of the idea even pre-state people (when one person, a couple, or a family, break a "taboo", the whole people are punished until justice is done) that likely the idea arises easily among people in general. In the Tanakh, God collectively punished the Israelites to make them adhere to his rules. Mostly in the Tanakh, God's rules were moral, so God collectively punished the Israelites to make them more moral. That is where we get the idea of "ethical monotheism". Jesus expected God to collectively reward Israel in his time; Israel was to be the basis for the Kingdom of God. In ancient China, Heaven rewarded and punished the current ruler, and the people, through drought and war, when the ruler transgressed. In ancient India, the people suffered collectively, usually through war, when the ruler broke a moral rule or annoyed an important deity. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the gods sent floods, droughts, plagues, and conquerors. In all places, when the rulers acted well, and the people behaved properly, the rivers flowed abundantly but flowed within their banks, and the crops were heavy on the stalk.

I do not know if any of this collective reward and punishment really happened or if it is only stories. If it did really happen, it has stopped now. Christianity and Islam are not the new Israel, and so the idea of collective reward and punishment by God cannot happen to them. If there is a real "new Israel" it can only be the new Israel founded in 1948. No other nation, religion, or ethnic group is the new Israel, and

so collective punishment and reward to shape a nation for greatness cannot happen to any other nation, creed, or ethnic group now. It could only happen to Jews and-or Israel. If it does happen to Jews and-or Israel, I think the purpose would be as in the Tanakh, so Jews could better serve as the instruments of God to carry his message. I do not think God is using modern Israel that way, but I could be wrong.

Even if God guides some particular groups sometimes, I doubt very much God guides any group through collective punishment and reward. I doubt he used collective reward and punishment even in the classic times of the Israelites and Jews but rather guided them through sending prophets. I am certain he does not use collective reward and punishment now. In the Book of Ezekiel, the Tanakh explicitly and clearly repudiates collective reward and punishment.

We still think like in terms of collective reward and punishment to some extent. When gasoline prices go up through no fault of current leaders, we still replace the leaders, and suspect them of moral badness. When we have a year of drought or a have a major hurricane, we do the same. When things go bad nowadays, we say we have not broken a moral rule but instead have instituted a bad policy. Not only does the bad policy lead to bad results such as deficit spending and inflation, but God makes sure we get the message too through economic hardship and natural disaster.

Some groups still take an Old Testament attitude. Some groups in the United States, who wrongly call themselves Christians, picket the funerals of dead soldiers as a way to protest laws that do not punish homosexuality severely. They assume God killed the soldiers as collective punishment on America so that we would change the laws to be more in accord with what the religious groups want from the Old Testament. No environmental group will admit it in public, but I suspect some relish the current droughts, mudslides, fires, and high food prices caused by global climate change as divine retribution for a hundred years of bad economic and environmental policy.

It is possible that God guided the Israelites, and later the Jews, up to the time of Jesus. He might have guided the Jews afterwards, and might still be guiding them now. I do not know. I think it is more likely he guided the Israelites and Jews up the time of Jesus but stopped after that.

Other than that small guidance of the Israelites and the Jews, and other than sending prophets, I doubt very much that God guides any group in particular. God does not guide America, China, India, England, France, Germany, or even modern Israel, in particular or in general.

God does not collectively punish America through war and through the death of soldiers because America has tolerated homosexuality. Our innocent soldiers do not bear the burden of God's wrath. God did not collectively punish Pennsylvania for taking creationism out of its textbooks. God did not collectively reward the Reagan or Bush administrations despite their claims to godliness. God has not collectively rewarded the Clinton or Obama administrations even though they are just as godly as Reagan and Bush. God will not collectively reward or punish America if we elect Mitt Romney, a Mormon, as President.

In the modern world, the analog to collective punishment is natural laws, and, to a lesser extent, the force of social laws and culture. Whether we understand them or not, natural laws affect our lives, and we must pay attention. We have given up on the idea that God collectively punishes and rewards but we cannot give up on the idea that nature collectively punishes and rewards. When people abuse nature, we

all suffer together. When I wrote this section, it seemed the policy of the Republican Party that there is no global climate change that is caused by human action. I disagree. People have caused global climate change. Eventually, nature will settle the dispute more clearly than ever God seems to have done. On the day I revised this section, “super hurricane” Sandy was flooding the Northeast, in late October, well beyond normal hurricane season. We transfer much of the moral fervor that people used to feel toward God’s collective punishment and reward toward nature’s collective punishment and reward.

When a nation allows wholesale stupid mortgage agreements through lax laws, then the nation will suffer economically eventually, but not due to the intervention of God but due to economic laws. If the United States tries to take away guns, then there will be a lot of unrest, but not through the intervention of God. If America were to institute responsible and reliable health care, American would benefit, but not through the intervention of God. If America were to teach fair play and good citizenship in its schools, American would benefit, but not through the intervention of God. The Palestinians indiscriminately collectively hit Israel with rockets while the Israelis are indiscriminately collectively shell Palestine and round up Palestinians; both groups suffer much and benefit little; now neither group can stop; but not through the intervention of God.

Grace.

We resolve a dilemma gracefully when we find an action that allows us to give some attention to several appeals at once, in about the proportion that they deserve. We act gracefully when we interact so as to make people feel contented and so as not to ruffle feathers. We dance gracefully when we perform a move with minimum stress, minimum additional movements, and in a line that finds a balance between opposing tendencies. We are “in a state of grace” when we feel as if we know what we are doing, and that we can always find the right thing to do. Graceful action is like mathematical elegance. Even in mathematics, there is not necessarily any formula for this although the end result is a formula.

Now recall flight-and-fight. There is not necessarily any all-around perfect resolution to the problem for all species or even for all individuals within a species. Natural selection resolves the problem at any time, but the resolution can change over time. The optimum solution at any time is the graceful solution. The solution appears graceful when it works. As with other kinds of grace, there is no formula even if we can specify the outside limits within which the resolution occurs.

People seek grace in their actions, even everyday actions, just as they seek it in being a host, dancing, mathematics, flight-and-fight, personal life, political life, and relations with nature. People seek grace in their lives. When they find grace in their lives, they feel that it connects to other religious ideas. Religions such as Taoism and Buddhism make finding their version of overall grace a central element.

Just as God does not intervene much in human affairs, so God does not bestow a state of grace or lead some people to a state of grace. Nearly all feelings of being in a state of grace should be explained by reference to evolved psychology. When we prepare ourselves properly, and we are lucky, we find a state of grace. The fact that grace does not usually come from God does not mean it is wrong, false, or a delusion – although our belief that it does come from God can be wrong, false, and delusory. Rather, a state of grace can be a good thing, and it is not wrong to seek it.

