

17 Worlds 1

This chapter is the first of two chapters that describe themes in world views. The term “world” includes “world view” and everything that goes to make up reality, how we think about it, and how we live in it. A world entails a stance and every stance implies a world in which that stance makes sense.

Each view about what people are implies a world in which that kind of person makes sense. Each feeling or attitude implies a world in which that attitude makes sense. Selfish people look at the world in a way that makes sense of selfishness. Generous people look at the world in a way that makes sense of giving. People have hundreds of attitudes, each with its own world. Almost every work of art entails a world. The obvious examples are fantasies such as “Star Wars” but even a simple poem such as “Jingle Bells” makes us think of times and places. Every poem, song, movie, TV show, ad, and comic book is a world. Religions imply worlds. Each personal code requires a view that makes sense in a particular world. Romanticism is a world view. I can’t describe all worlds.

Very few people live by one world view, and no religion has only one world view. People mix world views to justify themselves in various situations. Religions mix world views to allow different kinds of believers to justify themselves or to allow believers in different situations to justify themselves. Not all world views are compatible. I don’t know how much people can hold to different world views at the same time; I don’t know how much people can live in different worlds at the same time. I don’t know the logical constraints of mixing different worlds.

Themes-stances-selves-views-attitudes-art-codes-religions-worlds do not work apart from ecologies, economies, societies, cultures, histories, etc. Some particular worlds etc. go well with some particular ecologies etc. The role of a theme can vary according to its setting. This is an important subject in social science but I cannot go into it.

Some of the worlds described in this chapter and the next might seem dated and irrelevant to our time, such as Gnosticism. In fact, all are relevant to our time. Gnosticism might have gotten its official label in the Classical World of Greece and Rome but it is a style of looking at the world, and people of our time still see the world in that style. The movie series “The Matrix” is almost pure Gnosticism. It takes too much space to describe how our time still uses older world views. I give some examples in which old world views are still alive now.

Right World.

People usually care less about knowing the variety of worlds than knowing which world is the right one. This question is not easy to answer. The simplistic material world of science is true but it is not the whole truth because it does not include how we think about the world. The simplistic answer is that the one right world is the world in which my idea of people and acts makes sense and in which alternatives make less sense: the teachings of Jesus, practicality, Western values about people and good government, science, enjoy the world, and make the world interesting. That answer is appealing but there is so much “wobble

room” that people still argue over the one right world. Even if these values are correct and the world in which they are the best values is the one right world, the one right relevant world differs depending on whether we think democracy will succeed or fail, if democracies fails then what takes its place, whether we can manage world ecology or the world will sink into a chemical pit, world climate is already beyond saving, income inequality grows worse, people become hugely dependent parasites of the state, business firms merge with the state, advances in biology change our basic nature, and so forth. I have no firm answers. All I can say is what I have said throughout the book: the set of values offered here is the best base to start from no matter what happens next. They imply a world in which they make sense, including the world as science finds out about it. In sections below, I give some criteria for deciding among world views but I can’t get any closer to one completely correct indisputable world view.

Self-Reinforcing World View.

See “self-validating experiences” from the earlier chapter on issues.

Major world views support themselves. Once you get inside a major world view, it is hard to get out. It is hard to invalidate a world from inside. It is hard to see other worlds at all, harder to see them as valid, easy to see them as derivative and deceptive, and hard to jump from this world to another. Paranoid people see the whole world as threatening, and the whole world becomes threatening. Self-reinforcing views are powerful tools of control. If you can get other people into a self-reinforcing world view that supports you above them, you can get them to do a lot for you; this is a theme in modern portrayals of serial killers and criminal masterminds such as Professor Moriarty, Hannibal Lecter, and Red John. Self-reinforcing world views are not well understood. Darwinists need to ponder how the ability to make self-reinforcing world views could have evolved, and what counter abilities would have evolved.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is like a self-reinforcing world view. An evil monarch hears that a child born in a certain village will grow up to overthrow him-her; he-she sends soldiers to kill all the children; one child escapes; the child learns about injustice and tragedy from the event; and so the child grows up to kill the tyrant. If the tyrant had done nothing, the tyrant would have been alright. Variations on this theme are in “Oedipus the King”, the stories of Moses, Jesus, David, and Robin Hood, in the movie “Red Sonja”, the TV series “Beast Master”, “Star Wars”, and “Harry Potter”. In real life but transformed by this kind of thinking: Mohammad befriends Jews and Christians, who then betray him. He rises again stronger than ever, and defeats his enemies. The Buddha’s father, a king, heard that his son would grow up to reject the world, so, to keep his heir, the father made sure the son grew up in ease. When the son finally left the palace for the first time to see the real world, his shock at the contrast led the future Buddha to reject the artificial palace world and the whole world. By trying to keep the son, the father drove away the son. John O’Hara based his novel “Appointment in Samarra” on this story: A man is in Bagdad. While visiting the market, the man sees Death staring at him with surprise. The man knows that Death intends to take him tonight, so he flees to Samarra. A second man asks Death why the surprise. Death was surprised to see the first man here in Bagdad during the day because he had an appointment with him in Samarra tonight. Fear of bank failure causes it. Fear of recession causes hoarding which causes recession. Confidence in the economy causes consumer spending and business investment, which lead to robust economic development.

Self-supporting world views often borrow on self-validating experiences. If we feel God's love personally, it is easier to support a world view of universal love. If we believe in secrets, it is easier to base a world on secrets. Usually I do not point out the self-validating experiences in a self-reinforcing world view.

Just because a world view is self-reinforcing does not mean it is wrong or right. In the classic novel and the movie "Catch-22", the hero, Yossarian, built a self-reinforcing paranoid world view, but he was correct. We have to judge what the world view says regardless of its source.

Relativism, Objectivism, and Proper Assessment.

Usually we have to "walk a mile in their shoes" to properly assess a way of life and world. We have to see as they do and live as they live. When we do, we run the risk of falling in and never being able to climb out. This is part of The Big Risk of Life, where we can wander paths that are hard to leave and can make mistakes that are hard to correct. Unless we take this risk, we are limited to a narrow range, not know much about life, badly misjudge people, and do little good. I believe Jesus wanted us to take this risk.

Even so, we cannot lapse into total relativity. We cannot blind accept all worlds just because somebody believes in them. Not all worlds are mutually compatible. Self-reinforcing worlds are not all correct just because we have to see them (at least partly) in their own terms. Not all roads to god are the same. Not all roads to god lead to the same god. Repressive totalitarian regimes are wrong. Oppression of women is wrong, even when women do it to women. Bullying and severe hazing are wrong even when part of a macho subculture or Black subculture. Part of learning about other world views (other cultures) is so that we can actually judge them when necessary.

Real Imaginary Games.

We have to open our imagination to see how world views are used. People do something odd with world views. World views often defy the normal laws of physics and biology but they do so to get things that we evolved to want. In video games, people can go faster than light, fly, shoot death rays out of their eyes, and have many of the impossible powers of Superman or Iron Man. What do they use their powers for? In the classic comic books, they fight for good and against evil. In games, they demolish enemies and get the beautiful girl or the hunky guy.

