

RELIGIOUS STANCES

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2016

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DEDICATION:

This book is for the decent people, on this world, and all worlds. I have met many but can mention only Nitaya Polioudakis (Patsanakrison) and Norm Gross.

This book is for people who are trying to make better their community, neighborhood, religious group, ethnic group, gender group, age group, socio-economic class, nation, and the world. Good luck.

“Fury” does not necessarily mean anger, madness, moral zealotry, or bad-ass rebellion. This book is for people who feel a fury inside and need a way to get it out with minimal badness and maximal goodness.

This book is for people who want to blend reason with religion and practicality with ideals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

I thank the Document Delivery Division (Interlibrary Loan) of the Draughon Library of Auburn University with help on getting some books.

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Under construction

00 Introduction

A “stance” includes: the Golden Rule, be true to the rebel code, be your “true you” regardless, honor, life is good, life is tough, do good, avoid evil, and many more. Some stances are not compatible such as: honor versus getting ahead; all paths lead to God vs. there is only one way to God; life is only a game vs. life is real; help your neighbor vs. “look out for number one”; and simple decency vs. hard-ass “gangster” attitude. Then we have to choose. Religions are big stances that include small stances, and organize the stances around themes.

This book assesses stances that are important for modern people and it assesses major religions. I say both what is right and what is wrong. This book is not neutral. I do not assess political stances such as liberalism or the Tea Party outlook. I focus on life stances such as “be a rebel”, religious stances such as “all we need to do is act naturally”, and major religions such as Christianity and Romanticism. I point out the political implications of stances and religions. I avoid standard theological issues such as about the Christian Trinity, faith versus works, and the Will of God.

As everybody does, I use my beliefs and values as the basis for assessing. I use both my religious and political values as the basis for assessing. I state my own beliefs and values briefly below, and again in later chapters in more detail. You can still benefit from this book if you disagree with me.

The point is not to harangue anybody into agreeing with me. The points are: to present clear standards; give basic description of stances and religions; see how standards can be used rightly to assess stances and religions; urge you to develop standards; and help you relax so you can be a better person, act well, make the world better, feel better, not waste yourself, do less harm, and avoid mistakes. I use no tricks. People already know much of what I say even if they have not heard it said clearly. I just say it in writing so you can think about it at your own pace.

Theory and Practice.

I care more about what people do than about doctrine. I want people to act well. I hope people act well because they have good ideas but having particular ideas is less important than acting well.

Still, ideas matter. Ideas shape what we do. Bad ideas often lead to bad acts while good ideas do lead to good acts. To guide what we do, we interpret ideas such “what would Jesus do?”, and “follow the middle path of the Buddha”. We reject bad ideas such as “only the sacred book of group X tells the Will of God” and “we have a right to be obnoxious because we are oppressed”. I want people to hold ideas that are clear, simple, moral, realistic, practical, true to human nature, mostly consistent, and go along with science. I want people to act according to good ideas. I want people to reject bad ideas. So I assess the ideas behind stances.

All religions have good and bad doctrines. Some doctrines promote good ideas and interpretations. For instance, Christianity teaches the Golden Rule and it interprets the Rule through the parable of the Good

Samaritan. Some doctrines teach bad ideas and enable bad behavior, such as “all people who disagree with us go to Hell and we should hurt them even while they are still on Earth”. Luckily, nearly all people in all religions act well most of the time regardless of dogma. Usually people act well to neighbors even when neighbors believe another religion. Nearly all people interpret dogma so as to act well, get along with neighbors, and help each other. Sometimes believers override the dogma of their religion so they can act well by modern standards, as when people use birth control although their religion tells them they may not. I assess religions according to the ideas they offer and according to how people interpret the ideas so as to act well in the modern world.

My Basic Religious Stance.

The Enlightenment lasted from about 1650 to 1900. George Washington, Ben Franklin, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were people of the Enlightenment, and the Constitution of the United States is an Enlightenment work. My basic stance is like the Enlightenment. Many people now hold a stance similar to the stance given in this book.

This section lists the main points in my religious stance. Order does not indicate importance. The first chapter gives a full account of my religious stance while the second gives my political stance. Briefly, I assess stances and religions by how well they accept the following ideas and how well they promote some of my political ideas. .

-God created a world that could be very good.

-We all go to meet God when we die.

-God loves you. Try to love other people as God loves you. You can't fully succeed but you can try.

-God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, not from fear or from hope of reward.

-You do not have to accept God, or Jesus as God, to live by the remaining points.

-The Golden Rule (act toward other people as you want them to act toward you). Be kind.

-All rules apply equally to everybody, including you, your kin, your friends, neighbors, enemies, etc. Act as if you have to do what you want everybody to do. Allow everybody to do what you want to do. Do not do what you do not want others to do. Allow everybody to do what a free person making up his-her own mind could do.

-Treat people as persons rather than as objects.

-Respect nature and take care of nature.

-Decency.

-Work hard to make the world better.

-People who have more talent, wealth, time, energy, or power need to do more.

-Live and let live.

-Be useful.

-Pay it forward.

-Morality has to be mixed with practicality.

-Don't be bad. Don't be indecent.

-Do not enable indecent people. The Golden Rule means to help people deeply, not to give them what they want, enable them, or make them dependent. Sometimes the best help is the truth.

-"The truth will set you free". Seek the truth. Be honest about the truth. Accept the truth when you see it. Reject what is false, and reject lies, when you see them.

-Be open to getting better. Be open to letting other people, life, the world, and God guide you. You do most of the work on your own, but you can get help, and, very likely, you will get help if you ask.

-Science is correct.

-Religion and stances should be free of hurtful dogmas and wrong ideas.

-Assess what needs to be done and what you can do. Use your time, energy, and resources to do the most good. Don't waste what God has given you.

-Be committed and strenuous (zealous) when the feeling and the cause take you, as long as you really do more good than harm.

-But don't be zealous mostly to make yourself feel good, don't let zealotry cause more harm than good, and don't let zealotry become immoral. Avoid hurtful bad zealotry.

-A simple decent act done without regard to system often works well enough. Don't be confused by dogma, ideology, or system.

-I say the following many times in many ways throughout the book: God cares far less that you worship Jesus as God than you do as Jesus taught. If you do as Jesus taught but don't worship Jesus as God, then you are alright. If you worship Jesus as God but do not do as he taught, God will scold you severely. If you neither worship Jesus as God nor do as he taught, then I can't say much more. If you both worship Jesus as God and do as Jesus taught, then good for you, but please stay humble, and don't think you are better than other good people in God's eyes.

-I expect religions to be compatible with the main ideas of American plural democracy, and to promote those ideas within the limits of their beliefs.

Not All Paths Lead to God; Not All Religions are Equally Useful.

Our time hopes to ease strife by declaring “all paths lead to God” and “God is one”. The intent is good but the idea is false. By claiming all religions are the same, we lie to ourselves, do not ease strife, and wrong all religions. We do better to face differences squarely, see what we can live with, see what we can negotiate, and see what we have to worry over. I hope all religions promote the good ideas, acts, and people that we need in modern plural democracies; and I hope all believers act well. But religions don’t always promote good ideas and good people for our times. We have to be clear about ideas and actions so it makes sense when we assess a religion.

My values come from the West. Western values come from a mix of Jesus’ ideas with European ideas, mostly from Greece and Northwest Europe. My view is like American Christianity but does not insist that Jesus is God. This is the religious stance that I see as best and against which I measure other stances and religions, including standard Christianity. I do not think other religions are much inferior to this stance and I do not overlook their particular good points. Yet I do insist this is the best stance that I have found and that other stances are not as good as this stance overall.

Religion, Power, and Pop Culture.

Religion causes some pain but religion causes fewer problems than economics, politics, ethnicity, and gender. Sometimes people argue over pure religion but not often. People use religious ideas as tools in fights that really are about other issues. The main vehicle for ideas now is pop culture. The Beatles got “nailed” when John Lennon deplored that they were “more popular than Jesus”, but he was right. People get more from pop media than from traditional religious ideas and heroes. We get more from Spiderman (“with great power comes great responsibility”), rock rebels, and hip-hop “gangsters” than from Moses, Thomas Aquinas, Mohammad, or the Buddha. Ronald Reagan owed more to Captain America and to a wrong pop version of Adam Smith than to Jesus. People suffer more from lack of good political, ethnic, economic, and gender visions than from the lack of religious ideas. If we could make capitalism work well we would argue less about the greatest god and what he-she demands. To assess relevant stances, it seems I should focus on power, politics, wealth, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture rather than on religion.

First, sex, economics, politics, world order, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture are big topics themselves and they should be treated on their own.

Second, we can’t get clear about power, wealth, ethnicity, gender and pop culture until we are clear about stances and religion. Confusion in one fosters confusion in the other. Americans don’t have visions of politics and economics that actually work in the real world. So, instead, we use bad ideas from religion as tools to attack other groups and to get ours. We can’t make a workable political or economic vision until we calm down and get clear about stances and religion. This book aims to clarify issues and calm people down. Hopefully the insights about stances and religion can carry over into politics, economics, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture.

Use Your Mind; Not Blinded by the Light.

We need to think things through even if we had a religious education and even if we have had religious experiences of our own. We have to use our heads and hearts. Even people who have strong religious experiences rarely know what to do on the basis of the experience alone. They need to interpret their experiences and they need help doing so. Sometimes they are wrong in their interpretation and need correcting. Even people who have seen God still need to think things through when they stop being blinded by the light. Even Paul needed help. When the light slowly fades to the level of mere summer sunshine, what ideas do you accept or reject? What do you do? Who do you help? How do you help them? This book helps people who want to think things through.

Religion of “Just do Good”.

Boiled down, I tell people to “just do good”. This stance might sound simplistic and easy to do but it is not. To borrow from the chapter on Zen, people are taught this idea since they are two years old but few people eighty years old actually do it. We need help. Many situations are hard to decide. We seek dogma. We are born into the dogma of particular religions and political parties. We are born Christians and Democrats. Some of the doctrine is good but not all. Conniving bad people put bad ideas into our heads so as to use us. We use dogma to fool ourselves to get what we want. So we will not let go of dogma enough to “just do good”. We need help fighting bad ideas and bad people. It doesn't take much space to say “just do good”. It takes many pages to describe the pitfalls and to put up fences around the pitfalls so we can “just do good”.

For major theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, “just do good” cannot be enough. People not only have to do good, they also have to know right dogma and worship the right God correctly. If people do not also recognize God and worship him correctly, then doing good alone will bring down the wrath of God. For non-theistic religions, Buddhism, some Hinduism, and some Taoism, “just do good” alone is not enough because it does not lead to fully seeing how the world works. For them, in “just do good”, we become part of an illusory painful world of Dharma, karma, and dogma. Both traditional theistic and non-theistic religions are wrong.

I would like people to acknowledge God but I don't insist on it. If doing good is not good then something is badly wrong. If we can place doing good in the context of ideas such as God, then maybe better; but we should work on doing good first and then let dogma follow of its own.

What the Book is Not.

I do not condemn. God, and only God, is the final judge of stances, religions, and people. I am not the final judge. I do assess and criticize.

This book does not show you how to find God, find grace, have a huge religious experience, or find God's love. Other books do that. This book takes for granted God's love but not that you have found it. If you have found God's love already, this book will help you think through what to do next.

This book is not as would be written by a true believer orthodox (standard) Christian. It is not a devotional book. It is written by a moderately smart person who wants to understand with both heart and head.

I am not interested in exposing hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is in all religions, it is obvious to most people, and it has been exposed so well that there is no point repeating. There are more important points. I only bring up hypocrisy when it is relevant in a way that is not usually obvious.

I am not interested in deriding popular religion. Mostly I just leave it alone. People can be gracious and helpful through popular religion and despite popular religion.

Superstition is silly but I don't bother to debunk it. That too has been "done to death". People still believe in ghosts but their belief does little damage except to credit card statements and to the quality of movies, TV shows, and talk. Mostly superstition funds the entertainment industry. Long live vampire love.

The biggest religion in the world is not Christianity or Islam but "spiritualism" or "animism". Briefly, it is belief in spiritual powers, animal spirits, ghosts, mediums, seeing the future, people with hidden power, amulets, etc. It tends to rely on "us versus them". I don't bother with spiritualism except as it mixes with major religions to make popular religion. Spiritualism is false. Spiritualism is not relevant. Intelligent educated aware people should not believe in it.

Popular religion is a mix of spiritualism with the official doctrines of major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is part of all major religions no matter how much officials of major religions argue with it. Rather than the ideal pure orthodox religion of priests and theologians, popular religion is really what most believers follow in major religions. Popular religion, especially the spiritualistic part, is what atheists attack when they attack all religion. I devote one chapter to popular religion.

(Spiritualism-animism typically has the following features: spiritual power such as "juju" or "the Force"; use of spiritual power such as through relics of saints and through "voodoo"; beings that embody power such as spirits, saints, animal guides, demons, ghosts, and angels; adept humans, such as Jedi, Sith, witches, wizards, priests, pastors, imams, and modern-day prophets; people who "tap into" power, cajole more powerful beings, and who speak for powerful beings such as "witch doctors" and shamans; devotion to mid-level "powers" such as saints, leaders, mountain spirits, and tree spirits; and much fear. Animism-spiritualism thrives in major "high" world religions that otherwise officially dislike it. It is how Communism used to work when Communist leaders were deified, such as Marx and Mao. It is how politics actually works now when we expect political leaders to be "close to God" and to work miracles with the economy, weather, and immigration. Spiritualism-animism is big in popular culture; pop stars effectively are little animist-spiritualist adepts.)

Although I love the art and the amazing ideas that come from mysticism, I do not assess mysticism much. It is not relevant to most people. I do assess ideas that have mystic roots, such as we are all part of each other or we all live many lives.

I am not interested in arguing theology such as about the Christian Trinity, the Hindu Trinity, baptism, sacraments, miracles, or non-dualism. Those topics are not relevant to most people and do not affect

much what people do. I am not interested in defending my version of God. I do present my version of God, and hope people find it appealing.

This book is not a text on “introduction to religions”. I explain everything that you need to know here but I do not give a survey of major religions. This book does not repeat the ideas of old stances that are not important to most people, such Stoicism and Cynicism. Sometimes an old stance has a modern version. The 1950s Beats can be seen as a modern version of wandering Cynics. In that case, what is important is the modern version, and that is what I describe.

This book is not as would be written by a scholar. This book is not a pop book by a philosopher looking to reach a wider audience for his-her ideas. This book is by one religious seeker trying to help other similar people.

Bibliography.

Because this is not a scholarly book, there are no citations and notes in the text. A list of readings is at the back. There you can find some support for points.

My Qualifications.

I write as a religious person. I write as a believer in God. Unlike other people who write about religion, I am not a religious standout. I am not a priest, pastor, minister, or monk. I am not a professor although I did teach for about ten years. I am not enlightened. I am not a saint, mystic, arahant, ryshi, bodhisattva, Taoist adept, Sufi, wizard, shaman, vegetarian, vegan, would-be Jedi, or would-be Sith. I have no ability to contact spirits. I have never seen an angel. I doubt there is a spirit world except for God. I eat healthy but love chocolate and ice cream. I love nature but do not worship it. I do some Tai Chi and a little karate but I do not believe in magic dance, magic healing, chi, or “the Force”. I am not pure of heart. I am about as sinful as most of us. I am not a Romantic “bad boy”. My sins are small and boring, and they do hurt other people. I am sorry for that. I do not go to church, mostly because I am lazy, partly because I do not agree with the doctrines, and partly because it is boring. I am comfortable with “churchy” people. I like all people who live their religion in a way that helps people and nature.

I am a Darwinian (evolutionary) anthropologist but I do not write here as a Darwinian or anthropologist. Do not take me to stand for scientists, Darwinists, or anthropologists. Many would disagree with me. The views here are my views alone.

As an anthropologist, I did eight years of fieldwork in Thailand and several years in Alabama, mostly on economics and families. My work did help me with my stances and my religious views.

I have had a life-long interest in religion. I have been reading about religion since I was about ten years old, including non-Christian religions. Although raised a Greek Orthodox where almost all my neighbors were Protestants, my neighbors were always kind. They never pushed their views, they patiently told me about their religion, and tolerated all religion. Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims treated me with the same grace when I lived in Thailand.

While living in the United States, I have met people from almost all faiths, including nature mysticism, martial arts mysticism, New Age, Right Wing zealotry, atheism, political correctness, and postured indifference. In Thailand, I lived mostly with Buddhist rice farmers and fisher people. My wife and I worked for a year with Muslim fisher people. We met people of many other religions including Hindus who worshipped various gods and Chinese people who respected their ancestors.

All this has not made me an expert, but most experts have little important to say to people like me.

Book Style.

I do not cite from the Christian Bible or any other religious book. I never studied religion so as to preach it to other people; I did not read about religion so as to write another book; I originally read for curiosity and self help; so I don't remember scripture in the way preachers do. I wrote this book long after I had read about religion for other reasons, so scripture was not fresh in my mind. Besides, citing scripture annoys me. You have to get the idea. If you don't get the idea from plain words, waving a citation at you won't help. When you are in the mood, reading scripture from all the major religions is fun and almost always worthwhile.

This book is not an academic book or intellectual book. It is written from experience. I do not comment on any stance that I have not had personal experience with. I have gone down most of the roads, and made most of the mistakes, that I write about. I write about what I know about.

This book is less like a college lecture than like a twelve-year-old boy wondering aloud about God and the meaning of it all. We need a balance between wondering-about-the-world versus work-to-a-purpose. I had some of that balance when I was young, and that is what I am after here.

I refer to American pop culture and to some fun classic books such as by Walter Scott and Jane Austen. I don't do this to show off, boost interest, or because it is trendy. I learned much of my morality from old movies and from TV shows such as "The Twilight Zone", "Star Trek", and "Gun Smoke". That was a good way to learn morality. These days, people are likely to have seen movies such as "Star Wars" but are not likely to have read Plato or Confucius. To make a point, it is best to refer to what people do know. Even if you don't get a pop culture reference, you can still get the point.

Here are some pieces that are fun and that show some main points of the book:

The novels "Waverley" and "Ivanhoe" by Walter Scott

The novel "The Warden" by Anthony Trollope

The novel "Kim" by Rudyard Kipling

The novel "The Way of All Flesh" by Samuel Butler

The movie, "The Invention of Lying" starring Ricky Gervais and an excellent cast

The movies, “The Searchers” and “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” directed by John Ford

The movie “Blade Runner” directed by Ridley Scott based on a story by Philip K. Dick

The movie, “Scott Pilgrim versus the World” based on a graphic novel

The books “American Jesus” and “God is Not One” by Stephen Prothero

Advice about Reading this Book.

This book is not nearly as long as it might seem. Many chapters have optional material. About half of the first chapter is optional. The second part of the book can be skipped entirely at first reading. The book is not hard to read.

The book comes in four parts: basics, optional philosophical issues, general material on religions, and the assessment of major religions. Read the first part, the first eight chapters, straight through. Chapters Nine through Fourteen are on issues that appeal to academics but bore most people: atheism, self, free will, badness, and picking apart. Unless you like the topics, skip the middle chapters at first. Chapters Fifteen through Twenty One are ideas that appear in many religions, including mistakes to avoid. You can skim for interesting sections. Chapter Twenty Two starts the assessment of major religions. If you want nothing but basic ideas and my assessment of major religions, read Chapters One through Eight and then Twenty Two to the end. Because I anticipate some people will skip around, I have written the chapters to be somewhat self-sustaining and so they repeat material a bit.

The World and God.

In this book, usually the phrase “the world” means “the common world of experience for most people” and-or means “this whole universe”. Sometimes the phrase refers specifically to planet Earth. You will be able to tell by context what I mean. I accept that the common world of experience is very largely true and very largely real. The world is not an illusion. The world does have some illusions but we can figure them out, and most have been dismissed. The only supernatural is God. The real world is as it is and it is not otherwise. We see the real world as it is well enough, especially with a little help from our intellects and our friends.

When I say “God” I mean almost the stereotype, but not a bearded old man: a person, not material and not energy, who is outside the world, sentient, understands morality and beauty, created this world and all other worlds, used the Big Bang to create this world, used evolution to create sentient-moral beings on various planets, sometimes (but seldom) acts on this world, likes his creation, wants us to do well here, and sometimes sends teachers to help us. We can relate to God as we do to other persons. God is not simply male or female but I learned to think of God as “father” so I use male pronouns. Feel free to use female pronouns. I do not draw a sharp line between God, the world as mind, nous, dharma, Heaven, the Tao, spirit, etc. I relate to God as a person, and I cannot relate to those other things as persons, so I think of God as a giant person. I do not think of God as Nature or as the sum total of all. God is distinct from his creation and is more than his creation. God is not merely embodied in the world or identical to all-the-world. My image of God is not fully correct, but I hope it comes close, and I doubt God dislikes it. I

hope he is amused. I assume my God is the same as in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition. I assume the same God was known, a bit differently, in other traditions, as in China and India. You do not have to believe in my God to act well or to benefit from this book. Disagreeing with me does not make you wrong. I do not assume, because there is only one God, all religions are one, equally good, or equal. People can be wrong even when they refer to the same God. Read this book, and then figure out your own image of God and your own ideas about God's relation to religions.

One Apology.

In a few places in this book, among other examples, I use mud slides to show how people have ignored nature when they eat up the world, such as when they cut down the forest to build houses. I wrote these examples before the horrible mud slide disaster in Washington State in March of 2014. After some worry, I decided to let the examples stand. We suffer when we exploit nature. We need to do better. I am sorry for the people who died and suffered not only in Washington but around the world. I do not mean to insult them or add to their pain. I hope they recover as well as possible. I thank all the wounded people for their courage. I hope we learn from their hurt, and we change our attitudes so nobody else suffers and nature does not suffer.

01 Basic Beliefs

This chapter gives my religious beliefs. The next chapter gives my political values. I use both to assess stances later. No ideas here are new. Many people share my beliefs. The point is not to declare anything new but to state ideas clearly and to build a solid base so people with similar views can feel confident. I repeat ideas, so be patient. This chapter is not as long as it seems. If you want to go straight to my beliefs, go to Parts 2, 3, and 4. Part 5 is optional.

My religious beliefs come mostly from the Hebrew tradition, from Jesus, and from his view of the Hebrew tradition. My political values come mostly from classical Greece, Northwestern Europe, and in particular England. These traditions came together to form one stance. My view is similar to the Western Enlightenment of the 1700s: God, the teachings of Jesus, Western political ideas, and practicality. This stance does not insist that Jesus is God.

I hold these values not only because I was born into them. I have studied other values, religions, and cultures, with a sincere open mind, and still I saw that these are the best values. The values of Jesus and the West made the world better, and did so more effectively than other values. I do not denigrate other views but they are not as good and have not done as much good.

I do not persuade. I don't argue that the world is real, God exists, or we should act morally. I do try to get people out of errors such as zealotry. I simply give my beliefs. If they convince you of some good ideas, then I am glad.

Some Christians dislike my beliefs even though I hold Jesus highly. They focus on the fact that I don't believe Jesus was God and they tend to overlook my other points. In essays apart from this book, I comment on relations of my beliefs with orthodox Christianity. Some non-Christians reject my ideas because I took them from Jesus, the West, Christianity, or any religion. Being assailed from two opposite ends does not mean I am in the reasonable middle and I am correct. Please decide for yourself.

PART 1: Principles.

Where Ideas come from Doesn't Matter; What Matters is Truth and Usefulness.

Where good ideas come from doesn't matter much. Ideas can come from a spill of letter tiles in a board game, evolution, Greek culture, Thai culture, art, science, pop songs, priests, atheists, old spouses, dreams, bad people, and even thoughtful consideration. Albert Einstein got ideas from imagining he chased a light wave, fell off a roof, fell down an elevator shaft, and spun a cylinder. I don't have to know where Hebrews or anybody got the idea of one moral God, Jesus got the Golden Rule, or Thomas Jefferson and James Madison got "We the People".

(Optional philosophical “covering of bases”: What matters: (1) an idea is very likely true, (2) an idea is very likely false, (3) an idea accords, or does not, with other ideas that we take as basic and true, (4) how an idea fits in with general theories about how things work, (5) if an idea might change general theories of how things work, (6) how true an idea is, (7) how we can tell if an idea is true or false, (8) if we can test an idea definitely to see if it is false, (9) an idea is redundant to other ideas, (10) how an idea is useful or harmful, (11) when it is useful or harmful, (12) when an idea is more useful than harmful, (13) we can logically deduce an idea from accepted ideas, (14) an idea explains in simple clear terms, and (15) the use of this idea requires less explanation than other ideas. Often we assess not single ideas but comparisons of ideas and idea systems.)

We should assess ideas by how true and useful they are. Values and beliefs are ideas that we take as true enough to use as basic and to assess other ideas.

My beliefs are basic ideas that I use to assess other ideas, and-or my beliefs are likely true, fit with how I think the world works, more useful than hurtful, accord with historical facts as much as I can figure out facts, and are more so than ideas from other systems.

We should NOT evaluate ideas by: who said them; what culture, ethnic, religion, socio-economic class, gender, or age group they come from; or if they reflect a type such as a rich man, poor single mom, professor, poet, priest, saint, or tyrant. It does not matter that an idea came from anger, love, concern for fellows, patriotism, practicality, sex, greed, conniving, or hate although we naturally pay more attention to ideas that come from good motives.

We cannot “explain away” good ideas or “explain in” bad ideas. “Nothing but” is not allowed. We cannot “explain away” true good ideas by saying they came from some person or motive that we don’t like. A good or true idea from a Muslim, Jew, Christian, European, Asian, man, woman, friend, enemy, lunatic, sinner, or saint, or from love, anger, greed, generosity, sex, or sexism, is still good and true. A bad or false idea from a teacher, preacher, spouse, rebel, marginal group, rock poet, hip hop artist, professor, or our self, or from love or anger, is still bad or false. We cannot say a false bad idea is true and good by saying it came from a person or motive we like, or leads to results that we like regardless of overall benefit. We cannot adopt a false bad idea because it serves us. We cannot stop a true good idea because it does not serve us well or it gives them an advantage. Too many ideas in politics, religion, social life, and social science have been adopted or rejected for bad reasons.

Sometimes it is useful to consider motives and origin in discussing ideas as when we say that a song is typical of a bar band, Western Swing, or teen love; legislation is motivated by desire for ethnic support or business support; a political analysis is typical of man-bashing feminism or right wing backlash; or a vision comes from the Spirit or the Devil. But that practice never means we need not assess an idea on merits and never means we can explain away an idea or explain it in. We still have to use our heads and experience. Using motives and origin to explain away or explain in, and using “nothing but”, are so heavily abused, and so often kill reason, that we should not use them for politics, religion, or social life until we have practiced for decades assessing ideas only on grounds of truth and usefulness.

This stance toward ideas also applies to the ideas of Jesus but people react strongly to the ideas of Jesus and of most religious leaders. People assess according to bias rather than truth and usefulness. Because Jesus offered a unique way of life, played a key role in world history, and began a major religion, it can matter that Jesus was the person who set some ideas into Western culture and world history. First, some people who follow religions other than Christianity, or who dislike Christianity, discount Jesus' ideas. They explain away the ideas of Jesus as coming from the wacky male Jewish (or anti-Jewish) leader of a cult run by poor people, or as "merely ideas of Western males". Second, Christians who worship Jesus as God focus on some ideas that they like and use the status of Jesus as God to validate those ideas, such as that we can approach God only through the Church. They overlook other ideas of Jesus such as that rich powerful people care mostly about wealth and power, or that what matters is what we do for the Kingdom of God. They use Jesus to bolster ideas that came from elsewhere such as the Trinity. We have to seek the truest meaning and best use of Jesus' ideas without regard for feelings about Jews, Christianity, the West, men, and women. What difference it makes that Jesus' ideas came from him emerges throughout the book.

What matters is that we follow Jesus' ideas because they are good, true, work well with Western political values, work well with practicality, and have led people to do great things. In that way, "it does not matter where ideas come from" is still true even with Jesus.

Guessing Well about What to Do.

I don't know the deepest secrets of existence. Nobody else does either, not the most glamorous mystic, highest church person, or strident logical atheist. I have to guess. Everybody does.

We do not guess in a vacuum or only to indulge ourselves. We guess because we have to live, have to use ideas to live, and have to consider the motives of other people. We do know some ideas that are effectively true enough to live by such as that this world is real enough. We make reasonable assumptions such as that persons are real and goodness matters. We infer even if we can't prove, such as that God exists. We accept principles to live by such as the Golden Rule. We use all this assuming and inferring for good guesses about what to do.

Doing matters more than dogma. "Actions speak louder than words". If Taylor officially believes religious zealotry, but never hurts anybody, and gives food and medical care to a child out of his-her group, that counts most. If Chris officially believes the Golden Rule and "love your neighbor" but acts like Scrooge, a racist, or zealot, that is what counts. If Kim says "Green Lives Matter" but allows Green people to kill each other in huge numbers, selective inaction is what matters. If Kelsey shouts "Pro Life" but attacks nurses and confused unhappy women, and never adopts any babies, that matters. If Jo doesn't understand the Holy Trinity or how Jesus saves but helps at a food bank or an animal shelter, those acts are what matter.

People often officially believe one thing but act as though they believe another. Through their acts and words, we can guess at what they really believe, and we can assume what they really believe pushes their acts. Still, we should look first at what they do, regardless of what they say or what we guess about their true motives.

We can act well even if we haven't figured out deepest truth and even if we do not hold rounded logically consistent theories of everything. We can act well even if we are wrong about some things and even if we hold some silly ideas. Monotheists, polytheists, people who are "spiritual but not religious", atheists, spiritualists, animists, nature worshippers, Calvinists, and Roman Catholics all can act well even though they can't all be right.

Theory and practice come together but not entirely together and not equally. What we think and what we do (1) are not the same; but (2) are related; and (3) what we do is more important than what we say. (1) Nobody drives a car strictly according to a manual and the traffic laws just as nobody plays golf from a book. (3) In driving, we act mostly on reflexes and common sense, and we let safety trump the law. (2) Although nobody drives according to a book, still people's ideas (attitudes) influence how they actually drive. Defensive drivers differ from "squirrels" that jump lanes. People who drive to go safely from A to B differ from boys who drive to impress girls, the gang, or the "hood".

Even without knowing deepest secrets, we can still figure out enough to guide us in what to do. You can act well, or at least better. You can "drive" life well, or at least better. If you don't get anything else from this book, you can still get a sense of what to do.

In life as with driving, ideas-attitudes-and-principles do shape our acts. What we do differs if we: (A) hold goodness most important versus hold success is most important; (B) think "I want to do good because it is good" versus "I want to do the Will of God so God will think well of me and send me to heaven"; or (C) think "What goes round comes round" versus "I am entitled and can do no wrong". We guess about truth, theorize, accept or reject authority, and follow principles. Even if we can't know for sure, we would like to know as well as we can. We look at ideas and at acts based on ideas with the aim of holding reasonable ideas and of acting well.

It helps to guess and it is fun to guess. Imagination is one of the best parts of being human. I urge you to guess what the world is all about and what that means for what we do and should do.

When imagining, keep in mind the link between ideas and acts. Think about what you want and about how that affects how you think. It is easy to rationalize. Think how one person shapes what another person thinks so as to guide behavior. Think how other people do that to us, and how we do it to other people.

Don't let bad guesses subvert basic principles like the Golden Rule, and don't let people lead you astray through your needs for imagination and ideas. Stick with simple decent sensible ideas. Don't get caught up in ideologies that make you do bad things or stupid things.

Don't believe people who assert they do know the deepest secrets of the world, whether they are mystic, bishop, monk, atheist, prophet, politician, professor, artist, or rebel. Don't be misled by people who say they know what you should do, who say they are masters of morality. Don't be misled by zealots. Disagree with me. You don't know all about theory and practice but you do

know enough to guess well. This book intends not to give you all the answers but to help you find likely truths, make good guesses, find principles, and feel confident about acting well.

We Need Some Principles.

If we could just act spontaneously, from the heart, and everything worked out well, then we would have little need for religion and government. Sometimes this works among small groups of kin or friends. Sadly, mostly when people do what they want, things work out badly. Even when most people get along, enough people act badly to ruin it all. Even when people act mostly on good motives, enough bad motives arise in everyone. Even when people act mostly on good motives, not all good motives are compatible; and even a small amount of conflict is enough to ruin it all.

Nearly everybody has common sense and a sense of simple decency, and the two senses are similar for nearly everybody. If these senses were enough to get by and to run government, then we would be fine. But even when most people try to act on the basis of common decency, things don't work out as well as we need. Common decency doesn't tell us what to do about terrorists, identity thieves, and thugs. Enough people overlook common decency to do what they want so that they "screw it up" for all of us. All of us overlook common decency too often. All of us twist common decency so that our version becomes not really common decency but excuses, and we do it enough to "screw it up" for everyone. People differ in ideas of common decency enough to cause problems and enough so we cannot base society only on intuitions of common decency. While we can never overlook common decency, we need something more. The fact that human life cannot be based on simply acting from the heart or on common decency is one of the great sad realities of human life.

If all people had mystic insight, the insight guided us in how to act, and everybody agreed on the insight and advice, we could trust mystic insight alone. If all of us were mystic visionary saints and we all shared the same religion, it might work out. But most of us do not have mystic visions; any intuitions that we do have do not give realistic guidelines about how to act; and the intuitions of mystics do not all agree.

If God had given us a clear set of commands that everybody agreed on, we could live by those. The major deistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim that God did just that. But even they do not agree on what the commands are or how to interpret them. The commands that they attribute to God are not alone enough to live by. The commands that they offer do give us a good starting point to figure out what more we need.

If (1) God gave us a clear set of principles such as "do unto other people as you would have them do unto you" and "all rules apply equally to everyone", and (2) the principles covered behavior well enough, then that would work. Just as God did not give us a clear simple adequate set of commands, so also he did not give us a clear simple adequate set of principles, although deistic religions do claim that he did that for each of them in particular and did it best for each of them in particular. Jews, Christians, Muslims, and some Hindus each claim that God gave them the best principles, better than other religions. Deistic religions disagree about what the prophets said and about which is the most important message; so they disagree on the principles. We need a more

solid foundation for principles than “I say God said”. We need some criteria for good principles, we need logic, and we need the experience of the past.

If we could get a simple clear full set of principles from logic alone, and people would go along with principles from logic alone, that would do. Once we had the principles from logic, then we could find a way to reconcile the principles with decency, common sense, intuition, commands, and the teachings of various prophets. “Do unto others” and “all rules apply equally to everybody” are two of the best usual candidates that philosophy offers for principles based on logic alone. Logic is one good place to start but, by itself, logic is not enough.

First, we cannot get a full set of clear simple compelling principles from logic alone. Some key principles we can't get from logic alone, such as “work hard to make the world better”, “pay it forward”, “love your neighbor”, and “love your enemy”. We need an outside source of good principles. Logic can be used to help assess principles once we get them from other sources, such as religion, but logic alone cannot originate them.

Second, even when people agree intellectually with principles that have their roots in logic alone, people will not act on principles that are merely logical. People must feel commitment and passion in addition to logic. People don't follow the Golden Rule because it is logical but because Jesus said it and because it makes gut sense after he said it.

Third, even if most people agree with principles-from-logic-alone and act well, too many other people refuse to accept principles-from-logic-alone and-or refuse to act well enough on that basis. A person can accept a logical argument but still not act on the conclusion. Kirk did this to Spock all the time, and men and women accuse each other of this constantly. Too many people do not accept “all rules apply equally to everybody”. Too many people understand and accept “all rules apply equally” as beautifully logical but do not carry it out well. Logic is useful to guide us through what major religions have offered as candidates for good principles but logic alone is not enough without outside suggestions and an added push. Often we get both suggestions and push from major religions and from human experience.

We need a simple clear set of principles that go along well with common sense and the sense of simple decency, accord well with principles that were given us by the major religions, and make good logical sense whether or not we can derive them from logic alone. We need principles that appeal to people, on which people will act, to which people will commit, and by which we can assess what people do and the institutions they make. We need to accept that the principles are basic and have weight. We need principles that can serve as the basis for personal action, good institutions such as charities and schools, and good government. We need principles that we can interpret for varying situations in our changing world. We need principles that we can blend with practicality without betraying the principles. We need principles that can serve as the basis for good modern pluralistic democracy.

I find these principles in the teachings of Jesus mixed with practically and with Western ideas about persons, citizenship, and government. Below I give specific criteria for good principles. Here I just point out that the principles already exist and where to find them.

Other religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, do have similar ideas. But the principles in those religions that are similar to ideas from Jesus and the West are not as basic in those religions. Other ideas are more important in other religions, such as submission to God and his representatives, enlightenment, dharma-as-social-duty, being a member of a great joyous cosmic system, and a Heavenly Kingdom. Principles similar to those from Jesus and the West do not arise as naturally in other religions. The key principles of other religions have not served as the basis for good institutions and good government in societies that were founded on those religions. Ideas similar to the principles from Jesus and the West have not served to found good institutions and good government in societies that were based on other religions even when those religions had similar ideas.

Luckily, all religions can work with the ideas of Jesus and the West without distorting the religion much. All religions can adopt these principles in their own ways and can make them the basis for their versions of good modern societies. So I do not press hard on the fact that these principles came to be important through Jesus and the West; but I do make the point several times.

Principles are my way to combine simple acts of decency and goodness with a system without letting the system take control. They are my way to mix simple acts of decency and goodness with ideals, practicality, and proven values such as “rule of law”, without forcing everything into a theological or political system. Principles are my way to combine the simple direct insights of Jesus’ stories with practicality, ideals, and Western values. We will see what that means as we go along in the book.

The Principles Have to Feel Holy, and Usually Arise from Religion.

Logic alone does not give us all our principles; and logic alone does not lead people to act well enough even when it supports principles. Besides reason, we need other sources for principles and we need passion and commitment. As people, we have to feel that the principles are our principles and that our principles matter enough to stand on. For this book, and to give good advice generally, we have to find what can lead us to proper commitment to good principles but not lead to zealotry and other badness.

Without going into a long defense, I can fairly say that people need to feel that their principles are grounded in something bigger-than-me, and this bigger-than-me is usually God, Dharma, Tao, Heaven, a god, or the core “force” of a religion. People need to feel their principles are grounded in religion and-or are holy. When people feel their principles are holy, they more likely follow their principles. They more likely follow morality, laws, and rules.

To fully get this point, take away overt religion so we can see how tacit religion still asserts a role. Some people do not feel very religious but still feel democracy is special and we should follow it. They might not know it, but these people effectively feel democracy is holy. Democracy gets its power to govern because democracy is holy in general even if not holy in one particular religion. If people did not feel democracy was holy, they would not die for it. Some people feel this way about Truth and Science. Even atheists feel that their principles are grounded in logical morality,

and logical morality reflects what the universe is all about. In effect, atheists hold logical morality holy. If they did not feel that logical morality represents the universe and so is holy, they would not follow it and would not push their ideas on to other people.

Not only do we need the power of religion behind good principles but often good ideas about morality and human social life came first from religion. People did not get ideas such as “love your neighbor”, “one moral God”, or “live and let live” from abstract thinking but from religion, even if, later, abstract thinking supported the ideas. We need to accept that many good ideas came from religion. This does not mean we need not assess ideas by truth and usefulness but it does mean we should be historically accurate. It means we have to take into account the power that religion has for originating good ideas and supporting good ideas.

Because good ideas often came from religion, and religion provides the power behind ideas, it is hard to separate ideas from one particular religion. Particular religions generate and support ideas, not general religion. If humanity develops a general religion in the future, then we can talk about how general religion supports ideas but, in the real past, and for the real present, we have to see ideas in the context of the particular religions that made and support them. Even general ideas that obviously apply beyond their religion of origin, and were intended to apply beyond their religion of origin, tend to be tied to one particular religion. Although Christians intended the idea to apply beyond the circle of Christians, people think “love your neighbor” is Christian. Although Hindus intended “you are that (those people and those animals)” and “great compassion” to apply beyond Hindus, people still think it is a Hindu idea. People still see “one moral God” as a Jewish idea although it is now the basis for other religions. People think “the Middle Path” is a Buddhist idea although the idea appears all over including Aristotle. People think democracy is a Western idea although it is becoming the common form of government in the world.

People follow ideas better if they think the ideas are peculiar to their own religion. People usually feel that good principles come out of one specific religion, their own religion, and only from their own religion. It is hard for people who come from one faith to feel that the ideas in another faith are holy enough to follow, even when the ideas are really good, and even when, oddly, the ideas are nearly the same in both faiths. People who believe the same ideals about democracy care if we ground the ideals in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism. Muslims and Jews follow the same dietary laws but feel the laws are different and essentially of their religion alone. Atheists want people to follow morality because it is rooted in their logic and not because it comes from Krishna or Confucius even if the points of the morality are the same.

People want other people to follow not only the same values and morality that they do but also the same religion. This conflict can be resolved but it is not easy.

In the modern world of plural democracies, we still need religion to get our principles and we still need religion to back our principles but we cannot use any one particular religion and there is no “general religion” to which particular religions can assent. People live by particular religions from particular groups yet different groups have to live together, each particular religion has to support democratic values, and people in each particular religion have to feel that democratic values are

congenial to their particular religion. Overcoming this dilemma is a big task of the modern state. This conflict appears again throughout the book.

We have to figure out the relation of religion to principles. We have to figure out how to use the feeling of religion to back the right principles without leading to abuses.

Usually as children, we get our principles along with our religion, and our principles are backed by religious authority, so we feel bound to work with the principles that we inherit even if not all of us fully understand them. Religion works with moral values to give power to get people to act well enough, usually beginning when they are children.

As long as the principles are correct enough, then things could work out well, even if most of the people don't fully understand the principles.

Correct-enough-principles-not-always-deeply-understood-but-widely-followed worked fairly well when everybody was of the same race and religion. In an old agrarian village, people could find a set of principles to live by, and the principles could accord well with decency and common sense. In the modern world, this accord is hard to find because people of various religions and stances have to live together, and people hold to the literal words of religions. The old life of everyone going along with common principles even when we don't all personally understand them is what many people wish for in our modern complicated vexing world.

Unluckily, when taken uncritically in a heritage, now for the modern world, too often principles are not good enough, and they are often not well understood, but still widely followed. Tradition can work against us. Even tradition that once was good can work against us now. People denigrate ideas even when they know the ideas are good because the ideas came from another religion and another group and did not come from our religion and our group. People support ideas even when they know the ideas are inferior because the inferior ideas came from our religion and our group and the other better ideas came from another religion and another group. Modern religious zealots deny principles such as the equality of women and equality of ethnic groups even when they know those are the truest best ideas because the ideas came from White Christian Western men and women. People deny the idea of one moral God because it came from Jews, Muslims, and Christians. This attitude makes modern plural democracy hard.

Everybody thinks his-her principles are good and are best, but, in fact, people do settle on bad principles sometimes, or at least bad in the modern world of complicated economics, complicated government, international relations, and mixed peoples. Think of terrorists, crusaders, zealots, and thugs. What if the principles are not good although backed by religion? What if principles are downright bad? When people of different religions and needs compete, they likely stick hard to their original ideas, even to poor principles and bad principles.

Luckily, people also do reject bad ideas when better ideas arise. People do accept better ideas. People can change, and do change when better ideas appear, as long as better ideas do not undermine their personal and family success much. People change especially when better ideas can improve the success of their children and grandchildren.

Suppose people adopt new better principles. A leader gets people to see a better way. After people adopt new principles that do work well enough at the time, then their children get born into the principles. Then the situation is as if good principles were always handed down from on high. Thinkers within the prevailing religions find ways that their religion can support “new” principles – or really did support new principles all along but we just didn’t see it. Even atheists find how to ground democracy in logical morality. Then religion gives its validation, passion, and commitment to good principles. Then the fact that principles seem holy is good because it gets people to live by correct principles even when many people do not fully understand. This is happening to new generations now that are growing up in modern plural democracies. I doubt this effect alone will lead to a general religion to which all particular religions can assent but it can provide enough common ground to live together peacefully.

This book is largely about presenting the right principles. I do not try to prove the right principles. I hope I say enough for you to feel the principles and commit to them. Enough good thinkers from every tradition have seen the value of the principles that I present here so that people can accept them without much anguish. If you understand them, agree with them, and feel them, you can try to get your fellows to go along even if your fellows do not fully understand. The best principles can do the job of guiding modern life and can serve as the basis for modern pluralistic democracy if we put them into practice.

I am lucky because I stumbled on the right principles, and I think God endorses these ideas. The ideas are holy enough to live by. I am happy if other religions have versions. I hope we all look into history so we can appreciate where the ideas came from. Most people can believe in these ideas, and can hold them holy enough to act on, even if a person does not ground the ideas in the Judaic God. If the ideas appeal to you, and are important enough to live by, then think about why you hold to them as if they were holy.

PART 2: Essential Beliefs.

This part of the chapter states my religious ideas. Below, and in later chapters, I expand on the ideas. I do not argue for these ideas. I merely state them. Take the ideas here as my assertion of basic principles like axioms and definitions in mathematics.

Briefly.

We should be able to get any religion in half-an-hour. If not, something is wrong. The material in this section is what you could get in half-an-hour. I repeat this material below at more length.

God exists. God made the world and set the rules. God is the only supernatural that you have to think about.

God loves you and wants you to do well spiritually.

Trust God. Love God as much as you can. You don’t have to love God perfectly.

Polioudakis: Religious Stances

After you die, you have to face God.

Be decent.

Do good and avoid evil.

Do the right things for the right reasons. God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, out of your own choice. God wants you to do good because it is good.

Treat all other people as persons. Love other people as God loves you, as much as you can.

The Golden Rule: Treat other people as you want them to treat you. Act as you want all people to act. Don't do what you don't want other people to do. Act as if all that you do rests on general principles that apply to every person equally. Treat all people as persons just like you regardless of social status, wealth, power, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.

Work hard to make the world better.

Enjoy life and the world.

Make the world better by making it more fair, honest, just, beautiful, productive, interesting, fun, better governed, with less disease, with less hardship, and more enjoyable.

Be proactive. Pay it forward.

Do what you are good at and what suits you.

Thinking hard is part of doing, so think things through.

Treat nature well. Be a steward of nature. Treat animals almost as if they were persons.

If you have more talent, wealth, power, or energy, more is expected of you.

God considers your problems when assessing you. You are naturally able to deal with most of life's issues but not all.

Don't hurt anybody.

Oppose evil. Fight evil physically if you must. Don't become evil when you oppose evil.

Although God loves you and wants you to do well, the world is not about you. The world around you is not about you. You can play a useful role, if you wish, but that does not make you prince.

God only seldom intervenes directly in the world. It is unlikely that God will intervene directly to help you or your group. Instead, God set up the world so that you can get most of what you want if you try hard. "Knock and it shall open for you". God understands that you can try hard and still fail, and does not hold that against you.

A simple act of decency or goodness often works well enough. Don't get confused by systems. Don't get confused by people who claim to know the will of God and want you to do something that feels bad.

Learn from prophets such as Jesus. Almost everything I say is based on Jesus and his message. God wants us to do good because it is good and Jesus tells us how to do good.

The blend of Jesus and Western ideas changed the world, and changed it as no other man has done. Although his message is not completely unique, this is unique: Jesus' vivid presentation, he really lived it, and he put it in the context of the Kingdom of God. We need to accept all this and think about it. We need to take Jesus and his message seriously.

It is impossible to follow Jesus perfectly and live up perfectly to his ideals. We have to combine ideals with practicality. We have to cultivate ideas and institutions that help us govern well. We have to combine ideals, practicality, and governing well. The ideas and institutions that best support good government are Western ideas and institutions.

Our minds are a gift from God. Use your mind. Science is part of our minds. Respect ideas from science including biological evolution and Big Bang cosmology.

Search for truth. Be open to truth, even if it is not what you expected and are used to. Rely on truth to take you to goodness. Follow the truth. From Jesus, "The truth will set you free".

If you open yourself to the truth, trust God, open yourself to God, and work toward getting better, then you will get better. You will find out about yourself and the world. You will learn how to be better. You will not find heaven on Earth but you will find enough to work on for yourself.

God wants you to love all other people but God knows that is an impossible ideal for humans. Do the best you can. God will understand.

Not everybody is like you and not everybody is good, kind, sweet, honest, and knows God as you do. Most people are fun in their particular ways. Let people be who they are as long as they do no serious harm. Many people do not feel God closely and do not accept the ideas given here, yet do a lot of good for the world, and do more good than harm. Some make the world interesting in ways you could not. Accept that and enjoy it.

Don't try to make everybody the same as you. Accept and enjoy as much diversity as you can.

Some people are hurtful. Reject bad. Reject what is harmful. Control what is bad and harmful. Reject and control bad harmful people. Reject and remake bad harmful institutions.

You do not have to feel like one of God's special children to be a good person and to stand well with God. You only have to do what you can as yourself. If you do feel like one of God's special children, then fine.

Longer.

God created the world, including you.

The world is as it is. There is no mysterious level of reality. There are no secrets. God is the only supernatural that we have to deal with. We are not deluded by any supernatural beings such as the Devil and we are not helped by any supernatural beings such as angels.

A daffodil is a daffodil, flowers are flowers, a tree is a tree, an oak is an oak, a forest is a forest, an apple smells and tastes like an apple, red things look red, some roses are red while some are yellow, the wind blows, air moves, honesty is honesty, cheating is cheating, decency is decent, hot is hot, good intent is good intent, and gravity leads things to come together. Good, bad, pain, pleasure, joy, and suffering are all real enough. We do not live in a bad illusion or good illusion. We can begin with things as they are. The world is real enough.

God is good. Life is basically good. Rocks, trees, plants, animals, water, light, sounds, tastes, smells, sights, talking, stars, thinking, morality, struggling, body, mind, interaction, community, art, intellect, science, and most aspects of the world are basically good.

God wants us to enjoy life

God wants us to take care of the world and life.

God loves his creation, and wants it to do well, including you in particular.

Trust God.

Be decent. Play fair.

Despite its basic goodness, sometimes the world can be a hard place. Some problems are just in the world, such as earthquakes, malaria, and cancer.

Besides the problems that are naturally in the world, people cause other problems, mostly without need.

Don't make life any harder. Don't hurt anybody. Repent when you do make life harder. Make up for it if you can.

Learn from life, the good things in life, your problems, and the problems of other people.

(1) Follow the Golden Rule: "Treat other people the way you want them to treat you." Treat them as you want them to treat you even if they don't treat you as you want them to treat you. Follow the strong positive version of this rule by being proactive in helping. Follow the "negative" version as well: don't do to other people what you don't want them to do to you.

(2) Follow this idea: All rules apply to everybody equally, including you, kin, friends, neighbors, group members, and even to your opponents and to all the "other" people too. When you make a rule, make it as a general rule for everybody. Act as if you follow such general rules. If you want to do something, other people have the right to do it too. If you don't want them to do it, then you can't do it either. I call all this "applies equally".

(3) Treat everybody as a person, as free and valuable in him-herself. Treat everybody as a free valuable person regardless of social status, wealth, religion, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. Treat some animals, and treat nature, almost as if they were persons.

(4) Treat every adult as a free valuable person who can decide about him-herself unless he-she is mentally disabled.

The Golden Rule, the idea "applies equally", the idea of a person, and the idea of the free adult, are all aspects of the same idea.

There are a few exceptions to the four ideas such as that we don't treat children and sick people as we do adults and healthy people, but these exceptions don't undo the basic idea. Differences of ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, age (except children), occupation, socio-economic class, nation of origin, etc. are not enough to undo the basic idea.

(I got the Golden Rule from Jesus' statement of it, how he lived his life, and his stories; I know other religions have it too. I got formal ideas of "applies equally" and "the person" from Immanuel Kant from around 1800; nearly all people have strong intuitive versions. I got "free adult person" from American culture.)

God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, on your own. He does not want you to do them from fear of punishment or from hope of reward.

We all need help sometimes. We all can afford to give help sometimes.

Actively help. Be more than passive. Be useful. Do more than look out for yourself. Be kind. Pay it forward. Do what you can. Use your full ability. Actively do for others what you would like them to do for you. Try really hard. Cooperate with other people when you can. Forgive.

Include everybody as much as possible.

It is natural to live with, hang around with, and marry, people of your age, gender, religion, race, socio-economic class, place, language, etc. There is nothing wrong with that but you have to overcome it sometimes. You cannot hate and love only according to group boundaries. You

have to be open to crossing boundaries. You have to let other people in on a good thing when your group has a good thing and when letting them in can stand the expansion. You have to help other people build a good thing when they might be able, willing, and ready. You have to make your group the kind of people that others want to deal with, help, and accept help from. You have to help other people get able, willing, and ready to the extent you can. You have to make your group able, willing, and ready for a better way. People cannot erase boundaries but we can accept that they are there so as to overcome them, and we can practice overcoming them.

Not everybody is good, sweet, kind, honest, and knows God. Some people know God in their own way different from yours. Most people don't know God much but they are just as worthwhile as you are anyway. Many people are interesting and fun in their particularity. Even if a person is not interesting or fun, don't look down on him-her. Don't try to make everybody as you wish you were or you wrongly think you are. Some people are bad and hurtful. You should control them so they do no harm.

We can, and should, work hard to build a continually better world.

The more ability, resources, time, and energy you have, the more you personally have to give.

Decent people are a particular joy and are particularly useful.

You cannot try beyond your ability. You are responsible for trying hard but you cannot carry the world by yourself. All you can do is all you can do. If we accept this idea, usually we can a lot more than we thought we could. God made the world. In the end, God will decide what to do with the world.

Idealism is not enough. We have to mix idealism with practicality and with knowledge based on real world experience. We can do this.

Common sense practicality is not enough. We have to mix common sense practicality with ideas of good government and with good institutions. The best ideas of good government and the best institutions come from the West.

Usually a simple act of goodness or decency is enough without the need for a system. Don't get misled by systems and by the desire for power that lies behind many systems.

We should forgive but we don't have to tolerate repeated hurtful behavior. We should not enable bad behavior, hurtful behavior, or bad hurtful people. To do so only makes it worse. We would not want other people to enable badness in us, so we should not enable it in others. The Golden Rule requires us to really help people, not to give them what they want. Sometimes helping them means telling the truth about bad situations and it means not giving.

Zealotry is usually hurtful.

Don't intervene when not really useful. Don't be a busybody.

When you see you are wrong, stop it now.

Assess yourself, the world, nature, your country, your ethnic group, your religion, the economy, and the people around you. Don't do things, don't act any particular way, just because they tell you to. Go beyond your group.

Use your abilities, time, and effort as best you can to do as much good as you can. Don't waste yourself or the world.

Don't misuse your abilities on zealotry when your real purpose is to make yourself feel righteous, justified, saved, and smug. Even when the cause is good, you are wrong. If you crusade against abortion to make yourself feel justified and smug, then, even if abortion is bad, you are wrong. If you crusade against business and to save nature so as to feel good about yourself, then, even though nature needs help, you are wrong.

If you feel the call of a cause, then go ahead and pursue it vigorously as long as you do more good than harm, do not act immorally, do not act because it makes you feel righteous, and do not enable badness. Commitment to a cause led to a free America. Commitment to later causes led to freedom for all people in American including women and gays. Commitment to a good cause can be a good thing.

Oppose evil. Fight evil physically if you have to. Sometimes you have to bear the burden of fighting evil so that other people can lead decent lives. Don't become evil when you oppose evil. Zealotry often leads to becoming evil even when it begins by opposing evil.

There is no magic formula. We all make mistakes sometimes. If we trust, let go of fear, and use common sense, usually we can get along well enough.

Some people are exempt from working hard to build a better world and from enjoying the world, such as people who are physically ill, mentally ill, persecuted, quite poor, in jail, or oppressed. God understands. Sometimes you help the world best by helping yourself first. Sometimes the best you can do is to get by from day to day. Do what you can when you can.

Science is correct. To respect science is to respect a gift from God.

Search for truth. Be open to truth, even if it is not what you expected and are used to. Rely on truth to take you to goodness. Follow the truth. From Jesus, "The truth will set you free".

If you open yourself to the truth, trust God, and-or open yourself to God, and work toward getting better yourself, then you will get better. You will find out about yourself and the world. You will learn how to be better. You have to do most of the work yourself but the work will get done. You will get some help from the world and from other people. God might give you a little help but will not do it all for you. You will not find heaven on Earth, you will not solve all your problems, and you will not save the world, but you will find enough so you can work on the world yourself.

God can forgive a lot and God can make us see that past bad deeds do not have to drag us into deep depression. Past bad deeds need not be a barrier between me, other people, the world, or God. It helps to overcome past bad deeds if you work toward atoning and being better.

Although God loves you and wants you to do well, the world is not about you. Not even the small world around you is about you. You can play a role, if you want, but that does not make you the prince of any world.

God rarely directly intervenes directly in the world. It is very unlikely God will intervene directly to help you or your group. Instead, God set up the world so we can find almost all of what we need if we try hard. "Knock and it will open for you". "God helps those who help themselves". God knows that some people try hard but still fail, and he does not hold that against you.

Religion and stances should be free of any hurtful dogmas, support for bad acts, and support for bad commitments.

Prophets are people who are particularly adept at reminding us what God has in mind. When we find a prophet, we should pay attention. Jesus was an important prophet. Other prophets include Moses, the other Jewish prophets besides Jesus, the Buddha, Chuang Tzu, Mohammad, and the great writers of India. We don't have to believe everything every prophet said.

When you die, you have to face God. God will be more inclined to mercy and education than to stern justice. Still, if you did not use your abilities while here on Earth, or if you did evil, God will be stern with you. God will not punish people who were sick or oppressed.

People do not have perfectly free will in all situations. We have enough free will most of the time to make the right choice. We can decide to be decent, follow the Golden Rule, work hard to make the world better, and mix practicality with idealism.

Often we face a tug between doing the most good we can imagine versus simply being what we are naturally and doing as much good as we can as our less-than-ideal selves. We face a tug between some unrealistic saintly ideal that is "not who I am" versus doing the best I can as who I really am. Usually it is best to be yourself and to do as much that way rather than try to force yourself to play the saint. Trying to force yourself to be a saint backfires. Most people can't be Mother Teresa; too often they do more harm than good when they try; and they usually paralyze themselves with guilt and do nothing at all. Do what you can. You are not required to save the world. It is not a good idea to go against yourself even in a good cause. If your nature is to be an engineer who helps build houses for the poor once a month, and you don't want to devote your whole life to working in the slums, then be that engineer. Be who you are, and do goodness as that person. But don't forget to actually do what work you can. You can't use "that's not me" as an excuse not to do anything but only gratify yourself.

If your nature is to do bad things, then stop yourself. If you can't stop, then kill yourself. Expect other people to stop you.

Originally Jesus said to “love your neighbor as yourself” and to “love your enemies”. We should try to love other people as God loves us. We do not try to love other people simply because God loves us but because it is good, just as parents do not love children simply because their own parents loved them but because it is good. God loves us because it is good, not because it is his duty or because it will get him to heaven. We should use God’s love as a model, just as we use the love of good parents for their children as a model in our love for our children.

Jewish teachers, including Jesus, said that the two most important commandments were to love God and to love our neighbors. From that basis, come all the ideas about good in the Hebrew Tanakh (Old Testament) and come all the specific laws. For convenience, to this wisdom, I add that everything we do rests on the Golden Rule of “act toward other people as we want them to act toward us”.

If you can really love all your neighbors as yourself, and can really follow the Golden Rule, then good for you. You are a much better person than I am. I know what Jesus was after, I see his idea clearly, but I cannot do it. Most people cannot do it. You don’t have to succeed fully at it to do the right thing and to please God. You don’t have to be perfect. If you work on the Golden Rule and “applies equally” then you will approach the ideal of “love your neighbor” and “love your enemies”, and eventually you will feel the idea behind the slogans. Even then, likely you won’t succeed fully. You don’t have to succeed fully. If we try to force ourselves to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemies without first feeling the idea in our hearts, then we freeze, don’t act, get confused, disappointed, and bitter. We do worse than if we simply tried to follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally”, and we didn’t expect perfection that way either. If we hold “love your neighbor” and “love your enemies” as ideals but we don’t expect to achieve them for a long time, we will be better off and the world will be better off too.

Jesus taught other ideas that cannot be recounted here. I urge you to read the New Testament, especially the Gospels, and to read material from all the great teachers and religions.

PART 3: Elaboration on Some Points.

The Golden Rule, Persons, and Political Values.

The Golden Rule strongly implies we are all equally persons and equal under the law. It supports Western ideas of free equal persons with rights and responsibilities. It supports Western political values. At the same time, it does not deny social distinctions and personal differences. Parents and children are not the same; students and teachers are not the same; and police and ordinary citizens are not the same; yet we know what to do in the contexts of those relations and still follow the Golden Rule. I return to the Golden Rule in the next chapter on my political values.

Orthodox Christians Don’t Like This.

My beliefs depend on morality, and I see Jesus as the most important moral teacher. Standard orthodox Christians don’t like this view. They like seeing Jesus as the key moral teacher in world

history but they dislike seeing him as primarily that. To them, Jesus is God, and his mission is to save us. Jesus saves us through his Birth here as God-and-Man, Death, and Resurrection. His life and teachings help. Exactly how Jesus saves in these ways is a mystery but the fact that we don't understand does not diminish that he does save and he does it in these ways.

I disagree. Jesus' teachings are more important than simply his Birth, Death, and Resurrection – even if he really is God and was resurrected. What matters is following his ideas. I went through these issues in another book (“Jesus for Most People”), so I don't dwell on them here. We don't need to settle them to get what I say. See my essays apart from this book.

For books that give the orthodox (standard) Christian view, see the Bibliography in my book on Jesus, or the Bibliography here. For a modern orthodox Christian scholar whose work is well written, not too technical, accessible, and seems to be sound scholarship, read Wayne Meeks. Read the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church or any major church. Roman Catholic writers offer short versions of the Catechism. Most catechisms are available free online. Read Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton and Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis. Watch religious channels and religious shows on TV – they are not all silly. Old American Christianity is not really standard orthodox Christianity but most people don't know the difference. They are close enough to say: one way to know standard Christianity, as people show it by living it, a way more fun than preachers, professors, and priests, is to hear American country music and “Gospel” music. Start with small doses. I suggest the Louvin Brothers, Gospel music of Elvis Presley, and collections of classic Gospel, both Black and White. You can get the values from classic Western TV shows such as “The Rifleman” and “Bonanza” but the values in those shows are well mixed with non-standard non-orthodox values similar to mine.

Simply Having a Relation with God and Jesus.

At least since 1900, Protestants have boiled down Christianity to having a personal relation with Jesus. Hindus do much the same in personal devotion to a god or avatar. I don't argue whether this Christian devotion is enough on which to base standard Christianity. I use the idea to make two other points.

First, after you have a personal relation with God, Jesus, Allah, Krishna, Mohammad, Buddha, a bodhisattva, or an avatar, then what do you actually do? You still have to act in the world. Your personal relation will color how you act but you still do have to act. For that, you need principles. You do not get all needed principles only from your personal relation with Jesus – various people who have a relation with Jesus claim to find different principles on the basis of the relation alone – they can't all be right. Besides a personal relation with Jesus, you need the best principles and need to know how to combine them with practicality. In the end, if you find the best principles, you will act on the basis of the ideas here. For acting in this world, principles matter as much as a simple personal relation with God, Jesus, or any figure. If God wants you to do the right thing for the right reasons in this world, then you had better get your principles straight as much as you get your personal relation with Jesus straight. (Some people who know the need for principles even after a personal relation with Jesus claim their church alone gives them the principles. I do not assess this claim much but I do not think it is enough and I ask you to think it through.)

Second, when you see that you need the best principles, think where they come from. If you are not Christian, likely you will not credit Judaism and Jesus, but instead credit your heroes. After crediting your favorites, think how their principles go along with the teachings of Judaism, Jesus, and the West. If you are Christian, open your eyes to how many of your principles came from the Hebrew tradition including Judaism, and from Western values even apart from formal Christianity. Think how Christianity merged the ideas of Jesus with ideas of Hebrews and the West. Recent champions of Christianity, even deeply versed in Western tradition such as G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, don't do this enough. They credit the Church only while slighting Plato, Aristotle, and Locke. In any case, be honest about what principles you really use and where they really came from. I like to find the roots of good ideas in Jesus but to find them only there is to hurt Jesus as much as never finding them there.

Knowing God and Being a Good Person.

The Proverbs say fear of God is the start of wisdom. Believers say: if you really know God, Tao, Dharma, Heaven, Spirit, Nature, the Universe, etc. ("God etc."), the knowing necessarily changes your life and makes you better; and you cannot be really better unless you do know God etc. I hope people wake up to something bigger than their selves, especially they wake up to God and Jesus, and that this feeling does make them better.

Yet I did not write to make people know God and Jesus in that way. I do not intend to set people on fire for God etc. either for the feeling itself or to use the feeling to get something else. I want people to think about principles and stances.

Some, but not all, religious people who want others to know God etc. as they do; in fact, really they want to make others just like them, want others to believe as they do, or want to control others. That is a reason why we "others" resist believers who say they know God etc. Although bad motives are annoying, put them aside for now. Focus on the issue of acting well.

The feeling of knowing God etc. alone is not enough, not needed, and can be confusing. The feeling is not by itself a guarantee that it is correct, no matter how strong and clear it is.

People who say they know God etc. (1) don't always agree on what God etc. is; (2) don't always agree on how to act better; (3) don't always keep up the feeling; and (4) don't always act better even when the feeling lasts. (5) Some of them do use the idea of knowing God etc. as a tool. People who claim to know God etc. often say: (6) people cannot think out principles and act well without first feeling God etc; (7) people who lapse didn't really have true feeling for the true God etc; (8) anyone who acts badly never had the true feeling for the true God etc; (9) our group does have the true feeling for the true God etc; (10) anyone who disagrees with us on an important point has a wrong feeling and-or the God etc; and so quite likely (11) we are the only group with the true feeling for the true superior being. Academics do much the same with their pet theories, would-be rebels with their pet social fringe, art consumers with their pet art, atheists with not-God, and politicians with their pet ideologies and projects.

In contrast, I have seen good people, who only dimly have this feeling about God etc, yet still do the right thing for the right reasons, not from fear or from hope of reward. Knowing God etc. did play a role in their good acts but not the only role or biggest role. I have seen people who have the true feeling by all the plausible standards of their church, aimed at the right God etc. of their faith, yet still act badly. You can be on fire for God, and backed by the church, yet still act badly. I have seen people act well, of various faiths, who differ about God etc, both with and without a fiery feeling of knowing God etc. In the New Testament, demons know God, what God is, what God wants, the right things, right reasons, and who Jesus was, and demons know all this more than any mere human, yet demons still act badly.

To find principles and act well, it can help already to have a feeling for God etc. but the feeling does not have to be the full-blown fire of certain knowing. A feeling of knowing God etc. is not even necessary. People can think about principles adeptly and can act well as long as they see that some ideas and acts are better and some worse, that is, as long as they take morality and practicality seriously. They do not have to link better and worse directly to God etc. Later, people can think about relations between principles, acts, morality, better, and worse to God etc. Forcing people to know God etc. so that they think clearer and act better rarely works. If we get people to think clearly about principles and get them to act better, they are more open to questions of God etc. See the chapter on atheism.

People who do not have the feeling of knowing God etc, see that the feeling alone is not enough, is not needed, and leaves us open to error, so they get confused. Even people who do have the feeling, when they see that other people who claim to know God etc. don't agree or do act badly, get confused. People who seek to know God etc. without first setting a base for right thinking and right acting almost surely get wrong feelings and get confused.

God is happier with someone who does not have a spectacular feeling of knowing him but acts well than with someone who does know him but acts poorly. God is happier with someone who does not have a spectacular feeling but tries to think it all out, and does as well as he-she can, than with someone who does know him but acts poorly.

If the feeling of knowing God etc. is not enough, not needed, often a tool, and can confuse, rather than seek the feeling first, or rely on it alone, it is better first to seek right principles and acting well. Let the feeling take care of itself. That is what this book does.

People need not burn for God etc., and can have a different knowing of God etc., without lapsing into vacuous "all paths lead to God", bad relativity, bad moral relativity, idolatry, bad dogma, bad ideology, and perversion. Knowing God etc. does not always stop those mistakes. Sometimes good comes even from Samaria and Galilee.

Likewise, not everyone who feels God etc. is conniving to turn you into a zombie. Not everyone who feels God etc. is bad. Most are good. People who love God want you to have the same feeling because it is the best ever, much the same as you might want them to love democracy, Shakespeare, the Beatles, or modern tech. They are bad when they insist only their feeling and

their ideas of God etc. are true and their feeling and ideas must precede acting well. Practice telling apart good ones from bad ones.

If you know God etc., I am glad. You are lucky. Help people without trying to make them as you are. Give them a solid foundation in ideas and acts. Let them think their own way to right ideas and right acts when they can. Let “knowing God etc.” blossom in them as it will.

To insist, as I do, that Jesus had the right principles, and he set the right ideas into the world, is NOT to say we must feel Jesus as some Christians say we need to know Jesus-and-God before we can know good principles and can act well. Here, I present principles and, at the same time, say who set them into the world. The combination of principles and history should help people appreciate Jesus and the West. The combination need not make people feel Jesus-as-God in the same way some Christians know Jesus. If it does so for you, fine; you need to consider your relation to Jesus or your role in a church. If the combination does not do that for you, then it might lead you to think how one person, Jesus, could set the principles into the world, what that fact implies about human nature, implies for the reality of God, for the character of God, and for what God wants of people including you.

Sometimes people feel God etc. on their own, without prompting, and without much context to make the best of the feeling. People can know God etc. even if they are not of your religion and church, or any religion or church. They need help to make the best of knowing God etc. by putting it in the right context. The right context is not always you, your belief, and your group. My first impulse is to show them art and cosmology, then to show them the implications of knowing God for how we act toward people, nature, and the state, and to see that we need right principles too. If you do come to know God etc. on your own, remember: Your task is only starting. Soon you have to figure out what to do, why you do it, and what works in this world.

People who feel they know God, and know they also need principles, often go to their religious organization (church) for advice. They blend feeling with reason by going to the storehouse of reason in their church. I have nothing against this way. I get a lot from religious writing. But often the church is not enough. Churches are not always right. Sometimes we need more even than an old church with a good record. I cast my net widely and I ask God's help in finding right principles wherever I can, including Jesus, other prophets, philosophers, and artists. The fact that I rely on Jesus so much does not mean I find principles in a particular Christian Church or the general Christian Church. My reliance on Jesus partly reflects that I was born into the Christian tradition but more so it reflects the end result of long search and sifting.

If you want to know God etc, or you might be getting to know God etc, here is not the place for me to give much advice. I hope to write apart from this book. Here are a few words: At first, stay away from people who are strong for or against God etc. American culture either extols “God etc. fearers” or makes fun of them; and so you have to search despite the culture rather than with its help. Don't take the attitude of neutral jaded normal people who don't really know God etc. much. Don't suppress the feeling. You can blend feeling and reason, and should. If your friends are true, they won't make fun of you for seeking. Check out groups such as Christian churches, New Agers, Taoists, etc. but don't get “socialized” into a group for at least a year. A role model is good

but modern role models of all kinds have been so polluted by wrong ideologies that likely you have to avoid obvious role models. Find simple decent good people who act well, as if they know God etc, but they don't make a big deal of it. Our times devalue simple decent good people but they are still around. They appear in all groups. Don't hold against them their lack of worldly success or strong worldly success. Read from many sources. Novels, poems, history, and even social science can work about as well as religious material. Don't confuse knowing God with social action, ecological action, rebellion, or right wing backlash. Don't confuse knowing God with any conservative ideology, liberal ideology, political creed, or art movement. Don't confuse God and country. Don't be a bad zealot. Again: Your task is only starting. Soon you have to figure out what to do, why you do it, and what works in this world.

Please keep this section in mind for later chapters on "waking up". We need something concrete to wake up to beyond the glorious feeling of knowing God etc. We need to wake up to the right things, especially right acts and right principles.

Some Basic Criteria for a Good Religion and Good Principles.

A religion should make sense to almost everybody even if not everybody agrees. The religion should rest on basic principles. The principles have to follow some criteria.

(1) The principles should be clear and simple. Almost everybody should be able to see the basic principles.

(2) The principles should go along with basic decency and common sense.

(3) The principles should inspire, that is, they should be somewhat unrealistic and idealistic, or they would not be principles. They should show us a better world.

(3) Yet the principles should seem reasonable, both in the sense that they are moderate and in the sense that we can discuss them and their applications.

(4) The principles should give the basis for realistic acts even if not fully realizable perfect acts. People should be able to act in the real world toward the principles according to their situations as best as they can.

(5) We should see how to combine principles with practicality, without undermining the principles, even if we cannot fully meet the principles.

(6) The principles should support specific ideas about acting well in this world, and should support concrete acts toward good goals, even if the goals cannot be fully met. For example: making the world better by writing clear simple math books, by supporting good schools, supporting modern democracy through finding the facts about corporate welfare and personal welfare, by building houses for the poor with your own hands or your own money, or fighting evil. Principles should not merely say "believe to go to heaven" or "believe as we do". Principles should not support a pyramid scheme of "All you have to do is become one of us".

(7) The principles should support good institutions and government.

(8) The principles should be accessible to normal people. Nearly all people should be able to see the principles well enough, and be able to act well enough on the basis of the principles - even people who are not geniuses, saints, mystics, or half-crazy zealots.

(9) The principles should let us feel we are a part of something bigger than us and we can get along with the something bigger.

(10) At the same time, the principles should lead us to feel that, even though there is something bigger than me, I still matter as an individual, all individuals matter, and most of the specific bits of the world matter.

(11) The principles should never lead people to act badly such as to oppress neighbors or commit terrorism.

You should not have to be unusually smart to get the ideas of a religion or to act on the basis of its ideas. Feeling part of something bigger than yourself should not also make you feel tiny and worth little, and should not leave you open to bad ideas and people. Feeling part of something bigger than yourself should not make you feel gigantic and better than everybody; it should not make you the hero of your own system. Religion should not require a complicated vast system in which you fumble through as an obscure part or hope to blaze through in glory. You do not have to understand how the world works on the highest level to see the ideas and what you should do. You have to act well although you cannot be perfect. You do not have to be a saint to feel you are smart enough and basically good enough. Using the basic principles, you should be able to evaluate other ideas, and reject bad ideas - no matter how clever. You should be able to reject bad visions, bad systems, and bad instances of the "Word of God" when they disagree with the basic principles of a good religion, simple decency, and common sense. If you are smart and can see better than other people, then you should use your talent to explain to other people.

These criteria are why I follow the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and with Western ideas of citizenship and good government. They meet the criteria. With them, we all can imagine a better world even if we are not sure how to get there. We all know well enough what is going on, and have a pretty good idea what to do. We all can do something unless we are in a terrible situation. We all can act well enough to feel good about meeting God even if we are not perfect and do not expect to live forever on easy street. Some of us also have a good intellectual grasp of what is going on. You can still know what to do, and do it, even if you cannot intellectualize. We can feel linked to something bigger than us but there is no big system of which we are only an insignificant ignorant part.

It is not always clear what to do but that does not mean we need a complicated difficult obscure religion. The problems with acting on the basis of Jesus' teachings come because the real world is complicated. People make it worse. This does not change the fact that we need principles, the ideas have to serve as the basis for real action in the real world, the ideas have to be along the

lines of what Jesus taught and Western values, have to support modern democracy, and, on the basis of the principles, people can feel they tried hard and acted well enough.

Formal Christianity weaves a big obscure mystic authoritarian system. It gives people confidence only through magic texts, priests, a formal church, and its odd belief system. Judaism and Islam, and often Christianity, rely too much on the arbitrary word of God as explained by people that are often confused and self-interested. Buddhism and Hinduism weave obscure big systems in which only super smart mystics can succeed.

To repeat: All religions can be interpreted to support the key good principles that I offer here and to serve as the basis for modern plural democracy. Many believers are doing that now with their religions. But no other religion came to the basic principles and provided the support as naturally as did the teachings of Jesus mixed with Western ideas of citizenship and government.

Facing God after You Die.

You face God after you die. I don't know for sure what happens then. He talks with you about you and your life. He decides what to do with you next. While alive, if you have a good will and an open mind, and you actively try to help, don't worry. People with the best religious sensibility worry least about the afterlife.

If you want to minimize issues with God after you die, then face what you can face while still alive, and make any amends that you can make while still alive. Admit bad deeds now. Admit them to yourself and in prayer even if you cannot go to the people that you harmed. Admit what good you could have done but did not do. Then try to do some of it while you still have time. If your religion has "confession", then go to confession.

You cannot bargain with God after you die. What he says goes. His "take" on the situation is the only "take" on the situation.

After most people face God, they just disappear like a bubble bursting. Some people who vanish are uninteresting to God. Some people who vanish have just been around a long while and it is time to disappear. I don't believe God promised us eternity; I don't think we can compel him to give us eternity; and I don't think we should try.

God keeps some people around after death for a while. I am not sure why he keeps some people but not others, and I am not sure what happens to people that he keeps. Some might be reborn a few times but not indefinitely. Some people might reside in a place like heaven for a while to rest - but I doubt that heaven is an important alternative, so don't count on it.

You are not rewarded or punished strictly according to your good and bad deeds. If we were, we would all be in trouble. God is merciful. He does not forgive everything, and he does not forgive repeated bad deeds with a bad will. For some people, the best reward is to look back on Earth to see the good results of your deeds, as in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life". For most people, the

worst punishment is to look back to see the bad results of your deeds. I would punish bad people quite severely; I would send bad people to Hell; but, fortunately, I am not God.

I doubt most people are reborn. If you are reborn, you are not reborn strictly according to merits and demerits as in the theory of karma. You are not reborn according to some poetic justice system of karma either.

I doubt that everybody is reborn as often as needed to finally become a good person, to be saved eternally. I disbelieve universal salvation.

You can't affect what God will do with you by worrying about it. God makes up his mind, and that is that. You have to trust God. Worrying is less effective than using your talents here on Earth as well as you can. If you must worry, and most of us must, then use worry to spur your efforts.

Although God likes good people and dislikes bad people, be good for its own sake rather than to please God. You cannot make God treat you well after you die by being extra good while you are alive if that is why you do it. Forget distractions such as salvation, works, justification, heaven, hell, a cosmic ledger of deeds, karma, and rebirth. Just act well according to your better nature.

Some Contradictions.

First, it is a little contradictory, on the one hand, to "threaten" people with meeting God after they die and, on the other hand, to tell them not to think about the afterlife but to live life here as best they can and to do good for its own sake. Do the right thing for the right reasons. On the one hand, people must reckon with God after they die, while, on the other hand, they can do nothing to make sure what God does with them other than what they should do anyway. Do the good thing because it is the good thing. Why? Because God wants you to do it that way. Huh?