Mana, Taboo, and the Force.

“Mana” and “taboo” are Polynesian words which I cannot translate accurately. “Mana” is something like “the Force” from “Star Wars”. “Taboo” does not mean simply “forbidden” but something like “dangerous because full of mana, so should be treated carefully by everybody, and so should be avoided by anyone who him-herself is not full of the right kind of mana”. Mana is like a loaded and cocked gun. I would not rush to meet a Jedi or Sith unless I had a lot of my own mana (Force). Among things that can be full of mana and so can be taboo are people, places, things, ceremonies, and works of art.

Things that have mana have power. The power need not be physical power, although often it is backed up by physical force. The power can be moral, but usually it has to be more than the usual power of morality to compel us through our conscience. For example, Jesus and Gandhi had the power of moral force, and religious leaders usually try to gain it. Mohammad had both strong moral force and physical force to back it up.

The best modern analog to mana might be “coolness”. A sad modern analog is “gangsta”, especially when we romanticize would-be tough guys. The TV character “Fonzy” had mana, especially when he could get people, animals, the weather, cars, jukeboxes, and other devices to do as he wished. Before about 1970s, mana was called “it” or “the ‘it’ factor”. Movie stars and magazine models were “it girls”. Now man can be called “the X factor”. All media stars want to have “it” but few really do.

It is not clear why mana is in some things but not in others. Muscle cars have mana but family sedans do not. The lack of mana caused the demise of the station wagon, and caused a switch to the SUV (equally without mana, but people are good at fooling themselves). Anthropologists have given explanations that correlate mana with aspects of social organization or with categories of culture, but the ties are never one-to-one, and I can’t go into it here. Mana is stronger in some things than in others but it is not clear why. It is not clear if the quality of mana varies according to the quality of the object, as for example the kind of mana for men and women differs.

Mana is usually beneficial, especially when used properly, as when millions of people honored the wish of a dying girl to provide clean water around the world. That was wonderful. Mana can be harmful when used improperly, as the Star Wars saga pounds into us with “the Dark Side”. Religious zealots use belief in mana to power terrorism. National leaders use belief in mana to start wars.

Mana very likely is related to the idea of success or of “making it” but I do not speculate here on how the two are related. Having mana means likely you will make it. Not having mana, or misusing mana, means likely you will fail.

Mana is related to magic but definitely is not the same as magic. Magicians might wish to tie into mana but they personally do not have it. In a famous story in the New Testament, a magician tried to buy the mana of the Christian apostles, but they would not sell it, and the magician died. Magic is usually aimed at the gain of your group or yourself without necessarily much regard for the greater group while mana usually has to take into account the greater group.

Mana is force. Force is usually neutral. Force can be used for good or evil, like a gun. It is not clear if mana can be evil. People who have mana can turn to evil, as the Sith do in “Star Wars”, but that does not make their mana a source of evil. The Force has a light side and a dark side but the dark side seems not able to endure long on its own.

Mana is often associated with creativity, especially procreation and social reproduction such as the yearly holidays, but mana can be tied to other kinds of creativity such as artistic creativity or making the rain fall. Because of its tie to creativity, it is easily abused in Romanticism. The creativity of mana often helps to sustain society. When mana is creative, it is like the idea of Brahman in Hinduism. When mana is supportive, it is like the idea of Vishnu or Krishna. Mana is also often apparent at transitions, as when the dry season turns to the wet season, when a child is born, or when a dead person becomes an important ancestor. Mana might be most dangerous in those times. When mana is a force, or the force, in transitions, usually it requires the end of a previous order. “The King is Dead, God Save the King”. Every new President requires the retirement of an old President. In those times, mana is like the idea of Shiva in Hinduism.

There is no real mana. There is no real Force. Mana is real only to the extent that we believe in it. Jesus did not achieve what he did because he great mana, and neither did Moses or the Buddha.

Giving Back and Forth.

I mentioned this idea in the chapter on evolution. Part of a relation between selves usually is giving-back-and-forth. The technical term is “reciprocity”. Although not always what Americans call a “gift”, for here, call what is given a “gift”. Gifts can be material objects or services, even services such as teaching or singing. What is received need not be the same as what is given; one person can give a pot while the other person can give a set of wooden spoons. The reciprocity can be between two people, one person and a group, two equal-sized groups, two groups of unequal size, or two subgroups of larger groups. The character of the relation is reflected in the giving. If the relation changes, giving alters to reflect that. A change in gifts can signal an intended change in the relation. When the color of the rose changes from yellow to red, the relation changes too. Besides reciprocity not being equal in kind (pots for spoons), it can also differ in value. Differences in value usually show differences in status. For the holidays, a tenant of an apartment house gives a week’s salary to the doorman while the doorman gives a small bouquet to the daughter of the tenant. Changes in the direction of inequality, or in the size of inequality, go along with changes in the relation. When an author sells a book to the movies, he stops getting free pizza from the local pizzeria and instead buys the owner’s kid a laptop for school. We not only give to other flesh-and-blood humans, we also give to animals, institutions such as charities, spirits, deities, real groups, and idealized groups. When selves can reciprocate but do not reciprocate, usually they don’t have much of a relation. If someone at the school lunch table could trade snacks but never does, he-she is not likely to have many friends. Reciprocity often is not so much about trading goods that we need right now, as trading fish for rice, but about showing that we are interested in keeping up a relation, as when we give them a bottle of wine and they give us a bottle of wine. When we want to end a relation, or change it drastically, we make a point of not giving, not giving back, giving only a tiny token, or giving something so big that it is impractical for the person to reciprocate. When the other person does the same, we get the message. Fiction about “manners” often hinges on reciprocity, such as in the work of Henry James.

Giving can be a way to start a relation; if we give, and then the other person gives back, something might be up. Even if we are already in a gift-giving relation, giving “spontaneously” and giving more can show that we want something special back. We want back what we cannot get for ourselves. A person might give his-her marijuana dealer a nice gift for the holidays so the dealer later finds high-quality marijuana instead of the usual stuff. We give our boss (Department Chair or Dean) a nice but modest gift so that our boss will invite us to the holiday party of executives or choose us to go on a trip. We call what we give so as to get something, or make sure of a relation, a “sacrifice”. A sacrifice can be to spirits or to flesh-and-blood people. Some people are adept at this art.