World views each have their own logic, and they share a common logic. Thinkers have not spelled out well either the logic of any particular world view or the common logic, so I can't go into the topic here. The common logic is based on a combination of reality, fantasy, wish fulfillment, evidence manipulation, and argument manipulation. If a world view is to appeal to real people with real needs, it has to touch on reality, and it has to be more than reality too. This is the same appeal that religion also must have, which is why religions imply worlds and world views imply religions.

To serve as a world view, a view has to be believable even if it is also slightly unrealistic. People have to enter a world-view before it can be self-reinforcing. Even if people are born into it, a world view has to be mostly believable or people will leave it. In the same way, games have to be believable and satisfying even

if they are not entirely realistic. The same things that make games believable and fun also make world views believable and compelling.

To really work, while we play a game, we have to get lost in the game. Even if we are only spectators, we tend to get lost in the game. Fans get lost in football games and basketball games. We have to be able to take on the role of characters just as football fans identify with a quarterback or mystery fans identify with the able beautiful police woman. The people we identify with are a mixture of real and super. If they were not both, we could not identify with them or we would not want to identify with them.

Games teach. Suppose you want to get people to live a certain way, find out certain things, and become certain kinds of people. What game would you design to get them interested, keep them interested, and teach them what you want them to learn? What does American football teach people, or golf? In the end, how would you wean them off the game back to reality so they could put into practice what they had learned and had become? This is not an idle question now. In the future, much of our education is likely to be through computer-based games. Now, the American military uses games to teach soldiers. The pilots who fly drones fly them from thousands of miles away using a console that looks very much like a video game.

In the chapter on issues, I said this life is not a mere game and that this life is as real as it gets. I stand by that opinion, but here it is useful to step outside dogma for a while and to consider worlds as if they were a game that teaches. Suppose any world is a game-like teaching tool? The first steps in assessing the world are these questions: (1) What is this world set up to teach, (2) how does it teach, (3) how are we assessed, (4) when do we graduate or “wake up”, and, (5) when we graduate or “wake up”, where do we go (6) do we stay in this game, (7) do we have to move to another game or another version, and (8) can we put into practice here what we have learned here?

More on How to Assess Worlds.

At first, assess worlds as if they were games for teaching, as above. Then, think of them not as games for teaching but as anything else that comes to mind that seems useful, fun, or appropriate.

A world should not be incompatible with the current real world unless it is an obvious fantasy world such as on the Sci-Fi channel. Yet we should not be too critical if a world is not obviously realistic in all points. It might sound counter-intuitive, but, just as a biased perception can be more effective than a completely accurate perception, people do not expect total realism from the worlds in which they live. People expect to be able to interpret their worlds so as to do well in particular situations. Worlds should be amenable to interpretation for success rather than totally realistic.

People use world views to explain the most important aspects of their lives to them. They want to know who is in families, what roles are in families, what other kinds of people there are, how everybody relates to everybody, what work is, when to go to work, what play is, when holidays arrive, how to behave during ordinary days and how to behave during holidays, etc. Again, worlds need not include all this information explicitly as long as they allow people to interpret and to make up as they go along without contradicting the basic world.

Most world views answer some particularly important questions: Why is life unfair? How is life unfair? Why is there evil? Why are there particular kinds of evil? Why is there so much evil? Is there anything we can do about unfairness and evil? How do we succeed in this life? If spirituality is part of the world, how do we succeed spiritually? What is the relation between spirituality, fairness, unfairness, and evil? Can we do anything to promote spirituality, fairness, and good?

As you become adept at thinking about world views, what becomes most relevant is what people do as a result of being in that world. How do you act? What are your values? Can you use those values in the world in which you learned them?

Do not expect worlds to be completely consistent, any more than works of art are completely consistent. People are amazingly adept at holding inconsistent views at the same time. Holding inconsistent views allows us to interpret in ways that permit us to do what we want; see below. I do not know of any single academic work that clarifies how consistent a world needs to be, what kinds of inconsistencies people can tolerate or not tolerate, and how much.

In all the worlds that seem relevant to me, the values are the same. We learn to act the same. We use those values in the world in which we learn them. We follow “do unto others” and “applies equally”. We work hard to make that world better. We act decently. We do not act indecently. We apply the teachings of Jesus combined with reality and practicality.

If this world is a game, it is an interesting and unusual game in that we do not leave the game when we “graduate” or “wake up”. We live in the same game we learned in, and we apply the same lessons we learned during the game to our further conduct in the game. That is not true of all games and all worlds. That result is what makes this world as real as it gets even if in some “airy-fairy” way this world is a game.

In this book, I am most interested in the issue of what worlds teach, especially what values they teach. I focus on worlds that have been historically interesting, that are currently important, or that are interesting to me for personal reasons.

Learning in the Face of the Big Risk.

The chapter on issues pointed out that we need to experience the bad things and bad people in life if we are to know how to respond, become fully human, and really help other people. To really understand how failed and broken people feel, to be really able to help them, or to leave them alone if that is best, we have to have been broken ourselves, at least somewhat. To understand a person in pain, we need to have felt pain ourselves. There is no other way. There is nothing glamorous about pain, getting broken, or failing. It just hurts.

Badness is dangerous. Failure gnaws your guts. Getting broken drains your life force. We really might become bad ourselves, break, never heal, or lose our bearings forever. Some people remain damaged. This is part of the great risk. People that have been scarred or lost should not think they understand and should not romanticize. Religions, maybe especially in the teachings of Jesus, offer people a way back but not everybody can take the offer even when they wish they could.

This problem makes us think about what kind of a world this one really is and about how we make up worlds to make sense of this world. This section works its way through the topic. This topic colors all ideas about worlds.

Some of us get hurt, fail, or break, and then do heal. Usually you cannot make up for the loss even if you heal. Even so, we who heal are the lucky ones.

The best we can do with our experience is to learn from it how to be good to people and nature. We can learn what really matters and what people really need. We can learn to overlook silliness and diversions. We can learn to focus on what makes a difference. If we are adept, we can learn how to shepherd other people through their hardship so they learn without turning bad, wearing scars, or getting broken. That is very hard to do but it is worthwhile when it can be done. As Roy Blatty said in the movie "Blade Runner", "I have seen battle cruisers on fire off the shoulder of Orion" and "To live in fear is to be a slave".

I could never have learned to be a better person if I had not suffered hurt people hurting me. I could never have learned to be a better person if I had not suffered bad people acting badly. I could never have learned to be better if I had not suffered bad people hurting me and hurting people close to me. I could never have learned enough if I had not been hurt, failed many times, and even been broken a few times. I had to have people use me. I would not understand isolation and pain if I had not been isolated and broken. I had to feel bitter to overcome bitterness. I had to get lost in bad bitter fantasies before I could learn to let go of them and to focus on living instead. I had to get hurt to know how bad it is when I hurt other people. I am naïve, slow, wooden headed, and stubborn, so I could not have learned any other way. Luckily, I was never broken so badly that I did not heal. I thank God for what I gained, that I did not do any worse damage, and was able to heal. My insight does not make me better than other people or much different than average. This is similar to what the Nathalie Portman character goes through in "V for Vendetta".

Regardless of what I have gained or how, I do not wish hardship on other people unless it is absolutely needed. If there are better ways to learn, I hope we all learn through those ways instead.