Second, you should act well because it is good, and not worry about God. So, logically, if you act well because it is good, then you don't need to think about God. In fact, the idea of God might get in the way of acting well. If you act well because you fear God or want a reward such as Heaven or Salvation, then you act poorly. Likely, you will "screw up". You more likely act well and will do well with God if you can forget about God sometimes.

Third, on the one hand, God loves you, yet, on the other hand, after you die, you might disappear. People who do some good are about as likely to disappear as people who don't do much good or as the people who do some bad. There seems little point to doing good.

I don't feel the urgency of these contradictions but I do see how other people can feel it. The best response I can give is:

Life is a gift of love. The guidance that we get from the prophets is a gift of love. Be happy for what you do get rather than angry and afraid at what you don't get. Use your time to live well and usefully; that is reward in itself. It is natural to "rage against the dying of the light" but rage won't do you any good, and, if rage dominates your life, your life is a waste. You had your time, you

used it as you did, and, when you die, you face up to what you did and who you are. It is not a punishment to be let go after death. It is like an eagle catching a fish and feeding it to his-her chicks, a tree dying and decomposing into the forest that gave it birth, night giving in to day so day can give in to night, the hoot of an owl fading into dusk, or the hoot of a train fading into the dusk. Sooner or later, all of us fade away completely.

It is logically correct that, if we do good for the sake of good, then we don't need to refer to God. That is what atheists say. I still think the idea of God is a good idea, is correct, and useful. If we take morality seriously, then we necessarily open the door to reasonable belief in God and to reasonable guesses about what God wants. It is very hard to be fully moral without also thinking about God. If you wish to prohibit fair belief in God, then you must also give up morality. I choose God and morality, and my choice is reasonable. See the chapter on atheism.

The situation is like an athlete who has trained under a strong coach for the Olympics and is now doing what he-she trained to do. It is like a classical musician who trained under a great teacher and is now performing at Carnegie Hall. It is like a young martial artist who trained under a great teacher and is now in the most important tournament of his-her life, like the movies "Karate Kid" and "Kung Fu Kid". The performance will not be perfect but that is not expected. The teacher will assess the student afterwards but that is not the only thing that counts. The performance counts right now as much as the evaluation after, even when the evaluation is from a master. If you worry about the evaluation later, you will screw up what you do now when you need to do it best. You can look forward to the evaluation not only to hear what you could have done better but to hear what you did right, for improvement, and to know how hard you tried. In the end, sooner or later, every athlete and performer has to give up the game.

One More Contradiction: Simple Decency versus System.

On the one hand, I say a simple act of decency is better than actions stemming from systems. It is better simply to give food to a hungry person than to "give to one of the less fortunate children of God so that you become a virtuous justified saved person and surely go to heaven". On the other hand, intuition is not enough, and we need principles. Yet principles imply a system.

Systems are good and bad. Americans are more sensitive to the bad that comes of systems than the good that comes of systems, and I am American in this way. "Do unto others" and "applies equally to everybody" are simple to see but have spawned thousands of law books and millions of sermons, that is, have spawned systems, and the systems undermine the original good message. Too many simple decent people have been lost in theology and have failed to do the good they might have done. The movie "High Noon" is built around a simple act of decency, a very hard act, by a woman, an act that transcends system.

Once upon a time, Americans thought it was simple decency to have slaves and treat them well; this error was supported by a system; and this mistake also was a perversion of simple decency regardless of system. Many people think it is simply decent to fight when they feel "dissed" ("disrespected"); this mistake is part of a cultural system; and this mistake too is a perversion of simple decency. It is easy for bad people to fool good people with appeals to mistaken decency,

especially if bad people have an impressive system for support. Appeals to systematic “decency” led to rounding up Jews in Germany and Russia and to beating up gay people in America. Any theory invites a system and so invites perversion of decency and opens the door for glib people to “con” simple decent people.

We stray when we trust in systems more than in simple decency but we also stray when we think we personally are fountains of pure decency and we don’t need any help, especially not from a system or priest of a system. Self-styled rebels, people who enjoy moral relativity, extol human flaws in themselves and others, and think heroes must have mixed moral character – James Dean, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Han Solo - think of themselves, rebels, and heroes as fountains of decency not despite flaws but because of flaws. Flaws become the source of decency rather than a way to learn about it. In fact, often the best friend of simple decency in its fight against bad systems is a good system and its representatives.

Simple decent people need a framework so they can defend themselves against bad people and against their own mistakes. The best antidote to getting upset over insults is to see people in the right context and to have a solid background for your morality. To stop feeling bad about maybe getting “dissed”, feel good about yourself and your deeds. Get feedback from honest teachers and good decent people. Morality works best when anchored in sensible religion. The best cure for prejudice about any religion, morality, race, gender, age, etc. is a good grasp of (the system of) democracy. The best cures for a bad act born in a bad system are, first, a good decent act; second, principles; third, a good decent system; and, fourth, good representatives of the good system. While there were certainly bad people in Christian Churches, and the Church as a whole has some poor doctrines, the Church as a whole has worked well as a system.

When you feel your situation is wrong, and you are doing wrong, then stop. Try to do the simple decent good thing instead. Then think about what kind of system that sort of simple good decent act belongs in. Think how your system perverted good simple decency, and why people go along with perversion. Seek principles and a system that best support your good simple decent act. Make sure that your system does not have problems of its own, such as glib answers to abortion, choice, welfare, race, war, gender, sexual activity, drugs, and terrorism. Make sure good acts and good principles fit into the system. Try the system for a while, and make up your own mind. Don’t look down on other people if they find another system but do criticize them if their systems and acts are bad. This book carries out this plan.

I don’t know how to resolve contradiction between spontaneity and system at the level of theory because any theory leads to a system. All I can say is that most people can resolve this issue, in practice, if they take their time and get help from people, traditions, and experience. Learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others. You can’t be perfect, and God does not expect you to be. When you waiver, waiver on the side of simple decency and goodness.

Misleading Religious Goals.

Akin to burying good acts in a bad system is burying good acts in misleading religious goals. God wants us to do the right thing for the right reasons. Doing the right thing for wrong reasons is not

as bad as simply doing bad but still not what God wants. Two wrong ideas vex me even when they lead to good acts. One idea is common in deistic religions such as Christianity and Islam while the other idea is common in dharma-based religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism; but versions of both are in all religions and are in professions such as academia and the law.

In the first error, people do good things to be saved. I am not arguing about “faith versus works”; I don’t care about that. This issue is more basic. If we do good things for a reward, even one as apparently important as salvation, then we miss the mark, we sin in an important way. The best antidote to this misleading attitude is not to think of salvation at all even though salvation seems most important. Thinking about what you need to do to be saved is a kind of selfishness, and that selfishness blocks clear thinking (it would block salvation if salvation were most important). Just act well and salvation will take care of itself. Don’t think about “what must I do to be saved?” Think “what can I do to be really useful?” Don’t think about getting God to save you but instead think about merely serving God as best you can and letting the chips fall. If you believe in God and trust God, then you don’t have to worry about what you have to do to be saved, and you can merely do as God advises. To serve God by doing the right things for the right reasons, and to enjoy his world, is as much of salvation as we can ever hope for. There is no higher salvation. I say this point several times in different ways.

The usual form of this error is not to seek salvation directly but indirectly through justification, and to seek justification through widely-praised semi-heroic acts, such as confessing Jesus, even when your version of your religion explicitly denies that people can earn justification and so earn salvation, and even when your version explicitly teaches that justification and salvation come only through God’s Grace. People do good deeds really so they can feel good about themselves and stand out. This error leads people to crusade against abortion or fight capitalism when they don’t know much about the deep real issues. It leads people to pick fault with the police while ignoring attitudes that make crime rampant in their own group. It leads people to go on shooting sprees. It leads academics to seek fame so they can be justified and saved in their arena.

In the second error, people do good deeds to be a person who is superior, good, saved, saintly, adept, spiritual, aware, mindful, enlightened, cosmic, almost-perfect, getting perfect, educated, artistic, a leader, cool, or many other wrong images of what superior is all about. Almost always, people seek this position in a system that validates the position and seeking. Doing those things makes you a superior person in that system. Instead, in reality, it leads to looking down on other people and nature, and to vanity. Doing good things can help shape our nature and can change us for the better. But acting well does not change us into a superior being. Don’t do good things because they make you better or more perfect; do them because they are good. If they also help make you a better person, that result is “gravy”, and “better” is not “superior”. The best people don’t worry about their rank on a spiritual scale. They simply do good things; they simply do what is needed and what is in their capacity.

As humans, we cannot completely get rid of the needs for justification, salvation, and superiority. We cannot be perfect. We cannot control our minds that way. That is part of the point that I am making. But we can see when we err in these ways, and we can correct ourselves. We can back off and try something better for a while.

Be Sensible.

God likes people to “think outside the box” and to overcome their limitations; but God is not crazy. God does not expect you to do more than you can, or to try so hard that you hurt yourself, fail to do any good, and fail to enjoy the world. God does not want you to bother people by forcing your goodness on them so you can feel better about yourself. If you are physically sick, mentally sick, in prison, in an abusive relation, live in a tyranny, or otherwise hurt, God knows your limitations, and God expects you to work within them. If you are mentally ill, then God knows you have to heal yourself before you can help other people. Healing yourself makes the world better. Some people are not suited to working hard to make a better world, it would destroy them to force them, and it would diminish the world to hurt them. Some people are temperamentally unsuited to the stereotypical call of “God’s social work”. The world is better off if “free spirits” act freely, and they enjoy the world. The world is better off if mystics enjoy the world and commune with God, as long as mystics don’t try to force others to do the same, or think they are better. The world is better off if monks meditate. Some artists both can do their own art and can work to make the world better in other ways too. Some artists only can do their art; and the world is better off when they stick to that. Be reasonable. God is more reasonable than you are.

You can work hard to make the world better through your occupation, as do some politicians, civil servants, teachers, police officers, professors, etc. I think members of “Doctors without Borders (Frontiers)” succeed at both. But don’t fool yourself about this. If your work becomes just work, if you make a lot of money, then you can still help people through your work, but likely that is not the “more” that you know you really should do. As an office holder, if your primary job in office is to get re-elected, you aren’t using your office to make the world better. You are better off giving up your office.

If you live where the government is bad, then working to make your government better is working to make the world better. In some cases, you have to overthrow the regime, as in the American Revolution. If you can’t work to make the government better or to overthrow the present regime, God knows that. I don’t know what God thinks about revolution in general.

In a modern democracy where the government is tolerably good already, you have to work hard to be a good citizen in addition to working hard to make a better world. Working hard to be a good citizen does not count toward working hard to make a better world. Not working hard to be a good citizen does count against you. Working hard to be a good citizen is more than just voting for your party. It means working to understand issues, and voting for the greater good even when the greater good is not in your immediate interests. Not enough people do this. After you are a good citizen already, then you can work hard to make the world better too. See the next chapter on my political standards.

Here is an example of working hard to make the world better by making it more interesting, and it shows that God is sensible: the story of “Le Jongleur de Notre Dame”, or “The Juggler of Notre Dame”. In Paris, a juggler wishes to please God but does not know how. So he goes into the cathedral of Notre Dame (“Our Lady”) where he juggles in front of the statue of Our Lady until he

faints. The statue comes to life, dries his brow, and comforts him. Rather than juggle in front of a statue in a cathedral, I prefer that the juggler give a free performance for everybody in front of the cathedral, dedicate the show to God, juggle until he collapses, then someone carries him into the cathedral, where the statue comes to life to comfort him. But my mind is corrupted by the populist democratic dogma of our age. To their credit, Hinduism and Buddhism have the same sensibility as in this story; but they undermine good instincts with elaborate theology about being a superior entity in a system.

Meeting God Before You Die.

Mystics do not fully meet God while still alive, merge with God, or know they have been one with God all along. I do not doubt their sincerity, their experience, or that they have important things to say. Sometimes they are misled by the power of their experience. Even though they do not know God fully, mystics do have beautiful and interesting ideas, and true mystics rarely purposely mislead other people. If you have a mystic temper, go ahead with it, but do not let it mislead you or cause you to mislead others. If you like to learn from mystics, and you feel it brings you close to God, go ahead as well. Meditate, read books, read poetry, fast, or dance. Don't forget that you have to do something when you are not "in the clouds", and, for that, you need something like this book.

You can partially meet with God before you die. You do not have to be perfect to meet God while still alive. Many people partially meet God in small ways, so the experience does not have to be overwhelming. Every prayer is a partial meeting with God. Every time you help somebody, enjoy life, you meet god. As Jesus said, every time you help any small person or animal, you do it for Jesus – which is the same as doing it for God in this case. Every time you don't help a person or animal, you deny Jesus and God. If your own experience is overwhelming, then go along with it, and try to make some good come of it. Don't demand that other people go through the same big experience.

If you have done bad things, and you want to lessen the impact when you meet God, it is natural to repent, and to talk with God about the issues. It is natural to try to meet God a bit beforehand while still here alive. While this motive is not pure, if it leads to good results, I can't say much bad about it. Understand that you might start out with this motive but end up with other motives, other goals, and other tasks. Those might be even better but a lot harder.

Artists and other creative people do not necessarily meet with God here just because they are creative. Not all ecstasy is a partial meeting with God. Such ideas about the privileged status of art and artists are misleading modern stances. I don't know which acts of creation and ecstasies count as meeting God before you die. I advise not trying to be creative or to reach ecstasy so as to be in a state of grace and to be near God. If you have some talent, then use it, and don't try to get more out of it than it is.

Prayer.

Try to communicate directly with God. In standard terms, try to pray. You do not have to use formal prayers – the only one I ever remember is the “Lord’s Prayer“, or “Our Father who lives in heaven...” I recommend that you do not use formal prayers. Just talk with God. Don’t expect to hear voices back. You can do it anytime, for as short or long as you wish. You can do it sitting, standing, or lying down. If you can only recite formal prayers, do that. If you can’t talk with God, don’t worry. Just act well. If you can’t talk with God now, you might do it later. Even if you never are able to do it, don’t worry. Just act well. If it is easier to talk to Jesus, then talk to Jesus. You can pray for other people, your country, whole groups, nature, and the world.

The Middle Path of Strenuous Focused Effort between Apathy and Bad Zealotry.

The phrase “the middle path” is from Buddhism. The phrase “strenuous focused effort” is from Islam and is my understanding of the true meaning of “jihad”. The underlying idea of “walking the correct middle path of passionate commitment to goodness” is from Jesus and from other good thinkers too. Jihad is the appropriate middle path when we commit to doing good acts in a good cause. Jihad is not usually religious war. It is like commitment to Jewish “mitzvah”.

On the one hand, without committed passion, without strenuous focused effort, we would not have romantic love, the American Revolution, Arab Spring, monotheism, gay rights, the women’s movement, atheism, most science, most engineering, and most business. On the other hand, in the Christian story, zealotry killed Jesus. Zealotry leads to hatred, group versus group, killing, bigotry, and much evil. In the modern world, people adopt zealotry less from belief in the cause but more to feel good about themselves. Even when the cause is good, zealots ruin it, as when zealots ruin pro-choice, anti-abortion, protecting nature, and the free market.

We need the middle path of committed strenuous focused effort. We cannot lapse into apathy or leap into self-serving zealotry. We have to combine reason and passion. That might seem like a contradiction but it is not. People do it all the time. If you don’t do that, you cannot be a good artist, athlete, or business person. For a version that is not silly, see the opening scenes of the Bruce Lee movie “Enter the Dragon”. At least, we have to think about the deep real problems of the world, our country, our group, and our family. We have to think what can be done about deep real problems and what cannot. We have to think about what we can do to make the world better even if we cannot act directly to solve the worst problems. We have to think about how best to use our talents and efforts. If there already is a group working on these causes in these ways, we can think about joining the group. If it slides into zealotry, then leave it. Jesus invited people to do this when he invited them to join the Kingdom of God. People do this all the time. We just need some balance so we can do it properly without zealotry.

PART 4: Jesus and the West.

Jesus as Origin Point.

The good modern way of life, including science and democracy, came from the West out of fusing Western ideas with the teachings of Jesus and with practicality. Although similar ideas appear in many religions, in their modern form, around the world, they come almost entirely from Jesus.

Jesus made these ideas important. He made them into a way of life. He was unique in making them into a way of life and in living it fully. He was unique in changing the world. Without Jesus and his movement, these points would not be important. At best, they might be silly ideals among privileged elites. They would not be the basis for democracy, good government, good citizenship, economic development, the useful way of life that is the key to a good state, and good reformers. We would not have the way of life that flowers into Christmas. We should give Jesus his due. I do not denigrate other religions but I cannot overlook the value of Jesus.

Personal Note.

This story might help. I was raised Greek Orthodox but did not go to church often. When I was about thirteen, I read the Roman Catholic version of the whole Bible all the way straight through. When I was about nineteen, I read the “New English Bible” straight through, including Apocrypha. I have since done the same a few more times, in various translations. Reading the Tanakh (Old Testament) first, I deeply felt that there is only one God, God is moral, and we should not stray into any idolatry. To even think God is not one is bad. When I got to the New Testament, I was confused and scared. I knew of the idea that Jesus is God from Church teachings but it clearly contradicted what the Tanakh said. I inclined to the Tanakh. The New Testament view of Jesus seemed like another Golden Calf. Rather than see Jesus as a person and assess his ideas, Christians turned him into a cosmic principle like an avatar in Hinduism, and so they too often overlook his message. Jesus was the best and smartest person I ever read, or read about, different from anybody; and his message is better than any other message; but that didn't make him God. I put the issue inside to cook. Eventually I had to face Jesus, including the claim that he is God. I learned that the Old and New Testaments were not literally what God said or Jesus said. I have not been able fully to reconcile the Tanakh and New Testament views. I have been able to decide what to do, and I have learned to trust God and Jesus.

Message of Jesus.

Most of the points given above can be traced back to Jesus. Some of Jesus' important ideas that I want to stress are below. If you need facts about Hebrews, Israel, Jews, Jesus, religions of the Middle East, Classic World, early followers of Jesus, or early Church, see the Bibliography here or in my book “Jesus for Most People”. Most points of Jesus' message already were in Judaism and many can be found in other religions. His message is unique not so much in specific points but in commitment, clarity of vision, importance of acting from the heart rather than any ideology, and using the ideas as the basis for a way of life. I do not explain how Jesus came from Judaism, how similar he was to Judaism, or how he differed. Jesus teaches more than I say here. It is not hard to read all of the Gospels; it can be done in a few hours.

1. The Golden Rule: do for other people as you would have them do for you. Act pro-activity. Pay it forward. The philosophical version of the Golden Rule is “applies equally to everybody” and “treat everybody as a person regardless of wealth etc”.

2. The Kingdom of God. See below.

3. God loves us each in particular as individuals. God loves you.
4. We should love other people like God loves us, as much as we can.
5. Trust God, other people, and ourselves. Usually we can do what we need to do if we let go of fear and if we trust. Usually we get what we need to get if we let go of fear and if we trust.
6. Mercy. Show forgiveness with few requirements.
7. The importance of intentions. Here is where we see an emphasis on the spirit of the Law.
8. Treat everybody as a person regardless of wealth, power, social status, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, etc.
9. Include as many people as possible. Include sinners and other marginalized people. This is an intrinsic part of “applies equally to everybody”, the Golden Rule, and “treat everybody as a person regardless”.
10. Act on the basis of ability, to the full extent of ability. Try hard. You cannot do more than that. God expects more from people with greater ability, wealth, and power.
11. There is no magic ritual, formula, set of rules, or set of laws to establish and maintain a relation with God. We must respect laws but we have to trust God more.
12. Non-violence, with few exceptions.
13. Allow other people to hurt us rather than that we should hurt them, even to defend ourselves, our family, what is right, or any property. We should trust God to advance the cause of right if we cannot do it ourselves other than through violence.
14. You should be willing to sacrifice a little bit so that the common good for everybody benefits even more. If you sacrifice a little bit in this way now, you are likely to receive even more in return later as a result of society and life becoming better. But even if you do not, be willing to give up a little for the common good.
15. God is bigger than any ideology, program, law, or theology. God is bigger than evil. God is even bigger than Jesus.
16. God invites you to join the world and to enjoy it if you can. Enjoy it in your own way but do not hurt other people. Understanding that there is a God and he cares about you can be a great joy. Even when we are in distress such as when sick or in prison, we can sometimes take comfort from knowing that God cares about us and can feel joy in the world. If you cannot join and enjoy because your own distress is too much, God still understands and still cares.

17. Individual people are precious. Your integrity as an individual person is the most precious part about you, more precious to you than all the world. Following the above points helps you to maintain your integrity. Failing in any of the above points can undermine your integrity. You can call your individual integrity your “soul”; but Jesus probably did not think of individual integrity, and even of the soul, in the same ways that the modern Christian term “soul” conveys.

18. If you understand all of Jesus’ the message, then sometimes you can cut through silliness, personal problems, ill will, clinging, setbacks, and handicaps of yourself and the world to a sudden insight.

I learned Jesus’ message more indirectly from his parables and actions than directly from his declarative teachings.

I don’t know if people behave better when they act along the lines I listed or when they do what they think they should do as part of worshipping a god, that is, Jesus. I know I do better when I follow simple truth without folderol, when I act according to what I set out here. I suspect many readers of this book are like me. I suspect people who stress the worship of Jesus as God are likely to waste a lot of energy doing that instead of following his message.

If Jesus, as God or demigod, came back tomorrow to set things right, and he was really angry at me for not worshipping him as God, but still he did right by other good decent people who did the right thing as well as they could, then I would be happy with that result. It doesn’t matter what happens to me as long as God does right by good people, even if Jesus is God, and even if he gets angry at me. The satisfaction of knowing that Jesus did well by good people would more than make up for what happened to me. No true good God could do anything else but be good to good people. Feeling this way is enough to lead me to act right by what I think is truth rather than by what awes me, scares me, or tempts me, from somebody else’s theology.

The Kingdom of God.

Jesus intended some ideas differently than his immediate followers understood him, as the early Church understood him, as standard Christianity understands him now, and as modern people understand him. We have to try to see as Jesus did. We have to go along with him as much as we can. If we disagree with him, we have to accept that problem, and make of the total situation what we can.

Jesus understood this by the “Kingdom of God”:

-Israel would be free of political control by any other state or ethnic group. Israel would not necessarily dominate other nations but no other nation could dominate Israel, and God would aid Israel in case of any conflict.

-God would run Israel. Israel had two governing authorities (other than the Romans), which were not entirely distinct: the Temple priests and the aristocrats. Likely God would run Israel through the Temple priests with the cooperation of the aristocrats.

-Other nations would look up to Israel for moral, religious, and political guidance. Other nations would acknowledge God as the one god, and acknowledge the special relation of God with Israel. Other nations would not feel lessened by being under the dominion of God and the leadership of Israel but would be glad.

-War would end, at least as concerns Israel but probably everywhere.

-Social injustice would end. Some wealth and power differences would continue but no person would be injured by them. Everyone would have a chance. Nobody would fall into hardship through the conniving of another.

-Most disease and poverty would end.

-The Devil would be defeated. The main sign of the defeat would be the end of social injustice. If social injustice persists, the Devil is not yet defeated.

-it is not clear if Jesus expected a resurrection of prominent Jews of the past such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah, and/or a general resurrection of all Jews, or no resurrection. He did not make a point of it.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected himself to be resurrected in case he should die before the Kingdom came fully, but probably he did.

-People would not die anymore.

-People would be transformed to be more spiritual than they are now but not to lose their physical bodies entirely.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected people to continue to feel sexual desire, get married, and have children. I think not.

-People, especially Jews, would change their thinking and behavior to accord with the new way of life of the Kingdom. They would change in accord with Jesus' message as above. This is the most important point about the Kingdom.

-Jesus expected to be the major instrument by which God would start the Kingdom, and he expected to play a major role. He did not expect to be King but he probably expected to be the major prophet speaking to the Temple priests.

-Anybody who followed Jesus and acted as if the Kingdom were here would already be in the Kingdom and would be like Jesus as an instrument that brought in the Kingdom. Followers would change their behavior to be as if they were already in the Kingdom. It is not clear if their bodies would change before the full coming of the Kingdom. Followers both already lived in the Kingdom and brought it in for other people. This is the second most important point.

-All Jews would participate simply by being Jews. It is not possible that any Jew would see the changes and not wish to participate fully as a good Jew.

-The Kingdom was primarily for Jews. All of Jesus' original followers were Jews. Non-Jews could participate as much as they accepted God and the leadership of Israel. They did not have to convert to Judaism, but, if not, some benefits were not available, such as close communication with God through Temple priests. I am not sure what all benefits were available or not available to non-Jews. Non-Jews could fully belong by converting to Judaism.

-If any non-Jew did not fully accept all changes, he-she would be excluded. It is not clear what exclusion meant but probably it meant social ostracism, isolation from God as had happened to King David, and then death without possibility of resurrection.

-There was no Hell in the Christian sense.

Beneficial Early Church Modifications of the Message of Jesus.

If you know traditional orthodox Christian doctrine, note how the above differs. Note differences from popular ideas of Jesus. Most Christians wrongly take the message of Jesus to be: if you believe in Jesus as God strongly enough and worship him through the Church diligently enough, then, after you die, you will go to heaven to be with Jesus and your loved ones forever. I do not explain all the points of difference.

Jesus died because the Roman and Jewish authorities became annoyed and wanted to prevent any unrest. They killed Jesus about the year 35 in the Common Era (CE or AD). Jesus' followers were frightened and confused. They had to stop all talk of a political-religious kingdom and they had to explain why Jesus died before the kingdom of God came. Fairly quickly, non-Jews began to join the movement; fairly quickly, non-Jews outnumbered Jews; and then by about 100 CE, no Jews were in the movement and the entire movement was non-Jews.

Because the movement had to suppress talk of a political-religious kingdom, and because non-Jews became central, the movement re-interpreted the kingdom to mean an organization focused on faith and non-political behavior, and the movement gave full membership benefits to non-Jews without requiring conversion. At first, the movement redefined benefits to mean resurrection and eternal life. When resurrection did not happen, for most people the Church eventually redefined the benefits as going to heaven to be with Jesus.

Because the early Church redefined the movement, the scope of membership, and the benefits, we have ideal Christianity: moral, inclusive, doing good, and pro-active. We have the idea of a community of good awakened people actively working toward a better world, loving fellow people and nature as much as they can. We have the idea that people who feel this way already are in a good state, and that this community will be able to change the world. The message of Jesus now applies to all people, and aims to build a better world rather to restore Israel and make Israel pre-eminent.

The message of Jesus, augmented by the Church, carried important Jewish ideas about social justice, the individual person, one God, the importance of law and morality, and nature. Jesus' ideas combined with Western science, ideas about government, and about citizenship, to make the great Western civilization that we inherited. His ideas eventually spread around the world. His message is the morality we see in much of modern art and popular culture. It dominates TV and movies. It lies behind the action of good political activists even when they say they are not religious. It is the ideal of citizenship that most people around the world work for. It is the idea of "paying it forward" and of being pro-active for good. It leads to hospitals, schools, belief in natural laws, belief in the rule of law, disaster help, medical research, sustainable development, and working to be good stewards of nature. It leads to the "Christmas spirit", good fellowship, and most of the best that we feel toward each other and the world.

By about the year 100, Jesus' movement had become the Church and Jesus had become God for Church members. In modern times, people have come back to the idea of a community and have dropped the ideas of a Church and that Jesus is God. Even if they don't belong to a formal church, people who get Jesus' message still form a kind of community, work for a better world, and try to love fellow people and nature. Getting the message makes you a part of the kingdom and means that you are helping to bring in the kingdom for the whole planet.

I think Jesus would approve of changes such as including everybody. Whether he would approve is not as important to me as that his message forms the basis of a great message, great work, and a great community, that was not available before him and his movement.

The Kingdom as the Association of Godly Good Guys.

When the Kingdom did not work out as Jesus originally wished, the early Church redefined the Kingdom to be the association of people who believed correctly and who acted accordingly. In effect, the Church redefined the Kingdom to be the Church because only people who were in the Church could believe correctly and act rightly. After the first Church split, each separate Church has continued with that idea, with itself as the Kingdom.

People who do not belong to any particular Church but think of themselves as following Jesus or as doing the work of God think pretty much the same way. To them, the Kingdom of God is made up of good people who try to do the work of God and who act as God wishes them to act. These people are not necessarily insipid "goody two shoes". They work in slums or fight to clear land mines.

Even good-hearted good-minded on-the-mark active people tend to think as Churches do, partly out of frustration with how obnoxious people can be. They think of the Kingdom as made up only of people who "get it" as they do and act accordingly. They exclude from the Kingdom people who don't get it as they do and who do not act accordingly. Sometimes they exclude people from rival activist do-gooder groups and rival churches, exclude people who just will not get it and start acting better, and people who are obnoxious.

It is hard to fault people for thinking of the Kingdom in these terms. It is perfectly natural. I do it myself although I recognize it as a fault and try to stop it. In this view: the Kingdom includes, and is limited to, only people who see Jesus and see God as I do and who act accordingly. Out of my superior benevolence, I include people who receive help from me and are properly grateful. I can include people who half-way get my ideas and are basically decent but who can't make the final leap to fully embrace my ideas because of limited ability or worldly constraints.

While natural to think in these terms, it is still wrong. It rejects people, too often for bad reasons. It leads to narrow-minded "us versus them" thinking.

It is also wrong to think everybody automatically is in the Kingdom. Some people really are in, and some people really are out. This does not mean some people are saved and lost in old traditional Christian terms. I don't know how "in the Kingdom" aligns with "saved" or how "out of the Kingdom" aligns with "lost". Some people just do not get the ideas well enough. I don't know how to draw lines between the people who are in and the people who are not; and I don't worry about it too much. God makes that call. I try to enjoy people who get it, decent people, people who might not get it entirely but act well, enjoy people who make the world interesting, and deal with obnoxious people as best I can. It can still be useful to think of good people, decent people, and active people as making a Kingdom of God as long as we are not rigidly dogmatic about it.

Eventually the Kingdom of God shaped modern ideas of what a good state is and what good self-government is. Our modern ideas of democratic self-government are our version of the Kingdom of God on Earth as much as we can make it on Earth without direct intervention by God. If we did not have the idea of a good and just order from Jesus' idea of a Kingdom of God, we would never have had the ideas of a good and just state that lie behind Western ideas of citizenship and good government, and especially behind democracy and self-government. Just as all people are equal before God, so all are equal under the law and all people are equal in power as voting citizens. Just as the Kingdom of God aims at goodness, justice, and mercy rather than power and control, so do democratic self-governments. The ideas of John the Baptist about good civil servants, and the behavior of good Church officials after Jesus died, shaped our ideas about good civil servants of the people. The idea of the Kingdom of God can guide the behavior of people even in states that are not free or democratic, but it is the best preparation for when states do become free, self-governing, and democratic. I can think of no other religious stance that prepared us for good self-government in the same way as Jesus idea of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus as God or Not God.

Here, the question of Jesus as God naturally arises. The simple answer is: "Follow the message of Jesus. If you do that, you don't have to worry much about Jesus as God. If you don't do that, worshipping Jesus as God won't help you". I was surprised how much this stance annoyed many Christians. I did not mean to vex them. They insisted that I follow their idea of Jesus as God and that I could not follow Jesus unless I followed him as God. Because I was raised with the idea of Jesus as God, at first their demand frightened me. Eventually I got over the fear.

Accepting a Modified Message from a Mere Human.

Jesus' original ideas about the Kingdom were good, but flawed in some respects, such as that the Kingdom was coming soon, it would center on Israel, and non-Jews would not be full members. Jesus' original message about human behavior was excellent. The expanded message from the Church of full inclusion is better. The modified message takes great insights about human action and puts them into the better context of building a better world for everyone.

Is it odd to get religious insight from a limited imperfect human being? Is it odd to think normal human followers could modify the original message to make it even better? It is only odd if we demand religious leaders are God, superhuman, or perfect. Not only Christianity, but all religions make this mistake, even Islam and Buddhism. The real oddness lies not in looking for insight from normal human beings but in thinking that religious voices cannot say anything important unless they are perfect. The oddness lies not in thinking normal limited flawed humans can be improved on but in thinking they had to be fully perfect in the first place. I expect to get great insights from limited humans who do make some mistakes. I could not get insight from anywhere else unless God spoke to me directly, and he has not done that. We have to look at the ideas themselves. We have to pick out the good ideas from the bad ideas. We can add to the good ideas. Jesus' followers did that.

At the same time, be careful not to make the current trendy mistake of thinking that a message is correct only if the giver is flawed, and that a message is more correct if the giver is more flawed. Not every messenger is a flawed tortured artiste. Not all flawed tortured artistes know what they are talking about. Evaluate the message for its content regardless of source.

Jesus as Special, and Other Prophets.

Every religion wants its leader to be the greatest of all time, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and even Taoism. To do so is wrong. It would be easy for me to simply rail against the trend except I have said Jesus' ideas are best. So I have to reconcile two opposing trends of thought.

Jesus is not special because he was God, was the last and greatest of the prophets, or because his ideas were unique but because he had the right ideas and he made his ideas a positive way of life. His way of life led to the best social ideas and to the best societies in the history of people so far.

If you wish to say that your prophet is overall better than Jesus or any of the other prophets, then you need to give good reasons. You need to say why the ideas of your prophet are better than the ideas of Jesus or of other prophets. You can't simply say your guy is better because your guy is better. If you can say why the ideas of your prophet are better than the ideas of other prophets, then we don't need to argue about which person was better. We can appreciate which ideas are better, and we can leave the people out of it.

No Great Realizations Needed.

You do not have to go through a great experience, inside or out, to understand the basic ideas and Jesus' message. You do not have to go through a great experience to work hard to build a better world, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and apply all rules equally to other people as well as yourself. Many people do this without even knowing that they are doing anything special. As long as you do this, you are fine. I think people who do this as part of their character, without need for any justification, are quite lucky.

Some people do have an awakening in which they realize some connection to God, and then act well. If you have an experience, and it leads you to act well, then good; but it is not necessary. I hope, when you awaken, you come to see the ideas in this chapter, but I care less that you agree with me than that you act well. If you have an experience, don't try to force it on other people no matter how good it felt to you. Don't stupidly think you are better than other people. Don't think you know better than other people who already act well just because you had an experience. A lot of people have a great experience but then act no better or act even worse.

The Christian idea of "salvation" is misleading; see later. People mix together the ideas of having a big experience and salvation. What I said about having a big experience applies to salvation as well. You are not saved because you get the ideas in this chapter. You are not lost (damned) if you don't get the ideas in this chapter. You are not saved or damned due to any rigid set of ideas or beliefs. If worrying about being saved thwarts acting well, stop thinking about being saved and start acting well. What counts is acting well.

To act well, you likely need some intellectual understanding of working hard to make the world better, doing unto others, and "applies equally"; but you don't need a degree in theology. You can act quite well with only a basic understanding, and many people do. If you have this already, then go with that, and don't worry.

Christian Sacraments.

You don't have to participate in the Christian activities and rituals of baptism, communion, mass, confession, confirmation, marriage, and blessing at death; not all Churches recognize all these practices as sacraments. If these practices are part of your Christianity, then I recommend that you continue them. If you feel a close connection to Jesus, and join a church as a result, then I recommend that you follow its sacraments. See the movie "Tender Mercies" with Robert Duvall. If you are in another religion, then what you do is up to you.

Whoever you are, in whatever religion or church, or no religion, try to see the idea of sacraments as a mixture of the divine and material. See them as more than superstition and animism. The sacraments bridge the material and divine. They are a mix that is superior to the merely material or merely spiritual. They show why the mixture of material and divine that is human is superior to the merely spiritual that is angelic. They show why even death can be a blessing. They show why angels and (in other religions) gods might be jealous of us humans. Try to see the Christian view of sacraments. Sadly, you have to keep in mind that views of the sacraments differ between major divisions of Christianity and often keep apart groups of Christians.

Feeling Close to God.

You don't have to feel close to God to do the right thing and be useful. If you don't feel close to God, don't worry about it. Do what you can, including, if you can, praying. Just knowing you are trying will make you feel closer to God and feel better about yourself although it might not make you feel close to God in any stereotypical religious sense. Maybe things will change and you will feel close to God someday, but, if you still don't, still don't worry about it.

If you do feel close to God, then good for you, and you are lucky. Keep some things in mind. You are lucky rather than skilled. Most people feel close to God more for psychological reasons that have little to do with actually being close to God. I don't discredit the feeling but I do want to keep it in perspective. Feeling close to God is nothing to feel proud over. You are not more likely to be saved or to go to heaven, and people who don't feel close to God are not more likely to be lost or go to hell. If you feel overly proud about feeling close to God, you are in more danger than they are. It is alright to feel happy about it. Don't use it as a way to proselytize because you are much more likely to use it to assert your superiority. Saying "don't you want to feel close to God? It feels so good." is really a way to say "I am better than you are and I have a right to tell you how to think". That is obnoxious. Just because you feel close to God does not make you everybody's spiritual advisor. If people get curious, then simply explain it to them, and tell them how you think it happened that you feel close to God. Keep in mind the human desire to want to feel close to God, and so to think they feel close to God. Keep in mind how much other people can suffer, and try to alleviate their situation without making it an issue of being close to God or not.

Other Gods.

I recognize only one God. Traditionally in his relation to Israel, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this God was jealous. He did not like people of those religions worshipping other gods. He did not like people of those religions even theoretically recognizing other gods. In line with this old attitude of God, I do not recognize Jesus as God, and I do not expect people to recognize Jesus as God in order to follow his ideas.

I don't know how God feels about people following Jesus while still recognizing other gods. I do not recommend it. I recommend you give up other gods if you can. My wife is Thai of Chinese background. After I was married, a few times a year, my wife's mother carried out a ceremony in which she offered food and other goods to the family ancestors and then the family ate the food. My wife's mother did not think of the family ancestors as gods, and she knew this ceremony was as much for mental comfort as literally a sacrifice to spirits. Still, in the Old Testament (Tannah) prophets rail against Israelite men for allowing foreign wives to continue to worship the wives' original gods and rail against Israelite men for participating in ceremonies to other gods for the sake of their wives. The prophets blame the demise of Israel specifically on this fault. In the New Testament, Christians are told not to participate in ceremonies like this and not to eat any food offered during the ceremony. At first, I did not like being in the ceremony conducted by my wife's mother. Then, after a while, I felt that it would do no harm. I did not feel bad about it. Eventually I got to like it. After my wife's mother died, we stopped doing it, and I miss it. I think I would be alright doing it with other families who respect their ancestors as long as the other families knew

how I felt, and that I did not believe in family ancestor spirits. I would not feel happy about doing it for other gods. I do know how bad it is to create family unhappiness and how hard it is to resist family pressure. If I understand, then God gets it too.

If you know God yet have grown up in a tradition with Heaven, Dharma, and the Tao, then I am not sure what it means to continue a relation with them. It is probably alright to have a relation with them as long as you do not also worship the lesser gods, such as Vishnu and his avatars, or the many bodhisattvas. Buddhism already insists that you do not worship the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama as God, but many Buddhists break this command. You have to try out worship and non-worship for yourself, and then assess your feelings. If you can, pray about the matter. Pray to God and only to God.

You may not worship saints, Mary, angels, archangels, old monks, new monks, or bodhisattvas. You should be careful about having a relation with them so they will help you – I think most of that is misleading idolatry regardless of official dogma. Much of what Christians call “veneration” is really worship in disguise (“if it looks like a duck...”); and, if you do that, you should stop. You may not continue spiritualism-animism even if officially you accept Christianity. If you can’t stop, I understand; but you should try; and you should pray to God about this. Pray to God, or Jesus, and only to God, or Jesus, about this issue.

Not All Paths Lead to God.

Not all the ideas in every religion are correct. Some are misleading, wrong, or hurtful. The idea that we can force others to believe as we do is wrong and hurtful. The idea that we can preach joy without also working to make the world better is wrong and often hurtful. The idea that we can be above it all, and can find heaven for ourselves alone, is wrong. The idea that Israel, America, Muslims, Chinese, or any group, will dominate the world for God, is wrong and hurtful. The idea that people will go to hell because they refuse to accept that your prophet is the best, or because they refuse to accept some strange point of dogma, is wrong and hurtful. The idea that you can advance your religion by bombing civilians is wrong and hurtful. The idea that dogma is above the evidence of the senses, and above science, is wrong and hurtful.

This book champions the ideas of Jesus, and the ideas of the West that mixed with the ideas of Jesus, because they are correct and useful, and they are not wrong and hurtful. When ideas are wrong and hurtful, this book criticizes them no matter where they come from, even if they come from Jesus and Christianity.

Hard World Now to Follow Jesus’ Message.

Many people would follow the message of Jesus if they felt their effort would make a difference both to individuals that received direct help and to the world in general, the world could be made better, the world would be made better, and the helpers would not suffer too much for giving help. In the middle 1900s, many people felt this way, and there was a great outpouring of aid not only from Christian nations but from Muslim and Buddhist nations. Hindus would help too under the right conditions but, in the middle 1900s, India was still too poor to help other nations.

Sadly, things have changed. In the 2000s, although we can still do good in particular cases, we suspect we cannot help the world as a whole, we think the world as a whole is going backwards, all the help done in particular cases is not enough to keep the world from sliding backwards, and trying to help is likely to put our families at serious risk. People do not think past methods of help, such as through charity, churches, movements, and government, are working. People still want to help but they don't know what to do. When people don't feel as if they can help, and that trying to help is a great risk, then they stop trying and they feel really bad about not trying. They even get a little "wacky".

Even though we do not save the world, and the world might fail, it is still worth trying, and it is still worth trying along the lines taught by Jesus. We can't give up. If the world fails, eventually it will take down everybody, including the people who did not help at all and who only tried to make it for themselves. Even if you feel bad about the world as a whole, try to find ways to act along the lines of what Jesus taught.

This was one of the hardest lessons that I had to learn growing up, along with the lesson that not all people can be saved. Despite the prosperity of the 1950s through 1960s in America, some people saw it could not be sustained and we faced serious problems in the future. Yet people in power would not accept the situation, and even "do good crusaders" focused on their chosen groups while ignoring the overall situation. This fear paralyzed me for decades. Thinking about the topics in this book helped me to come alive again and to do what I could. I hope the ideas here can help you as well.

Practicality and Good Governing Again.

It is worth stressing that we have to combine ideals with practicality and with ideas about good governing and with institutions of good governing. I talk about governing in the next chapter. We all know this world is not the Kingdom of God. From time to time, Christian leaders say this world could be the Kingdom if only states would govern along the lines taught by Jesus yet this kind of governing has never been given a chance. Bertrand Russell aptly made fun of this idea in his essay "Why I am Not a Christian". It is just not in human nature to act fully according to the ideals of Jesus. We can get closer than we usually do but we can never close enough to make a real society run along those lines. We have to accept this fact and then deal with how we mix Jesus' ideals with real human nature, with how we mix Jesus' ideals and practicality. We get a lot closer to Jesus' ideals if we accept that they are not enough than if we pretend that they are.

I am not sure but I think all religions, like Christianity, would claim to offer the best society if we let them rule the world, and it is too bad wicked people have not let them rule the world. I don't know how to judge such made-up scenarios, so I don't.

All I can say is that we have to look at historical results for guidance. Part of practicality is good governing for all the people by most of the people and by the naturally talented people. By that standard, the West stands out. The West developed the ideas and institutions that lead to best government for the people by most of the people and by natural leaders – even though Western

states are far from perfect. Western success validates the idea that Jesus' ideals, combined with practicality, good institutions, and good ideas about how to govern, offer the best real hope.

This conclusion does not mean we have to push Jesus' ideals as absolutes and it does not mean everybody has to convert to Christianity. It is easily possible to accept the message of Jesus, combine his message with ideas from your religion, and use the combination to develop ideas and institutions for good government. That is what early Christians did with non-Jesus ideas of governing from Greece and Rome, and what Christians have continued to do. But, to do this, you have to take seriously Jesus' ideas, ideas of the West about governing, and institutions from the West. That is what I want people to do.

PART 5: My Other Deep Values

If you don't want to read any more about me or my Western values, then skip this part. This is the last part of the chapter. While the roots of my values go back to Israel, Jesus, and Europe, still, America developed its own version of these values, and I am an American. This part describes some of my specifically American versions of the values.

Oregon.

From growing up in Oregon, in the Western United States, among mostly middle class working people and middle class skilled people, I internalized some values. My feelings for my native values are as deep and strong as my feelings for the teachings of Jesus and for other Western values such as rule of law. That might, or might not, be a good thing. My native values include: decency, duty, integrity, strong egalitarianism, dislike of inequality and rank, citizenship, honesty, love of nature, respect for innocence, protecting people and creatures that need help, honor, responsibility, fair play, self-sacrifice, self-reliance, self-control, respect for public welfare, working for the public good, we are all in it together, professionalism, don't cause unnecessary trouble, don't presume, don't stop other people from enjoying life, imagination, creativity, actions have their consequences, democracy is sacred, power is bad, institutions are bad, people who support institutions are bad, and democracy is sacred but also an institution so we live in a contradiction. My values make me a cultural cliché. I don't care. I have seen other values elsewhere in America, among other Americans, in other classes, among other subgroups, and in other parts of the world; and I like the values that I learned growing up.

These values are similar to the teachings of Jesus. I am not sure of all the relations between these values and the teachings of Jesus, and I don't sort it out. I assume that most of the time the ideas of Jesus and these values go along well enough.

Sometimes these values do not go along with the teachings of Jesus even when we mix the ideals of Jesus with practicality. For example, people who are not honorable disgust me. I have trouble seeing their humanity as Jesus wished. Jesus taught that the more you have the more you should give. So I feel disgust less for poor people than for middle class and wealthy people who have resources but misuse what they have. A public office is a sacred resource, a sacred trust. Academics have been given a gift by the public; they have a public sacred trust to seek the

truth. Careerist academics who pretend to promote the public welfare but really promote their own career have betrayed their public trust and have betrayed an office. They are dishonorable people. I have trouble with them even when their work might help the general public.

When my native values and the teachings of Jesus conflict, usually I can feel it, and usually I try to go along with Jesus as much as I can. I don't always succeed. I don't think God expects me to succeed all the time. Issues with these values, and issues with conflicts between these values and the teachings of Jesus, have been so belabored in the popular media that I don't go into it in this book. Watch any good cowboy movies, detective movies, sci-fi epics, or films noir. You can start with "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" by John Ford.

Part of growing up in Oregon in the 1950s and 1960s was watching the TV and movies of that time, and listening to the music. I am also a product of ideas that came from TV shows such as "Leave it to Beaver", "Andy Griffith", "Maverick", "Bonanza", "Twilight Zone", "CBS Playhouse", "77 Sunset Strip", and "Batman", and the ideas that came from rock and roll, rhythm and blues, folk music, pseudo-folk music, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Who, and, later, New Wave. I always saw these ideas as going along with the values that I learned in Oregon even though I knew the fit is not perfect. The fit is close enough so that it all reinforced itself.

In the next chapter, these values show up in the context of my politics. In a later chapter, I write about decency and indecency.

Nature.

I like nature and I deeply regret what people are doing to nature now. Nature was a gift from God that we are biting off, chewing up, shitting out, and throwing in his face. God doesn't like that. We should treat nature, animals, and all life, almost as we treat human persons and God-as-person. I say this not because I have a romantic idea of nature, worship nature, want to preserve all nature intact, or I want to use crusading for nature as a way to justify myself.

The romantic idea of nature that prevails among some Westerners and some people from the Far East was not originally in Christianity or Greek thought. Jesus did not teach much explicitly about nature, nor did the early Church. Jews saw nature as the direct creation of God, as close to God, and as originally good. Jews had much respect for animals. They condemned the bad treatment of animals. I am not sure how much their attitude came from seeing nature as the creation of God. Jesus did say God knows each sparrow, and notes the dying of each sparrow, individually. The Modern near-worship romantic view of nature arose around the Renaissance and flowered in the 1700s and 1800s. For a charming account, read "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf. The romantic view of nature might have had some roots in Celtic thought and it certainly had roots in growing unhappiness about over-civilization, industrialization, and capitalism. Here is not the place to go into the question of its roots.

In any case, when the Church expanded the idea of what counts as a person to include all people regardless of gender, wealth, social status, power, age, etc., the Church also opened the door eventually to include nature, and especially to include animals. Although the modern attitude has

roots other than in the Church expanding inclusion, the modern attitude could not have developed without the Church expanding inclusion. People who revere nature now are the descendants of Jews, early Church thinkers, and Christianity whether they know it or not. I think Jesus would like this trend. Nobody who sees panda, tigers, giraffe, or elephants on the news can doubt we have expanded our idea of persons to include animals. If you doubt that we have expanded our idea of plants along lines of our idea of persons, think of giant redwoods or old pines.

The fact that modern reverence for nature has roots in Jewish ideas or Church doctrine does not mean much either way any more than the fact that modern reverence for nature might have roots in Celtic culture means much. What matters is a clear view of nature, seeing animals and plants somewhat like persons, working for nature as we work for people, and not using nature as a way to justify ourselves.

While I am happy we expanded our idea of a person to include animals, plants, and all of nature, we should keep in mind that animals, plants, and nature-as-a-whole are not persons like human persons or like God. To keep in mind differences not only protects us from the silly mistake of seeing a dandelion on the same footing as a child – and thereby inviting bad backlash - but also protects nature by keeping us from seeing it wrongly. The clearer we see rhinos and all of nature the more likely we are to do the right thing for rhinos and all nature. A clear view of nature easily can include deep respect akin to what we have for persons.

Christian Charm.

Here I use the term “Christians” to include Christians who follow Jesus as God and people who follow the teachings of Jesus without necessarily taking him as God. I use the term “values” to include practices that go along with the values.

Apart from the message of Jesus as explained above, Christians have values that most of the world now finds charming. The values come from the Semitic base culture of Jews and Arabs, Jews in particular among Semites, Jesus in particular among Jews, early Christians of many origins, Europeans, Europeans in America, and Americans. I can’t untangle what came from where. I think Jesus would approve of these values, and I can’t untangle what he would approve from what he might be a bit about, so I don’t try. In the list below, I duplicate from above.

Religions and peoples other than Christians have these values although they do not have them as a full set and as the basis for their world and action. Christians rarely live up to the values. I do not point out when Christians fall short. I do not speculate on how well Christians have to live up to the values for the values to characterize Christians and for the values to be successful.

-Christmas. Christmas is the best example of what makes Christianity and the West charming. There is nothing like it in other traditions. Nowadays Christmas is not about the birth of Jesus. Christmas is about acting on universal siblinghood. It is about being one big family. It is about making other people happy even at your own expense. It is about the giving rather than the gift. It is about getting along in one society together. It is about all the other charming Christian values

rolled into one holiday. You can celebrate Christmas while not even believing Jesus was God. Celebrating Christmas says nothing about whether you think Jesus was God.

-Intentions matter in both Christianity and in the West. We take into account what people did but we also take into account their intent. This attitude has two edges. We ease up on people who did not have bad intentions, or had good intentions, but we insist that those intentions really be not bad or really be good. We look for real intentions, not feigned intentions or stated intentions only. If you want your intentions to be considered then your heart had better be real. So taking intentions into account also leads us to consider people on a deep level.

-Moral growth is as important as face-value moral actions. It is important that a child share her cookies, as on a well-done Keebler ad, but it is as important that a child learn to share. A child who starts out selfish but learns to be good is likely to stay good and she/he gives more delight to the people around him-her than a child who is never tempted. In the movie "Pulp Fiction", the character played by John Travolta does not grow morally despite having chances to do so while the character played by Samuel L. Jackson does grow even if he is not perfect. The Travolta character dies while the Jackson character lives. The characters played by Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames also grow morally and so flourish in the end despite initial conflict. In "slasher" movies, the "kids" who get stoned, have sex, cause trouble, and do not grow morally, die, while the kids who can control themselves and do grow morally live and defeat evil. Americans and Christians think these results are just fine.

-Jesus said people rejoice more over recovering one lost sheep than over the ninety-nine that are not lost and over recovering one lost coin than over the nine that are not lost. In the great movie "Casablanca", the husband of the heroine is a great moral hero who has always fought for the good. We are not surprised when he continues the fight even at great cost. The ex-boyfriend of the heroine, Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, usually did not care much about morality or about other people, yet he "finds himself" and he sets out to work hard to make this world a better place. We are happier for Rick's change of heart and his salvation than for the "mere" continued bravery of the heroine's husband. This is strong moral growth.

-Maybe from the same sense of preserving, Americans do not abandon somebody without great reason. We might have to insulate bad guys to keep them from doing harm but we really don't want to give up on them. They might have a change of heart. This attitude can go to extremes and lead to error, such as enabling bad guys. In a good way, this attitude leads Americans never to abandon dead soldiers or prisoners. This practice also can go too far but it is probably better to keep the value even if it leads to mistakes sometimes than to lose the value and instead to calculate gains and losses habitually; see the movie "Blackhawk Down". I am not sure how wide this value is spread among Christians.

-Jesus urged people not to limit themselves to people and things that they already knew but to be open to people unlike them and to unfamiliar situations. He urged people to be open-minded, curious, and accepting. We should not reject other people and other ways as long as they do not clearly hurt us. Try out new ideas and new customs.

-Americans in particular, and Westerners in general, like new things. In fact, they make a fetish of new things. They prefer the new to the old even when the old is just as good or when the old has a lot of value left. I don't know if this attitude is an extension of Jesus' willingness to accept what is not familiar. This attitude drives American innovation and creativity.

-“Cleanliness is next to godliness”. Until recently, Europeans and Semites, including Jews, were not known for cleanliness. Jews and other Semites did have frequent ritual baths as part of their religion, and Pharisees might have been as clean as American suburbanites. Now, Americans, Thais, and Japanese are by far the cleanest people I have ever met. American bathrooms are the wonder of the non-American world. I am not sure how admirable hyper-cleanliness is in the grand scheme of things but I have come to appreciate Thai and American cleanliness.

-Christians look out for other people, even for people they don't know and for people who might be bad and might be enemies. I know of no others who carry out this attitude as consistently and as usefully. They take the parable of the Good Samaritan seriously. The institutionalized form of looking out for other people includes hospitals, charities, and schools. Most looking out for other people is done on the personal level of friend-to-friend.

-The Christian attitude of caring for other people builds strong communities. You don't have to be a member of “us” to be taken care of, but, among people of one community, the attitude of taking care of others leads to strong communities built not out of political or military obligations, fear, or guilt, but out of mutual cooperation. The downside is busybodies but we can overlook them for now. One of the best examples of this attitude still is the classic movie “It's a Wonderful Life”. The movie still is correct and still is a great example even if it has been shown far too often on TV. The idea of community can be appropriated and twisted by any group (Nirvana: “Smells like Teen Spirit”) but that does not make the idea wrong. It is appropriate to rebel against misuses of the idea but not against the idea.

-The combination of cleanliness and caring leads to clean communities, houses, yards, streets, neighborhoods, and to no littering. Until you have lived where people are not clean and garbage covers streets, you cannot understand how wonderful public cleanliness is. Clean cars do not make up for dirty houses and streets. The fact that Christians value public cleanliness makes the dirt of American cities all the more tragic and disgusting. Of all peoples that I have seen, only the Japanese might be cleaner than American Christians, although the Koreans seem clean too, I have little personal experience with their villages and small towns, and many Koreans are good Christians.

-Community extends to include nature. The Jews respected animals as God's creatures, they did not abuse animals, and their attitude carried over to Christian ideas about nature. Westerners used to worship nature in a way that Jews did not. Even now, Western nature worship can be a little creepy and sometimes it leads to bad ideas about the cuteness and kindness of nature. The Western attitude of nature worship might show up in Celtic and Wiccan religions. Virginia Woolf makes fun of Western nature worship in her short novel “Orlando”. The modern Christian attitude is a combination of Jewish and Western ideas. It is not quite worship and it leads to a healthy respect for nature, a desire to know real facts about nature, and a desire to help the planet. That

is what we see on “Discovery”, “Animal Planet”, “National Geographic” and the “Nature” specials on PBS. It leads to studies such as Jane Goodall’s long-term study of chimpanzees.

-Christians traditionally support the underdog in conflicts with over-dogs. In Christian societies, there is no shortage of the poor going along with the rich in practice and the poor hurting other poor but at least there is an ideal of supporting the underdog and it comes out sometimes in real acts. This is such a big theme in pop culture that I don’t go into it here.

-Jesus favored the poor over the rich. He did not disdain the humanity of rich people, he wished them all-the-best, and he was glad to eat free at their table; but he did not trust them because he knew that they had to make serious compromises to make wealth and keep it. He did know that the poor were corrupt as well.

-Christians still have a soft feeling for the poor and try hard to help the poor out of poverty without making the poor feel more miserable. Ideally Christians try to help the poor by teaching them how to make a living but sometimes you just have to help the poor by giving them food, clothes, and shelter. Since the rise of the comprehensive state (personal welfare and corporate welfare) in the 1800s, Christians have tried to help the poor through state programs. This way of helping the poor leads to dependency and abuse just as helping business leads to dependency and abuse. Christians have to find the right way to help the poor.

-One of the great themes of the Old Testament is social justice, of which helping the poor is only a part. Christians inherited the concern for social justice. Of course, since the Church became an established part of the state, and the rich control the state, sometimes Christians do not act on the concern for social justice as much as they could. Since the rise of capitalism, often it is hard to figure out how to act to achieve social justice. Still, Christians have never let go of the ideal and they act on it when they can. This ideal too can lead to dependency and abuse.

-In traditional Israel, as with other traditional states, there was no separation of church and state. The state was the agent of social action, which means the state should be the agent of social justice. Christians still look to the state to be the agent of social justice even when they respect the modern separation of church and state. This is why Christian nations pioneered the social programs that have caused such anguish in the United States and have caused great benefit as well.

-Perhaps as part of nature worship, Western Christians also worship innocence. We think it is a positive thing in itself, like a state of grace. We attribute innocence, usually falsely, to people and animals that we want to admire and raise up, such as children, Bambi, Thumper, tiger cubs, girls, women, Boy Scouts, handicapped people, and non-White ethnic groups.

-American Christians, at least, and now most Americans, assume innocence and take people at face value. At first, Americans trust people. This attitude of American Christians is well-known internationally and sometimes people make fun of Americans for it. Even Americans make fun of Americans for it, as Henry James did in his short story “Daisy Miller”. Yet most people appreciate this value and most people seek out Americans because other people know Americans will give

them a chance and will treat them fairly. Americans get taken advantage of less than you might expect.

-Forgive as much as you can. I have found other ethnic groups such as Thais and Chinese to be at least as forgiving as American Christians but at least Christians hold the value and act on it when they are reminded.

-You have to be willing to sacrifice yourself to make society better. This applies to high and low, rich and poor, and smart and average. You have to be able to see the greater good, have to see when the greater good outweighs the good of yourself and your immediate group, and have to be willing to choose the greater good. This idea is not nationalism in disguise. What you choose is the greater GOOD not the greater society. The greater good can show up at many levels other than the nation, from the family to the community to the cause of a group such as gay people or unborn children.

-Offices are sacred, so you have to carry them out honestly and fully. In effect, every office is a priestly position. When you hold an office, you are a priest. Not to carry out the full duties of your office honestly is to betray holiness and God. Offices include not only obvious high offices such as President of the United States but all political offices down to meter reader. Offices include not only political offices but also jobs and professions such as plumber, teacher, doctor, police officer, and business person. Each office has a code that you have to accept and carry out.

-Christians gladly offer help and, when they need help, Christians also know how to take help. At the same time, Christians are self-reliant. Don't be a burden to other people, either personally or through the state. Don't cause harm that other people have to pay for. Don't take help that other people might need more than you do, and which, if you take it, they might not get it. If you can find a job, then don't take unemployment, welfare, disability, food stamps, or free food. Don't accept state help for your business whether your business is large or small. Don't send lobbyists to the state capital or to Washington.

-So as not to be a burden, not to need help, and to be able to help when others need, look ahead. Don't get into bad situations unless you have to. If you have to take a risk, try to have reserves to cover your own ass. Wayne Shell, a friend of mine, said that the merchant in the story of the Good Samaritan broke this rule when he knowingly went into an area of bandits. Whether he did or not, I cannot say, but, whether he did or not, other people don't have an excuse to be stupid. If you are too young, don't get pregnant or get a girl pregnant. If you can't hold a steady job with a high enough salary and some benefits, don't have children. If you have a genetic defect or you have a condition that is likely to be passed on to your children, such as diabetes or obesity, then don't have children. Make sure you can pay for the education for all your children.

-Until recently, for many decades, Christians were by far the greatest givers on Earth. Charity is a duty and a privilege. Charity is not just giving alms to some local starving person in the hope of earning religious credit ("merit") but doing something to really help. If we count actions as well as money donations, Christians likely still are the greatest givers. Charity is figuring out why that person got in trouble to begin with, and then doing something to get him-her out of trouble and

doing something else to make sure others like him-her don't fall into trouble. Charity is both an individual personal act and something you do through organized institutions such as Red Cross and United Way. Whenever I see them in action, I am deeply impressed by the willingness of Christians in the Midwest and South of the United States to personally put in hours and labor to help people, even people they might not otherwise approve of.

-All successful civilizations have valued education and all successful groups within civilizations have valued education. I am not sure Christians stand out except that Christian, beginning at about the same time as the rise of capitalism, set up public schools to make sure that nearly all children received a decent education. As with hospitals and good government, Christians set up institutions to back up their values. Given the long history of good public education in the United States, the decline of public education here beginning in the 1980s is a great tragedy and likely a disservice to God. If your ethnic group or religious group does not support education at the personal, family, and institutional levels then you are a burden on other better groups and on the state as a whole. Education is not about producing compliant citizens of a big state but about teaching people how to think so they can see to the root of problems and figure out ways to solve problems. This is another form of charity and of carrying out your office as a citizen.

-Christians have fun. They encourage people to have fun. They enjoy it when other people have fun. Fun is not a duty. Fun is just fun. According to Paul McCartney, "fun is the one thing that money can't buy" which means it is what you can't force. Christians don't worry about going to hell, and so they can enjoy themselves while they are on Earth. Christians make the world more interesting.

-Christians know we all make mistakes and that we all have to do things that we are not proud of. Sometimes "questionable acts" (Roy Blatty (Rutger Hauer) in "Blade Runner" and Tom Donovan (John Wayne) in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance") can make the world a better place too as with good acts based on good intentions. We can't let bad guys run wild but we can be realistic and we can appreciate all kinds of people and all kinds of contributions.

02 Basic Politics

This chapter gives my political standards. I use them to assess stances and religions later in the book. Here the task is only to give my values. My values are not surprising. They follow typical mainstream America, not too left or right, not much different from a school “civics” class. The term “state” means one big political unit, usually one country, such as France or Thailand, not only one state within the United States, unless I say “the state of Alabama”.

Introduction.

The values, behaviors, and institutions that support modern democracy, modern democracy itself, arose from only one people with one culture and religion: Christianity in Northwest Europe, mostly England. Modern democracy did not originally come from anywhere else although some roots can be traced back to Greece and Israel.

Even though modern democracy originated only in Christian Northwest Europe, now nearly all countries try to be democratic. Most peoples of the world learn democratic ideals. People from nearly all cultures and religions adapt ideas and institutions from Christian Northwest Europe for their religion and culture. Not all peoples succeed well at local democracy but the task is doable. What once were particular values are now global general values.

Modern democracy originated in one particular place, culture, and religion; and countries adapt it to their specific history and situation. Yet democracies must not favor or disfavor any particular religion, culture, or ethnicity. Democracies must try to be neutral, general, or “secular”. Democracies especially have to seek neutrality and generality when they have many ethnic and religious groups in them, when they are “plural”. Nearly all countries now are plural. Neutrality-generality is hard but it is doable too if we accept history and we don’t obsess.

All government has to feel at least somewhat sacred to its people. The government has to be linked to something more important than pie and taxes. Good government has to help give purpose to life. Most people like to feel that the state is sanctioned by a particular religion and the key religious figure(s) of the religion. This is how democracy started in Christianity in Europe. Even atheists feel government is about something really important, more important than they are as individuals. Yet modern democracies cannot connect closely to any particular religion or deity. They are not the agent of any deity such as the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God or of any “force” such as Dharma or the Tao. This situation is a small contradiction but we can live with it, again if we accept history and don’t obsess. This dilemma can enliven democracy when it energizes interaction among groups.

“General democracy” requires general morality, general order, and general welfare. General morality, order, and welfare are the key core institutions that a modern democratic state needs to run well.

Modern democracies must support ONLY general morality, order, and welfare. They cannot support the morality of any particular group, not the morality of the people that began modern democracy (European Christians), the morality of the dominant ethnic-religious group (Japanese Buddhists), or the morality of loud powerful subgroups. Democracies should enjoy their own history and culture but they also must go beyond that when it undercuts general morality, order, and welfare. General morality, order, and welfare must be neutral to all religion, ideology, gender, age, and socio-economic class. Democracies cannot let the morality of any particular group control the general morality, order, and welfare.

Modern states need adept citizens and they need people who are good neighbors, the kind of people that hold the right values and can run the state described above. These people are mostly what this chapter is all about. I describe them here, chiefly through lists of values and traits. I do not describe how modern states cultivate these values or this kind of person.

Democracy is failing in America and the world. The failure is not spectacular. It is a slow slide. Failure is caused by: (1) not facing up to issues of self-government, capitalism, world economy, and ecology; (2) the modern world is too hard for mass populist democracy; (3) uncritical mass populism with its tendency to seize on bad leaders and bad ideas; (4) the modern world is too hard for wealthy powerful people to guide the state; (5) individuals, families, ethnic groups, and businesses depend on the state for success and security; (6) individuals etc. compete too much for access to the state as patron; and (6) individuals etc. now prefer wealth, security, and power to adept citizenship. Citizens will not, and too often cannot, face deep issues of human nature, self-government, citizenship, capitalism, world economy, and ecology. I mention some issues in this chapter, some in other chapters, and discuss them more in essays apart from this book.

This chapter is not a treatise on the state or self-government. This chapter is not a lament or a plan to save America. This chapter simply lists values and traits. It does not tell their history.

Modern democracy began among one people with one culture and religion, and then spread around the world to other peoples with different cultures and religions. Government has to feel sacred but modern democracies must try to be general and secular. Nearly all states, including America, were begun by one dominant ethnic group with one religion and culture, yet now democracies should not favor any group. Ideas of general morality, general order, and general welfare came out of particular ideas of morality, order, and welfare in specific ethnic and religious groups. People always live in specific groups, and take particular values and character from specific groups, so it is hard to think in terms of general morality, order and welfare; yet this is what adept citizens must do. All this is a more interesting story than I can tell here. Please see my essays apart from this book.

Ethnicity, Values, and Behaviors.

Americans like to stress individuals rather than groups but groups matter in real life and self-governing. It was only through group life and the history of a particular group that we got the values and institutions of democracy. I don't decide here whether people or groups matter more; I only say groups matter enough. Culture, values, institutions, attitudes, and character come from groups. I use "values" in the usual sense, to refer to what groups do to members, and to refer to cultures, institutions etc.

Groups shape individual behavior. Groups give the values that make people who are good citizens and good people. Groups give the values that make people who are not adept citizens even if they are good people in other ways, such as people who do not vote but do help the needy. Groups give the values that make bad people too, people with bad attitudes.

Not all countries, ethnic groups, and religions hold the values needed for successful self-government. Not all groups in America hold the values, not even groups that have been here a long time. We need to encourage groups that teach correct values and we need to disparage groups that teach bad values.

Any religious group and ethnic group now can take up the values needed for good self-government and make them its own. No religious or ethnic group needs to become the shadow of European Christians, either real or idealized European Christians.

Taking up the values is a matter of leadership in groups and of the general will in groups. Other groups can help, and should, but ultimately the group itself must make the jump. This need to make the jump yourself applies to groups who already live in tolerable situations. This view does not cover people living in tyranny, who cannot overthrow tyranny without help, and who cannot build good self-government without outside help. This view does not cover "nation building".

In taking up the values, religious groups and ethnic groups do have to change, and they must accept this change. There is no other way. There is no other way to get good self-government and to participate in the modern world economy. If you do not change, you will not self-govern and will not earn the benefits of a modern economy. Your values, institutions, culture, behaviors, attitudes, typical personality of people in your group, and even your art, might all have to change. You still don't have to become stereotypical White Christians but you do have to change.

Your group and all the individuals in it have to decide if participating in good self-government and in economic progress is worth change. If you decide it is not, if you will not change, then you have to accept living apart from the mainstream, without full self-government and economic benefit. You have to accept that other people will govern you. You likely have to accept living marginally, often near the bottom of the economic hierarchy. All this is on you.

In theory, all religious and ethnic groups can learn the proper values but, in fact, not all groups do learn the proper values quickly and fully. Some groups have difficulty taking the values to heart, even groups that have been in America a long time. Some will not change or cannot change. These groups have trouble with crime, thugs, bad leaders, silly ideologies, and bad attitudes, and they do not achieve much political and economic success. While their failure might be due in part to prejudice by other groups, the failure is due in large part to them as individuals and as a group.

After repeatedly failing to explain briefly relations between ethnicity, religion, and modern democracy, I decided to move that topic to separate essays outside this book. You can get a good idea from what I write here about values and citizenship.

PART 1: The Real American Dream.

When most people say “The American Dream” they have in mind material success, financial security, a happy family, and doing better than the neighbors. Details vary from a “Mc-Mansion” in the suburbs to a big apartment in the city but the dream is the same. This dream is basically materialism-with-family; it is perfectly human; and is fine as far as it goes. In the Cold War with communism, the American federal government used this materialistic dream to tout American superiority. When politicians say “America is the best country in history”, they have this dream in mind. People from around the world come to America looking mostly for this dream. Ronald Reagan uncritically pushed this dream as the master dream, from which all else flowed. When minorities, such as Blacks, call for their share of the American Dream, this is what they want. When majorities, such as middle class Whites, act to protect the share that they already have, this is what they protect.

I have nothing against material success but this is the wrong ideal for America. Affluence is not what makes America great. If we hold this ideal, we undercut what America was really all about, what America still should be all about, but is less all about every year. We also undercut the affluence that people seek.

America should be all about political freedom, self-government, and the adept citizenship that is integral to political freedom and self-government. America should be all about the responsibility of citizenship. It should be all about groups fostering adept citizenship among their members. America should be all about successful self-government. America should be all about having the right institutions and right people so people can think freely, speak freely, act responsibly, make up their own minds, help in self-government, make a living, live mostly as they wish, let others live, and make a good difference in the lives of selves, neighbors, and children. This vision requires people who combine realism and idealism. It takes people who have the traits that I explain below.

Political freedom, political rights, and political responsibility are the same thing. Every freedom and every right entails responsibility, and responsibility is the biggest part. Any nation that seeks political freedom must have citizens who know rights but feel responsibility more than rights. I use “freedom” as shorthand to refer to all three. Never forget that freedom means responsibility more than rights.

We can have political freedom and still have some differences in wealth and power. Modest differences in wealth and power make life more interesting. It is not clear how much disparity in wealth and power we can endure and still have political freedom.

We can't have political freedom if many people suffer materialistic hardship or if a big gap in wealth and power divides masses from owners. We can't have freedom with a few “haves”, many “have-nots”, and nobody in the middle. We need a base level of material security for nearly all people and we need a big enough middle class. The large majority of people in America already have enough for material security. The middle class is in trouble now but there are still enough middle class people in America. So, while wealth matters, we are still wealthy enough so that lack of wealth, and wealth differences, do not block political freedom if we choose to pursue political freedom as a high goal.

Although some material wealth and security are necessary as a base for freedom, material security and material equity are not political freedom and do not guarantee political freedom. Soon most Chinese will

be materially comfortable but I doubt they will have political freedom. We need the right values, attitudes, ideas, and institutions besides material security and moderate wealth equity. Prosperity is more likely to arise where people are free, and prosperity can reinforce political freedom, but wealth does not guarantee political freedom. So we have to keep the two distinct; and we have to hold political freedom first.

Political freedom does tend to produce prosperity but that is not why we should pursue it. We cannot pursue political freedom so as to gain wealth and power. Political freedom is not a means to an end unless the end is religious – and that is not my concern now. Political responsibility and freedom are not mere tools. We have to pursue political freedom for its own sake regardless of wealth and power.

If you wish mostly prosperity and don't care much about political freedom, if you pursue political freedom primarily as a means to prosperity and not for itself, then know that fascism usually delivers prosperity more efficiently, and gives more prosperity, than democracy. The Emperor brings peace, security, and prosperity to the galaxy. If you care about wealth and security more than freedom, then you should move to countries that have significant prosperity but not full political freedom, such as Russia and China. In practice, they are fascist now, not communist. Many Americans really prefer fascist order-and-prosperity to political freedom but don't know that is what they really prefer. Ethnic and religious groups that seek the constant care of the state, using ideas of "rights" and "tradition", really prefer the order-and-prosperity of fascism but don't know that is what they really prefer.

Americans have to take the chance that political freedom will not gain us wealth and power. Now, most Americans will not take this chance. Not even strident left and right wingers really will take this chance.

When people pursue wealth first, they always overlook the political vision. They wrongly think wealth is freedom. They do not do their job as citizens, and they "screw up" the country. That is the true legacy of both Reagan on the right and of "my imaginary giant share of the imaginary giant pie" on the left.

We do not have to give up material wealth and security to get political freedom. One does not always exclude the other. With luck, we can have both. Freedom supports prosperity. America has been lucky to get both. But we have to get priorities straight. If we must choose between them, choose freedom. We have to put political freedom and responsibility first. We have not done this lately.

Americans, on the whole, now in 2016, live well materially but they also live in jealousy and fear and they do not live as good citizens. Jealousy and fear are both symptoms and causes of not holding political freedom first and of not doing our job as citizens. By not holding political freedom first, we lose material success and justice too, so we feel jealousy and fear more. Then we overlook responsibility more; then neglecting our duties as citizens leads to more jealousy and fear; and so on.

I can't guess accurately what ratio of the people has to hold the political vision first so America as a whole stays free. I think we need much more than half yet I am sure less than half of Americans now see the political vision, hold it higher than the material dream, and do the work needed to make freedom real.

The baseline of wealth and security that is needed for political freedom does not include a guarantee to live well and to be able to raise your children well; and especially it is not a guarantee from the state. The baseline of needed wealth is not a guarantee of a job; it does not assure a well-paying job with benefits.

It does not guarantee that not-smart, uneducated, lazy, or conniving people live well. It does not mean all members of a family live well. You must accept personal responsibility when you start a family, including educating your children. You cannot expect the state to be co-parent.

The baseline is high enough to include helping some people who cannot help themselves and who will not abuse the help. Likely, the baseline mean that homeless well-intended people without children can be fed, housed, and get medical care.

The baseline of wealth and security does not include a guarantee that your business will do well, whether big or small. There should be no “too big to fail”. The baseline does not mean you can keep your fortune and position no matter what happens in the world economy.

It is easy to blame poor citizenship on laziness, greed, and partisan politics, and such blame is partly true, but those are not the biggest reasons now. Since the early 1900s, the world has gotten so complex that the average person can't understand it well enough to be a good citizen. Not even experienced business “people of the world” really understand it well enough now. We can't understand it well enough to choose people who might understand it, and who could lead us well.

When we can't “get it”, we give up trying. Populist democracy fails. Instead of seeking freedom first, we chase wealth, chase security, play partisan politics, play group politics, seek the state as a patron, make sure we “get ours first”, and hope political freedom miraculously follows. We choose leaders who might be smart but are not the right leaders for our situation now. They promise security, prosperity, and “our rights” in short order but cannot deliver; and then excuse their failure by demonizing the other side. Our leaders make sure most of us can chase the material dream well enough so we stay under control. They give us a taste of security and advancement by offering the state as patron. They bribe us, and we take it happily. If they won't bribe us, we vote them out of office. We will not deal with how the average person fits into the modern world, and we pay the price for willful blindness.

Evidence that we can't figure out the situation: (1) no major political party has offered a cogent vision for America since about 1970. Not “more stuff”, “bigger pie”, “rising tide”, “absolute equality”, “my rights”, “my share of the pie”, “bleed the rich”, or “starve the beast” is a cogent vision. (2) Race relations in America are good but not good enough. Yet no group has offered a realistic vision of how to make race relations good enough. We will not dig in to face the issue squarely. To face the issue of race means not only to face White prejudice but more so to face the flaws in capitalism and the fact that Black culture, society, and racism are big factors in Black problems. (3) People now talk of rights without understanding rights and they are far from feeling the responsibilities that come with rights. People “demand my rights” to get power, privilege, preference, a patron in the state, and revenge against other groups. They use the word “rights” as a magic word of control to intimidate and silence others. People see “rights” only as a crude tool. (4) America cannot control spending, so we have national debt of the kind that caused the collapse of France after Louis the Fourteenth and the collapse of many lesser countries.

America is not losing its feel for basic political values mostly due to immigrants. Long-term Americans, including White Christians, are losing their feel for basic values. Some immigrants come to America for political freedom but most immigrants come seeking the material dream. Before, that was alright because their children quickly learned the political vision. Immigrants came in numbers that could be assimilated

to political ideas, and there were enough Americans who knew political values to teach immigrants. Now, we have too few citizens who know real citizenship. Too many of the Americans who once knew, revered, and taught the political vision have lost it. Too many immigrants come too fast for the Americans who do know the political vision. I don't blame immigrants. They buy what we sell. We need to think how to teach the political vision to the people who are already here and to new people so we all get the political vision deeply enough. To teach them, we ourselves must first know the political vision as it applies in the modern world. But we don't and we won't learn.

Even Americans who have been here a long time and-or were born here have lost their feel for basic political values because the world is harder now and it is not clear how to live by the old values. How do we balance individual freedom versus terrorists and hackers? Why don't unemployed people and poor people just go away? Why don't ethnic minorities just get good jobs? Why do Whites and Asians do so much better in school? If America loses its edge to the Chinese, what then? Why are medical costs so high and eat up so much of our income? Why are incomes stagnant despite the increases in productivity every year? Why are so many schools so bad? Why do we have to spend so much to get a house in a decent school district? Why can't we stop using race and start basing our decisions only on individual merit? Why can't college graduates get good jobs? What does it take to guarantee getting a good job? Why have politics been so crazy for forty years? Why can't Jews and Arabs stop fussing? Why can't we just settle some issues once and for all?

Partly the loss is due to conflict between groups, wanting to use the state for security, and competing with other groups for access to the state especially for security. Groups have grown used to the state making sure they hold an edge in education, welfare, medical benefits, programs, tax breaks, corporate welfare, and influence. Groups feel they need this edge to get along and to compete with other groups. Groups would rather let go of the values that are needed for good citizenship and self-government than to give up their ties to the state, their competitive edge, and security.