We have a relation, usually asymmetrical, with gods. We sacrifice to gods so as to keep up a relation and so as to get from them what we cannot get for ourselves, such as a cure for a disease. Sometimes we sacrifice a large thing such as a cow, but usually we sacrifice only a small token because we assume the god already as a lot more than we do and we don't want to give up too much in case the god is not inclined to grant our wish. When people want something from a god, they make promises to do things that they don't usually do, such as go to church or make a pilgrimage. The logic of this reciprocity can be quite interesting, but that topic belongs to anthropology.

Devotion or “Bhakti”.

People hold on strongly to relationships that have been rewarding in the past or that could be rewarding in the future, especially if the other person in the relationship is powerful, wealthy, talented, or otherwise promising. Less-powerful people do things often to keep up the relationship with more-powerful people in the hope of someday getting something important back. Powerful people put up with this giving because retainers can be useful, and because often what the powerful person gives is not very costly to him-her even if it is quite valuable to the retainer. A powerful person gets the taxes reduced for a retainer, and, in return, the retainer busts somebody's head for the powerful person. By devotion, people hope to belong to the same set as the object of devotion, or to become like the object of devotion. As with imitation, people hold on most strongly when they most feel the separation, as long as they feel they can narrow the separation, even when they know they can't bridge it entirely.

People do this with religious figures and deities as well. People become devoted, even when they don't understand the message, probably especially when they don't understand the message but can see the charisma of the religious figure. People express their devotion by doing things for the deity, whatever they can imagine the deity might like. Religious devotion is one of the two-or-three biggest causes of the spread of religious movements. Religious devotion is probably the biggest activity in keeping up a religion. It is at the heart of most religious activity by most people throughout the world. Most people are devoted to Jesus, the Buddha, Krishna, or Mohammad, rather than understand his message and follow that. Churches would be empty without devotion.

The Hindu term for religion through devotion is “bhakti”. Hindus accept it as a major way of religion, not only in Hinduism but in other religions as well. Hindus correctly see the devotion in other religions even when other religions do not see it. Hindus correctly see devotion to Jesus as bhakti even when Christians do not. I think the term can apply to devotion to an exalted human such as Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi even before he is made the manifestation of divinity, perhaps in expectation of divinity. In Hinduism, I do

not think the term can apply to devotion to a principle such as wisdom unless the principle is also expressed in a particular divinity such as Athena. A particular god is not often the embodiment of only one principle but can embody several principles. The same principle can “show up” in several gods. A god can be more than the embodiment of any principle, and usually is more. The proper activity of a devotee is worship. Christians follow bhakti when they worship Jesus; some Christians practice bhakti when they are devoted to Mary. Muslims follow the idea when they worship God (Allah) and are devoted to Mohammad, even when they say that Mohammad is only a man.

To a devotee, whether this world is big or small, rational or irrational, good or bad, fair or unfair, does not matter. As a mere human, I can't figure it out. In Muslim terms, this world comes from the will of God, and that is that. Fortunately, I don't have to figure it out. There are beings that are much more powerful and smarter than I am. If I show my commitment and devotion to them, and worship them in the manner they desire, they will put me right. Even if they don't fully understand, they understand much better than I do. They are much more likely to be right than I am. I am much more likely to get “in tune” with what is going on through devotion to them than in any other way.

Even if devotion does not get me “in tune” with the universe right away, still it has many other benefits. The higher being can help me get into heaven or can help me be reborn well. The higher being can bring me peace of mind and clarity of mind. It can help me to act better toward other creatures, or at least act in the right ways toward other creatures. The higher being can bring me wealth and success.

For a finite being such as a human being, complete understanding is not possible at all, and complete accord with the universe is not possible through rational means or even through morality that is grounded in rationality (“do unto others” and “applies equally”). The universe made us, so the universe will provide a way for us to get in touch with it and to merge back into it. Bhakti not only clarifies my mind, it also unifies me with the universe in the only way possible for a limited finite being. When I worship the god of my devotion, I am at one with the entire universe, not just at one with the god of my devotion. The god of my devotion is merely the instrument of unification with the whole universe. I cannot think of the universe as a whole but I can think of my god as a whole person. In worshipping my god, I am participating in the whole universe in the only way possible. This is how the world really works.

Because humans and even particular gods are limited finite beings, it is no contradiction to say that one person can be devoted to one god while another person is devoted to another god. The gods can even overlap or conflict. Devotion transcends all particular gods to bring all gods and all worshippers in line with the whole universe. This is one basis for the idea that “all gods are one” and “all paths lead to God”.

If we think of devotion as devotion, and leave out of consideration whether it leads us to unity with the universe, then we can see bhakti not only in devotion to gods but in devotion to business, politics, sports, science, causes, human people, power, art, nationality, and other human activities and goals. This kind of devotion also might lead us to unity with the universe in the only way possible for finite human beings but I do not speculate on that possibility now and I do not believe it. For a sense of this alternative, watch any movie devoted to a sport such as to skiing, skateboarding, football, martial arts, and basketball.

I find it hard to accept devotion to a deity as a primary form of religion. I doubt that devotion to a god or a saint allows a devotee to achieve unity with that god or achieve unity with the universe. Devotion to a god

feels good but that is the extent of its value. I have seen Christians who are devoted to Jesus, Hindus who are devoted to their particular god, devoted Buddhists, and Muslims who are devoted to Mohammad, the Koran, and Allah, do bad things and overlook good things that they should have done. Devotion to a god, saint, text, idea, or to Mohammad, does not necessarily lead you to do good things and it does not necessarily lead you to correct spiritual insight. Too often, devotion excuses bad behavior. It allows you to overlook important questions and correct principles. If you are not devoted to correct principles, then devotion to a god does not help. If you are devoted to correct principles, then you don't need devotion to a god. This is the central message of atheism, and, as far as it goes, it is correct here. If you worship a god without considering the correct principles for which the god stands, then you are too likely to do bad things. If you are devoted to the correct principles for which the god stands, then the god does not need, and likely does not want, your devotion to his-her person. The god prefers devotion to his-her correct principles, and correct action, more than devotion to his-her person. This is a message of the prophet Isaiah.

My position differs from atheism in these ways: I do not believe we can find correct principles without help from special people such as Jesus. Being devoted to the correct principles does not exclude the idea of God, and leads us to wonder about God. Accepting God (guiding mind) into the picture makes better sense of the correct principles.

The vast majority of religion is devotion. Most people cannot carry on religion except as some kind of devotion. Nearly all churches are organizations devoted to the ordering of devotion. Even intellectuals such as C.S. Lewis, who clearly understood correct principles, default to devotion as the main form of their worship, as in the book "Till We Have Faces" (see later chapter). When I say "trust God", I veer into devotion. Devotion for most people need not be bad as long as it does not lead them to do bad things, and does not prevent them from doing good things. Devotion would be good if it led people into doing good things, as when formal Christianity carried the message of Jesus. For more comments on mass religion and the role of devotion, see a later chapter.