Some people who become bad deserve it. Some people ask for it. Some people choose to be bad. For them, I have little sympathy. They are lost, and deserve it. They are no longer the subject here.

Some people do not choose to be bad, and would undo hurt if they could. Some people who get lost or broken don't deserve as bad as they get. Nearly all people who are lost or broken would rather be found and healed. The undeserving lost and broken people pay the price for the rest of us. Most of them do not differ from us; they are only less lucky. There is no reason why they should suffer so badly while we suffer only as much as we do. I am not writing out of survivor's guilt. There is really a problem, and these people really do sacrifice for us. We need to appreciate them. The best ways we can appreciate them are by living well ourselves when we can and by helping other people. We can help the lost and broken people by helping other people. That is the message of the movie "Saving Private Ryan". I cannot explain why some people suffer so much, and why we should benefit from their suffering.

Christians represent Jesus as a man like this, who sacrificed himself for us. That is not all that Jesus did, but it is part of what he did. Jesus was deeply disappointed although I think he did not give up hope. So

Jesus likely knew what it means to be on the down side. I hope that, because Jesus knew, God knows too, even if Jesus was not God.

We also learn from bad people and we can benefit from bad people but that still does not excuse their badness. That does not explain their place in the world. I cannot explain fully.

It is not a good idea to seek bad experiences so we can learn from bad experiences. That is to glamorize hardship in a way that mocks people who really face hardship. Nobody should get raped just so he-she knows what other victims suffer. Nobody should get his-her legs blown off in a terrorist attack just so he-she can feel injustice and can understand hatred toward enemies. Nobody should watch his child go hungry just so he-she knows bitterness toward oppressors. No child should go hungry just so parents learn that they were selfish in having children when the parents were too young to support children or when the parents did not have enough skills and resources to support children. Usually the world gives us as much as we can take, and then more. If you want to learn about hardship, help people who are hard up.

Some people do live “under glass” “in the shade”, and it would be good for them, and for people around them, if they had more experiences, including some bad experiences. “Hot house” kids usually don’t do people much good. These people also usually are not well prepared to learn from hard experiences. When pushed out into the world unprepared, they turn vicious easily, even if they have somebody else waiting to bail them out of trouble. Then their experiences cause more bad than good. I don’t know how best to handle these people.

Parents face a problem. They can’t protect their children everywhere forever but they don’t want to risk that their children get scarred or broken, or turn bad. God has turned us out into this world to take our chances, so parents eventually have to follow God’s example, or they face the good chance their children will turn even worse in a different way. These days, parents look to the state to protect their children.

We can think God acts as if he were a big parent. God has set up this world to give us experiences from which we could learn but that are not likely to scar us, break us irreparably, or make us turn bad. If we break or turn bad, God offers us a way back. We could think of Earth as a training ground for sentient-moral beings that need to learn this way. This might be so. I can’t say for sure either way. I can note that the damage done too often exceeds the lessons learned. I doubt we could have real learning without some innocent people getting hurt or broken. I don’t know how to set up a world in which people could learn the deep lessons they need without some people hurting too much or getting broken. I don’t know what to make of this situation. We are tempted to find a way out of this dilemma by saying nobody really gets hurt, it is all a big game, like a video simulation, unreal, or embedded in a system of many lives. I reject these ways out.

Suppose, someday in the future, the world has turned out well, and there are no bad problems from which people can’t recover. We cure cancer, everybody has enough to eat, everybody can find a job that pays enough to raise a family, kids get sorted out properly at school, dogs don’t bite, etc. Then how do people learn deep lessons about themselves and life? In this imaginary world, they might not need such deep lessons, but, then, they will not be fully human. They will miss something important, like the people in the novel “Brave New World”. This situation might actually arise. If it does, people might construct simulators

based on case histories from the past so they can learn what it was like to be fully human back in the good-old-bad-days. For the simulators to really do the job, people have to believe life is really real, pain really hurts, and scars are permanent, while they are in the simulated world.

If you could do anything, could make any world, how would you prepare your children, and how would you lead them to learn what it means to be fully human and to fully connect with other people and with nature? What kind of a world would you make so people could teach each other and help each other? Could you do it without some real casualties? Are you willing to take the chance that some of those real casualties will be your own children? If you are not willing to take that chance, then how can people learn what is really real and what is really important? How can they become fully human?

(1) Many Lives and Many Places

Recall the contrast between believing this life is our one real life versus the believing in many lives. This section, and the following five numbered sections, six in all, use this issue to show how different visions of the world make a difference.

Rather than argue in the air, it is easiest to go after the problem with a fantasy. We pick up with the need to learn about life. Return to the scenario from above but here with a different goal. You are the parents of three 12-year old children. You live in a nice safe comfy boring suburb. All your children ever see are people like themselves: ethnicity, religion, wealth, interests in TV, movies, music, and sports. If the kids don't learn more about life, still they will succeed by most external standards, such as jobs and marriage, but likely they will start using drugs as teens and then graduate to alcohol as adults. They will fail in the deep way you want for them. Besides, if they don't learn more about the variety of people directly from life, then they are likely to learn their morality from TV, movies, music, and other art; and they will be easy victims to religious, ethnic, and political scams. To teach them life lessons, you need to do more than just drive by other parts of town and point out other kinds of people. What do you do?

Imagine we can play around with time. We can give the children "time outs", and, in time outs, time goes by only at one-tenth normal speed. When time outs are over, life resumes at regular speed.

We want the children to learn about other people and other ways of life. We want them to learn not just in theory or by acquaintance but deeply. To learn deeply, the children have to actually live the lives of other people, among other people, in the places where other people live, interacting with the people, getting sucked into their world, and getting stuck in their world. The children have to live other kinds of life long enough so that other kinds of life are about as real as the present life. The children have to become other kinds of people for a while. They need not forget who they once were but they have to know they cannot run away to safe haven until their time is up living among other people in other ways. They have to be committed to the life that they find themselves living even if they know it is not the only way, deepest way, or best way. In its own briefer way, this was the theme of the old TV show "Quantum Leap".

(A) So, for two years at a stretch, we send the children to live as bankers, retail checkout clerks, farmers, moms with five kids, DINKS ("double income no kids"), single parents, under dictatorships, Jews if they are Muslims, Muslims if Jews, careerist academics, sports heroes such as famous quarterbacks, linemen in the NFL with four-year careers and broken knees, movie stars, talented but unglamorous actors who

have to take character roles to live, in a Black neighborhood if White, in a White neighborhood if Black, unemployed, gay, straight, gangster, leftist community worker, conservative zealot, etc. We pick ten ways of life for them for a total of twenty years. After twenty years, the children come back to their original way of life, where they have aged only two years, are 14-years old, and resume regular lives.

Hopefully that should do it. Hopefully eventually they learn to live as a good person in almost any way of life they find themselves. They will make mistakes. In one particular life, they might choose to be a hard-ass gangster. Still, eventually they should come to appreciate their previous suburban life. They might not choose it as their permanent way of life but they will more deeply appreciate whatever way of life they do choose, and they will be a better person in whatever way they do choose. If not, then we give up on the child.