"Groups" includes religions, races, socio-economic classes, age groups, genders, occupations, business firms, etc. Middle class people do compete with poor people, Blacks do compete with Hispanics, and rich business people in America ask for help from business people in China.

It is too much to demand of any particular ethnic, religious, or gender group that it must teach deep political freedom to its members as part of its core values. But it is not too much to ask that it teach freedom, responsibility, and citizenship as a plausible extension of core values. That is what Christianity in Europe did, and that is how we got democracy. After you know God, Dharma, Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha, feminism, Black-ism, White-ism, "La Raza", or "the state must be small", extend your ideas to support good citizenship and democracy in our world now. At the least, we can expect that no group teach bad values. We cannot demand that groups teach good citizenship as their core message but we may look at what they do teach and assess that. We can hold them to standards of freedom and good citizenship. We can praise them if they make good citizens and contribute to freedom, and can blame them if they make bad citizens. If your group teaches bad ideas of freedom or citizenship, if your group enables bad attitudes, then we can, should, and will, blame it generally and blame you personally.

Luckily, every major religion can assimilate ideas of political freedom and good citizenship, and all major religions can help the whole each in its way. We don't have to blame any major religion. We can praise them all when they promote right values. They just have to do it.

You have to make up your own mind about socio-economic classes, genders, cultural movements, and artistic movements.

Ethnic groups are a difficult case. In theory, ethnicity is neutral to the values needed for self-government and economic development. Every ethnic group should be able to rapidly and fully learn the values, and the members of the ethnic group who learn the values should be able to teach them to fellows. In fact, this is not true. Ethnic groups differ quite a bit in how much their native values support good citizenship, self-government, and economic development. They differ in how readily they learn the values, what ratio of members learns the values, and how readily members who learn values teach them deeply to fellows. Some groups seem never to learn the values well enough to self-govern and succeed at capitalism, even groups that have been in the United States for a long time.

PART 2: Values about People and States.

Where Values Come from and How to Judge Them.

My standards are based on Western ideas of a good state and citizens. As I say often: My standards come from a mix of Jesus' ideas with practicality and with Northwestern European culture-and-institutions, mostly English. This source does not make ideas right or wrong; does not make every White Christian an adept citizen; does not make every non-White non-Christian non-Westerner a bad citizen; and does not automatically disqualify non-Whites, non-Westerners, and non-Christians. Just because ideas came from Jews, Christians, Europeans, and men, does not mean the ideas are right or wrong, other people did not also have them, and other people cannot make the ideas theirs. Assess ideas by their truth and use, not their origin.

We can have absolutely correct ideas in math and sometimes in science but most ideas about people have to be put in the context of other ideas; put in the context of history, society and culture; taken with a grain of caution; and taken about at middle strength. Even ideas that we hold dear, such as "fairness" and "democracy", have to be used moderately, and can be abused.

Originally "dogma" meant just "belief", "warranted belief", "likely correct belief", or "standard belief". Now a "dogma" is an idea that is held uncritically and too strongly, and often abused. We get in trouble when we push dogma or uncritically accept dogma. "Dogmatists" push dogma, usually for advantage. Turning good ideas into dogma is one of the biggest ways that states get in trouble. Too much equality is as bad as too little. Too much "defense spending" is as bad as too much welfare. This abuse is equally true of left and right. "Ideology" used to mean the ideas typical of a group or stance. Now, the term implies that the ideas do not reflect an honest assessment of truth but are complex confusing alluring tools to push an agenda held for other reasons. I use "dogma" and "ideology" similarly. The problem of abusing dogma is so common and so harmful that I allude to it often in this book.

Jingoists and ideologues have trouble living by the good values of self-government even when they push the ideas in public. That is my problem with “political correctness”, left and right: it says good things but its proponents act badly; they use the values of PC as tools. In distorting a few values to serve self and group, jingoists and ideologues effectively betray all the values.

General Morality, General Order, and General Welfare Again.

Modern democratic states developed out of the values and institutions of a specific ethnic and religious group, Christians of Western Europe, in particular from England and its daughter the United States of America. Yet modern democratic states cannot run on the basis of the values of any particular ethnic or religious group. Once having finished the foundation and walls, and climbed onto the roof, they throw down the ladder.

Modern democratic states have to develop a set of values and institutions that are as neutral as possible toward race, creed, religion, gender, age, region, socio-economic class, and other group affiliations that can hinder adept citizenship and a good state. Modern democracies need general values and general institutions. They need to support only the general morality, general order, and general welfare. All this can be done but it is hard, and it needs to be re-done often.

I do not define general morality, order, and welfare more specifically than in the points of this chapter. Please see my essays apart from this book.

Modern states must vigorously oppose any particular group that seeks to impose its values on the whole state no matter how much those values seem right to the particular group and no matter how much those values might appeal to people in general. If the values of a particular group do not coincide with general morality, general order, and general welfare, the state has no obligation to support those values and has a duty not to adopt those values. If the values of a particular group coincide with general morality, order, and welfare, the state has a duty to support those values because they do coincide with general morality, order, and welfare, and not for any other reason. In these cases, the state must make clear that it does not support the values because a particular group promotes them.

For example, anti-abortion (anti-choice), anti-gay (anti-homosexual), simplistic anti-drug, simplistic anti-gun, and simplistic pro-gun values do not serve general morality, order, or welfare no matter how right we personally might think they are. The state has a duty not to adopt these values and-or laws based on them no matter how powerful the groups that support the values. The state should resist groups that try to make these values general laws. The state should repeal existing laws that support these values.

Whenever any group seeks to make its morality dominant, it always thinks it is right and thinks it acts in the general interest. It seeks to safeguard its way of life and so it deludes itself about general morality and general welfare. It is wrong. The best safeguard for any group is general tolerance. If the morality of my group gains the upper hand now, then, in the future, the morality of another group will gain the upper hand, and then it will suppress us. It is better that no one particular group dominates. This view supports the human need for (general) morality, (general) order, and (general) welfare. This view is compatible with seeing the roots of modern democracy in Northwestern European Protestant Christianity.

This reliance only on general morality, general order, and general welfare is not Libertarianism although I admire Libertarianism. This view leaves scope for the state to maintain general institutions of “law and order” such as Federal Marshalls, FBI, military, local police, and local courts. This view allows the state to tax although this view urges the state to tax more fairly than what America does now. This view leaves scope for the state to carry out projects such as the national highway system, dams, national parks, and national health care.

The Standard Civic Values.

The following values seem self-evident but I have lived where they do not prevail, and people live badly as a result. I do not discuss extensions of these values that are common in school civics such as three branches of government. I do not discuss the military or war. I repeat sometimes for clarity. Order does not reflect importance. The values are not internally consistent, like a postulate set in mathematics. That is part of their worth and it is one reason why citizenship takes work. They are consistent enough.

-People are persons, with all that entails. I don't spell it out. We are more than rocks, trees, or animals. We have something intrinsically valuable about us. If you wish to ground our intrinsic status and value in religious ideas, you may, and I hope you do, but you need do so not as long as you accept it. Likely there are people (persons, sentient-moral-aesthetic beings) on other planets too.

-We live by rule of law. Individuals and groups should be governed by laws and not by the decisions of powerful people or cliques. Of course, some powerful people, such as judges, do some of the deciding, and some powerful people, such as legislators, make the laws.

-Individuals are the focus of rights, responsibilities, and laws. Originally in Hebrew history and Western history, this idea meant that families should not be punished for the misdeeds of individuals but it means more than that now.

-We treat individuals as adult autonomous agents who can make up their own minds about most aspects of their lives and about governing, and who are responsible.

-With few exceptions, laws apply equally to everybody regardless of wealth, power, status, age, formal education, gender, ethnicity, religion, origin, or socio-economic class. All people “count equally” under the law. People are “equal before the law”. The law does not favor any group, gender, age, ethnicity, national origin, religion, wealth, or socio-economic class. The exceptions do not diminish the power of the basic idea.

-If you wish people to follow a law, you must follow it. If you do not wish to follow a law, then you cannot expect other people to follow it. The idea of “applies equally” is the legal-political version of the Golden Rule of “act toward other people as you want them to act toward you”.

-Groups (teams, organizations, and societies) are real but they are not the focus of the law except as they are made up of individuals. We assume we can know groups in terms of individuals. This is not always true in practice, but still the individual is the focus. Individuals are responsible for their own actions even in groups. We do not collectively punish groups for what individuals do. When an individual accepts a

position and responsibility, we punish individuals for what their groups do, as when leaders give immoral commands or the head of a business firm condones illegal action by employees.

-To repeat: People are “equal before the law”.

-People are “equal before the law” but people are not equal in abilities, training, exertion, family, and luck. People also are not equal in wealth and power; see below.

-When we promote equality, we should promote equal opportunity and an equal playing field, not equal outcome – unless the outcome is bad enough to be repugnant to general morality or to threaten general order and general welfare.

-In American culture, the unit of most action really is a team rather than an individual. I discuss teams elsewhere. Although team is important, it does not have the same status as the individual in law. The idea of the team should not be confused with ideas of the family or the business corporation.

-People of sound mind and body are expected to make their own living.

-We have both rights and responsibilities. Rights always entail responsibilities and responsibilities usually entail some rights. Being a parent gives both rights and responsibilities.

-We should stress responsibilities at least as much as rights, usually more than rights.

-Democracies were founded in opposition to monarchies and oligarchies, so they stress individual rights. Even so, especially in a democracy, all rights come with responsibilities. The idea of rights has been used well in America. It was used to gain freedom, dignity, and full citizenship for groups that had been oppressed before as in movements for Civil Rights, women, and gay people. Yet, too often since about 1970, the idea of rights has been turned into a dogma and abused by people to get what they want. The abuse of entitlement programs in the United States rests on the abuse of the idea of rights. “Civil Rights” has been abused. Business firms abuse rights. So, while we should never overlook rights, we always have to recall the responsibilities that go along with rights, and stress those more than rights. People should “call out” the abuse of rights, and abusers, as much as people “call out” unfairness toward them and demand their rights.

-Americans should maintain all the rights in the Bill of Rights. They should think about the responsibilities that go with each right.

-Society depends on order. In real life, individuals cannot have any freedom without some order, and cannot have greatest freedom without a particular order that preserves greatest freedom. Order does erode some freedom, and that is the price we pay for any freedom at all and for the greatest freedom. We rely on the state for order. We rely on individual people to internalize morality and order, families to teach morality and order, churches to teach it, and friends, work mates, and work places to guide us.

-We need a balance between individual freedom versus social order. Americans have been better at finding this balance than we usually get credit for but we still have work to do.

-Individuals should be able to control themselves so as not to harm others or society.

-Groups of individuals should be able to self-govern. The largest most inclusive group of individuals, the state, should be able to self-govern by forming a democracy.

-Not all people are competent to be adept citizens of a self-governing democracy. Some people are not competent because they are intrinsically unable (not smart enough or otherwise mentally handicapped), some are not competent because they have not learned needed skills, and some because they have not learned the facts about issues facing the democracy. How many people are competent or not competent depends on the problems that the democracy faces. There is no guarantee that enough people are competent. To allow the people who are not competent to participate in self-governing hurts democracy and the nation.

-We expect the state to guard general order, welfare, and morality. We expect the state not to be overly zealous in guarding general order, welfare, and morality.

-We expect individual people and the state to work constantly to make life better. I do not define "better". "Getting better" can include better general morality, better general order, and better welfare. The state is not only the guardian of order, welfare, or morality but the agent of progress, of getting better. The idea that the state is an active agent of getting better is one way in which the Western idea of the state differed from other ideas of the state until recently.

-“Better general morality” does not necessarily mean more morality; it could mean fewer rules. “Better order” does not necessarily mean more order; it could mean fewer rules. “Better welfare” does not have to mean more wealth although “more welfare” often does. “Better welfare” does not have to mean more equal wealth holdings or income. “Better welfare” could mean better use of the wealth that we have already, or could mean better distributed wealth as long as the state does not go against other principles too much in aiding better distribution.

-People are not the owners of the planet and of nature. People are only the stewards.

-Sometimes individuals work to make things better apart from the state. Sometimes individuals working to make things better is better than the state taking the task. Some tasks can be done only by the state. Some tasks are done by the state and individuals working together.

-When the state pursues getting better, the state should not override other important values such as rule of law, human dignity, privacy, nature, political freedom, and basic private property, or override them as little as possible.

-The ability of people to be secure and to make their lives better rests in large part on private property. Private property is a basic right. The private use of property often leads to increase in general wealth and to “things getting better” in general. Without good reason, the state should not undermine the abilities to hold and dispose of property.

-Yet the right of private property is not absolute. Sometimes the use of private property harms general welfare or general order, as when people and business firms pollute or when they harm nature so much that nature cannot recover. The state may limit private property and its use. When the state limits rights in private property, takes ownership of property, or takes control of property, the state should keep in mind that it too is not always a good steward and often uses property less adeptly than private citizens.

-“Getting better” is not simply more wealth. We can get better though increased wealth but not always. Wealth usually helps but not always. Increased wealth is not the only way to get better and does not guarantee we are better. Sometimes increased wealth erodes getting better, as when we use immoral policies to increase wealth or when increased wealth blinds us to social and natural problems. We have to learn to see these issues clearly.

-The state may, can, should, and will carry out programs (policies and laws) for reasons of general order, general morality, and getting better. The state carries out programs for all three reasons. Here I do not divide “getting better” from practical gain, that is, from increased wealth and prosperity; I expect you to keep the distinction in mind.

-Not one in particular of morality, order, practicality, prosperity, or “getting better” always “wins out” in every case. We have to look at each case to see which factor is most important, and to see what we can stand. When in doubt, it is best to err on the sides of caution, morality, and order. It is best to make sure an act does more good than harm, however we think of good.

-Moral concerns can come before practical concerns. Sometimes the state acts primarily on the basis of morality, to redress a moral grievance, to guard a moral, or to advance a moral solution, and not primarily for order or prosperity, such as feeding school children. Yet the state cannot address all moral issues. The state is not required to seek moral perfection. Sometimes to address a moral issue is so costly in practical terms that the state cannot act to correct the moral issue, such as giving total medical care to all people of all ages no matter their previous condition. Sometimes to address one moral issue breeches general order so badly that the breach of general order is an even bigger moral breach, such as if we tried to force all people to show no gender or ethnic bias. Morality and general order usually coincide but sometimes not. Sometimes we must act morally even at practical cost, such as to educate all children or to steward nature. Sometimes an act that might be practically appealing, such as a dam for increased wealth, leads to moral breeches, such as taking property. Sometimes gain in practicality outweighs modest moral breeches. Morality and practicality often coincide but sometimes contradict.

-In all cases, the people, and their representatives, have to weigh the issues honestly and publically, and decide. The people, and their representatives, have to acknowledge all aspects of a case: moral, order, general order, getting better, and practicality. The people and their representatives have to clearly say their motives, clearly say which aspect they think dominates, and why. Again, it is best to err on the side of caution, in particular on the side of morality and general order.

-Individuals need not be equal in wealth, and very likely will not be. Differences in wealth are sometimes helpful.

-Individuals may not use their private property to pervert democratic self-government. Individuals may not use their private property to oppress other people or harm nature. If private ownership leads to constantly increasing differences in wealth, so as to undermine dignity and self-government, the state might have to intervene.

-People personally have to provide for their families. If they cannot provide for their families, they should not have families. The state may require people to pay for some expenses in raising a family such as for school and health care. People should take into account such added obligations when thinking whether they can raise a family. People cannot expect the state to take over the expenses of raising their family for them. People cannot expect the state to take over as a parent.

-Because of how capitalism runs and creates jobs, we inevitably have some unemployment and poor employment even among people of ability, training, and drive. This unemployment and poor employment will not go away. No simple policy or simple “tweak” can solve this problem. No increased wealth and not “making the pie bigger” alone can solve this problem. It is not true that “a rising tide floats all boats”. We have to accept that capitalism has problems, including unemployment and poor employment, and have to face them. We have to deal with problems without allowing abuses such as cheating and dependency. The problem of inevitable unemployment and poor employment sustains other problems and is a root deep issue. To do anything realistic about other problems, we first have to face this problem and have to face the twin issue that not everybody is competent to find work in a modern economy; see Part 5. The fact of inevitable unemployment and poor employment does not mean we have to make a job for everyone; we should not.

-While capitalism has problems, its problems do not change that each person individually is responsible for him-herself and his-her children; and people still cannot expect the state to step in.

-Real democracy is not fully populist and egalitarian. Real democracy has to be representative. People elect some of their fellows to serve them in government.

-A working democracy has to pick among the people who are qualified for self-government, as voters, officers, and representatives.

-America has done poorly with representative democracy. It has not figured how to pick among its people those who are qualified and how to exclude unqualified people.

-As noted above, the state is the guardian of general order, general morality, and general welfare. The state is limited to guarding general order, general morality, and general welfare. The state should not promote any morality or ideology not needed for general order, general morality, or general welfare, or not needed to stop an obvious excessive immorality.

-The state is not the agent of the morality, ideas of order, ideology, myth, or religion, of any particular group. The state cannot promote the ideas of any particular group in addition to ideas of general order and general morality.

-If a private act by an individual does not injure the general order or general morality, the state should have little to do with the act. If an act does not injure general order or general morality, the state should not prohibit the act. If an act does little harm or no harm, the state should not be concerned. The state should err on the side of caution and inaction. For example, homosexuality does no harm, and so is not the business of the state.

-Likewise, unless an act does considerable good, the state should not concern itself. Even if an act does noticeable good, the state should not necessarily concern itself. It might benefit all children if they joined the Scouts for ten years but that is not the business of the state.

-The state may force people to do acts that do clearly promote the general order such as force people to vaccinate their children. The state may force people to do such acts especially if not doing them hurts the general order, again as with vaccinations.

-State agents must perform their duties as agents of the general order, general morality, general welfare, and the state, with full fairness according to their duties, and without regard to their families, friends, gender, age, ethnic group, religion, socio-economic class, or place of origin.

-In addition to the rights in the Bill of Rights, people have the right to do as they wish as consenting adults as long as they do not harm other people and do not create a liability on the public.

-In addition to the rights in the Bill of Rights, people have a right to privacy.

-People have a right to be both smart and stupid. The state cannot, and should not, prevent people from acts that other people think stupid. The state may prevent actions that harm the public or create burdens on the state such as burning trash in the open or jumping off bridges.

-We cannot hurt nature so as to undermine nature, our fellows, or society. I believe we should not hurt nature very much at all and that the state should guard nature; but this value is not widely accepted yet.

-The state is not the agent for any group of wealthy or powerful people, or for any business group.

-People, and business firms, must pay taxes; taxes must be fair; and people and firms must pay fairly.

-Life is partly unfair. Social life is partly unfair. Business life is partly unfair. Social groupings are partly unfair. Real self-government is partly unfair. A capitalist economy is partly unfair. Usually the benefits of life outweigh unfairness, but not always. Usually the benefits of living in orderly self-governing democracy outweigh unfairness, but not always.

-As much as possible, the state should avoid policies that increase unfairness or that concentrates it on some groups.

-The state is the guardian of fairness. Traditionally "fairness" was "justice" but Americans have come to see justice in terms of fairness. Justice also is a value that distinguishes the Western idea of the state although states in other parts of the world did pursue justice. Although the benefits of living in a good

democracy outweigh unfairness, still unfairness remains an issue that we must face. The state is obliged to provide some fairness, hopefully as much as practically possible. The state has to address unfairness of the kinds listed in various places here. The state cannot provide perfect fairness and is not obliged to try. Citizens have to accept some un-fairness. The state cannot try to lessen unfairness in ways that add even more unfairness. The state cannot act to lessen unfairness in ways that cause more harm than good. The state has to control some unfairness between groups, such as racism and sexism. The state does not have to insure perfect fairness among groups.

-People may, and should, petition the state for some redress in unfairness and injustice. Redress cannot cause more harm than good. People cannot expect always to get what they want.

-As noted above, in real life, people are not equal in wealth and power. The state should not try to make everybody fully equal in those ways. Differences in wealth and power can lead to unfairness. The state can address resulting unfairness but cannot provide full fairness. Differences in wealth and power can harm freedom, self-government, rule of law, prosperity, and the economy. In those cases, the state can try to lessen differences as long as the state does more good than harm. Differences in wealth and power sometimes can augment prosperity and the economy; even in those cases, the state should not intervene to create differences, as in taxing rich people less than other people.

-When ecology, the economic system (such as capitalism), or prejudices such as based on gender, age, religion, or ethnicity, persistently create unfairness, the state is obliged to deal with the issue as best it can. The state cannot perfectly rectify the badness or create perfect fairness. The state can deal with the issue only to the extent that remedies cause less harm than the original unfairness. As part of the right to be stupid, people have to endure some bad results on the part of their fellows such as some of the bad results due to racial discrimination and sexism.

-Groups use appeals to fairness, general order, general morality, general welfare, or prosperity, as ways to manipulate the state into policies that favor them or as ways to become clients of the state. The state has to be on guard against this tendency and has to fight it. The state and the people have to point out when groups abuse fairness and have to stop them. Abuse of fairness, general order, general morality, general welfare, and prosperity undermines all of them and self-government too.

-The state may not pursue fairness to the point that the pursuit creates unfairness or other abuse. The state may not pursue fairness to the point that the harm done by pursuing fairness outweighs the good done by fairness. Moderation and restraint are a part of fairness.

-Good ideas tend to become bad dogma, such as the idea of fairness becomes dogmas of entitlement. The state has to pursue good ideas but guard against bad dogmas. The people are obliged to point out when good ideas become bad dogmas.

-You personally have to actively participate in self-government to the extent of your competence as a citizen, without becoming a harmful zealot. You have to work on being a good citizen. You cannot just let other people govern for you while you make money. You cannot just work on the issues of your group. If you are not adept enough, you have to make yourself adept enough. If you cannot make yourself adept enough, then stay out of the process and let other better people govern; but, find other ways to be useful.

-Enough people in your group have to actively participate in self-government without becoming harmful zealots. If not enough people in your group are adept citizens, or too many are bad citizens, then you have to change your group or leave it. The people in your group cannot just work on making money and letting other people govern for them. The people in your group cannot just work only on the issues of the group. Your group has to foster well-rounded adept citizens.

PART 3: Good People.

General Culture and Political Culture.

The character that makes a good citizen and good neighbor is as much a product of general culture and institutions as of political culture and institutions. The character that makes a good citizen of France is as much due to French culture as to the ideas and institutions that make up democracy. French democracy is a combination of general ideas about democracy with French culture. Nations can have a great paper constitution and, in form, have all the institutions that should support the paper ideal, but still not have the real culture, attitudes, and institutions that make the kind of people that make real democracy work. Third World and Communist nations were full of stymied unhappy would-be citizens; North Koreans still suffer on. America made good citizens through both political institutions and ideas and through its non-political culture and non-political institutions including family, schools, sports, peers, art, workplaces, labor unions, business firms, Christian churches, other churches, many religions, philosophies, movements for nature, and clubs. I cannot separate general culture from political culture. I only describe the kind of person that I want. I do not advise on how to develop the culture that develops these people.

Background.

Character and values come together. What follows are my ideas of character. When I wrote this, my wife and I lived with people who did not have good basic character, were not mostly decent, and too many had bad attitudes. We felt every day what we were missing and the damage done.

I am not ashamed to say that the kind of people I want are like characters in TV westerns such as "The Rifleman", "Gunsmoke", "Bonanza", and "Maverick". I like the great families of TV, especially the great dads such as Andy Griffith. The people I want are like good characters from classic western movies such as "Shane", "High Noon" (the real hero was a woman), and "9:10 to Yuma". The people would fit well into a movie by Frank Capra, for example "It's a Wonderful Life" or "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington", and that does make me blush a bit, but I live with it. These people are basically decent, but not too sweet, and with human flaws. They are the people you want for neighbors. I want the people who, if the world were less complicated and screwed up, would make good adept citizens.

I know the difference between good people and adept citizens. General culture is not the same as political culture but the two are inextricably mixed, and it is hard to have a good political culture without a good general culture. I know that a person can be an adept citizen but a nasty person, and a person can be a good person but inept citizen. I like: Judge Roy Bean, who ran court with .45; the character Judge "Dredd"; and Sergeant Striker. Still, in general, good people make fine citizens, and even fierce citizens have a big streak of goodness on which they base commitment to be an adept citizen – else, why bother?

We all learn the traits of an ideal adept citizen in civics class, so I do not dwell on them or try to separate the traits of adept citizens from good people. I list the traits of good people and I hope that “adept citizen” is in there too. In the next part of the chapter, I mention a couple of traits specifically of good citizens.

I appreciate rascals, anti-heroes, flawed heroes, crabby heroes, and even some gangsters, criminals, bad boys, and bad girls. But they don't make good neighbors or good citizens. When society has too many of them, enables them, or romanticizes them, society goes bad. Americans romanticize bad boys, bad girls, criminals, and fake rebels far too much. If you have ever known real criminals, you know they are not fun, interesting, or good to be around. The world is not going to run out of these people soon, so I don't have to defend them, so I don't have to include any tolerable versions of them here.

We need the combination of Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne from the movie “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”, and we need them both to defend us against Lee Marvin. No matter how much we romanticize Lee Marvin, he really makes a bad neighbor and bad citizen.

Almost anybody who has internalized some American values - and now that includes most people around the world - can be like one of the people here. It doesn't take a saint. In today's confusing world, you might not be able to succeed as a fully adept citizen but you can be the kind of citizen who would have been adept in a saner more human world. You can be the kind of person who would have been an adept citizen during the American Revolution or Civil War. All you have to do is be honest and try harder than you are trying now. It helps to have a good situation. Most of us don't try hard enough, and we soon lose sight of what it means to be a good person and good citizen.

What I want is typical of a proud clean poor person, proud clean working middle class person, or proud clean other middle class person. I have found this person mostly among people whose background is Northwestern European, Northern European, and East Asian – Mr. Miyagi from “Karate Kid” is a case - but this kind of person is not limited to those backgrounds. Again, just because I take these people as my inspiration does not mean the ideas are wrong.

The point is not to make everybody into what I wish, have the state make all people into a character from a romantic comedy, or have religion make all people like a character from “The Flying Nun”. I don't want sweet zombies. I like differences. Without glamorizing, I even like some not-so-decent people. But I like some kinds of people more than others, and some kinds make good friends, neighbors, and citizens while some don't. The point is to give us standards that we can work toward.

Most people feel as I do, and share my tastes, but they won't say so from fear to appear un-cool or not PC (politically correct), either left or right.

I want religion to encourage values that make good neighbors. I want religion to condemn bad neighbors. I want ethnic groups to make people who are good neighbors. I want ethnic groups to condemn all their members who are bad neighbors and have bad attitudes. I want the state to control indecent people and bad people. I don't want the state to make everybody into the good person that I describe here.

Ideally, I would like people who can face and handle the hard issues of our times. Not all people are able to do this, and we have to take that limit into account.

I want people who can see that they cannot do it but are willing to seek out other people who are smarter and know more. This willingness to go beyond yourself is quite hard too.

General Character.

-I want decent people to prevail. See the chapter in this book on decency. I want them to set the tone for the world but not stamp the world. I want people who know decency from the heart, know why decency is important, and for whom decency is automatic in their character. Decent people follow the Golden Rule, have empathy, are considerate, value dignity, and help neighbors. They see beyond social, economic, or political status. They don't have to be told not to bother neighbors. They clean up after themselves and after others. They don't tolerate nonsense.

-I know that people other-than-fully-decent-people have to be in this world, and I don't usually mind as long as the not-fully-decent-people don't hurt decent people. The world needs its share of grafters and crooks. But indecent people have to be controlled so they don't hurt decent people.

-I do not want only stodgy boring people. I like people who have fun. I want people who make the world interesting. You can be a monk, or a lawyer, and have fun. Fun comes from various kinds of people.

-I want people who understand honor, duty, and responsibility.

-I want not all of the people, but many people, to be adventurous, including artists, scientists, and business people. This is part of having fun and making the world interesting. You can be a decent person and still be a creative person, who makes things, or gets things done. Not everybody is adventurous by nature, so don't feel bad if you aren't, but don't look down on people who are.

-You can be however you are as long as you don't hurt other people and animals. You can be moody, withdrawn, asocial, or rebellious. See the chapter on Taoism for other people that I also appreciate.

-I want people who really do work hard to make a better world. They don't need a grand vision of heaven-on-earth. They don't have to single-handedly save the world. They don't stick their noses in uninvited. They only have to see what needs work and be willing to help.

-I want people who understand "expect more from people who have more".

-I want people who understand good citizenship and who work to be good citizens to the best of their particular abilities.

-I want people who can temper justice with mercy but not let mercy undermine everything else.

-I do not hold it against people that they are "down and out", and cannot help other people now, but have to save themselves. Life can be really hard.

-I want people who have personally known some of the bad things in life, and maybe have been crushed for a while, but have not let it ruin them for always, who fought back after defeat, and so have learned to appreciate good even more. I want people who can feel for the other ruined people because they have been there themselves.

-I dislike indecent, loud, dirty, shortsighted, selfish people; people who do not feel the dignity of other people and themselves; and people who don't understand the idea of public spaces, public times, and the public good. I dislike people who "get mine first" or who make sure they "come out clean" ("aw tua roht" in Thai).

-I want people who see the difference between justified rebellion versus rebellion for silly reasons such as Romanticism, zealotry, fashion, and feeling good about yourself. I want people who can pick causes and can assess how to spend their time, energy, resources, and personality in causes. I want people who can join justified rebellion without lapsing into zealotry. I want people who can see when even justified rebellion has gone too far, is hurting more than it helps, and has to change. I want people who are disgruntled at times, suspicious of the system, and willing to buck the tide to get something done. I want some natural rebels. At the same time, I dislike people who rebel because they want to feel good about themselves, justify themselves, and save themselves.

-I have sympathy for the downtrodden, down and out, victims of the system, underbelly, and beautiful losers. I don't mind them. At the same time, I don't glamorize them. They don't always know better and are not always right. Sometimes they are not interesting. Sometimes they are more trouble than they are worth. I want people who are comfortable among outsiders but who don't glamorize them.

-I want people who are willing and able to judge an idea on its merits rather than its source. An idea is not better or worse because it comes from the underbelly of society, elite, rich, working class, Blacks, Whites, any religious group, any gender, or any political party. An idea is an idea. People have to be able to judge them correctly. This is a surprisingly rare and precious talent.

-John the Baptist, the teacher of Jesus, said that an official, Roman or Jewish, could be a good citizen of Judea, and the Kingdom of God, if he-she carried out the duties of his-her office correctly, honorably, with respect to law, and without favoritism toward any ethnic group, religion, wealth, or power. Today, we add without favoritism to gender, gender, age, handicap, and occupation. Briefly, officials have to respect the rule of law, and have to serve as examples of the rule of law. People in general have to see this of their officials, have to support their officials, and have to be ready to act this way if they become officials. My wife and I have lived where officials did not respect the rule of law, and it is horrible. Of course, we all cheat a little bit, and we all have a natural human tendency to favor our kin, friends, fellow ethnics, and fellow religion members. It is impossible to be perfect. But we have to fight to be better as officials, and we cannot let a system of cronyism replace a system of law.

-I want people who can blend individualism and team effort, and can vary the blend to suit situations. Despite American ideals about rugged individuals, in fact, teams succeed much more often. Too much group is bad as in collectivism but so also is too much individualism as in a ball-hog show-off. Most great TV shows and epics have been about teams rather than individuals even when one individual was the star: Star Trek, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Jesus and his Disciples, Moses, David, and Robin Hood.

Americans are among the best people in the world at teams, and that is one of the most important values in our successful democracy and economy. The American character is a blend of football and golf. We need to learn the best blend of individualism and team play. Not only do we need to learn it for specific situations, but we need to learn how to vary the blend when situations vary. This skill takes a lifetime of study under good teachers. Americans should be happy that they are lucky enough to have this skill.

-I want people who understand “live and let live”. Let people live as they wish as long as they don't hurt other people. This attitude is part of not wanting to make everybody like you. Not everybody who lives as he-she wishes is interesting, good, useful, or makes the world better. Some will be cranky, quirky, or loners. We have to accept that. If other people are obnoxious, you have the right to call them out and make them stop.

-I want people who see what hurts good citizenship and democracy, and who can “just say no” to those things even when those things might otherwise be valuable and might be esteemed in their group. For more on this point, see below.

-The best action is based on principles mixed with practicality. Best action always uses principles but it is not dogmatic. Best action does not fall into mere expedient practicality but always refers to some principles. Action based solely on ideology usually gets crazy and becomes a hidden tool of crazy self-interest. For example, calls for “fairness”, “equality”, “family”, and “free market” are usually about benefits for us. Action supposedly based on practicality usually does the same. We need much experience to learn to blend principles and practicality well, and I don't go into how to learn here. I want people who get this situation and are willing to learn. They don't have to be experts already but they do have to be willing to learn and they have to expect to continually improve. They have to be willing NOT to act until they have reached minimum ability – unless, of course, they have to act in a crisis. They have to know how to trust people with more ability than they have. They have to learn how to trust institutions that have been built on this idea.

-Institutions, including relations of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic class, can be fair or unfair, can be fairly responsive to new conditions or unfairly mired in the past. No institution is completely fair. We have to decide how much unfairness we can stand before we move on to maybe something better with a different mix of fairness and unfairness. It takes pain to change unfair institutions even when we can see the unfairness we are in now and can see the fairness we need to get to. It takes pain to build any institutions anytime. I want people who see this even if not as clearly as Adams or Jefferson. I want people who see how institutions serve us in general, can serve particular groups, and disserve others. I want people who think out institutions, and who can guess well about when to change them and when to leave them alone. I want people who can figure out what to change them to when we have to change. I want people who can figure out how to change them with the least pain and unfairness. All this is hard and takes much learning. Mostly we do not learn by doing but by studying what people have done in the past and by watching skilled people now.

-People are equal under the law as persons but people are not equal in ability. People would still show differences even if everybody had exactly the same education and opportunities throughout life. We should try hard to provide children with opportunities but we should not expect all children to come out equally able. Differences in ability make a difference. Not all people should act as governors of the state.

Differences between individuals are not the same as differences between groups. Differences in groups appear and persist for reasons other than differences between people. I want people who know all this and take it into account. I want people who know the difference between equal opportunity versus forced equal outcome. I want people who know when inequality and unfairness perpetuates itself, and when to do something about it or when to leave it alone. I want people who can find a balance between giving people a chance versus destroying the play of individual talent and differences. I want people who know that some people are capable of self-government and others are not, and who recognize the ones who are and are not.

-I want people who can see that we do not own the Earth, we are its stewards. God owns it. We have to act accordingly.

-I end where I began. I want people who can accept the limits of their own ability as citizens and who seek out help beyond their limits.

I do not expect perfect people. Definitely I am not perfect. I don't want everybody to be like me. Not all the traits listed here are fully compatible. Full compatibility is not crucial. The traits here are compatible enough. The mismatch between the rough edges only makes the world more interesting.

To repeat: What I want is close to what most people want but most people won't say so out of misguided ideas of political correctness, from fear of the PC thought police Left, Right, and ethnic, and from fear of not being thought cool. Do better than that.

PART 4: Traits of a Good Citizen.

Five Specific Traits.

I elaborate below a little on some aspects of these traits.

(1) Don't get trapped by a dogma, ideology, party, group, church, cause, or movement. Step away from your dogma or party if it produces bad results. We all have to take some bad with the good, and we have to break eggs to make an omelet, but we also have to think on our own, practice thinking on our own, and stand up as individuals. I don't mind party politics but I do mind shills. American parties after Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, beginning with Ronald Reagan, have become legions of zombies. They are herds and crowds rather than individual human beings joining together for the common good. Do better.

Two examples of how people get mixed up in seemingly good groups but make mistakes: The first is the movement for nature, Earth, and environment. The second is young Republicans after Reagan, a group that was portrayed on the TV show "Family Ties" and is satirized in the TV show "American Dad". Who can deny the charm of these groups yet who can deny that too many people never evolved beyond the simplistic ideas, and the people who still live in the simplistic ideas hurt the country?

If your religious group, ethnic group, or gender activist group does not support good attitudes, and does support bad attitudes, then step away from it. Start another branch of your group that does support good attitudes and condemns bad attitudes.

(2) Get the facts. I know it is hard in today's world to find the facts but it can be done. The Internet can even help. Don't rely on parties or ideological groups for facts. Find out if crime in America has gone up or down, and among which groups. Find out if global climate change is real and, if real, what causes it. Find out if drugs really hurt people. Find out what kind of guns facilitate deaths in America. Find out if rich people are really getting all the wealth. Find out if middle class incomes have stagnated. Find out why. Find out which socio-economic class pays the biggest share of income in taxes. Find out if middle class people get benefits from the state that they don't see as benefits such as police protection, parks, and low college tuition for their children. Find out if police kill more Blacks or Blacks kill more police. Find out who kills Blacks. In essays outside this book I explain why it is hard to find the facts, and why people have to make decisions not based on facts.

(3) Find out how the major institutions of our times really work, in particular capitalism. Don't accept the right wing ideology that capitalism would be perfect except for the nasty meddling state. Don't accept the left wing dogma that capitalism is simply a ruse to help rich people loot and enslave others, in particular Blacks. Ask the questions above. Find out how capitalism helps and hurts particular groups. Find out why we have chronic unemployment and have more bad jobs now than before. Think about what to do with all the people who are not smart enough to find a decent job in the modern world economy.

Don't accept Black dogma that their plight is due completely-and-only to prejudice by others, that Blacks have no part in their plight, and Blacks cannot be prejudiced. What role do Black attitudes play? Don't accept White dogma that all White ideas and institutions are better just because there were a few smart White men a few hundred years ago or a few thousand years ago. Jesus was not a European.

(4) Make up your own mind. Do the right thing for the right reasons.

(5) Little can be done on the basis of pure rationality alone, as above. We need causes, and we need to join causes. Causes such as for nature, gay rights, and a small state, help America more than they hurt America. We would not have had the American Revolution and the spread of democracy if Americans after 1760 had not been a bit crazy. We need to mix rationality and commitment, a mix that we can see in great documents such as the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Federalist Papers. So, go ahead and commit to good causes but also use your sanity.

See the Big Picture; Don't Selfishly Assume Your Own Competence.

Nearly all people mistakenly think they have the skills to be an adept citizen just because they were born. People think they make adept citizens because of their formal education, lack of formal education, street smarts, cleverness, glibness, gender, political party, gun ownership, dislike of guns, religion, atheism, age, occupation, being in business, having a profession, being a working person, having children, socio-economic class, or that they feel like a rebel. None of that automatically qualifies you as an adept citizen, and thinking any of it does automatically qualify you likely automatically disqualifies you.

The Founders of the United States wanted not wide-spread populist democracy but representative self-government where the representatives were a natural elite of smart, educated, and experienced people. Most rich people, business people, college-level academics, doctors, lawyers, other professionals, and

many high school teachers, feel they are automatically part of the natural elite when they are not. Their wealth, education, and experience are useful but do not automatically make them adept worthy leaders.

The only things that make you an adept citizen are training, experience, enough talent, and practice. You have to work hard at it. You have to get outside yourself to see the big picture.

Assume democracy is sacred. To the extent that people act as self-proclaimed adept citizens when they are not, they violate what is sacred. You insult God. If democracy really is a sacred duty, then you have to do the work and muster the courage to help what is good. There is no shortcut.

Some people cannot be adept citizens because they are not smart enough, are not smart enough in the right ways, never had the background, can't get it, or won't work on it.

If you are not an adept citizen, then don't act as one. If you are not prepared to vote wisely, don't vote. If you cannot assess issues, then don't vote and don't agitate. To exercise the power of a citizen without being qualified is bad citizenship. Bad citizenship hurts the people, the state, your group, and you.

Even if you don't have the skill to be an adept citizen, you can still serve God. There is much you can do short of being one of the citizen governors. Nearly anybody can work for charities and can give. Nearly anybody can support a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. Nearly anybody can help a neighbor or animal. If you are not qualified to be a good citizen, then work on what you can do, and be satisfied with that. Don't try to run the world, or run a country, if you can't.

Good Citizenship Takes Work.

The economist Thomas Sowell said the discipline of economics hinges on asking the question "and then what?" over and over again until we came close to seeing what really happens, to bedrock. This practice is true not only of economics but also of adept citizenship. You have to find facts and ask questions until you have a good handle on what will really happen if a policy is enacted or not enacted. It is not enough to look at surface results. You have to look at a chain of events. You need a feel for nature, human nature, values, and institutions. You have to be honest enough not to stop at a result that pleases you but to go beyond that level to the real bottom. This skill takes experience and practice. If being a good citizen is part of following your religion correctly, then you have to work at good citizenship, to the extent that you are able, to be "right with God".

Some easy examples: A sales tax is easy to levy but hurts poor people. If a poor, middle class, and rich family all spend \$1000 a month on groceries, the poor family spends 30% of its income, the middle class family spends 10%, and the rich family spends 1%. A 10% sales tax (\$100) on top is a serious burden to the poor family, annoying to the middle class family, and nothing to the rich family. Education is a good thing. But, if we support education by taxing houses, then old people will never pass a levy, and, if a levy does pass, then old people will leave. Social Security Disability (Insurance) started as a modest program of a few hundred million dollars to help physically crippled people. Now it costs tens of billions of dollars, and is pushed by lawyers on TV. This expansion could have been foreseen and headed off. If we invade Iraq, topple Saddam Hussein, and disband his military, without building a central order to fill the vacuum, what will happen? We should have seen that coming. If we tell Syria that chemical weapons is a "line in

the sand” and they use chemical weapons anyway, then what? If Russia invades the Ukraine, can we win a tank war in Eastern Europe? Can we win a war on all drugs including marijuana and powdered cocaine? What happens if we continue to fight drugs or if we legalize some instead? What happens if some states ban abortion entirely but some other states keep it legal?

Why are the citizens and politicians in America so inept at seeing the train of events that runs through the various cases? What can we do to make people more astute? If we cannot make all people more astute, how can we limit voting and holding office to people who are astute enough?

Good Citizenship Requires Looking Beyond Yourself.

Around election time in America, pundits say “people vote their pocketbook”. When Ronald Reagan ran for election and re-election, he asked people if they were better off now than four years ago. By “better off”, he meant materially better off. Although the vast majority of people think this way, it is wrong. It is bad. To repeat from above: Democracy cannot just be about material wealth. Lots of countries in the past were materially wealthy, but they were not democracies, and Americans now would not want to go there to live. If all you want is wealth, go to China and join the Communist Party.

You have to look beyond yourself. You have to see what is best for the whole country. What is best for the country includes material prosperity but it cannot be limited to material prosperity. What is best for the country is what cultivates free, intelligent, creative, responsible, respectful, decent, good people. What is best for the country is what cultivates good citizens. You have to seek that first. You have to vote for candidates that understand that and work for it.

You are not a good citizen if you vote strict party lines, for the Black guy, White guy, Hispanic, woman, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, pro-lifer, pro-choicer, cool guy, bad boy, bad girl, or charmer. Don't vote for the candidate who promises you a big entitlement or guaranteed economic development. If you feel you should vote for the candidate of your group just because he-she is the candidate of your group, then your group is teaching you wrong. You need to rise above your group.

“Just Say ‘No’”.

If you or your group do anything to undermine the values above, or do not support them strongly enough, then you undermine good citizenship. I mention two specific acts to avoid.

People need to avoid what undermines good citizenship and development even when sometimes that practice is otherwise good and when it is valuable in their culture. Learning not to do what seems useful in the short run takes a lifetime of learning under good teachers. Learning this is like learning to be a good official and finding the right balance between group and individual. We cannot all be like the great “Noble Romans” who gave up their lives, and the lives of their families, for the sake of Rome; but we can learn to give up one benefit for ourselves or our narrow group for the sake of a greater benefit for our country and all democracy.

Family is an important value but sometimes we have to put democracy ahead of our families. Friendship is an important value but sometimes we have to put democracy ahead of friends. When a cousin comes

to ask for a job sometimes we have to say “no”. When a fellow Greek or Christian comes to ask for a job sometimes we have to say “no”. When we owe somebody a favor, the payback can’t be to allow him-her to do something against the benefit of everybody else. If we work for the park bureau, we can’t let our political party have the public park for a private party. We can’t let a rich person hunt endangered goats in a national park even if his-her bank holds our mortgage. We can’t give high grades to school kids just because we are the same ethnic group any more than we can give low marks to kids because they are in a different group. Poor people allow other poor people to act noisy or dirty so that someday, if the need arises for themselves, other people will allow them leeway. If I let you be loud for your party, you will let me be loud for my party. This is a good value when it does no general harm. It is good to live and let live. It is good to bend the letter to serve the spirit. But not enforcing a rule lets the whole neighborhood get dirty and loud all the time, and not enforcing this rules says that all rules are arbitrary, meaningless, stupid, and breakable. Often we have to see beyond our little social bargains for the sake of the whole. Don’t ask for what is generally hurtful. Don’t expect it. Don’t give it.

Learning to say “no” is like learning when to forego a personal benefit so as to avoid a higher cost to the neighbors or so as to gain a greater benefit for the neighbors. It is like not letting your dog shit in the yards of the neighbors. The difference is that the stakes are much higher. Democracy is at stake, not money or comfort. When we say “yes” to friendship, family, ethnicity, religion, or cronies, over rule of law, there is a gain; but we undermine all of democracy.

Instances of My Group versus the Country.

In the 1950s and 1960s, America owned the world economy. That was not a realistic situation, could not continue, and the benefits that came from it cannot continue. America is still an important country for the world economy but it no longer owns the world economy. America has to compete with Europe, India, China, Brazil, Japan, Korea, and others. While America dominated the world economy, it gave some internal groups benefits that could not continue under normal competition. Even if the benefits, to some extent, make up for past injustice and create present justice, they cannot continue. The benefits make the country as a whole, or some groups in it, support the receiving group. The support undermines the whole country so now the whole country is the victim of injustice and unfairness. It is bad citizenship to expect these benefits to continue and bad citizenship to allow the benefits.

When a benefit is based on a political grant, this almost always happens: the group that gets benefits votes en masse on the benefits as a key issue. The benefits become a one-issue “deal breaker” or “deal maker”. If a politician talks about removing benefits, the group votes against that politician, and gets him-her removed from office, no matter how otherwise good the politician is. So politicians are afraid to take away benefits. Other groups see the benefits, see that the benefits put the first group at an advantage, feel disadvantaged, and demand their own benefits in compensation. Soon we have a tangled tissue of benefits-groups-and-politicians. Soon we have in office only politicians who can work with this kind of benefits system, whether they like it or not. If the receiving group has used the benefits to improve, and has shown promise that it would someday not need benefits, then it might make some sense to continue the benefits until the receiving group was “on its feet”. But, in nearly all cases in practice, the receiving group does not “grow up”. We have to carry that group and all other groups indefinitely. As with parents, we cannot carry our children forever.

The same is true when benefits are based on the economic equivalent of a political grant, when workers get unusual wage-and-benefits packets from successful companies on the wrong assumption that the firm will be unusually successful forever. This happened in the 1950s and 1960s with American companies such as airlines and automakers, and their unions, so-called “sweetheart unions” and “sweetheart deals”. The dynamics are not quite the same as with political deals but the gist is similar enough, including rivalry between unions for deals, so as not to go into details.

Examples include:

- Voting ethnic.
- Voting gender.
- Voting religion.
- Entitlement programs for individuals and families.
- “Corporate welfare” including subsidies, loopholes, tax breaks, depreciation allowance, other allowances, support for research, etc.
- Affirmative Action.
- Farm Aid.
- Lower taxes on the wealthy than on other socio-economic classes in society.
- Many indirect subsidies to the middle class such as for college. Either extend the benefits to all people or end them for all.
- Lower profit taxes on some business firms, especially when not applied equally to firms of all sizes.
- Support for house buyers such as for mortgage interest.
- Support to small business firms.
- Sales tax.
- Aid to couples with more than two children.
- Support for single parents.
- Support for the children of irresponsible parents.
- Retirement, health care, and other benefits that were negotiated while America dominated the world economy, both from private firms and for government programs.

PART 5: Comments on Institutions and Values.

Good Institutions.

See comments above about political culture and general culture.

The line between values, traditions, and institutions is fuzzy. Christmas is all three, as are: “one person, one vote”, “no taxation without representation”, birthdays, and wedding anniversaries. Ideally, we want good institutions to come from good values, re-make the good values out of which they come, recall old traditions, not change traditions too much, and use traditions to re-make good values without betraying the traditions. You should judge for yourself how well this all works where you live.

I do not spell out good institutions. Refer to any textbook of civics. Good state institutions are based on rule of law and the laws are based on Western ideals of decency and persons. Good private institutions are based on ideals of service and progress.

Good institutions come from decent people and from people who live by the ideals of Jesus and the West. People do not have to be Christians or explicit followers of Jesus; they just have to know the ideals and try to live by them. Good institutions do not come easily from people who do not know the values. Good institutions include good government, citizenship, science, schools, hospitals, medical care, enduring charities such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent, B'nai B'rith, temporary charities such as aid to victims of a storm, aid to animals and nature, camps for children, support groups for victims of abuse or disease, giving to find cures for disease, support for research, support for the arts, support for good citizenship such as the League of Women Voters, support for responsible fair capitalism such as with Public Interest Research Groups and the work of Ralph Nader, sports programs, and all kinds of volunteer work.

Good institutions include both formal institutions and attitudes. We need to support values of honesty, honor, trustworthiness, dignity, and sacrifice – without prudishness. Virtue is an institution, and we need to support virtue in our attitudes.

Good institutions do public work such as educate children and help the needy. We can look to the state for help with some of this work but we should not rely on the state. We should not rely on the state to do the bulk of the work, leaving private action to mop up what the state forgets. We should engage in private work regardless of what the state does.

Good education includes not just sending your child off to a building but valuing knowledge, judgment, and learning yourself. It includes being able to teach your child – at least up through grade school. It includes having a good relation with teachers and insisting that teachers have skill.

My admiration for good institutions comes from seeing them as a child in Oregon, from seeing Christian groups overseas, and from seeing Christian groups in the American South. As a child, I benefitted a lot from good schools and from programs of the YMCA and local Christians. The Christians in the American South roll up their sleeves and get to work personally. They do not merely give money, although they do give money. They give time. They do not fear personal contact. I disagree with much of their dogma but their actions speak louder than their words or my words. I was impressed with Buddhist institutions in Thailand, in particular Buddhist schools, Buddhist priests, and health care workers. I was impressed by the dedication of the health care workers and by many teachers. The Thai have not developed the link between individual action and institutions such as was developed in Christianity, as in a Christian school or hospital, but the Thai see the ideals and work toward them, and they do so without having to become stereotyped Christians.

Although we should work on our own regardless of what the state does, we should also expect the state to do some of the work. We can expect the state to help the poor and the sick to some extent. The state should not rely on private charity to do some things such as help sick children. Some of our good work can be directed through state institutions although not all of our good work should be directed through state institutions. (Lifelong civil servants who work primarily for the good of the people can rest confident that they have done well.) We should expect the state NOT to provide help that enables dependants on the state, including persons, business firms, or groups such as charities. How much the state does, and how much we do, I cannot go more here.

The importance of good institutions and traditions is the mutual support between them, character, values, and a democracy. None can work apart from the others. All are needed. When most are running well, they can help the whole state recover from some badness, as when the United States recovered after the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the economic shocks of the 1970s. This is why it takes so long to describe institutions and traditions, and why I don't do it here. What really needs explaining are mutual relations, how they go well when they do go well, what can go wrong, how to fix it when it does go wrong, and when to worry about serious trouble.

Part of ideal (but not often real) conservative ideology is that we should change institutions and traditions only slowly. Traditional institutions evolved because they work, usually better than anything we can make by conscious design. Change usually leads to less freedom, less welfare, worse morality, less morality, and a worse state than before. Especially the institutions that America inherited from Britain were useful and good, and we should not change them. This conservative idea is mostly true but not fully true; I doubt we want a hereditary ruling class of rich lords just because England had it, and we don't want to stop the free market because England in 1700 didn't have it. I do not simply endorse the conservative position but I understand the position. This conservative view should be assessed in the context of other conservative positions and many liberal positions. I can't do that here.

Not Enabling; the Golden Rule (1).

People misunderstand the Golden Rule. It does not mean: "give people whatever they want regardless of the cost to you, your family, groups that don't get the benefit, and the nation; give regardless of whether giving really helps the receivers or really hurts; and give to this group because they squawk loudly even if another groups needs the help more and can do more with the help". The Golden Rule is not a charter for doormats, passive aggression, enabling, entitlements, benefits programs, justifying yourself through charity, or feeling good about yourself. The Golden Rule means to really treat people as you wish to be treated, and should be treated, including not "helping" if "helping" really hurts, and including being tough if that is what you (they) need. If I were an abusive selfish ass who demanded, I should not want people to enable me. I should want them to straighten me out and do what is good for me. When we base help on the Golden Rule, we have to give what really helps. The Golden Rule is not an excuse to keep lower groups down by making them slaves of the state and of their own bad values.

Jesus wanted us to help people, really help people. He did not want us to help people in ways that feel good for them now, and feel good for us now, but hurt in the long run. He did not want us to give token help to other people so really we can feel better about ourselves. He did not want us to help some people in ways that hurt other people more. Jesus would not want us to enable people with issues. We do not take candy from children. Likewise, we do not take candy from quiet children to give to screamers, and we do not give children candy so their teeth rot and they suffer all their lives. Jesus would not loan money to a chronic gambler or hire a compulsive embezzler to keep the books. He would not hire a child molester to babysit. Jesus would not hire cheating bankers to guard themselves. He would not condone race discrimination, gender discrimination, or reverse discrimination. He would not want zealous political correctness of left or right. He would not support corporate welfare or giving to affluent farmers at the expense of the urban poor. He would not levy a regressive tax like the sales tax. He would not tax the rich less than the poor. I do not really know the mind of Jesus but I do understand the logic of helping and I feel free to use Jesus to make a point.

There is a big difference between helping people personally versus helping through the state. I leave it to you to figure out personal aid. Here, I comment about aid through the state, especially aid through the state done in the name of Jesus' teachings.

America has real problems such as unemployment, health care, and racial discrimination. As long as we have these problems, we have to run some state programs such as welfare. We have to give through the state. We have to use the state as an instrument of the Golden Rule. I do not like this situation because it leads to enormous confusion and bad policy, but it is what it is, and we have to deal with it.

State programs do help people. They also turn people into dependants, hurt the character of people, encourage people to go down the path of bad character, encourage children to go down the same bad path as bad parents, and they hurt everybody else – the general welfare - in the long run. Programs encourage bad people to blackmail good people. For example, bad parents use children to force good people into giving bad parents aid so the children do not suffer. Children that might otherwise have been good parents follow the example of bad parents, become bad parents themselves, and teach the next generation to blackmail good people.

When we think of bad enabling, usually we think of programs for people such as welfare, food stamps, and disability. In fact, much bad aid comes through programs such as mortgage subsidies and tax breaks to help business firms. Middle class people, business firms, and "job creators" are as much the blackmailers of the general good will as are poor people. We enable dependent middle and upper class households and business firms as much as poor people. Overall, in the long run, programs to help business firms so as to boost the economy likely do more harm than other programs because of how badly they distort the economy.

Jesus would not want this. We have to find the right line between helping people who deserve it while not helping bad people and not causing greater problems. I am not sure how other countries do, but America has been bad at finding this line.

When trying to figure how much to help through the state and how much to leave alone through the state, when trying to figure out "what would Jesus do through the state", we have to not abuse the scriptures. We cannot distort scriptures to validate what we want. We cannot distort the scriptures to validate: "They are all abusers; don't help anyone except me and us". "We can only help people who would have made responsible good businessmen if only they had not fallen on bad times." "The poor deserve it; so screw them." We cannot distort the scriptures to validate "we have to throw vast sums of money at the poor and we have to give minorities first crack at jobs".

For example, I had a friend who wanted to interpret the parable of the Good Samaritan as a warning not to get in trouble and so to need state help because of your trouble. People can foresee trouble, and so people who get in trouble have only themselves to blame, and certainly they should not get state help. If you get in trouble when you could have avoided it, then you should not get state help. My friend is an independent self-reliant good-hearted fair American. The merchant in the parable who got hurt by bandits bears much of the responsibility because he knew where bandits were and should not have gone there. In the same way, poor people who do not work hard to get an education, willfully fat people, people who

do not exercise, smokers, bad investors, people who build houses where it likely floods or burns, etc. do not deserve help from the state. People who have children when they cannot support the children do not deserve state help. We should not enable them out of a false sense of goodwill and moral obligation. I agree with his conclusion but I disagree with him using Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to support the conclusion. The parable is not primarily about these issues and should not be distorted to apply to these issues. The parable does not teach us to evaluate the "enabled" or "deserving" status of a neighbor first. It teaches us to help personally with our own hands and our own resources. It does not teach us to help through the state. It does not teach us to avoid help through the state. It does not teach we should be angry because the merchant was an idiot to ride through country infested by bandits; it does not teach us to abandon the poor because they did not get a good education when they should have. If you feel my friend's conclusion is correct, and the scriptures support you, then you should be able to find support in other passages. If we want to use scriptures, we have to read them, know our own biased hearts, and think hard to figure out what is best. Jesus would approve of that.

Individuals and Equality; the Golden Rule (2).

I am an American, and Americans are often accused of putting too much stress on individuals. Modern democracy requires that we value each individual but, to make democracy work, we need not see each person exactly as Americans idealize individuals. I like the American stress on individuals but I want to put it in proper realistic perspective.

To stress individuals, we have to see all individuals as persons equally, with equal dignity, equal rights, and equal responsibilities. When we see individuals as equal in those ways, we tend to extend equality in other ways.

This extending of equality is not necessarily wrong but can go too far. Americans have tended to push it too far, especially since the 1960s. Americans overlook differences, even important differences in ability, talent, training, life history, family history, and earned station. No matter how equal before the law might be Mozart and some garage band banger, they are not equal in all ways. Some people are more adept at democracy than others. Some people are not adept at all. Some people are smart enough to make a good living in modern capitalism; some are not.

We have to find the right balance between the autonomous-dignified-legal-and-moral individual versus the fact of differences in real individuals, histories, outcomes, and the need for social organization made up of different roles. We have to do this without submerging the individual in some totalitarian idea of the good of the whole.

As part of stressing the individual, and as a value in itself, some Americans stress not just equal before the law, and not just equal in opportunity, but equal in outcome, as, for example, some Americans wish to redistribute wealth so that everybody is in the middle class range. I love equality but this view is too much stress on equality. While Affirmative Action was a good idea in the 1960s, it is not a good idea now, and it is an example of stressing equality of outcome despite the fact of bad results.

To better see the individual, and to avoid mistakes about the individual, it is useful to see how ideas of the individual and of equality can be traced to basic concepts, including the Golden Rule and its kin concept

“applies equally” (from Immanuel Kant). I repeat some comments here in the chapter on Confucius, where I also ask you to remember them for other religions and cultures.

Just as the Golden Rule does not mean to give indiscriminately, the Golden Rule does not mean to treat everybody exactly equally regardless of age, gender, talent, ability, achievement, power, family status, status in the state, or social rule. Yet it does tend toward treating people equally regardless of situation. We have to find how to treat people as we wish to be treated, fairly equally, while accepting good social relations that include differences, and without reinforcing bad distinctions. We have to find how to treat everybody almost equally without vaporizing all categories, especially useful ones. We have to find how to act in accord with useful social divisions while still treating everyone as we wish to be treated, as a person like us, without always treating people exactly the same. The West has been lucky in being able to find this right balance often.

A teacher does not treat students the same way he-she treats other teachers, and students do not treat the teacher the same way they treat other students; and this is all correct. Students who get to be the teacher later want to be treated as teachers should be treated, not as I-the-student is treated now. Jesus himself did not expect his disciples to treat him as they treated other disciples and as he treated them. Jesus did not treat his disciples as he treated God and as he expected God to treat him. We have to take relations and circumstances into account.

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean we use the Golden Rule as an excuse to reinforce bad unfair harmful relations and positions, such as a social order founded on wealth alone, fear, power, or on an economic system that reinforces wealth differences. On the contrary, the Golden Rule has an inherent push to equality. It forces us to think of other persons as persons just like us, and so to treat everybody on that basis. When we treat everybody on that basis, we tend to treat them equally with little regard to station, wealth, and power. Jesus reinforced this tendency when he washed the feet of his followers, hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes, ate meals with Roman soldiers, and respected poor people. Jesus pushed the tendency in the Golden Rule toward equality. Jesus pushed the Rule to its limits. Jesus pushed the limits of society by using the Golden Rule. We do well when we follow Jesus this way. This is why good Christianity fights against slavery when it can fight against slavery, and why good Christians see slaves, women, and “others” as full persons. The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, and the Taoist Chuang Tzu, did much the same.

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean to respect every way everybody wants to be treated and every social distinction. Some social relations and positions are bad, and should not be treated with respect, even when we can imagine we might be there someday. When haughty people wish to be admired, we don’t have to. When rich-and-powerful people wish to be obeyed, we might have to obey from fear but not because we act as if we know how rich-and-powerful people wish to be treated and we respect that as part of our common humanity.

This is why modern democracies stress the idea of “applies equally”, “equality under the law”, and “rule of law”. “Applies equally” means to make no law that does not also apply to you; if you want people to follow a law, you have to follow it too; if you don’t want to follow a law, you can’t expect other people to follow it either. “Applies equally” treats most people as if they were simply adult persons but it does accept some differences. “Applies equally” etc. are the institutional expressions of the fact that the Golden Rule is

based on persons and the Rule pushes toward equality but does not demand absolute equality. We don't apply the same laws equally to adults as to children, or to mentally handicapped people as to normal adults. "Applies equally" etc. allow the law to respect justifiable distinctions. "Applies equally" etc. are the right institutional expression of the balance between treating everybody as we wish to be treated, treating everybody equally, yet not treating everybody as exactly the same, still respecting important useful distinctions, but not respecting harmful distinctions. The West has been lucky to put the Golden Rule and its institutional expressions of "applies equally" etc. into our political life. Democracy would not have been possible without Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule, not even using only Greek ideas. It was only possible with Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule, combined with Greek ideas about "applies equally", combined with English ideas of fair play, and with English institutions.

Although I write as an American and I share the American idealization of individuals and equality, my background does not mean a stress on them is wrong. Democracy needs both stress on individuals and equality, and respect for fair and reasonable differences.

Different traditions, such as in Latin America or Asia, will put different "spins" on the value of the individual and the push toward equality but still they need both. Americans will be able to learn from the realizations of individual dignity and individual equality found in other places.

PART 6: Failing Democracy and Its Lessons.

Failing Democracy.

Democracy, even in America, likely has been failing since about 1900, and certainly has been failing at least since 1929 (Great Depression), more since World War Two (first proliferation of bad entitlement programs including corporate welfare), after 1973 (rise of the world economy), after the middle 1970s (entitlement defeats good citizenship), and heavily after 1981 (simplistic rightist backlash and more corporate welfare). We citizens have let down ourselves, our nation, the human world, and nature. Yet I urge people to act as good citizens. Why? Why not just "get yours"?

Before answering, it is important to make clear that America now has a combination of simplistic populist democracy and rule by the rich. Sometimes mass movements prevail, sometimes the rich, and often the rich use the masses to push the country where the rich want to go. Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and, sometimes, George W. Bush, are offered as examples of good rich people stepping up to lead the masses in a good direction. There are bad rich people who successfully push the country but I cannot list any for fear of law suit. It is not important to decide for sure whether rule by the rich or by mass populism dominates, and how it all works, but only to know that we have a mix of both.

The textbook answer to "why be a good citizen now?" comes in two parts: First, democracy might be a bad system but everything else is worse, so we have to support democracy.

This platitude is partly true. It is true if we compare democracy to anti-democratic systems such as firm monarchy, dictatorship, tyranny by a community, tyranny from political correctness left or right, rule by the rich, by religion, dogma, and by one group such as the Communist Party, Religious Right, business firms, or soccer moms. The platitude is false if we compare the real democracy that we do have to better forms

of democracy that are not merely idealistic and could be practical and real. The platitude also is false if we think we can do better under another system such as mild fascism in which we get security from the state, we are allowed to carry on business fairly freely, and the state protects our ethnic or religious group from falling too far down.

I favor the original view of the Founders, representative democracy where the country is run by an elite group of natural aristocrats who are smart, educated, and experienced. I do not discuss alternatives to our current version of democracy in this book because this book is not about that and because people are not likely to revert to the Founders soon. I do discuss alternatives in essays apart from this book.

Second, democracy is messy, complex, and full of gassy ferment. People have many stupid ideas and half-smart ideas but also have good ideas. Eventually the good ideas rise to the top; people will know good ideas, and will use primarily good ideas to govern well. Good leaders will emerge as champions of good ideas. The “masses” are “creative chaos” out of which goodness and truth magically emerge (see the chapters in this book on Issues and Romanticism). Any attempt to channel the masses and to instill better democracy necessarily suppresses all goodness and all truth. Even the representative democracy that I prefer is too much stifling.

This second answer too is more false than true. We have deep problems yet we have done nothing definitive to deal with them. We won't face them and deal with them. Goodness, truth, good ideas, and good leaders do not magically emerge. Populism failed. The rich have not stepped in to provide good ideas, programs, and leaders. The rich have floundered as much as the masses. So, instead, people seek dogma and security. The rich seek security and they offer the masses the dogma that helps the rich find much security and the masses find enough security. The masses are not ideal creative chaos from which goodness is guaranteed to emerge and prevail. Too often, the masses are nasty chaos from which bad state programs and bad leaders have emerged. Before about World War One, we might have gotten by with this simplistic myth of truth and goodness magically rising from populist democracy, guided by the rich, but the world now is so hard that we cannot get by this way anymore.

To support our inferior system of simplistic populist democracy and guidance by the rich is to betray the truth and all the people. As with the hypocrisy that says every culture and ethnicity is equally adept at democracy, we can no longer afford hypocrisy about democracy itself, and likely already it is too late.

Here is why I support good citizenship anyway. First, the people who make good citizens in a struggling plural populist-plutocratic democracy are the same ones who make good neighbors in almost any system. They are the people who might ease us into a more decent future. Even if populist-plutocratic democracy does not work, I want these people to prevail. Only if we have many of them could self-government work. It is worth cultivating these people so we have good neighbors, in the hope that self-government can work, and that good people can prepare us for the future.

Second, even if democracy does fail, and the world suffers, that does not mean we personally should not act morally and should not try. Good personhood and good citizenship are good in themselves. The question is not whether to try but how to try in our particular arena. This situation, this question, is at the heart of every good detective story: how to be a moral person in an immoral or amoral world. We should go down fighting. We know how to act well, and we should act well even in a world where decency never

prevails. Don't fool yourself that this stance is glorious sacrifice in a Romantic lost cause. You are not part of a rebel band fighting the evil empire. You are not a Klingon in glorious battle. You simply see what is right and do it as best you can.

Since I was a child, I loved populist democracy and thought it one of the most sacred things on Earth and in human life in all of human history. One of the hardest tasks of my life has been accepting the failure of populist democracy and the failure of many of its institutions. This realization is much deeper than feeling that "Washington stinks". For decades, I resisted this truth and I hoped.

What is Wrong Now.

I can't explain in detail what is wrong now. I mentioned some of it above. Not facing issues is cause and effect. We don't face big issues because we feel democracy is failing and democracy fails because we won't face big issues. I cover what is wrong in more detail in essays outside this book.

Much of the problem comes because we do not have good representative democracy in which people of ability and experience guide us. We have mass populist democracy in which most voters are not adept citizens and so are prone to dogma, bad voting, bad policies, avoiding issues, and following bad leaders. People of wealth and power lead the nation mostly for their benefit while making the people feel as if the people lead. Amazingly, in the past, people of wealth and power often did a good job. In seeking their benefit they also helped the country; they knew their benefit depended on the welfare and security of the country. America got by this way until the middle 1970s. Even present populist-democracy-led-by-the-rich-and-powerful would not be so bad except that the world is too difficult even for people of power and wealth. People of wealth and power are no longer good enough leaders for a country like America in the modern world.

Regardless of particular times and issues, democracies always tend to fall into a bad pattern where the mass of people are not adept citizens and bad demagogues arise. Plato and Aristotle described it well 2400 years ago. America had this tendency too, and has had bad episodes, but was able to rise above the badness and return to a good track until about the 1970s. Because of bad problems, that we will not face and deal with, since at least 1929, America has slid into the bad pattern repeatedly and it has been continually harder to come out. We slid permanently into the bad pattern about the middle 1970s and certainly after 1981.

It is worth recalling the bad pattern. When faced with hard problems, interest groups spring up based on business, ethnicity, religion, occupation, and socio-economic class. Everybody tries to use the state as a patron. Groups turn good ideas into bad dogmas to use as tools. People turn to bad leaders. When the problems recur in various ways, people fear. As fear spreads and takes root, people press for even more populism, which they mistake as real democracy, and the pattern reinforces itself.

Democracy as such is not the root problem. The masses by themselves are not the root problem. Some forms of representational democracy are good under the right conditions. Good ideas that get abused as dogma, such as "fairness", "rights", and "freedom", are not the root problem. They get turned into bad dogma only in some conditions. Rich and powerful people are not usually the root problem. Some rich and powerful people have acted as good leaders throughout American history.

The conditions that spoil democracy arise when democracy faces problems that are too hard for simplistic populism guided by the rich. Democracy can spoil for other reasons, but this reason matters for us now.

Some conservatives see the root weakness of democracy entirely in populist democracy and criticize its role only, especially the mutual reinforcement of populism and bad dogma. They are not comfortable with the idea of simple rule by the people. I agree with them somewhat but conservatives rarely see other factors, in particular the deep underlying problems such as unemployment, bad employment, corporate welfare, and harm to nature. Liberals see the root problem in wealth and power alone. I do not deny that wealth and power cause nasty problems but they need not. The trick is to harness wealth and power for good, not to suppress them or govern them too much.

It helps to see if we make a black-and-white before-and-after contrast between an ideal imaginary world versus the real world.

This imaginary world never existed but people think it did: Everybody who wants to work can find a job and can make enough to raise a family. The harder you work, or the more ability you have, the more you make. While there are socio-economic classes, anybody can move up, or down, through his-her own efforts and abilities. People depend on each other in the way that the baker depends on the farmer for wheat for flour but nobody deeply depends on anybody else in the way that a slave depends on a master or the way that working people depend on the factory owner in a town with one factory. If you are not happy with this job, you can find another job or you can go start a farm. Just because nobody depends on anybody else in a bad way, people are happy to interact and form a community voluntarily. Because people form a community voluntarily, community is strong. People help each other spontaneously and freely. The problems are mostly those that nature throws our way such as drought, flood, fire, some failed crops, some diseases, etc. Everybody can understand every problem. Not everybody can think of the best response to every problem. But, somebody always can think of the best response to a problem. The rest of the people can understand and weigh proposed solutions, and, eventually, accept the best solution and accept the leaders who offer the best solution. The best and brightest people are elected and-or appointed to public offices. The people in general can recognize the best and brightest among them and will send the best and brightest to public office. People do form groups, and sometimes people do compete as groups, but people can overcome group allegiance when they have to. People can see when group allegiance hurts the overall welfare of the nation, and will leave groups, or put down groups, when that happens. Everybody has as much education and knowledge as a citizen needs.

Into this ideal, inject some real facts:

-People are no longer fully independent. They need jobs, and they need good jobs. You cannot leave this job to go to another job at will. If you don't like working for an employer, you cannot start your own farm or your own firm. People feel dependent, constrained, and nervous.

-Real problems come up that have to do with the way things run, that are hard to understand, and hard to fix: the business cycle, unemployment, and bad employment. Some people cannot get work at all, or cannot get work that allows them to raise a family well. If you can't find a job, you starve. If you can't find a decent job, your children starve. If you can't get a good job, your children are doomed to bad schooling

and further bad jobs. If you have a degree, you are not guaranteed a job; but if you don't have a degree, you are guaranteed not to get a job. Getting a degree costs enormous amounts of money. Medical care costs enormous amounts of money. Some people cannot contribute to the community, and feel bad as a result.

-People feel community within groups but not across groups.

-To be at a disadvantage is to risk total failure.

-People fear.

-Some groups have to take the brunt of unemployment and poor employment but that result is tolerable as long as the majority have a job to cling to.

-People now see life as a "zero sum game" in which what one group gains another group loses, and vice versa. To lose is to suffer comparative disadvantage. To suffer comparative disadvantage is to fail entirely for yourself and your family. Groups insist on having a comparative advantage at all times.

-People cannot understand the proposed solutions to problems. They cannot see the best solution to a problem and cannot see when a problem might not have a best solution or might not have a solution at all.

-Schemes abound. People choose schemers to lead. Rich people and powerful people see all this, and develop a system to provide the people with supposed leaders with plausible schemes.

-The rich and powerful people make sure enough people are well-off enough so there is not too much general unrest. Hopefully the worst effects can be confined to a few ethnic or religious groups. The rich and powerful people do what they can to lead the state well but even they are not up to the task. Their first concern is the welfare of their own kind although they do still try to lead the state well when they can.

-People, and business firms, think, if they can forge an alliance with the state, then they can be secure enough not to suffer comparative disadvantage, to gain comparative advantage, and so succeed. They seek relations with the state in many ways. They seek to be clients of the state.

-The state offers "breaks" to groups of people to make them feel as if they will be able to get by. The breaks include farm subsidies, deducting mortgage interest payments from taxes, and loans to small business. The breaks include tax breaks for large firms and finance for research for large firms.

-People and firms depend on access to the state. They believe everybody else has more access to the state than they do, and are jealous. If they lose access to the state, or other groups get more access, they will be at a disadvantage, and so risk total failure. People carefully scrutinize access to the state. People compete as socio-economic classes, ethnic groups, religious groups, and gender groups to gain access to good positions and the state.

-Groups turn morality and fairness from good ideas into bad dogmas. Groups use appeals to morality and fairness to get more for themselves, make sure other groups do not get more, and even make sure other groups get less.

-Good ideas become bad dogmas of all kinds. Groups, including business, become adept at turning good ideas into bad dogma to use as tools.

-Groups learn to blackmail the system such as by appealing to the plight of children and immigrants. Groups learn “double speak” to reframe situations in ways beneficial to themselves such as by calling all business people “job creators” and by using “pro” as in “pro life” and “pro choice”.

-The rich and powerful, and the leaders, use group jealousy and group competition. They give some groups breaks, threaten to take breaks away from other groups, and play one group off against another.

-Rather than think through this, or think through any issue, people concentrate on not seeing reality and concentrate on getting as much from the state as they can. “Get mine first” prevails. Nobody can think straight.

This end situation sounds like something out of ancient Rome or the chronicles of any decadent empire. It develops when people depend on a system for a living and cannot make it on their own; some problems come from within the system; some problems are hard to think through and solve; people turn to schemes and schemers; and people seek security through being clients of the state. These conditions are more common than the ideal conditions that lead to a good democracy. If we want to have a real democracy in a real world then we need to think about how to run that kind of self-government in that kind of place. This we have not done so far.

Democracies are set up to deal more with the first ideal situation than with the second real situation. At least since 1973 and the failures of the world economic system, democracies have not had the citizens, institutions, ideas, and leaders to deal with the real world.

Individuals, families, ethnic groups, religious groups, and gender groups are not the only miscreants or even the chief miscreants. Business groups abuse the system at least as much as the ethnic groups and welfare recipients that they vilify. Business groups began the system of being clients to the state and are its chief supporters today. Conservatives and righties of all kinds usually overlook this fact.

Repeat: If these Values Fail, Why Support Them?

The classic values of Western Christianity gave us not ideal democracy but real democracy that does not work nearly well enough in the modern world. Again: why should we support these values?

Soon, other half-democratic systems will evolve, and, in many ways, those systems will support prosperity and limited freedom better than failed American democracy. While we might call other political systems “half-democracies”, in fact, they are variations on fascism. China, India, Russia, and Brazil are examples. Those nations as a whole will prosper enough. People there can do as they wish as long as their acts are not too political, mostly limited to business, and do not undermine the ruling class. The prosperity comes

of that limited freedom. The ruling class makes sure everything works together. Some bribery and other corruption is tolerated as long as it supports the ruling class and does not undermine general prosperity. Tainted goods threaten China's reputation on the world market. China executes factory owners and-or operators who produced tainted goods, and the officials that took bribes to allow them to produce tainted goods. Not all groups within these countries can be prosperous but the central political elite are happy to put down the rabble who don't have good enough jobs. The business elite are happy that the political elite does this for them. These political-economic systems borrow from European Christian values and American democracy but, really, deeper values underlie them and make them work their way, systems such as Confucianism or Hinduism.

Why don't we adopt this other pattern and the values that go along with it? Why don't we become half-democratic mostly fascist? Now, many people might prefer it. That outcome is more likely than that we will come to grips with the problems of European Christian democracy, fix them, and so advance. If I had to guess, I would say this is what we will do, and embrace it as "Americanism". We will re-interpret our old values to make it happen.

I hope we don't do that. We can still salvage self-government based on old European Christian values. It can work, and it can compete in the world arena. In the hope that we still do this, I still support traditional values.

Rather than say the values of Western Christianity lead inevitably to simplistic populist democracy that is not up to the modern world, it is better to say one version led to that. The values of Western Christianity can give us more than one version of self-government and democracy. They can give us versions of self-government that are not simplistic populist democracy but are responsible representational democracy. Whether that better version is up to the issues of the modern world, I don't know. But I would rather try that version than most alternatives.

Lessons from the Failure of Democracy and from Our Failure as Stewards of Nature.

Good citizenship is not a slogan, ideal, or joke. It makes a difference. We really do need good citizens. To have good citizens, we have to work at it.

We need to teach good citizenship. Not all people, ethnic groups, religions, classes, gender groups, etc. are automatically good citizens just because they were born, are oppressed, or had oppression removed. We have to learn how to teach good citizenship. Then we need to do it.

When people in religions, ethnic groups, gender groups, etc. want, they can learn to be good citizens.

When people in general, and the people in all kinds of groups, become good citizens, we should value them highly. We should learn to reach across normal group boundaries to find good citizens. We can learn from them too.

We should not be afraid to denigrate bad citizens. They cause harm. We should not be afraid to blame groups that will not learn good citizenship or that practice bad citizenship.

We should face reality, not just the scenes offered to us by our right wing beliefs or left wing beliefs.

No Plan of Salvation here.