Self-Validating Experiences.

See above. In the chapter on Issues, I opened this idea by mentioning self-validating prophecies and ideologies that eat the world. A self-validating experience is worthwhile in itself without borrowing the feeling of being worthwhile from anything else and without needing justification from anything else. A self-validating experience makes us believe in whatever is integrally involved in the experience. Almost always, a self-validating experience feels good, feels practically good, and feels morally good (or at least does not feel morally bad). A self-validating experience can feel good even when it involves physical pain, as when we get burned saving a kitten from a fire. When we sense that a self-validating experience involves something morally suspect, as in illicit sex, we usually find rationalisms such as moral relativism. Self-validating experiences can trump our sense of morality.

Self-validating experiences include: eating; intoxication; fun; sex; morality; kin; drugs; righteousness; self-righteousness; encountering the numinous; art; devotion; awakening; "reaching" Nirvana; "satori"; love; logic; religious justification; salvation; being sure you are going to heaven; comparative success; athletic triumph; racing; forbidden fruit; adolescent rebellion; being outside the law; following the rules; praxis; dialectic; kicks; creativity; glamour; feeling attractive; rites of passage; and initiation rituals. People need

a quota of self-validating experiences or they begin to feel empty. In a wise line, Paul McCartney said, “Fun is the one thing that money can’t buy”.

There is no good theory of self-validating experiences for me to offer here. Self-validating experiences likely have roots in our evolutionary history in acts that were useful for evolutionary success, and about which extended debate was counterproductive, such as sex. Self-validating experiences often borrow from context, especially from cultural context. In the West, it can be a self-validating experience both to break the law and to follow the law. Self-validating experiences are not merely culturally determined. We have learned to be somewhat skeptical of self-validating experiences, and to temper them with other calls, such as from reason. Still, we remain susceptible to them.

Religions and ideologies seek to ground themselves in self-validating experiences. If you can rest your ideology on a self-validating experience, then nobody can argue against you. Religions and ideologies seek to make sense of self-validating experiences in ways that justify the religion or ideology. We have all had the “Grand Canyon” experience (see the movie) in which we realize how big the world is, and how small and not very important we are (see also “Men in Black” and “Animal House”). We all also have felt that God (Dharma or Tao) considers us important, and wants the best for us. If a religion can put these two experiences together and make sense of them for us, or can make sense of them separately while keeping us from being bothered by the contradiction, then we tend to feel the religion is true, and to go along with its doctrines. Religions structure rituals as self-validating experiences so they can make participants go along with the doctrines of the religion.

People can get skeptical of the link between self-validating experiences and particular ideologies. When people get discouraged with a religion, they reject its interpretation of self-validating experiences. They seek other explanations of their self-validating experiences, or seek different self-validating experiences. When we reject formal Christianity, we find another explanation for the idea that God loves us. If we want somebody to reject a religion or an ideology, we try to sever the connection between the religion-ideology and the self-validating experiences that it explains. We show how Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism cannot be the correct account for the feeling of justification.

When people sever the link between self-validating experiences and their religion, they tend to get angry at the religion and to reject it entirely. They see the entire religion as hypocritical. When people feel a direct link to God without need of a hierarchical organized church, they reject the entire church and all its teachings. When people feel justified without need for a priest, they reject priests and churches. When atheists can find truth apart from the church, they reject all churches. Rejection can be as bad as simply going along with the religious definition of self-validating experiences and with religious dogma.

Both forging and severing links of self-validating experiences with institutions can be ways to manipulate other people and manipulate ourselves. We put people through strong initiation rites so as to control them. We allow ourselves to go through strong initiation rites so we will feel more a part of a group that we like. In both severing and connecting, we have to be careful of the groups and their doctrines. We have to choose wisely.

Self-validating experiences seem as if they should be the enemy of rationality and reason, and, often, the two camps do oppose. They don’t always have to be opposed. To necessarily oppose them is to make

the mistake of opposing reason and emotion. We can have the “Grand Canyon” experience and the “God loves me” experience together without giving up on all reason. We can balance our credit card statement while still realizing that we are only one small speck of dust in the universe. Most people manage to do this every day quite well.

In an important way that I don’t want to go into here, logic is a self-validating experience on which most science rests. How self-validating experiences and logic get along or don’t get along is a large topic. Rather than go into it directly here in this section of this chapter, I go into it indirectly at many points of the book. Please look for the topic in that way.

We can live by important principles, such as the Golden Rule, apart from self-validating experiences. We can live by principles without grounding them in self-validating experiences and without devaluing self-validating experiences. We can have self-validating experiences related to principles, such as when we help somebody who is “down and out”. We can have self-validating without giving up on principles. We try to find the accord between self-validating experiences and our principles. If we find perfect accord, we are quite lucky. If discrepancies lead us to examine both principles and experiences, then we are also quite lucky. If discrepancies lead us to feel bad and to wander aimlessly, usually it is time to get help. Discrepancies should never be an excuse for bad behavior.

Self-validating experiences are like “self-fulfilling prophecies”. You can understand one without the other, although they often reinforce each other. I take up self-fulfilling prophecies elsewhere.

Secrets.

People love secrets. Secrets are often self-validating experiences. Maybe because we all have secrets, we are sure everybody else has them too, that their secrets are really important, and that we would have more power if we knew their secrets. We want to know their secrets. We are sure that successful people have secrets, and, if we knew their secrets, we would be as successful as they are. If we are successful, we think it is because of some little technique we learned along the way, and want to keep that secret. You can lure a person into a relation if you tell them a secret, and you can keep a person in a relation by promising to reveal a secret in the future. A secret promised is a gift. You can keep the relation indefinite by keeping the revelation date indefinite. When explained in this simple way, it sounds silly. But people really do behave this way.

Religions keep people by offering them secrets, often in layers, often in increasing obscurity. TV get-rich-quick gurus and self-help gurus make a good living this way. Sometimes they actually give good tips but usually the tips are something everybody has already heard. This also sounds silly but is real.

Empty Secrets.