(B) In my version of this story, there is one real life, and that is all. This life counts. It is the only life that counts. It needs to count for something more than mere worldly (evolutionary) success. There is no suburban base camp with chances to sample other lifestyles during time out lives. Different people in different situations here live different lifestyles but they are all in the same big life arena. We can live other lifestyles through empathy and through really living them temporarily, as when we work a different job. Hopefully we get really adept at empathy. We always come back to our one real life because we never really leave it. Hopefully we learn to be a good useful person in this life. There are universal moral standards that can apply to any lifestyle, such as “applies equally” and the Golden Rule. Life is set up to teach us about various lifestyles within it, if we will learn. Most situations inside this one real life allow us to be good enough. Some life situations make it hard to be good, and easily lead people to selfishness and delusion. I don’t know how to teach all people so that everybody succeeds at what counts. If God acts like the parents above, and gives some people other chances, that story is between him and them. We cannot all expect that.

(C) There are many alternative “time out” lives, but there are no good parents to watch over children, and there is no difference between lives lived in happy suburbia versus lives in the time outs. Each life is equally valid and invalid. Every life counts in its own meager way, and thus no life really counts in the way that we want. There might be some “game” of many lives in which all particular lives are embedded but there is no safe haven base life. There is no good-hearted parent to guide you in-and-out of lives and to move you continually on to better lives. There is only a never-ending march of lives.

(C) Continued: We can’t be sure the whole march of lives is moral, immoral, amoral, fun, boring, real, or not real. Whatever all particular lives are embedded in can’t be a life like any particular life. We can only ever know one life at a time, the life we are in. You can’t live in the whole march of lives. You can only use the standards of this particular life you are in to judge this life or anything. The standards of any one life do not apply to the whole march of lives, and so we don’t have any standards by which to judge the whole march of lives. We cannot say for sure if we learn lessons from one life that we can apply outside of that one life to other lives, and if we continually grow to become good people. If that cannot be determined, then, for all relevant purposes, we don’t learn any lessons from one life that we can apply to the whole march of lives. For all relevant purposes, we can’t say the whole march of lives is a whole system, good, bad, fun, boring, real, or unreal. Some people do say they have seen the whole march of lives, that the whole march of lives is a system, is good, is joyous, and is realer than any one life; but we can’t know that while we are in this particular life.

Most people don't like either (B) or (C). So they modify a version to suit their desires.

From (C): On the one hand (D), if we live many lives, people want the whole business to be real, good, satisfying, and worthwhile even if sometimes particular lives are not very satisfying and even if no one particular life is as real as the whole cavalcade. The game-of-lives is real and good, and it allows the chance to be good into each particular life. The game-of-lives is like a good benevolent parent. Each life is real in its own way even if the game-of-lives is a realer than any one particular life. Not all lives are equally good. We can progress through lives to become better and better. We can live as many lives as it takes until we are good people and we are all saved. Bad lives are steps to good lives and are steps toward seeing the whole game as good. We are like the children above; and Dharma, or God, is like a parent who teaches by giving the children many lives.

From (B): On the other hand (E), people who think we live this one life only, and are religious, want this life to be a prelude to heaven or hell. Heaven or hell is the real life, the one that really counts. God is a good parent but he gives us only one particular life here. One life here is all we need. This life counts because it is the prelude to the real life in heaven or hell, the life that really counts. If you have only one ticket to the movies, that ticket really counts. Everyone has enough free will and mental skill so he-she can succeed at being a good person no matter his-her particular situation.

From (B): On another hand, (F), moralistic atheists combine morality and one life. This life is intrinsically satisfying without recourse to heaven or hell, despite the fact that some lives here certainly appear not to be satisfying. Everyone has enough free will and mental skill so everyone can succeed at being a person no matter his-her own particular situation. Moral success in this life is enough reward in itself.

We can divide the approaches into "one real life" versus "many semi-real lives". Along that divide, I take the "one life" approach (B) while I oppose "many lives" (C and D). I want this life to count. Yet I dislike "one life" approaches with dogmatic rigidity (E), such as Christianity and Islam, and that disallow me to speculate about God (F) such as moral atheism. This life is not primarily a prelude to heaven or hell. If we think of it that way, we will waste it. I want us to use our imagination, empathy, and sympathy to live many lives through seeing other people, not directly ourselves. While a moral life here can be intrinsically satisfying, my imagination leads me to wonder about God, and I see no reason to stifle my imagination.

I sympathize with "many lives" stances that see the whole system as a good parent giving us chances we can do the best with who we are (A). Yet stances (D) that try to save the reality and morality of particular lives in a system of many lives degenerate into the idea that all particular present lives don't really count (C). You can do what you want in this particular life because there is always another chance. "Here" is not so real as to count fully. If every particular life in the game-of-all-lives doesn't fully count, then the whole game-of-all-lives can't be moral either. Holding to (D) is a way of pretending to be moral and super real while not really being moral or real at all.

(2) Optional Fussy Technical note.

If you say people have many lives, it seems you can also say whether many lives are part of a system, and whether the system is moral, amoral, immoral, worthwhile, boring, joyous, real, or unreal. But this is

not necessarily so. Those are all judgments within particular lives that can apply only to particular lives. The judgments might not apply to any system if there is a system. Just because someone says he/she can sense there is a system of many lives does not mean we can know much about it.

People argue for a system of many lives because it helps explain evil and helps explain differences in abilities, wealth, position, power, luck, family, spiritual advancement, insight, etc. Even if people have many lives, that fact can explain such things only if it is also inherently a system, moral, and realer than any particular life. If there is a system and it is moral and strongly real, that also implies the system is worthwhile and fun. None of that is necessarily so. People who believe in God do not usually believe that God is incoherent, crazy, evil, and took no joy in his creation. People who believe in God usually also believe God has a coherent personality, is good, strongly real, makes life worthwhile, and makes creation enjoyable. As with God, people who believe in many lives also believe it is a system, is good, and is strongly real; some people also believe it is worthwhile and joyous. If we accept God, it makes sense to accept the other ideas too. In contrast, to me, even if we accept many lives, it does not make as much sense to accept the other ideas too. It is not clear what we can say about many lives even if we accept many lives.

The strict “undeterminable” “many lives” stance (C) is held only by a few unusual skeptics (I can’t think of any now), and it is not an important feature of any religion. It appears in fantasy stories in which people use drugs or machines to create dream worlds. Religions that use “many lives” ignore (C) while holding to (D). “Many lives” advocates usually do not see that (C) is the logical base; you have to explain how to get from (C) to (D); (D) tends to fall back to (C); or (D) tends to lose attributes. Weirdoes say the system of many lives is incoherent, crazy, bad, painful, or unreal. Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism all take stance (D); they take the system, morality, and strong reality for granted; they take the Dharma for granted. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism also take for granted that the system is worthwhile and joyous. Theravada Buddhism does not take for granted that the system is worthwhile or joyous; in fact, it says the system is full of suffering.

(3) Assessment: More Comments on Strengths and Weaknesses.