I can think of suggestions to help although I cannot think of any way to make all this better for everybody gracefully. Getting better will take pain and will take changing from simplistic populist democracy to good representational democracy. Usually the plans of the major political parties, religious groups, and ethnic groups are not what we need and would not work. We have to choose what would work and what would go together. That is not likely to happen soon. Here is not the place to offer specific suggestions. I do that in other work.

03 Evolved Human Nature

PART 1: Introduction.

This chapter can be short (30 pages) if you need only the basics of evolved human nature. Portions that you may skip are noted. “State” means a large political unit, usually a nation such as France, not a single state in the United States.

We need an honest realistic view of human nature to: (1) blend the ideals of Jesus with practicality and Western values, (2) assess stances from any source, (3) blend ideals from any source with practicality, and (4) build a just enduring state.

For an honest realistic view of human nature, we must accept that human nature evolved. We can't see human nature truthfully if we don't accept that we evolved sentience, intelligence, much of our character, and our abilities for religion, morality, art, social life, and political life. If we do not have an honest view of human nature, one that accepts evolution, we will make bad mistakes in government and religion.

As of 2016, what we know of human evolution is not enough on which to build good enduring economies and states, or to say why any religious stance feels right or wrong. We have to rely on wisdom from the past, experience, and our evolved ability to think. Still, knowing evolved human nature helps. What we learn of evolved human nature goes well with empirical-practical-yet-hopeful views.

This chapter gives some background on human evolution. This chapter does not find biological reasons for every quirk that makes us inept or adept citizens, able to see a particular religious vision or not. You have to fill in details. You have to use your evolved mind.

This chapter and this book assume: (1) (a) evolution is real, (b) humans evolved; (2) (a) God exists, (b) God created this world (through the Big Bang), (c) God made natural laws such as gravity, (d) set values for the laws such as the gravitational constant, (e) used evolution to create life on Earth, (f) used evolution to create people on Earth, (g) and used evolution to create life and sentient-moral-religious-aesthetic beings on other planets too. You can use most of my conclusions about human nature without sharing my view on God or evolution but it is up to you to say why human nature is as it is.

Morality and religion are part of our evolved human nature; they were not added on to our evolved nature. God did not reach down magically to make us moral and religious. God used evolution to give us genes for sentience, morality, religion, and art. God made sure evolution, and it alone, would be enough to give us the needed genes. After having set up natural selection, God did not reach down magically to override natural selection to add specific “super” genes for morality and religion. God would not interfere, and did not need to interfere, after he had set up a beautiful arena – Earth - in which life naturally evolved genes for sentience, morality, religion, and art.

I focus on the evolved capacity for morality and I touch on religion. “Natural selection” and “evolution” are the same here. I do not explain how they work. If you do not know how natural selection is an automatic process, then please read about it. A “Darwinist” is anyone who uses evolutionary theory, including most biologists and some anthropologists. Any account of human evolution needs much hedging. I give most of mine on the Internet rather than here.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) and David Hume (1711 – 1776) are relevant here and worth reading in the original. Both wrote clear short books summarizing major points. For specialists and for people who want to “really get into” the role of ideals in human life, please read Plato’s “Parmenides”.

Prolog on Evolution and Human Social Life.

People evolved genetically based capacities for morality and religion in general; people did not evolve the genetic basis for any specific moralities and religions such as the warrior code, Taoism, feminism or right wing ideology. We evolved few particular features of morality or religion “ready-made” or “hard wired” such as the desire to worship a Golden Calf. It is not useful to argue here about which features might be almost “hard wired” or almost entirely plastic (learned).

Some features appear often and are important in morality and religion such as the idea of a person, the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, giving back and forth, the idea that many things have “spirit” or “life”, and “us versus them”. Usually their scope is not the same between moralities, religions, cultures, and periods of history. Before and after Jesus, the West saw the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and “us and them” differently. All groups have ideas about borrowing from neighbors but groups have different ideas about what you can or can’t borrow, what you have to give back, and when. Instead of deciding whether any feature is hard wired or is the product only of a particular culture, I write about features in whatever terms suit the case, and don’t worry about that issue.

Rather than say people evolved to show features, it is more accurate to say people evolved to learn them. Genes give a general framework, some general features, a push to learn, and guides for learning; then learning fills in specifics. Learning “fulfills adaptive potential”. Genes guide learning. Genes and learning cooperate. Specifics come from a blend of learning and genes, such as the Lord’s Prayer, sharing open meals with first cousins but not second cousins, holding stories about the hearth to be sacred but not holding stories about the sky to be sacred, animal sacrifice, and giving gifts to water spirits so they return the favor. I do not explain why both genes and learning are needed, how they work together, and which is more important when. Rarely does one totally override the other.

Although some motifs run through most morality and religion, and we have genes for religion and morality in general rather than genes for any style, still we don’t learn general morality and religion. We always learn a particular style of morality and religion such as Taoism or the warrior code. We evolved to learn particular styles. Learning religion and morality is like learning language. We have a general ability to learn languages and we can learn any particular language but, except for a few gifted people, we learn only one language at a time. We get any particular style of morality or religion only by learning it on the basis of our evolved ability to learn styles. A particular style tells us when, with whom, and to what extent, to use motifs such as the Golden Rule, sharing, etc. A style gives us the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors typical of that style such as “don’t cheat on taxes”, “you can kiss a second cousin but not a first cousin”, or

“there is only one God and he is good”. Which styles we learn usually depends on how we grew up. We can change the content of a style, or switch to another, through learning, reflection, and choice. We can learn more than one style but not often at the same time. Learning morality or religion is less like learning to “stand up and self-move using two legs” generally, and more like learning to strut, OR sprint, OR run a marathon, OR power walk, OR stroll casually – but not all at once skillfully.

Human genes evolved in a social context. Most learning occurs in society. A strong lesson that people learn is a particular culture, with particular rules and values, such as American, French, Thai, or Yoruba. Even so, learning a particular culture does not simply override genes any more than any learning simply overrides genes. Genes are still important.

For a well-rounded full view of evolved human nature, we should see how genes, learning, culture, and society interact to form distinct styles of morality and religion under particular conditions. I can't do that here. I do not untangle nature, nurture, learning, culture, society, and conditions. I focus on how morality and religion work in light of evolution. If we can't do the whole task about genes, learning, culture, and conditions in one big blast, then we have to begin somewhere more limited, and it is useful to begin by taking evolved human nature seriously.

Mostly I use the short phrases “morality (or religion) evolved” instead of the following long phrases: (a) “the general capacity for morality (or religion) evolved”; (b) “the capacity for morality (or religion) results from a mix of learning and genes, evolved in a social-cultural context, and morality (religion) is learned socially-and-culturally”; (c) “the general capacity for morality (or religion) evolved but we learn specific styles of morality (religion) depending on how we grew up and what we choose”. The short phrase does not imply I do not know about genes, learning, culture, and situation.

“Do unto others” is short for the Golden Rule: Treat all people as you wish they would treat you, hope other people treat you as you should be treated (wish to be treated), and hope everyone treats everyone like that. “Applies equally” is short for: Treat everybody the same, with some provisions for age, social role, and ability; and rules apply equally to all people including you, your kin, friends, group, neighbors, and people outside your circle. If you wish to do something, you have to allow other people to do it, such as vote. If you wish other people to do something then you have to do it too, such as share and act honestly. If you wish other people not to do something then you have to accept that you can't do it either, such as lie, cheat, and steal. Treat everybody, and frame rules, as if everybody was a free adult person, who is valuable in him-herself, and can make up his-her own mind. Frame all rules as if they followed these guidelines. Act as if you follow rules that have to apply to everybody equally. I consider “do unto others” and “applies equally” to be aspects of the same basic idea. When a rule is framed along these lines, it feels like a moral rule. A rule can feel moral over the long run only if framed along these lines. “Do unto others” and “applies equally” require a fair amount of empathy and sympathy. They require that the doer be a person and imply that most of the others with which the person interacts are persons too. Ideas about “applies equally” came mostly from Immanuel Kant.

I am an anthropologist who uses Darwinism to explain human social life. But I do not write in that role. I write as a believer in God, follower of Jesus, Westerner, man, and one who accepts Darwinism. Because I believe in God, I differ from current official agnosticism in science, so don't take all I say as orthodoxy. The Bibliography cites works that represent current agnostic and atheistic thinking.

Repeat: The fact that the capacities for morality, religion, and culture evolved does not mean the content of any particular morality, religion, or culture is in our genes. No genes code precisely for pacifism, British fair play, French Rationalism, bargain hunting syndrome, fascism, Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, Thai culture, or American culture. Some genes code for the general abilities to learn any of those as specific abilities. Our general ability to play games evolved but the ability to play golf, poker, football, chess, “thrones”, serious flirting, or any particular game, did not evolve. Usually we learn and play one game at a time – nobody learns games in general or plays basketball-chess-golf-poker. Likewise, our general ability for culture evolved but the ability to act specifically Thai or American did not evolve. It is learned. People vary in ability to learn particular games. People vary in how well-suited they are to particular moralities, religions, and cultures and in how well they learn particular moralities, religions, and cultures. In this chapter, I do not assess any particular moralities or religions. I do later in the book. In this book, I do not assess any particular cultures but, in my real life, I do enjoy American, Northwestern European, Thai, and East Asian cultures.

Grant that people are animals, as I do. Yet still people are unique. We really aren’t just another animal. It is natural to (try to) say what is unique about people and to (try to) give a biological explanation for how our unique features arose. I do not do that here. Some human features are qualitatively distinct although I do not argue what those are. Most distinct human features differ from other animals in degree rather than kind. Even so, the extent in humans can amount to a difference in kind. Honest pet owners and honest students of animal behavior know that some animals - dogs, horses, apes - have a modest sense of morality but a sense of morality that is less than among people. The deep loyalty of some dogs is not evidence for full human morality; nor is chimpanzee abilities for offenses, grudges, revenge and make-up. Animals cannot learn all the styles of morality that people can learn and they cannot play all the moral games that people can play. Still, it is worthwhile studying morality in animals, and all abilities of animals, not only because the abilities are interesting in their own right but because they shed light on how our sense of morality evolved and how it works. I suspect we will not appreciate human abilities until we have a sense of animal abilities. All I can do here is point out what is important about human morality and how morality might be based in human evolutionary history.

Two Important Warnings, Repeated Often.

(1) Where an idea came from doesn’t matter. We can’t dismiss an idea because it came from another group or religion, old spouses, your opinionated brother, academics, or “them”. We can’t dismiss an idea as invalid, false, illusory, delusory, or stupid just because we evolved the ability to think the idea, including ideas such as “rocks are hard”, “trees are pretty”, “God exists”, “eagle sight is an adaptation”, scientific method, and morality. We should assess each idea on merits alone, including its likely truth and overall usefulness. Such assessment is not mechanical although there are guidelines. We have a valid tradition in the West for how to assess ideas; we should learn that tradition and use it.

(2) Avoid explaining away as “nothing but”, as when old psychoanalysis explained away sports, cooking, doing math, music, and yard work, all as nothing but sex in disguise. Explaining away as nothing but usually depends on reducing one thing to other things which are easier to explain, usually by seeing a big complex thing in terms of its parts, in terms of other things that we already know, and in terms of laws such as for gravity and electricity. Biologists reduce by explaining all features of organisms in terms of

how they serve success in natural selection. I favor adeptly done reduction yet I am leery of nothing but. Reducing is useful and often the only way to make progress, as when physicists explain a star in terms of particles. But reduction opens the door to explaining away as nothing but, and those mistakes can lead to traps, to seeing a thing only in terms of how it serves evolutionary success rather than also in terms of how it works, what it is, and its own logic. Reduction leads us to overlook the important features of things, and to overlook the independent reality of things.

Biologists, including some anthropologists, tend to reduce and explain away as nothing but evolutionary reproductive success these aspects of human life: morality, religion, friendship, cooperation, competition, culture, and society. Without doubt, we evolved the capacity for these things and they were shaped by natural selection. But they also have their own character, and we have to know each character, or we lose proper sight of how they work and of how they arose in evolution and were shaped by evolution.

Bonus: (3) (A) The opposite mistake to explaining away through reduction is explaining away as nothing but through “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. This error is more common now with ideas of self-order, complexity, links, systems, fractals, and nets. This explanation is a reduction too despite that it is about wholes, the people who use it do not see it as reduction, and it works sometimes. (B) Some anthropologists reduce and explain away human life as nothing but society, culture, or a system. They reduce and explain away even though they think they keep the whole, fight reduction, and fight explaining away. I don’t deal with (3A) or (3B).

We have to avoid two parallel opposite mistakes: (1) Since the 1920s, some social analysts have said: “Science is nothing but another social belief system, another ideology, determined entirely by society and only by society. Science is no more real than magic, superstition, or religion.” Messy human life does affect science practice but the idea is false that science is only a social belief system. Science really can approach truth. You can’t make a cell phone with magic or social rules. To avoid the second mistake, we need to keep in mind that: (A) Some ideas have an evolved basis yet (B) sometimes the ideas are still true. So, the assertion is false that (2) “Having an evolved basis automatically discredits an idea. Any idea with an evolved basis is nothing but a delusion or illusion, especially ideas of souls and God”. Both assertions are false reductions. Both are misused to avoid sincere debate about what is real, true, and useful. I think evolutionists who assert (2) don’t always see they act like social analysts who assert (1). Ideas with an evolved basis need not be like social “brain washing”. We cannot assess the reality of God as we do theories of gravity, and we can’t come to a definite conclusion about God, but still we can think and choose. The idea need not be like magic. Don’t be fooled by either camp. Use your head, and your intellectual heritage, to decide about particular ideas.

Ideals and Evolved Nature.

Some ideals evolution likely created as tools for evolutionary success, and the ideals do not exist apart from their use as tools. These ideals are illusions, or even delusions, but they can be important in human life, and we can cherish them. Evolution gave us ideals for family life, success, surpassing neighbors, wealth, power, and how great are me, my spouse, my children, and my group; but those ideals are not real apart from me and my imagination. It is not fully correct to reduce them to nothing but evolutionary practical success, but we don’t go too far wrong that way in these cases.

Some ideals and their objects exist apart from us. Evolution gave us the abilities to see them. Examples are scientific method, truth, logical accuracy, and the Golden Rule. We have to not reduce these ideals and their objects to nothing but anything, including nothing but culture, society, or practical evolutionary success (direct reproductive success and indirect reproductive success through adaptation).

Some ideals seem in-between such as Justice, honor, the Great American Novel, abstract painting, a good family, wonderful neighbors, true friends, and the perfect symphony, pop song, and sonnet. Likely there are real ideals for some art but not real ideals for romance novels, pop songs, and ethnic art. Luckily I don't have to handle this in-between case here.

Just because evolution led us to see an ideal does not mean evolution also led us to reach the ideal. Human acts are almost never perfect. People have to balance the success offered by the ideal against other kinds of success, and other success lead us to act against the ideal. We can rarely achieve perfect Justice not only due to accidents of life but because we seek other goals, such as security, wealth, power, dominance, and fame. Academics seek Truth but get confused because humans also seek security, power, fame, glory, etc.

We have to use our evolved intellects, and our long Western tradition of assessing ideas and ideals, to decide which ideals are merely useful illusions and which are real although the basis for us to see them evolved. We have not done a good job of this sorting lately.

Morality is an ideal that exists apart from us, which we cannot reach fully, but which is not unreal simply because we cannot reach it fully and-or because our basis for it evolved. Evolution gave us the capacity to see morality and follow it, but evolution did not make us able to follow it perfectly. Other needs compete. The pattern of how we actually do and do not follow morality can be explained well by referring to how morality evolved and how it served evolutionary success in our past. The pattern of how we follow morality cannot be as well explained in any other way. The facts that (1) we can't follow morality perfectly and (2) how we actually do follow it can be explained by our evolution, (3) do not mean morality does not exist apart from us. If we want to decide how real morality is, we have to use other grounds than whether we follow it perfectly, and that we evolved the capacity for it. We have to see morality in other ways than that we evolved a capacity for it. On the basis of my small skill with ideas, I conclude that morality is real apart from human sentience. I repeat these points.

What the Task Should Be and What It Is.

Suppose we had a list of human traits that affect us as citizens and affect our religious and moral stances. Ideally, I should relate traits to how humans lived when we evolved, and show how we still think and act accordingly. I can't do this task here. Instead, below, in Parts 2 and 3, I give traits that are rooted in our evolved nature and affect stances and citizenship. I do not justify my assertions much. In other writing, I hope to do more of this task and to give reasons.

Optional technical paragraph: (1) Some traits are intimately tied to sentience and likely are needed for sentience such as self-awareness, and the abilities to think logically, give reasons based on cause-and-effect, and stop a train of thought that is logically unbounded. (2) Some traits are tied to sentience but might not be needed for sentience such as abilities to imagine other sentient beings, sympathize, and

empathize. (3) Some traits are usually found with sentience but are not needed for it such as abilities for mathematics, music, and oratory. It is not clear which traits needed for sentience also have to evolve with sentience. (4) Some traits likely evolve with sentience whenever it evolves and they might be needed for evolved sentience even if not logically needed for “pure” sentience such as abilities to form intent, to read intent from cues, for generative embedded language, and for morality. Think of robots that are not given these abilities but still might be sentient. (5) Some traits likely evolved along with sentience whenever it evolves but are not needed even for evolved sentience such as sexuality, gender, and one-to-one-mostly-monogamous pair bonding; life on gas planets. (4 and 5A) Some traits that evolve with sentience might be needed for real sentience and might not be practically separable from sentience such as morality, the Golden Rule, and Applies Equally. (4 and 5B) Some traits that evolved with sentience might not be needed for sentience, even if they are often found with real evolved sentience, such as the ability to enjoy beauty. Much the same breakdown can be given for other important features such as the abilities for language, art, and morality. Ideally, I should be able to do all this with sentience and morality, and show how the various kinds of associated traits affect citizenship. This task is not even close to possible yet. So I skip it. Hopefully talented people will make progress on parts-or-all of this task.

Remaining Parts of the chapter are:

- PART 2: Some Basic General Lessons
- PART 3: Optional: Aspects of Evolved Human Nature.
- PART 4: Optional: Lessons from Nature and Evolution about God.
- PART 5: Optional: The Semi-Whole Self.
- PART 6: Optional: More Implications.
- PART 7: Optional: Evolution of Religion.
- PART 8: Optional: Evolution of Morality.
- PART 9: Optional: Needed Ideas about Morality.
- PART 10: Optional: Darwinian Explanation of Morality.

PART 2: Some Basic General Lessons.

This Part repeats from Chapters One and Two. Little is new. That is as it should be if evolved human nature accords with common sense and we really can mix the ideals of Jesus with practicality. For some people, this material is all you have to read. I mix facts and guesses.

Original Groups.

Humans diverged from our common ancestors with chimpanzees and gorillas about 5 million years ago, in Africa. From then, we lived largely by: scavenging meat; hunting small game; gathering fruits, shoots, and nuts; and digging roots. We lived as “hunters-gatherers” or “foragers”. We used fire by one million years ago. Over time, hunting overtook scavenging. We started hunting big game maybe 500,000 years ago. Modern fully human people appeared after 500,000 years ago and before 40,000 years ago. We have had horticulture (gardening) for about 15,000 years and have had full-blown agriculture, especially of grains, for about 6000 years. Farming is not the traditional human way of life. (See Internet for more accurate dates based on recent evidence).

While we were hunter-gatherers, we lived in small groups of 10 to 60 adults and children, mostly kin and friends. Small groups contacted other nearby small groups. People could move from one small group to another, usually as families but also as young adults or adults. Small groups formed clusters. Clusters overlapped (small groups could belong to more than one cluster) and interlinked to form nested networks. Boundaries likely were not rigid. I don't explain why we lived in groups at all instead of wandering about as individuals or small families, and why we lived in groups of particular sizes.

People usually married within their small group or between nearby small groups. People finagled for spouses from within their networks.

About as often as fights happen in big city neighborhoods now, individuals fought then, usually men on men and women on women, usually in the same small group. A guess: Less often than gang fights in cities, but still sometimes, groups raided other groups, usually out of their cluster and network. After we hunted big game, groups, clusters, networks, fights, and raiding got larger. True war did not happen until after the rise of gardening and agriculture with their concentrations of wealth and people.

People formed subgroups within small groups, or within adjacent small groups, for work, play, romance, friendship, trading, drawing, music, storytelling, dancing, sport, socializing, gossip, politics, moral suasion, and religion. Subgroups were made of kin, friends, and solid acquaintances. Subgroup members were both friends and rivals with other subgroup members. People could belong to more than one subgroup but not many. The situation might be like an old style small town or urban neighborhood. Evolving people had to deal with group dynamics from the beginning, at several levels, often with overlap and cross-cutting.

Natural Selection Shapes Behavior and Minds.

Natural selection shapes behavior-and-minds as well as bodies. This idea is hard for some people to accept but it is important that you do. Cats, dogs, mice, bears, bats, and people have different typical characters due to distinct evolved ways of life. This view does not discount differences due to particular genes and to learning; this view does overlook culture for now but does not discount culture; and this view does not remove legal responsibility. "Minds" and "behavior" mean "minds and behavior".

Our minds were shaped by our long evolved past as hunter-gatherers and our minds are suited to that evolved life. Our minds have not changed much in at least 40,000 years. Our minds were not formed to live in the world of agriculture, industry, capitalism, nations, bureaucracy, big business, big government, jobs, TV, movies, pop songs, processed food, the World Wide Web, identity theft, smart phones, media stars, and glamour. Our minds are quite adaptable but not infinitely adaptable. Nobody knows how much we still see the world as did our forager ancestors and how much their minds, our minds, shape how we live now. Although bodies changed since gardening and industry, minds did not. There is no "gardener mind". Gardeners use forager minds to make a gardener mindset. The same is so of the mindsets for tribal person, "working stiff", farmer, academic, business person, civil servant, and pop culture follower.

In part, our minds were shaped by the needs to make a living, defend ourselves, and build a shelter. In larger part, for at least 2,000,000 years, our minds were shaped by social interaction such as the need to find a mate and find friends. Human social life is deeply complex. It is harder to succeed as a social

human than as a forager. The bases for the skills do overlap. Hunters and social people need to assess if an organism is alone or in a group, how the group coheres, group strengths and weaknesses, how the group spreads or clumps over space and time, the intentions of various group members, who are leaders, who followers, who young, old, male, female, and other roles. Still, some tasks are harder in social life, such as judging coherence and intent. In 2016, no scientist knew definitely what skills were needed for what aspects of human life, what parts of our mind evolved to deal with material life or social life, and how much of our mind evolved what way. While our mental roots are in physical life, most of the evolutionary growth of our mind as humans had to do with social life.

What Counts as Success.

Success in evolution can be measured by “reproductive success”, by the number and quality of offspring, in particular the offspring that go on to reproduce, to have their own families. Some people have trouble thinking in terms of reproductive success and linking features of life to reproductive success. If you have trouble with the idea of reproductive success, then think of “practicality”, especially practical successful family life. Include social and marital success in practicality. Success in natural selection depends on practicality. What is practical, works; the impractical does not work nearly as well or fails. Reproductive success is practical family success; and whatever aids reproductive success is practical.

Success is measured by a practical outcome. Darwinists explain everything in terms of a measurable practical physical outcome. Darwinists reduce everything to nothing but a measurable practical physical outcome. I say often: this technique is not often bad and it usually leads to huge insight but it can also lead us to oversight and mistakes.

Darwinists explain traits by reference to reproductive success. Traits that led to more success in the past are typical of a population (species) now while traits that led to less success dwindled. Eagles with far-sighted eyes became typical of what an eagle is. Penguins that could swim well but could not fly well in air became typical of penguins. Penguins that insisted on flying in air disappeared. Eagles that insisted on pecking seeds disappeared. Darwinists assume that, if a trait matters in the life of a species now, then the trait likely led to reproductive success in the past, and likely still does now. Again: this way to explain is quite effective in its arena but it also can explain away and reduce traits to nothing but evolutionary practical reproductive success.

We are the Heirs of Automatic Natural Selection.

We people now are the descendants of humans who reproduced well in the past. Humans who did not reproduce well did not leave descendants to carry on whatever traits they might have had. The traits that are now human led to greater practical reproductive success in our past and often still do now. We walk upright now because those of our ancestors who walked upright well did better, and now the people who walk upright without too much back pain or too many hemorrhoids still do better. We now think in terms of right and wrong, spirits, beauty, and power because our ancestors who thought this way adeptly in the past did better than their fellows who did not.

Quality and Quantity of Spouses, and of Children and other Descendants.

Among people, quality matters as much as quantity. During our forager past, a woman had about five children over her life, of which two survived to have their own families. When you have only five children, and only two survive, you put a lot into those two. The same attitude reappears among modern people who worry about education, security, and activities for each child, and so have small families.

Although our ancestor mothers usually had only five children, sometimes they responded to conditions by having more, and sometimes more of the children survived. Our ancestor mothers had more children by: (a) shortening the time between births, (b) starting to have babies earlier, and (c) having babies later in life. Also, (d) grandparents helped their children to rear their own children (the grandchildren), so their children had more children (grandchildren), and so more grandchildren survived. (1) People have more children when food is abundant and danger low, especially when women walk less. These conditions lead to rapid population growth and so eventually undercut themselves; but, while good conditions last, families are big. (2) People also can have large families when life is insecure, and people have many children to make sure some survive. (3) People have large families because they need groups for labor, and-or to protect against uncertainty, and their children are the best source. (4) Social pressure to have large families. (5) People need a gang to insure safety, and the gang is best recruited from family. (6) People need to secure large resources intact, such as big parcels of land, and need a gang to do so. (7) Families that are large can secure large resources intact, the large resources require a large family to hold, the large intact resources can support a large family, and so on, in a feedback process. (8) The state picks up the cost of having and raising children, as with health insurance, paying for school, and welfare. (1, 2, 3) Sometimes people have big families because conditions are good, then conditions turn bad because of overpopulation, then people continue with big families because conditions are bad and insecure and they use big families to make sure some children survive.

People have smaller families (revert to smaller families) when: (1) It pays in the long run to invest a lot in each child, as when education secures children a steady high-paying job with benefits. Investment in one child precludes investment in others. (2) Women have to delay reproduction, for example to go to school. Women go to school for many reasons. (3) Women cannot continue to have children late in life because they have other needs such as a job, especially women have to protect children they already have. (4) Women cannot have children every few years because they have to work to provide for the children they already have. (5) The life of each child is fairly secure, so women don't need five children, or ten children, to make sure two survive. (6) Successful people have only small families and other people imitate them (usually rich or successful women have only two children but rich or successful men have more by other "wives" that do not appear in public and so don't influence society as much). (7) Social pressure to have small families. (8) Large families are not needed to keep large blocks of wealth intact, and, beyond a certain point, large blocks of wealth do not help much in producing many children. A woman can have only so many offspring in a lifetime regardless of how rich and a man can have only so many mistresses; even when we consider succeeding generations. (9) The fact that the state picks up some of the costs of children can also work to reduce family size but I cannot go into how that happens here.

People often use wealth, power, and fame to have big families when they can. The push to reproduce, and the urge to have multiple spouses, both shaped social life when conditions allowed. In our forager past, both men and women often had more than one spouse over a lifetime due to death or divorce but rarely more than one spouse at a time. Even in later (agrarian and industrial) societies that allow multiple spouses - usually multiple wives for men - the large majority of people have only one spouse at a time.

Usually only rich, powerful, accomplished, or conniving men have more than one “wife” at a time. The push, usually by only some men, to have more than one spouse at a time, and through the spouses to have big families, shaped social life when conditions allowed. In jargon, humans “have reproductive skew” both within and between sexes and humans are “serial monogamists generally with mild polygyny and occasionally with stronger polygyny”.

Now, with class society, different socio-economic groups can have different family strategies even within the same society. Middle class people and rich women have small families even while rich men and poor people have large families. Where socio-economic class is tied to ethnicity and religion, then family size, ethnicity, and religion can all overlap.

Often under horticulture, farming, and industry, people had big families because one-or-more conditions prevailed for big families. Immigrants to the US still have large families because they feel the bounty but do not yet feel the costs per child. In the long view, big families were a recent change due to horticulture and industry, and hopefully will be a passing trend.

The state can use attitudes toward children to guide us to a family size that suits world ecology. I strongly favor zero growth of world population. So, for example, the state can make people pay for school and health care for children after the second child, the state can limit welfare to women with only one or two children, and the state can refuse support to any woman who has children before the age of twenty three. I do not favor the state setting an upper limit on the number of children, as China did, until our world grows even more polluted and short of resources.

Focus on Individuals and Individual Self-Interest; No “Good of the Group”.

Reproductive success is the success of individuals. What counts in evolutionary success and natural selection is reproduction of individuals. Evolution happens through the success or failure of individuals. The reproduction of small groups of kin counts a little but not nearly as much. Reproduction of a whole extended family, small group, a cluster of groups, population, or species usually does NOT count. The small local group, and the local network of small groups, can matter a bit in the evolution of morality but that fact does not change the basic importance of individual reproductive success.

Natural selection does not directly protect the species; evolution is not about the good of the species; natural selection has no direct way even to see the good of the whole species; natural selection has to work through individuals. (I do not write about the importance of variance at several levels.)

Sometimes individuals do things that are good for their own reproduction but harm the species overall. A male langur (monkey) tries to kill all infants when he takes over a group of females, wasting years of work by the females in their children. Male Hamadryas baboons herd about half-a-dozen females in a personal “harem”, and sometimes the male assaults a female to control her, wasting large time, energy, food, and water, for him and the females. Biologists can explain such traits only through individuals each seeking his-her own self-interested reproductive success regardless of the group.

By using only individual reproductive success, Darwinists can explain very nearly all features of all life, including social groups such as bands, packs, herds, hives, and colonies.

This focus on individual reproduction comes from natural selection as an automatic process. This focus has been so successful for explaining that we have to accept it as the right view.

Even so, a focus on using individual reproduction to explain can lead Darwinists to overlook the intrinsic character of traits such as morality and can lead Darwinists to reduce features to nothing but individual reproduction in disguise. Individual reproductive success can explain most of how traits arose, are used, and are sustained in a population. It does not explain what traits are, their character, their logic, and how they work in themselves. What traits are etc. influences how a trait arose, is used, and is sustained. Of course, trying to explain what traits are can mislead us into metaphysics. But, still, as thinking humans, it is usually worth the risk. It is worth trying to think in both ways.

Because successful reproduction depends on individuals, organisms evolved to think and act in terms of themselves and to think and act strategically. The focus is on me, my reproduction, and what I do. Get the job done, do it as benefits me, work effectively and efficiently, don't worry too much about others, and don't waste much time or energy trying to hurt others. This biological focus on the self includes people. People are self-interested, as in economic theory.

It is important to see that self-interest does not prevent considering others, empathy, sympathy, or, even sometimes self-sacrifice. All these things can be part of self-interest, and all of them can occur as a result of traits in human nature that helped self-interest in our past, and still help self-interest now. People join a work team or join the Scouts out of self-interest, at least in large part.

Social groups arise out of persistent interaction between self-interested individuals. In a successful long-lasting social group, adept self-interested individuals see how their welfare depends on getting along with other self-interested individuals. Sometimes, for a while, the group can dominate the individual and force the individual to remain even at some cost. But, over the long run, among foragers, groups that harm individuals do not cohere and the group cannot dominate the individual so as to prevent individuals acting in self-interest. In our past, if the group did not help the individual and-or the family, the individual or the family simply left to join another group. Since the rise of gardening, and especially since class society of agriculture and industry, the situation is different.

The fact that individuals think in terms of self, and think strategically, is not the same as full-blown short-sighted silly un-strategic selfishness. It is better to say we are self-interested than selfish. Yes, there is a difference. Self-interest leads us to see when our interest and the interests of other people coincide, and leads us to cooperate for mutual gain and protection. Self-interest leads people to trade labor for food, or apples for meat. Self-interest gets people to cooperate to keep the hyenas, lions, and bad neighbors out of camp. People who insist on always getting the upper hand and controlling every interaction, selfish people, do not have partners, and so do not fare well. People leave them alone in the wilderness to fend for themselves, and they die, their families die, and their genes die.

Even with as much as we know now about our evolutionary past and about life before horticulture, non-biologists still romanticize pre-modern and non-modern life as peaceful, cooperative, never competitive, full of sharing, never selfish, not self-interested noble, kind, spiritual, in tune with nature, never greedy, never taking more than is needed, and always playing out in a comprehensive happy ecological-social-

economic system. That is not true. I would guess that foragers were not that different from us now when we are not in harsh situations that promote conflict or tyranny. Don't romanticize or demonize.

Competition and Cooperation.

The strongest driving force in natural selection is competition, especially between individuals of the same species, and this effect holds for humans. Wolf females compete to be dominant mother in a pack, and wolf males compete to be dominant father. Competition is between individuals. Competition focuses natural selection on individuals and competition gives natural selection much of its tone.

Our ancestors competed for food, water, shelter, mates, dominance, alliances, reputation, and leadership. People competed to show skill levels such as who could make the best spears or sing the best songs, and competed over good looks, forming cliques, greatest moral rectitude, religious knowledge, and ability to forge relations with spirits – much as we do. Besides direct competition, we competed indirectly by conniving, grudges, backbiting, gossip, lying, politics, framing, cheating with someone's spouse, cheating on my spouse, not helping, and excluding from groups. Natural selection and competition together left their marks as tendencies in our character. We often do our best when we compete and when we seek success and glory for ourselves and-or our team.

People also cooperated in finding food, in cooking food, sharing food, sharing tasks such as cleaning up, tending sick and injured people, doing tasks together that could not be done alone such as defending a large body of meat to be scavenged, finding allies, finding mates, protecting against predators, protecting against violence in the group, protecting against violence between groups, fighting people in the group, fighting other groups, participating in rites, rituals, ceremonies, and holy days, and encouraging morality. This cooperation too left its mark on our character. People are amazingly able to share and get together to do things. No other animal comes remotely close. Cooperation is what allowed us to conquer the world despite being puny humans. Cooperation depends on mutual self-interested benefit. Cooperation is a better way to compete.

Sadly, cooperation is plagued by cheating, lying, stealing, and slacking. If everyone else goes out looking for food, and shares what they bring back, why should you work? If other people will face off lions that come sniffing around camp, why should you be in the front? If your neighbor leaves dry meat hanging behind the hut while he-she goes off to arrowhead making class, who is to say the dog didn't take some? It is impossible to make sure everybody works hard every time at every task. Still, if people are to benefit from cooperation, people need ways to make sure others do almost their fair share of the work nearly all the time and other people can cheat only a bit.

So, not only do we need sanctions against cheaters, we also need to get other people to cooperate with us to sanction cheaters – we also need sanctions on people who merely tolerate. Not only do you have to (1) do your part, you have to do your part in (2) getting other people to act well, and you have to do your part in (3) getting other people to do their part in getting other people to act well.

Organisms, including people, compete directly and fairly for food and mates such as by getting to the food first, showing off, "showing skin", and fighting. Organisms and people also compete unfairly by hurting competitors. When a male lion takes over a pride, he kills off the young cubs already there, the children

of his predecessors. Male bower birds build big nests to attract females, often lined with shiny trinkets such as bottle tops and shells, and colored by fruit juices. Some male bower birds destroy the nests of other males, steal trinkets, and steal colored straw. At least one female chimpanzee, with her daughters, murdered the children of rival females. People mostly use the tools of social life to hurt competitors, such as slander, betrayal, spite, and backstabbing. Inflicting this kind of pain is most of the “action” in movies about mean girls. So, of course, humans also have to defend against spite. A lot of “keeping up with the Joneses”, being cool, hip, and up on trends in fashion, politics, art, religion, church, academia, and pop culture is about making sure others can’t slander us, our children, friends, and allies. Even more, humans imagine that others have committed unfairness against us so we have an excuse to commit against them. We also convince stooges that someone, actually our enemy, has wronged them so they will do the dirty work for us. That, too, takes up plot time in movies about mean girls. Some bugs and squishy animals have amazing ways to hurt rivals, too much to describe here, but, still, I would guess that humans have the greatest diversity of unfair competition. I am amazed at how people can think of all the scams that we see on TV news, and how writers can come up with devious ways for one character to hurt another or to get twisted revenge years after the initial badness. From now on, the words “cheating” and “lying” include unfair competition.

Unlike the modern state, foragers cannot appeal to a central authority, courts, and police to control liars, cheaters, thieves, slackers, and thugs. Foragers had to rely on local group dynamics. Scientists have developed a few ways to see how local people might solve problems for themselves. My favorite way is “game theory”. I cannot review methods. Because people do control cheating enough to cooperate, we did evolve some methods that did work in the past and still work now, even if not perfectly. Darwinists are not sure what methods worked in the past and what did not, what abilities we inherited, and how that still affects our thinking and doing today. Certainly we are sensitive to cheating. This issue figures large in theories about morality, to which I return later.

Mixed Human Nature and Societies.

Because cheating, lying, stealing, and slacking worked in our past, they left in us a few genes for those behaviors. We all have a sleazy bad potential as well as a good potential. Thankfully, most of the time, for most people, good overcomes sleazy bad. But, for all of us, sometimes, the bad sleazy does win out. Who has not committed petty theft, slacked off, cheated, or lied? We tend to be opportunistic. We do it when we can get away with it, and we have a hard time not doing it when we can get away with it. We are susceptible to temptation. We have to keep this fact clearly in mind for state programs.

(0) To fully appreciate the following idea requires a technical background that I cannot give here but the idea is important so please accept it. In the complex human social situation, many strategies can work partially, at the same time, even mutually conflicting strategies. No one strategy is best always. Think of a strategy as a character type. No one type always succeeds and so always eliminates all other types. For example, sometimes it is better to cooperate and sometimes it is more successful to let other people do the work while you gain from their effort. Sometimes it is better to tell the truth while sometimes lying succeeds. Sometimes it is better to respect property and sometimes more gainful to steal – with quick fingers, a six gun, fountain pen, or computer.

(1) As a result, in any society, different people have somewhat different characters partly due to genes. Some people are more honest and some more prone to lying. Some are reliable in a fight while others tend to run. Some people love risk while others hate it. Society is a mix of types.

(2) Likewise, inside, ALL of us have blended characters. Except for a few sociopaths and psychopaths, ALL of us have a bit of the stand-up guy, liar, Boy Scout, Girl Scout, cheater, seducer, thief, embezzler, sneak, good girl, bad girl, risk taker, security seeker, etc..

(3) ALL of us are morally imperfect by evolved nature, and people have been imperfect through all of human history. NONE of us was ever perfect, not in all human history. There was no perfect original Adam and Eve. Most of "it" is in there in all of us, including good stuff and bad stuff.

(4) Which characters prevail in a society, and which character traits prevail in each of us, depends on a lot of factors. Literature, movies, and TV do a good job of explaining the factors. Good moral education and other education can help make people and society better if the education is realistic, and is realistic to the times and situations of real people.

(5) We cannot be made perfect, holy, totally compassionate, etc. We cannot love our neighbor as God loves us and as we love ourselves. We can have glimpses. Whether a few people can achieve some version of perfection does not matter because the vast majority of us cannot. In other places, I say "no harangue can make us perfect".

(6) Do not work for perfection, do not lament human imperfection, and do not lament that we cannot be perfect. Instead work to be better and more useful. Fight badness in yourself and in general. Religion can help, as can other kinds of education. Do what you can with what you've got.

(7) As far as I can tell, slightly imperfect people are more interesting, and often more useful, than perfect people; but that is no reason to wallow in, romanticize, or cultivate, faults and naughtiness. All people have enough faults so we can do pretty well with the faults that we already have. See comments on morality below.

(8) Because most of human nature already is "in there" in varying mixes in all of us, you can get more in touch with bad parts if you want. If you have never felt all the bad parts, or the depth of bad parts, then getting in touch with them can be a thrill. But that doesn't mean it is good in the long run to dwell in bad parts – even for you. Feel it, and get it over with. If you feel the need to dwell in the dark side, ask why, and what good it is. See chapter on Romanticism.

Use common sense about human character and avoid superficial stereotypes. Basically, all the common traits that you see, excluding mildly bizarre traits, have an evolved basis. People modify evolved potential through learning, especially social learning. Social learning does not end genetic influence. We can change our character through choice and education. We can get better. We can't be perfect.

Cooperation does not automatically end all individualistic competition. Likewise competition does not require only isolated individuals out against all other isolated individuals. People can cooperate to better succeed, as in cooperating to do tasks or in trading; and, in that case, cooperation is best seen as a way

to compete. A team consists of people who cooperate so as to better compete. People who cooperate with little obvious competition in one arena, such as gathering fruit and nuts, compete strongly in other arenas, such as for mates.

Contrary to myth, big nasty people, who are ready to beat the crap out of anybody, did not do well in our past, and our minds are not evolved to seek that tactic consistently. People like that did not have many friends, could not do well enough on their own, and mostly died out. Bitchy conniving manipulative backstabbing people also did not have friends and mostly died out.

With both sexes, likely the person who did best got along well, led by example, did not criticize harshly, and could form teams to do things. This person had good ideas, ideas that did not strongly favor him-her over others. This person brought out skill in others. Sometimes he-she inspired, as with Jesus, Gandhi, Churchill, and John Kennedy.

Once some good people get good things going, then bullies and connivers can take advantage, and so bullies and connivers never totally disappear. Force and conniving can have a role but are they only two abilities among many.

Sometimes in hard situations we need forceful people but not all the time. In the movie, “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”, what works is a mix of Jimmy Stewart (lawyer) and John Wayne (honest tough guy), and what doesn’t work is Lee Marvin (sadistic bandit). Maybe Ben Cartwright from the TV series “Bonanza” is more accurate. We should ask why we now in the 2000s glamorize big nasty dominators, or bitchy connivers, rather than admire people who really were most useful in our past and still are most useful now.

Contrary to more myth, foragers did not often fight hand to hand, and the “winner” of conflicts was not the one who “had the strongest kung fu”. That kind of fight did not happen even in the American West or old China. If two people had serious problems, they moved away from each other if they could. If two people knew a fight was coming, one ambushed the other in the back. This action is not honorable and romantic but it worked. It worked in the Wild West too but it was usually done with a rifle or shotgun and a shot to the back – not pistols at four paces. In old China, likely it was arrows in the back.

Contrary to yet more myth, girls, lasses, and women all compete, sometimes nastily. That is what “Mean Girls” and “Bring It On” are about. Also, boys, lads, and men all cooperate. That is what team sports are about. That is what military units and business units are about. What is typical of male cooperation and/or competition, typical of female, and common to both, is a big touchy subject, is plagued by myth and PC of Right and Left, and so I don’t open it here. Even Darwinists get confused.

There is no consensus for how cooperative, competitive, honest, cheating, hard working, or lazy people are in general; of where the balance lies in general.

How much, how, and when people cooperate, compete, tell the truth, do as they say, and work hard, or instead people cheat, lie, steal, slack, etc., depends on culture and society, conditions such as availability of food and mates, and the history of cooperation and grudges. In a group with a good history, the good continues; in a group with a bad history, the bad continues. When food is gone, people eat neighbors, as

when Jerusalem was besieged. When America boomed in the 1950s and 1960s, we all loved each other. In modern states, usually the balance depends on institutions such as whether you live in a democracy or tyranny, have many political parties or a few or one, belong to a particular ethnic group or religious group, depends on ethnic and religious relations, whether you are an owner or worker, are in a labor union, your in-laws deal drugs and have police records, etc.

Limits of Human Foresight, the Greater Good, and Useful Institutions.

People are self-interested. As hunter-gatherer-foragers, our social horizons originally ended about at our cousins, local group, speakers of our dialect, and respecters of similar spirits. Our ideas of common tasks were picking fruit and vegetables, a small cooperative hunt, gossip, and some shared moral fervor, some anger, some scheming, and some fear. The whole world was fifty miles (eighty kilometers) across. The world changed too fast to think in frames larger than a few weeks for “now”, and larger than a few years for an “average”. Modest cooperation usually coincided with self-interest but self-interest rarely led our ancestors to heroic self-denial for the greater good. We did not think grandly except in myth and religion. Anyone who thought grandly as a habit likely did not take care of business close to home and did not leave enough descendants. This is our nature, developed over millions of years, and a few thousand years of civilization and science have not changed it.

For these reasons, not because people are rabidly selfish, people now struggle to put the greater good above self-interest except in obvious cases. Even when we hear valid arguments about common good, and how a little sacrifice now can help all children later, we don't take the chance. We prefer to get ours soon in ways that we can see and feel. We see that; we just don't see anything bigger. This view is not irrational, stupid, selfish, nasty, demonic, fallen, or perverse. It made sense for hunter-gatherer-foragers. It made fairly good sense in gardening, herding, and agricultural societies. It worked in a lot of situations in industrial and capitalist societies. It does not work well in enough situations now and it is not enough now on which to build good societies.

We can make institutions to help us see farther, and to help cooperation while reducing competition and cheating; but we cannot make everyone Abe Lincoln or end competition and cheating. We do a lot better when we accept real human nature and we build on that rather than see humans as horribly depraved or see them as able to deal instantly with every issue of politics, economics, and ecology.

We don't want to end competition. Competition provides great benefits and competition helps people sort themselves out by ability, training, and character. We can channel competition to mostly good ends. We cannot force all competition into only good ends. Competition creates some badness in human character and human life but not all the badness, and likely only a small share of the badness. Most of the badness is there in itself because it succeeded in our past. Competition can create huge benefit.

Despite the great ability of people to cooperate, modern institutions that depend on good will and good social feelings rarely succeed well, and the oversight needed to make them succeed well is so expensive that it undermines the total of good that we get from the programs. Institutions that accept competition and self-interest, and harness competition and self-interest, do much better. Idealized socialism and communism don't work. Welfare for individuals can work but has to be managed, and it has to accept that people connive for self-interest regardless of society. Welfare for business firms does not work.

Fascism can work because it blends competition and cooperation but fascism hurts humans. Modern state programs for children can work because they are usually low cost for the benefit, and competition can be managed by adult supervisors. Sesame Street, Head Start, and breakfast and lunch at school are bargains. But even here, programs for children don't work if the programs ignore natural competition between children. Capitalism works well when it approaches the ideal: competition leads to lower prices and better goods, people earn according to ability and effort, no collusion between business firms, no one firm or group of firms dominates a market, there is enough so everyone can get by, world ecology is not in peril, the system does not cause increasing gaps in wealth and power, wealth is not a force in politics, and the whole is well regulated. If all these conditions hold, we can be quite lucky. If we can preserve them, we are wise.

Institutions that rely on intense competition and strong order can work during times of hardship but not for ordinary life, and they warp our nature too much. Sparta worked but it was a bad place for most people. Fascist capitalism and market-only capitalism can work but they distort humanity and society too much, and market-only capitalism is not really that but really fascism in disguise. Stalinism and Maoism were intensely competitive despite the ideology and so were bad on both sides of the coin – unreal ideals of cooperation with rigid state order and tacit intense competition.

Biologists tend to see cooperation as a roundabout way for individuals to compete. They see groups in terms of interacting competing individuals. Groups form and persist because they serve the self-interests of competing individuals. Individuals cooperate and they care for other individuals so as to serve their own self-interest. That does not mean there is no cooperation or caring, but cooperation and caring are not the primary reason for groups, and are not tied up intimately with the essence of group life. However much goodness arises, however we see goodness, depends on particular cases. Biologists usually don't judge goodness in non-human groups.

In contrast, anthropologists and sociologists too often see individualism and competition as unusual, even deviant and bad. From the 1960s through even now, anthropologists and sociologists saw competition as entirely due to a social complex based mostly around capitalism and the domination of White Men over all genders and ethnic groups. Caring cooperation is the typical human way in standard society. Living in a non-capitalist society automatically leads people to follow social rules and those social rules automatically promote coordination, cooperation, caring, and welfare. Anthropologists and sociologists see individuals in terms of a place, a role, in social wholes; they see individuals as made by social wholes. In contrast to human social life for most of human history, modern capitalist society is deviant and bad, and it makes all individual people deviant and bad.

I don't have to argue out this issue here but I do fall on the side of biologists.

Success is Comparative.

Success is comparative. Competition is comparative. It is not a matter of how well we do by ourselves, it matters how well we do compared to others. If Betty always gets one rabbit a day but Sally gets two deer a week, then, in the long run, Sally does better than Betty. If Rose has 4 surviving children while Kate has only 2, then, over the long run, all the people will consist of Rose's descendants.

On the other hand, if Rose has 4 surviving children, the children could have more trouble finding food and mates, so have only 1 child each, and Rose will have only 4 grandchildren. With 2 survivors, all Kate's children all find food and mates, so have 2 or 3 children each, and Kate will have maybe 5 grandchildren. In the long run, Kate does better than Rose. It is better to do a little better than others but we have to be careful of ruining our own success.

As a result of comparative competition, we evolved to watch how other people do, and we evolved to compare us to them. We evolved to notice, seek, and imitate successful people. We "keep up with the Joneses". We evolved to imitate the trappings of successful people, so that if they use un-marbled flint to make tools, we use un-marbled flint. We evolved to look down on people who do less well than us and less well than the average, and to not do what they do. We evolved to make sure we are not associated with losers. We evolved to adopt or eschew clothing, trinkets, mannerisms, and other markers so we (think we) look like winners and we (think we) don't look like losers. We follow what others call winning and losing, rather than make our own standards. The comparative aspect of competition and success can put an edge on competition and interaction. Likely, comparative competition is the strongest weapon of the advertising industry. It can lead to fads such as fashion and to runaways over big houses, big cars, big boobs, big penises, and big business firms.

Means and Ends.

Reproduction does not happen by itself. Successful reproduction needs food, warmth, clothing, housing, mates, sex, friends, partners, helpers, safety, and a good social life. Emotions and intellect both play their role in the right proportions that work. Art, including telling stories, sports, religion, morality, a good name, appealing looks, and achievement all can help get us a good social life, food, etc. They are means to greater reproductive (evolutionary) success. As such, natural selection would keep them around, and they are a part of us. We seek them. We are susceptible to them. Natural selection would keep them around to the right extent that they help us without hurting us. We seek the right amount of expression and we seek the right balance between all of our means.

We evolved to seek means to successful reproduction in themselves even when we do not see the link between them and reproduction. They take on a life in themselves. Ordinarily in our forager past, people kept them in perspective and did not get side-tracked into them too much for their own sake. Anger can be useful but not too much. Thinking out can be useful but not so much that we never act. In present life, we can get side-tracked into means-to-and-end and forget their role in contributing to successful family life. (In technical jargon, inclusive fitness (reproductive success) is the ultimate goal while the various means to inclusive fitness are "proximate mechanisms" or "proximate goals".)

In the modern world, wealth, power, fame, and glamour (beauty) still can lead to reproduction, and it is clear that people seek them. Regardless of reproduction, people often seek the goals for themselves. Yet in our forager past, people could not amass wealth or power. Few material goods lasted long. Power was getting other people voluntarily to go along with you; people did not order or dominate. Modesty was as important as fame. Beauty was short lived. Still, modern lusts for power, wealth, fame, and beauty are so strong that it is hard to believe they did not play a role in our evolutionary history. It is hard to believe lusts for power, wealth, fame, and beauty do not have a strong genetic basis. I think they do. Darwinists are working on the issue. Because the issue is not clear, I don't make more of it here. I do stress that

people lust for power, wealth, fame, and beauty in themselves regardless of reproduction and of effects on family life and community; and the lusts often lead us astray.

A good way to see the means that help reproductive success is through acts, attitudes, and ideas to which humans are commonly susceptible. What-we-are-prone-to likely worked in the past and likely left in us genes that make us prone to it. We are susceptible to fatty foods, sweet foods, burned meat, clean huts, good smells, handsome people, beautiful people, pulchritude, sex acts, promises, promises of sex, promises of support and fidelity, gossip, art, stories, religion, morality, conniving, coalition forming, coalition busting, power, fame, some wealth, lies, flattery, intimidating, getting intimidated, trains of valid logic, and trains of not-so-valid logic. We are tempted by all those. People can talk us into them. We can talk other people into them. If you don't like the term "susceptible" then you can use "enjoy" but the term "enjoy" doesn't get across what happens when we buy an unreal political promise because we want to support it for other reasons or take a drug because we want to be "out of it" for a good while.

Susceptibility and Control.

Because we are susceptible to beauty, power, wealth, artistic ability, etc., people can use these things to control us to their advantage and we can use them to control other people to ours. We are susceptible to words, so people can successfully lie. We want sex, so other people can use offers of sex to control us. We want to be on the winning side, so people can use offers of "join us to tip the balance" to control us. We do the same to them. People evolved to use the susceptibility of others to their own advantage regardless of advantage of others, and often to the harm of others. People evolved to manipulate other people by using natural openings.

For most of the things to which we are susceptible, we also have resistance. The amount of resistance varies. We do not have much resistance to things that we would have met rarely in our forager past, yet had a high value, and, during our forager past, had little downside. We evolved to get as much of those as fast as we could, such as fatty foods, sweet foods, and sex. We resist things that had a big downside and that we met often enough, such as lies, sexual cheating, and power grabs.

We resist being controlled. We want to gain as much from being led as we would gain if we did nothing or did something else. Yet because the original thing has both value and dis-value, such as words and lies-as-the-misuse-of-words, we cannot get rid of susceptibility, using susceptibility, or resistance.

It is reasonable to ask "which side wins" but there is no constant answer. It depends on the people and the situation. In the modern world, fatty food, burned meat, and sweets win "hands down" over meager intellects and stern doctors. In lying, people that want to know the truth as it relates to them usually are a little ahead of liars, but not much. Human lie-detecting is a little ahead of human lying, but not much. As we see during every political election, liars still do well enough so we need not fear that lying will vanish from the human gene pool. People usually can tell, eventually, when a romantic partner is cheating but not always and not always fast enough to head off damage.

It is reasonable to ask whether, overall, people are more honest or more conniving. Do we tell the truth more often than we lie? Does our truth-telling overall cause more good than our lying causes harm? As far as I know, there is no measure. I guess that people are overall much better than worse, and do more

good than harm. Of course, if you have been the victim of harm, or have led a hard life, or you like all the fashionable “noir” in pop culture, then feel free to disagree.

Self-Deception.

People that use the susceptibility of others to control them do not always know that they do so. We lie to ourselves too. When we pledge undying love, we think we actually mean it. When we fake interest in the work of a would-be paramour, we think we actually mean it. We talk ourselves into cake or chasing our neighbor as much as our gracious host talks us into eating cake or our neighbor lets us chase her-him. Because self-deception is so common in the game of susceptibility, using, and resisting, we cannot get rid of it either. We cannot be fully honest and open even to ourselves.

Keep in mind that the game is played over morality and religion. We evolved to yield to moral argument and religious visions. We evolved to produce moral argument and religious visions not only from direct experience of truth but also to control the ideas and acts of other people. We evolved to be skeptical of moral arguments and religious visions – from other people. We evolved to be very confident of our own moral argument and religious visions. I suspect we evolved to assert our moral and political opinions often, loudly, regardless of evidence, and regardless of much real logic. We evolved to spout. Often the producers of moral argument and religious ideas do not know themselves whether they produce visions and arguments out of belief in truth or out of compulsion to say something that people will listen to and act on. I think we more often want to assert ourselves than we witness for the truth. Out of this game, we have to find the most accurate and useful morality and religion.

The game of being susceptible, using susceptibility, resisting, and self-deception, was a strong force in the evolution of the multiple talents that we label by the one simple term “intelligence”.

Because of the role of this game, including self-deception, I return several times to the ideas, especially with religion, morality, and politics.

More on Limited Horizons; Us and Them.

Natural selection is a short term process and it is focused on individuals and-or small groups. In our past, all the reproduction that mattered happened within three generations at most, usually one generation, and took place in our small group and its near neighbors. People did need a few other people to help find food, feel safe, and reproduce but didn't need a lot of others. Key players were self, spouse, immediate family, near family such as siblings and grandchildren, and close friends who helped us and to whom we gave help. Still now, people think in terms of me, my family, and near group. The typical time horizon is weeks. The typical distance is the neighborhood. People have trouble thinking of next year, the next decade, the next century, general humanity, economies, states, all the groups within states, ecosystems, and planets. We need good honest capable practical leadership to be able to think this way.

We tend to think: if it is going well now, it always will be like this, and we should exploit good conditions as hard as we can as fast as we can. We think: if it is going badly now, something is wrong in our group relations, with our leaders, or in our relations to the spirits; we have to act now to make it all better again. We have trouble assessing causes and their scope. We reject leaders that tell us what is true but that we

don't want to hear. We accept leaders who tell us what we want to hear even when it is false. Prosperity is always just around the corner. Again, we need good leaders and good ideas to get us over this constant yearning for silly pie in the sky. Because this kind of yearning is not realistic, it seems evolution would have selected it out of us long before now, yet it is still common. Many such unrealistic thought patterns remain in humans such as glamour. Among the remaining open questions in theories about the evolution of human character is the persistence of silly obviously impractical ideas.

People tend to think in terms of "us and them" on several levels as the situation warrants: individual me against other people; my family against other families including the families of my siblings; my extended family including the families of my siblings against the other families in the group; my group against other similar groups; and a few groups made up of related people and friends against other groups within which we have few kin or friends. Within "us" relations should be kindly, that is, people should act toward others as they act toward kin: "we are all family now". Toward "them" the quality of relations depends on what is at stake, what the risks are, the balance of power, any ties between groups such as marriages, and on the history of relations.

Now, people can extend "us and them" to cover relations between ethnic, religious, or political groups but usually in a selfish way rather than friendly way. Sometimes, people can extend "us versus them" to large blocs such as in elections.

In our past, people thought in terms of groups but likely not in terms of groups based on religion, ethnicity, and region. People lived on too small a scale for religion, ethnicity, and region to matter much. Modern people are able to extend group thinking in those ways. Yet people still tend to activate group thinking mostly in arenas of small groups of us against them or us with them, as when gay bashers go after one or two "queers", one clique goes after another as in academia or in the movie "Mean Girls", a few terrorists attack a school bus full of defenseless children, or our church gets together to help victims of a flood. The media have helped both kinds of extension.

(In my version of human evolution, which I do not stress here, differences in wealth, power, class, area, ethnicity, and religion came into play. Modern people put them into play now because, when we evolved, they were relevant, and we keep the ability to work with them. They are part of our character. I think fully modern humans evolved in a situation more like the tribes and chiefdoms of the Pacific Northwest Coast of the United States than like the foragers of the Kalahari.)

Competition, or lack of competition, between groups is not the only large force that determines if groups have good or bad relations but it is one of the biggest forces. It might be the force about which the state can do most by reducing it as much as possible.

If people think the pie is limited, and the pie is not enough, then people form groups to compete to make sure they get enough. If you can succeed only by being in a gang, even a gang as big as a whole race or religion, then you join a gang and you stay in. You also make sure all others are in a gang even if they don't want to be, so you know enemies and friends. Once groups form this way, it is hard to disband. The situation can be worse if people believe the piece is not enough not because it really isn't enough but because some people take a much larger share than they need or deserve, that is, when comparative competition is intense. We had enough group antagonism in our evolutionary past so that humans are

adept at this group thinking. This bad competition between groups happened with race relations in the United States since the middle 1970s.

In contrast, if people feel the pie is big enough, and will be shared roughly according to merit, so even if not everybody gets equally even the people who get little get enough so their children can get more, then people don't feel the need for a group and don't stress groups. Because competition is comparative, it can be hard to make sure the pie is big enough to make people relax, but it can be done. This condition prevailed in America in the 1950s and 1960s, and led to improvement in group relations and to advances in civil rights. States cannot make sure that all people and all groups get an equal share of the pie, and states cannot make sure sharing is fully fair. But states can make sure that everyone feels his-her efforts are rewarded and his-her efforts lead to enough gain so children can do better, and differences between groups don't accumulate and grow dangerous. States can assure an almost-fair playing field but states cannot assure an equal outcome. In our evolved past, definitely the outcome was not equal. The same comments apply to socio-economic classes as to ethnic groups and religious groups.

We are Not Smart Enough for Everything.

People are amazingly smart, especially considering we formed our nature by chasing rabbits, picking apples, and wrangling among cousins. But we are not smart enough for everything now, not even for situations that we made. Many of us are not smart enough to find decent jobs in modern technological capitalism. Many of us are not educated enough. Many of us are not smart enough or educated enough to be adept citizens. Even if smart and educated, we have quirks that make us bad citizens: we do not seek evidence, do not know real capitalism with its real strengths and weaknesses, cannot judge when some power is really a threat, cannot stop thinking in terms of "us and them", don't know who our real "us" or "them" is, cannot see past the promises of demagogues, expect the state to make everybody better off than average even as we rail against the state, and expect the state to enact the morality of our group so we can feel justified, saved, and worthwhile. See Chapter Two. We did fairly well until after World War Two but have not done well since. Nobody knows how to overcome the limitations of our evolved minds to make us adept enough citizens.

If you think people are smart enough to deal well with the modern world, then why does advertising work so well despite being so obvious? Why are we so susceptible to fun crap? Why do pretty young people sell cars? Why do hipsters think they are different and better? Why do action movies and silly romances work so well although the characters, dialog, and scenes have not changed in decades? Movies are the same now as in 1935. Turn off the sound on the TV; then watch ads, a police show, medical show, and romantic comedy. See how silly and obvious they are. Then ask again why you are so susceptible. Do the same with political ads – they are scary. Even if most people are smart enough, such as, of course, you and your friends, enough people are not smart enough so that we all have a real problem.

In a democracy, not everybody has to be smart enough to figure out all the problems and their solutions. That is what leaders are for. The large majority of people have to be smart enough to choose leaders who understand true problems and offer realistic practical long-term solutions. This choosing leaders is what we have not been able to do. We are not that smart. Our inability to choose good adept leaders has been evident in the United States at least since Reagan. It won't get better. We won't get smarter. We can't make us any smarter than five million years of evolution already has.

Education could help but it hasn't helped enough, certainly not in proportion to how much we spend. Even if we spent more, it is not likely that education can make us smart enough in general to do the job. We have limits.

I had a hard time learning that people can make good decisions although they do silly things. People can make good decisions even when: they are not in my political party, put on makeup, worry about hemlines, wear shorts that show the bottom of their butts, spend money on hair, play fantasy sports, binge drink, brag, check email often, talk loud, think they are good athletes, think they are tough, smoke, listen to crap music that is really bad political sermons set to bad rhythm, obsess over business trends and conditions that they can't understand, spout PC bullshit rhetoric, send pictures of food on the Net, groom their lawns, stalk "the next big thing" in art, crusade, or are prejudiced by gender, race, nation, creed, or age. Even people with these behaviors can show insight.

But people can't make good decisions when all they do is the above, never learn facts, never learn how big important things such as capitalism really work, and never practice making good decisions. Activities such as listed above are important not because, by themselves, they disqualify a person as able to pick good leaders but because they show that a person has stopped thinking. Our evolved past made it far too easy to retreat into self-indulgent solace.

We tend to think that not being up to the job of citizen in a modern democracy somehow disqualifies us as people, makes us less men and less women. This view is not true. Even people who are not smart or not adept as citizens can be great as people. People can be amazingly brave and generous regardless of any ability for citizenship. The bravery and toughness of average people amazes me. If we required that all soldiers also had the obvious ability to serve with honor in the Senate, our country we would soon end. Not everybody can be John Kennedy, John McCain, or John Kerry. I find the courage of ordinary people far beyond me. I am stunned by people who were physically or mentally wounded and fought back. I know I am not up to their standard. I find people a great joy most of the time. It is not clear why we could have evolved the ability for greatness of humanity and soul during our past as hunter-gatherer-foragers; but we did. I am thankful we did. I would like to see people who use evolution to explain human character explain how our ancestors did that. It still does not automatically make us adept citizens.

Quick Summary in Transit.

The common behaviors of people have an evolved basis, and they are learned. We have good instincts about how to deal with the mix of evolved basis and learning, and mostly we can go with our instincts.

We should accept human nature as it commonly is. On that base, we should build institutions within which people can learn to be better, in which good behavior reinforces good institutions. We should not try to force people to be better than they can be. We will see ordinary people sometimes to do great things in unusual conditions such as earthquake or disease. We cannot build a good state by expecting people to be great.

We also can expect people to be more than half-way decent most of the time. If people want to think of themselves as decent then they have to act decently, even, sometimes, in the face of other people who act badly. We evolved the ability to do this.

We can expect people not to be indecent and thuggish. We can expect people not to respond to a bad situation by crime, nastiness, acting like a thug, acting out, or terrorism. Especially in a plural democracy, we can and should expect people to respond to a bad situation through rational means. We can expect people to look at themselves to see how much they add to badness. We can expect people to look at their groups such as ethnic, religious, class, and gender groups, to see how much of the bad situation starts there. We can expect people to work to make their groups better. People evolved the ability to control their bad acts and to better their own group, and we can expect it of them. We can and should fault people when they act badly. We have to not enable bad acts. We don't have to tolerate thugs and terrorists even when they have a grievance. We can and should punish criminals and thugs. We evolved to do this too.

After some wildness in youth, most people want a good family life. That usually worked in our past, that is mostly what we evolved to do, and it usually works now. We can understand most of what people do if we think of their behavior as aimed at a good family life in the context of their economy, history, society, and culture.

People seeking a good family life can build a good state when conditions are not too odd. Sadly, modern life is too hard for ordinary people seeking a good family life to gracefully build a good state. Now we need something more. Chapters One and Two give a sense of what we need, and I go into the topic further elsewhere.

Many abilities and goals helped a good family life in the past: to make all kinds of art, to appreciate all kinds of art, work, finding the right mate, avoiding people who might not be right, cooperation, showing off, wealth, moderate power, friends, alliances, beauty, athletic prowess, shrewd thinking, rationality, religion, morality, etc. This is how most people succeeded in starting and raising families. People still seek these goals in themselves and as means to successful family life. In the first third of life, people often seek these goals largely for the goals themselves, such as wealth and fame. Still, in the last two thirds of life, most people learn to subordinate these goals to a successful family life and community life.

The modern version of these goals usually is getting an education, finding a mate, getting the best job you can that gives you some satisfaction and income with the least heartache, living in a safe clean neighborhood, and participating in community, religious, and political life. This package includes working for causes such as gay rights, national parks, or against abortion, if you believe so.

Evolution gave us the ability to enjoy many things that contributed to family life but now also have value in themselves. We should be free to seek these things as long as we don't hurt other people or hurt society as a whole too much. We should be able to have a few drinks, chase a few people of the gender that we prefer (if they allow), or ride a motorcycle.

Some people now get caught up in what used to be means-to-an-end in our past, such as wealth and power. These people are not necessarily bad although we might see some as sad. We need to insure they do more good than bad in their striving. Too often they do more bad than good.

Some people should not primarily seek family life but should work for art, science, politics, commerce, or religion. A few great musical composers, such as Beethoven, or philosophers, such as Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Hume, and Kant, did not have good family lives but still did much good. Jesus thought following God and following him were far more important than family life, wealth, or power. The Buddha thought that thinking clearly and assessing life correctly were more important than family life, wealth, or power. Here I do not explain where these people come from and their relation to human evolutionary history and our genetic base.

There are basic differences between men and women, differences rooted in our genes and evolutionary history. The differences are not nearly as important as we make them. Men and women overlap in all the key traits that make us human. The overlap is much bigger and more important than any difference. Still, the difference can be crucial and it is a big part of what makes life fun. Although there are two biological sexes, there are more than two genders, and at least some of the more-than-two have genetic bases. Homosexuality (gayness) likely has a firm genetic component. The same person can feel and act like more than one gender although not usually at the same time. Even gay activists often are confused about the variety of genders. The various genders can have a lot of fun discussing this topic. I don't go into gender any more here.

I overlook the roles of learning, culture, society, history, economy, ecology, material conditions, etc.

Morality.

I don't explain what morality is. Use your evolved moral intuition. See Parts 8, 9, and 10 below.

For Darwinism, morality is a puzzle. On the one hand, morality is an ideal. Morality tells us to be as good to others as to ourselves, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But loving your neighbor as yourself can thwart self-interested reproductive success and thwart potentially self-beneficial competition. Yet morality evolved from the self-interest of individual people interacting. How can "rise above self-interest" evolve from "follow only self-interest"? Sometimes people live up to the ideal, even against self-interest, as when people help children that they don't know out of a crashed bus. Most of the time, the ideal and practicality go along pretty well. People don't steal from the police station. We give to our neighbors who are likely to give to us. Still, nobody lives up to the ideal fully. All of us fall far short every day. Usually when evolved ideal and basic self-interest conflict, in a big enduring arena, then self-interest wins.

How we meet the ideal or fail to meet it shows a pattern, the pattern makes sense in light of the fact that we evolved, and the pattern doesn't make much sense any other way. (I skip cultural rules and social organization, which overlooking doesn't undermine what I say here.)

A simple observation about the pattern of following the ideal and failing it gives us some hints. The way in which we follow or fail goes along well with common sense practicality. The pattern goes along with what succeeded in our past and what usually succeeds now. Take "kind" to mean "morally good to" and

“nasty” to mean “morally bad to”. We are kind to our kin. We are kinder to near kin than far kin. We are kinder to people who live with us, such as in our house, than to people who live farther away. We are kinder to people who live around us, as in our neighborhood, than to people who live far away. We can be kind to strangers but we don’t feel too bad if we are not. We can be nasty to people who have been nasty to us. We are nastier to people in another school than to people in our school, and likewise with neighborhood, church, and city. We are nastier to foreigners and people in other countries than people in our own country. We are nasty to people who we know have done bad things such as molest children or defraud the teachers’ pension fund. We shoot burglars.

Biologists explain the pattern in this way:

-We are nicer to people who are likely to be nice back to us.

-We are nicer to people according to their degree of kinship with us, mixed with the kind of relation we have with those particular kin.

-We sometimes take advantage of people that we don’t expect to have relations with, when we can get away with taking advantage.

-We are nasty to rivals that we know about.

-Briefly, we are kind to people that benefit our reproductive success. We are nasty to people that harm our reproductive success if we can get away with it.

-Sometimes we make mistakes as when modern urban dwellers help a stranger even though the stranger is never likely to help the reproductive success of the urban dweller. Once evolution sets into motion a strong emotion such as the feeling of “us and them”, sometimes the emotion makes a mistake just as sometimes we eat a fruit that looks ripe and sweet but is really sour.

-Usually we do better when we cooperate than not. Cooperation requires some risk, in particular risk of cheating. We have to be able to overcome the risk to gain the benefits of cooperation.

-Even though we can see the benefits of cooperation, see that that the benefits overcome the risks in the long run, see the risk of cheating, and see that we could benefit in the long run if we could suppress cheating, this practical assessment is not enough to overcome the risks and get us to cooperate enough. We need something emotional as well.

-Morality allows us to gain the benefits of cooperation, to overcome the risk, and to suppress the risk of cheating. People who are moral to each other cooperate better among each other than people who are not moral. Moral provides the emotion needed to cooperate and benefit.

-Morality is an indirect means to gain the benefits of cooperation, both directly by getting moral people to cooperate with each other, and indirectly by getting moral people to punish and eliminate cheaters and slackers.

-Feelings of morality likely developed as extensions of feelings that we have toward kin, trading partners, work partners, and neighbors. We originally had the feelings for other reasons that make sense in terms of natural selection (I don't explain more here) but are easily turned into morality and incorporated as part of morality.

-Once feelings of morality arose and spread among a group, and people who felt morality were good to each other and bad to cheaters, then natural selection would sustain morality well enough.

-What matters is that overall moral thinking and moral acting, both kind and nasty, help our reproductive success, that is, that morality serves practicality.

I take this account to be very largely true. No other account is nearly this true. What follows is comments on this sketch. Part 8 below explains in more detail.

Not all people are smart enough to figure out all the provisions in a modern mortgage but people are not all stupid. People can figure out practical needs and what serves practicality. If morality largely serves practicality, and we can figure out practicality anyway, isn't morality redundant? Why do we need an extra level of force, morality, to tell us to do, or not do, what we can figure out anyway? As of 2016, there was no definite answer. All I say is that morality did succeed as an extra level of force in our past, and so natural selection kept it.

First, we benefit from people with whom we have consistent exchange relations, especially trading of help in work, food, child care, and marriage. They also gain from us. As part of this mutual gain, while the relation persists and does well, we have good feelings for each other. However, if the relation goes bad, we also have bad feelings toward each other, as in a divorce or when roommates start feuding. Second, kin also help each others' reproductive success not only in the same way as do other exchange partners but just by being kin and by doing a few special things that only kin do. I do not here explain how kin help each other's success just by being kin. See Part 3. Kin also have good feelings most of the time but the feelings can turn rancid.

Morality needs feelings for its force. The feelings that power morality likely originated as modifications of the feelings that we have for partners and kin. Once the feelings were used in the moral arena, they took on a life of their own, and morality took on a life of its own. At that point, morality worked overall to help reproductive success, so natural selection kept morality. We are the descendants of people who had moral feelings and did well.

(I think the feelings that power morality have to follow the logic of the Golden Rule and "applies equally". We have to think that morality is fair. Mainstream Darwinism differs from me in this regard. Mainstream theory does not think the feelings have to follow any particular logic, they only have to serve reproductive success. Natural selection can attach moral feelings to any act that benefits reproductive success such as helping a work buddy and can insure moral feelings do not attach to an act that might hinder success such as helping a suspicious stranger. See Parts 9 and 10.)

The acts that come out of mutual benefit and kinship are fairly strong, and people figure practicality pretty well. Again, if so, why was the extra emotion of morality needed? First, sometimes the feelings we have

for kin are not enough to hold us in the big groups that we need for big projects such as hunting a bear or a herd of deer, or protecting the whole local group. Second, likely nothing else solves inevitable problems of cheating, especially when cheating often makes self-interested sense in the short term. Cheating is a strong acid that dissolves good relations, as most of us find out some time in our lives. Simply seeing the benefit of a mutually helpful relation, and-or simply being kin, are not enough to stop cheating so we can cooperate. We need something emotional and strong. Morality can work. It can suppress cheating, and cheaters, enough to keep the benefits of cooperation, mutual help, and kinship.

Another way to say this is that morality is the strongest, and the one absolutely necessary, “social glue” of human social life. Without morality, we could not have cooperated enough to evolve into humans. This is why I like to see evolved human nature through the lens of morality.

Once humans evolved moral feelings and moral acts, natural selection made sure they did apply where they usually serve practicality and did not apply where they harm practicality, as much as possible, even if the fit is not perfect. In our past, natural selection successfully made sure that the fit was good enough so the benefit of morality always was greater than the cost.

Morality requires not only good relations with friends and group mates but also requires that moral people (a) punish bad people, (b) urge other moral people to punish bad people, and (c) stigmatize or punish the otherwise moral people who do not help enough to punish bad people. Morality requires that sometimes we are moralistic and nasty. Sometimes we have to treat usually good people as if they were bad. This issue of punishment and being moralistic is troublesome, so I leave it at this for here.

Morality is not fully rational. Morality is a mix of judgment and irrational emotions. Even so, it works.

We need the ideal of morality to have the strong feelings that get us to work together, to stop cheating in ourselves, and to punish cheating in others. But, if we really followed the ideal, then ideal morality would undermine itself. Cheaters would be able to take advantage of all the blindly moral people, all the stupid suckers. Morality would self-destruct. Paradoxically, to work, morality both has to be an ideal and has to be somewhat selective. We have to think of being good to everybody but really we have to be good to others who are reliably good to us, and we have to be bad toward others who are bad to us, especially others who are consistently bad.

Because our moral nature evolved, despite the ideal of morality, we do not feel morally equally toward all people and we do not act morally equally toward all people. We know the ideal but we do not follow the ideal, and we cannot follow the ideal. We are susceptible to morality as we are susceptible to sweets, fat, burned meat, power, good dwellings, handsomeness, beauty, pulchritude, sex, ceremonies, religion, and temptations to lie, steal, and cheat. We have to find the ideal through the susceptibility.

Because our moral nature evolved, moral harangues don't work. We can't make people generally better, and better citizens, by carping, ideology, dogma, threats, promises of heaven, fear, or promises of being great contributors to some great cause. Harangues don't work even if they come from parents, teachers, priests, politicians, demagogues, or politically correct people. Moral instruction can work a little, but it is not like a harangue, and I don't go into the difference here. Men do not treat women well or ill depending mostly on moral climate but do so depending on conditions of home life, work, work life, and politics. The

same is true of relations between ethnic and religious groups. If times get tough, usually we can't badger ourselves so as to stop people in other ethnic or religious groups badly. No matter how much I point out to people that seeing problems clearly, and thinking them out to a realistic practical solution, is the moral duty of a good citizen, my admonition almost never works. People learn their morality more from art such as TV and from looking around to see what other people are doing and what works. Likely that is how our forager ancestors learned their morality too, how they learned who was "us" and who "them", and how to treat us and them. "Do as I say, not as I do" never works. Saint Francis of Assisi insisted that we preach constantly and that sometimes we even use words when we preach.

What does work is: good institutions; the fact that important people are realistic, recognize how society and socio-economic classes really work, recognize real problems, work on realistic practical solutions, can explain what is going on, and can explain what to do about it. When that happens, then morality, religion, and practical life can go together well. Then, people can relax enough to get more religious and moral in ways that are more in line with what the great religious leaders wanted. The world has had very little practical realism since World War Two, not even in America, not even with your favorite leaders such as Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.

People range from evil, bad, immoral, naughty, amoral, neutral, modestly moral, fairly good, strongly good, naturally genuinely good, naturally genuinely sweet, moralistic, annoyingly moralistic, zealous, to crazy zealous. People can be concerned more with positive kindly helping morality or with condemning morality. All people are a mix, in different ways, in different situations. There is no sure-fire formula to say where the balance lies; it varies with individuals, and with societies, cultures, conditions, and history. We can make people better, and make them somewhat into the people that we want, through training and institutions. Bad situations stay bad, good situations need constant care.

I said that modestly flawed people are more interesting than "goody two shoes" people. Slightly naughty people can be interesting, and we are more relaxed around slightly flawed people than around moralistic people. We get more done working with slightly flawed people. We trust them more. People who are annoyingly moralistic and zealous usually are not actually more moral. As books, stories, TV shows, and movies have said, often they are hypocrites who just use morality to manipulate even if they themselves don't know what they do. Moralistic conniving worked in our evolved past so we all have some evolved basis for it and some of us have a strong tendency for it. On the other hand, conniving happened often enough in our past so people also developed a kind of "radar" or "immunity" to it, as with cheating and lying. Beware the people who seem too good and who call to arms too often. That is one reason why we are more comfortable with slightly flawed people and why they get more done.

We should not make the modern mistake of thinking that people are better because they are worse. Bad people are still bad. We should not indulge our moral flaws or cultivate moral flaws because we feel that makes us morally superior or existentially superior. Everybody has enough moral flaws so nobody needs to cultivate any more flaws. Go with what you've got already; it is enough. Beware of people who have cultivated a morally flawed bad boy bad girl persona just as much as you beware of moralistic hypocrites. Often bad boys and bad girls are bores, boors, and hurtful.