Self-validating experiences need not have content in the same way that “apples are red” has content. There is not necessarily any content in wonder at the universe. We just wonder. “What if the secret is that there is no secret?” That is an old joke. It still often happens. An ideology, religion, or institution, can borrow on the force of self-validating experience to pretend that it has a self-validating experience at its heart but that it cannot reveal the experience or explain the experience in mere words. It has an empty

secret, but the emptiness still has power. People really want to believe in secrets, so it is easy to make them believe, and to get them to do what you want, even when there is no content to the secret. If there is any content to the secret, the content is that the perpetrator is smart, the believers are fools, and the perpetrator is taking advantage of them. It is a mental pyramid (Ponzi) scheme based on a made-up secret self-validating experience.

Unless a religion has a point in addition to secrets and to self-validating secrets, be careful of the religion. The religion should have a clear goal that it is willing to tell you about. Good goals for a religion include being a better person, morality, and working hard to make a better world.

For a lot of cults, the point of the cult seems to be to get other people to join the cult, who then get more people to join the cult, and so on. Unless there is a reason to join the cult other than to get other people to join the cult, don't join.

There are exceptions, but be wary. In martial arts, sometimes it is necessary to make people repeat movements thousands of times before they fully know what the movement is all about. If you give them ideas before they act, the mental buzzing interferes with the action. Yet, in the end, they do know. The action is not an empty secret.

Meaning can be like a secret. Searching for meaning is like searching for a secret. Sometimes there is no secret meaning, and we have to have the search knocked out of us by clever use of an empty secret. Taoism, Buddhism, and Zen sometimes use this technique, but, as with martial arts, it is not the basis for a mental pyramid scheme. It is a non-ideological way to stop mental pyramid schemes.

Many people get interested in art because some art has a deliberate meaning. Then they wrongly think all art has to have a meaning. Many young people get interested in art because they see in art comments on society, life, and their lives in particular. This is not an illusion. That commentary really is in some art. It is not in all art. Most art does not have a deliberate meaning or serve as a commentary. I like nearly all music, including jazz and classical music. Only some jazz is "commentary" art. Most jazz is not about anything in particular yet it is still good art. Most rock is commentary music. Young people have trouble going from rock and roll to jazz and classical music because jazz and classical music is not predominantly commentary on young life like rock.

Sometimes the only way to get a person to stop being afraid is to scare the crap out of him-her until he-she realizes he-she is still alive, and then can stop being scared. Sometimes the military and martial arts use this technique. Sometimes the only way to get a person to stop picking apart and bolstering things is to undermine everything, including especially the self, until the person just blows up and starts to live in the ordinary real common sense world. Be careful of the fear technique because usually life gives us enough to be afraid about without adding more to be afraid about. If we live long enough, we get over some of the fear. Sometimes it is better to help another person to live long enough to get over the fear rather than to try to scare them out of the fear.

Pyramid Schemes.

A mental pyramid scheme is one kind of world-eating ideology. It is easiest to explain the subject of this section if I describe how I came to see it. In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans faced not only evangelizing Christians but also evangelizing Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists. I recall being harassed by a Buddhist from a sect. He said, if I joined, I would feel good, and I would see the world as it really is. I would go out and get other people to join. Then what? Then we all would go out and get even more people to join. Why? Because people in the movement are happy and have good lives and they go to Buddhist heaven while people outside are not and do not. What makes you have a happy good life? Seeing what the world is all about and getting other people to join. Expansion makes you happy. Turning other people into you makes you happy. The secret consists of perpetuating the secret. This is another version of Agent Smith. It is a mental pyramid scheme like the pyramid schemes used to sell soap or real estate.

This does not work. There has to be a point to the movement other than simply expanding and making other people like you. There has to be an external point like saving the whales or ending government interference in the free market. If all we have is a magical self-validating experience that automatically makes people inside feel good and makes them want to go get other people into the movement, then really the movement is empty no matter how beautiful the experience.

Movements that feed on themselves do not need content. The less content the better. If that Buddhist sect had promised I would levitate, and then I could not, I would have quit. By promising me nothing except a vague “wow” experience and the call to call others, the movement had nothing deniable, and could go on forever. This is a pyramid scheme. Once in, successful movements can keep people in.

In fairness to Buddhism, most Buddhism is not like that, and most Buddhism has a clear solid agenda. Unfortunately, too much Christianity is like that. Believers have a “wow” experience in the presence of the Lord, in the presence of other believers, or at a ceremony in church. Sometimes being in a group leads you to a self-validating wow experience. The believers tag a doctrine to the feeling. You think you are forgiven and saved just because Jesus died. You think Jesus was resurrected, his resurrection has cosmic importance, and so you will be resurrected and live forever in heaven too. The doctrine says the self-validating “wow” is not fully self-validating unless you go out to get other people to do the same. You get converts so you can continue your “wow” experience and share it. “Come with us and be saved.” What happens after I am saved? “You go out and save more people, who go to save more people, and so on.” The church grows on itself, like the housing bubble of the 2000s or like a chain email. Most bubbles burst but some go on for a long time, such as some forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism.

The “wow” should not be too important. Whether the “wow” is true as far as it goes does not matter so much as what happens after the “wow” experience. If growth of the group is based on what you do afterwards, such as feed the poor, then it makes sense. If growth of the group is based primarily on recruiting for more recruiting for more recruiting, then it does not make sense. “Try it, you’ll like it, and then you can be a part of us too” works for religions as much as it works for junkies, sects, gambling, or for a particular style of sex. For religion to be more than junk, it has to be more than “wow”, and has to be more than “us ever expanding”.

“Building a better world” has enough independent substance so we can strive toward that for a long time as the basis for a religion apart from any particular “wow” experience or on top of any “wow” experience. If ever we run out of the need to build a better world, and I hope we do, then we really can be happy, and we can look for another basis for religion.

Explaining Everything.

This section continues the topic begun in the chapter on issues about ideologies that eat the world.

If religion did not explain important things that are hard to explain, there would be few reasons for religion. Religion has to explain, to some degree, badness, unfairness, random events, why some people make good use of a good start in life while other people “blow it”, why some people can overcome a bad start in life, why the universe is instead of is not, why they universe is as it is instead of otherwise, etc. Yet ideologies that explain too much are strange and creepy, especially ideologies that explain everything. They are like conspiracy theories. We should be careful of religions that explain everything too easily just as we are wary of conspiracy theories. Religions that explain everything tend to feature self-validating experiences, empty secretes, and mental pyramid schemes. There is no good theory of ideologies that explain everything that I know of, so I do not offer one here.

We should reject religions that explain everything but we should not reject religions that explain a lot, and we should not accept a religion just because it explains very little. There is no point stepping around the pond only to fall into a well. I don’t know how much is too much, too little, or just enough. The religion that I have offered in this book does not explain everything. For example, I have no good explanation for prophets or for all of badness.