The many lives stance offers a plausible explanation of unfairness and badness. It also makes people complacent about any particular life and makes them morally lax. We don’t need to develop imagination, empathy, and sympathy. We don’t need to wonder about other people. If spiritual reckoning comes only later, we might as well use this life for pleasure and worldly success. If unfairness gets taken care of later, then we can be as unfair and selfish now as we want. We are not really hurting anybody; we are not really hurting ourselves. If we don’t help a needy person, then that’s the way it goes. If we are rich, good looking, powerful, and have a successful family, we should just enjoy it without worrying about other people. If we are poor, it is alright to scabble, bite, and cheat our way up. It is alright to look down on people who are less successful, less educated, poor, sick, suffer bad luck, suffer mental problems, born in bad places, born in other religions, or born where people don’t believe in many lives. We don’t have to work hard for a better world because that problem will take care of itself. We don’t have to protect nature.

Not all people who take the many lives approach lapse into selfishness. A few people take seriously the idea that their deeds will catch up with them sooner rather than later (karma), and act well. A few take seriously empathy and sympathy.

The “one life” stance has trouble explaining unfairness and badness. When it does not combine with the idea of meeting God, then it can lead to selfishness: If I only have this life, then I might as well “look out for number one” and get all I can. When we have only one life, stakes are high. We have to succeed or fail right now. So we get “hardnosed” about life. Then, we get selfish, moralistic, or zealous. The idea of one life does not always lead people to morality, imagination, empathy, and sympathy. When the idea of one life combines with the right idea of meeting God after we die, then it can lead to living well. When the idea of one life combines with the idea that morality is important regardless of God, as in the moralistic atheism of David Hume, then it also can lead to living well.

A person can believe in many lives but live each life as if it were the only life, as if each life would lead to a reckoning with God, or can live each life with moral commitment regardless of God. That doesn't happen often. If you think you can get away with this approach, likely you can't.

If this world-life is the only life, and we take the right attitude, then we can wake up in this life (graduate the game), find the right values, and live by the right values in this one world-life. The right values are, of course, Jesus' message mixed with realism and practicality.

If we believe in many lives in a system, it is not clear if we can wake up in this life, what values we wake up to, we can use those values to live in this current life, or use those values to live in the system of many lives. People who believe in a system of many lives do offer good values to live some lives by for some particular lives, as in the Bhagavad Gita when Krishna advises Arjuna to live by the code of an aristocratic warrior. But the values for any one particular life are not necessarily the appropriate values for the whole game-world of many lives, and it is not clear what the appropriate values are for the whole game-world. It is not clear that every life can wake up to the right values unless Krishna is standing by to advise them. A holy person might wake up to a clear set of values. But a holy person does not live by the same code as an aristocratic warrior, and it is not clear that the values of a holy person are the right values for the whole game-world of many lives. The values of any particular life, or for the whole game-world of many lives, are not necessarily Jesus' message mixed with realism and practicality. To the extent that I understand religions that use a many-lives world, the values for the whole game-world often do not apply to any one life within the game. (1) It seems that the ultimate value is to opt out of the game entirely, and to opt out of any particular life-world. (2) Sometimes the value for the whole game of lives-world is to bask in the never-ending joy of the whole game. In both alternatives, it is not clear what the values are for any one particular life, if there are any values for particular lives, and, if there are, how we live by them in particular lives. Keep all this in mind for later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

(4) More Fun and Games.

I invite you to make up your own “many lives” world-game fantasy (A, C, or D) to see what you think and where you fall. See if you can get people in that world, and its many lives, to live morally. Try this: Instead of other “real” lives as in (A) above, you find engrossing incredibly realistic video games that mimic ways of life. Your children spend hours every day on them. Within a game, reality and morality do not necessarily have to hold as in our world. They could be different, or not hold at all. Just as, in a game, a person can defy the laws of physics, so a person can kill with abandon and not fear worldly retribution or a talk with God. What kinds of game would you want your children to play? How would you

get them to play only those games, and to avoid others? How would you get them out of the games into something better, like real life?

(5) Beauty.

“Many lives” images often are beautiful, both intrinsically and because they give us hope. Still, I find the image of “many places” more beautiful: planet Earth is not the only planet to have conditions conducive to life; life evolved on many planets; sentient-moral-aesthetic life evolved on some other planets; planet Earth is not the only beautiful world; many other planets are beautiful; and many other places in the universe are beautiful even if they are not planets with life. God enjoys the beauty and grace of his many places whether the sentient-moral-aesthetic life anywhere succeeds in keeping the beauty and grace or not. If, on at least a few planets, sentient beings do succeed in keeping the grace and beauty, then that is even better.

Enjoy the beauty of many places without succumbing to the beauty of many lives. This advice is not as hypocritical as it sounds. Almost certainly there are many planets. It is far from certain there are many lives. We might be able to appreciate directly other planets someday, and there is even a dim chance we might travel to some. We can't appreciate the beauty of many lives unless we die repeatedly, and, even then, unless we can remember previous lives, we might as well have only this one life. “Many lives” is all about you; it seems selfish; while “many places” is all about many places and God's creativity. “Many places” goes along with the feeling that we are only a small part of something much bigger yet we are still important. “Many lives” implies we are always the focus even when we are in a system. I think the promise of many lives lends itself to religious mistakes too easily. It is easy to get lost in the promise of many lives and so forget the tasks and joys of this life. Even if many lives is true and beautiful, you are better off to focus on this one life here in this place now.

Deterministic World.

I now return to describing various worlds. Use the standards from above to assess these worlds both from the point of view that they could be teaching games, and otherwise.

I mention this world view here first get it over with. I described this world view in a previous chapter on selves, so I don't say much here. In this view, everything is governed entirely by natural laws, an idea that is probably true. Everything is determined entirely by natural laws, so that if we knew enough about the condition (state) of anything now, we could accurately predict its state later. Everything is a kind of machine, although not always like a car or a wind-up toy. It is not needed here to know about different kinds of machines, some of which depend on probabilistic laws. Most importantly, everything is equally interesting or uninteresting. There is no qualitative difference between any machines. People are not special. Selves and morality are not special. There is no reason to follow morality or not follow it other than that we were evolved to follow it.

I like the reductionist view. I hold this view inadequate not because it is deterministic but because different “machines” (clouds, flowers, bears, computers, scientific method) are qualitatively distinct and because the existence of such things as morality point to a mind that ordered this world. I think people

are qualitatively from rocks, and morality is qualitatively distinct from the smell of bananas, are that the qualitative distinctions are important.

A reductionist world view can be at odds the view of with normal people, who accept as real things such as colors, love, birds, persons, and justice. Normal people think of qualitative things as in-themselves, with some autonomy from formal laws. Description in terms of formal laws does not necessarily explain things or get at what is most important about them. Normal people fear that deterministic accounts of qualitative things explain them away as “nothing but”.

Take the atoms and energy that are in a car, and then rearrange them into another car without adding or subtracting any matter or energy. You have two different cars. Take the atoms and energy in a person, and then rearrange them to make another person. It makes a difference.

Except for a few physicists who habitually think in terms of basic matter-energy-space-time-movement-symmetry etc., most scientists do not think rigorously in reductionist terms even if they give lip-service to the idea. Instead, each scientific field has its set of basic objects and relations that they use to analyze other objects and relations in their field. The basic objects are the qualitative things of their world out of which they make deterministic relations. Biologists have genes and natural selection as their basic qualitative “objects”, which they use to explain the behavior of cheetahs and gazelles. Biologists do not reduce genes and natural selection to atomic particles and their relations, and, in fact, probably could not. This situation does not invalidate scientific thinking. It shows how scientific thinking and normal thinking can mix to produce a powerful way to explain the world.