Sometimes the carping moralists are correct, and even the thundering zealots are correct. We do need to learn to recycle. We should not dump motor oil down the drain. We do need to use re-usable bottles and

cans. We should give to charity. We should not support demagogues. “No” means “no”. The character Gandalf in “Lord of the Rings” was modeled after Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis, a call-to-arms zealot who was far more right than wrong. Even those damn PC people of Left and Right are right a lot of the time in what they say if not in what they do. You have to grow your own good judgment.

Don't be afraid to go a little overboard sometimes in sweet simple goodness or in zeal. A little craziness sometimes is good for us and the people around us.

Religion.

Some of what is true of morality is also true of religion. Religion seems little relevant to practical issues, was not much more relevant in the past, people can figure practicality adeptly without need for religious guidance, sometimes religion gets in the way of practicality, so people often ignore it, and people mold religion to serve practical ends. So why confuse ourselves with added questions about what spirits, gods, saints, Jesus, God, the Buddha, or the Dharma might want? Why is there religion? I go into this topic in later optional parts of this chapter, and it is not useful to go into it much here. Briefly, religion is social glue, it works with morality so they reinforce each other, it lets us know who is in our group and who not, It lets us know who we can trust and not, how much, and in what ways. Also, religious thinking is inevitable in an evolved being with a lively mind such as ours and which uses categories to think as we do.

Without thinking of why religion might have evolved in the first place, and what religion might be in itself, instead think of how religion and practical life shape each other, and how they get along. I think practical life influences religion as much as religion shapes practical life, at least after practical conditions get going and get the upper hand. Religion reflects a way of life, and way of life how people make a living. Once capitalism becomes the dominant economic system of the world, middle class people who began as Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, or Muslims will act more like each other, and, in truth, have religious beliefs more like each other, than their distinct religious origins now lead us to expect. Hunger-gatherers who insisted staunchly on worshipping spirits of the wet cool jungle and the river after their band moved to the dry hot savannah and had to depend on water holes, did not do as well as fellows who discovered a new world of spirits who took care of water holes, rain, and hot weather. We inherited a similar ability to shape our religious beliefs to validate our way of life now and to validate what we want for success in our way of life such as finding a big stand of nut trees or finding a good job.

Religion does make a difference. Democracy and good capitalism did develop among Western Christian countries and did not develop among Hindus or Buddhists. It is not clear to me exactly how this power of religion to make a difference is rooted in our forager way of life, and how this power stems from abilities that developed while we were foragers. So I leave the issue mostly alone.

A few other religious features have roots in our evolved nature but the link is not clear now. Although I have ideas, it is not worth reviewing them here. It is worth mentioning the features.

(1) People want to feel their lives mean something, count for something. People wish they could do amazing things and be amazing people like Newton or Gandhi, and so make their lives count. That hope is not realistic for most of us. Instead, we want our daily lives, personal, family, community, career, and

business lives to mean something, to count. If our own lives are not so successful through our own direct reproduction, we want to feel that our contribution to our kin, friends, and neighbors counts.

(2) People feel something “bigger than me”. I think this is God. Other people use other names and other people have a different sense of the bigger. We want to connect to the bigger than me. We want to feel that the bigger than me approves of us and helps us.

(3) People want their ordinary lives to connect to the bigger than me. People want the bigger than me to approve of their ordinary lives. People want the bigger than me to make their lives meaningful, to make their lives count.

(4) People did not start out with an idea of a single ethical God. People started with many spirits, usually good, but not all entirely good. These spirits are part of the bigger than me, or, collectively, they make up all of the bigger than me.

(5) People feel that, if they have good relations with the spirits, then things will turn out well. The crops will grow. Food will be abundant. Nobody will get hurt. Families will do well. Lives will feel meaningful. On the other hand, if things go badly, then relations with the spirits must be bad. We need to make amends, however it is the spirits have suggested for doing so.

(6) Perhaps before, but especially after people began to do agriculture and to live in state societies, and continuing into industrial and post-industrial societies, people had leaders who would make good relations with the spirits. If things were bad, people expected their leaders to do something to improve relations with the spirits, and to make things good again. If things don't get better, or if a disaster strikes, even a disaster over which modern scientists would not expect leaders to have any control, still the people blame the leaders.

(7) Perhaps before, but especially after people began to do agriculture and to live in state societies, and continuing into industrial and post-industrial societies, people want a hero (“hero” includes women). The hero has tasks-roles: (A) Mediates between the people and the spirits. (B) Makes all big things alright. “Things” includes food, shelter, safety, security, wealth, and control of natural disasters such as floods. The state makes sure that our state prevails in conflict with other states. (C) The hero makes people feel that their lives are meaningful and count.

(8) People want a mediator between the spirits and themselves. They want somebody who can talk to the spirits for them. They expect the spirits to send such a hero. Moses, David, Jesus, Mohammad, and the Buddha are examples of the hero.

(9) Perhaps before, but especially after people began to do agriculture and to live in state societies, and continuing into industrial and post-industrial societies, people seek cosmic principles, and they seek to identify persons with cosmic principles. People don't want only good and bad, people want goodness and evil, and they want particular supernatural persons to embody goodness and evil. People want not only to see the Spring come every year, they want a principle of Regeneration, and they want to see a person embody Regeneration. In common form, this tendency is simply personification of natural forces and-or common events such as lightning or war. I wish to get across the people seek something deeper, more

pervasive, and important. People see maleness and femaleness but they also want GENDER to be a cosmic principle and want embodiments. People want WISDOM to be a cosmic principle and they want a goddess of Wisdom to embody Wisdom. People want Dharma to be a principle and they want avatars to embody not only specific instances of Dharma coming to straighten out the world but they also want avatars of the general depth and pervasiveness of Dharma. Even academics treat their favorite theories as cosmic principles and treat their heroes as embodiments of Science, Rationality, Progress, or Art. Even Darwinists and anthropologists do this.

(9) I don't know exactly why people seek cosmic principles like this and why they want super persons to embody them. I can speculate but it would do little good here.

(9 continued) Perhaps not most early Christians, but certainly orthodox Christians after the Gospel of John, made Jesus into the embodiment of several cosmic principles. That was a serious bad service to Jesus and his followers even if Jesus is the personification of cosmic principles.

(10) People are superstitious and only about half-rational. People believe in super natural force. People believe the spirits reward morality and punish immorality. People believe that spirits reward people for following orders (laws) and punish people for breaking orders. People need the supernatural, and usually need spirits, saints, mediators, wizards of all genders, spirit doctors, rites, ceremonies, civil ceremonies that are like religious ceremonies, festivals, etc. People believe in luck and fate at the same time. People need to believe that spirits watch over them. People need to believe there is a close connection between the state, family life, and the supernatural.

(10 continued) All this superstition need not be harmful and need not lead all people into stupidity. We need to recognize what is bad now, attack that, and leave harmless stuff alone. Most superstition does little harm and a lot of it does some good by bringing people together. A lot of it is fun.

(10 continued) We cannot make people fully rational, rational enough, or even much more rational, with harangue, threats, or shame. Trying to do so is like American Prohibition against alcohol or the War on Drugs.

(10 continued) We have to think seriously how rational people have to be, and in what ways, for particular kinds of government to succeed, especially for self-governing democracy. We have to think whether we can make enough people rational enough. If we think we can make enough people rational enough, we have to think how. I don't think our modern populist style of democracy has faced this issue at all.

(10 continued) It is up to particular individual people who think they are sufficiently smart, rational, human, well rounded, and irrational, to sort out what is good and bad in rationality and irrationality, sort out what is likely to be true (such as God) from what is likely to be false (animal spirit companions) and harmful (fear of witches), and to teach other smart receptive people. This sorting and teaching does not necessarily involve diatribes against the masses and their bad ignorant superstition. We have not done a good job of sorting and teaching lately.

The fact that religion and practicality often meld makes it easy for me to give advice. I repeat what I said in Chapters One and Two. The best ideals for modern states come from the teachings of Jesus, mixed

with Western ideas of the individual and state, and mixed with practicality. Every religion can adopt them fairly easily. All people can learn them. All religions can adopt them with little damage to the historically key ideas of the religion. We can shape institutions to go with them. We can do all this without offending any major religion. If these ideals are not acceptable to any religious group, then too bad for them, and that group has to change or has to live apart from nearly all the modern world.

If you want to see how evolution prepared us to be nice, think of good relations in a large extended family or in a small group such as the supporters of Little League. From the old TV show “The Waltons”, think of the family and its neighbors. To see nasty, think of bad relations in the same arena, in the family and with neighbors – even around Walton Mountain. Think of modern TV shows about set-upon wronged women and cycles of revenge. Thinking of how a church, neighborhood, or academic department can go good or go bad is a useful exercise. We are like that because we evolved to be like that, good and bad.

Natural People Again.

(1) Morality is an ideal. As an ideal, morality tells us to care for other people as much as we care for ourselves. Yet morality evolved out of self-interest. How can an ideal that tells us to transcend self-interest arise out of self-interest?

(2) Morality is a combination of both irrational emotion and considered rational judgment.

(3) Morality largely serves practical self-interest. It helps people do practical things that they could not achieve without morality. People are adept judges of practicality most of the time. So why do people need irrational emotional morality to get them to do what is in their own practical self-interest? Why can't people reap the benefits of practicality, especially of cooperation, without irrational emotional morality to push them and bind them?

(4) Ordinarily we think that rational strategic consideration best serves practical self-interest. Yet people cannot achieve full practical self-interest without irrational emotional morality. People need irrationality to achieve supposedly rational practicality.

(5) Morality works as an ideal only because it doesn't work as an ideal. If people were fully moral, then their moral society would fall apart, for many reasons. People need apply morality selectively to keep the ideal of at least some morality. People need to be good to some people, indifferent to others, and bad to yet others, so people can keep the ideal of morality and be good to the select few.

(6) Imperfect people are often more interesting than really goody people.

(7) Nobody can be morally perfect.

(8) Somewhat paradoxically, we are often better people when we are less morally perfect, or at least when we try less hard. We often do more overall good even if we do a little damage along the way. Society often achieves more benefit when people are not as concerned with goodness.

(9) We get nervous around strongly moralistic people. We appreciate a little urging but don't like being told we are piles of shit (Martin Luther), and we will go to hell if we don't straighten up right now and do what a zealous moralist tells us. While morality is an ideal, it seems to work best when it is not extreme. Can an ideal be an ideal but not be absolute?

(10) The West has opposed emotion to reason since at least Plato, 2400 years ago. The Hebrews had their version of this dichotomy and preference in "personal indulgence versus God-given Law". The two versions fused after Jesus and the early Church Fathers. Previously, the West extolled reason above emotion. Since 1800, the West, and, now perhaps most of the world thanks to Western pop culture and Romanticism, extols emotion above reason. Which view does morality support?

It is easy to have a metaphysical "field day" with some of these points but I urge you not to. Figure out what might have happened in our evolutionary past and what is going on now with morality. See why it is a good idea to keep the ideal of morality and to live up to it as much as you can. I take up a few of these points later in optional Part 8.

One point I wish to linger on here because of its role in Western pop culture since about 1800, the idea that emotions are better and more reliable than reason, except the emotion of morality. Maybe the most obvious version of this theme is "All You Need is Love" but the idea is more general. It is the idea behind "I never felt so alive". It is the idea of "taking a leap". I have nothing against good emotion, in fact, I like it. But that is not what this theme leads to. It leads to indulgence, confusion, crime, and mistakes such as discussed in the Chapter on Romanticism.

Because morality needs strong emotion, a Martian might think people would indulge morality as a way to find cosmic satisfaction, to feel really alive, and to "Say Yes to Life". In fact, in the ideology of "feelings are better" and "trust your feelings", bad mere morality usually is put alongside bad mere reason. Morality is not put along with bad reason because morality has a rational component but is put with bad reason for other motives that are too much to go into here.

Be aware what you do when you extol emotion above mere reason yet also look down on mere morality. This is a bad move. Figure out why you do it, and stop. Instead, figure what is good and bad, practical and impractical, realistic and unrealistic. Then dare to be as morally good as you can.

Emotions, Reason, and Biological Explanation.

Please see Part 3.

PART 3: Optional: Aspects of Evolved Human Nature.

This part gives more background so non-specialists can read popular books on the evolution of morality and the evolution of religion, and so non-specialists can follow the comments on the evolution of morality and evolution of religion given below. I repeat a little from above.

Groups Again.

Remember that we evolved as hunter-gatherer-foragers. Social life came in several levels:

(A) Bands composed of several small extended families, with maybe 10 people per extended family, about 20 to 70 total people in a local band. Our ancestors carried out their daily lives in this setting.

(B) Groups of about 150 people, composed of several nearby bands, with whom members of local bands consistently interacted (“Dunbar’s number”).

(C) Clusters of about 500 people (up to 1500), composed of many bands and-or several groups of (B). As members in (C), people in (A) and (B) met irregularly but likely spoke the same language, shared religious ideas, and considered all the people at their level (C) as “us”.

(D) Larger groups about which little is known, and which could be “us” or “them” depending on situation.

(E) People who were seen, or who left tracks, but were not known very well and with whom we did not interact much. These people would be considered dangerous, and we would be nervous around them. The line between (D) and (E) is not distinct. In fact, the lines between (C), (D), and (E) might not be very distinct.

(F) Rivals could arise at any level but were more likely at medium levels such as the good hunter, “pretty youth”, or great singer who lives a group or two over - not unlike, now, the athlete, good looking person, or hot-kid-in-a-band in some high school across the city or county.

Families moved between bands (A) and groups (B) according to needs and whims, in fair safety. Likely, the lower the level, the more important it was in evolution and shaping our nature. All levels could have played some role in our evolution but that topic leads to a controversy into which I don’t go.

The small extended family of our past was NOT the idealized extended family of the Bible, some religious ideals, or TV shows. It was made of a woman and her current spouse, surviving children, and sometimes surviving grandparents, usually parents of the woman. A woman had about five children over her lifetime, of which two survived to make their own families. When children got old enough to have a spouse, they did not have to live in the same camp as parents, and often for a while did not. Likely, girls came back to mother for help in birthing. It is not clear how many spouses a person might have over a lifetime, due to death of a spouse or separation of spouses, but, judging from current foragers, likely at least two, maybe four. People were “moderate serial monogamists with mild polygyny”. Families were more like what now we call “blended”. This is what our minds are set for. This is not always what succeeds best in modern economic life or what makes the best environment for children in modern life.

Kin Selection and Inclusive Fitness.

Successful reproduction includes not only your own children but also reproduction through kin, such as nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and cousins. What you do for them affects your success, what they do for you affects your success, and vice versa. We have to take kin into account to count success. If we help our brother, nieces, and nephews to succeed, such as by sharing food with them when we make a large kill or find a big apple tree, that success counts almost as much – but not quite – as helping our

own children. Likewise, if we hurt nieces and nephews when we do not share or when we punish a group as a whole for moral badness, hurting them hurts us too. The fact that relations between kin can affect reproduction is called “kin selection” or “inclusive fitness”.

Reciprocity.

Animals can help each other. Sometimes animals of the same species help each other, and, when they do, often they are kin, as when sister monkeys groom each other to clean each other and feel better. Yet animals help even when they are not related and even when they are not of the same species as when mongooses and birds both watch for predators and both heed each other’s warnings. This action is called “mutualism”, “reciprocal altruism”, and “reciprocity” depending on details that are not useful here. It is “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”. Reciprocating is risky and can be plagued by cheating but it does work often enough. In social animals such as monkeys and wolves, it is hard to separate effects of reciprocity, kin selection, and individual selection.

We are Them and They are Us.

In small bands of people, everybody knew his-her children might marry the children of anybody else in the group. We succeed only through other people. If we treated other people well or badly, indirectly we treated our children and ourselves well or badly. When we helped other people, as by sharing food and tasks, chances were they would help us later, so, indirectly we helped ourselves when we helped others. When we treated other people as we wished to be treated, indirectly we did treat ourselves as we wished to be treated. Along with kin selection, this effect is one of the roots of empathy and sympathy. It is part of inclusive fitness.

Of course, our children are not exactly ourselves, other people are not exactly like us, other children are not exactly like our children, many other people are not our kin, and exchanging with other people is not quite the same as making do for ourselves. So, people did not act fully in accord with idealized empathy and the Golden Rule.

Social animals, including people, live in groups for many reasons: safety from predators, safety from others of the same kind (as when tom cats kill kittens), to accomplish large tasks that cannot be done by one person such as kill buffalo, find food, defend food, share food, share tasks, share childcare, find mates, and help heal. Social animals usually depend on their groups. Even so, it is still better to look at groups in terms of individuals than to think of individuals in terms of the group.

As part of group life, we have a sense of “us” and “them”. “Us” and “them” is not absolute but varies with circumstances and needs. “Us and them” is not always evident in obvious social units. It is built through interaction. We have “our” family versus other families. We also have “we boys” which can cut across families and might override family feelings. We have “our band” and “we who speak the same language and think of similar gods” in contrast to “other bands”. We have “us who want to live near this water hole” and the “them who can use the water hole anytime they want but don’t really live here”.

Thinking in Categories.

Normal people have natural categories that they use to order the world. It is easier to deal with the world if we come predisposed to think things in the world come in natural types, for example: dead stuff that usually doesn't move, such as dirt; hard dead stuff such as rocks; moveable dead stuff such as water, air, and clouds; plants; animals that move but don't have much of a personality or will, such as slugs; animals that have some will (intentions) but aren't very smart, such as toads; animals that have a will (intentions), recognize natural categories, and can vary their response according to the situation and their past experience, such as deer; animals that recognize the intentions and personalities of other animals, such as dogs and monkeys; humans; us and them; and things in the world that don't have a material basis but can influence us, such as wind and the spirits.

Although we come with a few built-in natural categories, most of our ideas about the world, most of our categories, we learn. After we are more than about four years old, our natural categories do continue to operate in the background but we live mostly in a world that we learned and that is built up from made-up learned categories. We always have the category "physical thing" but that is less important than specific ideas of "car", "house", "smart phone", and "TV set". We always have the category "place" but it is less important than "home", "school", "mall", "bar", "restaurant", and "downtown". We always have the idea of "person" but that is less important than "mom", "dad", "sibling", "teacher", "girlfriend", "girl friend", "boss", "co-worker", and "police officer". Repeated reminder: We learn these added categories in the context of social life but that does not mean the social group determines the world and our actions.

Intentions.

People not only do, they intend to do. Intentions, including motives, are important.

In addition to having our own intentions, people evolved the ability to read intentions in other people and even in animals. We can read them, and we assume many of them can read us.

People have also evolved the ability to hide intentions or to send out misleading indications (lie about) intentions. This leads people into games, gamesmanship, confusion, and complexity. I don't have the space to go into it much here. See any movie about revenge.

The ability to manage intentions is important. It includes our own intentions, the intentions of many other selves, and intentions that we impute to groups as wholes. The ability to manage intent is the key to alliance. Humans are unusual in being able to manage many levels of intention: "Suzy said that Johnny knows that Emmy had a fight with Tommy because Emmy thought that Tommy likes Amy but really he likes Jenny and Emmy lied to Sally who told Karl that Tommy likes Amy". Most humans can handle about five levels of intention but are only comfortable through three. As a sexist, I think girls can handle more than boys. My ability is quite limited. I get antsy after one and dizzy after two. I am far below the ability of the California Cow in the TV ads. The ability to manage intentions is often taken as an important sign that an organism has a mind, and indicates the level of its mind. When we see that dogs can read the intentions of other dogs, sheep, and humans, we credit them with a pretty good mind.

Exchange.

An important relation among people is a continuing “back and forth”, an augmented kind of “reciprocity”. This relation often uses the exchange of gifts and services. If John gives Jack a Swiss army knife, both John and Jack expect Jack will give something back someday. It need not be the exact same thing. In fact, in this case, to give back the exact same thing would be odd. Maybe Jack gives John some wild mushrooms. If Jack and John give back and forth like this, it shows they have a relation. The nature of the giving reflects the nature of the relation. If they give the exact same value every time, and the return a gift in a fairly short time, then the relation is a careful relation among equals. If sometimes one gives more and sometimes one gives less, and the same person is not “less” or “more” all the time, then they have a warm relation between friends. If Jack gives service such as tending the garden while John gives protection, it is a relation between a higher more powerful “patron” with his-her “client”. Changes in the nature of the relation are reflected in gifts. If Jack and John grow friendlier, they give gifts for the whole family. If they grow cooler, they give more evenly and they start leaving hints about overdue returns. Likely the most important kind of exchange was in marriage, and in giving your children to another family in marriage so that they would give their children to your family.

People exchange not just as individuals, or as particular families, but also in groups and as groups. It is called “indirect reciprocity”, “delayed reciprocity”, or “generalized reciprocity”. People give one thing and get another thing in return. We share food and tasks such as childcare. We give now and get back much later. We give to one member of a group both as an individual and as a representative of a group. Then we get paid back by another member of the group or by the group as a whole. Our group as a whole gives to another group as a whole. Think of circles of friends and neighbors holding barbecues and dinners, or hosting at various houses while watching “the big game” of the week.

Useful Distortions.

It might seem that the more accurately an animal can know the world, the better it will do. Mostly this is true, but not always. Usually getting an accurate picture takes time and mental resources, and animals don’t always have that luxury. Sometimes animals have to act on the basis of imperfect information or have to act quickly. Sometimes it is better to have a basis for action even if the basis does not exactly reflect the world. When a deer hears rustling leaves, it has to decide to stay or to leap away, before it can investigate to find out for sure if the rustle is the wind or a wolf. When two male bears meet, they have to decide to fight or to run away, usually fairly quickly, and usually without a “middle ground” option. A cat pounces on a moving spot before it knows if the spot is a beetle, cricket, toad, or mouse; in that way, at least usually it gets something for dinner. A slightly inaccurate view of the world can be more useful than an exactly accurate view. I recommend the educational TV show “Brain Games”, which I saw on the National Geographic channel but might be on other channels too.

People also have to see the world slightly inaccurately sometimes. We see ourselves, spouses, children, siblings, friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners, co-workers, boss, and employees in a far better light than objective reality; and it helps all of us to do so. Seeing myself as better than others see me give me a big confidence boost, and helps things turn out as I hoped rather than as others guessed. If we did not see our spouses as beautiful, handsome, and really good, divorce would more common and reproduction would be less common. We see our rivals as much nastier than they really.

Misperception also can lead us to error and even down dark paths. I don’t go into this aspect here.

Life, finding a mate, and successful reproduction, require some irrationality and commitment. We can see irrationality and commitment as a variation on not perceiving the world exactly as it is but helpful anyhow. A rapid response to rustling leaves is irrational because inaccurate but it is useful overall. Every man and woman in a group wants to make sure nobody messes with his-her spouse. I strut around to make clear that anybody who does mess with my spouse will face a fight. My strutting around offering battle is an irrational commitment. Even if both fighters lose that particular fight, still, few people will mess with my spouse, fewer than if I did not threaten violence, and so I gain in the long run. All the other people learn to strut too. In this irrational committed situation, everybody has to strut around and so waste effort, but everybody is fairly secure in his-her relation, and so everybody is better off in the long run even at the cost of some short-term strutting.

In learning how to use fire, my child, the little demon, burns down the hut that we had just built and that was not yet full of vermin. It might be about as easy to make another child as to make another hut, but, if I took this attitude toward every child, especially toward every child every time he-she made a mistake, I would never keep any children. So I irrationally with strong commitment love this child. Thus through my irrational committed love I get past the occasional issues with children, I irrationally commit to love every child, and so I succeed in long-term reproductive success.

Seeing the World as Lively; Seeing A Lot of Persons.

As part of seeing the world inaccurately for benefit, we see the world as more lively than it really is. Seeing the world as more lively is a better mistake than seeing the world as not lively enough or even as trying to see the world just exactly as lively as it really is. A classic example makes the point. A man is walking along a path in the fields when he sees a wiggly line a few feet ahead. If the wiggle is a stick, but the man takes it for a snake and jumps backward, he feels foolish, but also he lives to walk again another day. His genes for his lively imagination reproduce. If the wiggle is a cobra, and the man strides along thinking it is foolish to jump at shadows that are likely only sticks, he dies, and his genes for a stodgy realistic non-imagination die with him. In a world of uncertainty and danger, we are often better off seeing the world as lively. Humans see the world as very lively, far livelier than a robot might see the world. We tend to see life, action, will, intent, goals, groups, coalitions, conspiring, and conniving much more than are really there. Children take as obvious that animals can think talk. We give our cars personalities and names ("I named him 'Brad'"). We talk to our computers. We see spirits. Our lively world was important in the evolution of religion.

Among the most useful misconceptions is thinking of a group as if it were one big individual person with the appropriate collective abilities to act, have intentions, manage intentions, and have relations. It is easier to treat most individuals in a group as if they had a similar collective personality and abilities. We do that by thinking of them all as part of the giant individual that is the group. This could be one way that groups dominate human members but it is also simply a useful way to think about group-and-members without entailing the conclusion that the group is always above the individual.

When we deal with groups, we create a "generalized other", a big generalized person that stands for a group, and with which we can think about groups, especially the several groups to which we belong and the groups with which we (and our group) have important relations. A big group is an "other" because it is

not exactly us, and we use it as an external reference to assess our thinking and where we stand. In the modern world, we have several generalized others. They include the firm or school that we work for, our occupation and the people in it such as farming or music, our socio-economic class, our nation, and our religious group.

Sometimes “other” refers to people and groups not in our group. They are “other than us”, and we tend to treat them as if they different from us in important ways and alike in being different. We tend to divide our social and natural world in various “us” and “them” according to situations. We have our gender and the other genders, our age group and other age groups, our family and other families, our foraging group and other foraging groups, we who are like wolves and other people who are like ravens. Common cases in the modern world include other schools, ethnic groups, religions, genders, socio-economic classes, etc.

To help ourselves deal with groups, we split ourselves in two internally, into two “persons”. One of the internal people represents us as an individual while the other represents the group-as-a-whole that we are thinking about now. For example, I think of the “I” that I am as a distinct person in the family and the “me” that I am as a member of the family and by relating to other family members, especially by taking on the common identity of our family, and by taking on the common identity of our family in distinction to other families. By having both an internal distinct “I” and an internal distinct “me” to represent groups, we can think “in our heads” about the intentions of groups and our relation to groups. We can play out scenes “in our heads” about what other people might do, what we might do in response, what they might do in response, and so on. One of the people in our heads acts like a conscience. It helps to keep moral standards and a moral record. These mental games can lead to dizziness, and sometimes to illness, but most of us have evolved the ability to control them as we play them and to use them well.

We belong to several groups at the same time; and there are other groups that we don’t belong to but that we have to relate to. We belong to a family, a neighborhood, congregation, work situation, area group, gender, hunting buddies, etc. The group under current consideration is a “reference group”. People have many reference groups depending on context and situation.

Means and Ends Again.

The “ultimate” goal in evolution is family success (reproductive success and inclusive fitness). To achieve family success, we need to meet other goals along the way and develop various abilities: good relations in the family; good relations with other families; friends; allies; reciprocal relations with other people; good relations with the spirits; reputation; food; security; sex; prestige; wealth; and power. These “goals along the way” and various abilities are called “proximate goals” or “proximate mechanisms” to contrast with the one ultimate goal.

In the modern world, most of our proximate mechanisms are not actions that people did throughout most of human history but actions derived from more basic abilities. Most people do not walk around looking for fruits, vegetables, and small game but instead get in a car that takes them to work. In the modern world, usually we meet proximate goals through one major derived proximate goal: our paid work. We get money from our job with which we acquire mates, food, housing, children, power, etc. In the modern world, men don’t impress a woman by bringing home a dead deer but by driving a big fast car; women

don't impress men with their ability to fill a gathering bag with apples and rabbits but by taking care of an apartment and working as a realtor at the same time.

People do not have to be aware that proximate goals serve family success for the proximate goals to do their job. People have sex because it feels good and not only to have exactly the right number of children to achieve long-term family success. People eat because it tastes good and makes our bellies feel good. People tell stories because it is fun and not necessarily because they know it impresses members of the opposite sex.

Proximate goals can take on a life of their own, as when people enjoy hunting so much that it gets in the way of a good family life, or enjoy sex so much that they seduce a neighbor's spouse and get killed for it. Evolution made sure that proximate actions always served family success over the long run, at least in the context of our evolutionary history. People enjoyed sex but just the right ways, and in just the right amounts, to make sure they reproduced well.

Mental Modules.

When a wolverine meets a badger, buckeye, lion, or bear, both have to decide right now to fight or to flee. There is no time to carefully assess the overall situation. The wolverine and bear can't stop to consider the weather, what they had for breakfast, if they need to pee, the footing, and if the other animal looks normally tough or really tough. To make sure to act, sometimes it is better if action is controlled by an independent "module" that is triggered off when the situation arises. Animals don't stop to consider the whole world when they see a piece of ripe fruit. They just grab that piece of fruit and eat it. When male animals see a female animal in heat, they go after her. "Going after sex" is a good candidate for a distinct mental module that gets triggered off in the right situations almost regardless of anything else. Many behaviors are better seen in terms of activating modules than in terms of some large overall rational program making all decisions in all conditions. If we consider all the modules together as the mind, then animals have "modular minds". If animals have modular minds, then humans likely do too. Many of the same modules that activate in animals are in humans too, such as sexual arousal and the smell of good food. Of course, modules don't operate completely in isolation. During rutting season, a deer has to decide between sex versus avoiding oncoming wolves. How modules relate is not very well known yet. The fact that modules connect still does not mean the mind is one connected rational system. Modularity is currently a hot, and fun, topic in evolutionary studies.

Imitation.

People don't have to fully understand a successful strategy to act successfully; they just have to do it. If people can recognize other successful people and imitate them, they can be about as successful as the original people without understanding at all. Imitating might be an example of a group of related mental modules. A lot of learning begins first as imitation. Imitation is an example of a complicated module that "goes off" in the right situations.

Comparative Competition.

Evolutionary success is almost always comparative. If Danny-the-buck-deer has three does in his family, it seems Danny has done well until we know that Benny-the-buck has five. If Emily-the-doe has two healthy fawns every three years then it appears she has done well until we learn that Doris-the-doe has four healthy fawns every three years. Once every three years, Doris has a set of twins, both of which survive. Over time, the offspring of Benny and Doris will become the deer population. Benny and Doris comparatively out-compete Danny and Emily. Over time, the ancestors of Benny and Doris are what a deer is.

In human terms, comparative competition is “keeping up with the Joneses”. It doesn’t matter how much we have; it matters how much we have compared to them. A big problem with comparative competition is that it has no intrinsic stopping point. When the goal is not “x” amount but “more than them”, then there is never “enough”. Comparative competition is the source of much grief in human life. It is also the source of some progress as a spur to action and development.

Manipulation.

Recall our susceptibility and recall that people use susceptibility to advantage. We don’t like to admit that we manipulate others, especially other people in our group, because that makes us not “good guys”, and can even get us cut out of the group. We hate to accept that we get manipulated. Yet we do manipulate other people, even within our group, and we let them manipulate us.

Manipulation is a mutual game. Manipulation does not have to be all bad. Almost nobody manipulates others without also getting manipulated. We are not too suspicious of people who do a little manipulating as long as we can see that they also get manipulated from time to time. People allow themselves to be manipulated a bit because everybody does it. If we didn’t let other people manipulate us, then they would be very strict about not letting us manipulate them. Manipulation is part of the “little white lies” that let people get along and get their own way while other people get their way too. As with other abilities, some people are more adept at manipulation, and so benefit more than others, but that does not stop the game as long as the adept people are not too much more adept.

Seeing the world inaccurately, susceptibility, and manipulation go together. We are susceptible when we see the world inaccurately, even when we usually do so for our benefit. Our susceptibility makes us easier to manipulate, or, alternatively, the susceptibility of other people makes it easier for us to fool and manipulate them.

“Seeing” is a metaphor here for all kinds of perception and mental activity including thinking. Thinking something is so when it is not, or not quite so, also is seeing the world inaccurately for our benefit. Wolverines and honey badgers think they can “take on” animals that are much larger and stronger than themselves such as bears, hyenas, and lions. Because they think so, often they can – but not always.

Self Deception.

Thinking about the world inaccurately can also be “fooling ourselves”. We fool ourselves about our own abilities, the abilities of our spouses, children, and other kin, and the abilities of our rivals. We fool

ourselves about our own moral rectitude and about how vile our rivals are. When we fool ourselves, we are susceptible.

Evolution made sure that most of the time, when we fool ourselves, we gain more than we lose, as when we think we have the moral high ground, and so gain courage. But sometimes we fool ourselves and lose. No adaptation is perfect. Not every time that a David goes up against a Goliath does David win. Not ever every time we think we can outrun a lion, or outguess the stock market, do we win. Sometimes fooling ourselves can lead to mental illness.

Even if we did not fool ourselves, other people would still have some ability to lie to us and so manipulate us. The fact that we do fool ourselves widens the door for others to fool us and manipulate us. Flattery really does work. Men want to think they are big, strong, and shrewd, and women, among others, use that self-deception to manipulate men. It is not PC to say that women want to think they are pretty, so I will just say that women also have qualities that they want to think apply to them, and men, among others, can use those qualities to manipulate women. Parents often use the desire of children to be more grown up than they really are to fool them. Children use the desire of parents to be more wise and authoritative than they really are to fool them.

Resistance is not Futile.

If we were too easily duped, we could not reproduce. Natural selection made sure we have resistance to being fooled and manipulated by others. We cannot completely disbelieve everything everybody says (“all clients lie to their lawyers, and to detectives, all the time”) because then we would lose the benefits of information and of group life; we have to trust red lights; but we also have to be wary. Evolution gave us the ability to filter. Our ability to filter is good but not perfect. In our evolutionary history, we have run an “arms race” between the people that lie versus finding out lies. Believe it or not, we are usually better at finding out lies, at least over the long run, than people are at lying.

To fool somebody is to put your thoughts in his-her head. See the old movie “Angel on His Shoulder”. We are susceptible to having thoughts put into our heads, both by people that want to share information with us and by people that lie to fool us and use. Groups (made of individuals) also can put thoughts into our heads, both as part of sharing beneficial knowledge in the group, such as where the berries are, and as part of fooling us. The fact that we can fool ourselves makes it easier for a group to put thoughts into our heads and to manipulate us. Our wife’s kin can fool us into thinking her children are our children, even though they are not, so we will take care of her and her children. Everybody in the group “just knows” that the gods will punish you if you eat meat on Friday. As with the battle between liars versus finding out liars, our evolutionary history featured a battle between the ideas that we hold because we think they are true versus the ideas that the group puts into our heads. Often we accept the ideas of the group, especially when they help us to succeed, or when they are neutral. If the group can show me how to kill deer or appease the gods with a cucumber, fine. Sometimes we don’t accept the ideas, especially when they hinder our success or allow other people to dominate us. Yes, some of us do jump off bridges because our cool friends do it but most of us don’t.

The idea (1) that the group can put ideas (2) into our heads leads quickly to the idea (3) that we are just a part of the group, the group controls us, and the group is more real than we are. It reinforces the idea (4)

that, as social scientists, we better understand individuals in terms of group ideas and group organization than in terms of individual ideas and individual pursuit of success. While the first idea (groups put ideas into our heads) is true, the third idea (we are a mere blob in a dominant group) is only partly true at best. Group dominance is a topic of much contention among social scientists. For this book, I accept that the group can put ideas in our heads, and we get a lot of ideas in our heads through our cultural heritage; but I also assert that we can think if we need to, and we do not accept for very long ideas (5) that damage our ability to compete and to reproduce. I cannot here go into details. I return to this topic in various ways in several places.

Rank.

People rank each other in various ways for various reasons: health, body build, symmetry, memory, smell, talking skill, intelligence, imagination, strength, beauty, speed, memory, artistic ability, geniality, family size, size of social group, social connection, hunting ability, gathering ability, fecundity, skill with children, prestige, etc. The standards for ranking do not all coincide so people can rank high in some ways but low in others. Some features can make up for others, as, for example, social graces can make up for being a bit tall and skinny. Although not hunter-gatherers, among the Thai, I found social prestige and social connections to be quite important, and able to make up for some differences in wealth. Even so, aspects of rank do tend to coincide so some people tend to rank generally high while some people tend to rank generally low, with a lot of people in the middle.

Contrary to current political correctness but coinciding with what people do anyway, people use rank to sort out marital partners and sex partners. A “4” might seek a “10” but does not really expect to marry one. A “6”, man or woman, is afraid of being a mere sex toy for a “10”. A “9” seeks a “10”, and might get one, depending on whether enough “10s” are readily available for them to seek one. The “9” might have to settle for an “8”, and be glad to do so. In the modern world, people tend to rely on external appearance for rank and for choices about marital partner and sex partner, but traditionally, family, social connections, social rank, prestige, temperament, wealth, ability to earn, diligence in work, age, and ability to give security likely ranked higher; they are still quite important.

Categories of People and Mating.

Because people tended to marry and have sex according to rank, age, religion, language, and culture (“[positive] assortative mating”), the group and the people in it tended to separate into segments, a bit like modern socio-economic class but not exactly so. A few families might commonly intermarry and maintain themselves at the top of a socio-economic-prestige-beauty hierarchy. Because life was so unsteady in our evolutionary past, these strata likely were not stable for more than two generations. A few setbacks, or windfalls, could completely change the hierarchy in small groups. People could “marry up” and “move up”, and they actively looked to do so. People feared falling, and acted to keep their station.

Gossip.

People evolved to gossip. Contrary to current popular ideas, gossip in our evolutionary past likely acted more like a social glue to keep people connected than as a weapon to divide people, although it could be both (see Robin Dunbar in the Bibliography). Secrets might have been part of gossip but likely were not

limited to gossip and included aspects of life such as hunting, power blocs, relations to other groups, and religion. I can understand cherishing some secrets but I don't know why people evolved to relish secrets so much. People put a metaphysical "spin" on their secrets. Still, the taste plays a role in religion, ideas about "us and them", and group relations.

Among our proximate mechanisms, evolution gave us ways to do things and not do things according to their likely impact on our success: pleasure and pain, imitation, many emotions, rational consideration, advice from other people, beauty and ugliness, moral feelings, and religious feelings. These ways cannot be reduced to pleasure and pain. Usually what felt good was good for us in the original environment in which we evolved. Eating fatty food usually was helpful when we had to walk five miles a day to get any food at all. All animals feel pleasure and pain, many animals have emotions, and many animals imitate, but few animals have the other methods that evolution developed to get us to do or not to do. It is not clear why evolution developed so many methods with people, or needed so many methods, and I can't go into the topic here, other than what I say briefly about religion and morality. I comment briefly more on beauty toward the end of the chapter.

PART 4: Optional: Lessons from Nature and Evolution about God.

Violence, Good, Bad, and God's Plan.

Nature is beautiful, good, ugly, and bad. We are all familiar with the beauty and goodness, so I skip over that except for one point. Unless (1) natural laws (such as about gravity, electricity, radioactivity, bonding in atomic nucleuses, etc.) are set almost exactly as they are now in our universe, within a narrow range, and (2) are set together exactly as they are so they interact as they do within that narrow range, then (3) life-as-we-know-it could not have evolved. This fact does not prove some far-sighted intelligent planner set natural laws that way, but it is strong circumstantial evidence. Indirect evidence for God can be based on this idea of natural laws and their settings, and the case is strong (see chapter on atheism). This issue is what I had to leave out in this chapter, regrettably.

On the bad side, Nature contains a lot of violence and chaos. Half-a-dozen times, the Earth has been nearly covered with ice or has been ripped up by volcanoes. From time to time, nearly all life on Earth goes extinct, only to be replaced by other orders of life, which in turn perish. Meteors strike Earth, and totally change the climate for thousands of years. Sometimes one kind of life itself causes these great changes by polluting the Earth and killing off its fellows. New kinds of life could not flourish unless old kinds die off sometimes, as when the death of the dinosaurs opened the door for mammals. Some things that happen in nature seem not just violent but bad or even evil. Bugs eat other bugs while the other bugs are still alive, paralyzing their prey, and devouring their prey slowly over a period of weeks; one kind of bug enslaves another kind; parents eat their young; baby birds steal food from each others' mouths; sibling bugs eat each other; sibling mammals kill and devour their siblings in the womb; and cancer eats children from the inside for no apparent gain to anybody.

On the one hand, nature seems to say there is a very intelligent God who planned everything within close tolerances, could see a long way ahead, wanted life, wanted sentient-moral-aesthetic beings, and loves beauty. On the other hand, nature seems to say God puts up with chaos, violence, upheaval, poison, life eating life, badness, and even evil. Rather than value all life for itself alone, God seems to use one kind

of life simply as a tool to set the stage for other kinds of life. God does not mind sacrificing innocent life on a large scale. God likely uses bad and evil, not because he has too, but just because he does. That is not the kind of behavior that any major religion wants to see of God.

When we see badness in nature, and know its role in evolution, we tend to think that natural badness is an inevitable by-product of evolution. We have to put up with one thing to get another. We could not have males without females and vice versa. We could not have flowers without bees. We could not have hawks without sparrows for them to eat. We could not have interesting life without germs, parasites, age, decay, and death. Nature could not evolve humans without a lot of bad, and some evil, along the way. The same process that gives us sentient-moral-aesthetic beings insures that some natural evil persists. Still, we have to wonder why God could not set up nature so sentient beings evolved without natural badness, or at least without a lot less than we see on Earth. Either God is limited in his ability to set up nature or else God doesn't mind some badness and some evil.

I do not know what to make of this situation. If God has a plan for life, it seems the plan is bigger than my simplistic ideas of morality, duty, honor, decency, and kindness. I have to accept the situation, and move on. Although badness exists, sometimes wins, and seems to be a tool of God, it also seems goodness outweighs badness overall. The fact that goodness usually dominates is the fact that we have to work with. It seems God went to a lot of trouble to make sure sentience and morality arose in creation, so they must be important to him. I can't see anything more important. To act morally must be to act in accord with God's wishes. We come closer to "playing God" when we act morally than when we act nasty or when we act for power. We cannot become "little gods" by acting "above" morality through acting badly or through indulging our selfish wishes. We do have to mix practicality with morality but that does not mean we abandon morality or somehow rise "above" it.

The idea that the universe shows signs of being designed to produce sentient-moral-religious-aesthetic life is called the "anthropic principle". The name is off a bit because "anthropos" means "human" yet the idea applies to all sentient etc. life even on other planets. The idea cannot be proved or disproved, so it is not scientific. Most people who think about it understand that it is not science. As far as I can tell, most people who entertain it share many of my attitudes. I think the idea is common among physical scientists although not often stated or discussed. Enlightenment thinkers likely would approve it.

Me as Machine.

When people see that we have evolved, and that many of our mental abilities are evolved such as our ability to like other people and to assess justice, they get upset. They think it robs them of their soul; it makes God and everything interesting not needed. They think it makes are mere scribbling or aimless whistling. From the outside, I understand that point of view, but it puzzles me that people are so upset by it. Suppose I am a merely evolved very clever machine. Because I learn, I am both the hardware of my genes and development, and I am the software made up of things that I have chosen and learned. That is all that is needed for God to assess me and do something with me that suits his needs. I have a form and I have content. Whatever has a form and content can be assessed. Likely it can be reproduced in another medium and the reproduction can be assessed. When I die, my body decays, and a lot of what I was here on Earth while alive decays away forever. So what? If, after I die, if God wants, God can reproduce my form and content in whatever medium pleases him, and assess that. That is close enough

to me so that I don't worry over any difference and any metaphysical implications. The mind of God is a suitable medium. Maybe God assess the memory of me that still lingers in his mind. That also is close enough to me so that I don't worry about it. Wanting more is wanting too much.

Suppose you had an amazingly complex car that had learned things such as the most efficient way to avoid the police when you had been smoking "weed". When the car died, couldn't you still assess it? Wouldn't you still assess it? Wouldn't your assessment affect what cars you bought in the future? Can't you assess computer programs and assess what they have learned and done? Can't you assess an animal and what it has learned and done? There is not enough difference between me, the car, the computer program, and an animal for me to worry over.

Optimal Expression; Right Balance; Inner Logic.

"Abilities" includes physical abilities such as running, intellectual abilities such as to play music or do law, and emotions such as anger at neighbors and love for our own children. To "express" an ability (trait) is to show it to a certain extent. Some people run faster; some run faster in games such as soccer; and some run faster when pursuing a game animal. Some people sing a lot while some sing not at all. Some people sing well while others sing badly. Some traits (abilities) are under strong genetic control such as eye color but they are not of much interest here. The abilities of interest here have some genetic control but also are learned and depend on choice and desire, such as abilities for golf, singing country music, or getting on well with neighbors. People vary in natural aptitude for abilities and in the extent to which they express abilities. Part of variation in extent is due to underlying natural (genetically based) variation and part is due to differences in learning and choice. I don't sort out this issue. If you want a strong version of the argument here, limit the arena to our evolutionary past as hunter-gatherers. The ideas also apply now to a large extent but I can't argue the issue here.

The fact that we have an ability means that, overall, the ability had value in evolutionary (reproductive) success or else natural selection would not have kept it and shaped it. Not all the abilities that we see were obvious in natural selection but instead result from other underlying abilities that were important in natural selection in our hunter-gatherer past. There were no concert pianists in the plains of North Africa but there are concert pianists now based on what did happen in Africa. Natural selection might have kept the ability to argue persuasively but natural selection did not keep the ability to go to court every time the neighbor's dog pees on our sidewalk roses. We can misuse abilities from how natural selection originally shaped them, especially in modern life that is removed from our hunter-gatherer past. We evolved to flirt but not in "meat market" pickup bars. I can't sort out these issues here. Accept that abilities have a natural evolved basis but also are learned and depend on choices.

In our original environment, we expressed abilities as a way to get evolutionary reproductive success and we still often do now. We express any one ability to the right extent, at the right times, in the right places, in the right social context, in a balance with all our abilities. Trees do not send out leaves at all times of the year but only when to do so does the most good for reproduction. Most flowers don't bloom full tilt all year. Lions do not prowl hungry and ready to kill all the time even after they had a big meal yesterday. People don't talk politics and religion all the time; if they do, they soon have no friends and fewer family members. People talk politics and religion when it matters and it works. People don't run to every place they have to go nor do they walk – sometimes even in cities in the era of smart phones they still do walk

and run. Hopefully even stereotyped women don't cry with every minor disappointment. Hopefully even stereotyped men don't hit every man who doesn't step out of their path. We don't "put the moves" on every person we see, male, female, young, old, married, or single. Except in Hollywood and Bollywood musicals, people don't sing and dance their way down the street but they do sing and dance and play the guitar sometimes. Whether man or woman, playing guitar well usually makes you interesting and often helps you "get laid".

It is hard to give a sense of a balance of abilities in a few lines so all I can do here is point out that we do have to trade off some abilities for others, and I can suggest a balance. We love each of our children but we cannot love them so much that we stay with them all the time and we don't go get food, shelter, and clothes. We can love hunting but we can't love it so much that we never bother to bring back what we kill, or we never come home to make love to a spouse or display love to children. We can love a pet but not usually more than our children. We can love figuring out the weather because to do so is useful but we can't spend so much time figuring weather that we don't use the information to go hunt and gather in the right times and places and we neglect social duties. In modern times, students need family life, social life, love life, entertainment, sports, hobbies, art, and many intellectual pursuits, all in the right doses. Exactly how much that we show (do, feel, or think) is not rigid but is partially learned.

In our past, natural selection set the correct extent of expression and the balance automatically for us. In our present, we have to use more of our judgment but we still rely heavily on the tendencies and general balance that natural selection set for us about 200,000 years ago.

To see abilities more clearly, think of the most useful extent of expression in given situations. Expression can be underdone and overdone. Think how any given ability balances with other abilities. Just right, underdone, and overdone usually only make sense in context. It is more useful to think of human traits-abilities in these ways than to take them in total isolation as just a quality that we have or don't have, such as that we have religion or don't have abilities to digest wood or fly. Looking at abilities this way is useful when facing dilemmas about human nature such as the standard quandary of emotion versus reason.

To get a better sense of abilities, expression, and balance, it helps to develop the ability to see the inner logic of particular abilities, such as, for example, the logics of seeing, hearing, anger, and morality. Most traits do have some logic. I cannot here go into the logic of any particular abilities or how to cultivate the feel for the logic. I do discuss the logic of morality. Without a feel for the logic of particular abilities, likely we make mistakes in how we understand them, in terms of evolution or otherwise.

Emotions and Biological Explanations; More on "Nothing But".

Not only the West, but maybe especially the West, has been caught in a false dilemma between reason versus emotion. You had to choose one or the other. Until about 1800, usually reason was good while emotion was bad. After 1800, they reversed status, although there are still bad emotions and emotion can serve bad ends. Usually emotion is crazy and demonic while reason is sane and angelic. Reason is rational while emotion must be irrational by definition. Men are sanely rational while women are crazily emotional. All this caused needless confusion and mistakes. I see the distinction between reason and emotion, and sometimes it can be useful, but not often. All this confusion can be reduced by thinking that we have several abilities to reason and many emotions, and all of them usually are expressed to the right

extent in the right situations, are part of a balance, but can be misused. The problem cannot be made to vanish by seeing it this way but you will worry about it less.

Emotions are like religion and morality. Emotions usually are productive, as when we love our siblings despite small faults, and so help them to live past the faults and grow up to reproduce nephews and nieces. If emotions weren't productive most of the time that we show them, natural selection would not have kept them to the extent that we have them. Some emotions are unproductive, as when we sock the boss or chase our neighbor's spouse. Natural selection would have changed those in the past.

We can think too much and we can think in the wrong ways. Should I use my intellect to figure out how deer move and feed in this valley or should I do something else such as listen to the advice of all the old men, wander aimlessly, or follow a grid? Should I spend a week figuring out deer patterns given that my wife's cousin just killed a big buffalo and we all will eat well for a week? Should I spend a week figuring out deer tracks given that nobody in our band has killed in a week and my children, siblings, cousins, nephews, and nieces are hungry now? In the past, natural selection would have shaped how much we use reason in particular situations.

The Darwinian account of the emotions is 80 percent correct. The remaining 20 percent, when filled in eventually by theorists and field workers, won't contradict the current 80 percent.

The Darwinian account is a rational (strategic) account of seemingly irrational behavior. It seems reason does trump emotion after all. Yet to insist on this dichotomy here is really a philosophical prejudice and shows the confusion that arises when we insist on a dichotomy between emotion and reason.

Because we practically define emotions by their irrationality yet the Darwinist account is rational, it can help to look more at the Darwinist account. The best presenter of this view is Robert Frank, an economist with a keen sense for the logic of situations and for evolutionary logic. Sometimes what seems like the best short-term strategy really is not best over the long run. Over the long run, this strategy bleeds us in little bits and actually hurts us overall. The long-term bleeding more than erodes any short term gain. In that case, we need to give up what seems like the best strategy and to adopt another strategy that might not seem as rational (effective) but really is more effective. A classic example is the school bully with the stereotyped fatherly advice to stand up to him-her. If we have to pay the bully 3 dollars a day for 200 school days per year for 10 years, then we pay \$6000 over the time in school and we don't get the lunch that we need, thereby stunting our growth, our intellect, our school work, our pride, feeling of self-esteem, and whole future. If we stand up to the bully, we might get hurt for a short while, but we stop paying, if only because the authorities see the situation. So we gain back all we might have lost, and gain respect from comrades. Even if we lose at fisticuffs, we gain in other ways. All we have to do is screw up the courage to get hit. In real life, the situation is not this simple. Don't stand up to bar bullies or street thugs unless you have been well trained and have talent. Still, the logic makes sense once we think it out fully over the long run and we see that a short term stand can yield long term benefits.

In this episode of passion, we show as much bravery and commitment as needed for the situation. We don't show bravery and stern commitment in all situations, or to this extent. Passion and commitment are closely tied. To understand emotions, you also have to study commitment including the lack thereof. I

don't make much of this connection here but I mention it because it is important if you read more about the subject.

Fine; Darwin takes this field and all fields; everything supports reproductive success over the long run; and everything is strategic practicality in disguise. We can see everything entirely and only in terms of reproductive success. We can reduce all human life to nothing but that. If this way is the only way we look, we are like the old Freudians who saw sex behind everything, like old existentialists who saw a commitment to personal being behind all, or like ethnologists who see cultural rules as the overwhelming dominant force in human life.

In fact, anger, love, jealousy, threats, courting, friendship, deep friendship, etc. are not the same even if they all do have the overall effect of increasing reproductive success. They all have a different internal logic, a different internal feel. They also each have a distinct way that they fit together to form a whole field. They are both distinct and overlap. How they fit together depends on their internal logic, and their internal logic depends on how they fit together.

In practice, Darwinians intuitively use their feel for emotions and for the logic of emotions when they think through how an emotion works and how it helps reproductive success. I cannot go through how thinking-through-with-the-help-of-an-intuitive-feel happens other than what I gave above. It would be very hard to work through how an emotion helped reproductive success if we did not also have an intuitive feel for its inner logic and for how it fits in with other emotions.

All this would be fine too if there was a theory of the internal logic of each emotion, and a general theory of emotional logic, how the emotions worked as a whole set, how they interact, overlap, and are distinct. Psychologists have made considerable progress but there is still no such general theory.

As long as there is no such general theory, Darwinians have to explain each emotion separately in terms of how it aids reproductive success, in that way alone; and Darwinians have to use their intuitive feel for the structure of each emotion to help them do that.

Just because do Darwinians succeed so well, Darwinians become less sensitive to the need for a general theory of emotions, the need to see the internal logic of each emotion, and the need to see how emotions interact. Darwinians lapse into a mostly successful but also limiting reductionism and "nothing but".

Without a clear view of the logic of each emotion, sometimes we can get confused about how any given emotion helps reproductive success even if we are not biased against the idea that emotions are mostly about helping reproductive success. If we did not understand how love differs from "mate guarding"-though-coercion then we would not understand either love or mate guarding. Quick success in seeing how an emotion might have served reproductive success ironically can block long-term greater insight into how this emotion and all emotions evolved. It helps to think in terms of plausible obvious ways to serve reproductive success, the internal feel (logic) of the emotion, and how that internal structure might have affected how this emotion evolved.

Despite that Darwinists overlook the logic of emotions, overlook relations between emotions, and lapse into explaining away as nothing but, I still prefer them to critics who doubt that evolution shaped behavior,

mind, and emotions, and doubt that emotions still serve reproductive success. I still prefer them to critics who assert that society, culture, or a socio-economic-political-adaptive system, creates all emotions and determines all the content and objects of emotions. It is easier to escape mistakes of Darwinist reduction than to escape from self-imposed blindness to evolution or blindness that reduces all mind, behavior, and emotion to society, culture, system, economics, or hegemony.

In the long run, Darwinists will use their intuitive feel for emotions combined with their commitment to the idea that emotions help reproductive success to make a more general theory in which each emotion has a place in the total constellations of emotions. Then, a more explicit view of the logic of each emotion will arise along with the general theory. I look forward to that.

Much the same comments about emotion apply to other fields such as all the arts. Yes, the ability to blow a horn, bang a drum, sketch a deer, or dance, all can lead to greater reproductive success. But, if those are the only terms in which we can think of melody, rhythm, drawing, moving, and any art, then we will not be able to fully see how they work in reproductive success and fully see how they evolved, or appreciate them apart from evolution as they deserve.

Please keep these comments in mind for the Parts below on the evolution of religion and morality.

PART 5: Optional: The Semi-Whole Self.

This Part of this chapter is needed for later chapters in optional Part Two of the Book, and for chapters in Part Four of the book on Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism. Part Two of the book has a chapter on the self that makes many of the same points as here but some people will not read Part Two.

Both Together and Separate.

Any evolved organism, including a human person, is both a unified whole and a fragmented grab bag of separate genes, organs, chemicals, structures, events, acts, traits, processes, modules, and learning. I explain “fragmented grab bag” below. It is impossible to declare categorically that persons are either a simple unified whole or merely a fragmented grab bag with no unity at the center. (I ignore essentialist thinking and the basis for essentialism in our evolved past.)

People hold different views on the unity or fragmentation of the human self according to the needs of the people holding the view. For example, people want the self to be one unified simple metaphysical whole, a soul, or like a soul, if they believe in Christianity, Islam, most kinds of Hinduism, Platonism, and most “New Age”. In contrast, people who want to avoid responsibility say “my genes for that one particular bad trait made me do it but otherwise I am a good guy so don’t send me to jail”.

People who oppose traditional religions sometimes stress the fragmented self as a way to argue against the soul so as to argue against traditional religions. People who defend traditional religions stress unity of the self as a way to defend the eternal soul so as to defend traditional religions.

The psychological, legal, political, evolved, rational, or emotional self is not the real issue but is only a means. I am not concerned with attacking or defending traditional religions or the soul. I do not use the

self as a way to get at the soul to get at traditional religions one way or the other. I do not use the self as a means to another end. I focus on the evolved self. Try to see through arguments that use the self as a way to argue other issues.

For the purposes of this book, I don't have to decide categorically. Even without being a single unified whole, even without being an eternal soul, and even if the self has a lot of loosely associated parts, still the human self is unified enough for God to do with us what he wants when we die. The self is unified enough for the legal and political systems in a democracy. The self is unified enough for morality, as, for example, to learn good and bad, and for praise and blame. The self is unified enough for the Golden Rule to make sense, and for us to know the legal implications of "applies equally" and "rule of law". The self is unified enough for parenting and schooling. I like to think about the unity and fragmentation of the self but, for me, this activity is mostly for fun and scientific curiosity.

Children often first see the non-unity of the self when they realize that people change over time. Is your 10-year-old naïve childish self the same as your 13-year-old experienced "mature" self? Is the geeky self of high school the same as when you are a parent, employee, business person, or professional? Could your parents once have been cool? The same idea applies also to dogs, cats, houses, cars, and chairs. In a later chapter in this book, I show how this insight is used to "pick apart" almost any object and many ideas, sometimes fairly, often unfairly.

We simply have to work with the selves (or self) as they arise in particular arenas - and we can do that. We evolved abilities to do that. We have to argue among our fellows and change our minds sometimes, and we can do that too.

Likely the natural evolved "fallback" position of most nearly-sentient organisms or fully sentient organisms (cats, dogs, apes, people) is simply to assume the self is one whole nearly-unified thing despite changes. Likely we evolved to see selves this way. That is a good short-term strategy and there are few reasons to think about the long term. Our paramour is the same person over the space of a few months and there are few reasons to dwell on whether he-she is the same person over a few years. We deal with that self when it develops. We can deal with changes of heart too, like falling in and out of love, and we don't think of those changes as undermining the unified selfness of me, my girlfriend, or boyfriend. If a bully intends to beat me up then likely he-she intends to beat me up in the morning and afternoon. If the bully "finds God" and doesn't beat me up in the afternoon, then I don't worry if he-she is the same. If Joe is my friend today then likely he intends to be my friend next week too.

We find it easier to think of mental abilities, especially intentions, if we think of them as coming from one single fairly unified person. We know that people have various intentions, and that intentions can conflict, but we hope we can unify it all on a higher level. Otherwise, it is hard to deal with other organisms (other people). It takes a lot of time and energy to think of them as bundles of distinct intentions. It is easier to think of them being as unified and consistent as possible. We like to think Joe's generosity works with his reserved dignity because Joe is overall a standup guy. We see how our dog can protect our children but bark at neighbor kids when we recall that dogs evolved for pack life where packs were composed of one large family and that different packs were often rivals. We evolved to see this way.

Humans hold on hard to the natural fallback position of one single unified whole person despite changes. We want to think of ourselves and fellow humans that way. We want to think of animals, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, oceans, storms, and stars that way. This way of looking has a basis in evolved human nature, which likely means that it had strong success value in our past.

Just because unity is the natural evolved fallback position does not mean we are each an eternal soul, either as distinct individuals (Christianity and Islam) or as parts of an eternal system (some Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism). Just because unity is the natural evolved fallback position does not mean the self is not at all unified and is simply a mixed jumble. Just because we evolved to see selves and to think of selves as largely coherent does not mean either that selves are totally incoherent or simple eternal souls. What we evolved to see does not force us to conclude. We can use a variety of evidence, including what we evolved to see, to decide what we think about the coherence of human selves.

For here, it is more useful to dwell on how modern Darwinism has come to see the human self not quite as unified as religious people and philosophers previously thought of the self. Most marked points below describe a mental trait that needs to be taken much on its own regardless of what else is going on in the self. Because these mental traits would have supported success, natural selection made sure we had the means for these traits almost regardless of what else was going on in the self. Evolution supported the creation, maintenance, and distinct operation of separate mental “modules” made of genes and learning to make sure these mental traits happened when needed. When we think of the self this way, it is easy to think of the self as nothing but an accidental collection of useful behavioral modules, a fragmented grab bag. We should not go that far.

-A mental “trait” and mental “ability” are the same. If human individuals are one whole single self-person, and all humans are human, then all our various mental abilities should not vary too much from individual to individual, and various mental abilities should come together. Everybody should be able to reason and talk, everybody should be able to reason well enough and talk well enough, and reasoning and talking should come together nearly all the time. The abilities to reason, talk, enjoy music, recognize a few birds or cars, and wear clothes should all come together.

A little variation in mental abilities between people is part of what makes us individual as persons, and is charming. But too much variation undercuts the idea that people are one whole single self-person. This problem with variability is one reason why mentally handicapped people make us uneasy: not because they are creepy, hard to be around, hard to work with, or require extra care, but because they undercut what we think of people in general and of ourselves as a person.

In fact: 1) Many mental abilities are distinct from other mental abilities (they vary independently).

(2) Individual people vary in mental abilities. Particular distinct traits vary from person to person. People vary in the extent to which distinct mental abilities are developed.

(3) Mental abilities don't all come together as a whole unified set, especially not one set that is typical of all human person-selves. All mental abilities are not all found in all people. All mental abilities are not developed to the same extent in each person.

Some people can sing well while most of us can't carry a tune (singing is more a mental than physical ability). We can hear in-tune or out-of-tune singing without being able to sing in-tune ourselves. Some people can reason quite well while most of us struggle. There is not only one kind of reasoning but several kinds. People vary in their abilities to reason; some people can reason well about mechanical things but not about the law while some people can reason well about the law but not about finance. Some people have fashion sense while others don't, and the degree of fashion sense varies by individual. The degree of fashion sense varies within the same individual even about different styles; some people can pick a shirt but not shoes. Some people easily figure out what a rabbit will do, or where to find wild berries, while most of us are happy to tag along with the clever ones. Having fashion sense, the ability to sing a tune, the ability to appreciate a painting, the ability to hunt, the ability to shop, and the ability to do math and science, do not all come together.

Here is not the place to decide if distinct mental traits, so much variability in distinct mental traits, so much coming together of distinct mental traits, or so much separation, supports the idea that nearly all humans are single whole person-selves, or undercuts that idea.

Rather, the points are: (1) There is a real issue. There is space to argue on these grounds. We cannot assume that all variation is merely part of the charm of being individuals. We cannot assume that we are whole single person-selves just because we want to be. (2) We have to think in terms of (a) separate mental traits, (b) variation in mental traits, and (c) how traits do or don't come together. (3) Then we have to decide if our assessment supports or denies the idea that humans are each whole single person-selves or are merely accidental grab bags of distinct traits.

-Humans share mental abilities with animals. I don't go into what those are.

People also have abilities that (we think) are found only with humans, such as the abilities to speak well, make art, and appreciate art. For this issue of the whole person-self, of course we should focus on the abilities that make humans distinct.

Still, important mental traits that we share with animals are distinct, vary, and do not come together reliably. That result leads us to doubt humans are simple whole single person-selves. If our underlying animal nature is made of a lot of distinct parts, the parts vary a lot, and the distinct variable parts do not always come together consistently, then it does not make sense to think we can build a single whole human person-self on that shifting sand.

Again, here is not the place to go into the issue. I am not saying this observation undercuts or supports the idea that all people are single whole person-selves. I am only saying there is an issue, even with the important traits that we share with animals. We do have to think about even our animal mental traits if we are honest in assessing people as whole single person-selves or as fragmented grab bags.

-Some people have a hard time thinking of mental abilities as traits. People more easily think of physical abilities as traits such as hair color and fingers made for grasping. It can help to think out this issue (distinct traits, variation, and not coming in a whole coherent set) first in terms of physical abilities found only among some animals, then with physical abilities that humans share with animals, and then with physical abilities that are human only (such as full upright posture, full upright posture on two legs, ability

to run distances on two legs, and full precision grip). Then extend the insights from physical traits onto mental traits. I will try to put on the Internet an essay that walks people through from physical traits to mental traits, and the issues.

-It was useful in our evolutionary past to think of the self as the center of intentions and it is still useful to think of whole single person-selves in this way, both our self and other selves. Really what matters are the distinct intentions, not any supposed center location where intentions live and out of which intentions come. We can see intentions (or their effects) but we do not easily see the center. Intentions are often distinct. We can have distinct intentions even without a central place from which they spring. The fact that we think of intentions as unified does make them unified and, in contrast, leads us to suspect that they are not unified. We over compensate with the idea of unification to make up for a distinct lack of unity.

-The idea of a unified single self need not be entirely true to be more useful than harmful. We can hold to the idea of a unified self even if the idea is not entirely true. We can repress questioning the unity of the self if questioning undermines an otherwise useful idea. If questioning the unity of the self leads us to treat other people in ways that hurt our success, such as by leading us to be nasty to neighbors, then we have to stop thinking that way. If questioning the unity of the self leads us to doubt the soul, to doubt the mainstream religion of our group, and so hurts our success, then we should repress such thinking. On the other hands, as scientists, we need to (temporarily) rise above this evolutionary limit. We should not think about the unity of the self as a metaphysical given but as an evolved idea with strategic benefits. Whether it is true or not is another issue. When not thinking as scientists, we think it is true because it is useful and because we evolved to think it is true. Thinking of the self as a soul is one way to use the idea of a self usefully and to prevent undermining the idea. Still, as scientists, we do have to get over evolved biases sometimes.

-Running every idea through a unified self before acting can take a lot of time and energy, and sometimes we can't afford the time or energy. It is better to have specific mechanisms for specific situations, and to set those off when the need arises. This is one reason why we see the world as lively. When hiking, if we see a snake, it is better to stop in our tracks and to slowly go backward. If we have to think about this situation, and process it through our gigantic brain, then we would die too often. If something sticks in our throat, we spit it out without thinking. We can see these mechanisms at work even when the situation now is not exactly like what the mechanism originally evolved to serve, as when parents stick their arms in front of children when parents brake the car.

-To make the absolute best decision often requires much information. Sometimes we don't have as much as we would like but we have to act anyway. After a certain age, it just comes time to either get married or settle down to single life. Most of us decide to get married even though we don't know nearly as much as we should. Most of us know far less about our spouse than we should, especially in the modern world where everyone knows everyone else for generations. Even with the Internet and dating services, we don't know enough. But we "take the leap" and get married anyway. Almost the definition of a good entrepreneur is being able to make good guesses on limited information. You can't sit on a pile of money forever and you can't let great chances keep passing by. Sooner or later, we have to leap for a business venture not unlike we used to leap to catch rabbits. We have evolved mechanisms to deal with less-than-perfect-and-needed information but it is not useful to describe them here. They support the point.

-A lot of the information that we get is not certain in the sense of “the sun will rise tomorrow” but likely in the sense of “probably it will rain lightly tomorrow” or “probably that red car will stop at the stop sign by where the children are playing”. Probable information is like incomplete information so that I don’t go into the difference. The point is that we have to act and we have to do it in ways that are peculiar to this kind of situation. The way we act in this situation is under the control of different methods (mechanisms) of deciding than how we decide whether to wear the green shirt or the blue.

-We can’t think of, assess, and decide a lot of stuff or we would go crazy (breathing, chewing, digesting, beating of our hearts, etc.). While it might not seem exactly the same, thinking is not really all that different from just doing bodily acts. We have to do a lot of our thinking in a similar manner such as going through a yellow light or stopping, buying red apples or green apples, wearing a light coat or a medium coat, using this word or that, etc. You just have to make up your mind fairly soon.

-Some acts, ideas, attitudes, etc. seem to “get our goat” and we act on them “without thinking” such as someone cheating at cards, election fraud, idiots making loud noise coming out of their cars. We feel the same way but in the different direction for good acts such as one child sharing with another or a politician telling the plain honest truth.

-Morality does involve judgments and facts but morality does not involve judgments and facts such as in the issue “are extra large eggs worth the price increase over large eggs?” Morality involves decisions about the quality of acts and ideas, decisions that do not necessarily rest on pure information of any kind. Suppose two people argue and then one hits the other (I recall pictures of brawls at speeches of Donald Trump). We can argue whether there was sufficient provocation but the decision does not come down to knowing exact words and exact tone. The decision comes down to what we consider provocation and how much is sufficient to do what. That is a different kind of assessment than considering the price of eggs, and requires a different kind of thinking. It might require different pathways in the brain.

-Emotions often commit us to a way of acting rapidly and even when we do not have all the information that we might like. When animals are familiar with the emotions typical of a species, then emotions help the animal to know what this animal is likely to do regardless of the first animal might assess the situation, and so the first animal can respond appropriately. As people, we know the stock of emotions typical of people, and that helps us know what will happen if somebody slaps somebody even in a mall. When we learn the emotions typical of dogs, we know what will happen when a strange child wanders too near the dog bowl at feeding time.

-Contrary to how people tend to think of “emotion” when they think in terms of “logic versus emotion”, emotions are not all one thing and they might be about as distinct from each other as love is from geometry. Emotions are a bundle of jumps.

-When we have fungus on our toes, doctors give us an anti-fungal cream to apply directly to our toes. Doctors don’t treat our souls. Doctors cut out specific parts of our body that have cancer. Doctors give us chemotherapy for cancer.

-I mentioned in Part 3 above that we sometimes misperceive the world because a misperception is more useful than accuracy. Many features that I described just above are variations on this theme. One of the most important variations is that we see the world as more lively than it is. We see more intention than is really there. We see intention where really there is none. We see more meaning than is really there. We see meaning where there is none. Almost all of us think more of ourselves than we should. Some of us think too little of ourselves, leading to sadness. Most of us over-value our spouses, and that is a good thing. Without all this mis-thinking, the worlds of opera and soap opera would not be possible.

-We deceive ourselves, usually so we can deceive other people. Every time we deceive ourselves, we fragment ourselves. We make little compartments where the real truth has to be locked away to protect us. We don't put all suppressed truths in the same compartment, and usually we have to keep one suppressed truth from knowing about the others, so we can have many dozens of little mental "cysts". Each mental cyst is potentially another self in our total bundle. Usually, sane people can handle the fragmentation. Sometimes we get lost and lose our sense of self. Nobody is immune to this breaking of the self due to self deception.

The fragmented self is not the bad horrible creature that Tom Riddle makes of himself when he breaks himself into pieces (horcruxes) so as to become Voldemort, but, then neither is it the simple good soul we wish we were.

On the other hand, consider these images that make us reconsider the place of independent modules in the construction of persons:

-When confronted with something like an angry dog, we have to either fight or run, right away. We cannot hesitate. There is no intermediate solution. The "flight versus flight" mechanism is a "module" that makes us do one or the other right away. But the module does not, and cannot, stand alone.

Your family, including your children, goes camping in the deep woods with another family including their children. You have bologna sandwiches for lunch. Some bear cubs happen to be nearby, and wander into camp looking for the source of the meat smell. Of course the children think they are cute. Their mother follows them into camp, see all you foreigners near her cubs, and gets really angry. You have to act quickly. Who do you save? Do you run away to save yourself regardless of your children? Do you save all your children but not the children of the other family? What if you can only save some of your children? Which do you save? Do you save your favorite? If you can, do you try to save all the children from both families? I won't tell you how natural selection might solve this problem.

-We can control our emotion with logic, other emotions, or through faith. We can control our emotions with practice.

-A friend steals some money from your purse. You discover the theft and guess who did it. But before you can do anything, the friend tells you about stealing and pays back the money. You should, can, and do put this in a greater context and evaluate a whole person.

-People who meditate, such as some yogis (including female yogis called "yoginis") can control bodily functions to some extent such as by breathing very slowly or changing their heart rate.

-Even ordinary people can control some usually automatic processes such as the need to sneeze or to gag.

-Doctors have known for a long time of the relation between will to live and ability to heal, attitude and recover, a relation between mind and body. The mind and body are one. If we neglect the mind, too often we cannot heal the body alone. If we damage the body, usually we damage the mind. Soldiers cannot be treated for PTSD or other problems if we ignore these links.

It seems as if there is a higher level of control that can sort out when to trigger a module or not. When two modules might need to be triggered nearly at once but are incompatible, the higher level of control can decide which module to trigger. This higher level of control is not likely a similar module itself such as "fight or flight" or "get really angry at cheating friends".

Does the possibility of some high level centralized control mean that we really are one unified self with a soul after all? No. It means we have to think through the issues carefully but we still should not jump to any conclusions, especially to support our views of religion, morality, or science.

Integrated Person.

I value integrity in people. I do not define what integrity is. Most religions also value integrity, and think that integrity goes along with being a good person and-or an adept person, in religious views. Think of integrity as lack of contradictions. Contradictions undermine integrity, make us feel bad as a person, and make us act worse. Each lie, theft, cheat, or missed promise is a contradiction and it eats away at us. While usually we do not reach the level of Voldemort or the Emperor Darth Sidious, on a smaller scale, each contradiction is like Tom Riddle creating another horcrux and so becoming Voldemort.

Ideally, we would like to be completely free of contradiction. Ideally, we would like all parts of ourselves to know what all other parts are up to, and harmonize the parts. We do want the right hand to know what the left hand is doing.

While there seems to be a high level of control in humans, that high level likely does not lead to smooth total integration.

Do these facts mean I can never be fully integrated? Does the fact that I can never be fully integrated mean I can never achieve enough religious success? Is the simple truthful life of Christian, Taoist, or Zen hopes completely out of the question?

I think the realities of how people evolved do mean that we can never be fully integrated. We will always have conflicts in us. We will always be somewhat the slave to our modules, and we never can be fully in control. We can never live totally without self-deception. We always hide some truths. We can never see the world simply as it is, and so can never see ourselves simply as we are. Very few people learn to speak simply from a clean whole helpful heart. Just as we are always morally mixed, so we are always never simply whole persons. We can increase our integration, can diminish our contradictions, just as we increase our moral level, but we can never achieve full integrity.

The failure to achieve full integrity does not mean we are doomed to religious failure any more than the failure to be morally perfect means we are doomed to religious failure. Whether we are deep down really one or are a fragmented bundle is not our problem; it is God's issue. We don't have to worry about not being able to control our "flight or fight" response, our gag reflex, or all of our jealousy. We can control what we need to control to improve and to achieve religious success. We can control our tendencies to blurt out whatever little lie gets us out of a tight spot and, instead, try to tell the truth even when it hurts. We can stop stealing even when we won't get caught. What can control what we need to control to see the world in terms of God's love and to work hard to make a better world. We don't have to tell our wife that she looks fat in that dress or tell our husband that he is not going bald. We don't have to tell the boss that he-she sucks at golf and fantasy sports. We do have to accept when the candidate of our political party is not the best. Some people are more unified, honest, and simpler. We can imitate them. We can achieve their high level of integrity. We can achieve a pretty high level of integrity. That level is enough to get us on the right path and keep us there even if it is not the goal itself. You can still be good even if you are not wholly and totally good.

If you believe that some great religious heroes such as Jesus or Taoist adepts were without any internal conflict or contradiction, saw the world exactly as it is, saw themselves exactly as they are, and never hid away any truths, then I do not argue with you; but I don't agree with you. For example, Mohammad, in the Koran, lied to himself about cattle; and Jesus likely lied to himself about his mother getting "knocked up" before she was married. Rather than defend the view that your favorite hero was totally honest and totally integrated, it is more useful to think what it means that religious inspiration comes from imperfect fragmented persons. I find that insight more inspirational than the idea of perfect persons.

PART 6: Optional: More Implications.

All the ideas in this Part of the chapter are my own. They are not necessary implications of the fact that human nature evolved. You could believe human nature evolved but not agree with my ideas. Still, they are reasonable implications of the fact that human nature evolved.

God Exists or Not Exists.

The fact that we evolved the ability to imagine God does not mean that God exists or God does not exist. The evolution of the ability for the idea of God, the fact that the idea came to us through evolution, is not relevant to the truth or value of the idea. We evolved the ability to imagine tigers and elephants; whether they are real depends on grounds other than our evolved ability to imagine them. We evolved the ability to imagine cloud-beings on giant gas planets. We might never be able to assess whether they are real by going to look. So we have to judge whether they are likely real or not by criteria other than direct view. We evolved the ability to imagine unicorns but used our other evolved abilities, our evolved abilities to think, to decide that unicorns are not real in the same way we can use our evolved abilities to assess the likelihood of life on giant gas planets. Likewise, we have to judge the issue of God on other grounds than whether we evolve the ability to imagine God. If you are quite careful, you can admit the fact that the basis for an idea evolved into the grounds for assessing the idea; but, until you learn to be quite careful, it is best to forget about evolution, pro or con, while thinking out God and morality.

Every particular kind of God entails also a particular kind of morality. The morality of Jesus and the idea of God-as-a-mind-and-person-and-the-Judeo-Christian-Muslim-God go along. I don't go into this aspect of the issue here.

Neither logic nor evidence can conclusively prove that God exists or does not exist, not logic or evidence from evolution or anywhere else.

So we have to rely on judgment and have to be open about what we do. We can decide if the evidence supports more the idea that there is some God or supports more the idea that there no God at all. If we think the evidence supports some God, (1) we can start from the evidence to think about what God the evidence supports, or (2) we can start from a particular God to think if the evidence supports that God. Most people take their God from childhood, and use whatever evidence and logic they can to support the claim that their God is the one-and-only-God and their way of life the best. Some people take a God or take a philosophical idea to which they have converted, and then search the evidence for justification; that is what atheists do. There is nothing absolutely wrong with doing this as long as you know what you are doing and you don't hide it from others. Just as no evidence or logic can conclusively prove God or not God, none can conclusively prove one God or one way, and we still have to use judgment.

Not surprisingly, on this basis, I think the evidence supports the idea that there is a mind behind it all, that mind is like a person, that personal mind is God, this God is like the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God, and the way of life that God supports is the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. God welcomes good ideas from other traditions. I do not go into the issue more here. I go into it some more in the chapter on atheism, but I don't finally settle it. Most of this book supports my judgment in one way or another.

Frequent Theme: Evolved Sentience and Evolved Morality.