An ideology that explains everything needs a kernel of truth, a way to extend the kernel of truth plausibly, a way to get around counter-examples and cases where it fails, and ways to debunk rivals. Sometimes a few examples can do almost as well as a theory. For the first example, pick your own favorite conspiracy theory such as that aliens walk among us and slowly influence the course of Earth history. “God’s will” explains everything to people who truly believe. “Market worship” believes the free market can fulfill all human needs as well as they can be fulfilled. Neo-classical economics and modern evolutionary theory explain all human behavior on the basis of strategic self-interest. “Jesus saves” explains all good feelings about religion and all seeking for God. “The Devil Did It” explains everything we don’t like. “The dialectic” (from Hegel, Marx, and Sartre) explains all logical and historical events, and the ultimate rise of classless society. “Those scum bags did it” explains all social problems. Yin-and-yang coupled with “changes” (I Ching) is the Chinese equivalent of the Western dialectic. Dharma, karma, and reincarnation explain all current social relations and your duty, and are the equivalent of Western dialectic. “Depth psychology” (Freud, Jung, etc.) explains all human action as variations of food, sex, death, and power so that painting the Mona Lisa and killing a lot of innocent school children come down to the same thing.

Perhaps the biggest problem with ideologies that explain everything is that they can be used to rationalize everything as well, including bad personal behavior and social injustice. They are a type of contradiction from which we can deduce any nonsense (see Chapter 15 on Mistakes). If dialectic, market worship, karma, yin-yang, God’s will, or “Jesus saves”, can explain why an otherwise talented person should be born with epilepsy and so never realize his-her other talent, then those ideologies can rationalize anything

we do to people. It is God's will that poor people never get an education. It is the logic of the market that the rich be allowed to control politics. It is karma that poor people serve the rich. It is in the nature of yin and yang that women serve men or that men go to war. We need to be able to find good explanations without being able to explain everything so that we can analyze correctly.

Science aims to explain everything. So far, it has not succeeded, but I expect it to go a long way, and, someday, it might succeed. In theory, science is not an empty theory of everything because what it says can be tested, and, if false, rejected. This idea of science is too simplistic. A few important ideas in science cannot be conclusively tested but we accept them anyway, such as evolution. Still, science is not the same as simplistic ideologies that explain everything, there is no reason to reject science, and there are abundant good reasons to accept it.

Tit-for-Tat, Atonement, "What Goes 'Round Comes 'Round", Judgment, Karma, etc.

Reciprocity is part of relations between selves. Most of our relations are with people similar to ourselves, and so we get to expect that reciprocity will be roughly equal or roughly tit-for-tat. Most of the relations in the world after the rise of agriculture were, in fact, approximately equal or tit-for-tat, such as going to the market. We come to think that, if we do something, something of about equal magnitude will happen back to us. If we say something nice, somebody will say something about equally nice back to us. If we give a gift, we will get about that much back. If we do a favor, somebody will do a favor of about equal magnitude back for us.

In the same way, we come to think that, if we do something bad, something bad will happen back to us of about the same magnitude. We expect an appropriate punishment for our crimes. People think this way not just because people usually are in relations and we punish deviations from the relation appropriately, but because people live in groups and groups punish criminals appropriately. Often the two punishments are the same thing. When we get caught stealing from a friend, the friend hits us, and then the group won't have anything to do with us either.

We have a relation with non-physical spirits. Just as real people reward us when we do something good, and punish us when we do something bad, we expect the spirits to do the same. Spirits reward and punish through the medium of nature. If we do something good, maybe we catch a big deer especially easily, or we find a large apple tree with the apples near ripe. If we do something bad, we slip, fall, and cut our leg, or we spend a day hunting and gathering with nothing to show for our effort.

Because we expect punishment to follow crime, if we punish ourselves before somebody else does it, we can make sure the punishment fits the crime, make sure nothing terrible happens, show other people that we have the right mind and can be trusted, and hopefully can re-enter relations with everybody in good standing again. People atone for their crimes.

Because we expect a punishment to follow a crime a large share of the time, when we see a punishment, we infer a crime. If Joan slaps Jim, we expect Jim did something wrong. Because we have a relation to non-physical spirits, if a rock falls on Jim's head, we suspect Jim did something bad even though we didn't seem him do something bad. We hope Jim confesses and atones so nothing worse happens, and so we don't accidentally get caught in the crossfire.

We do know of unusual punishments, as when somebody steals from his friend, and then the friend kills the person and his-her entire family. But we don't expect disproportion. We expect roughly tit-for-tat for bad behavior and punishments. If a truly awful thing happens, we suspect a truly awful crime behind it.

In the major religions, these attitudes have led to the expectation that God keeps a ledger book of our good deeds and bad deeds. We get sent to heaven or hell according to the sum of the ledger book. The equivalent to a ledger in non-theistic religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) is Karma. I take up differences between ledger and Karma in later chapters; they are not great. We get rewarded and punished in about correct proportion to our deeds.

Grace Again, for Our People.

It doesn't matter if this world is good, bad, fallen, hell, or heaven. What matters is the situation of me and people like me. If we can feel a better world, and respond to that better, and if the better world can reach back to us, then that is all that matters. All that matters is our connection to better-ness. We can achieve a state of grace in this world through what we feel, know, see, or otherwise sense. If there is a next life, a heaven or hell, then achieving grace in this world prepares us for heaven in the next. People like us naturally tend to form a community of people who have insight and grace. It is too bad that not all people can have the same sensitivity as we do but we can't do anything about them. All we take care of is ourselves and people like us. Within our community, we can achieve something like a heaven on this world, with success for our people.

Grace does not have to be the standard Christian idea of grace with goody-goody people floating around with haloes over their heads. Grace can be any insight that gives some satisfaction, carries us above the mundane world, and sets us apart from other people without insight. All major religions have some idea of grace in this sense: born again, saved, in touch with God, Enlightened, in touch with the Tao, chosen of God, stewards of Heaven, etc. Even modern religions such as Scientology have a sense of special people who are in touch with other special people in a mutually-supporting community. All major religions have a rationale for why the world is as it is, why there are some special people, and why there are some not-special people. Scientology sees special people as continuations of successful people from another world and time.

It is easy to make fun of this view when it leads to self-proclaimed superiority and privilege, as it often does. When it leads to badness, it should be condemned. It is a lot harder to get rid of this view and its bad results. If you are reading this book, chances are you are a bit more sensitive to religious and spiritual issues than most people, have abilities that other people don't have as much, and would like to be in touch with other people like you. That is natural. It also leads easily to abuse.