To repeat from the chapter on selves: I can think in both ways without going crazy. The ability to do this is what makes persons qualitatively distinct and interesting. The fact that people can see these issues at all tends is strong evidence that people are qualitatively distinct things; that is, the world has qualitatively distinct things, among which one is “persons”. Persons have world views as part of their selfhood.

Good Wins, Maybe.

For most people, it matters that good wins in the end. If good will not win, then fighting for good is still worthwhile but the fight feels different. It also matters how good will win. Good cannot win by bad means or even by force. Ideally good should win through appeal and voluntary action because it is good. Any other way to victory, such as force and domination, actually undermines the victory

Maybe neither good nor evil ever win. The world might just drag on as a “mixed bag” the way it usually has. People who want good to win usually find this option depressing.

Maybe neither good nor evil ever win because good and evil depend on each other. Good and evil are merely aspects of the same thing. The fact that neither good nor evil ever win is a better outcome than if either won, a better outcome than if good won decisively in a good way. At the least, it leads to a more interesting world than if either definitely won.

Other sections in this chapter, and later chapters, look at these options.

The World is Fallen.

The stance in this section restates in Christian terms a common idea. The world feels like crap a lot of the time. What if evil has already won? Power, greed, lust, lying, and stupidity dominate. Then what should we do? What still matters in that kind of world? Most people don't feel this way about the world anymore, even when they get unhappy with the world. Maybe a little surprisingly, people who do feel that the world has fallen also tend to feel even more strongly that good matters and that they should continue to do good. They do not look to do good in big ways but still work for good in little ways.

People who think the world has fallen continue to do good for two reasons that are mixed up. The first reason is that good is good in itself, and we should do it anyway regardless of how the world is and what happens to us and our families. The second reason is that God commands us to do good anyway. Even if God allowed the world to fall, he still wants us to do good. Good matters to God, so it matters to us. Among the people I have met who think the world is fallen but continue to do good, they publicly stress the will of God. To me, on the outside, it seems as if they have a sense of goodness based on their humanity and on their upbringing, and they want to act on the sense of goodness even if officially they believe that the world is fallen and evil.

My Version of a Fallen World.

Through talking to people who believe the world is fallen, I saw that I differ from them even though I have grown pessimistic. This section restates earlier material. Christians and Muslims who believe this Earth is fallen also tend to think the whole universe is fallen. All creation has turned evil. In contrast, I think this particular planet will not turn out nearly as well as it could have, and should have, but that sad fate does not mean all creation is evil or that this planet is evil. This planet is merely graceless and tacky with some instances of evil. Most of what happens here is not evil even if overall it is annoying. Other planets might turn out well. Other planets might turn out worse. Even if no planet in this particular universe turns out really well, God still gave all sentient beings here a fighting chance. This world turned out as it did not because of the revolt of Lucifer or the bad choice of Adam and Eve but because the large majority of evolved human beings are too narrow-minded to make decent self-government work. That fact is terribly sad, but it is not the same as a cosmically fallen evil universe.

Illusory World that Still Matters.

We do not have a completely accurate perception of the world. Nearly everything we experience is partly illusory: stars, genes, people, chairs, sunsets, love, children, hope, scientific method, good government, relationships, etc. That does not mean they are pernicious evil delusions or that there is nothing to them. There is something to most things in world, and they matter even if they are illusory. Importance can work even through illusionary things. Usually we can tell the difference between the normal illusoriness of worldly things, things that are more illusory, delusions, evil delusions, and delusions that are made by bad beings to further their evil.

I can pick apart the idea of a scissors so that the idea is hopelessly fuzzy and all scissors seem like sad illusions. Even so, when I want to cut a piece of paper, I reach for a pair of real scissors. The scissors is not solid and is made mostly of space, but it is real enough, it is real enough as a scissors, and it has its

uses. When I get hungry, I eat real food, even if somewhat illusory real food. When I want to figure out something, I use illusory logic and illusory scientific method, and they seem to work fairly well. I assume that the speed of light is real even though nothing material has ever gone that fast. Justice might be hard to pin down but I think it is real enough so that we ought to pursue it, we do sometimes achieve it, and I am happy when we do.

Unfair World.

Whether the world is good or bad overall might still be an open question but there is little doubt that it is unfair. Realizing the world is unfair, and carrying on anyway, has been a major theme of movies since the 1980s, so I won't dwell on it here. Is the world still worthwhile? That depends on how unfair it is, but the world seems to be fair enough so that often it is still worthwhile.

There is a difference between saying the world is unfair sometimes to particular individuals versus saying the world in general is unfair to nearly all people much of the time. The world does have a few particular cases of Job but most people don't seem to be Job. Of course, if you are Job, then the world seems all-in-all unfair, probably not worthwhile, and sometimes meaningless. I am not sure how unfair the world is as a whole. It seems not to be so unfair that most people can't count on their efforts to make a difference in their own lives, and so that most people think the world is not worthwhile. Most people still count on their own efforts and think the world is worthwhile despite unfairness.

Deeper Delusion.

People can deal with the fact that we do not experience the world immediately with total accuracy. We are used to that kind of illusion, and it really is not much of a problem.

The world can be illusory in other ways that are a problem. These ways have to do with the world being sticky and with our tendency to commit to things such as spouse, children, house, neighborhood, friends, job, church, country, and success. Unfortunately, religions in which this idea is important, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, are not always clear about it. The list below illustrates ways in which we can be deluded about the world and in which our delusion ensnares us into acting badly toward ourselves and toward the world. Later instances depend on earlier instances. A person adept at this knowledge might not agree with my ranking. The list owes much to Hinduism. The end of this section comments on the nature of this kind of delusion.

-Not everybody in the world is the same. To think everybody in the world is the same and deserves the same is simply foolish. You have to accept difference between people and different fates for people. That does not mean you have to treat people badly. You treat them according to their ability and to what they have made of their ability. To deny differences in people is delusion.

-If you can understand this book, then you are probably more astute than other people. You are part of a group of spiritually elite people. You can be born into this group, or you can learn its ways. Mostly likely, both forces are at work. To deny the existence of the elite group, and to deny that you belong to the elite group, is to continue the delusion of everybody being the same.

-Some people are obviously screwed up and trapped even if they don't feel it, such as Gordon Gecko of the "Wall Street" movies before he was rehabilitated. "Users" and "enablers" are like this. People in these situations invent fantasies that justify their situations, much as serial killers invent fantasies that justify their actions. Popular media is aware of this problem but has not really explored it well.

-Some people are screwed, trapped, and feel it, but don't know how to get out. Usually they are trapped by false ideologies that they have made up in the past or have adopted from other people.

-Most people are not aware of the deep reality of morality. We just don't really feel it yet. If we felt what it means to do wrong, we would seriously consider before we did wrong. We are not aware how wrong it is to hurt other beings, including animals. We can treat other people well even if we recognize that not all people are the same right now.