When sentience and the capacity for morality evolve, they have to evolve together. Any evolved sentient being (person, agent) has to have moral feelings, and those moral feelings have to be similar to the moral feelings that humans have. Any being that evolved morality also has to be sentient, and the sentience would be similar to the sentience of humans. When you think of evolved sentient being, always think of sentient-moral being; and when you think of evolved moral being always think of moral-sentient being. Sometimes I write "sentient-moral" to make this point but even when I write only "sentient" or "moral" always think of "sentient-moral".

Evolved morality has to be along the lines we know of as morality. Morality has a logic, and evolution has to follow that logic, at least mostly. Evolved morality has to be based on the logic of the Golden Rule and "applies equally". See above for details of these ideas. Once we have this base, of course, we can twist it to serve our self-interest; but we must begin with this base. If we stray far from this base, other people will "call us" on our diversion, and we have to return. When we return, we return to this base.

An evolved sentient-moral being could create artificial beings who are sentient but do not have morality, or who have a sense of morality different than the morality we humans evolved with. An evolved sentient-moral being could create artificial beings who are moral but not sentient. An evolved sentient-moral being could create artificial beings who are sentient but have sentience different than human sentience. We

evolved humans likely are doing that right now with computers. All the possibilities will come with genetic engineering and bio-technology. None of this detracts from the facts that (1) when sentience and morality evolve, they evolve together, and that (2) all evolved morality has to follow much the same logical lines as the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

The universe is mechanical and amoral. Yet it generates sentient-moral beings and generates many situations-and-things that are complicated and interesting such as galaxies, storms, forests, tribes of people, farms, fire flies, cities, democracies, Baroque music, chick flicks, and crime novels. The world gives sentient-moral beings a lot to do. It is a dangerous place but also one full of opportunity. I believe God planned the universe to be all this. He gave sentient-moral beings an arena in which to wonder and to work things out.

I do not say the world is a fantasy playground and we all should be “at play in the fields of the Lord”. The world can be a hard place too, and it is often a painful boring grind. The sentient-moral beings on planet Earth might not do well but instead might turn this place into a poison pit. Even if most of us do well and have fun, a lot of us get beat up too much to succeed. God knows all this. I am not sure what he makes of it and what he will do with beat up people. These facts do not change that something fascinating arose out of the mechanical and amoral, we can work on what arose, and we can often enjoy ourselves as we work on it.

God, through Evolution, Gave Us Almost Enough.

God, through evolution, gave us considerable abilities. Evolution gave us enough abilities so that we can properly assess most situations if we prepare ourselves and put our minds to it. We know how to make a living even if we cannot succeed grandly. We know right from wrong, and can do the right thing if we are willing to take the “hit” to our practical success. We know when we use morality to serve other ends, and we know we should not. We know when people use us for their own ends, and we usually go along with it because it serves our own (bad) ends or because we “get off on it” such as by feeling righteous. We know how to be good neighbors and good citizens. We know how to make the world better and more interesting without also making it worse and scarier.

God did not give us enough abilities so we can do everything proper preparation. We cannot be good citizens unless we are lucky enough to be born into a country with good institutions or we are very brave. We cannot be good citizens, good neighbors, good friends, or good parents, unless we put work into it. We have to be informed, listen to other people, and practice making good decisions. Most of us don’t do that but rather spend our energy getting off on giving our ignorant opinions.

God did not give us the abilities to overcome all obstacles. Sometimes we run into something that we just cannot handle, such as disease, natural disaster, terrorist attack, home invasion, long-term abuse, chronic depression, or a bad boss. God did give us the sense to get help sometimes. Sometimes we just suffer through it. Don’t look down on people who really can’t handle situations, as long as they are not “faking it” as part of the culture of victimization.

Most situations in the modern world are not much more complicated than situations ever were in human history but some are. It is hard to figure out what to do about terrorism; unemployment; welfare; inflation;

illegal immigration; bad education; ethnic groups, religious groups, socio-economic classes, and other subgroups with bad attitudes; and general rudeness. But that is part of being a citizen in a modern state, and we have to put up with the bad to get the good; we have to put up with the duties to get the benefits. Do what you can with what you've got. Get advice from somebody who makes real sense, not from some political demagogue who panders to your self-interest and prejudices. If you can't figure it out properly, then don't do anything. If you can't elect a person who clearly has good sense, then don't elect anybody.

Individual people differ in almost all details of their physical appearance. In the same way, people differ in the details of their abilities. Some people are better at music while others are better at business. Some people are better at cooking while others are better at hunting. People are able in different ways and they are unable in different ways. People differ in their able-ness and un-able-ness. This does not mean we are generally all-able or all-un-able. It means we can expect to be generally able for most situations that people usually had to face, at least before the invention of agriculture and civilization, but we are able in different individual ways. We can rely on what we have for most of the situations in life even if we do it a bit differently than other people, and even if we are better in some ways and worse than others.

The facts that people were generally able for most of life's situations, at least until the rise of agriculture and civilization, and that individuals differ, figure in later chapters in discussions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen. These facts matter for the teachings of Jesus because they support the idea that we should be tolerant and accept individuals. Individual differences are usually as source of pleasure.

Mixed Moral Nature Again.

Nearly all people have a firm moral sense. We know good from bad, right from wrong, and should from should not. We know the difference between being pro-active versus waiting for the world to take care of itself and take care of us.

Our moral sense is not perfect. We make mistakes. Moral ambiguity is real, and we get confused. We can get fooled by well-meaning parents, bad-meaning politicians, televangelists, self-righteous indignant people, smug do-gooders, people who use ambiguity to excuse what they want, modern Romanticism, greed, the smug moral superiority that prevails among college students, and all manner of non-academic slimy persuaders. The fact that we make mistakes is why we have moral sense; if we did what was right automatically then we would not need much moral sense any more than we need a well-developed sense of air to breathe. The fact that we make mistakes does not mean we do not have a firm sense of morality, it only means the world is a difficult place.

Again, we have a firm enough sense of morality for nearly all situations, especially if we talk to people without losing our natural bearings.

At the same time, it is worth stressing that nearly all of us have a mixed moral nature. We evolved both to act well most of the time and to cheat too often. We evolved to do out-and-out bad some of the time such as by stealing, hitting, and lying hurtful gossip, although, thankfully, we do that rarely, and only few among us learn to be criminals as a way of life. Usually we are good; we can shape behavior through teaching and learning; and we can learn to be even better than our nature by birth, if not perfect. When we "go

bad” consistently, usually we learned to do it. What can be learned could have been avoided, and might be reversible.

We have to accept the badness in ourselves without romanticizing it, liking it, dwelling in it, wallowing in it, indulging it, enjoying it too much, or using it for selfishness and further badness. We have to deal with the badness in ourselves without thinking we can become perfectly good. We can be naughty without being too bad, and we can make up for it if we really hurt somebody. We can learn to channel bad energy into getting things done without becoming annoying do-gooders.

How we turn out depends on culture, social group, government, institutions, and personal history. It is worth striving to mold the kind of social group etc. that leads people to be good, supports other people being good, and results in mutual support of goodness. It is worth striving for democratic institutions. While we cannot change our personal historical past we can change the trajectory of our lives, and it is worth striving to do that.

We cannot make people thoroughly good through moral, religious, social, political, or politically correct harangue. We cannot make people thoroughly good by threatening them with hell, through religious revivals, or through scolding and gossip. We cannot make people thoroughly good through a lot of fussy laws. Usually we make them worse. We can control their behavior through horrible tight institutions such as in Fascism and Totalitarianism; but that is worse than the usual amount of bad behavior. Any politician or preacher who offers a plan to make people really good usually is offering a plan for one social group to control the state and to dominate other social groups.

Conditions can drive people toward badness. Poverty is one such situation but so is protecting privilege and wealth. Living in a bad corrupt state usually makes people bad and corrupt. Living in a place where people have not sense of community and general good usually makes people selfish. Once in a situation of badness, then badness can foster more badness and other badness, and so support itself. Badness can become endemic.

There really are societies of badness and cultures of badness. There really are subgroups in modern societies that have been overrun by badness, sometimes ethnic groups, and sometimes occupational groups. I feel sorry for the innocent children that are born into bad situations. If our particular culture or social group supports bad attitudes, we have to accept that about our culture, and then change it or leave it. Once situations “go bad”, it is hard to correct them from the inside. Usually bad situations have to be corrected when good people interfere from the outside, and keep interfering for a long time, as when the federal government steps in to “clean up” a city gone bad.

In nearly all groups, there will be mostly good people but there will also be a few bad people. Some bad people are bad by nature and there is little we can do about them. Some bad people learned to be bad, and might not have been bad by nature under other circumstances. But they did turn bad, and there is little we can do practically now to help them. We cannot eliminate bad people by harangue or crusade. The presence of some bad people does not mean morality has failed or religion has failed. It does mean we have to be sensible and we have to protect ourselves, our family, and group from bad people. We try to protect ourselves against bad people without becoming paranoid and without ruining life for good people too. We have to have good social pressure, laws, and enforcement.

Sometimes bad groups use state programs to live off the state. Such bad groups include: some people in business firms, financiers, poor people, occupational groups such as some teachers, and even ethnic groups. We can use our good nature to see the good aspects of the people within these groups, but we have to protect ourselves from these groups too.

People naturally divide up into groups of “us” and “them”. We tend to be suspicious of them, and we tend to see their normal life in a bad light. They do the same with us. In this case, we have to work against evolved nature. We have to try to overcome the natural tendency toward suspicious relations among groups. We have to try to see them as if they were human like us. We do not always succeed, but we can try.

All Kinds of People.

As any large group will contain various moral personalities, and all of us have a mix of moral tendencies in us, so any large group will contain various kinds of people, and most of us have the potential to be several kinds of people. Groups contain heroes, bullies, musicians, soldiers, healers, priests, leaders, followers, potters, skilled hunters, skilled gatherers, patient people, impatient people, good parents, bad parents, good citizens, bad citizens, brave people, cowards, gossips, truth tellers, etc. I have no idea which of these types is more “natural” or less “natural”, and I don’t care here. The point is that we are bound to deal with a variety of people, we cannot make everybody the same, and we should not try hard to do so. The fact of human variety has good points and bad points. On the good side, we have a lot of interesting variety. On the bad side, we have some crappy people, and we always have social pressure for conformity. It is better to accept variety as long as a type does little harm. Accept silly people as long as you do not also accept criminals. You have to work out your own lessons and your own balances.

Almost Good Enough for Democracy and the Planet.

I repeat what I said at the beginning. People are mostly good morally and are astute politically but people are not good enough and adept enough to make a simple populist democracy succeed. We are not good enough or adept enough to steward the planet properly. The goodness, and political skills, of the average person can be increased by the right institutions but they cannot be increased enough to make simple populist democracy successful. Alternatives exist in which we might be generally good and adept enough but we don’t have those, and so there is no point in speculating. Even if we had alternatives now, I think it is already too late. We have already dug a hole too big. Even so, we should not stop training people to be good neighbors. Even when the world declines, we will still have neighbors.

Through evolution, God made us good enough and adept enough to create agriculture, industry, and populist democracy but he did not make us good enough to make them work well. I don’t know why. I don’t know if God, through evolution, could have made us more adept or less adept and still made us sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. I don’t know if God could have made us good enough and adept enough but did not. I don’t know if, on some other planets, evolved beings are good enough and adept enough to succeed well - but I hope so. It is easy to make metaphysical dramas out of all this but I refuse. It is better to accept the situation and to figure out what we personally, and in concert with other like-minded people, can do to make things better.

Magic and Superstition are Natural.

See Part 2. My religious stance is austere and uncommon. Because our capacity for religion evolved, most religion includes a big dose of what I call magic and superstition: saviors, ghosts, spirits, visitations, power, the Force, Jedi, Sith, angels, saints, demons, medallions, curses, witches, etc. I do not dwell on that here. I have seen enough superstition of various kinds on various levels – including academic ideology that is pretty much just magic - so that I have come to dislike it. I point out some of the magic and superstition in later chapters on common popular religion and on mistakes in religion.

Magic and superstition are not necessarily bad. They are part of evolved human imagination, and most imagination is good. We should not try to squash imagination, and so we should not try to eliminate all this “mumbo jumbo” stuff from religion. Without imagination we would not have science or art, so magic and superstition are part of the price we pay for better things.

This irrational “stuff” can be bad in two ways. First, it blocks appreciation for a clearer better view of reality – in other words, it blocks appreciation for my view. Second, it leads to bad behavior more often than to good behavior. Even so, the bad behavior is mostly annoying rather than really bad. The harm done from trying to block magic and superstition usually is worse than tolerating them a little. More harm is done by zealots crusading on staunch religious principles that allow only a minimum of magic, such as in Protestantism, Islam, and atheism, than is done by people burning incense to ask the saints for a good score on an exam or for a negative on a pregnancy test. When magic and superstition lead to really bad results, then we have to take up intellectual arms against them.

It is sad to see an intelligent person lapse into magic and superstition. Most of my academic friends felt that sadness when they found out I believed in God and prophets. The greatest scientist of all time, Isaac Newton, wasted a third of his life looking for a nonexistent code in the Bible that hid the timetable for the world and its end. People have a right to be both stupid and smart. Rather than try to save all potentially clear-thinking children negatively by squashing magic and superstition in everybody, it is better positively to promote good thinking so people who have the ability for clear thinking have something to come to and can feel proud of using good judgment. That is pretty much what we do now, but we could do a better job. People who believe in a reasonable religious position, and who follow science, should be more open about what they believe.

I am not sure if my religious stance is an aberration when put in the context of evolved human nature. It does seem a little odd that humans in general evolved to accept spirits and forces, and that most people actively believe in magic and superstition, but that a small group of people does not. I don't know if the people who do not dwell in magic and superstition are stunted or advanced. Most people are about five feet to six feet (160 centimeters to 200 centimeters) tall but some people are only four feet tall and some people are over six feet six inches tall. If my view is an aberration, if reasonable religion is an aberration, then maybe I should feel bad about promoting it; but I don't. I feel good about it.

I don't know how evolution gave rise to people having a range of predilections for making something out of our lively world. I don't know if people show a continuous range or if we fall into types such as natural

skeptic, natural moderate believer, and natural spiritualist. This is a good topic for future research in the evolution of human nature.

Natural and Good.

Paraphrase of remarks after Darth Sidious got Annikin Skywalker to murder Count Dookoo:

A: I shouldn't have done that; it's not the Jedi way.

DS: It's only natural. He cut off your hand so you cut off his head. You wanted revenge. Remember what you did to the sand people.

See "The Tempest" by William Shakespeare.

In this section, I do not distinguish between "good" as a moral term and "good" meaning "beneficial" or as a general term of approval. Mostly I use it "good" to mean morally good. Take "natural" however you wish. In this case, in most common views, it does not include evolution and natural selection.

We like to think what is good is natural and what is natural is good. That is often true, but not always. When goodness and natural are not the same, we have to choose. Evolution gave us the abilities to see goodness and naturalness, even if not always clearly, and to choose, even if not always adeptly.

Most of the time, in most places, people have not drawn a sharp line between good versus natural unless situations forced them. People want to merge goodness with what comes naturally and with the natural world around them. Most of the time, we can do this, but not always.

Since about 1600, about when Shakespeare wrote "The Tempest", for reasons I don't go into, nature (natural; including the ecology and the planet), good, human-made things (art and artificiality including machines and science), and ordered human social life (including economy and state) have not always gone together well. When Westerners have not been able gracefully to align natural and good, we have tended to favor natural over good, and to denigrate everything civilized as un-natural, perverted, artificial, good only in a false way, harmful, and bad. Everything natural is honest and beneficial regardless of its apparent moral goodness or badness; everything that is truly beneficial must be from nature ultimately. Although modern people live in this well-intended hopeful view, this view is wrong. Nature is not always good. What is good is not always natural.

For example: It is good to give to charities so charities can give to needy people, even people we don't know, likely will never know, and can never give back to us. It is good to tell the truth even when lying might help us. It is good not to steal even when we would not get caught. It is good to treat other people as we would like them to treat us. It is good to frame all big rules as if they applied to everyone equally. But none of these is natural. It is natural to lie, cheat, steal, cheat on spouses, force other people to our will, and sometimes to murder, especially when we would benefit a lot and would not get caught. But it is not good. Formal schooling with thirty children to a room is not natural but, most of the time, it is good. It is natural for a 20-year-old boy to go out with a 15-year-old girl but usually in modern life it is not good. It is natural when an experienced 15-year-old girl seduces an inexperienced 19-year-old boy, but usually it

is not good. It can be natural for a 30-year-old man to take a 15-year-old girl “under his wing” to teach her about sex and life. In some situations, it might be good; see the movie “Gigi” and read “Emma” by Jane Austen where the heroine is 14 and the hero is 40. In our world, we think it is bad, and usually it is. It can be natural for a 30-year-old woman to tutor a 15-year-boy in sex, love, and life; but teachers go to jail for doing that; see Adam Sandler’s “That’s My Boy”. Birth control is not natural but usually is good. People like to think any plant is entirely-and-only beneficial and good but that is not true. Poison oak and ivy are natural, and are bad. Apple seeds and peach pits have cyanide. Most herbal teas have little benefit, and, if they do, the benefit is from chemicals that could be reproduced by a drug company. Sometimes, but not too often to worry about, herbal teas are harmful. “Natural” and “organic” foods cost a lot of money for whatever benefit they might give. Childhood cancer usually is quite natural but it is evil.

Although we can’t fall back on “natural” as a sure guide, we also can’t fall back on morality, even when we overcome obvious mere convention and contrived ideologies. We have to be careful putting good over natural. When put as a simple choice between natural and good, it seems obvious that we must choose good. To some people, choosing good over natural is the definition of morality. They denigrate natural and raise moral – they glut on the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The choice between natural and good is not so clear. We can see they are wrong without falling into silly moral relativism. Religious leaders say it is better to die than to return violence for badness but nearly all of us choose to fight for our families rather than let them suffer. Our choice is natural, and, over time, this choice led to great good. Jesus said people have to give up family, wealth, and most comfort so as to follow him. Almost no supposedly-ardent Christians that I know do this. Almost nobody can do it, and I think Jesus knew so. We really don’t want to put in jail the young single parent who steals food for his-her children. Much harm is done by dogma that leads people to seek supposed good over natural, such as suicide bombing, killing doctors who do abortions, and living off the state. When a 14-year old girl seduces a 15-year old boy, the boy goes to jail but the girl does not. Sometimes even dogma that is supposed to support natural leads to harm, as when religions reject birth control or reject homosexuality by saying wrongly that it is totally unnatural and so totally bad.

In the 2000s, we think of families as natural, perhaps the most natural, as very good, and as the best mix of natural and good. We want families, natural, good, and a good political state that lets us mix them. The dying words of Princess Padme (Amidala), as she gave birth, were that Anakin still had good in him, with the implication that Obiwan should seek it. The mix of good-and-family is how Luke saved Anakin and so also at one stroke how Luke overcame the evil state. Sadly, real life is not like this. Loving your family is a great idea but using the family to settle all issues of natural and good doesn’t work. I don’t explain or give examples. Shows such as “Married with Children”, “Animal Kingdom”, “Good Behavior”, “The Americans”, and “Empire” try to make sense of this problem.

So, still, sometimes we do have to choose between natural and good.

I do not settle this issue. I point it out because it affects how people think of evolution, nature, morality, good, and God. People with sense respect the issue of natural and good, and they take the time and effort to think it out. People that support natural over good don’t like that: natural is not all good; there is goodness apart from their view of natural; good sometimes trumps natural; much of what they see as natural is not natural; and much of their idea of natural is from ideologies and is not realistic or natural. I don’t know if they like the idea that the ability for good (morality) came from natural selection. People that

support morality (their view of good) over natural don't like that: our ability for good comes from nature; sometimes what is natural but not obviously good can lead to good in the long run; people who know well the difference between good and natural often do what is natural anyway; most ideas of good come from ideologies (dogma); and most dogma has ideas of good that are not natural and that people don't follow even if they staunchly support the religion. How little nature is too little in a modern society and on the planet Earth of the future? How much contrivance is too much contrivance? Does substituting worship of nature, morality, or society for worship of God really help? There are other bones of contention in the debate of good versus natural but there is no use going into them here. Don't fall into the traps. Accept that you have to choose sometimes, and find sound reasons for choices. Think about what "natural", "non-natural", "artificial", "contrived", "genuine", "good", "beneficial", and "bad" mean for you, other people, society, and the planet.

Most choices between good and natural are not very harmful, and usually natural versus good is not important. It can be important to choose a small ecologically-friendly car over a gas-guzzling monster SUV but it is not so important whether you choose a Toyota or a Ford. When we choose the unnatural brownie over the natural organic bitter tough wild carrot, the world does not end. Natural versus good only becomes an issue when it becomes an issue, as, for example, if I am too fat and should not eat the brownie at all or if I stupidly eat so many natural bitter carrots that I puke.

We have three problems in choosing between natural and good. First, there is no framework greater than both that tells us how to choose. Usually one or the other serves as our biggest framework and the basis for choice. In the distant past, natural selection automatically made choices for us but, in modern times, usually we have to make a conscious choice, and have to take a shot in the dark. Second, we rarely see natural or good plainly, simply, and in-themselves; if that is possible. We see them only through lenses. One set of lenses is ideologies, especially ideologies that people use to distort their own thinking and to manipulate others. A large part of what people in all parts of the world think about natural and artificial is itself artificial and it is not nearly true enough. It is fun and helpful to examine your ideas to see how much they are distorted ideologies. Third, to choose well, people have to think hard, and that task, too often, they will not do. They prefer to abuse "natural" and "good" as overly simplistic tools.

The ideas of religious teachers help overall, and usually are not too wacky. Most great teachers such as Mohammad, Jesus, the Buddha, Confucius, and even Chuang Tzu were sensible about choices between natural and good, and only sometimes stressed what is good but not natural or natural but not good.

The problem of good and natural holds many sub-problems. The problem requires more space than I can give here. I go into it elsewhere.

No Intrinsic Natural Meaning to Life.

Natural selection is automatic. It has no intrinsic direction or goal. Nature does not aim at complexity, stability, interdependence, intelligence, cognitive ability, moral competence, or awareness of God even if nature does get there during evolution. In evolution, some individuals reproduce better than others in particular situations because they differ. The next generation is made up more from descendants of the individuals that reproduced better. What works in one situation does not necessarily work in another

situation. That's all. What works, works; what is, is; what reproduces, reproduces; what out-reproduces, out-reproduces; what comes to represent the species, comes to be the species.

Because there is no intrinsic better or best in the automatic process of natural selection, there can be no intrinsic meaning in the automatic process. There is no necessary meaning to evolution.

People evolved to find meaning even when there is no intrinsic meaning, just as we evolved to see the world as livelier than it is and to taste nutritious food as delicious. Seeing meaning where there is not necessarily meaning, seeing more meaning than there really is, and seeing meaning other than correct meaning, are all misperceptions that can help us in evolutionary success. How this works is a big field in itself, and not well understood, so I leave the topic alone here. I have been on the bad end of all these misperceptions, and so I have no doubt that they are a real part of evolved human nature.

People don't like that there is no intrinsic clear meaning in nature, evolution, and human nature. People evolved to find meaning, this is an important place where people expect to find meaning, and they find meaning whether it is there or not. The question is whether they find good modestly correct meaning. People think "natural" and "good" do coincide, should coincide, and have to coincide. People want to find a natural meaning to a good moral life, especially their own particular lives. People want to find meaning in life by doing natural things such as raising a family and outshining the neighbors. People want to find meaning in a successful life even if it is not entirely morally good. People want to find meaning in having a lot of experiences even of some are harrowing and some are morally bad. People who know something about evolution find intrinsic meaning in facets of evolution such as complexity, kinds of brain activity, and interdependence of parts. I sympathize with the need for meaning but there is still no necessary intrinsic basis for meaning in evolution or in nature.

I find the fact that there is no intrinsic meaning in evolution invigorating. I like imputing meaning to life. I don't mind that I impute meaning and I cannot logically prove meaning is "out there". I don't mind that I am not fully correct. I don't mind that imputing meaning is an evolved ability like finding nutritious food. I like acting morally most of the time, and I don't mind that my tendency to do so evolved. I don't expect to show that any meaning is necessary or intrinsic, although I do want to make good cases for the meaning that I impute. I expect to find out more after I die.

Because there is no necessary intrinsic meaning in nature alone, we have to accept variation in what people do find subjectively meaningful. People vary on what is meaningful, and we just have to accept that fact. That fact supports the ideas of plurality and interaction. The fact that we find a lot of overlap on what is meaningful gives me hope that we might be right about some of it even if we are not right about all of it.

Just because there is no necessary objective intrinsic meaning in nature alone, and people vary on what they find meaningful, does not mean there are no guidelines and standards. There are, especially in the teachings of the great religious teachers and scientists. We can't allow people to impute meaning that excuses badness. This book helps you discover the ideas of great religious teachers and to avoid the bad ideas.

Enough or Not Enough.

To me, it is more than enough that God set up the universe as an interesting place, in which life would evolve on many planets, and sentient life would evolve on enough planets. It is enough that people on Earth evolved a sense of morality and beauty, and that God sends us – I am not sure how – prophets to teach us how to be good people and live well. It is enough to act well according to the teachings of Jesus and other prophets without feeling that my idea system has to dominate. This is enough even though I know there is a good chance that human life on planet Earth will fail of its promise and fail in its duty to be stewards of the Earth. I don't need much magic or superstition.

For most people, this is not enough. People really need magic and superstition. Magic and superstition really are natural. People need to believe in many spirits. They need to believe they can have a personal relation with a mid-level spirit who will take care of them. They need to believe their ethnic-political group knows the "one true religion", and that a powerful spirit takes care of their ethnic-religious-political group. They need to believe that they each personally, their families, and their ethnic-religious-political group, will succeed regardless of what happens to Earth or to other people. They are susceptible to causes and they need to feel justified and saved. Even atheists and secularists need to feel religious-like fervor; they find their fervor in causes. They cannot live without causes to justify and save them. They transcend the superstitious magical religion of the masses so they can feel superior, justified, and saved.

Include secular fervor in magic and superstition. When people believe in magic and superstition yet also do little harm and act on the message of Jesus, that result seems fine. When people believe in magic and superstition but do little harm, even if they seldom act on the message of Jesus - the usual case - then I accept the situation. When people believe in magic and superstition, they are also susceptible to bad reasons, usually from bad people, and they use bad reasons to validate acting badly to get wealth, power, and sex. That I dislike. When people do evil on the basis of magic and superstition regardless of other causes such as desire for wealth and power, I dislike that too.

I differ from most people in that I believe in only one magical being, God, and I disbelieve in almost all magical acts. I am not superstitious. I can relate directly to God, and I think people should relate to no other supernatural being except God. Atheists and jaded academic pseudo-skeptics think that makes me no different from most superstitious people and does make me different from the. I disagree because, to me, they seem more like most people than they seem like me. I leave it to the reader to decide.

I don't know what to do. The best thing I know to do is what I have done in for myself and in this book: think as clearly as I can, explain as clearly as I can, and work for what I think is worthwhile.

Imitation and System.

People evolved the tendency to imitate what other people are doing, especially when other people look successful. If men see a man with a successful family, men try to find similar work, wear similar clothes, eat similar food, drive a similar car, drink similar booze, and, most important, find a similar spouse. Women do the same for what matters to them.

When I was young, parents used to say "If your friends all jumped off a bridge, would you do it too?" as a way to get children to follow parental rules instead of imitating peers. Kids followed peers anyhow, but

not in everything. Most of us didn't jump off bridges, wear stupid clothes, or take bad drugs for too long. Evolution also gave us the sense to know when to stop imitating one person and to start imitating another person or to stop imitating entirely and to do something on our own.

In the same way that people evolved to want meaning, are evolved to make it, and are evolved to imitate, so people evolved to seek and accept system. Meaning is more meaningful if it is part of a system. The more comprehensive the system, the better it is. We want to know not only that God set up this world to make sentient moral beings but also that he did it on other worlds, and we want to know what that all means as part of a system. We want not only to follow the Golden Rule but to think it is part of a system of ethics and part of what God wants. We want to think that voting leads to a good political system and a good nation. We make a deal with a particular spirit because that particular spirit is powerful and we want to think our spirit is the biggest baddest in the spirit system. Imitation is how people get into a system and reinforce the system. You follow the religion of your parents, ethnic group, and nation.

Yet following a system is no more always reliable than imitating other people is always reliable. We have to assess the strengths and weaknesses, the goods and bads, and the successes and failures, of the system. If this particular system does not work well enough, we might try another system. If this spirit doesn't have enough "mojo" to give us what we want, we look for another spirit, or we look for a different system of "mojo" and spirits. If Buddhism does not work well enough, we might switch to Hinduism or Taoism. If no system works well, we might have to strike out on our own, and we might even have to live without a well-knit system.

The general system is what most people live in most of the time, most people imitate when they imitate other people, and most people sustain when they follow other people. Social scientists call it "culture", "social system", or "social organization". Most people follow the general system most of the time but make exceptions when it is in their interest and when doing what they want is not likely to get them in too much trouble. Most people don't steal except when a lot of money is at stake and they are not likely to get caught. Most people wear similar clothes to everybody else except when they like to wear t-shirts or Hawaiian shirts. Most people strike a balance between the general system, alternative systems, and their particular tastes.

Just as evolution gave us a solid foundation of abilities to live (at least before the rise of agriculture and civilization), so most people are able to live through following their own capacities without a well-knit tight system - even though we seek system. Just as evolution leads us to differ a bit in our abilities even though we are generally capable, evolution led us to differ a bit in how we accept systems, how we reject systems, and what we are like when we live apart from systems. The ability to do on our own, ability to live apart from systems, and the distinctions between individuals, all play a role in later chapters on Taoism and Zen. These features remind us of the respect for individuals in the teachings of Jesus. The power of system plays a role in later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

Don't romanticize system or anti-system. Just because we need some system does not mean the bigger and tighter a system is, the better it is. Just because we evolved to be able to get along pretty well using our native abilities (including imitation), and we all differ a bit, does not mean rebellion against the system is heroic. System is not necessarily good or bad; staunch individualism is not necessarily good or bad.

We can get an idea of the best attitude toward both system and non-system not through any platitude that I can offer here but through the ideas that come up throughout the book.

Beyond Itself.

In the great movie “The African Queen”, Katherine Hepburn says to Humphrey Bogart something like, “The purpose of nature is to rise above itself”. People are the part of nature that rises above itself. Her opinion applies both to “good versus natural” and to the idea that religion rises above the “mere physical finite” nature of individual evolved sentient beings.

Natural selection gave us the ability to look at the world both semi-objectively and with inspiration. Most of our intellect is used for practical evolutionary success right now, but some of our left-over intellect might give us a picture of the world that is not limited by a focus on evolutionary success. Accidentally, we might have evolved the ability to look beyond ourselves to a bigger world, even if we cannot live in the bigger world. We owe much of our progress in science to the ability to see beyond what is right in front of us regardless of practicality.

Before you get excited, recall that images of bigger more important worlds do not agree between people who see them and between major religions. So, if evolution did allow us to see beyond ourselves, the vision is not clear and reliable. The most common elements of those visions seem to be love, trust, joy, empathy, decency, “applies equally” and the Golden Rule.

Evolution might have given us the ability sometimes to see beyond ourselves but it did not give us the ability to sustain the vision, and, in fact, evolution made sure the ability is limited and short-term. In our evolutionary past, dreamers who spent a lot of time seeing beyond the obvious world of right now did not do as well in the everyday world of raising a family and playing politics, and so left fewer descendants. Dreamers stumble over tree roots even if their dreams are true. There might be lessons in the images of a better world beyond the obvious hassle-ridden world of daily life but there might also be lessons in the fact that we cannot live in that other better world while we are still here. There is an evolutionary value to glimpsing a greater truer world from time to time but there is great evolutionary detriment in living in that world for more than a few days at a time.

Imagine you are a smart dog who lives among people in a happy suburban neighborhood. The people take you for walks. The people take you to the countryside. You have dog friends. Sometimes you are allowed to roam alone. From your travels, you have learned where food comes from, and how organized the human world is.

One day you come to deeply appreciate that the human world is better than dog world. The dog world depends on the human world for food, protection, shelter, health, entertainment, and in many other ways you don't understand. You think how dogs might become like humans, but, in your heart, you know that could never happen. It is not just that dogs can't talk – human children think dogs can – but dogs can't think like humans and act like humans.

Humans on the grand stage of existence are like dogs on the smaller stage of the human world. The difference is that the better worlds we see come as much out of imagination as they come from any real

spiritual world that encompasses this real material world. There might be a better world within which this real world lives but I doubt we can see it clearly. At best, we can get a sense of a better world to work for in this real world by seeing how our sense of morality and decency leads us to see a better world, and how our imaginations make this world more interesting.

If you do see a bigger picture, if you have a “Grand Canyon” moment, if you come to realize correctly that human squabbles are so much spray raised by the wake of a giant ship, then go with that as much as you can. Almost always, that kind of experience leads people to better people and to live by the teachings of great religions teachers such as Jesus. Go with that. Spend your life enjoying the world and helping out. Don’t go with anything bad. Admire the simple good people who can live that life even if they never had the feeling you had.

Getting By on Incomplete Knowledge.

It seems vexing that God would evolve people who have moral feelings and wonder what it is all about but who can’t settle on one explanation of what it is all about. It is as if God didn’t finish the job.

Imagine you did know what it was all about. Likely, you would get bored. Likely, you would stop acting with moral commitment because you would lose interest. Likely, life is more fun because we don’t know what it is all about. That idea does not excuse evil, but it is a start.

Whether we know what it is all about or not, we still have a pretty good idea how to act. We know the basic principles of how to act even if we argue about their application in particular cases. We know the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. We know of charity, rule of law, the value of the individual, freedom, social justice, schools, and decency. We did evolve to know the basic principles and we did build ideas and institutions based on that ability. So maybe God did finish the job for what is needed in this world. Wondering what it is all about is icing on the cake.

In the future, we might learn more of what it is all about and we might have different moral challenges. The world of artificial intelligence and bio-engineering will change what it means to be human and to be a person. Even so, the moral foundation that we lay in this world will determine what that world will be like. Even in that world, I doubt the creatures will know fully what it is all about, but I think they will have good ideas what they should do anyway.

The Natural Wisdom of Following Jesus.

Morality evolved. It is part of our nature. We have an inborn tendency to act along the lines of “applies equally” and “do unto others”. Most of us are more good than bad. Most of us respond well to goodness. A few consistently good people can change a troubled neighborhood. We have a natural tendency to empathy, and so we tend to widen the circle of goodness. We naturally follow along the lines taught by the great religious teachers. Jesus taught this way as a way of life, and so we naturally tend to live as Jesus taught.

It is wise to go along with nature as long as nature is good. It is wise to go along with the teachings of great religious teachers. It is not necessarily stupid, blind, or idealistic. People that tell you to slow down,

pay attention to the quality of life, help out, and maybe volunteer, are not saying anything foolish unless they take it to extremes.

Don't make too much of this. Don't make great religious teachers, including Jesus, into gods, avatars of a cosmic principle, or living archetypes. They simply felt clearly and strongly that part of human nature that we have all been prepared to feel but usually suppress.

The Natural Folly of Following Jesus.

In our evolutionary past, really good people did not leave as many offspring as people with a mixed moral nature. Because we evolved morality, we necessarily have a mixed moral nature, and necessarily cannot reach the perfection taught by great religious teachers. Even now, people who try to be like Jesus, and who work hard to make a better world, might achieve some satisfaction, but they usually fail miserably in terms of evolutionary success. They do not achieve power, wealth, fame, and great reproduction. They do not reproduce well and so the genes that helped them be very good decline. So what?

Maybe this is a case of evolution taking us beyond. Maybe it is important that some humans see beyond but not necessarily important that all humans live beyond. Maybe that occasional arising of a minority of visionaries helps the rest of us more than if we all did really evolve into angels.

Maybe it is better for some people to see the better world, fail, die, and drop their insightful genes out of the general human population. People with the genes will come along from time to time even if they also fail by normal standards and even if their genes never dominate. I think it is better to see the better ideal world but not necessarily to try to live in it while we are still in this world.

On a less "airy-fairy" level, for this world, we are back to the problem of why we should pay attention to great religious teachers if their advice is impractical, and if evolution has proven their advice impractical for at least the last 100,000 years. That is, why be very moral? The plainest way I can respond is: You either get morality or you don't. You either get the idea of trying hard despite a mixed moral nature and the disadvantages, or you don't. About 2500 years of Western moral teaching have tried to make sure that as many people morality as deeply as possible. In particular, they tried to make us get the teachings of Jesus. I can't improve on that tradition in the next few lines.

Morality originally evolved among small groups, and it works best among small groups. In fact, it works almost along the lines that Jesus taught. It is evolutionarily successful among small groups, and is not evolutionarily foolish. People live in large societies now but often their important lives go on among small groups-networks in which the teachings of Jesus make a lot of sense, even at work.

Even in large societies apart from small groups, morality works pretty well if not ideally. Even then, it is usually better to be mostly moral than amoral or immoral. People who act mostly morally, if not ideally, succeed about as well now as people who acted mostly well in our evolutionary past. Acting well leads to pretty good comparative success among our little networks where it counts. Most of us cheat a little but not much. We can recover from the small cheating of ourselves and our friends. We can still succeed in the game of competitive competition by acting well most of the time.

Every once in a while, somebody cheats on a big scale, makes a fortune or gains great power, founds a family, and the family goes on to success for generations on the basis of initial ill-gotten gains. Then the family tries to achieve good standing through charity and public service. That is not likely to happen to you, and I wouldn't plan my life around it. In my experience, people who act badly now eventually crash. The crash takes away more than they have gained both from themselves and their families. Business men who spend all their lives at the office lose their families. Academics who spend all their lives working on a big reputation rather than doing solid work find themselves relegated to a footnote a few years after they retire. That is more likely to happen to you than founding a dynasty.

These points do not make the world basically moral and do not mean the teachings of Jesus are bound to be strategically most effective in all situations. These points are merely an observation that the teachings of Jesus are right enough now.

No Perfect Consistency.

Having a mixed moral nature is a kind of imperfection due to mixture and inconsistency. Just as we are doomed to suffer a mixed moral nature, so also we have to suffer misperception, susceptibility, deception, self-deception, a mix of many "modules" and proximal mechanisms not all of which are compatible, self-contradiction, animal urges such as the desire for burned meat, emotions, comparative competition, commitment, over-commitment, doubts, restlessness, craving, and other psychic forces too many to list. Maybe because we can never get enough success in evolutionary terms, and we are never the only one in the group who matters, we seem doomed to face a limit on satisfaction and we can never get enough satisfaction.

For some religions, this human dilemma is a real problem. Religions dream of perfecting humans. Part of reaching perfection is reaching perfect consistency. Another part of perfection is purging emotions with frequently bad results such as anger, jealousy, desire for stuff, and desire for power. It is very unlikely mere humans can ever reach such goals, not even monks who works for decades. If success in some religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zen, depends on reaching such perfection, the no human has ever achieved it.

If any person who started out as a mere human ever reaches such perfection, then I think we might have to stop thinking of that person as a mere human. What we then think about that person varies with the particular religion. It pains me to not think of Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha as a mere human being, but, if he did achieve perfection and freedom from all craving, then, to me, he was no longer human. I doubt that is the case. I think of Jesus as still human.

No Need to Be Perfect.

Perfect people don't need religion. Religion is not for perfect people, it is for real normal flawed people. Imperfect people benefit from religion. Just as we don't need to know what it is all about to know what to do, we don't need to be perfect to act. The fact that we evolved, and evolved a mixed nature, helps make sense of why we need prophets and that we don't have to be perfect.

Who to Take Advice From.

One of the big lessons of literature and politics after World War One is that leaders and useful people do not have to have a perfect character. A person can be quite flawed and still be human and useful. The most common example has been Winston Churchill. The drug habits of George W. Bush, and the sex habits of Jack Kennedy and Bill Clinton, are recent examples. I add the ignorance of Ronald Reagan. We are all flawed, so this lesson about flawed character succeeding is good to know.

Pop literature after World War Two took this idea too far: Useful people have to be flawed. The more flawed a person is, the more useful he/she is. Nearly-perfect people are really more flawed than flawed people, and far less to be trusted. Contrary to pop culture un-wisdom, in fact, not all bad boys and bad girls are more useful than good boys and good girls. Good boys and girls can still be very useful too. We can still take them for examples. Some of the great TV dads and moms, such as Andy Griffith, were good people and good role models. We need to search for the right balance of flawed and perfect in ourselves and in the people that we take for leaders and examples.

Religions make a point of seeing their leaders as perfect. Even stances and ideologies take their flawed heroes as perfect in their "flaw-ness". Mick Jagger is the perfect bad boy. Kurt Cobain was the perfect suffering artist. Angelina Jolie tried to be the perfect bad girl until age and reality caught up with her, and she realized heart is better. To save his career, Justin Bieber "went bad". To keep her career going for a long time, Taylor Swift knows how to keep the perfect balance of good and bad. George W. Bush is the perfect convert. When religions and ideologies offer a person as perfect, or perfectly flawed, we are right in being suspicious. If the leader really has achieved perfection, it is not clear that we can take him/her as an example for the rest of us.

It is a good idea to take advice from people who are flawed enough still to be human and yet who do not make a virtue of their flaw-ness. People who have something to say need to know something about what it means to be human. You don't find out what it is to be human without making big mistakes and without hurting a few people. Yet if you make a virtue of being damaged, of mistakes, and hurting people, then you haven't learned nearly enough about what it means to be human. This too is a lesson of history and literature but seems to be a lesson we forget in favor of ideologies.

Regardless of what dogma says, some religious leaders are more charmingly naïve than perfect. That is how I take Jesus, the Buddha, Chuang Tzu, Zen masters, and even Mohammad. They are idealists. There is nothing wrong with this. They could still be quite effective, and were. To say they are idealists is not to make a virtue of your flaws. Just as a child sometimes sees something that a jaded adult forgot, sometimes we need to listen to idealists. Their naivety gives them enough simplicity to be more perfect than usual. Sometimes that kind of simple incomplete perfection gives people insight and makes them worth listening to.

If I were really clever, I would devise a scheme to merge metaphysics with evolution: Evolution produces both not-perfectible contradictory complexity most of the time and naïve simple near-perfection from time to time. From that result, I could draw implications about God's plan; advise people who to listen to; and make imperfect people think they were more like the nearly-perfect prophets than they really are. It would sell well. That kind of cleverness is neither simple, consistent, near-perfect, nor worth listening to.

Repeat: Objectively Existing Morality.

At least since Plato about 2400 years ago, Western thinkers have seen morality as objectively “out there”. It is something that we discover and conform to, like we discover logic, mathematics, the laws of physics, or the rules of golf, and conform to them. Morality cannot be explained away by any reference to any kind of practicality, including power and evolutionary success. Morality cannot be explained away by any kind of “nothing but” reduction. Morality is more than brown eyes or curly hair. This view is useful when trying to merge God and morality. Mostly I agree. It is easy enough to take points of my argument as evidence for objective morality, such as the independent logic of morality and the likelihood that a similar morality would evolve anywhere morality evolved. Evolution did not make morality; evolution led us to discover moral logic and to conform to it.

The idea that our capacity for morality evolved seems to undermine the idea that morality is objective. This implication troubled Darwin greatly. I disagree. I hope it is easy to see how we could evolve to be aware of objective moral logic even if we don’t live up to it fully. Regardless of whether morality really is objective, my argument makes useful points, and, on the whole, stands. It is not useful here to embroil my argument in another argument about objectivity.

If morality is something in its own right, and cannot be explained away by “nothing but”, then what is it? What does that mean? These questions are what really lie behind current controversies about evolution, God, and morality. Questions about whether the capacity for morality evolved is often just a way to set up questions about what morality is and what that implies so as to lead into opinions that are held for other reasons. These are natural questions for a book on life stances but mostly I do not get into them. They are big topics in their own right, and I have to address other topics. Many people naturally invoke “God” at this point, and I have no strong objection. But the answer is not as simple as “God is goodness, and goodness is God”. I have already said I don’t think God can be immoral yet God tolerates evil in creation, and uses evil, and that I have no explanation.

Naturalistic Ethics.

Naturalistic ethics is the idea that morality, or at least moral lessons, are in nature, and we learn morality from nature. Even when we don’t anthropomorphize over cute little animals, we do tend to see morality in such effects as parents taking care of young, cooperation among prey to avoid predators, cooperation among predators to catch prey, the carbon cycle, and weather cycles. Natural ethics is like natural law, an important idea in the history of democracies. Naturalistic ethics predates evolutionary theory. It is not always clear how morality is in nature and what kind of morality is in nature. It is not clear how the fact that morality evolved affects naturalistic ethics. I like the idea of natural law. I don’t mind seeing moral lessons in nature. But I don’t think we could learn morality from nature or anywhere else if evolution had not already predisposed us to feel moral feelings along the lines of the moral logic of “applies equally”. The relations between naturalistic ethics and objective morality are not clear either, although, often, the two stances are taken as incompatible.

Another version of (what might be) naturalistic ethics says that ethics is only another proximate ability, and that ethics can be reduced to reproductive success, in the same way that hunting, flying, swimming, or fighting over mates, can be reduced to reproductive. As evolved beings, we could not be sensitive to

moral feelings or moral logic unless we evolved to be sensitive to them. That does not mean they can be reduced to “nothing but” or explained away as “nothing but”. We could not be sensitive to mathematics or to scientific method unless we evolved a predisposition to be sensitive to them, but that does not mean we can reduce mathematics or scientific method to reproductive success. I say more about the mistake of “nothing but” reductionism in later chapters on the self and on atheism.

I didn't go more into these issues because I don't have to settle these issues for the points that I make here to have value.

Do Not Metaphysical-ize Evil or Good-and-Evil.

Just because individuals have a mixed moral nature, God allows badness in the universe, and God used badness in evolution, does not mean that badness is a thing in itself or is a force in itself. Good and bad are not locked together in a mutual pact. They do not need each other in some spiritual or metaphysical sense. We do not need evil to see good. God is not by necessity a mix of good and bad. Badness does not by necessity have an objective existence. Evil is not a metaphysical principle. Evil is not a principle personified in the Devil. The Devil is not an archetype. Jesus and the Devil are not twin brothers locked in combat forever. You cannot become more godlike by acting badly or by hurting people. These are all self-delusory stances that allow you to excuse self-indulgence. Don't make these mistakes.

Exactly what it does mean is not settled. I do not know why God allows just the badness that he does allow.

Some stances, such as Taoism, urge us to get beyond simplistic ideas of goodness and badness. That is not the same as metaphysical-izing badness. It does not mean goodness is not real, or that the people who advocate getting beyond simplistic ideas of good and bad do bad things. It rarely means that Taoists do bad things. It is not an excuse to do whatever you want. Some early Christians made this mistake, and Paul severely scolded them for it. In this case, Paul was correct.

Thinking beyond simplistic good and evil so that you can indulge yourself does not make you a profound thinker. It does not set you free. It makes you a self-indulgent dangerous fool. If you really want to be a profound thinker, figure out how goodness arises so consistently out of chaos and badness, and figure out the implications of that.

Using Evolved Abilities for Fun and Otherwise.

People evolved a rich repertoire of abilities such as sex, games, fame, wealth, art, religion, morality, and science. In the last 5000 years, we have taken many of our original abilities out of their natural setting. We learned skills that are based on the original natural abilities. Instead of hunting, people chase little white balls around a long beautiful golf course. Instead of taking chances on which way the rabbit will swerve, we deal cards to see how they fall.

Most deviations and augmentations are not harmful, and many are good. Modern scientific medicine is a deviation from original shamans but I much prefer modern doctors. I would rather have people chasing golf balls on a course than running down deer in the middle of my streets. People have a tolerance for

alcohol because we evolved as fruit-eaters, and some fruit naturally falls to the ground and ferments. So now we are able to drink beer, wine, and various spirits.

Some deviations and augmentations are bad, harmful, or annoying. I like music but I hate when loud crap is blasted out of rolling boom boxes (cars). Young people have always sought places to meet in private but dark bars and bad booze do not always make the best modern venue. Moderate drinking is OK but excessive drinking is quite bad.

As with other aspects of life, we have to choose. I take the Libertarian stance. Enjoy what nature gave us, and enjoy augmentations too, as long as we are consenting adults and we don't hurt anyone. Even if the actors endure some small harm, then what business is it of mine, and why should I get involved? If people want to drink, and they harm nobody, let them drink. Let them smoke marijuana. Let people have sex as they will. People can smoke tobacco in their own private separate dwelling as long as nobody else has to endure the poisonous smoke; they cannot poison me; they cannot smoke in public places or in contiguous housing such as apartments. People can eat whatever they want as much as they want but they must pay extra insurance if they get fat or likely will develop diseases for overeating.

Boons and Banes of Morality.

Believe it or not, imitation, various proximate mechanisms, comparative competition, and manipulation can serve morality. We teach children morality through manipulation and imitation. We get them to act well by telling them to "act like Suzy" or to "do what Father Dave says". We use comparative competition to get people to act more morally – or at least more like the morality we want. Most PTA meetings, faculty meetings, meetings of PC people, and meetings of Right Wingers, feature heavy moral competition. The pursuit of fame and wealth can be channeled to serve the greater good. Apologists for capitalism sell it that way, and it even actually works that way often enough.

Imitation, manipulation, and especially comparative competition, also can be banes of morality. Trying to act more morally than somebody else, or act more morally than the norm, leads to acting badly. The modern equivalent, acting cooler than other people, goes down the same path. Imitating a cool jerk who does not really understand coolness makes you less cool and a bit bad too in a cheap way. Imitating "bad boys" and "bad girls" makes you un-cool, not really "bad" in the good sense, and not at all good; instead, it makes you silly and a nuisance. Comparative competition is "keeping up with Joneses". A person would have to miss all the literature and media of the 1900s and 2000s not to understand how keeping up with the Joneses leads to bad behavior. Religious-moral movements depend on imitation, manipulation, and keeping up with the holy Joneses.

Beauty.

Morality has its own logic, to which natural selection has to conform in the long run. In contrast, pleasure and pain are almost (but not quite) free of any logic that constrains natural selection. Evolution can apply pleasure almost to any act that leads to success, even to an act like childbirth. It would be convenient for theorists if beauty either had little intrinsic logic, like pleasure and pain, or had a clear single logic as with morality. Beauty has some logic but no clear single comprehensive guiding logic. Legions of art critics in the West, at least since Socrates and Plato about 400 years before Jesus, have shown there is some

logic, and have offered us their bit of aesthetic insight as the essence of all the logic of beauty. All have failed so far. The fact that so many can have partial success but none can have full success shows that beauty has some logic but no single clear comprehensive logic that we see so far.

The problem is compounded by the fact that beauty likely is more diverse than pleasure and pain or than morality. Without going through every idea that art critics have offered, I can list highlights: prettiness, symmetry, balance that is not necessarily symmetric, harmony however defined, charm, a variation of sex, a variation of sexual attractiveness, awe inspiring, inspiring to morality, and aesthetically effective without necessarily being pretty. These aspects are not compatible; they are also not exclusive; they are not all clearly defined from some other common idea; and more than one applies at a time even when they are not fully compatible. Here is a line from John Lennon: "Yellow matter custard dripping from a dead dog's eye". It is quite effective in its place, and so beautiful, but it is hardly pretty.

Scientists have shown that we tend to see as beautiful those things that are conducive to evolutionary success, and we tend to see as more beautiful things that are more conducive to success. Men see women in general as beautiful, and see women who are healthy and have body proportions that are likely to make them good mothers as more beautiful. Men see women with good personalities and who are skillful also as beautiful because they are as likely to have success as women who merely have good proportions. Women see men as handsome (male beauty) for the same reasons. Landscapes with the right amount of trees, open grassy spaces, and water, and that are likely to support many vegetables, fruits, and game animals, we see as beautiful. Yet this cannot be all there is to beauty. We hear John Lennon's poetry as beautiful. We see the open ocean or the baking desert as beautiful. We see pictures as beautiful even though looking at them does not lead to immediate evolutionary success. The art of the 1900s boasts thousands of images that are aesthetically effective without necessarily being pretty such as Fauvism and Cubism.

This issue is important because it bears on religion and morality. We have the same feeling of beauty and awe in religion that we have toward other beautiful things. We make our gods in the image of healthy strong young men and women, with a mixture of ideals from our culture and society. Pictures of Jesus or the Buddha likely are wildly inaccurate – Jesus was not a northern European from about 1910 with a neatly clipped beard and a short haircut. Religion uses the feeling of beauty to draw in and hold people. Some religious visions are quite awe inspiring regardless of their likely truth. It is not likely any major religion could survive for long if it did not lend itself to a many various beauties. We need to separate the feeling of beauty from particular religions. We can't disentangle religion from beauty until we know more about beauty. This book does not dwell on this problem but I do point it out sometimes. I do not dwell on this problem because it is too hard to make sense of it given the current state of thinking.

PART 7: Optional: Evolution of Religion.

Please see the section on religion in Part 2. Please read Part 3 before this Part.

If we mix natural imaginative thinking, "irrational" commitment, "irrational thinking", categories, lively world, intentions, enduring relations, bridging of categories, and distorting of categories, we get spirits added to (my idea of) the natural world. Really, all we need is a lively world and semi-persons. From this base, we get personification of places, events, and ideas. We get spirits that don't necessarily personify anything

but can sometimes. For example, when wind moves, we see not just air with different pressures but a life with a will moving air around. When we see a large mountain, we see not just a pile of dirt and rocks but a being with a will, and who can be dangerous and useful. The gain we get from seeing a lively world with spirits likely far outweighs the world without spirits. The spirits can form their own spirit-real world like the real natural world.

Not only do natural things have spirits, so do living individual people and dead people. Categories of people have a particular spirit, often in addition to their particular individual spirit or in place of it, such as pregnant women, hot-headed young men, our family, their family, our group, and their group.

Scientists used to debate which of these spirits might have served as the original model for all spirits but that question is not useful here.

We have different relations with different spirits. All spirits tend to be of higher rank and more powerful than individual people, so individual people “curry favor” with the spirits by giving gifts and doing services. People sacrifice to spirits and worship them. When people approach spirits, people act as individuals and on behalf of whole groups. In return for gifts and services, spirits protect individuals and groups. Spirits also can be allies in conflicts, as with coconuts above, and in many famous battles featured in the Tanakh (Old Testament) and in the Hindu epic Mahabharata.

Sometimes it is easier to think of the spirit as a “force”. Things, situations, and events that have spirits also have a force, a vice versa. The cold snowy windy mountain has a force. The hurricane has a force. Springtime and winter have a force. Love is a force, and it has a spirit. It is probably not worth trying to separate out the two ideas in normal human thinking, at least here. Where there is a spirit, there is a force, and vice versa. Where there are a lot of little forces, people tend naturally to drift into the idea of one big Force, as in Star Wars.

“Animism” is paying attention to forces and spirits. Modern religions think of all animism as “polytheism”. “Polytheism” is literally the worship of “many deities”, but the difference does not matter here. The first form of religion very likely was animism. Evolutionary biologists now are re-discovering an idea that has been current in some schools of anthropology at least since Edward Burnett Tyler explained it in the middle 1800s.

From animism, monotheism grew, just as the idea of one big Force grows out of the idea of many smaller disparate forces. Monotheism is not an idea that prevails in many societies and cultures. It is an odd unusual idea. It developed out of polytheism-animism after the genetic basis for belief in polytheism-animism already was set. There are no genes for monotheism and there are no genes that naturally lead us to the idea of one single good God; God did not implant the idea of himself in our genes either by direct intervention or indirectly through evolution. How monotheism arose in history is not entirely clear, and the topic is not important for this book. Even though the belief in one God has genetic roots in our evolved nature, and even though it developed out of earlier polytheism-animism, those facts do not mean it is false or true. Whether it is true or false is a much different question. I have already decided that it is true. You are free to agree or disagree.

Animism does not go away just because some people get theoretically sophisticated about their religious beliefs, as with monotheism. The large majority of people still believe in ideas such as giving-back-and-forth, spirits, the Force, and the group-as-giant-person. The large majority of people are still animists even if their official religion is strongly monotheistic.

Religion and Morality Go Together.

Religion and morality evolved together. They usually support each other. Very likely, when they evolve, they are always together and mutually supportive. I doubt one could evolve without the other.

Once people have the idea of spirits, they can use spirits to reinforce morality. If you act well, the spirits reward you. People who act well, when they act among other people who also act well, that is, when they act well in their own group, tend to do well. People who act badly toward near kin, friends, and neighbors get abused in return. The spirits really do reward good guys and punish bad guys most of the time.

Once people have the idea of morality, it can be used to reinforce religion. We want beneficial relations with the spirits. The spirits are supposed to reward people who act well, and people who act well do well, so the spirits must really exist, and they must at least recognize morality most of the time. Even if the spirits are not entirely good, even if they are sometimes impish or even bad, at least, as persons, they recognize morality (see below) and respond to it. The fact that they respond to morality makes morality a force in religion. As persons, at least some spirits are more good than bad, and those are the ones that become most important in our relations and in our religion.

Religion is Both Quite Sane and Partly Crazy.

We can't make all bits of the world equally lively and we can't relate to all the lively things equally. Some things lend themselves to being more lively, especially things that move on their own and with which we interact closely such as a car. Some things we interact with more, and we tend to make them more lively, such as our houses or the Internet.

We have to select which parts are livelier and which parts we interact with more. Religion is an integral part of selection. For example, where people have to hunt big game, and compete with other predators, they tend to make animals and predators quite lively and to give them spirits. Among North American plains "Indians" ("native Americans"), bison and wolves tended to have their own spirits. Where people grow grains to make a living, they give grains a spirit. Where society is complex, for various reasons, people give the subgroups within society their own spirits.

Whenever we select, we have to commit. If we see bison as having a spirit, and we interact with them more than prairie dogs, then we have committed. If we fish for a living, and one subgroup in our society represents salmon, then we have a different attitude, relation, and commitment toward that subgroup. Our subgroup has its own spirit, and we certainly have a different attitude, relation, and commitment toward our subgroup and its spirit than toward other subgroups.

Religion is one of our biggest guides in selection and commitment. When we say oak trees have a spirit but pine trees don't, then we have made a commitment about the world, people, and society. Religion is not neutral.

In being not neutral, religion differs from the ordinary mundane everyday world. In not being exactly like the regular obvious world, and in demanding commitment, religion is a little crazy. Some crazy is good. People who have a strong relation to wolves as part of their religious commitment are not neutral and so are a little bit crazy. But their craziness helps them make sense of the world, act, and get along. They know how they stand with the people who have a special relation to bison, coyotes, or the river.

At the same time, religion can't be too crazy or it "turns people off", and they won't commit. People who identify with wolves can't really live like wolves in all aspects of their lives. They can't run around on all four legs and have six pups at a time. In being a little crazy, religion helps people to act and succeed. If religion gets in the way of success by being too crazy, people give it up in favor of other ways of seeing that are not so crazy.

Religion has to find a balance between being crazy enough to inspire commitment and guide action versus being so crazy that it causes disadvantage and alienates people.

To find the balance, religion can't be static. Religion has to be able to change somewhat to go along with changing conditions. If wolves become extinct, the wolf people might have to forge an alliance with the coyote people. If the number of wolf people dwindles even if wolves themselves don't go extinct, the wolf people might still have to forge an alliance with the coyote people. Commitment and the need to change don't always work well together. Commitment resists change, and change undermines commitment. Still, most religions that survive solve these problems.

Human Irrationality.

People do not see the world exactly as it is, not only due do limitations of merely physical beings but also because to see the world inaccurately sometimes is better. Effective action requires strong commitment. Morality, as effective action, often requires strong commitment. Strong commitment is not strictly rational. Sometimes it is irrational. Sometimes it borders on the crazy. Religion is often irrational. Although I do not make the case, art is often irrational.

Much of human life is irrational, and people like it. People need their ceremonies, holy days, candles, icons, blessings, civil ceremonies, black versus white, good versus evil, television preachers, political demagogues, church services, etc. We just have to get used to irrationality. We have to put up with it when that is all we can do. Sometimes we can learn to enjoy it.

If we try to force people to be rational, especially to be our version of rational, then we usually do much more harm than good. The obvious examples are American Prohibition and War on Drugs, but as much damage is done by Political Correctness of both the Left and Right.

Of course, irrationality can be a source of badness, and that we don't have to put up with. So much has been said about irrational badness, how to recognize it in ourselves and others, and what to do about it, that I don't repeat here.

Some good can come of irrationality. Religion is irrational but religious people argue it is good irrationality and I don't wish to argue too hard against them. The lesson is to pick from religion what is good despite being irrational, or because it is irrational; then keep the good and reject the bad. Getting "ripped" every once in a while often does more good than harm. Screaming at a sporting match is fun as long as that is not the only mental activity you ever have.

A modern mistake is to romanticize and glorify irrationality, especially emotion as super-rational and necessarily morally superior. We already have enough irrationality. We don't need to cultivate even more irrationality, and we don't need to add insult to injury with an irrational argument that irrationality is better. You, and others, already have enough irrationality so that you can enjoy what you have without wanting more. Do enjoy it as long as you don't do much harm, then let go.

It can sound as if I say: "The masses at heart are irrational fools. Let them have their stupid irrationality as long as they do little harm. Make sure we minimize the harm they do. Don't expect them to be as rational as us wise people." The worst effects of such patronizing are that it allows "the masses" to get away with bad irrationality and it allows us to not help people to be better thinkers, including to be more rational. Yes, we have to put up with a lot of irrationality from "the masses". But the masses also have a lot of rationality, a lot of good common sense, and basic decency. That is what schools are supposed to cultivate. We should put up with civil and religious ceremonies but we should also expect people to think as well and they can and we should teach them to do that. It is not nasty to expect people to work to think better. It is not condescending to help people think better, to teach them to think better. Some people can become really good thinkers if we believe in them and help them. Becoming a really good thinker is not to become a computer.

Extending Moral Groups.

When great prophets, such as Jesus, want us to be better, they urge us to extend moral logic by ignoring superficial differences while recognizing deeper similarities. They do the reverse of what bad people do when bad people find distinctions so bad people can use misguided moral fervor. People evolved to be able to extend in some situations, and to ignore some differences, but people also evolved not to be able to extend willy-nilly and to ignore all differences. When we marry, we have to extend the feeling of "us" to our spouse and our children, and often we have to extend "we" to the family and group of our spouse as well. If we wear blue shirts while they wear green shirts, we have to overlook the difference of blue and green to find the common human skin beneath. It is hard enough to do this over marriage. It is harder to do it to the neighboring "tribe", town, state, country, ethnic group, religious group, etc. It is even hard for men to extend full humanity to women, and vice versa. I could guess when we can extend and when we cannot, but, at present, there are no simple clear guidelines, and so I don't guess. It is clear enough that people in state societies have to extend more than is common in human nature, but that we can do it. It is clear enough that we will have to extend quite a bit if humanity and life are to endure on this planet. It is not clear that we can do it.

PART 8: Optional: Evolution of Morality.

Please refer to the sections on morality in Part 2. Please read Part 3. It might help some people to read Part 9 before Part 8.

We have moral feelings, make moral judgments, act morally, offer moral argument, and are susceptible to moral argument, because, in our past, people who had moral feelings etc. succeeded better than people who did not have moral feelings etc. We have moral feelings etc. because our ancestors who had moral feelings etc. succeeded and we are their descendants. If moral feelings etc. had not worked better than amorality, immorality, and moral laxness then we would not have morality now. For ease, I use “morality” or “moral feelings” to imply all of morality including acts etc.

At the end of Part 3, I noted some puzzles of morality. Here they are again.

(1) Morality is an ideal. As an ideal, morality tells us to care for other people as much as we care for ourselves. Yet morality evolved out of self-interest. How can an ideal that tells us to transcend self-interest arise out of self-interest?

(2) Morality is a combination of both irrational emotion and considered rational judgment.

(3) Morality largely serves practical self-interest. It helps people do practical things that they could not achieve without morality. People are adept judges of practicality most of the time. So why do people need irrational emotional morality to get them to do what is in their own practical self-interest? Why can't people reap the benefits of practicality, especially of cooperation, without irrational emotional morality to push them and bind them?

(4) Ordinarily we think that rational strategic consideration best serves practical self-interest. Yet people cannot achieve full practical self-interest without irrational emotional morality. People need irrationality to achieve supposedly rational practicality.

(5) Morality works as an ideal only because it doesn't work as an ideal. If people were fully moral, then their moral society would fall apart, for many reasons. People need apply morality selectively to keep the ideal of at least some morality. People need to be good to some people, indifferent to others, and bad to yet others, so people can keep the ideal of morality and be good to the select few.

(6) Imperfect people are often more interesting than really goody people.

(7) Nobody can be morally perfect.

(8) Somewhat paradoxically, we are often better people when we are less morally perfect, or at least when we try less hard. We often do more overall good even if we do a little damage along the way. Society often achieves more benefit when people are not as concerned with goodness.

(9) We get nervous around strongly moralistic people. We appreciate a little urging but don't like being told we are piles of shit (Martin Luther), and we will go to hell if we don't straighten up right now and do

what a zealous moralist tells us. While morality is an ideal, it seems to work best when it is not extreme. Can an ideal be an ideal but not be absolute?

(10) The West has opposed emotion to reason since at least Plato, 2400 years ago. The Hebrews had their version of this dichotomy and preference in “personal indulgence versus God-given Law”. The two versions fused after Jesus and the early Church Fathers. Previously, the West extolled reason above emotion. Since 1800, the West, and, now perhaps most of the world thanks to Western pop culture and Romanticism, extols emotion above reason. Which view does morality support?

It is useful to boil it all down to three basic topic clusters:

(1) Given that humans are quite adept at figuring practicality, at figuring what helps and hurts reproductive success, why were specifically moral feelings useful? What does morality do that rational reckoning of practicality can't do and-or that other feelings can't do?

(2) How did moral feelings arise in the first place? What makes moral feelings differ from other feelings, especially feelings that lead to action?

(3) (2A) How did morality work to aid individual reproductive success, or to aid family success, in small groups of foragers? (2B) Given that morality is an ideal, why are we more moral to some people and less moral to other people or even bad to some people? (2C) Why do people sometimes act morally in ways not likely to help reproductive success, as when a person pulls a strange child from a burning car?

I don't repeat much from the sections on morality in Part 2. I repeat a little for reference.

The Evolution of Morality and Cooperation.

People get more done by cooperating. Some things can be done only through cooperation, and those things are important such as hunting in groups, defending, going after other groups, sharing food and chores, and tending the ill. Think of simply living together in peace and harmony as cooperation. Almost always a group that cooperates because its members feel morality out-competes a group that does not, and so all the individuals in the moral group do better than all the individuals in the group that does not feel morality and cooperate.

Unfortunately, cooperating is beset by problems, of which maybe the most obvious is cheating. Morality helps overcome the problems of cooperation, especially cheating, so moral people can reap the benefits. Apparently evolving people could not overcome problems of cooperation in any way other than through irrational emotional idealistic morality. We cannot overcome problems of cooperation by merely rationally weighing self-interest.

Moral feelings might have developed as an extension-and-modification of feelings that we already had for close kin, friends, and exchange partners. See Part 4 above about kin selection (inclusive fitness) and reciprocal altruism.

However we got moral feelings and judgment, assume we already have moral feelings, make moral judgments, and act according to our judgments. Then we need to see what happens.

Mutual help, through morality or in any way, works better if people focus cooperation on the other people who cooperate in return. Mutual help works better if moral people focus morality on other similarly moral people. As long as people can focus moral actions on other people in the group who also act morally toward them, as long as almost everybody in a group can focus moral acts on each other, then they all do well, and they all leave more descendants than people who do not act morally and-or who cannot focus moral relations on each other.

While morality helps individual practical self-interest, and depends on practical self-interest, morality does it all in a group setting. Morality helps the formation of groups, and helps the formation of particular kinds of groups. In fact, morality likely could not continue, could not be selected for, without that particular kind of groups. This situation raises a chicken-and-egg problem that I don't go into here. This situation is the basis for never-ending bickering between Darwinists and non-Darwinist anthropologists.

Morality works also because moral action is not usually a matter of one wronged person, or even a few wronged people, against one cheater. Part of morality is that almost the whole group has to go after bad people and uncooperative people. Part of morality is the right of moral people to ask other moral people to help in case somebody cheats, or "slacks off", and should get punished. Part of morality is the right of moral people to get angry at other would-be moral people who do not help, do not help enough, do not get angry at cheaters, and do not join in active punishment. Moral indignation and moral guilt are part of the moral complex of ideas, feelings, judgments, and acts, and make morality strong. When one person wants to go after another, he-she builds up his-her case and support in the community. He-she "gets the moral ducks in a row".

(Through punishing wrong-doers and non-cooperators, we can get people to do almost anything. We don't need moral feelings or judgments. So, Darwinists who offer punishment as part of morality have to say why morality is needed in addition to punishment. Darwinists are aware of this problem and have done work to deal with it. I don't summarize the issue here.)

We don't want morality to get people to do anything. We want morality to get people to do moral acts and cooperative acts. We want morality to stimulate people not only from fear of punishment but for the sake of the ideal and the act. Darwinists have to think how morality works with and without punishment, and how punishment works with and without morality. I don't go into the issue here.

As mentioned in Part 2, when we pay attention to how we really act morally, we don't act according to the ideal of loving everyone. Mostly we act according to strategic self-interest.

Here we need caution. Not all systems of morality say we should act according to universal love. I think most systems only say we should act toward more people more kindly than usual. Most systems are about ordering human relations without necessarily pushing us to an absolute ideal. Most systems of morality say how we should act toward particular kinds of people such as parents, brothers, sisters, children, in-laws, cousins, members of another spirit group, members of groups with whom we trade, and members of groups with whom we don't trade. If a hunter kills a rabbit, with whom should she share and

how much? If two hunters kill a deer, with whom should they share and how much? Moral ideal absolutes such as “love your neighbor as yourself” might be implicit but they linger in the background. Most of morality is about other matters; those other matters are what people think of as morality. For most people, most of the time, morality was more like Jewish Law and less like the parables of Jesus or the simple teachings of great rabbis. Trying to sort all this out here is not possible. So, I take that morality tells us to act better to most people than we might ordinarily act, and morality holds as an ideal that we act toward all people as if they were close kin, as if they were us. I accept ideal morality. Now we need to think about the relation between ideal and real.

When we look at how we do act, we find that we act about as we would act according to the ideas of kin selection, inclusive fitness, and reciprocity that were given in Part 3. We help people who are related to us about according to how we are related, they help us about according to how we are related, we help people with whom we share work and marriage, and they help us according to how we share work and marriage. In morality, we follow practicality as practicality is determined for us by natural selection and reproductive success.

In that case, why do we need morality? Why isn't following practicality enough? Likely practicality alone is not enough because, to cooperate and reap the benefits, we need to act a bit better, on a wider scope, than obvious practicality tells us to act. If we look carefully, we find that, with morality, we cooperate and act kindly a little more intensely and toward a slightly wider circle than mere strategic rational kin selection and mutual reciprocity would lead us. Without morality, we might be able to cooperate with siblings but likely we have only a couple of siblings at most, and we need half-a-dozen people to hunt a group of deer or to gather wild rice safely in dangerous water. We need the extra little nudge.

Why is the extra nudge only a little? Why doesn't the nudge go further and make us kind to, and make us cooperate with, a big group of group mates, or even across groups so that people in half-a-dozen groups all act as if they were siblings? Why doesn't the nudge get us to live up fully to the ideal?

To answer that question, we first have to see other issues. Compared to small groups, large groups are more susceptible to cheating and all the problems of cooperating. Think how much easier it is to maintain moral standards in a small group, a small church or musical group, and how much harder to maintain standards in a large groups, a large church or big band.

The nudge should be small enough to get small groups to hold together reliably but can't be enough to get people to try to form large groups with greater risks. A large nudge would not be very useful, and might be dangerous, while a small nudge often would be enough. A small nudge is more efficient. In that case, natural selection almost always chooses the most efficient option, the small nudge. The actually evolved nudge is not strong enough, and need not be strong enough, to get us to go much beyond what is set up already by kin selection and reciprocity.

If the nudge is only needed for small groups, can't work on large groups, and so is only a small nudge, then is any moral nudge really necessary? Can't assessment of practicality do the trick? Can't a simple extension of the rational logic of reciprocity and kin selection do the trick? There is no definite answer to this question but apparently the answer is “no”. Even with small groups an extra nudge is needed that mere rationality cannot provide.

If only a small nudge is needed, and a big nudge couldn't work, then why does the nudge have to come in the form of an ideal, morality, with potentially universal absolute scope? Why does the nudge have to feel like a very big nudge? This way leads to an inevitable contradiction between the ideal absolute motivation that we need to act and the necessarily limited scope of our real action. We have to talk in terms of loving everybody when in fact we know we can only love a few people who are near, dear, and cooperative. Again, there is no clear answer. Rather than give a lot of speculation here, basically, all I say is that people need universals, ideals, even absolutes, to get even a little bit beyond what immediate practicality tells us. The use, and misuse, of ideals and absolutes is the price we have to pay for the nudge beyond obvious self-interest that leads us to effective cooperation. The nagging contradiction between what we should do and what we know we will do is part of the price, and part of the human condition. I write more about this issue elsewhere.

What happens in a group if people act strictly according to any ideal? Suppose we tried to run America strictly according to the ideal of "tough guy (and girl)", honor, Justice, or Truth? Society would fall apart. Society would not fall apart because the ideal is wrong but for two other reasons. (A) Most of life is not about any particular ideal, and trying to force life into the "Procrustean Bed" of any ideal only freezes life and people. It adds a huge overhead, enough to destroy. What if we had to consider Honor and Pride whenever we bought lunch or went to a garage sale? (B) There is more than one ideal. Ideals conflict. Much as we might like, we cannot have Justice and Pride together. The conflict of ideals worsens the problem when we try to run society according to an ideal only.

How many ideals are needed for full human society and full human life? How did we get any ideal? How do they work in society? How do we judge between ideals? How do we know when to leave ideals alone and simply get on with life? These are relevant interesting questions, especially for Darwinists, but I can't take them up here.

What happens when people do act morally strictly, as much in accord with the ideal as possible? First, what happens depends on the size of the group. Strict morality can work in small groups where people know each other quite well, usually when they are at odds with a bigger group around them, even when they owe their living to the bigger group, as with religious groups in America such as the Amish and Jews in Europe for a long time. But strict morality cannot work even in modestly sized groups, and especially cannot work in groups where people don't know each other quite well and don't have a strong reason to stick together. That is, strict morality can't work in real groups. People cannot resist short-term self-interest, and so cheating comes again.

Second, as with other ideals, acting strictly according to morality tends to freeze people so that people don't act on opportunities that they might otherwise have taken, so that people lose out on some benefit that they might otherwise have gained. When people act with great strictness, paradoxically, the group overall benefits less (achieves less total welfare) than if people have enough freedom. It is not true that "to ask forgiveness is better than to ask permission" but it is true enough. People need not to worry about morality always. People need to feel confident they can make a few mistakes, be forgiven, and get over the problem with modest restitution if needed. Morality arose out of self-interest. For morality to throttle self-interest is for morality to kill its parents. The overall greatest good for a group comes when people follow morality generally, don't break any serious rules, but otherwise are free to pursue self-interest.

Exactly where to draw the line is a big topic, and the line varies by culture, society, conditions, and history. I don't go into the issue here. It is important to say that people in general have a sense that too much morality can be bad, and that we need some freedom. So people are naturally suspicious of too much morality and fight against too much morality.

Third, morality conflicts with other goals and other ideals, such as Honor, Revenge, wealth, power, and Family. While a moralist might say that morality has to come first and be on top of the ideal heap by its very nature (I come close to saying this below), natural selection does not look at it that way. That ideal wins, in particular types of situations only, that leads to the most reproductive success, in those particular situations only. No ideal need come out on top all the time. There need be no dominant ideal. Trying to force one dominant ideal all the time adds to action freeze and reduces practical success.

Natural selection would give morality the force of an ideal strong enough to get us to cooperate in fairly small groups most of the time but no more power or scope than that, under normal conditions. How it is that modern people can cooperate to live in states is another issue entirely from what I raise here.

Morality requires that sometimes moral people get after bad people and even get after other moral people who are too lax. Morality requires some moralistic people, attitude, and acts. The facts that morality is an ideal, and there is always a gap between real and ideal, open the door for moralistic harangue. Yet people don't like to be prodded morally and made to feel guilt. (A) Moral selection, including not getting too worked up about all transgressions, is in accord with the general selectivity of people about acts. People get a lot huffier when they personally suffer wrong or someone near them suffers wrong than when somebody unrelated suffers wrong. We get morally angry when an unrelated visiting child steals from our purse but only get sad when our own child steals. We want not to be goaded into acting on an ideal in every case, especially when self-interest tells us that we don't benefit by acting on the ideal in every case. (B) People sense that getting too moralistic might do more harm than good. It upsets the balance between ideals and freedom that is needed for their own best benefit and for the possible best benefit of the group.

(C) Most importantly, moralistic harangues, and manipulation by guilt, are ways for some people to use other people, almost always in the self-interest of the moralistic people. When one office worker wants to "get" another, the first worker "runs down" the moral character of the second so the people of the office will take the side of the first. Yet the second worker really might not be worse than anybody else. When one politician goes after another, the first always attacks the moral character of the second, and drums up moral outrage. If one cunning person can use morality against another, he-she might later use morality against me, my kin, or my friends. Even if, in some cases, a person is justly accused, the whole tactic of moralistic attack is dangerous. Moralistic attack leads to overly-moralistic behavior that erodes the overall welfare of the group. It is better not to let cunning people use morality as a weapon at all. It is better not to fall into the habit of moralistic thinking. One way to hold the line against overly-moralistic behavior is to hold the line against moralistic attack and the moralistic people who tend to use it often. We suspect them. We don't like them. Even when they are right.

Moral life in early human groups was not simply about trying to get as many people as possible as much as possible to live up to a simple easily-understood ideal. Even in early groups, living more morally might have made things worse, not better, even though living somewhat morally certainly did make things much

better. Even in early groups, there were sub-groups of kin, friends, and allies, and people had to act a bit differently toward his-her sub-groups and toward the whole group. Even in early groups, morality could never be the only consideration and often was not even a relevant consideration. Even in early groups, morality competed with other ideals such as Honor, Courage, and Beauty. All this is even more so today in complex societies. Morality is quite important to me, but I have to see it for what it is, how it evolved, and its role for good and bad in the real current world.

Variety of People; People are overall more Good than Bad.