The real questions are: Which states of grace are really states of grace and which are counterfeit or only pale imitations? What should people in a real state of grace do? There are no ready answers. I think it is a good idea to act as if grace was irrelevant, and simply try to be useful, decent, and to make the world a more interesting place.

Rituals.

This section does not offer a theory of rituals. Rituals often are a type of self-validating experience. They can be an empty self-validating experience, but, here, I take them as something usually better. Rituals do not have to be anything formal like a high mass. Rituals can be any activity with fairly stereotyped actions, people do the activity at regular times or on particular occasions, and the participants have fairly well-defined relations to each other. Usually the participants are in the same in-group, such as a family, school, church, ethnic group, religious group, or nation state. Rituals include pep rallies, Saturday pizza-and-movie night, holidays, going to church, going to work, going to lunch with friends at work, checking email again after lunch, burying the dead family pet, birthdays, weekend sex, etc. Rituals used to include family dinner. Rituals can be held on special irregular occasions, such as a funeral or after a disaster, as long as they are similar enough from time to time and-or they borrow motifs from other regular similar rituals.

People do rituals for many reasons, often all at the same time. Again, the reasons almost certainly have a basis in our evolutionary history but the evolutionary theory of rituals is not yet well-enough developed to go into here. It is easy to give plausible reasons for a ritual but, if we go deep enough, it is also easy to see that the reasons themselves need explanation. For example, rituals very often comfort people, even rituals such as the Fourth of July. Why do people need comfort then, how does comfort “work” in various situations, and how is it that ritual can comfort people in just the way they need then? Keep in mind the many reasons for rituals for use in later chapters on stances and religions.

-Rituals give comfort.

-Rituals allow us to repeatedly see who is in our group so we know who is with us when.

-Rituals allow us to see several of our in-groups in appropriate situations, and to evaluate each group in its appropriate setting.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate the condition of the people in our group and the condition of our group.

-Rituals reinforce bonds of the group.

-Rituals connect us to an ideology, usually an ideology that is important for our group.

-Rituals reinforce religion, and reinforce our systems of categories.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate other groups.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate the particular individuals of other groups.

-Rituals allow us to show the condition of our group, and its members, to other groups, particularly after a change in our group such as a death. We put our best face forward.

-Ritual helps us through changes but giving us a solid base from which to change, and by allowing us to introduce changes in small manageable pieces.

It is tempting to think the ability for ritual evolved so as to fill these uses, and that we completely explain ritual as “nothing but” when we list these uses. That is not so. Ritual is a part of our evolved abilities. It is in its own right before it does anything in particular. These uses surely played a part in the evolution of the ability for ritual, and surely play a part in the actual acting of ritual, but they do not necessarily explain how ritual evolved, or what ritual is all about and is only about. That is why this section does not offer a theory of ritual.

Friend Signals; and Taboo among Friends.

Keep in mind that “taboo” does not mean “forbidden” but “handle carefully because special”. Not all our friends, relatives, associates, etc. are the same way to us. Not even all our friends among our friends, relatives among our relatives, and etc. are the same way toward us. We use rituals, signs, and other markers to show our various relations. We do some things with some people, not do some things with them, and do, and not do, other things with other particular people. Boyfriends and girlfriends have “their” particular places, songs, dates, etc. Families have theirs. A common theme in movies since the 1980s has been a friend who sulks because his-her good buddy has now gotten a girlfriend-boyfriend and now does not do all those special friend things they used to do before. The change in activities signals a change in relations. Movies hopefully teach us how to go through the changes so that we keep the best of both worlds.

Sometimes we signal relations with an especially close friend by what we don't do. We don't do anything to undermine their identity. Good friends do not “out” their gay friends. We do not reveal friends' most embarrassing moments. We do not show all the pictures from childhood. We do not reveal weaknesses of our friends or any group we are in. We build layers of defense. All this defense is taboo. During the first craze for “Cabbage Patch Dolls”, my wife and I lived in an apartment complex in which also lived many families with children. My wife and I became friends with some sisters who were about eight years old. One day my wife tried to serve them some Chinese cabbage. When the girls found out what it was, they wouldn't eat it. They did not eat cabbage. To do so would be like eating their dolls, their friends, would be cannibalism, and would undermine their friendship with their particular dolls and all Cabbage Patch dolls. This might seem silly but it is a common way of thinking and acting. We protect our religions and groups in the same way. We do not wear the colors of other schools, and we do nothing to debase the flag or colors of our own school.

The movie “Sucker Punch”.

Do not read this section if you wish not to spoil the movie. We all need help sometimes. We all have been helped. People usually enjoy helping other people and nature. Some people are willing to sacrifice much for others, such as people who give bone marrow to a stranger. We learn some lessons only from the sacrifice of others, as when a friend falls into drugs and we learn not to do that, or when a friend helps us survive a break-up and we learn what to do from him-her. Most people can lead a normal life only through the sacrifice of other people who cannot lead a normal as a result of the sacrifice, the theme of Moses standing at the door of the Promised Land, and the theme in several great movies by John Ford, including “The Searchers” and “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”. Soldiers are willing to take this

chance, but we hope they can return to normal life when they get home. It is a theme of the movie "Saving Private Ryan".

In the movie "Sucker Punch", the innocent heroine is about 16 years old (the actress playing her is older but not so much older that it spoils the illusion). The evil stepfather of the innocent heroine wrongly puts her in a home for wayward girls so he can hurt her and take her inheritance. The head orderly in the home is powerful and evil. The stepfather arranges with the head orderly to have a visiting doctor cut the brain of (lobotomize) the girl so she will become a "vegetable". The evil head orderly also sometimes does this to girls so he can use them for sex. The girl has only a few days to escape. With the help of some other girls, she carries out a plan that would lead to their escape if it worked. The girls in the home already have a natural leader, who is not the "new girl". The natural leader at first opposes the plan but then goes along with it when she sees the other girls intend to carry it out anyway and they need her help. For the plan to work, somebody has to distract the bad guys long enough so that the girls can steal items that they need. The plan needs several items and several episodes of distraction. To do this, the new girl dances. In each dance, she creates amazing new fantasy worlds into which the audience goes for a while. In each world, imaginary members of the gang of girls are on a mission and have to fight bad guys. Each world has its own spirit. In the real world of the home, when the real escape is underway but not yet achieved, the weakest girl in the gang is caught and made to confess the plan. The plan is almost but not entirely thwarted. Only the new girl and the natural leader can get free. Yet now that the bad guys are alerted, only one can escape. All along, we thought the plan for freedom has been "for" the new girl and "all about" the new girl, but now the new girl understands better. The new girl knows now that the events started by her coming to the home were really for the natural leader of the girls and were really all about her. The events were not about the new girl. The natural leader of the girls is to be saved, but only through the self-sacrifice of the new girl. The nature leader is that best person among us who we want to succeed. The new girl allows herself to be captured as a distraction so the natural leader can escape. As a result, the new girl is lobotomized and loses herself entirely, but she goes with a smile at what she has accomplished. I don't know how much the movie was inspired by the true story of Frances Farmer. See the Internet.