-Sometimes we place far too much importance on some things while placing far too little importance on other things. We "have our priorities screwed up." Even being too moralistic can be screwed up. People who are screwed up in this sense are not as obviously screwed up as a serial killer but they also invent rationalizations and they are just as trapped. This has been a common theme in Western popular media since the 1930s at least, but it is still true.

-Even people who understand morality and have good priorities can mistakenly expect more satisfaction from the world than it really gives. There is some satisfaction in family, friends, success, and other human goals but they cannot give deep lasting satisfaction. Everything fades, and even they will fade over time, even after you are dead. Evolution has led us to commit to "the good life" and to invent rationalizations of "the good life". The rationalizations are not distorted like that of a serial killer or of a person whose priorities are "all screwed up" but they are not entirely accurate either. They block us from seeing the world accurately, and they lead us to commit to the world. Religions are a strong source of rationalization and inaccurate commitment.

-One way in which we mistakenly think we can seek satisfaction is to mistake quantity for quality. We know that an ordinary reputation is not worth seeking but if we win three Nobel Prizes, then that is worth the effort. If our reputations endure (are measured to be big) then it is satisfying. If we have a large enough estate, we can endow our descendants for four generations, and that is surely enough to be satisfied. Scientists measure things in the mistaken belief that they can find the source of values and of being. Yogis and mystics think they can master the world through greater more rigorous practices. We have to look beyond the quantities of the world to the qualities in the world before we can start to evaluate the qualities.

-Although people are not the same right now, they might have the potential to be the same eventually in the future. Whether this is true depends on how we understand past, present, future, karma, and the rules of the universe (dharma). In any case, it is a trap to look down on other people because they are not now as advanced as you are, and it is a trap not to recognize the links between you and other people of all levels.

-Even people who have given up seeking deep satisfaction can still think this world is worth committing too. They are like parents who take care of their children even though they know the children could die or

could fail. They are like good politicians who take care of a city even though they know the city is full of common people who are not much better than crooks. They are like good shepherds who take care of a flock of sheep for another master because they really care about the sheep even though they know the sheep are destined for somebody else's table.

-People who really see the delusion in committing to this world tend to treat the world like a game. They play the game because they are in it but they don't care about winning or losing. Yet even these people mistakenly think the game is important or worth playing. If this version of the game is not worth playing then no version of the game is worth playing. No game is worth playing.

-Even if the game is not worth playing, we are in the game for now anyway. To opt out of the game by killing yourself is really just to be committed to a negative version of the game and therefore still to be committed to the game. It is like trying to be cool by being an anti-nerd. To respond by skepticism, even deep skepticism, also seems like play a version of the game by playing an anti-game. If they game really is not worth playing but we are in it, then how do we act? To answer this question is to strip away about as much delusion as can be stripped away.

It is important to understand that delusion and entrapment do not arise because the world is false, fake, empty, a cheap illusion, or a false creation. We are not fooled because of a magic trick. We are not fooled because the world is like a movie with computer graphics that make the physically impossible seem real. We are fooled because the world is sticky and we don't know how to maneuver properly between threads of the spider's web. We crawl along the strands or we get stuck entirely. People do not usually get caught because they are bad but because they are mildly good. It is not bad to love family, friends, job, and country but all of those can be dead ends. All are dead ends if you do not see beyond them. This is the mistake of "family values" Christians; and this is what Jesus warned against. It is not bad to enjoy a golden sunset or a plate of fruit but it is a trap to think that is what the world is all about. Hindus sometimes use the term "maia" ("maya") for delusion and use the term "samsara" for the world of delusion. Japanese Buddhists call the world of delusion the "floating world". Some of the greatest visual art ever done, Japanese woodcuts, the Japanese call "images from the floating world".

"Animism" or "Many Minor Spirits among Us".

This is the world view of a lively world with many spirits. I described it in Chapter Two on evolution. I do not repeat here. Because we all share this view to a large extent, I leave it to the reader to use intuition.

This is the most important world view, and ultimately underlies religion. The historical modifications of this world view often became more important than the original simple version of this world view, as when this world view gave rise to the scientific world view and gave rise to major religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Despite the modifications, this view, in its basic form, is still the most important world view and the most pervasive world view. It survives as the most common belief system in the middle of all major world religions.

I think many anthropologists would disagree with me on the following point: Modern people treat some things as spirits even if they do not overtly think of them as spirits. Scientists treat reductionism and mechanics as a spirit. Lawyers treat laws and legal procedure as a spirit. Business people treat their

business, and the idea of commerce, as a spirit. Churches goers treat their church as a spirit. Christians treat the Christian church as a spirit. If we think of all spirit worship as idolatry, then many modern people are idolaters. I do not pass judgment on this.

Veneration of the Saints.

We can see this world view in many modern forms although we do not recognize it as such.

The Roman Catholic Church, all Orthodox churches, and some Protestants, venerate (worship) saints. By any reasonable standards, saints are spirits. Even if they once had a real human identity, that has long since become less important than their identity as spirits. They are the spirits of good luck, finding lost objects, gardens, houses, children, widows, etc. In pre-modern times, the saints lived in particular awesome places; the awesomeness of the place and awesomeness of the saints reinforced each other. Their relics have intrinsic power, or mana, and are dangerous, or taboo. The saints are spirits with which people can have a relation. Most of the religious life of Christians until recently was conducted with saints and their local parish priests rather than with Jesus or God. People forged a relation with the saint by giving the saint devotion (bhakti) and small gifts, in return for which the saint gave protection and good fortune. Roman Catholics venerate the Pope almost as a powerful spirit. Greek Orthodox people used to treat archbishops and patriarchs much the same way as Roman Catholics treat dead and living Popes.

Even in religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, that are careful about not deifying founders, important figures take on the status of powerful spirits. To many Muslims, Mohammad, Ali, Omar, and the figures in the early history of Islam are spirits with which they can forge a relation. Most Mahayana bodhisattvas are spirits in this sense.

Some Protestants treat founders as if they were powerful spirits with whom they could form a relation. Americans treat John Wesley, Mary Baker Eddy, and Cotton Mather, and even Billy Graham, much the same way that Roman Catholics treat their saint-spirits. Regrettably, some American Protestants seem to treat TV preachers as if they were saint-spirits with whom they could forge a relation and get gifts.

Americans who make fun of religious veneration of saint-spirits have their own version of spirits, some of them like saint-spirits. I have heard Darwinists speak of Darwin, Ronald Fisher, and William Hamilton as if they were saint-spirits: if you read these great thinkers diligently, you get something mystical in return. Living Darwinists aspire to be raised to this semi-divine status. Popular books on science treat Darwin, Newton, Einstein, the founders of quantum mechanics, and, lately, Stephen Hawking, this way. Popular books on mathematics revere Newton, Euler, and Gauss as more-than-human. Musicians all have their own little gods, some of which can seem more-than-human. Followers treat politicians as mystical saints with whom the follower can forge a relation simply by making a donation.

The Greco-Roman Classical world was more honest about this tendency of people. It openly allowed the deification of important people such as emperors, and encouraged the common people to worship deified people and to form a relation with them.

The World Is As It Is.