Even in a basically moral group, some cheating happens. Even your most angelic best child sometimes steals a cookie. We have all used moralistic cunning. Morality can end some cheating but not all. As a result, even in a moral group, (1) there will be a variety of characters, and (2) each of us will have within ourselves the potential to be good and bad. See movies about hucksters who go into a good community where they bilk the folk as in "The Rain Man".

Are people basically more good-moral or more bad-cheaters? How particular individual people turn out depends on circumstances, but I think people are more good than bad. I think most people can be taught to act quite well most of the time in the right conditions. Usually the conditions were right enough in our evolutionary past for cautious good attitude to be fixed as the basic predisposition. We start out giving people the benefit of the doubt. We start out acting mostly good with a little bit of opportunism, trying out badness sometimes. Sadly, people also can learn to be quite bad in the right conditions, as with children who are forced to be soldiers.

Here is one reason why people are usually more good than bad: Cheaters depend on moral people in a way that moral people don't depend on cheaters. Imagine a group in which only moral people do productive work while cheaters can only live if they have moral people to live off of. Moral people help each other while cheaters always harm the people they interact with. Moral people benefit, they benefit more with increasing numbers of moral people, they benefit with an increasing ratio of moral people in the group, they benefit even without any cheaters, and they benefit most without any cheaters. Cheaters cannot benefit without moral people, cheaters do not benefit much if there are many cheaters, they lose benefit the more cheaters there are, and they only hurt each other if there are only cheaters without any moral people. We can imagine a group of all-moral (or almost all-moral people); but we can't imagine a group of all cheaters because they would have nobody to prey on, and they would destroy each other. Briefly, moral people are "primary producers" while cheaters are parasites. Primary producers can live quite well without parasites but, without hosts, parasites die.

All people vary in propensities to cheat and to act with simple goodness, and, likewise, moral people vary in simple goodness and in zealotry. First, within each person, we have both simple goodness and fierce zealotry. Second, within groups, some people tend to be zealots by nature while others are simply good without being zealots. It is hard to say if people in general are more zealous or less zealous. I think most of us prefer not to be zealots unless situations bring out our zealotry. It can be dangerous to be a zealot, and it is convenient to let other people be zealots. When situations do call for craziness, then most of us can rage with moral indignation easily enough. We can even talk a big game and let other people do the dirty work of zealotry and of punishing bad people. This is part of our mixed moral nature too.

If we all have a mixed moral nature, and we all need some training to bring out the best, then we need to build institutions that bring out the best. Usually institutions that bring out the best also produce people that support those institutions such as charities, good schools, and democracy. People and institutions support each other. On the other hand, bad institutions produce bad people who sustain bad institutions such as tyranny and gangs. Usually the middle ground is narrow, and the situation goes one way or the other. It is hard to make a good balance and easy to fall into a bad balance. People who live in good situations are lucky. We need to make sure we fall on the side of good institutions and good people, and stay that way.

Morality, Intent, and Persons.

Real morality requires the ability to read intent, and it requires empathy and sympathy. We have to be able to guess accurately what other people intend, what their motives are. We have to be able to guess adeptly what other people feel, and we have to feel along with them at least sometimes. In jargon, morality needs a solid “theory of mind”. We have to know what it means to be the “other” when we “do unto others”. At the same time, for morality to persist, we have to feel that other people can understand us, feel us, feel for us, and feel with us, too. We have to expect others in our group also to have a theory of mind, and their theory of mind has to be similar to ours. We have to believe that understanding, feeling about, feeling with, and feeling for, are mutual. We do not have to expect they really will treat us as well as we would treat ourselves.

When we read the intent of others, especially when we have empathy and sympathy, we see others as persons. Morality and the idea of a person evolved together. They imply each other. I mention this link again below, and the topic requires a lot on its own, so I leave the issue alone here. Even with animals, when we can read intent, have empathy, and sympathy, we see the animal as a person. About the time I wrote, some people wished to give chimpanzees, gorillas, and elephants the status of persons for many humanitarian (!) and legal reasons. It does little good here to argue about exactly where to draw the line as long as we do see the close ties between moral feelings and persons.

Altruism.

Sometimes people do act in accord with the moral ideal at the expense of their apparent fitness (practical reproductive success) as when someone leaps into the street to snatch a strange child from an oncoming car.

Think of morality not as an ideal but as a mechanism or as a tool. Most tools have specific uses, an “ideal” for the tool, including the situations in which the tool should be used. At the same time, no tool is perfect. Sometimes the tool is used in cases that resemble the best situations but are not the best. Sometimes we use a wrench for a hammer, and sometimes we use a hammer to prop open a window. Ordinarily the people around us are close to us, are kin, friends, work partners, sharing partners, or members of our group. We develop the general attitude of kindness toward them; we develop moral feelings toward them. In those situations, it makes sense to snatch a child out of the way of a wandering water buffalo or a running herd of giraffe, even if the child is not ours. At the least, our act will dispose our moral partners to do the same for us. Even if we get killed, they will be kindly disposed to our relatives and friends, so we will gain indirectly through their gain. If the same attitude later leads modern people to

save strange children from automobiles, there is nothing to wonder about, and the act certainly does not repeal all the other ways in which morality does go along with our reproductive success.

As an ideal in human theory, morality should be universal; but so what? In evolution, universality is only a guide, a suggestion. Universality is not evolutionarily mandatory, and could not be made mandatory by natural selection. A modest sense of universality might be needed for morality to work but that does not mean really acting universally is needed for morality to work in natural selection. We should not confuse ideal with real even when the ideal guides the real somewhat.

Some Companion Ideas that are Important Later.

Not only did we evolve to act morally most of the time, we also evolved the following ideas. I do not say why. We evolved to:

(1) Think morality is really important, about as important as anything else in life. Not all of us are like the “noble Romans” who put duty above family and life but nearly all of us understand the feeling.

(2) Think morality is real. We don’t think of morality as real in the same way we think of rocks as real but we do think morality is more real than the images that we see in clouds and more real than the ripples we see on water during a windy day – and, yes, I know the ripples are real.

(3) Link morality with the super natural. We think morality is real in the way other super natural things are real such as spirits of the storm. People that believe in high gods or in God think morality and the gods, or God, are closely related.

At the beginning of this chapter, I said morality is real. I use these points to support my belief. These points are not the most important support but they do help. The most important support is that morality has its own logic, the logic of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

I think dedicated Darwinists would use these points instead to argue that morality is merely evolved. The feelings that morality is important, real, and linked to God are all evolved, likely merely evolved and not true. If they are all merely evolved and not true, then they are bad evidence that morality is real. In fact, they are evidence against morality being real. So morality is not real. Morality is merely evolved, a handy delusion that serves reproductive success nearly all the time.

The Logic of Morality.

I differ from mainstream Darwinism in 2016 because of how much I stress moral logic. I use the logic of morality to bolster my belief that morality is real while Darwinists pretty much overlook any particular logic that morality might have while they focus on how morality is used to support success. Morality is entirely, only, and nothing but its use. I disagree. I think morality is channeled by its logic. Morality IS something, and morality’s is-ness is important. So, here I explain a bit.

I do not discuss the logic of morality in the context of other ideals. I do not treat morality as one ideal to be comparted to other ideals but focus only on morality. I hope to do that elsewhere.

People can't argue much about taste in food but they do argue about morality. They argue the facts of a case, relations of facts to principles, and which principles apply. While not exactly the same, it is useful to think of court cases as arguments about morality. When a young person says "but that's not fair" he-she has to back up the assertion with ideals, principles, rules, standards, and precedents.

We can't argue about anything unless that thing has a logic. Usually we can't appeal to rules unless the rules are organized into a logic. We can't relate facts to rules without a logic. We do argue enough about morality, and in the right ways about morality, so that it has to have a logic. People can be susceptible to sensual appeals that don't have much of a logic such as the naked body of a healthy young person. But ordinarily people are susceptible to things as parts of systems with a logic. Immediate sex appeal makes sense but romantic movies only make sense as a set of ideas about relations and love. Even porn only makes sense in the context of logics; I let you figure out which logics. Sometimes immediate violence makes sense but movies about the American West, and films noir, even when they have a lot of violence, only make sense as a system of ideas about good, bad, justice, self-reliance, friendship, teams, etc.

Even purely physical systems follow a logic, and the logic makes a difference. We don't think of motion as following a logic but it does, and the logic makes a difference. It makes a difference if moving bodies follow Newtonian rules or Relativity. Crystals cannot form in any ways. They have to form following the logic of "group theory". Abstract mental systems have to follow a logic even when we don't just make them up. There are only so many abstract design patterns that can be made on a wall, and they too have to follow the logic of group theory. Each branch of mathematics has its own logic such as the logic of groups, hyperbolic geometry, or all the various infinities (there is more than one kind).

It makes sense that our mental abilities follow a logic even if they evolved. Now we have to decide which logic, or even which logics, morality follows. Of course, I think the logic of morality is in the Golden Rule and "applies equally". The key issue is whether even natural selection has to follow the logic but I cannot really go after this problem here. I can say enough to make more sense. I only illustrate. See my other writing.

Think about kin selection (inclusive fitness). We are kind to our kin, and we expect them to be kind to us, because we are part them and they are part us. We share genes, a lot of genes. Doing something to a kinsperson is like doing something to me. They feel the same way. The same is true of our constant partners in gathering food, sharing food, sharing child care, and other chores. Doing something to them is almost like doing it to me even if we are not (as) related as kin. They are in the same relation to us. In this situation, the only rule that consistently makes sense is the Golden Rule and "applies equally", with some allowance for different age, experience, particular individual skills, gender, etc. I am NOT saying that we are always kind to our kin and frequent work buddies, that we never compete, and that we never do bad things to each other. Bad things do happen, and bad relations do develop even with close kin. After all, they are not exactly us and we are not exactly them. But the only efficient way to approach the situation to begin with is to treat them much as we want them to treat us, and that means everybody treats everybody the same. We begin with the benefit of the doubt, with good intentions, and with good overtures.

Think about life in a group, with persons, the persons can read intent pretty accurately but not perfectly, and the persons have sympathy and empathy for each other. Sympathy means they have similar sets of feelings and they can read each other's feelings. Empathy means they can share the feelings so that they understand the feelings of others, know why others respond, and know they likely would respond similarly if they were in the situation of the others. If you do something to someone else, that is almost like doing it to yourself. If someone else does something to you, that is almost like the other person doing it to him-herself. Of course, natural selection made sure that we are not that empathetic and sympathetic, and did so in ways that serve reproductive success. Only saints, some avatars, and some bodhisattvas, are that sympathetic and empathetic. We have all ignored somebody else's feelings and done to them what we would not want anybody to do to us. And we have all been ashamed of ourselves later for doing it. Despite how empathy and sympathy might work out in particular cases, the underlying logic is that of the Golden Rule and "applies equally". As with morality in general, even though sympathy and empathy have been shaped to serve reproductive success, there is still an underlying logic, and this underlying logic is that of the Golden Rule and "applies equally".

Persons, morality, empathy, and sympathy all evolved together, and all share the same underlying logic of the Golden Rule and "applies equally". Each has other features, especially persons, but that does not change the common underlying logic.

If people are fairly free to leave a group and set up their own group, then morality has to follow "do unto others" and "applies equally". Under any other rule, some people in the group would have to gain while others would have to lose. If some people tried to make morality follow another rule, the other people who "lost out" because of the new rule would leave to set up their own group in which morality did follow that rule and only that rule. Eventually in free groups, people would have to settle into a rule something like the Golden Rule as the basic default position. From this default position, people could negotiate variations and people could maneuver for gain; but that does not change the basic default position. Not all basic default positions are encoded into our genes but I think this one is. No social animal is totally free to leave its group, set up another group, or join another group, especially with predation and strife between groups. I think evolving humans were free enough to set up new groups even given intergroup strife. This point is contentious in evolutionary theory now, and I don't go more into it here.

The theories that Darwinists use to understand cooperation, in particular game theory that relies only on "Prisoner's Dilemma", are set up so freedom to switch groups is not part of the game. The players are trapped in the game, usually in one group with no subgroups or alternatives. This limit is not realistic. When modified to allow switching between groups and memories about players and groups, I think the default condition of the Golden Rule and "applies equally" emerges.

Morality is an ideal, and a universal ideal. Moral teachers say to be good to everybody. This kind of an ideal goes along with the logic of the Golden Rule and is a mirror image of the logic of "applies equally".

People are adept at twisting moral logic to get around it and to use it for self-interest. People kill each other in the name of a good god. People enable their friends' bad habits. People are adept at making themselves feel moral about bad acts such as stealing. These abilities to twist logic and feeling do not alter the basic ideas just given. They do not mean morality can follow any logic or that evolution can apply moral feeling to any act.

In mainstream Darwinist thinking, moral feelings could apply to any act if that act furthered evolutionary success, even bad acts such as robbery. Moral feelings can go along with other feelings if the other feelings helped our evolutionary success such as greed; we can feel moral about feeling greedy or acting greedy. In contrast, I think moral feelings cannot apply to just any act and cannot go along with just any other feelings, no matter how much the act or feelings might have promoted our evolutionary success. We can feel clever about bilking old people out of their retirement through a Ponzi scheme but we can't really feel moral about it. We can rationalize so as to act badly and to cover up our bad feelings but deep inside we still know we have done wrong when we do not follow the Golden Rule and "applies equally".

Morality, sentience, sympathy, empathy, the idea of a person, ideals, universal ideals, the Golden Rule, and "applies equally" all go together and evolved together. I think they would all evolve together wherever they evolved. Thus even all extra-terrestrial aliens that feel morality would know of the Golden Rule and "applies equally". They would also all have a mixed moral nature and would be able to twist moral logic for self-interest. We can expect aliens to understand our morality but they might not act any better toward us than we have acted toward ourselves sometimes.

Pro-Sociality.

People who act morally among each other promote their own particular individual success, the success of other group members who act morally too, especially ones who act morally among each other, and even the success of other group members who might not act as morally. People who act morally among each other promote overall group welfare. They help each other to find food, trade, care for children, defend food, defend the group, find spouses, and do all the other act that are important in group life. People who act morally also act "nicely" and "kindly" toward each other. They act like kin toward each other. Morality is "pro-social".

Politicians and priests promote morality as much for the pro-social effects as for the morality itself. We should be careful about this effect of morality. We tend to see this effect in terms of people sacrificing for the group. This way of looking can be misleading. The group benefits because members individually gain more benefit on average (some might lose but that does not change the average). If we think of group benefit in terms of the sum of individual benefits then the group does benefit when people act morally. We should not think that people would act morally for long if they personally lost benefit even if somehow the group gained benefit at the same time. If many people lost benefit, then the group would not act morally and could not gain benefit. The group does not come before individuals and it does not channel what individuals do. Individuals helping each other make the group better, partially directly but mostly indirectly.

The Legacy Carried Over.

Because moral action was successful for our ancestors in general, we inherited a bundle of abilities that still shape our lives. We are more pro-social than an observer might expect for an evolved organism for which self-interest is basic (this result does not reduce the role of self-interest). We are susceptible to morality, kindness, friendship, and moralizing. We take people at face value until they show otherwise. We share. We trust. We give to strangers. We respond to appeals of all kinds, even from comparative

strangers. We cooperate. We plan together. We can delay reward for a long time. We can divide work and reward among a large diverse group. We “carry” people when they have problems. We expect other people to be moralistic enough. We learn cultural values and social roles. We expect all this of other people. We enforce expectations for good behavior and shared values through rewards, ostracism, and punishment.

Our abilities evolved among hunter-gatherer-foragers. We carried these abilities to other settings that arose later such as horticulture, agriculture, villages, towns, cities, states, occupations such as carpenter and blacksmith, labor unions, business firms, professions such as electrician and lawyer, long-distance trade, commerce, and capitalism. We adapted abilities that were originally suited for hunting bands to let us build complex democracies or complex fascist states. We could do that without changing hardly at all the underlying abilities – our “mental genes” are very likely nearly identical to the “mental genes” of our hunter-gatherer-forager ancestors.

Because moral action was successful for most of our ancestors, and because selfishness is often a way to succeed, we also inherited abilities to be amoral or immoral. We are not always bound enough by our susceptibility to morality. We can use the susceptibility of other people to morality against them. We lie, steal, cheat, seduce, run away, and act like cowards. We do not enforce expected good norms, and so we let down society, the people who trusted us, and our kin and friends.

Tendencies to good and bad exist in all people to some extent, and in all societies. Which tendencies come to the fore, how much, and in what ways, depends on the person, history, culture, society, and conditions. All in all, people have been pretty good, even given wars, exploitation, and the impending ruin of the planet. The harm that we do mostly we don’t intend. Unfortunately, we also don’t stop even when we clearly see the harm.

Reducing Morality to Nothing But Reproductive Success.

If you don’t like arguments about ideals, what is real and how, and relations to the super natural, you can be a good Darwinist and overlook those issues entirely. All you have to do is focus on how people really behave under considerations of morality, and check to make sure that what people really do goes along with their reproductive success, or would have gone along with their reproductive success in the past as we evolved our nature. You take that as evidence that morality really evolved, and use as much as you can to speculate on how morality evolved. This is what most Darwinists do.

I have nothing against this research strategy, and much good insight has come of it. I don’t like that it tends to reduce morality to nothing but reproductive success, to explain away morality. It does not tell us how morality is distinct from any other trait that serves reproductive success such as drooling at the smell of burned meat, chasing rabbits, running from bears, having genitalia, or having orgasms. It reduces the variety and interest of life. It even reduces our ability to explain why various traits evolved because it overlooks the particular nature of particular traits, and so, in the long run, it actually reduces the power of Darwinism.

I prefer a more rounded view that takes account of how a trait works and what it is, including the logic by which it works and that might have affected how it evolved.

Optional Technical Insertion: Rules, Values, Strategic Interaction, and Society

The need for rules, values, and institutions raises the following problems, which I do not solve.

First, imagine two people sharing a rabbit. How they share the rabbit can be seen by looking at their strategic options. If the two people are of about the same “power” likely they will share the rabbit about equally. We cannot so easily understand what happens with many people, as the example of sharing the deer from above shows. It is not easy to read off what really happens just from theories of strategy. Social scientists tend to think rules and values are the direct simple result of strategies, as in sharing the rabbit, but they are not. This mistake can be called “individualist reductionism”. It is true that rules and values have to come out of strategies and cannot stray far from a balance of strategic interest. People modify rules and values to go along with strategic interest. But they are not the simple direct reflection of strategic interest. The rule “the hunter gets the left leg” holds if the hunter weighs 90 pounds and is nice or weighs 200 pounds and is fierce. Rules and values have some autonomy of their own, and have an interesting relation with strategic interest. You cannot guess what will happen in a town meeting from reading “Roberts’ Rules of Order”; and you cannot derive “Robert’s Rules of Order” from knowing that people form power blocks. How this all works is not well known now. Social science theory can help but it also hurts by channeling the imagination.

Second, we are susceptible to rules and values as to sex and morality. We follow them, even when, at least in the short run, sometimes we suffer. Very likely we have capacities for rules and values, and the capacities are about as important as our capacity for morality. This result leads some social scientists to say that humans could not have evolved a capacity for rules and values unless natural selection occurred not just at the individual level but between groups: “group selection”. For decades, this idea was framed as group versus group, like “spy versus spy” from Mad Magazine, in which whole groups annihilated other whole groups. Now, the idea is often framed in terms of multiple levels of selection, from gene to small group to big group. It is too hard to summarize that idea here. It is a mistake is to think simplistic group selection entirely replaced individual action in the evolution of the capacity for morality and the capacity for rules and values.

Third, some social scientists dismiss biology and individual strategy. They say culture, social structure, social organization, or some other group dominates the individual and determines what he-she does. This is a mistake. Still, these thinkers use the importance of rules and values, and the susceptibility of people to rules and values, as evidence. These thinkers ignore how individuals institute rules and values, change rules and values, and maneuver within rules and values. In my experience, these thinkers have little feel for biology, individual strategies, and the interplay of individuals and rules.

PART 9: Optional: Needed Ideas about Morality.

I repeat my request that you read David Hume and Immanuel Kant. See Part 8. This Part summarizes ideas that you need so as to think more about morality, and this Part repeats from above. Unless you already have some background, you can’t assimilate all the points in this Part at one sitting. They are meant for future reference and to guide you in future reading. They set up the argument in the next Part of the chapter on the modern Darwinian explanation of morality.

Morality is about is about goodness but it also includes feelings-ideas-and-judgments of good and bad, good and evil, right and wrong, should and should not, ought and ought not, fair and unfair, just and unjust, disgust and approval, “yes” versus “no, icky”, duty, rights, responsibility, and other feelings and assessments that I don’t list here. In this chapter, I write as if all the aspects of morality are pretty much part of the same greater thing. I don’t distinguish between the morality of fair and the morality of icky. In fact, I think most of morality can be unified under good and bad, the Golden Rule, and “applies equally”. In a longer work specifically on morality, I would explain, and would deal with feelings and ideas that did not fit under those three aspects of morality. Here, I just note the problem and go on.

Morality is about persons. Only persons can have morality and show morality. Morality cannot arise in rocks, amoebas, trees, forests, roses, clouds, storms, falling coconuts, and most animals; and morality cannot arise by natural selection in the single-onto-itself tree-based life force in the movie “Avatar”. Persons usually show morality between other persons. Morality is part of a relation of what Martin Buber called “I and Thou”. People can correctly show morality toward animals such as when people fight cruelty and when people wish to save endangered animals. People can correctly show morality toward aspects of nature and to nature as a whole, as when people save forests, ecosystems, and the planet. This does not undermine what I say. Part of morality is responsibility and duty, and wishing to help nature is a valid extension of those. When we think about how morality evolved, we have to think too about how persons evolved at the same time and what role morality played in interactions between evolving persons. When we think about how morality works now, we have to think of how morality and personhood work together and cannot work separately.

Some animals do show rudimentary morality but that is not relevant here and does not undermine what I say. Someday robots will be sentient and have no morality or have morality different than evolved human morality. That future also does not discredit what I say.

The fact that morality is based in persons affects how we see morality, what we expect, and how morality works. For example, the idea of “applies equally” assumes that everyone is a person, and that people have to be treated in accord with “applies equally”.

Likewise, the rules and facts of morality also shape persons. How morality works affects what we think is a person, what we think of persons, what we expect of persons, and what we expect persons not to do or be. If you are too moral, amoral, or immoral, too social or non-social, like power too much or not enough, then you cease to be a person. Some people become demons, some saints.

Another way to say morality is about persons is to say morality is about agents. Agents have to be free somewhat to act; they do not need absolute cosmic freedom. Agents have to have some free will and freedom of choice; they do not need absolute cosmic free will. Agents have to take responsibility for actions, and feel duties. Agents have rights.

In theory, morality could work with only two agents, or with only one agent and nature. In the real world, morality implies a community of persons who regularly interact and have expectations about each other. Morality implies communities. Interacting-somewhat-autonomous-agents-becoming-persons is the only way morality could arise under natural selection. So, naturally occurring morality always implies a group

of interacting persons. That is where we find morality now. Morality does not necessarily imply the kind of society that any particular interest groups now promote, including anthropologists, NGOs, politicians, ethnic activists, and religious activists. The relations between morality-in-general, particular moralities, and kinds of communities, are not clear. I don't have to clarify them. To repeat: the fact that morality and community are closely related does not mean that society makes the category "morality" or society sets all the content of morality.

This idea of agents affected the American Revolution and has affected mainstream non-Marxist economic theory since it began with Adam Smith in 1776 in his book "The Wealth of Nations".

While empathy and sympathy are not logically necessary for "applies equally", still morality, especially the Golden Rule, implies a lot of empathy and sympathy. It helps to know what other people think and feel, and to share in their thinking and feeling as much as our character and imagination allow. At the least, persons have to see each other as persons. For normal naturally evolved human beings, sympathy and empathy are needed for morality. Sympathy and empathy are part of naturally evolved group life among persons, and could only have evolved naturally in group life among evolving emerging persons. Morality, empathy, and sympathy had to evolve together. Not only did Adam Smith write about economics in terms of agents, he also wrote about moral sentiments and moral theory. The fact that morality, empathy, and sympathy imply group life does not imply society originated and fully controls sympathy and empathy. It does not imply any particular society or any social theory that is promoted by any modern group.

Morality is not just an assessment such as "the price of apples is too high today" or "I like Mozart but not Beethoven". Morality is a judgment. We approve or disapprove, extol or condemn, and offer reward or punishment, when we make moral judgments.

In theory, morality is one of the highest judgments we can make, perhaps the highest. Morality is right in case of a conflict of morality versus: you, family, God, any religion, any dogma, any Church, any country, any political agenda, or humanity. Few things may judge morality. Morality can judge almost anything.

Of course, in practice, we do not apply morality in the vast majority of human acts or ideas, as when we buy coffee. In practice, other things often trump simple morality, as when people choose their country or their family over what is good, even when they know better. This kind of ranking and choice despite the clear ideal of "morality first" made only intuitive sense until evolutionary theory gave a good explanation. Now we have a better systematic sense of why we rank morality so highly but often "fudge" in the better interests of family, religion, job, or nation.

Morality implies that we reward and punish people in some cases.

Evolved morality requires that some good people require other good people to go along with punishing bad actors (offenders) and rewarding good actors. It is not enough just to be good yourself, you also have to be against bad people and for other good people. Evolved morality requires that some people be self-righteous and moralistic at least sometimes. Self-righteousness and moralistic high-hat can go too far. There is no absolute guideline for how much is enough.

Morality requires rights, responsibilities, and duties. We cannot have rights without responsibilities and duties. We need duties to be moral. I do not go into relations of responsibilities, duties, and rights. Since the 1960s, Americans have stressed rights more than responsibilities, and that has led us astray.

Morality can apply both to acts and ideas (all kinds of mental states and attitudes). We can have morally bad ideas and good ideas. For valid reasons, Western legal systems decided it is better to focus on acts and to not manage ideas through morality. Even so, in our human past we did apply morality both to acts and ideas, and in our daily life outside the legal system we still do. We apply morality to ideas even when we don't expect ideas to lead right away to acts. The term "dirty mind" is a potent moral judgment.

To assess and judge, we need a logic. To make assessments and judgments that work with more than one person, in a community of persons, we also need a logic. Otherwise, people could have no grounds to assert or deny moral judgments, and could not agree or disagree. Morality has a logic. I believe the root logic of morality is the Golden Rule and "applies equally" (with some additions and modifications that do not affect my assertion, and that I discuss elsewhere but not here). I differ from mainstream evolutionary thinking in this point. For that view, see below.

To repeat: there is a difference between knowing about games in general and knowing any particular game. We don't learn games in general; we learn particular games on the basis of knowing about games in general. The basis to learn games is not given to us by society and it is not learned. We are born with the ability to learn games, with which we learn particular games. The same is true of morality. We have a general ability for morality but we do not live general morality or learn a general morality. We learn and live particular styles of morality. The general ability to learn morality evolved. The general ability for morality is not given to us by society, and it is not learned. The general ability to learn particular styles evolved. We do learn the particulars of any given style of morality such as Christian or Taoist morality. Society gives the particulars of a style of morality but does not give us morality as such. The particulars that society gives us can be so important that we overlook our underlying general capacity for morality.

The same is true of religion.

Morality uses facts but morality is not limited to facts. We do not read morality directly from facts. We add moral judgment to facts. Moral judgment and facts are logically distinct. When we see a boy taking apples from a tree we don't know how to assess his actions morally until we know that his grandmother owns the tree and gave him permission or know that the neighbor owns the tree and forbade him. Even if we know that the neighbor forbade him, we might withhold judgment until we know how reasonable it is to forbid neighborhood children from taking apples off a tree when the neighbor does not pick them himself and does not pick up windfalls either.

Morality adds something to facts. Morality adds assessment and judgment.

Facts do play a role along with morality. We need to know who owns the tree and what the owner said about picking apples. Morality cannot be arbitrarily added to any blank fact. Likewise, on the other hand, morality cannot be reduced to a formula about facts. I cannot go into the interplay between morality and facts. What is important here is that moral assessment is logically distinct from facts.

There is a difference between a judgment about a situation versus the drive to do something about the situation, to respond. In common, incorrect, but still useful, terms: there is a difference between logic versus emotion, thought versus action, rationality versus irrationality.

We need both logic and emotion to know what to do, and then do it. In terms of the TV show "Star Trek": Mr. Spock is logical but does not always know what to do and does not always do anything; Dr. McCoy is emotional but does not always know what to do and often does nothing; while Captain Kirk blends logic and emotion, does know what to do, and does it effectively.

Morality not only has passions that drive moral responses, morality has its own distinct passions. When we see right and wrong, we want to do something because we feel moral approval or moral outrage. We do not get angry at a dog getting out of a yard through its own cleverness in the same way that we get angry when the owner does not control the dog, does not secure the yard, the dog gets out, and the dog bites somebody.

Sometimes morality is about a lone right-thinking right-feeling person who has to go against society even at great cost, as in some Classical Greek drama, Classical American Westerns, film noir, detective films, and all police ("cop") movies after about "Bullitt". That case would be important if this book were about morality but here we can overlook it.

More often, people think morality is "prosocial", that morality promotes society; and, in fact, most moral ideas do lead to a better social life. Telling the truth most of the time, not stealing, not cheating, helping others before they ask, helping others when they do ask, and the "Boy Scout Code", really do lead to a better life for the doer and everybody around him-her. If everybody were the Good Samaritan, our world would be better. If everybody could think of nature as our mother and as someone that we have to get along with, this world would be better. Business in the long run would be impossible without business ethics even if in the short run you can make a killing by cheating. This idea that morality is prosocial is how most people explain and justify morality to children.

The link between pro-sociality and morality is at the root of modern controversy about morality. It leads anthropologists to explain morality as an aspect of society. It leads biologists to wonder how evolution, which is rooted in individualistic natural selection, could lead to a strong prosocial force, and to answer that the pro-sociality is only a by-product of individual gain. The confusion over pro-sociality leads both groups to reduce morality to nothing but whatever they think is important. It leads the groups to talk past each other. It leads both groups not to look at morality in itself before giving explanations and reducing morality to nothing but.

On a more personal level, but tied to pro-sociality, are two complementary views of morality. On the one hand, morality is kind. We all know that we behave better, and in many ways more morally, toward our near kin than to strangers. Morally seems to be a version of these feelings, an extension of them. On the other hand, morally sometimes requires us to be stern, as when we have to punish even our own children when they break important rules. The sternness leads to a better family-social group. We can look at the sternness as kindness in disguise ("you have to be cruel to be kind" and "tough love") but it is better to look at it first as simply sternness, as when we spank a child for stealing regardless of what that act might contribute to more efficient family operation in the long run.

At least since Plato argued with Sophists, 400 years before Jesus, it has not been clear if people should be good

- (1) For the sake of goodness in itself.
- (2) Because being good and acting well leads to benefit for the person.
- (3) Because acting well leads to benefit for society.

Personal benefit can be pleasure, satisfaction, other positive feelings, better character, Heaven, a better rebirth, getting along in society, having more useful contacts with people, staying out of trouble, or helping society because you like society.

Plato was unclear on this point, his confusion led him to err, and the errors have lingered in Western thought ever since. For an example of confusion over (a) morality for its own sake versus (b) morality for benefit, listen to the song "Santa Claus is Comin' to town", as in Chapter One. Parents teach children all three rationales for morality. The issue remains unresolved. Just why is honesty the best policy? I come down on the side of doing good for its own sake. It might be necessary to teach children that doing good leads to reward but in the long run that is a dangerous idea.

The issue is important because of the ties to pro-sociality and to conflicts between anthropologists versus biologists. Anthropologists latch on to the explanation that good is for the good of society while biologists use benefit of the individual. To the list above of individual benefits for doing good, biologists add that a person increases his-her reproductive success and so increases long run evolutionary success. Morality is for the good of the self. All other reasons are simply that reason in disguise.

Long before modern controversies about the evolution of morality, thinkers offered theories of morality, usually based on one of the benefits listed above, for individuals or society. An act was moral if it aided that benefit. A judgment was moral if it led people to see a situation so that they would act in ways that promoted one of the benefits listed above. People could feel when an act or judgment promoted one of the benefits listed above, and so would feel that act or judgment was moral. People could feel when an act or judgment went against one of the benefits listed above, and so would feel that act or judgment was immoral. Since about 1800, thinkers have focused on acts and judgments that have to do with society rather than individuals. I don't go through the list, but only mention some examples that, hopefully, get the idea across:

-Stealing is immoral because it disrupts social order, social cohesion, and the sense of social identity. Respecting social status is moral because it promotes order, cohesion, and social identity.

-Morality is entirely a matter of convention, in particular socio-cultural convention. Society invented the idea of morality and society fills up entirely the content of morality. It makes no sense to speak of a moral sense apart from the particular content given by each particular society. This stance implies that morality is not comparable across societies; there can be no general rules of morality.

-Stealing is immoral because it subtracts from the total welfare (food, clothing, security, entertainment, families, housing, religious activity, sports, etc.) of particular individuals, and so subtracts from the total welfare for society as a whole. In contrast, honest purchase is moral because it adds to the total welfare. Think of whether paying for apples rather than stealing them benefits Johnny, Suzy, and Tom individually more than it costs each individually, not only right now, but over their whole lives. Say that buying rather than stealing leads to greater benefit than cost for Johnny and Suzy but to greater cost than benefit for Tom. Still, if the sum of benefits for Johnny and Suzy is greater than the cost to Tom, then, paying is better than stealing, and so paying becomes the moral rule for everybody. If the sum total of the benefits minus the costs for an act, reckoned for each individual, summed over all individuals, is positive, then the act is moral. If the sum total is negative, then the act is immoral. If the sum total for one act is greater than the sum total for another act, then the first act is more moral, than the second act. This vision is the basis for social planning, and has been used to justify quite a few giant sports stadiums.

-Society is not the sum of individuals. Society is greater than the sum of individuals. Still society is about overall benefit, for which we have to figure cost and benefit. We can figure costs and benefits to society directly without going through individuals. If an act, judgment, rule, program, etc. benefits society-as-a-whole then that act etc. is moral. If an act etc. hurts society as a whole, then it is immoral. If one act benefits society more than another act, the first act is more moral than the second act.

-Rather than figure trillions of particular acts, we can reckon in terms of a rule. If a rule against stealing leads to more benefit than cost, we can say the rule is moral and so stealing is immoral. If a rule against lying leads to more cost than benefit, we can say that the rule is not moral even if sometimes it is useful for teaching children or for limited situations. If one rule benefits more than another rule, the first rule is more moral than the second rule. The cost-and-benefit consequences of the rule can be figured for the sum of individuals or for society as a whole. Usually it is easier to figure for society as a whole and then make up rationales about how that also benefits individuals.

Two particular visions (theories) of morality deserve mention, especially because they don't fit into the molds above. Both have influenced me much.

(1) Immanuel Kant is my source for "applies equally". Any rule, to feel moral, must apply to all people equally including you, your kin, your friends, etc. It applies equally to us all because we are persons, and we are not rocks or animals. It is hard to imagine being a person and not wishing such a rule to apply to all persons, at least in theory. A good example is telling the truth. If any rule does apply equally in that way, then it will tend to feel moral. Kant's term for a rule that has to apply to all people because they are sentient beings is "categorical imperative". You see that term often in the literature on morality.

(2) G.E. Moore made a strong case that we should not reduce goodness to any other thing. We should stop trying to explain goodness in any other terms. We cannot understand goodness in any terms other than goodness. We should understand and accept the idea that we do good for goodness itself and not for any other reason. Goodness is its own category. We should think about good in itself. Moore used the term "naturalistic fallacy" for reducing morality to anything else, in particular to any natural thing such as cost and benefit but including ideas such as honor.

It is possible to combine Kant and Moore but I don't try here and a combination of the two is not needed for what I say in this book.

To explain morality properly, I should contrast moral assessments with other assessments such as based on beauty and economics. I can't do that here. I hope to do that in other work.

PART 10: Optional: The Darwinian Explanation of Morality.

This part requires Parts 6 through 9. Especially refer to the last few sections of Part 8, and even more the section on the logic of morality.

When Darwin first applied evolution to humans he was scared by implications for morality and religion. If our senses of morality and religion evolved, and how we actually feel and act under morality and religion follows our reproductive success rather than ideals, then morality and religion could not be about anything real. They are useful delusions, aimed to serve individual reproductive success, and cannot be anything more. Darwin reduced morality and religion to nothing but evolved traits that serve reproductive success like antlers on deer or spots on butterfly wings. I disagree.

Evolutionary scientists carried on Darwin's mistake of reducing to nothing but and explaining away. They did so in how they think about morality as adaptive, how morality might have evolved, and how morality aids success. Below, I retell one of Darwin's examples, and explain how his mistake is carried on. Most evolutionary scientists avoid the issue of what happens if morality is successfully reduced to nothing but. I am not sure what they really think. See the chapter in this book on atheism.

I think most religious people also avoid the issue. They have a feel for the bad that would ensue if we reduced morality to nothing but practical reproductive success, and so they deny evolution is real; deny humans evolved; or accept that humans evolved but deny humans evolved morality and religion, and they assert that God inserted genes for morality and religion into an otherwise evolved proto-human non-moral animal. Or they simply don't deal with the issue.

If we make the mistake of thinking morality can be reduced to nothing but, simply because our capacity for morality evolved, or because what we do follows reproductive success rather than an ideal, we make a fundamental mistake about how the world works. We make a mistake about how persons, evolution, self-determination, and self-government work. We misunderstand ideals.

We severely diminish our hopes for good self-government. It is unlikely any trait that is nothing but can serve as the foundation for persons, morality, and self-government. Even if, through amazing social engineering, some "reduced to nothing but" trait could serve as the basis for democracy, why bother? It would be gilding a clod of dirt. It helps good self-government when we can be secure in believing that persons and morality are real enough.

Morality evolved to serve reproductive success and it still does. Even so, if we reduce morality to nothing but an evolved mechanism to serve reproductive success, then also we make the mistake of thinking that any-and-all ideas that have an evolved basis cannot be about anything real simply because the basis for

the ideas evolved. We wrongly think evolved ideas cannot have a real object and cannot be true. When we make this mistake with morality, we also tend to make it with other ideas such as scientific method.

The Darwinian Explanation for Moral Feelings and Acts.

Assume that we have moral feelings, and don't worry about where they came from or how they relate to other feelings such as hot and cold, and pleasure and pain.

IN THEORY, natural selection can attach any feeling, including moral feeling, to any idea or act, as long as the attaching leads to evolutionary success, that is, to reproductive success. Natural selection can attach the feeling to the degree that gives the best results for evolutionary reproductive success. Natural selection can make sure a feeling does not attach to an act or idea if having that feeling to motivate the idea or act would lead to less success. IN THEORY, natural selection can get us to do or not do, to the right extent, in the same way. Usually a feeling goes along with doing or not doing to the right extent. For example, we find fruit and some nuts sweet but spoiled almonds are bitter and rotten fruit is icky. We like meat more than vegetables but like both better than hunger. Usually we are not afraid of robins. We love all babies including tiger cubs but fear adult tigers. We love babies that look a lot like us more than we love the babies of other people or other species. We are more afraid of big hungry angry nearby bears than of well-fed neighborhood dogs usually confined to their own lawns.

Given that we do have moral feelings, natural selection attaches moral feeling to any act or idea to get us to do the act or think the idea, or not do the act and not think the idea. Natural selection attaches the feeling to the right intensity so that we do the act or think the idea to the right extent. Natural selection makes sure moral feeling does not attach to any act or idea that might harm reproductive evolutionary success. Natural selection made sure we don't attach moral good feelings to people that do not help us achieve practical evolutionary success or that might hinder us. We feel more kind, good, and moral toward our near kin than to strangers because we achieve practical evolutionary success through our kin but not usually through strangers. That is the whole current theory of the natural selection of morality, in a nutshell. For example, we approve of love and duty, but usually approve of love more than duty, yet act more from duty than love. We condemn stealing and incest but usually disapprove of incest more, likely because, when it happens, it leads to more personal, family, and social damage. We get huffier when a stranger steals from us than when our niece steals from us.

This explanation makes sense and is overall true. This account explains how people really use morality, that is, who we treat fairly well, who we treat really well, who we treat badly, who we treat really badly, and when. The neo-Darwinian explanation can give us suggestions for what to do and not do in making a lasting just state. The neo-Darwinian explanation can account for odd cases of strong altruism as when a person saves an unknown drowning child, although I do not explain how. This explanation is well worth keeping.

This explanation also reduces morality and explains it away as nothing but. Just because the explanation is so good at accounting for how we actually use morality it takes all focus away from how morality differs from other features of human nature, what morality might be in itself, and if morality ideally follows a logic even if in practice it bends the logic.

Darwin himself opened the door to thinking about attaching feeling this way and so explaining away morality as nothing but. In an example that became famous, Darwin used bees. A hive has only one queen. If the current queen is young and healthy, and a bee that ordinarily would be a worker begins to grow into another queen, then other worker bees, her nearly-identical sisters, sting her to death. Darwin said, if bees were moral, they would feel justified, righteous, and good about stinging to death their own sisters - as justified, righteous, and good as humans do saving the life of a drowning child or shooting a drug-addled home invader. Natural selection can attach the moral feeling to any idea or act as long as the attachment leads to more success than failure overall. Darwin did not bring up whether the idea or act has to follow the logic of “applies equally” or any logic. In his view, moral logic is not at issue. The question of logic does not come up. Darwin did not think ask whether morality has to pertain only among persons. The question of persons does not come up. Bees are not persons. Darwin did not bring up why bees would need moral feelings so as to be able to sting to death a sister. Apparently bees can figure out practicality without need of morality to urge them on; if bees can do it, then humans can do it too and so should not need morality. But humans do have morality and it is not clear why they need the extra boost to do what bees can do without morality. The only issues for Darwin are act and attached feeling, of applying moral emotion to get animals to do the act or think the idea, and the overall degree of evolutionary (reproductive) success.

Overwhelmingly: Biologists followed Darwin in considering only situations, acts, moral feelings, and cost and benefit; biologists followed Darwin in attaching moral feelings to acts and ideas to get people to do and think idea (or not do and not think); biologists have not considered if morality has to follow a logic even if morality evolved, in particular if morality has to follow the logic of “applies equally”; biologists have not considered the extent to which morality goes with persons – although since about 1985 biologists have taken seriously agents and have made progress in seeing relations between agents and morality. Biologists followed Hume and Darwin but overlooked Kant. Biologists dived into explaining away morality as nothing but practical success, reproductive success, in disguise.

Even so, biologically based analyses have been quite productive and are on-the-whole far more correct than wrong. I write not to undo what biologists have done but to keep people from making the same mistake of explaining away morality as nothing but, of overlooking what morality is and the context in which morality evolved, among evolving persons. We can think that our sense of morality has historical roots in practicality and success, and still intimately tied to practicality and success, without concluding morality itself is nothing but practicality and success. At some point, morality becomes something in itself that we need to respect.

In other work, I assess “attaching feelings to acts and ideas” in more detail.

Right and Wrong about the Current Darwinian Account.

(1) If humans already are so good at judging practicality, that is, what serves reproductive success, then why do we need a strong force such as morality to get us to act practically? Why did we need any force other than practical consideration? Why did we need any force other than practical consideration to overcome cheating to benefit from cooperation? Why do humans need morality if bees don't? I know analyses of irrational commitment. I accept that they are good arguments. I want them made better.

Specifically, we need to pay careful attention to games other than “prisoners’ dilemma” to figure out how morality works to augment considerations of practicality.

(2) Why do we need specifically moral force and feelings? How do the moral feelings that spur moral action differ from other feelings that spur other action such as a taste for sugar, a taste for meat, desire for sex, desire for beauty, and pleasure and pain? Why do we need so many different kinds of feeling? What makes moral feeling distinct from the others?

(3) How did we get specifically moral feelings to begin with? Where did moral feelings originate, and so how did morality originate? Modern Darwinism does offer an account of how morality originated from kin selection (inclusive fitness) and reciprocity; see above. But the account is not fully satisfying. Nobody is sure why humans evolved morality while other animals did not.

(4) I find exhilarating recent studies of the development of morality and the sense of persons in children. I think moral sense and a sense of persons are linked in any naturally evolved sentient being even if they are logically separable. Darwinism could benefit from more consideration of the evolution of the idea of persons, and study of the mutual evolution of the senses of morality and personhood.

(5) If Darwinism could answer these questions, it would be more powerful. Darwinism does not need to answer these questions to show how selective application of morality does serve practical reproductive success. In offering accurate arguments about that, Darwinism can feel it has successfully solved the problem of morality when, in fact, it has solved only one aspect of the problem of morality. So, for the most part, the other questions remain overlooked and unanswered.

(6) Not only did we evolve morality but we also evolved to think morality is really important, morality is real in some way, and morality is linked to the highest levels of the super natural. If the main goal of morality is to promote reproductive success, why is morality reinforced (reified) this way? We don’t need to feel that pleasure and pain are real in the same way we think morality is real, and we don’t need to think they are linked to super natural at any level.

(7) Morality evolved to promote reproductive success. People still use morality to promote reproductive success. We can understand a lot about morality by considering how it promotes success. Exactly the same can be said of pleasure and pain, the taste of food, smells, sight, hearing, sex, strategies for finding food such as hunting and gathering, fighting, sentience, art, and personhood. If all are merely methods to promote reproductive success, what makes them different? What makes them all needed? What is the best way to understand them in themselves? How do we think of them as distinct? What makes each special? This question goes deeper than asking how each evolved at a particular time, and in particular situation, on planet Earth. Moreover, morality seems to be more distinct from, say, the sense of smell, than the sense of touch is distinct from the sense of smell. As long as we think of all them only in terms of methods to serve reproductive success, we can make little sense of this feeling that not only are they distinct but are distinct in different ways. We need better ways to think about the methods that nature evolved, even if we first have to think of them as methods to serve reproductive success.

(8) A handy way to summarize the issue in (7) is to say that Darwinism gives us a good way to see how something works and what it works for, but humans also want to know what something is. Knowing what

something is, is not just a metaphysical quest. Knowing what something is also helps us to know how it evolved, how it works, and how it is distinct from other methods.

Don't dwell too long on the distinction between knowing how something works versus knowing what it is. Western thought has at times emphasized one to the detriment of the other, mistakes followed, and the mistakes became entrenched. The idea of "Being" or "is-ness" has haunted Western thought, as have reactions against the idea of Being. Get the idea of "is" versus "how it works", and see how knowing both points of view helps.

The desire to know what something is, and to think in terms of "is", likely evolved. That does not mean the desire to think in terms of is and to know what something is, is not useful, and does not mean things do not exist simply because our desire to see them in terms of "is" evolved. Again, the source of an idea does not matter, not even that it evolved. Some things exist even though we evolved to think in terms of existence and essence.

(9) Morality really does seem to have a logic, and the logic seems to be the Golden Rule and "applies equally". What does this "having a logic" imply for the evolution of morality? What does this imply for how morality differs from other methods that serve reproductive success such as walking upright?

(10, with 5 repeated) The fact that the questions in (1) and (2) don't need answers to offer explanations based on adaptation and reproductive success makes it too easy to reduce morality merely to practical evolutionary reproductive success, and so intensifies the reduction. We should be suspicious of any reduction that fails to address the questions in (1) and (2).

(10 continued) Many attributes that evolution gave us are merely accidents of the history of evolution on this planet such as the ability to breathe oxygen, fly in rarified gas (air), and walk on two legs on solid ground. In contrast, some abilities lead us to perceive things that would exist even if humans never evolved, and to follow some of them. We perceive light, the sun, and the octave, and we follow scientific method. We need to decide which of these options morality is, and what that means.

We do gain by looking at morality as merely a method to serve reproductive success, and as a thing for which we evolved a capacity to imagine as real - but what do we lose? We lose appreciation for the logic of morality, the force of "applies equally" and the Golden Rule. We lose appreciation for morality as what we should follow as much as we can. We lose the feeling of morality as something apart from people, with its own being, and greater than people. We lose a chance to know any ties between morality and the super natural, including God.

Giving Darwinism a Needed Break.

I am a Darwinist. I do not criticize Darwinism to negate it but to make it better, especially for well-rounded people who want to place Darwinism and themselves in a bigger context.

For reasons that I can't go into here, science rightfully cannot accept the super natural into explanations. This rule is a strength of science. The view I take of morality leads me toward the super natural even if my view does not require the super natural. So Darwinists are correct to be leery of my criticism if they

feel it leads inevitably to the super natural. They have to decide how much they have to deal with without being forced into the super natural.

If Darwinism cannot settle the issues raised above, such as the reality status of morality, and cannot admit the super natural into scientific arguments, then what is the proper path for Darwinism? The proper path is what Darwinists have done. The proper path is to see how morality is used, and not used, to promote reproductive success. Once Darwinists have more and better information on that topic, then they can worry about the other issues. Darwinism applied to humans is still young enough as a science so that it should focus on how morality is used and not worry so much about what morality is or about some of the other issues raised above.

On the other hand, Darwinists should not think every attempt to place Darwinism in a bigger setting is necessarily a critique of evolutionary theory and of the idea that evolutionary theory applies to humans. Some of us believe that humans evolved, including morality, and want to understand not only how that happened, and how it works now, but what it means. To understand how humans and morality evolved, we have to consider at least some of what morality is as well as how morality is used.

What I Want.

I want to have my cake and eat it too. Usually I dislike wanting to have your cake and eat too but in this case not only can I get away with it but it is the best attitude.

-I want to keep the Darwinian account of how morality works and how it might have arisen, and keep the traditional sense that morality is almost uniquely important, morality is bigger than humans, and is real.

-I want to keep the Darwinian account of how morality works and also think about what morality is.

-I want to know why we have the ideal of morality but apply it selectively. Darwinism is very good at offering an answer to this question.

-Even though I see why we do not live up to moral ideals, I also want to keep morality as an ideal for me, and I want to work hard to make a better world.

-I want to believe that moral logic (Golden Rule and “applies equally”) conveys the ideal of morality and constrains even real evolved morality but also that natural selection often does not fulfill moral logic and sometimes does an end run around moral logic.

-I want not to reduce morality to “nothing but” anything including nothing but evolutionary reproductive success and nothing but society.

-I want to keep what we gain from seeing that we are moral but we are not perfectly moral.

To repeat: Just because we evolved the ability for something does not mean that our ideas about that thing are nothing but evolved useful delusions, and does not mean that thing is necessarily unreal. We can evolve true ideas about true real things, even non-material things such as morality.

Just because something is non-material and real, and evolution gives us an ability to see it and follow it, does not mean evolution will lead us to see it completely clearly and follow it fully. We see real material things such as forests but we hardly know everything relevant about them and we don't treat them as well as we should even for our own welfare. Our evolved ability for geometry falls short of ideal geometry but that does not mean we don't do any geometry, and falling short of the ideal because we evolved the ability to see the ideal makes sense of the fact that some people are adept while others are not. The fact that how we follow morality can be explained by evolutionary theory does not debunk that morality exists. It means the capacity for morality evolved in the context of serving practical evolutionary reproductive success. We do not follow scientific method perfectly either but that does not mean scientific method is merely an evolved delusion.

We can have both ideal morality and real morality if we think morality is real but that we also evolved a capacity to see morality and to follow it as much as practical evolutionary success allows. Morality does exist apart from humans or any evolved sentient beings. Evolution led us to see and to follow something that is non-material yet still real apart from us, morality. Morality is not a thing evolution merely invented as just another organ like fly wings. Moral logic does constrain real evolved morality. Our evolved ability to follow morality falls short because it is an evolved ability. Falling short is what we should expect even if morality is real.

We cannot use morality and persons as the basis for real democracy unless we do see morality as both real and evolved, unless we see both the ideal and how we really act. Unless we see real and evolved, ideals and real acts, we will constantly confuse real and ideal, and will constantly make bad policies and programs.

I think evolutionary biology so far has done an outstanding job of going after morality. Biologists do tend to get misled by the idea that morality is nothing but an evolved delusion, and frightened by their own train of logic, but that is a chance we take when we think hard. Besides the classics in moral philosophy, any person interested in knowing about morality should read works on the biology of morality.

To improve understanding of morality, I have some suggestions:

-If you are a religious person, don't worry that modern Darwinism has explained away morality and God. Appreciate how well modern Darwinism explains what people really are like and what people really do. Use knowledge about what people really are like and really do to get people to act better and be better. Don't base your work on unrealistic ideologies.

-If wish to make democracy work, pay attention to what biologists say about human nature in general and human moral nature in particular. The best source for wisdom is still the past but wisdom from the past goes along well with what biology tells us. Use what you know of human nature, and learn about human nature, to design good laws and good programs. Use it to understand how capitalism really works and real capitalism affects social and class relations.

-If you approach these issues from modern Darwinism:

=Stop taking pride in the possibility that evolutionary theory explains away morality and religion. Instead, pay attention to how theory explains what people actually do, sheds light on how morality evolved, or on what a person is and how persons might have evolved.

=Think about how moral feelings differ from other feelings. Why do we need so many feelings?

=Think whether morality follows a logic. Can moral feelings really attach willy-nilly to any act or idea even among evolved persons? Is there a pattern to how moral feelings attach other than to serve reproductive success? If morality does follow a logic, what is that logic?

=Think about how ideals work in human life, how they might have evolved, and why we need so many ideals.

=Step back and, as a person, wonder if morality might be real and what that might imply.

=Read my chapter on atheism later in the book.

04 Some Issues 1

My basic stance always is Jesus' message mixed with realism and with Western values about freedom, citizenship, and science. If religion was so simple, this book would not be needed. Real questions arise. Many real questions are asked first by children, go unanswered, and then get lost in life's rush: "Can God make a rock so heavy he can't lift it?" "Can God do bad things?" It is worth asking again every once in a while. The point of asking here is to get past the questions in an adult way, use common sense, and get on to better issues. This chapter and the next pose some questions so we can sort things out to focus on what is important.

People pestered the Buddha about heaven, hell, next lives, karma, power, food, having energy, losing weight, looking good, being cool, being a "gangsta", love, winning the lotto, erectile dysfunction, vaginal dryness, etc. He refused to answer because those issues blocked the main task, which was to wake up, see how the world works, stop clinging, and stop suffering. Some questions can help with the main task, but, even then, mostly we ask them to get past them. "Getting past them" does not mean dismissing them as we do for a small child but letting them trigger our sense of wonder and using them to think.

PART 1: Childhood Questions

God, Goodness, and More than Morality.

Are God and good the same or do they differ? Is goodness good because it is good in itself or is it good because God has a list of good things? Is goodness good only because God said so? Does goodness have logic? Does all goodness have something in common or do we merely have a list that we learned in childhood? Does God have to conform to the logic of morality? Can goodness judge itself? Could God have had Jesus teach a different message? Would something now good, such as the Golden Rule, be bad if God said so? Could the Golden Rule be bad on another world? Would something now bad, such as eating children, be good if God said so? Is God intrinsically, only, and always good? Could God will bad? Does God allow bad? Could God approve what is bad in the service of greater good? If God told us to do something bad, should we do it? Can goodness judge God? You can ask the same questions about Dharma and Tao.

I find it hard to think God and goodness are not the same. Yet God seems other than, and bigger than, my simplistic morality. God is bigger than the message of Jesus, so acting well is not all that the world is about, and acting well is not enough. Then what? Job, C.S. Lewis (in "Till We Have Faces"), Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and most mysticism, just fall back on the inscrutable grandeur of a God beyond morality. Why not just accept what the world has to bring even if some of it is bad?

I have no response to any difference between God and good. I would not do something bad because God told me to. I would not do something bad because some human told me it is God's will. "God's will" is never a valid reason to do anything bad.

It is hard to follow a way of life that accepts both the bad and the good equally. It is hard to be neutral. Not even philosophies that say they do this really do it. It is hard to go along with badness. We want to fight badness. We do not like when people gain from badness. If we stop fighting badness, badness will win: Edmund Burke: "All it takes for the victory of evil is that good people do nothing". To fall back on the grandeur of a God beyond good and evil is like letting evil run wild; it is not to act godlike. God can turn much badness into goodness. Still, we don't like depending on God to do that for us and depending on God to turn the tide of goodness over badness. That idea sounds like an excuse for badness.

So we seek simple moral ways to live. In doing so, we might as well blend simple morality with the best religion.

It does not matter if our dislike of badness has a basis in our evolution; it is still there; it is as likely true as not; it works in us; we have to act on it; and we have to figure out what it means.

If we live by principles, we might as well have a good moral set of ideas that support the principles. The teaching of Jesus is the best place to start. No matter where you go from there, you need to keep Jesus' morality as a reference base. Even people who break rules on purpose keep his morality as a stable reference to know what they are reacting against.

Moralities imply religions even if moralities do not specify religions exactly. The morality of Jesus implies a religion based on one very smart good God. Even though Jesus was idealistic, and even if he wrongly expected a Kingdom of God, the religion that Jesus held seems reasonable and correct. If we accept the moral principles of Jesus it is reasonable to accept his ideas about one very smart good God. I am glad the morality of Jesus and the religion of one good God go together. I don't see any other religion that works as well with Jesus' morality.

More on Goodness and Badness.

My naive simplistic ideas about goodness cannot be the whole story. A lot in life has little to do with good or bad, such as cooking, going to work every day, art, science, sunsets, comets, elephants, rain, snow, and allergies. Life is as much about those as about moral stands. Nature has badness in it, as when spider babies eat their own siblings. The capacity for morality evolved through self-interest, selfishness, competition, and even unfair competition. Morality arose indirectly because people in our evolutionary past worked for their families, friends, and group mates rather than directly for goodness. Morality evolved partly as a response to amorality and immorality, and it could not have evolved unless animals and people acted badly often enough. Good intentions often cause more harm than good in the end: "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". People often achieve more goodness when they act out of love for family, friends, and group than when they act directly for goodness; appeals to family, friends, and group are more likely to get people to act well than direct appeals to goodness. People acting in self-interest still often lead to more good than people who aim to do good, as in examples from economics when bakers, car makers, and the Los Angeles Lakers, all seeking profit, give people usefulness (utility), and usually give more usefulness than a moralist preacher or PC person. By the time humans figured out that they needed to take care of the planet, and how to take care of the planet, it was too late already. It seems God tolerates badness on the way to creating goodness, and-or God must go through badness on the way to making goodness.

First, although the world is bigger than my naïve moral ideas, still I can't have better principles on which to act. I have to use my naïve morality as the basic guideline, even when I allow for practicality. At the same time, I have to be humble. I have to avoid zealotry. I keep my eyes open to learn about what is in the world along with my simple morality.

Second, acting morally and being a good person does not stop me from doing the other interesting things in life. You don't have to be moralistic all the time. Most of the time, you can enjoy life without worrying about moral fallout. If you do worry about morality all the time, then something is wrong, and you need to re-assess. Proper morality should encourage people to create, do science, smell roses, admire sunsets, ride a motorcycle, eat, and enjoy life. In the long run, much more than morality, badness is likely to get in the way of life.

Third, we have to avoid the mistaken, misleading, bad stance that good and bad are metaphysical twins that need each other. We don't need badness to make life more interesting. Nature, accident, and the legitimate struggles of life provide enough problems that require goodness so that we don't have to add badness to get goodness. Storms, disease, car accidents, failure in business, and disappointment in love and family all provide enough need for goodness so we don't have to go looking for badness to round out goodness. Bad people do enough bad things on their own without encouragement or rationalization. We do appreciate goodness more after fighting badness but that does not mean we need great evil to have true goodness. It does not mean we need badness to fight with so we can have any goodness at all. It does not mean the more badness we have, the more goodness we have too. We cannot seek goodness through badness. Badness is not a positive thing in itself like the wind or like goodness. We do not act like God when we act badly. We do not gain more freedom, and we do not act like God, when we break rules for fun and when we do what we want.

Fourth, the fact that the world is bigger than simplistic moralizing does not mean: simple moral relativism is true; sophisticated moral relativism is true; all judgments are relative; all principled judgments are false; all judgments are both true and false; and we can do whatever we want if we find an excuse. Right and wrong still are, and are still important. We have to use judgment. Judging means right and wrong still are relevant; it means there is something to judge. Of course, we should be cautious about using absolutes and about thinking we are right all the time. All this is hard, but it is what has to be.

Fifth, badness can be fun sometimes, more fun than goodness. Goodness can be boring. Badness can alleviate the boredom of goodness. Not facing up to this simple truth leads people into badness. It is like telling people that all drugs are all bad all the time; then, when people try a drug that really isn't very bad such as "pot", they lose their judgment and get into drugs that really are bad such as "meth". When people hear that badness is hurtful all the time, and then find it isn't, they fall into the reverse mistake and romanticize badness. The truth leads to better judgment than do simple platitudes. Although badness is fun at times, badness still is not a good idea, and badness still does not add enough to goodness to make badness worthwhile. I return to the topic in several later places in the book, in particular in the chapters on Romanticism and on decency.

I can imagine great badness, greater than anything most people have met, greater than a child getting cancer. The Stalinist terror and the "Borg" on the TV show "Star Trek TNG" are mild examples. I do not

describe such badness. I doubt such badness consistently leads to greater goodness. Some badness is so bad that we can't respond with more goodness, and the badness would crush us. Some badness would take away our humanity. Luckily, we don't face such badness yet. Hopefully, we will avoid it in the future. We should think now so that we don't face it in the future.

The badness we do face does stimulate a lot of goodness in us without also crushing us. Badness does crush some people, but, really, not many. Most of us get by. I don't know if God planned the world so as to force us to face just the right kinds of badness, in just the right amounts, so as to stimulate the greatest goodness in us, without often crushing us. Gottfried Leibnitz suggested this idea; he said we live in "the best of all possible worlds". Voltaire, made great fun of it in the wonderful short book "Candide". I don't know how to measure goodness and badness, and how to assess this idea. I doubt this idea is true. I side with Voltaire. Things turned out as they did in this world, and most of us can stand most of what we have to stand, but not all of us can stand all of what we have to. Some of us get unlucky; that is part of the reality of life; see below. I do not speculate more on this question.

Some religions, such as some Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, urge people to go beyond conventional morality. Sometimes they seem to scoff at all morality. They do not really. They take for granted deep basic morality such as sympathy and empathy. They dislike zealotry and dislike people falling back on merely external rules when people should use judgment and intuition. They do not prefer bad to good. They do not say people are realer, more spiritual, successful, or godlike when people act badly than when people act well. They do not say people are freer when people act badly or break rules. They make clear that going against deep morality is another mistake and another bondage to external artificial principles. I largely agree with the Taoist view of morality but I still emphasize correct principles and I still adhere to my naïve morality.

The idea that we should work hard to make the world better can be an irrational obsession. It has fueled both selfless hard work and zealotry. It can support both satisfaction and guilt. It has led people both to clear minds and to confusion. In the West, and among Christians, too often it is an obsession that leads people to impose their ideas of goodness and order; and, when they do not succeed as they had hoped, to feel oppressive guilt. People outside the West and Christianity often see the idea as an annoying cult-like obsession, and see Western do-gooders as interfering screw-up busy-bodies who serve their own desperate need for justification more than true good. Wishing to make the world better is more a way of getting along personally, a game, than actually doing good in the world. While the bad parts of the obsession are true, the good parts of the dedication are true as well, and I think the good outweighs the bad. All I can advise is that we keep aware of the bad parts, clear our heads as much as possible, and actually try to do some good. Seek to do good rather than to feel better and feel justified.

The Problem of Evil.

We can tolerate a little badness such as getting a cold before a big date. We can tolerate a little evil such as getting cheated on by a girlfriend or boyfriend as long as we don't have children together. We can't tolerate, or understand, some evil, and why there is so much evil. Why should a child get sold into sex slavery? Why do so many people and business firms want state support? Why does God tolerate hard evil or so much evil? Does God actually promote some evil? Even if God uses the evil to make greater

good, how can God promote evil? This chapter does not look at badness and evil. See a later chapter. There are no definitive answers.

Other Religions.

I never felt I had to hold all the ideas in any one religion, had to hold any one religion to the exclusion of all others, and had to deny all the ideas in all religions other than “my” religion. Always it was a matter of ideas. We keep good ideas while dumping bad ideas. We do not desperately hold one religion and all its points regardless of value while excluding all other religions and all their points regardless of value. Childhood Christianity “took” in me but my version never excluded ideas from other religions. I never felt wrong about learning from other religions. I got joy from it. I never learned to exclude and condemn. One religion does not necessarily exclude ideas from others. We do not exclude religions, we exclude bad ideas, and we do that from all religions. I could feel this way and still not feel I was “straying from God” or lapsing into the idolatry that the Tanakh (Old Testament) condemns.

I saw that not all ideas in all religions were equally valid or could be. Religions contradict. All religions have some bad ideas, and all religions are bad when they assume their own superiority without good reasons.

PART 2: Lingering Theological Issues

Jesus’ Secret Successes.

Standard Christianity argues that Jesus succeeded in saving people simply by being born on Earth as a man, being crucified, and being resurrected. For two thousand years, Christian theologians have tried to explain how that works. They failed. We need to look at Jesus in other ways. In their view, their failure does not mean the idea is false, it only means we mere humans don’t understand. We might not have to understand the idea for it to work; we only have to believe. I leave that issue aside.

Even if Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection can save people, it is not likely they can save people if people simply believe but are not also good. According to the New Testament, demons know Jesus is God and has saved the world but it does them no good because they will not submit and do good. If people are good according to the message of Jesus, then it is not clear that they also have to believe in the magic of standard Christian dogma. The magic impresses on us how much God loves us. If we can see that anyway, then we might not need the magic.

“To carry on Jesus’ message, it is likely that people had to believe Jesus was God and had to believe in the magical ability of the incarnation, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ message did go on. It is hard to believe God would deceive us about the magic of Jesus just so we would carry the message. So, it makes sense that the magic of Jesus is true. To avoid deceiving us, God allowed that Jesus was God, and God sent himself as Jesus here to Earth. That way, we can avoid the idea that God deceived us or allowed us to be deceived. Thus the magic of Jesus is real and it worked.” While appealing, I doubt this argument is true. It makes more sense that God did let us deceive ourselves because that is the only way we stupid silly humans would promote the message of Jesus hard enough and long enough for it to stick. Even if the above argument is true, as long as I follow the message, I don’t have to worry about it

because God will not judge me mostly according to whether I believe in Jesus' magic, and so I do not to accept the argument above.

Jesus wanted to set up the ideal Kingdom of God but apparently failed. This apparent failure also bothers theologians, and they have found ways to say Jesus really succeeded in setting up a kingdom although it appears he failed.

Rather than a Kingdom of God like what Jesus had in mind, Christian theologians argue that the Kingdom is the Church, at least until Jesus comes again. If you join the Church, believe, and act well, then you are in the Kingdom of God. If you don't join the Church, then you are not in the Kingdom even if you act well and, apparently, even if you believe in the magic of Jesus. There is something about the magic of Jesus that requires a Christian church. I have nothing against churches of any religion; they do more good than bad; they can do a lot of good; most people are happier if they belong to some religious group; and I hope everybody finds the right church for them. But, like many Western Americans, I don't think it is necessary.

What if the Kingdom of God is not a Kingdom as the Jews thought but a Kingdom based on attitude? What if the Kingdom of God is inside you, as a passage in the New Testament says? This is not a bad idea. It impressed me when I was young. It is important to have the right attitude and the right relation with God. Even if the rest of the world goes bad, if you have the right attitude, and the right relation with God, then you are alright.

I do not dispute the importance of a good attitude but I don't think that is only what Jesus had in mind or primarily what he had in mind. Jesus really did want the Kingdom of God as foretold by the prophets, and as modified by his ideas about good behavior and citizenship. He did not have in mind only a kingdom of individuals with the right attitude, not even in the same Church. He did not have in mind a therapy group. He wanted us to act well and to set up communities based on decency and decent acts.

Suppose a few people do have the right attitude but the world goes bad anyway. Tyranny runs the world, nature decays, and the world looks like a garbage pit. Then, having the right attitude will be an enormous comfort but it will be a hollow victory. It will not be success as Jesus hoped. If that is all we can get, then we should take it; but don't mistake it for the Kingdom of God as what Jesus hoped and as what we might have achieved. The Church cannot make up for that failure.

Suppose the world does go right, and it goes right largely because of Jesus' message. Whether people become Christians or not, people in general adopt the institutions begun in the West as a result of Jesus' message, build working democracies, and save the environment. Is this not the Kingdom of God, or at least a decent substitute? In this case, didn't Jesus succeed anyway? I don't argue for or against this idea of Jesus' secret success. If it works, I will simply enjoy it.

Purity of Motive: Good for Goodness' Sake.

The old Christmas song "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" says (quoting from memory):

"You better watch out, you better not pout
You better not shout, you better not cry

I'm tellin' you why
Santa Claus is comin' to town...
He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake"

The omniscience of Santa Claus is the omniscience that priests give to God, parents borrow, and parents use to scare children into behaving.

The last line is ironic. If you act out of fear, and hope for a reward, you don't act for goodness' sake. If you do something good because you want a reward, is it still good? Do you still deserve the reward? Should you still get the reward? If you act well because you want to come off well when you meet God, does that work? If you act well because you want to go to heaven, do you still deserve to go? Can you just act well without also thinking about it? Can you act well without any reason, not even for the sake of acting well? If you act well for the sake of acting well rather than just acting well without any reason, is that still acting well? There are no simple answers. This is what I have in mind when I say that we need to use ideologies without being bound by them. Remember this dilemma for the later chapter on codes, Taoism, and Zen.

Total purity of motive rarely exists in humans. We are morally mixed. Morality arose out of self-interest and nearly always served self-interest. We still act out of a mixture of genuine morality and self-interest. Morality and self-interest coincide nearly all the time - "honesty is the best policy" - so usually we don't have to worry too much about the mix. Trying to separate them would be like trying to take the wet out of water. We do not necessarily fault people for imperfect purity. Nobody faults a firefighter, police officer, or soldier for drawing a salary.

The real question here is not purity of motive but using morality primarily as a tool while expecting to get away with it. To act on mixed motives is only human. A little moral manipulation is only human. A lot of moral manipulation is bad even if moral manipulation is still only human. People used moral manipulation while human nature evolved, and it goes along with having an evolved sense of morality. It is part of our human nature. Our ancestors also got caught doing it, and then catchers were usually more adept than the deceivers. So now usually we can tell when somebody is being too manipulative, and, if the issue is important, we call them on it. We assess the best we can.

In theory, God can tell the exact mixture of pure morality, self-interest, and manipulation. I don't know if he really can or if he even bothers. I doubt God demands total purity. God has his own criteria. I don't know how God assess these situations but I don't worry about it.

Bad Feelings.

Not needing purity of motive includes not needing purity of emotions. Nobody has only sweet kind good emotions. Nobody but bizarre saints always forgive from the bottoms of their hearts. People who seem to have only pure good hearts usually are lying. People who really do have pure good hearts are hard to be around. We all have mixed emotions. We all want to mangle somebody sometimes. We all carry a

grudge for a while. Sometimes we derive strength from our “bad” emotions. We channel that power to act better or to avoid acting badly. We can turn bad emotions to good use without becoming insipid and boring, and without using our apparent kindness as a secret cover for passive aggression.

In a famous “Star Trek” episode, Captain Kirk splits into a “good” Kirk and a “bad” Kirk. The good Kirk is indecisive and ineffective. The bad Kirk is decisively selfish. When the two combine, the real Kirk is decisive and effective about acting well. That does not make the real Kirk an insipid boring guy. In the TV series “Burn Notice”, when he was young, the hero, Mike, was beaten by his alcoholic father. In one episode, Mike discovers that, all his life, without knowing it, he had used the anger at his father to get him through hardships, and he had used the memory of his father’s treatment of his brother and mother not to do the same. He had used the memory of one time when he did hurt some innocent people never to do it again. The fact that good motives dominated bad emotions did not make Mike a nice sweet insipid boring guy either before he consciously knew how his mind works or after.

God knows how we evolved and what makes us tick. God feels anger and wrath himself. He seems able to channel his anger mostly toward long-range good outcomes, and so he must take our mixed emotions into account when assessing us.

Free Will.

I have no solution to the question of free will. Because people worry about it, I take it up again in a later chapter. For now: The question of free will is like the question of purity. We have neither totally free will in all situations nor are we always totally determined like a simple machine. We have situational free will. We are free enough for most situations, and free enough for most situations that come up for this book.

Contrary to ideal free will, sometimes our will is not free; that is what “duress” means. Only a fool thinks you can be free while someone squeezes your fingers with pliers or holds a cigarette to your child’s eye. On the one hand, according to biology, even when we think our will is free, we might still be machines operating under a delusion of freedom. The delusion evolved to help us succeed. When we give in to the manipulations of loved ones, we still call it free will. On the other hand, people freely act against their own success: people walk into burning buildings to save strangers, give up a throne for love and for the good of the country, and support an aged sickly dying parent. Children have their own minds and try hard to assert their freedom. Between mechanical slavery versus the perfect freedom of martyr’s fancy, we have workaday free will. How free our will is, varies by situation. When not fooled by ideology, we are skilled at assessing how free a person might be in particular situations. For law, politics, social relations, personal relations, and religion, all to work properly, we have to assume our will is largely free in those situations where we expect it to be free enough. That seems to be true.

You Don’t Have to be Perfect.

Just as you need not have total purity of motive and totally free will, so you don’t have to be perfect in act and thought. Nobody is perfect, so if God demands perfection, we are all doomed. I don’t know how flawed you can be and still be decent. I don’t know if good trades off with bad. I don’t know if trying extra hard to make a better world can balance a nagging flaw such as addiction to Internet shopping or Internet porn. Some flaws are serious, and cannot be overlooked by other people regardless of what God thinks;

see below. I don't know if God is kinder to people who are better than average or show unusual talent. From what I have seen, those are the people who least expect favors. All religions say their founders approached, or reached, perfection. That is silly. Not Abraham, Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Confucius, or Chuang Tzu were perfect, not even as a prophet - let alone if we add their character flaws. I don't point out their flaws to prove my point.

Everybody Is Not the Same.

American society makes excuses for bad, foolish, and inept people. To see them falsely, as saints-in-the-making, clouds our judgment. It makes us over-value stupidity and indecency. It makes us under-value decent, smart, and adept people. Making excuses warps religion, politics, and society. Because society has distorted this question, I take it up in a later chapter on decency. For now:

To say everybody is not just as good as everybody else goes against current American "PC" culture in which everybody is as good as everybody else, we all get rewards, everybody is a winner, nobody is a loser, and everybody does as well as everybody else. This American delusion is simply not true. Enough good movies have been made poking fun at it so we would know it is not true if we were not clouded by silly ideology.

We are all equal under the law, and should be equal under the law. That is much different than saying we are all equally adept at everything, equally good, and equally valuable.

Although we are not equal in worldly abilities and worldly affairs, we might all be just as good in the eyes of God. We are all human, and all valuable to God. Differences in natural abilities do not impress God much. Except for some mentally ill people and people under duress, we all can choose to be decent or bad. We are all about equally worth "saving". We are all about equally "saveable".

That is true, but, even so, now we have to accept something Americans reject: There really are bad people, louts, and assholes. Some people are dirty, loud, stink, are selfish, liars, thieves, obnoxious, irresponsible, uncooperative, troublesome, and cheaters. None of the usual excuses are acceptable for them, such as a hard life, romantic rebellion, or being in an oppressed minority.

Although, on one level, in potential, people are similar in the eyes of God, on the level of choosing to be good and acting well, or choosing to be bad and acting badly, people clearly differ in the eyes of God. If you are a bad person, God does not see you the same as good people. God does not see you as you wish to see yourself. God does not see you as you fool yourself into seeing. God does not see you as your dog wishes to see you. God might see that, inside, you had the potential to be good. But God also pays attention to what you actually choose and what you actually do. When you choose to be bad, and you act badly, then you are not the same person as the potentially good person. You really are what you really are. Eventually you are what you do. God sees that. He sees your outside as well as your inside. He does not see you in the same way as he sees a flawed person really trying hard to be good.

For mere humans here on this world, it does not matter much how God sees bad people. What matters is how bad people act and the results on good people. Just because we all had about equal potential in the eyes of God does not mean we can treat each other exactly the same. We have to respect differences in

ability, effort, outcome, responsibility, decency, and badness. We have to beware of bad people. We cannot treat assholes as saints just because God knows they had a good person buried in them and they might change their hearts. We can start by doing as Jesus said. We can give people the benefit of the doubt until they prove otherwise; we can follow the Golden Rule. We can try to look on people as God sees them until they make us change our minds and force us to protect ourselves.

Saved and Wasted.

By “saved” I do not mean the Christian idea of “saved” or the Hindu-Buddhist idea of “enlightened”; by “wasted” I do not mean “damned” or “not enlightened”.

The following idea was one of the highest hurdles I had to jump in growing up. On the one hand, some people see the message of Jesus, and try to live it. They succeed spiritually even if they don't save the world. They are “saved”. On the other hand, some people really do fail. They are wasted people. I have seen too many bad people now to think all people will die as good people, in this lifetime or any number of lifetimes. I would like to think everybody gets saved eventually but I don't. Some people are wasted.

You do not have to be smart to be saved. You don't have to understand all the ideas in this book. You can be a simple decent person by nature with little understanding of dogma, and be saved. All you have to do is act according to Jesus' message as best you can. Being saved does not mean you go to heaven automatically. Being saved has no gain other than that you will have a comfortable talk with God when you die.

You are not wasted because your life has failed, you did not succeed in your business or profession, your marriage failed, your kids are jerks, you never lived up to your promise, your friends dumped you, people used you, you are sick, you are addicted, or you can't find a job. You are not wasted because you are homeless, eat at soup kitchens, or buy all your stuff at thrift stores. You are not wasted because you take the bus. You just have a hard life.

You are wasted because you have a bad attitude, act badly, and choose to act badly. You can rationalize all you want, but, if you have a bad attitude and-or act badly, you are wasted.

In between saved and wasted is a large middle ground. Most people think they fall in the middle ground but are sure God will cut them a big break when they die. God is a pretty good guy but still I doubt he will treat normal wishy-washy self-centered people as well as he treats simple decent people and people who get it. But I don't know for sure.

Along the same lines, another high hurdle I had in growing up was accepting that some cultures-social-groups are better and some are worse. Some cultures-social-groups have a good useful attitude while some have a bad hurtful attitude. Wasted people tend to come from groups with bad attitudes although they can come from any group. This topic is contentious and anti-politically-correct. Rather than go into it here, I go into it in bits and pieces throughout the book.

No Magic or Superstition but Still Morality and One Supernatural Being.

I hold to morality. I want to believe in God but I want as little superstition and magic as possible, including no Devil, few miracles, no magic of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection, and no ghosts, vampires, demons, spirits, mediums, or magic intuition. Yet God is supernatural. It seems a fine line between God the supernatural versus magical claptrap.