Watching "Sucker Punch", or any movie, is like watching the magical dances of the new girl in the movie. "Sucker Punch" comments on us as we watch it. We are like the people in the movie that watch the magic dances of the new girl. We are as much "taken in" for a while as they are. We are as much freed as they are. The director makes sure we know this. (Using "watching" as a theme in the movie that we now watch can lead to a paradox. I don't consider that possibility here.)

To lose yourself through brain damage, and then become the toy of a bad person, is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a sentient being (a person), worse than death, and worse than being trapped in the "matrix" because you cannot escape from brain damage but you might escape from the matrix. To be maltreated so that you cannot recover is as much to suffer brain damage as to have a needle jammed in your brain. Both are evil. Voluntarily to lose yourself in this horrible way, for the sake of others, is one of the bravest greatest acts that any person can do.

Ordinarily I dislike allegorical interpretations, but here are some: The home for wayward girls is like the daily common world of delusion, the liquid world, the world of samsara and maya, the fallen world, one world among many in the total system of many lives and many worlds, or the total system of many lives

and many worlds; that is, our world. It is like the Romantic world created when the Spirit loses itself. Our world need not be bad but it is bad when bad people take control. The sub-worlds that the new girl creates during her dances are like particular adventures that the Spirit creates, especially to advance its cause, as, for example, the Renaissance. The new girl is like the Romantic Spirit sacrificing itself so the world can be born, carry on, and can eventually come to a proper achievement. The Spirit loses itself so we limited others can find ourselves. The new girl is like a bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism, who voluntarily puts aside his-her spiritual enlightenment-and-release, and who continues to live in the world of delusion, to make sure all other beings achieve their enlightenment. The bodhisattva loses him-herself so other can find their selves first. The bodhisattva creates sub-worlds as expedient means to help other people find what they need. The new girl is like a Hindu avatar who takes on a particular form to save people in particular circumstances, like Vishnu becoming Krishna the charioteer of Arjuna. The new girl is like some Hindu goddesses who dance particular sub-worlds worlds into existence; the danced worlds are real within themselves but are subordinate to the greater world of many lives and many worlds. The items that the girls seek in their fight for freedom are like the magical weapons given to a Hindu hero by the great gods Brahma and Shiva. The new girl is like Jesus sacrificing himself so we can be free and we can go on to have decent lives. The new girl is like a Muslim martyr who dies in battle for the glory of God. The new girl “saves Private Ryan” by willingly giving the most that can be given.

Allegory is like dogma. All dogma tends to turn bad. Allegory is more prone to turning bad than most dogma. For this movie, and for self-sacrifice in general, allegory fools us into a bad attitude. If you can avoid allegory, simply see the movie, and have your own ideas, then do that.

The idea of self-sacrifice is too often abused. It is glamorized to enable bad motives. Allegorical visions of self-sacrifice promote the abuse and they promote self-deception. People “get off” on the idea of self-sacrifice; to “get off” on the idea is bad; it undermines the good done by real self-sacrifice. We don’t look at self-sacrifice directly for what it is but instead look at it only allegorically. Instead of seeing self-sacrifice as a horrible crime forced on the new girl by evil people, we see it as an uplifting act that makes the new girl noble. We want to be like that, not really to help other people, but because it is so cool, glamorous, and seemingly spiritually successful. To self-sacrifice justifies us, saves us, and allows us to overlook our faults, frustrations, and failures. People glamorize self-sacrifice and martyrdom so they can endure their own silliness. People did this with the Frances Farmer. It is part of Muslim extremism, PC attitude, and the Right Wing stance. It is part of the political-and-religious personality of our times. That is why we-the-movie-viewers are like the people in the film that watch the magical dances of the new girl. Delusions about self-sacrifice are a kind of made-up distracting world as in the magical dances. This delusion about self-sacrifice is as sad as the forced self-sacrifice by the new girl. This delusion is a self-lobotomy that does not save anybody. It is better to see through the silliness and to save what you can of yourself and other selves. Saving yourself is the best way to save the new girl and to thank the new girl. That is what the natural leader of the girls did, and that is why, really, it was all about her all the time, not about the new girl.

I point out several times in the book that people in state societies need a quasi-divine human mediator between the world of humans and the world of the gods. All the major religions focus on such figures. Even Judaism and Islam need these people, although, officially in those religions, they remain merely human. A common attribute of these mediators is extreme self-sacrifice, usually death. The misleading

allegorical glamorization of sacrifice feeds off of, and feeds into, this need for a quasi-divine hero. I do not fully understand this need and how it works; but I know it when I see it.

Working for the welfare of others is right. Sometimes sacrifice is unavoidable, and I thank the people who have done that so I can have a clear mind, secure body, and political freedom. I don't know how the new girl could have avoided self-sacrifice. Maybe in that situation she did have to sacrifice herself, and maybe that was the best thing to do. But it is not an overall good thing to do, and self-sacrifice should not give us pangs of satisfaction, justification, and salvation. Getting forced into self-sacrifice is not a good thing. It is just a tragedy. To glamorize the self-sacrifice of the new girl is to betray the self-sacrifice of true heroes, to betray her particular self-sacrifice, and to give in to deluded and perverse ideology. The best way to honor the people who have to sacrifice is to live well in the world that they could not get but wanted you to have anyway; that is what Private Ryan did.

Biologists have shown clearly how sacrifice can have roots in evolutionary success. Likely there is an evolved basis for the tendency to glamorize self-sacrifice too. People who sacrifice, even if they don't die, and the kin of such people, are highly regarded. People who sacrifice a little, and survive, can use it as a tool to make other people do what they want for a long time after. Alluding to past sacrifice is a good way to get enabled. A common joke on this theme is: "I carried you in my belly for nine months, and I fed you at my breast for a year, so now you have to make it up to me". The kin get a bonus from the self-sacrifice of their kinsperson, even if the kinsperson doesn't die. The kin retell the sacrifice and remind the people of the group how much they owe. I don't go into the question of evolutionary roots here.