This is another way to say this world is as real as it gets. However the world came to be as it is, whether created out of nothing by no god, or evolved along the plan of one good God, it is as it is. The world is made of people, animals, trees, weather, food, water, rocks, soft stuff, hard stuff, energy, colors, and everything that is obvious. Yes, there are forces that underlie what we experience but that does not mean the world is not as it is.

We have to adapt to the world as it is, seek success within the limits of this world, and with the chances given us by the world. Don't fight the world. Don't try to remake the world along idealistic lines that are generated primarily out of your brain alone. You may strive hard for an ideology, and you may strive hard to make the world better. If the world has what you want, and you can get it by moral means, then use the world to get it. If God created this world this way, then he wanted it this way, and he wanted us to find success in the terms he gave us to know. Even if we do not always act morally upright, our behavior is still along the lines of what the world is, and along the lines that God laid out.

People who believe the world is as it is often lead a normal human common sense life. This view leads us to relax and to do what we can when we can. It allows us to appreciate the world without forcing too much change.

Selfish people proclaim "this world is as it is" as a cover for their selfishness. Instead of "just act human", they say "the world is a tough place, and you have to be tougher to get what you want", "self-interest is how the world works, so you must promote yourself without regret", and "you let down your guard, and I will do what serves me". So, most of us are cautious when we hear somebody proclaim this view. Our caution is justified, but that does not mean we have to look at the world askance, not as it is.

Ironically, for us to appreciate that the world is as it is, sometimes the world has to be otherwise, at least for a while. We only really appreciate that the world is as it is if we come to appreciate that the world is as it is from some other view. That change does not mean the world was not as it is as has now become as it is. The world did not change radically. The change means we had wrong ideas before, and now have better ideas. We "wake up" from mistakes about the world as mechanism, that our ideas of a table are illusions, morality is unreal, only power is real, the spirits control our destinies, etc.

The ability to wake up from one vision of the world to another is part of the world as it is. If we have the ability to wake up, then we also are susceptible to making mistakes about how the world is, and we are susceptible to people who use our ability to wake up to fool us. They offer us false views of the world so as to control us and-or control themselves. This potential for being fooled also is part of the world as it is.

Visions of the world other than it is can be quite tempting, often more satisfying than the world as it is. We need to make visions of the world other than it is to have all kinds of art but maybe mostly to tell stories. There is nothing wrong with going away from this world for a while, feeling better, and maybe learning while we visit other worlds in our imaginations. I love fairy stories, "escapist" fiction, sword-and-sorcery, and science fiction.

Some visions of the world other than it is are not good and some are bad. That is how bad people come to control us. There is no point in cataloging bad visions here. Often it is not the vision itself but the uses to which it is put that are bad. A fairy story can be a bad thing if it is used to terrify children beyond the

intrinsic scariness of the story – fairy stories are scary. A real story of seeking justice in an unjust world can whip up prejudicial frenzy.

How do we know the world we see is the world as it really is? Paranoid people believe their delusions. Ideologues of all kind believe their dogmas. There is no good answer, especially because, if we are to grow as human beings, we will come to see the world in somewhat different ways several times in our lives. We evolved a pretty good sense of how the world is, of what are good visions and bad visions. We should rely on that to begin with. We also evolved abilities to test visions to see if they are false or bad. People who live a long time in fairy land or paranoid land often do badly, and we should trust our sense of what does badly and well. We can benefit from the advice of other people. I have always found my ability to judge visions of the world improved if I let my imagination roam a bit and so developed a sense of what is real and what is imagination.

Your Favorite Spirit.

Nobody relates to all the spirits equally. Just as we have favorite places where we go to get refreshed, and which we take care of if we can, people tend to have favorite spirits with whom they forge a relation of mutual support and care, such as the saints, scientists, artists, and politicians described above. People can have more than one favorite spirit, although it is hard to have too many. In some societies, the spirit is of a place such as a waterfall or mountain; in others it can be a tree or an important crop; and in others it can be an important or interesting animal.

Comparative Power of the Spirits.

People vary in their opinions of which are the powerful spirits and the spirits with the broadest scope. It seems natural, for example, that a sky spirit (Zeus) would have a wide scope and be powerful. But a water spirit or the spirit of travel (Poseidon) also would have a wide scope and be powerful. People like to align themselves with spirits that are powerful and have a wide scope but it is not necessary to align yourself with the most powerful spirit as long as you have a good relation with your particular spirit, and you give each other what you need.

Originally, among foragers, spirits probably did not much variation in power and scope, the differences were not consistent between people and groups, and the differences did not matter much. Questions of power and scope became more important as people settled into other ways of making a living such as herding animals, horticulture, and agriculture, and as people developed more complicated societies to go along with other ways of making a living.

When modern people hear that spirits differ in power and scope, they naturally ask which is the most powerful spirit and-or the spirit with the widest scope. This question does not have to have an answer, and in many societies did not. What difference does it make if that spirit is more powerful than this spirit, or if there is a most powerful spirit, as long as my spirit and I get along well? It also does not matter if the scope and powers of spirits overlap. What if both snake and badger have some power over the ground and the water that runs through the ground? As long as people who like snake get along with snake, and people who like badger get along with badger, there is no point in disputing who is the most powerful controller of the ground and its water.

Ordered Spirits in State Societies.

Chiefdoms and state societies developed with the rise of intense horticulture and with agriculture. State societies are about six thousand years old. Some agricultural state societies developed into industrial societies. Nearly all people alive now have grown up in a state society, including nearly all the readers of this book.

People tend to see the spirit world as ordered and ranked when their own social lives are ordered and ranked. It is not the case that the ordering and ranking are direct mirror images of each other, or that one simply causes the other; but the two do go along together.

Chiefdoms and state societies have to have a single order of power, with a clear small group of rulers at the top. In these societies, it does make sense to ask which spirit is most powerful and has the widest scope. The rulers associate with the top spirit.

Because most modern people live in state societies, and are the social descendants of people who lived in state societies for millennia, we also tend to think in well-ordered hierarchical terms, and so we want to know which spirit is the most powerful and has the widest scope.

The highest “spirit” in a state society usually is not one single spirit (god) but is a small group of spirits, often connected, often a family. The original “God” in Israeli thought was a small collection of gods (“Elohim”). The development of one god out of the original small circle of high gods is unusual, and happened only in Egypt, Israel, China, and perhaps in some versions of Hinduism in India. It also happened in a philosophical form in ancient Greece, but this version was never a general religion, and so does not count.

Other spirits do not disappear in state societies. Many of them stay on with various powers and scopes. It is tempting to think of the other spirits as like the bureaucratic officers in a state – this idea is developed in ancient China – but that need not be the case, and it is too much to deal with the variations.

The order of spirits within a state society depends not only on relations within a given state but also on its relations with its neighbors, in particular other states. For example, if states are at war, they might see their high gods as warring also, and might be particularly concerned with which gods have the greatest power and scope. If the states are friendly, they might see kinship connections between their gods. Because most early states developed near each other, such as the various states in Mesopotamia, usually it was not too hard to find either of these alternatives in the old lore.

Faced with this new world of spirits, people of various social ranks and powers have to decide what to believe in and what relations to cultivate. I take that topic up again later.