Admirable Christians such as C.S. Lewis believed in Christian magic and openly called it magic without shame. Great theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas offered strong logical arguments for the reality of Christian magic. I likely could screw myself up to believe some of the Christian magic such as the resurrection but I don't need to and don't want to.

If I believe in Christian magic, then I have to believe in most of the magic of all the other major religions including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. There are few good reasons for believing in the magic of one while denying the magic of others. I doubt even Thomas Aquinas really pulls that off. I don't want to believe in that much magic. It is too much overload.

If I believe in Christian magic and some of the magic of other religions, then I have to argue over "regular" magic and superstition such as ghosts, spirits, animal spirit companions, witches, demons, the Devil, etc. I have to bicker about sensible magic and silly magic. I want to avoid that entirely. The best way to avoid it entirely is to avoid the magic even in mainstream major religions.

The benefit of belief in God and the message of Jesus can be had without the downside of dealing with magic and superstition. I can hold the line at "one supernatural with one good God and his prophets, including especially Jesus", without having to accept magic and superstition; so I do.

Acting Well Regardless of God.

Here it is worth repeating: On the one hand, we meet God when we die, and we act well partly so we can come out well when we face God. On the other hand, we should do well whether we face God or not. God does not require purity of motive. God does not require us to act well only purely because we act well and not because we want to look good when we meet him. Still, God prefers we act well because we act well. God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. God does not want us to be terrified of him or to act on the basis of terror. This situation does not feel like a contradiction to me. This feeling of acting well for its own sake yet still respecting God is similar to the feeling of Taoist and Zen adepts who just act without thinking too much yet always also follow the Tao or the Dharma.

Acting Well; God seems Redundant.

If we want to get rid of as much magic and superstition as we can, and if we act well because we act well and not out of fear of God, then the idea of God seems like too much. We don't need God. If you get morality, then you don't need God, Tao, or Dharma. You can get rid of magic and the supernatural yet keep morality. Atheists stress this point. I don't argue here; see the chapter on atheism where I explain why keeping the idea of God makes sense. Again, I do not feel this situation as a contradiction. We can draw the line between magic and superstition on the one hand versus God and morality on the other. We don't have to draw the line with magic, superstition, and God on one hand versus morality on the other hand.

Accepting morality, God, a sense of imagination, and a sense of wonder, does not mean I have to accept magic and superstition. Being rational and reasonable does not mean I have to get rid of morality, God, wonder, or imagination. I can even accept magic in fiction, which I do wholeheartedly. I do not believe in ghosts, witches, wizards, demons, or any other superstition "for real". I think respecting morality opens the door inevitably to thinking about God. If we want morality, then we have to think about God even if we don't accept God, and we have to accept the right of other people to believe in God. That is why we can put morality and God together while leaving out magic and superstition.

God's Will.

When somebody claims to know God's Will, yet his-her idea of God's Will goes against common sense, morality, simple decency, or science, or when doing God's will hurts another group, then that person very likely is wrong and does not know God's Will. Terrorists do not know God's Will. At this time in history, no one religion knows God's Will better than any other. Not Jews, Christians, Muslims, nor Hindus know God's Will better than the others; adept Buddhists and Taoists would not argue in these terms. People claim to know God's Will as a way to get other people to do what they want. People claim to know God's Will as a way to promote their own agenda.

There is a place for God's Will. It is easy enough for people to say God's Will and morality always are the same and that the combination is obvious; but reality says otherwise. Too often, morality is not clear. Morality has contradictions, as the debates over torturing terrorists for information make obvious. The world is bigger than my simplistic morality, all simplistic morality, and even bigger than all complicated sophisticated morality. Even though morality is not always clear, and morality does not cover all points in contention, we still need to decide issues, sometimes right away. Then people appeal to God's help and God's Will. When God's Will decides an issue so we can move on, and God's Will leads to more good than harm, then fine. In fact, then maybe what happened really is God's Will and is not just a ploy by somebody seeking his-her own benefit. When God told Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt toward Israel, maybe that really was God's Will and not just Moses seeking power, glory, and to prove himself to his father-in-law. Maybe Americans did God's Will in American Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and 1970s. Maybe your mother is expressing God's Will when she tells you not to smoke crack cocaine or have premarital sex.

We can't decide when a decision-under-uncertainty is human will or God's Will expressed by a human agent. I advise not to think of it as God's Will but still to pray for guidance.

When a decision leads us into trouble then it is a good idea to stop thinking of it as God's Will. God might once have willed us to ban alcohol but now I am pretty sure he changed his mind. God might once have willed America to be the police officer of the world but I doubt he thinks that now. I doubt God really Wills us to repress homosexuals and not let them marry. Maybe once upon a time God willed us to enact laws for Affirmative Action but I am beginning to feel God has since changed his mind. When people continue to claim to know God's Will despite common sense, they are wrong.

God's Will, Holy Texts, and Agendas.

Here are more issues worth repeating, and to which I return in later chapters:

First, people cite holy texts as a source for God's Will when they want to invoke God's Will to promote their own agendas. This tactic could be valid only if the text really did express God's Will and only God's will, the text was absolutely clear, the text was always consistent and never contradictory, the text covered all relevant issues, and people could not interpret the text in different ways. Of course, none of the points are true. Not only are holy texts self-contradictory, the texts of major religions contradict each other. There is great danger in citing the Tanakh, Talmud(s), New Testament, Apocrypha, works of the Holy Fathers, Koran, Hadith, Sutras, Tao Te Ching, Analects, commentaries on Confucius, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Ronald Reagan's life story, as God's Will.

People pick-and-choose passages they want, ignore passages that might go against what they want, and interpret the passages they do want so as to serve their own agendas. It is not possible that God's Will could be behind all the agendas that have been offered as an expression of God's Will. While God's Will might support some points of some agendas some of the time, it is unlikely that God's Will supports all points of even any one agenda. Being really really really really sure deep in your heart of hearts that God is on your side and you are doing God's Will is not a valid argument, and you are likely wrong.

Second, people misuse God's Will to support their own agendas. In assessing agendas, why not leave God's Will out of the picture entirely, and focus only on the agenda? Rather than argue whether or not it is God's Will that gay people can marry or not, why not just leave out God's Will and focus on the issue? In a perfectly rational world where issues could be decided entirely on the merits, we could do that. The world is not like that. The world is too uncertain, indeterminate, unclear, and confusing. People have to fall back on arbitrary but necessary choices. People have to take shots in the dark and then chase the prey as if they really hit the prey. People have to fall back on religion. When people fall back on religion, they leave the door open to using texts and using God's Will to promote agendas. We just have to live with this problem too and have to cope with it when it comes up.

When facing a question of God's Will, it is still a good idea to look at the agenda first. What do people on any side of an agenda stand to gain or lose, in terms of wealth, power, sex, family, society, satisfaction, or justification? Who benefits? Who loses? Are people loud about an issue? Does the agenda point to motives? Are motives godlike or anti-godlike? Even if the actual point seems to have a basis in a holy text, such as opposition to gay marriage, is the overall direction not godlike?

Even though people use bad allusions to God's Will to support an agenda, and even though the agenda might come out of bad motives, their bad motives do not necessarily make the goals bad. Even though people use good allusions to God's Will to support an agenda, and even though the agenda comes out of good motives, their use do not necessarily make the goals good. We still have to decide on the basis of merits, with some small mixture of our own feeling for God's Will. People on both sides of the abortion issue argue out of bad faith, and misquote God's Will, but that does not mean both sides must be wrong, and we can ignore the issue. We have to decide the issue, and we have to decide on the best criteria, including, for some people, reference to a holy text to discern God's Will. People on both sides of gay marriage and immigration problems argue in bad faith, and misuse the Bible to support bad faith. They also argue in good faith and correctly use the Bible to support their ideas. Neither strategy means there are no real issues and we do not have to decide. We have to decide based on the best criteria, including,

for some people, reference to a holy text. We should reduce references to holy texts and to God's Will to the least possible. We should rely on morality, greater social good, social justice, and economic reality, as much as possible. In modern pluralistic democracies, sometimes we do manage to achieve this.

Small and Big.

The paradox of acting well whether we meet God or not is like another contradictory feeling that, I hope, we all get many times in life and that changes us: (1) we are only a small part of something much bigger (2) but we count anyway, we are important anyway, and all life is important anyway. We know "the world goes on within us and without us" (George Harrison). We know the world would go on if we vanished. Even if we do something big such as think up Relativity, still we know someone else would have done it if we had not done it. At the same time, we all know we matter anyway even if all we ever do is make a kid breakfast, kiss a spouse, climb out of our deep dark depression, or help someone down in his-her luck. The lilies and the sparrows matter even if all they ever do is drink rain and peck seeds. We can take satisfaction in our deeds yet we cannot think too much of ourselves. I cannot explain this apparent-but-not-real contradiction any better than I can explain doing well whether you meet God or not. It is one of the deepest and most important insights about life. It goes along with the idea that God made everything and cares about everything he made.

It Doesn't Matter if It Matters.

Sometimes we feel it doesn't matter if it matters. It doesn't matter if we are important to God or not. We are as we are, and we have to do what we do whether it matters or not. "I know what I have to do and I will do it whether it matters in some cosmic scheme or not". In a good light, this idea leads to the response of "Stop thinking so much. Just do. Just be." In a good light, this is the same as doing the right things for the right reasons and doing the right think because it is the right thing not because you want to "get in good with God" when you die. This is the same feeling as the combination of we are not very important but still God cares. Maybe it is a purer way of having the same feeling, and maybe it is just a quicker way of having the same feeling. If this is how you get the idea, then get it this way. This way of getting the idea is important in Taoism and Zen.

Feeling "it doesn't matter if it matters" is not the same as "it doesn't matter at all". If you say it does not matter all then you have made up your mind about whether it matters, and it doesn't. Feeling "it doesn't matter if it matters" is not the same as "I have to do whatever I do even if that is bad". It is not the same as "I have to do whatever I do whether it is good or bad or neither". It is not an excuse for being selfish or indulgently hypocritically coercively "selfless". It is not an excuse for acting bad. Even if it doesn't matter if it matters, you still have to be decent. This is another way the feeling of big and small connects with the idea that we still have to be good people whether we face God or not. If you understand all this, fine. If not, then don't worry about it.

Great Compassion; Joy and Melancholy.

All religions, yes, even Islam, teach people to feel great compassion for all other people, even people not in the same religion. Thinkers in all the religions have extended the feeling to animals and nature, even to inanimate nature such as the Earth, stars, and galaxies. It is not just that we are a part of it all, they

are like us, and we are like them; but we should feel love toward them even if we are not alike and not all in the same boat.

Many individuals actually do feel this feeling whether they have heard the teaching or not. This feeling is much like the feeling of the great and small. I think, when people have one of the feelings, they have both the feelings, and do not distinguish them.

I hope everyone individually has this feeling and that it changes him-her. If ever you have this feeling directly you can never again be quite so callous as before, and you might even become a loving person.

Because of its role in all major religions, and the fact that people have the feeling personally, this feeling shows up again in later chapters, especially on Buddhism and Hinduism.

Usually this feeling is a source of great joy but it is also a source of some melancholy. When I have this feeling, it also makes clearer to me how much humans waste their lives and what damage we are doing to nature, the planet, other people, and our selves. When we see the goodness clearer, we also see the badness. Even if seeing the goodness more clearly does not make us see the badness more clearly too, we just always get a slight feeling of sadness that goes along with the joy of compassion. I am not fully why this is so, but it is so, and, if it happens to you, don't worry about it. This companion feeling of a little sadness also plays a role in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Evolved Limits on Big Feelings.

While many of us have the feelings of the "big and small", compassion, the joy of compassion, and the sadness of compassion, few of us can live in those feelings for long. The feelings fade and then we get back to normal life. Usually our lives are somewhat enriched by the feelings but our lives are not usually dramatically altered. For the few people whose lives are dramatically altered, I don't advise dwelling on why you differ, and I advise taking the following comments with a grain of salt.

People who lived long and deeply in feelings of "big and small", great compassion, joy at compassion, or sadness at great compassion, would not have done as well in our evolutionary past as people who lived normal lives in which these feelings did not play a big role. I leave it to you to think why people who lived in these feelings would not do as well. It would not be a disadvantage, and it might be an advantage, to have these feelings once in a while for a short time, or to have these feelings mildly, but not to have them strongly for long periods. So, natural selection would have made sure that, if we had these feelings, we did not dwell in them. If we had these feelings, we would take from them what was likely to help us succeed in our daily lives, such as greater love for family and near community, then let them diminish while we went on with our daily lives. That is where most of us stand.

Given that is the capacity for most of us, it does not mean we should ignore or despise these feelings. We can still cultivate them and take what good we can from them. We should not fear them. That is a pretty good bargain.

I believe natural selection not only placed limits to these feelings but it gave us the propensity for these feelings in the first place. Natural selection both gave us the feelings and made sure that we did not live

in them, for reasons mentioned above. I think natural selection led us to have these feelings in a limited way because these feelings lead us to get along better with our family, friends, and community, and that getting along was an important part of success in our evolutionary past. But I have little evidence for my view, and so I do not pursue it here.

This use of the logic of evolution is an example of how it can help us to understand our selves and how we work, both the positive upwelling and the negative circumscription. It is fun and useful to practice applying it to diverse arenas including religion and morality.

PART 3: Life is Real, and Other Linked Topics

This part of the chapter introduces some ideas that show up again in later chapters. It is useful to have them in the back of your mind as you read on.

Life is Real; This Life is the Only Real Life.

This life is real, not any other life. To live this life is what it means to live a real life. To live this life right here right now is what it means to live a real life. This life is real because it is real right now, not because it is embedded in anything else, such as a series of rebirths, church supervision, giant divine forgiveness, many worlds, or a big game. This life is real because this is the life you have to talk to God about after you die. What you do in this life is what counts, not what you wish you did do or didn't do, or what you might do in another life if God gives you another chance. If you can't get it right in this life, likely you can't get it right in any other life. If you do get it right in this life, right now right here, then you have done all you can do ever anywhere, and you stand a good chance of being able to get it right ever anywhere. To live in any other imagined life, even the life of endless rebirths or the life of God at play, is not to live in this real life and so not to live a real life.

That sounds too serious. The seriousness of life does not mean life is a grind or you have to worry more. It means you can worry less. Just because life is real we should let ourselves play a lot. Life is not simply a big game but it can be like a game if we don't let that metaphor mislead us.

"Right here right now this moment" does not mean you to live frivolously in the moment like a silly "free spirit" or not to plan. Planning for the future is part of living this life right here right now for a normal human. These are really two separate questions. The important issue is your whole one life that you live now before seeing God and all the moments in it when you have to decide what to do, when you have to decide right and wrong.

Success, Failure, and Real Risk.

If we can succeed, then we can also fail. If we could not fail, then we could not succeed. Failure is just as real as success. I do not know why this world has to have failure. I only know as an empirical fact that it does have failure.

Success is worth the risk of failure. Most people succeed if they try. You might not succeed in worldly ways; you might not understand why there is evil; you might not be able to defeat all evil or even a little part of evil; but you can succeed in terms that make sense to you and God.

Just because there is a chance of failure does not mean we should fear trying. We fail just as much if we don't try as if we actually fail. God can forgive an honest failure, even an honest spiritual failure, if we try. "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" and "You cannot win if you do not play" are trite but true.

Success, Failure, and the Spice of Life.

In a classic Twilight Zone episode, a cheap hoodlum dies in a shootout and goes to his just reward in the afterlife. There he meets what seems to be an angel, played by Sebastian Cabot. The angel gives the bad man everything he wants: booze, women, and success in billiards, gambling, and crimes such as robbing banks. The bad man can't lose. At first, the hoodlum thinks he is in heaven, and can't figure out what he did to deserve it. One day the bad man gets screaming angry. He is bored beyond limit. He knows he will win every hand, seduce every woman, and walk away from a shootout unhurt. He wants real action, real danger, to take a real risk. If this is what heaven is like, and he can't have any real risk, then the bad man wants to go to the "other place". Sebastian Cabot changes his oily demeanor, laughs like a demon, and retorts, "You can't go anywhere else. What makes you think this is heaven? This is the other place." Hell is unending boredom. Unending boredom comes from life without real risk. Many modern people know this.

In one "Star Trek TNG" movie: A filament ("The Nexus") is moving through space. Inside this filament, the world is just as you wish. All the people, animals, and places you ever longed for are there. You succeed at everything. You do not age. You feel fulfilled. You are "wrapped in joy" just as in joyous systems of many lives in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Captain Kirk was captured by the filament. Decades have passed but, to him, the years seem like days. In the middle of a mission, Captain Picard also gets captured in the filament. Like the man from the Twilight Zone episode, Kirk is bored but doesn't feel it yet. Every time Kirk jumps his horse, he knows he will make it. Every time he needs somebody, that person will be there. His long dead dog even comes back to life. This is not real life, real living. Kirk wants real risk and real danger. Picard talks Kirk into leaving the filament together and helping Picard. As a result of helping on the mission, Kirk dies. Kirk knew he was taking that risk but real life was worth the risk of real death.

In real fairy tales, not sanitized versions, people are really hurt and really killed. That was how children learned lessons about real life then. As in fairy tales, in "Harry Potter", good people really get maimed without being restored "good as new", and good people really die without coming back: the parents of Neville Longbottom, Sirius Black, the Weasley twins, and even the great Dumbledore. Some bad people even decide to do a little good: Draco Malfoy and his mother.

In real life, not literature, people die when they should live, and live when they should die. Soldiers, police officers, and fire fighters, all give their lives to help us. Soldiers give lives, brains, and limbs so we can be free. Parents die in car accidents taking their kids to school. Aid workers get kidnapped by bandits from among the people they are truly helping.

The possibility of failure makes life exciting. We likely need the possibility of real failure to make success worthwhile, to make people try for success, and to make life real. I don't know if this is why God allowed the possibility of failure into the world.

The fact that failure helps make life worthwhile does not mean we can take success for granted. Real failure is real failure. Sometimes you don't "succeed at last". It is not the case that God allows us to fail over and over again until we finally succeed. It is not the case that there are no truly bad people and that everybody is saved in the long run. The fact that failure is real does not mean we should not "try and try". It means trying is really worthwhile.

If you do not succeed by normal worldly standards, if you fail by normal worldly standards, but still feel the truth of Jesus' message, and feel you have succeeded inside, have you really succeeded after all? I think you have. I don't think this attitude is merely a consolation for losers. Not everybody agrees with me. This idea does not mean you don't have to try or that the Kingdom of Heaven is merely an attitude.

The idea that real life entails real risk does not mean you can find real life by putting yourself at risk or by putting yourself in harm's way. Usually, life does that to us without us trying. You can wake yourself up a bit by traveling, going to unusual places, meeting unusual people, and doing unusual things such as bungee jumping. Movies and TV extol this approach to life. But you don't have to do this to feel alive, to be a useful person, and to succeed.

Real failure is not just getting physically hurt or dying. Real failure can also mean getting trapped in bad attitudes such as bitterness or in addiction. Real failure is failure of the soul or the spirit. This failure is far worse than dying physically. For comments on this kind of real failure, see later chapters.

An adept study of real risk and the spice of life is the movie "The Game" starring Michael Douglas and directed by David Fincher. Michael Douglas plays a jaded selfish man who has to get really shaken up to appreciate life.

This movie also shows what it might mean that God has to fool himself (fall asleep) so as to have fun, and that humans are part of the way God fools himself; see below. According to that way of seeing God and us, even if we are not in real jeopardy, we have to fool ourselves into thinking we are in real jeopardy so that we can fully appreciate life. I do not think we merely fool ourselves so that we can get the full value of life; I think we really do take a real risk.

Order, Disorder, Creativity, Good, Bad, and Greater Good.

In literature, movies, and TV, the bad guys want to conquer the world, not just so it is theirs and they can impose their will, but so they can establish order in chaos. They justify what they do by saying they do good in the end through imposing order and any badness that happens along the way does not matter. The fact that this stance is only an excuse is too obvious to stress. Examples appear by the hundreds in TV and the movies, and Dr. Evil, in the "Austin Powers" movies, is a funny parody. God made order out of chaos by defeating chaos when he created the world, as told in Genesis. That does not mean God is a bad guy with a great excuse or bad guys really are like God.

Contrary to conventional pop culture wisdom about only rebels being good guys, most order is good, and we could not live without out order. Our bodies order themselves. Too little order is bad. When parts of the body stop talking to each other and ordering each other, we die, as in old age. Yet too much order, or the wrong kind of order, also is bad, as when bad guys want to take over the world, a rigid teacher stifles creativity, or a bad official abuses the law.

A better order sometimes develops out of disorder, as when life evolves or when a smart person creates a fun game or a smart phone. With too much order, we could not have advances in beauty, interest, and good order. Sometimes a little disorder is the friend of creativity while a lot of order is its enemy. A little disorder sometimes is the friend of even greater better order while a lot of order now is the enemy of even better order later.

We cannot know when an even greater better order will develop out of a little disorder, so Americans tend to tolerate disorder on the chance that something good will arise. At the same time, we should not make the mistake that disorder automatically leads to better greater order; and the more disorder now the better greater the order later. Most disorder is simply bad disorder. Disorder enables selfishness. I have lived where disorder and selfishness prevail, and they are simply bad.

There is no formula to sort out relations between order, disorder, creativity, good, bad, and even better order and more goodness. You have to pick your tolerable levels of order or disorder, and then take your chances. That resolution might be the meaning of God conquering chaos to instill the right amount of the right kind of order.

Since about 1960, Americans decided always to err on the side of disorder, both because it seems to go along with political freedom and from the dogma that disorder always leads to creativity and benefit and only disorder does so. Disorder has become an American pop culture value. We verge on worshipping disorder as creativity and the only source of creativity; see the chapter on Romanticism. Even the Tea Party was an adventure in creative disorder. The 2016 Trump campaign was a huge worship service to this belief in disorder.

Often Americans are correct to prefer a little disorder to too much order. Yet, too often now, especially since the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of drug culture, gangs, increasing instability in large markets, right wing backlash, ethnic politics, and political demagogues, Americans have been wrong. We don't have the right kind of order and the right amount of the right kind of order; and no level or kind of disorder seems to bring it. There is no consensus as to what kinds of order or disorder, and how much, are the right kinds in the right amounts.

I pick up the theme of order and goodness several times in this book, particular in the next chapter, Issues 2, and in the chapter on common themes in many religions.

Trade-Offs and Finitude.

The world is finite. Paths are finite. We are finite. You can't have it all. So, the world is made of trade-offs. To achieve deep insight, we have to give up some rewards of the ordinary world and we have to

suffer some hardship too. In a famous passage, Jesus told a young man who showed great promise to give away all his possession first, but the young man could not do it. Good Buddhist monks own almost nothing. The head of the Norse god, Odin, had to lose an eye to gain wisdom.

On a lesser scale than giving up worldly success, we have to choose within the world as well. Usually you can't be a great investment banker and a world-class golfer as well. Usually you can't be the best musician in the world and the best race car driver too.

What we give up is always a lot bigger than what we actually take up. This does not mean we lose more than we gain because, if we didn't focus on one thing, we wouldn't get anything at all. We can't have the whole world, so we don't really give up the whole world when we take up one particular thing that gives us some satisfaction. We give up a few other particular things. The world does have a lot to offer, a lot of joy, and it can seem a waste to give up so much just so we can have the joy in a little part. "So many women, so little time"; or, "So many men, so little time". If we could have many lives, then we could enjoy it all; but I don't believe we do. I don't know if God can have all the joy, either directly or by experiencing it through us as individuals. I don't know why the world is like this.

We should focus on the fact that there is so much possible joy for everybody, and that we can get a big chunk of joy by giving up trying to have it all. We should not focus on the fact that we can't have all of it. Imagine a chocolate cake the size of Dallas Cowboy's stadium. We could only eat a big piece of it. We could not eat it all. We should be happy that other people can eat other pieces of it. We should be happy for what we do get, not what we don't get. If we tried to eat the whole thing, we'd get sick.

Limited, Sticky, Deceptive, and Good.

Most activities are "sticky". Once you begin, even if you did not intend to commit, you get "sucked in". Once you have been "tainted" by an activity, it is hard to ever get free of what the activity has done to you. Once you start an online video game, it is hard to stop, and you are forever marked even if later you quit. Once you start following American football or European soccer ("football"), it is hard to stop, and forever you show the marks of a fan. Once you start wearing make-up, you have to, and your face never looks the same without it again. Once you start playing golf, you start arranging your life around it. Once you start that ridiculous night-time soap opera, you just have to know what happens next. Once you learn the joys of volunteering, you know it is part of you.

You become what you do, what you stick to. Once you start acting like an adult, you are. Once you start selling insurance, you become a salesperson. Once you help people, you are never the same.

Relationships are sticky. Children are sticky. They forever change us. They make us, and make us who we are. Once you begin teaching, farming, or selling stocks, that is what you do. The first martial art that a person learns tends to be the one he-she sticks with whether the best or not.

Stickiness is a big part of what makes the world risky and valuable at the same time. We take a risk when we start getting interested in something. It could be not worth the time, it could be bad itself, it could be bad for us even if it is good for somebody else. On the other hand, it could be very good for us. We have to do something, so we might as well try that.

Stickiness is not necessarily bad. Stickiness leads us to the particular activities that together help make the feeling that life is good. Stickiness gives us experiences that we use to assess life. The Hindu word “yoga” is cognate with English “yoke”. Contrary to modern yoga fads, early Hindus saw yoga as a limiting discipline that sucked you in, committed you, and channeled you. Channeling was worthwhile because yoga was good in itself and yoga could open a road to higher goals. The Buddha had to go through austerities first to get to Enlightenment. For people not suited to the monk’s life, going to work, acting adult, getting married, and raising a family, all are just fine.

Getting stuck in an activity can be bad if you want to reach higher goals and the activity blocks you from seeking them. The activity in itself does not have to be bad; it only has to block you from better. The better the activity-in-itself, the stickier it is, the more readily it sucks you in, and the more it blocks you from something better. That’s what family often does. The Buddha had to give up family, wealth, power, security, and success as an ascetic so as to awaken. I have seen people get stuck in forms of yoga and spiritual activities that were good enough in themselves but a trap when done wrongly. I have seen people stuck in dogmatic religion. I do not have general advice for how to get out of an activity once you are stuck in it and you know you want out. I do not know if we can still feel the satisfaction of life-as-a-whole if we have been stuck in activities and know we have been stuck.

Many satisfactions of a normal life can serve as blocks. In the novel “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis, Jesus had to give up many other things. We tend to think the most tempting thing that Jesus gave up was great worldly power. In fact, it was a successful family life with a large family, the kind of success that our evolutionary history leads us to seek.

Higher Level Reflexive Stickiness.

Eventually, avoiding-getting-stuck-to-any-particular-activity-while-seeking-higher-goals itself becomes an activity to which you get stuck, a trap. Seeking the highest goal is an activity in which you can get stuck. Enlightenment itself can be a trap. This is one point of Bruce Lee’s movie “The Iron Flute” (Bruce Lee is visible in the credits only). Eventually you almost have to accept sticking to some particular thing so you don’t get stuck on not getting stuck. Sometimes you have to pick something to get stuck in so that you don’t get stuck in something worse, or don’t get stuck at all. That is why yoga is alright.

Deception, especially self-deception, can make the world stickier but stickiness does not depend on any deception. For example, we can get stuck in business without necessarily being deceived about what it can do for us. Once people are in a path, often they deceive themselves about its importance. In those cases, deception might not cause the original stickiness but it adds considerably to the stickiness that follows. Almost always, we must un-deceive ourselves before we can un-stick ourselves, even if later we re-stick ourselves in a better way. It is very hard to un-deceive yourself and un-stick yourself.

Way of Life.

The particular activities that are most enjoyable often cannot be isolated from a way of living. They are big activities even when they don’t start out as big activities. They become ways of life, or parts of ways of life. People turn knitting into a way of life. Being a Mets fan or Cowboys fan is a way of life. People

turn being a fan of their college sports teams into a way of life. You cannot just do a little business; you become a business person, as many young business people learn to their surprise. You cannot just do a little law, you become a lawyer. When I first went to graduate school, my advisor told me soon I could not imagine doing anything but anthropology and could not imagine being anything but an anthropologist. He was wrong in my case, but, as I looked at people around me, I saw what he meant. Being a gangster is not just beating up a few people, or knocking off a liquor store every week, it is a way of life; that is part of the message in the movies “Goodfellas” and “Casino”. Being a “gang banger” is not just getting tattoos and bullying women, it is a way of life. People in particular criminal paths call them “the life”, in particular prostitutes call prostitution “the life”.

Just as it makes sense to weigh particular activities against other particular activities to wonder if one is best for us, being an actor rather than a race car driver, it makes sense to weigh ways of life to see which might be best for us. This leads people in middle age to wonder about the path not taken, the boy friend or girl friend not married, the school not gone to, the hitch in the military avoided. It is not as easy to compare ways of life as to compare particular activities. It is harder to compare the way of life of a golfer, lawyer, business person, and house person than to compare golf, bowling, fishing, and cooking. This comparison between ways of life is not important in this book, except between religious stances, so I don't go into it here except to say that it is reasonable to wonder. I get at it later. I doubt that we all get the very best way of life that we might have had but I doubt that most of us do much worse in one way than another way, unless we fall into crime, zealotry, or the pursuit of power.

Ways of life are sticky, and, once in them, hard to get out. We cling to them, and rationalize them and our participation in them. People go to the same church all their lives and think that is the best church in the world. Business people can rarely do anything else as a way of life, which channeling is not necessarily bad. Old academics haunt libraries. From the “Godfather” movie series: “Every time I try to get out, it keeps sucking me back in”. This is why parents are so worried about what their children will fall into, and so careful to monitor activities so that children don't fall in with a bad crowd and fall into a bad way of life. Zealotry, especially religious-based zealotry, is one of the worst.

The stickiness of a way of life, and its power over us, is a theme in modern art. A poignant movie about this issue is “Donnie Brasco” in which an undercover police officer becomes one of the bad guys, and loses his family as a result; it featured outstanding performances by Johnny Depp and Al Pacino; and it set the mold for many imitation movies and TV shows. Using memory to get at it, Philip K. Dick often explores this issue, and you can see it in all the movies made based on his works, such as “Total Recall” and “Blade Runner”. During the Cold War, as young Americans, we heard stories about Russian agents who came to America, lived here a long time, and then came over to our side because our way of life was so good and they had grown used to being Americans. The TV show “The Americans” uses the Cold War as its setting. It is not based on this issue alone but brings it up sometimes. In the original Star Trek TV series, sometimes aliens would take human bodies and live among us, often as spies for an invasion. But taking our bodies and living as we do turned them into us, they got to like being human, and got to like other humans, so the invasion never took place. My favorite episode was a case when the aliens were able to move so fast that we could not see them unless they wanted us to see them but they did emit a slight buzz. In the remake of the movie “The Day the Earth Stood Still”, starring Keanu Reeves as Klatoo, a previous alien spy, an old Chinese man, at first hated being sent here in a human body, but then got to love life here and love humans. In the Old Testament (Tanakh), angels were sent to watch us but

they fell in love with our way of life and especially our women. That happens to space aliens too. Some movies explore what happens when this process breaks down, and taking our bodies does not lead to taking our way of life, as in “Species”.

During the real Cold War, it is likely some American agents went to Russia as spies but became so used to being Russian that they went over. We rarely heard about them. The side to which you “go over” does not have to be better than the side that you left. A way of life into which you fall does not have to be a good one. Any way of life into which we fall, we tend to cling to and to rationalize. This is why parents are so cautious. This is why it makes sense to compare ways of life.

Life as a Whole.

Just as it is natural to wonder if the way of life of a business person is better than the way of life of a car mechanic, so it is natural to wonder if life as a whole, all life, not just any particular life, is worthwhile. There are good reasons to suspect life might not be worthwhile. I do not go into the issue here because the question comes up in bits and pieces in several places in the book, especially in the chapter on Theravada Buddhism.

We do not ask to be born. As far as I know, we do not choose life on planet Earth, some alternative life elsewhere, or an alternative to life entirely. We fall into life-as-a-whole here just as we fall into particular ways of life. Just as with any particular way of life within this life-as-a-whole, we find this life-as-a-whole sticky, cling to it, and rationalize it. We rationalize living. We hope life-as-a-whole will give us meaning just as we do with being a lawyer, business person, teacher, parent, or car mechanic.

The stickiness of life, and how we cling to it, makes it hard to assess life as a whole. We tend to assess life itself as worthwhile just as we do any activity that we stick to. Yet, if ever we are disappointed, we tend to “flip” on life and to turn our judgment as much against life, without reason, as earlier we were for it without reason. It is hard to say we should be rational about life as a whole, and judge it without falling into it or sticking to it, so I don’t go into that argument yet here.

Basically, except for a few sad souls, I think life as a whole is worthwhile. Rarely is one particular activity within life enough to make life as a whole worthwhile, such as business, teaching, or even family. Yet life as a whole is still worthwhile even if no one activity makes it so. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Life as a whole is worthwhile even if we make a lot of mistakes – I have made big ones.

As we will see later, evolution (natural selection) very likely led us to stick to activities, to fall into ways of life and stick to them, stick to life, and think of life as very good. People are more successful when they believe in what they do and go into it fully. People are more successful at life when they believe in life. The fact that evolution led us to believe in life, ways of life, and particular activities does not itself mean that activities, ways of life, and life, are worthwhile or not, good or not, silly or not. We have to try to stand outside a little bit to assess, which is just what evolution made it hard to do. Partly that is what this book is about, so I don’t go into the issue in any more detail here.

Life is a Game.

Pseudo-sophisticated people like to say life is a game, by which they mean life is not really real in the way most of us think it is. In my view, life really isn't quite what we think of it and probably isn't as real as we think it is but that doesn't matter. What matters is facing the moral challenges in life no matter how real or unreal it is. The moral challenges are real even if life is not. What matters is getting a lot out of life and contributing to life even if life is not as real as we think it is.

People who say "life is a game" usually don't know what they are talking about. They have read a bit of pop-level non-Western theology, and parrot back a half-insight. There are useful ways to think about life as a game but people who say "life is a game" usually don't have anything that deep in mind. They think life is a "mere" game. They think they are clever because they had a minor insight, want to be recognized for their cleverness, and want to coast on it. They want an excuse not to think hard, not deal with issues, and to do what they want. The idea that life is a game should never be an excuse.

One way to look at life as a game is to think of God asleep and dreaming the world; see below.

If God created this world, then the world is not as serious as God, and not as serious as what happens to us when we face God, so, in that sense, life is a game. Even so, life is not a mere game. God made this world because he wants us to act certain ways in it. Enjoying life, contributing to life, moral action and moral growth are important even if they are played out on a stage less real than God. They are important to God and that makes them as real as they can be. The lessons of sports, of being in the theater, or of being in business, are as real as the game, the current play, or the current deal.

The current popular way of saying "life is a game" is to say that this world is a giant computer simulation run by amazing smart aliens or that life is like a computer game. Even if this is true, what matters are the important goals-and-lessons within the game: enjoying life, contributing to life, moral action, and moral growth. Even if smart aliens did not intend to set up a stage in which we face moral challenges, that is what they did, and that is what we now have a chance to respond to. When we set up games for our children, even if we did not intend, what matters is less the game than what the children learn from the game. That is the real game they are playing even when the apparent game they are playing is dodge ball or hide-and-seek. Saying that we are in a great computer simulation or a great computer game does not get us out of facing issues, thinking, acting well, enjoying life, contributing to life, moral choice, and moral growth.

Sometimes it helps to approach life as if it were a game. If we are always deadly serious, and we see only heaven and hell with nothing between, then we freeze up, screw up, suffer, and make other people suffer too. It is easier to do the right thing if we don't think that the fate of the universe depends on our particular drama. It is easier to follow Jesus if we forget about hell whether there is hell or not. How to draw the line and use the right "game approach" is a subject in itself for later. The movie "The Game" by David Fincher does not make such silly pop psychology mistakes, and provides good insights.

Judgment, Dogma, No Dogma, and Necessary Principles.

The dilemma in this section appears several places in the book. The dilemma is puzzling like doing well for its own sake but also worrying about meeting God. Don't dwell in the dilemma so much that you go

crazy. When this dilemma shows up in particular places in the book, I advise what to do with the dilemma in its particular form there.

On the one hand, even when mostly true, all ideologies also are at least partly false. No matter how well-intended, and no matter how well an ideology might work in a certain scope, all ideologies, when pushed, mislead us, open the door to abuse and manipulation, open the door to unfairness, lead to badness, and become false. Even simple moral rules can be confusing. We need more than one moral rule, and that means rules have to contradict each other sometimes. Examples include American policies to grow the economy and social help programs such as food stamps, welfare, and Affirmative Action. When we use dogma instead of good judgment, we must get into trouble. On the other hand, while we might like to get rid of dogma entirely, as human beings, we need principles. Principles are dogma too. We cannot live without some dogma. You cannot fly a space ship without science and you cannot run a country without laws. You cannot run a religion on the basis of mystic feeling alone.

There is no way around this dilemma, and there is no formula to resolve it either because all formulas are dogmas. We have to find the best principles, and we have to practice judgment on the basis of the best principles. We have to be sensitive to when we can follow established guidelines and when we have to use judgment. We have to not substitute dogma for good judgment in those cases where good judgment is more important.

The idea that we should live without dogma is itself a dogma. It seems to contradict itself. The easy way out of this dilemma is to say “We should live with as little dogma as possible. We have to live with some dogma. The dogma of ‘no dogmas’ is one of the dogmas that we have to live with”. That is a valid way out, but I urge you to do more if you can. Try to live with as few preconceptions as possible but accept that you do have to live with some principles, that is, preconceptions. Practice tearing apart your preconceptions. Try to find the basic ideas that you actually live by even if you are not usually aware of them. This kind of exercise helps to clear the mind, find the best principles, and live correctly on the basis of the best principles once we find them.

The fact that we have to use judgment in addition to principles does not mean that everything is relative and principles have no meaning. The idea of judgment does not undermine principles. Another useful complementary practice is thinking about how we judge by using principles, and why we need principles to make judgments even when our judgments go beyond our principles sometimes.

Waking Up.

Every major religion agrees that ordinary life is not enough. Most people go through life as if they were in a trance or as if dreaming. They focus too much on wealth, power, material stuff, sex, family, success, winning, kicks, sensual pleasure, nation, us versus them, dogma, etc. People do not value love, morality, respect, kindness, help, usefulness, nature, and connections. People are what Buddhists call “asleep”. People need to wake up to something more important and bigger.

Religions differ in how they wake up people and in what they wake people up to. We can know stances and religions well by what they have us wake up to. Islam has people wake up to the idea that there is only one God, what Mohammad said about him is what you have to pay attention to and only what you

have to pay attention to, and God was moral. Standard Christianity has people wake up to the idea that Jesus was God, Jesus saved us through being born, dying, and being reborn, and the church is the Kingdom of God on Earth. Buddhism has us wake up to the idea that good moral action is important but that life, even a good moral life, is not ultimately worthwhile. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism have us wake up to the idea that life in a system is joyous even if any particular life is not worthwhile. You get more details in the chapters at the end of the book.

For this book, the standard for what to wake up to is Jesus' message, coupled with practicality, combined with Western values about good government, and set in the context of pluralistic democracy. I don't know how to wake up people to this. Harangue does not work.

Suddenly waking up is like "having a religious experience". People tend to follow the image of the world that they first see when they feel awake. Religious leaders urge people to "wake up", and religious leaders give people an image to have when people feel awake, as a way to guide people or to control people. When the image is accurate, this is not necessarily bad, and can be good. When the image is inaccurate, it can be very bad.

Almost always, waking up comes at a cost. It rarely falls out of the blue. You have to earn it. You have to "pay dues". Sometimes, when it comes, it feels as if it came "out of the blue" but that is only because we laid the basis through hard work. Usually waking up entails making hurtful mistakes, going through pain, and, regrettably, usually you have to hurt other people too. Meditation can help prepare for waking up but I don't think meditation alone can do the job. Pain might be needed to get started but pain alone cannot wake us up; we cannot make ourselves wake up by making ourselves hurt more; we cannot wake up by causing pain to anybody or to the world; all version of this idea are wrong.

Many people have short clear periods of awakening. Some people have long clear periods of awakening. Some very few people are permanently changed, and it lasts a lifetime.

Recall from the chapter on evolution that animals, including people, do not sense the world exactly as it is, and that the "misperception" actually helps in success. Recall that the behavior (minds) of animals, including people, likely is not fully integrated in one "master plan" but that action comes in modules such as flight or fight, sex, food, play, morality, and religion. Even if there is one master plan, the modules still retain much independence. Even if there is one master plan, it is unlikely the master plan is the same as idealized rationality from Western philosophy or idealized "super rationality" from Hinduism or Buddhism. Deception and self-deception are important aspects of how we strategically succeed.

When we wake up, we wake up to some particular ideologies, even if the ideologies are not preconceived and even if we were not focused on those particular ideologies before we awoke. If we do not already have an ideology to explain our waking up to ourselves, we quickly find some or make some up. Even the Buddha woke up to ideologies or made up ideologies to make sense of awakening. All ideologies are incomplete, false, contradictory, and lead to some harm, including the ideology of no ideologies. So, even after we wake up, we are not fully awake in the sense that we are free from error. Even after we wake up, we can still be imperfect, inadequate, make mistakes, and even hurt people. Even after people wake up, they can hold different and contradictory ideologies. I do not know how to reconcile this except to seek the best principles both before and after I wake up.

It is unlikely people can ever fully wake up to be clear about all motives, feelings, thoughts, relations, and the reality of everything in the universe. It is unlikely people can achieve the total clarity that seems implied in some strains of Platonism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do not require this kind of clarity in waking up. Neither does my idea of waking up. We do not have to fully wake up to succeed as small but important sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. In fact, the search for total waking up is probably another version of being asleep, and is likely to impede a more reachable, more real, and better, mostly-waking-up of the kind that I suggest.

Waking up is like free will and purity of motive. We don't have to wake up to total clarity about everything all the time in order to wake up enough. We can wake up enough. We can stay awake for long enough. Even when we nap again, we can recall what waking up is like when we need to. We can know when we have fallen asleep again and so need to wake up again. We can know when we act well on the basis of ideas learned while awake or when we act poorly out of confusion. We can appreciate the difference between a good image of the world that we follow after we wake up versus a bad version of the world that bad people fool us with, or that we cling to ourselves, when we wake up. We can appreciate that we do need to wake up, we need to work at waking up, and we need to prepare for a good vision of the world for when we do wake up. That is enough.

Common and Particular Themes in Waking Up.

Although waking up varies according to the context (culture, religion), some themes tend to run through waking up. I think that true waking up can be only to good themes such as compassion while waking up to bad themes such as racial purity is false waking up.

Most religions insist that a person be a morally better person as part of waking up. If you don't act better, you have not woken up. Most morality includes what we think of as stereotypically good morality such as the Golden Rule but it can also include particular styles of morality that vary between flavors of waking up and that vary between flavors of religion. Mystics have their own way of waking up that is similar among mystics but not among people in their religion who are not mystics. Zealots have ways of waking up that are similar among zealots in different religions and political views but are different than the other people in their religion or political party.

Each group thinks its particular waking up is the only real waking up, and no other group can possibly have a true waking up even if many of the details are similar. Most religions accept that other religions can wake up to good morality and to a sense of what they consider God, Tao, or the Dharma; but they also insist that other view of God, Tao, or the Dharma is incomplete or wrong, and so the other waking up is not fully real.

In my view, good waking up is having a clear sense of morality, risk, finitude, stickiness, deception, ways of life, how we get channeled, success, failure, order, disorder, creativity, and contradiction. It is sensing the bigness of the world, the smallness of yourself, and seeing that you and other small things matter even though you are small. It is sensing the limitations of ideology and yet the need for ideology. I think it is important to wake up to God or to something like God, but I am not sure how much God insists on

that. I would like people to wake up to the message of Jesus, combined with practicality and Western ideas about citizenship and good government, but I can hardly insist on that.

You can be a good person, and do good things, without ever having a big “wake up” experience. If you keep your basic good principles in mind, no matter how you came to them, then you are doing well.

Having a sense of the “bigger than me”, feeling the big and small, feeling great compassion, feeling the joy of compassion, and feeling the sorry of compassion, are common experiences in waking up in major religions. Usually, though, then those feelings are tied to other feelings and dogmas in the religion, as when Christians tie them to Christ’s passion or Hindus tie them to the playfulness of Krishna or the grim determination of Siva.

It would be helpful if people could learn to separate out what might be common to all forms of waking up, what might be common to some big forms of waking up such as in feeling great compassion by the waking up of mystics and zealots, and what might be shaped by particular traditions such as belonging to the Republican Party or to Theravada Buddhism. For most people, it is not possible to untangle this in themselves or in other people. It is fun to think about. Later I do some untangling for particular traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

We Sleep and Dream.

Before we can wake up we have to be asleep. Sleeping is mistaking bad values, such as selfishness or zealous crusading, for real values, such as compassion. We fall asleep when we are lulled by the press of worldly matters such as business, family, politics, and art; and when we fall into a system that eats the world (see next chapter). We are born partially asleep and with the propensity to fall into deeper sleep. We are born that way because we evolved to be that way because sleeping people succeed better at the ordinary world than do fully awake people. The idea of being spiritually asleep recurs all through the book. The idea fits naturally with systems of many lives, that is, with rebirth and karma.

The idea that we are asleep in this world implies that this world is a dream and implies that this world is not really real. It implies the world is a mere game. A similar but different way to look at it is: This world is really real but our attitude toward it is like sleepers. We simply have the wrong values. When we wake up, the world does not change but our approach to the world changes. Sometimes we see the world so differently that it is like another world altogether but that is due to a change in us rather than in the world. Religious thinkers have both ideas about being asleep and often mix the two ideas together. In later parts of the book where I take up the idea of sleeping and waking, I do not always untangle the two ways.

The idea that we are asleep implies that the world is a mere game, and negates the idea that this world is really real and important. The idea that we are asleep does not have to imply this but it usually does, and that is how I take it mostly here.

God Sleeps and Dreams.

The idea of falling asleep can apply to God. If God knows everything, can foresee the future, and can do anything, then the world can’t be much fun for God for very long. The world would be more fun for much

longer if God could forget he was God for a while and simply play or dream. God would have more fun if he could forget himself as God and fall asleep for a while.

That people are asleep is only an aspect of God sleeping. The world carries on because we are asleep, and the carrying on amuses God in his dreaming. The fact that sleeping (deluded) people mimic the playful dreaming sleep of God does not excuse bad acts by people who have bad values.

The falling asleep of individuals and of God differs in that only God can fully completely put himself to sleep. Only God can make himself fall fully asleep. People are born asleep, or fall asleep, because they are part of the sleeping world that God dreams. People do not have the same power as God over the mind. Although beings other than God cannot make themselves fully forget, that does not mean we are fully awake. Mostly we are ignorant and so mostly we remain asleep. It is not clear if God is the only being who can be fully awake.

It is not clear what it means for God that a few individual people wake up sometimes. Probably it means that God partially wakes up. Because so many other people are still asleep, most of God can stay asleep too and so continue to dream and have fun. God does not need to fully wake up. God can enjoy the best of both worlds. It is not clear what happens to God if everybody wakes up. Probably God fully wakes up, has a good laugh, and then goes back to sleep again to dream another world with other physical laws, other experiences, and other people.

The idea that God is asleep strengthens the idea that the world is a mere game. Even if the world seems serious to use while we are asleep, when we wake up, it seems like a mere game. This is a reason why I do not like the idea of God as dreamer of the world. The world could be serious even if it is a game and even if God dreams it, but most people who think about God dreaming the world and think the world is a game don't take it that way.

If you get all these fanciful ideas, then you are closer to awake than the average person but that does not mean you are fully awake. The fact that you might awaken a little or a lot does not say anything about how awake or asleep God is overall. A hit movie based on the possibility of being asleep so as to have fun is "Total Recall" starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. A clever fun use of the idea of being asleep so as to get things done is the movie "Push" starring Dakota Fanning. The movie sequence "The Matrix" plays with the idea of levels of reality and of one level seeming like sleeping to another or one level seeming like a dream to another.

"What are They For?"

We think we understand what we are for and what the people like us are for but we have trouble seeing what some other people are for, especially if they are not like us. In college, I met people who disdained "the masses" and who could not see why their world is burdened with people who cannot understand the finer things in life. People who like sports look down on geeks who like computers or art; women wonder what men are for. It doesn't just work one way. The masses disdain the elites; and artists disdain the intellectuals. We all make lawyer jokes. The most acute form of the problem is with bad people. What are bad people and indecent people for?

Partly this is a non-issue. There is no reason why we need to explain what other people are for as long as other people are not bad. We don't feel a need to explain what robins and comets are for. Think of most other people as like robins and comets. As for bad people, I don't have a good explanation. See the later chapter on the problem of evil.

Being a wasted person, or a bad person, but still contributing in some ways to the world, does not make up for being wasted and for making other people sad.

The Best Me I Can Be.

Not all of us fit religious stereotypes about what a good person is. We need a variety of people to make the world interesting. For more on this issue, see the chapter on "codes" and see Parts 4 and 5 below.

Learning What to Do.

We are born with a modest sense of good, bad, right, and wrong but that is not enough. We need to learn deep feeling for situations, for other people, and what to do. For us to really learn that, we need to get kicked around, usually hard. Yet if we get kicked around hard, we might lose more than we gain. We might turn bad or bitter. We might fail or get lost. These kinds of losses are devastating. How we think about this problem shapes our overall approach to life. I return to this issue in later chapters.

Hardship and Contrary Me.

Hardship is supposed to make people bitter first, then really sweet for ever afterwards. It is supposed to make us value all life and forgive other people readily. This might be what happened to Roy Blatty in the movie "Blade Runner". It did have that effect on me, but not entirely. It made me appreciate all life more. It made me want to help the people who suffered through little fault of their own and it made me want to make up for damage. It did not make me into a universal bleeding heart.

Dealing with hardship also made me more critical. I saw that many people had streaks of badness and selfishness, and were willing to hurt others. Not all people who are lost or broken are innocent victims or heroes who sacrificed for us. I saw clever users and sociopaths. I learned to abhor self-made victims and enablers. I finally saw careerist academics and bureaucrats that use appeals to the public good to get money, reputation, and power. I felt creepy revulsion for people that use PC fear of racism to hide their own indecency and inability, blackmail people of other races, manipulate the system, hurt their own race, and hurt all race relations. I saw when people brought hardship on themselves through selfishness, short sight, and denial of reality. The economic depression in America of 2007, in particular the housing crisis, came from greed by rich people; amazing deliberate ineptness by politicians; and greed by regular old Joe-and-Jane house buyers who thought they deserved much more than they could afford, could get rich on the crest of a craze, and expected the state to bail them out if it went wrong. I want not to help any of these people. I resent that they can use the state to force me to help them. These people should suffer the pain of their own actions. That is part of the big real risk of life. If I were one of these people, I would not want other people to help me because then I would not get better. Not helping people who should not get help is part of the Golden Rule too. We should keep such people from hurting others. We can't help real victims in pain unless we can keep our resources in reserve for the people who need them.

Many Lives.

The issue of many lives pops up often in this book. “Many lives” can mean going from body to body, being reborn in different bodies. It can mean that individual humans are not really distinct but are really parts of a supreme spirit and so are linked, “we are all one”. Often it means a combination of all these elements. Usually it is part of a strong system that eats the world. It doesn’t matter in this book exactly what it means. I do not believe in many lives, and I argue against it. My argument with many lives is not the dominant theme of the book.

On the one hand, life is real, there is only this life, this life is real, and this life is as real as it gets. On the other hand, this life is not as real as we think; there is more than one life; all people have many lives; this life is embedded in a larger realer framework of many lives; this life might be as real as it gets for any one particular life, but because this life is embedded in a larger realer framework, this life is not as real as it gets; the bigger framework is as real as it gets.

When stated theoretically, most people just laugh it off. People are happy to accept that we don’t know all there is about life but they are less happy with the idea that this life is so less-than-real that it does not count seriously. They want this life to count even if it is embedded in something realer. They aim to do the best they can in this life, and then let future lives worry about themselves. A system of many lives plays a role in Hinduism and Buddhism.

I think this life is the only real life that counts. This life is as real as it gets. We do not participate in the supreme spirit and in each other, except in the same way that any things that interact participate in each other such as a squirrel and a pine tree.

Ennui (Boredom) and an Interesting World.

“Ennui” is a French term for deep boredom. When people are not hungry, at war, conniving to get their kids ahead, or fussing with neighbors, most people are deeply bored. I found both Thai peasants bored to craziness, and they loved to have a White person around for fun. Boredom led them to become rabid consumers. The large majority of people now are bored. The fact that evolution has no intrinsic meaning contributes to the feeling of boredom. The fact that evolution gave us a predisposition to find meaning anyway does not seem to help modern people to find meaning and to alleviate boredom.

Recall the “Twilight Zone” episode in which hell is deep boredom. In the TV series “Star Trek TNG”, the “Q” are a race of gods who collectively embody most traits of God (“Elohim”): all-knowing, able to be everywhere at all times, all-powerful, playful, naughty, mischievous, etc. The Q homeland is a dreamlike place that seems like a run-down ghost town from the American Southwestern desert. It is not a lush paradise. It is not interesting. It is like the background for a piece from the Meat Puppets, Friends of Dean Martinez, Iron and Wine, or Calexico. The Q seem bored to death. Maybe the more powerful you are, the more bored. Maybe the Q whiz around the universe meddling with others largely to entertain themselves. It seems the mighty Q envy the limited struggling always engaged inferior interested and interesting Earthlings, and need them.

Most people cannot fight boredom with their own abilities. Most people cannot find meaning without some help. Most people don't find the world intrinsically interesting, don't know how to make the world interesting, and don't know how to get ideas from other people so as to make the world interesting. They make the world interesting by comparative competition (getting ahead of the Joneses), improving their looks, chasing fads, getting intoxicated, having affairs, violence, art, sports, politics, zealotry, religious zealotry, intrigue, naughtiness, sex games, and badness. This result is not as bad as it sounds as long as bored people don't cause harm. Keeping bored people busy rooting for a sports team is more useful, and less likely to cause harm, than if bored people try to make life interesting by interfering in politics. Keeping them busy chasing money can help society as long as they do not also interfere in politics. The problem, of course, is people do try to make the world interesting by interfering – that is the end result of taking intrigue as valuable – and so do cause problems. That is another story. In the long run, it might be up to adept politicians to find ways to channel ennui so most people do good and do little harm, as in the novel "Brave New World" where people play tennis with square balls, have a lot of sex, and watch a lot of movies about bouncy young women being rescued from serial psychopaths.

Some people really do find the world interesting, such as scientists, some artists, and some politicians. Some people can make the world interesting, even for other people. I don't know anybody who can really make the world interesting for other people if the other people did not already find the world interesting somewhat. Mostly, I find the world fascinating. I don't know how to make the world more interesting for other people; I have tried and failed.

People who find the world a little interesting tend to look down on other people who have given up on finding interest. People who find the world a little interesting tend to look down on other people who do not find the world interesting in the same way. Kids look down on parents, and college literature majors look down on business majors. People who find the world only a little interesting usually end up in middle age among the lost bored people that they formerly looked down on.

I don't mind if people fight boredom with some games, alcohol, drugs, and even badness. I have used those pastimes myself, and I am not too much the worse. I mind when people do that a lot, and annoy other people. I mind when people romanticize badness, bad boys, bad girls, rebel lefties, rebel righties, and the underbelly. I mind because it blinds them to the real work that needs to be done, and it adds to problems instead of solving problems. Being a "goody two shoes" can be boring but that does not mean acting well is wrong or boring. It does not mean goodness needs badness. Badness can be fun. But badness is a bad way of life and is not fun in the long run. Badness does hurt you in the long run and it does hurt other people. You really can do better. Wake up to this while you are young enough to craft a positive fun useful life. Wake up to this before you get stuck in stupid badness and refuse to get out of stupid badness because to stop would seem like a betrayal of that way. Grow up on your schedule to make your own good life.

Saying God is asleep is another way of saying that God got so bored that he deliberately fell asleep – forgot himself - so as to better create and to have more fun. I doubt God is bored, created the world to alleviate his intense boredom, and interacts with us mostly to alleviate his intense boredom. God is not the lonely Q and we are not his human "meat puppet" entertainment. God is not head of the "voyeur angels" as in the movie "The Truman Show" starring Jim Carrey; God is not Ed Harris. God might have created the world out of a sense of play rather than a feeling of deep boredom; the two are not the same.

Finding the world interesting through activities such as science, art, meditation, business, home making, the professions, sports, hobbies, etc. is not necessarily the same as falling asleep although it can be a way of falling asleep. It can help you wake up too. It is not necessarily a way of alleviating boredom although it can be that. We have to sort out for ourselves what is falling asleep, a desperate attempt to alleviate boredom, and a genuine interest in the world even if it might lead to spiritual traps such as falling asleep or escape from boredom. This task is not easy to do but it is not that hard.

Which people does God find interesting? I can't speak for God. If I were God, I would cultivate people who find the world interesting and can make it interesting, decent people, people who work hard to make the world better, scientists, and some artists. I don't know what I would do with the people who fall into boredom and who cause annoyance. It is a mistake to look at people who fall into boredom as "damned" and people who find the world interesting as "saved".

I don't know all the relations between bored, interesting, bad, and good. Good people tend to find the world interesting. Most people who find the world interesting are not deliberately bad even if they are not deliberately good. I think most people who find the world interesting are good natured. I know that not all people who find the world interesting, or make it interesting, are good people. Bad people don't usually make the world more interesting than good people do, but bored deluded people mistakenly think so.

You can't force yourself to find the world interesting just so you can look good to God. Why God set up the world so some people find it interesting while others don't, I don't know. It is one of the fascinating things about the world and people.

Boredom, the need to make the world interesting, and the resort to naughtiness, all mesh with ideologies of many lives. The confusion that results around questions of boredom, interest, falling asleep, waking up, goodness, and badness, is a big reason why I dislike systems of many lives. We resort to fantasies of many lives to alleviate boredom. We think that having other lives makes up for the boredom of this life. Rather than fantasize how much more interesting your life is in a system of many lives, you are better off making this life right here right now interesting. If you can make this life interesting, there is a good chance you can make any life interesting. If you can't make this life interesting, there is a good chance you can't make any other lives interesting. We will see these issues again in chapters on Romanticism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

05 Some Issues 2

The previous chapter looked at issues mostly for single ideas and individual people while this chapter looks at clusters of ideas and the impact on society. I use the term “system” without meaning anything good or bad, implying anything tight or closed, or recalling systems theory of the 1950s through 1970s. “System” is a handy catch-all term for any cluster that hangs together.

PART 1: Relativism, Social Issues, and Political Issues

Subjective and Universal.

All modern major religions were founded in the time from about 1000 BCE (BC) to 800 CE (AD). Except for Islam, all were founded in large agricultural states with a stratified society, strong priests, and a strong military. Islam began in militarized city-states (Mecca and Medina), then quickly moved to a hierarchical agricultural military state (Babylon, Iraq) with, in effect, a strong Muslim priesthood.

Most ideas are relative to situations. All modern religions originally were suited to an empire based on agriculture, not to life in the modern world of capitalism, plural democracies, and glitzy technology. The fact that ideas are relative to situations does not automatically make all religions wrong, bad, or irrelevant to conditions other than the ones in which they began. The fact that all major religions were founded in agricultural states with strong priesthods does not automatically make them wrong, bad, or irrelevant to modern democracies. The fact that they were founded in conditions different than what we live in now does mean we have to assess their claims carefully. We too live in particular conditions that lead us to see the world, God, Dharma, people, souls, salvation, religion, and so forth, in particular ways. Even modern atheism is shaped by modern conditions. Relativity does not necessarily make us wrong either but it should lead us to be more careful of ideas from the past, more respectful of them, and to be more careful of our own ideas. All the major religions still have relevance if we look to what is relevant, ignore what is not relevant, and discard what is harmful.

The presence of any historical relativity, past or present, seems to knock all objectivity out from under us. If all points of view are shaped by particular temporary conditions, in the past or now, then how can we ever find an objective place from which to have a universal view? The simple answer is that we just can do that, at least well enough, if not perfectly. A slightly more sophisticated answer: even if we do not quickly achieve absolute objectivity, we get ever closer; and getting ever closer is good enough. We get close enough to support what we have to do in our times. Evolution gave us enough mental acuity to see well enough to get on with life now. Evolution gave us enough objectivity to do what we have to do. We make mistakes, but we get over them. We never see a berry or a deer absolutely perfectly objectively but we see them objectively enough so we can gather and hunt. We never see our spouses absolutely objectively but we still get on with relationships. We never solve religious questions perfectly but we solve them well enough to know what we should do.

All major religions claim to be universal and true. Even if they do not say so outright, they imply they are the one and only true best religion while other religions are false or inadequate. Even Hinduism, which says there are many paths to the same God, also says it has the one general framework within which that idea makes sense while other religions do not, so other religions are inadequate and partly false. Not all religions can be the one and only true best religion if they are not all deeply the same, and they are not all deeply the same.

We have to look for the core basic ideas of various religions, their basic stances, to see if those stances are wide enough. We compare religions. If no religion is universal, then we need to accept that fact as well. We assess religious ideas according to our criteria, especially the principles of morality. We assess religions according to the actual behavior of believers and the actual institutions they make.

Social Relevance.

Some religions have social concern built in, the most obvious of which is Christianity. Christians should take seriously Jesus' commands to help the poor, sick, hungry, sad, alienated, imprisoned, distressed, and oppressed. They believe, or should believe, that evil can be conquered only when social injustice is conquered too. Jews and Muslims recently have acted similarly. Even religions that do not emphasize social action have contributed to social justice in the modern world. Buddhist monks avoid politics but even Buddhist monks have worked against unjust regimes. Buddhists believe in minimizing suffering. In the last few decades, Buddhists in Thailand have tried to develop a rationale for social and ecological action based on minimizing suffering.

The modern world still has too much badness. The badness could be greatly alleviated through social justice, even if not eliminated. Yet the current problems of badness and social justice are not necessarily universal. Even if we solve these problems, new problems are likely to arise. A never-ending crusade to solve the evils of the present day is not necessarily the proper subject of supposedly-universal religions. Too often, governments do not seek to alleviate badness and injustice but use it to perpetuate their own power. Religions do not want to antagonize established power. If they do antagonize power, then they won't be able to help anybody.

Still, any religion that does not face current issues will seem irrelevant. People will not follow it (unless it gives them many other benefits, such as worldly success). Religions have to face the problems of today and the underlying causes, just as religions did before when they spread through meeting the needs of agricultural states. Religions now have not done a good job so far. That is one reason why they seem so hypocritical and why people don't follow them.

Contradictions of Capitalism.

All times have problems that shape them. Capitalism is the world economic system. Everybody already lives under it, or soon will. Nobody can make a living other than under capitalism. So, capitalism must provide wealth reasonably well, operate with a certain amount of social justice, sustain the planet, and be compatible with plural democracies. Surprisingly, capitalism actually does most of that most of the time. Sadly, it does not do it well enough, the gaps make a difference, and we refuse to deal with the problem. I focus on one gap.

Capitalism necessarily generates about 4% to 10% involuntary unemployment, even for people who have some skills and earnestly seek a job. Capitalism necessarily makes about 20% poor employment, where people do not make enough to buy benefits such as health care and retirement, and where they might not be able to raise a family. These issues are confounded because some people really are stupid, inept, will not learn a skill, have a bad attitude, or will not hold a job.

The flaws of capitalism lead to dependence on the state. The poor can prefer welfare to work. They can become a burden on the good will of others and on the system that was set up to help them. They have too many children. They have children young and unmarried. They develop a bad attitude toward education and toward being good citizens of a larger society. They do not care for their children in a way that helps their children get jobs and be useful. They teach their children their bad attitudes. They become trapped in a cycle. We mistakenly think economic growth will solve all problems, so we create a system of welfare for business firms. Business firms learn to take for granted money and help from the state, and learn to corrupt the political system so as to keep the tap flowing. Corporate welfare probably causes more harm than personal welfare.

The flaws and dependence create moral dilemmas. Helping can make things worse. On the one hand, we cannot deny help to children. On the other hand, if we help the children we enable bad parents. Bad parents prefer dependency, become experts at milking the system and at PC blackmail, have a bad attitude, and they teach their children. By helping we create bad people of the future and we ruin young lives. Yet if we cut off bad parents, we cut off their children too and we cut off other good parents who do need help. We are caught between helping innocent children versus enabling bad adults. We are caught in a similar trap between good business firms versus bad business firms, farmers versus consumers, and small business versus big business.

The comparatively small flaws of capitalism feed huge problems of bad development, hurting nature, racism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination by nationality and religion. The problems feed party politics and political irrationality. The problems prevent us from seeing the future clearly and preparing for the future. The problems shape how stances play out. For example, rebellion means one thing when carried out by bandits in 2000 BCE and means another thing when carried out by freedom fighters hiding in the hills. Romanticism distorts our understanding of all these problems.

Any religion has to come to grips with this situation of capitalism sooner or later. The specific solutions will be framed in terms of economics and politics but the insights behind the solutions likely will come from religion.

Politics and War.

Anybody who has not had this insight has not lived in the modern world: If we used all the resources that we spend on wars and preparation for wars, we could solve the problems that cause conflict in the first place. If the United States, Israel, and Muslim nations had used the money that they spend on conflict, they could have prepared all Muslims for an occupation and could have developed all Muslim nations, so there would be far less conflict, and there would be many people with a strong stake in peace opposing conflict instead of supporting it. Even if religion alone does not cause conflict, it has not done enough to

end conflict. Even if religion does not waste wealth, religion does little to make nations spend it wisely. Religion has not done enough to end the underlying causes. It is not enough for leaders to urge world peace on holidays or when celebrating an old victory of civil rights.

Standard Textbook Problems of Democracy.

-Not everybody is competent to be a citizen in a democracy. If too many people are not competent, the democracy must fail.

-People can be incompetent because general human nature is not good enough, particular individual abilities are not good enough, they were not prepared by school, or they are too lazy to stay abreast of current issues.

-Democracy has to allow free thought but it cannot allow groups that wish to destroy democracy, not even to establish a theocracy based on your favorite religion.

-The values of democracy ideally are neutral toward all religions and cultures yet the values of democracy came out of one particular religion and culture: Western Judeo-Christianity. It is not clear that the values can stand if we forget where they came from. Yet, if we extol the founding religion and culture too much, we automatically lose its key values of neutrality and freedom of thought.

-Not all cultures and religions are amenable to democracy. It is still an open question how amenable to democracy are Chinese, Indian, and African cultures, and fundamentalist religions of all kinds.

The Future.

The previous chapter mentioned the changes that will come from artificial intelligence and biotechnology. We cannot avoid these changes by banning birth control, bottle babies, or abortion, or by declaring that people are really angels in disguise and we shouldn't mess without our DNA. These changes will make obsolete current arguments about such issues as abortion, and they will force us to make up our minds about what is human, sentient, and valuable about life.

Sadly, democracy as we had hoped for in America already has failed. Some kind of democracy in name will linger on all over the world but it will be only a shabby ghost. World ecology has fallen so low that it cannot be repaired in the near future. We already have lost too much biodiversity. Medicine has given us great benefits but it also has allowed people to live who have genetic burdens and who do not take care of themselves, such as people with diabetes and obesity. It requires us to pay for them. Population will not stop growing until the Earth has about 10 billion people. More people in the future, all over the world, with few real ideas of democracy and good citizenship, all wanting more stuff and more convenience, can only make the problems worse.

The changes of biotechnology and artificial intelligence will combine with the degradation of nature and the state. We will have to define what is human and good in that context.

One Big Combined Contradiction; "I Can't Get No Satisfaction".

Without us really quite understanding how, all the contradictions of modern life seep into our hearts as one big contradiction. This one big contradiction creates a constant nibbling malaise that undermines other goods that we get in life. It makes us anxious and bored. We look for one big solution to everything even when we know it cannot be. We seek one religion or one ideology to master it all. We seek a giant ideology to comfort us but can't really find it. We try hard to get satisfaction in family life but even success in family life does not make the unease go away. People seek other ways to find satisfaction such as business, wealth, fame, power, and professional glory. That gets some people through their lives but most people feel it would not be enough even if they had it. Rich and powerful people turn to philanthropy not just to provide a cover but also to find some peace of mind.

Some people in all times have felt that life might not be worthwhile but only in our times has this malaise become a common theme in pop culture and high culture. Even before about 1800, people sang ballads about the comfort of death but not until after 1800 did angst dominate song as it has since.

At some time, religion has to address these issues, both individually and in their agglomerated unease. To do so, it has to find the source of the problem, and it has to find reasonable suggestions. Religion has not done this. My religious view based on Jesus, practicality, and the ideas of the West does not in itself do it all either but, at least, it lets me see the issues clearly and suggest some meaningful actions. Other religions seem not to do even that much.

Fake Rebellion and Justified Rebellion.

The attitudes described in this section show up in many ways throughout the book. At the risk of boring you, I repeat the ideas later in the book.

There really are problems, such as the contradictions of capitalism, injustice, degradation of nature, living off the state, using the state as an agent, racism, sexism, growing inequality of wealth, degradation of the middle class, the failure of democracy, etc. Since the 1970s, our leaders have not faced up to these problems. People feel that something is wrong, and that our leaders have failed us, even if they can't specify what, who, and how. People respond in various ways.

The proper response to the problems is to try to understand them, what works, what doesn't work, what to do in general, and what you can do personally. Even if our leaders do not seem to understand problems and will not address them, still we are obliged to think about them as well as we can and then to do what we can. We have to assess our particular abilities, think about what problems need the most work, what problems need what kind of work, and then apply our particular abilities where they will do the most good. We can take into account what kind of problems we like to work on or don't like to work on. Some people like to work with nature while some people like to work on social issues.

As long as problems remain, and leaders will not address the problems, then some rebellion is justified. "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Even if you are not quite sure why you rebel, and against what you rebel, some rebellion is justified. Not much rebellion is justified, and most rebels are not justified. Justified rebels are not stereotypical rebels and they usually don't look and act like stereotypical rebels. Justified rebels work to understand and to get something done.

Few people, and few leaders, work to really see and get something done. Instead, people find an outlet that lets them feel good about themselves while doing not much. All times have uncertainty, and ours is no different. When faced with uncertainty, intractable problems, and bad leadership, people tend to fall into routines from which they can gain at least some satisfaction.

One such response is to act according to a code. I take up this response in a later chapter.

Many people flee into careerism, both of the job and, now, of idealized mommy-and-daddy family life. People pursue a job as career even when they don't have much feel for the content of the job and don't even like the job much; many academics are like this. It might seem surprising to think of mommy-and-daddy as a career after all the movies and TV shows about "parent versus job" and all the movies from the 1980s onwards about parenting as holy, but mommy-and-daddy are careers now because that is how we approach modern life.

Many people escape into a role, often roles defined by the media, such as sports fan, hip-hop fan, wannabe glamour girl, artist, religious person, modern guy, and modern woman.

Many people find a scapegoat, such as "Blacks", "White trash", "honkies", "Mexicans", "the gays", "the Christians", "Liberals", "gun nuts", etc.

Many people find a cause for which they can crusade, especially a cause that has some merit, such as saving nature, controlling abortion, promoting radical Islam, Black anger, or White power. People do not act in this cause primarily because of the merit, they have thought through the issues, or this is the best way for them to use their talents but because it makes them feel good about themselves.

Many people take on a semi-permanent attitude of rebellion. Most rebellion is not justified. It is primarily "acting out", a pose, and fake. Fake rebels think of themselves as fighting the Emperor or "the man". Fake rebellion seems justified because there are real problems, and it borrows justification from the need for real action. But fake rebellion is annoying and it adds to the harm. Fake rebellion is a version of finding a scapegoat, finding a cause to make yourself feel better, and taking on a role given by the media. Fake rebellion makes things worse because it undercuts real rebellion and real action to correct real problems. Fake rebellion blocks good thinking. Rather than hurt oppressors, fake rebellion helps oppressors because it gets in the way of seeing real problems and thinking hard about what to really do. Fake rebellion keeps victims under control by causing them to hurt themselves, hurt their own people, and hurt other groups.

We need to stop responding to problems in bad ways that only serve ourselves in the short term and that really make the problems worse. We need to respond in better ways. Clear thinking is the first step to better responding. Clear thinking is one of the best ways to help ourselves while we help others. Clear thinking is one of the best ways for underdogs to stop hurting themselves and to stop helping oppressors. Clear thinking about stances and religions can help us to do this. That is one reason for this book.

PART 2: More on Goodness.

It helps later to expand now on why the morality of Jesus seems naïve. The goal here is to reinforce the ideas that (1) I have to fall back on simple morality despite the fact that my idea of simple morality is not the whole story, and (2) we have to not reinforce badness. The points here are not the naïve charming points that young children make when disputing with parents, and the points are not the common ploy of moral relativity that adolescents usually raise. The points here are harder to deal with.

The goal here is not to convince everybody to be sweetly good. There is little danger of that. I want to avoid the opposite problem that often comes indirectly. When people find that some goodness is not as good as their parents said, or find that some vice is not as bad as their parents said, they dump good and embrace vice. They don't do this "whole hog", and often only play at being bad, so I am not worried about spawning a legion of minor demons. Rather, people spoil their ability to sort out good and bad, and so they do not make the best decisions they could, and often fall prey to bad ideologies and demagogues. Only later do people find out that good was good anyway and vice was bad anyway.

For example, when people find out that trusting can get you cheated, they quit trusting altogether. When people find out the first cigarette doesn't give you cancer, they get addicted to tobacco. When people find out that "pot" (marijuana) is fun and doesn't lead to heroin, they get a cocaine habit. When people find out that working hard to make the world better, and doing unto others as you would have them do to you, often gets you headaches, they turn selfish. When people find out that cheating, stealing, lying, taking, bullying, riding around in cars with boys or girls, and being a minor-league badass is fun, they "go that way" and can't get back. When people find out that politics and the economy don't work, and rebellion is fun, they become whining tools. All these people romanticize badness and then slowly turn into bastards and bitches.

I want to stop the glamorizing of badness by admitting right away that all goodness is not as sweet and successful as it's cracked up to be. I admit badness is fun, and that a lot goes on in the world besides goodness. Then we can see why we have to fall back on goodness in the long run anyway.

-People who set out to make the world a better place don't always do so. Often, they make things worse. Often, people who say they want to make the world a better place are meddling self-interested hypocrites who use morality as an excuse to manipulate other people.

-Often people who act for other reasons, even self-interest, do more to make the world a better place than people who work deliberately to make the world better. Henry Ford and Bill Gates did not set out to make the world a better place but they did.

-To oppose badness, we need tough people. We need moralistic people. Tough people are not always good. They do not always have a heart of gold. Sometimes tough people serve good but often they do not, and, even when they do serve good, they do not always aim to serve good. Often superficially good people get the credit for the hard work of tough people. Often the tough people who build a good world cannot live in the good world; they leave it for other people to inherit; it is an ongoing issue with soldiers "back from the war". Several movies of John Ford are built around this issue, including "The Searchers" and "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

-Much more is going on in the human world besides morality and religion, including science, politics, art, business, etc. We cannot limit interests only to what obviously right now makes the world a better place. If we did, we would make the world a worse place and a more boring place.

-Much more is going on in the world besides morality, science, politics, etc. There is a world beyond the realm of human action. There is also weather, meteors, solar radiation, chance, etc. How the world turns out depends on factors that are beyond the control of people who want to make the world better.

-Goodness and good people are often boring. Naughty people, and even some bad people, are often more fun, at least at first. It seems we need some mixture of naughtiness to have all the different kinds of fun in the world. If God wants us to enjoy the world, then God wants us to be naughty a lot of the time and even wants us to be bad some of the time.

-God is about more than the simple morality of “work hard to make the world better”, “do unto others”, and “applies equally”. We can’t get in touch with the fullness of God if we limit ourselves by this run-of-the-mill morality. We need to get beyond simple moral bounds to reach God. We need to learn to compromise and to mix morality with practicality. We need to learn to get on with things. This does not mean we have to be amoral or immoral, but we do have to see beyond simple morality.

-The world will not succeed as it should. “Work hard to make the world better” implies that everything will turn out tolerably well in the end. It implies that the contributions of hard workers make a big difference. Neither of these points is necessarily true. So “work hard”, “do unto others”, and “applies equally” don’t always make sense in this world.

-Because God foresaw this world, “work hard” etc. don’t always make sense in God’s plan either, and God’s vision must include more.

-If the world does succeed partly, and does not fail dismally, likely forces other than striving to make the world better will be important, even if striving to make the world better plays a role.

-Even if striving to make the world better does play an important role in helping the world, other forces also play a big role.

-If striving to make the world better is to play an important role in helping the world, it has to be mixed with a heavy dose of practical realism. It is easy to make a case that practical realism is more important than the ideal of working to make the world a better place. I am not sure which is more important when.

-God does not condemn to hell people who live normal lives and who do not work hard to make the world better. Likely those people only vanish after they die. In the meantime, they could enjoy the world. God also wishes us to do that.

-Many normal people do not have the temperament to work hard to make the world better, or even to become artists, politicians, scientists, business people, medical care providers, or other people who make the world better through their work. People farm, sell insurance, and run bars. To force these people through guilt to work hard to make the world better is to do evil. To force them makes the world a worse

place. It reduces the enjoyment of the world. Let people be who they are and do what they do as long as they do no harm.

-As long as you do no harm, it is better honestly to be what you are rather than force yourself to conform to a religious ideology. If conforming to an ideology perverts you, then God would rather have you as you are than pervert you into a false semblance of a saint. Trying to turn a dandelion into a rose is ridiculous, and a dandelion has value in its own right that we should not lose.

-It is hard to follow a religious idea without also falling into a perverting religious ideology. It is hard to work hard to make the world better while not perverting ourselves and others.

-Most people are pretty good. If they only follow their natural instincts, and take opportunities as they find opportunities, then they can do a lot to make the world a better place without having to follow an ideology.

-A great episode of the TV show "The Simpsons" condemned censorship even when censoring in the service of goodness and the greater good. Marge found that life was better all around if she did not let the family watch bad TV. Marge especially disliked "Itchy and Scratchy" and "Krusty". Marge had good taste. Marge found life was best if she turned off the TV entirely. So she did. Her idea caught on. People followed her not only in turning off the TV but in all questions of morality, proper behavior, and art. The whole town used her as the standard of right and wrong, of good taste and bad taste. As a result, children played in the sunshine and fresh air; families had dinner together; people loved nature; chores got done; people had more sex and love; and everybody was happier. To replace TV and bad art, Marge and the other good members of Springfield brought traveling art exhibits to town. One day, the statue of "David" by Michelangelo arrived. David's genitals are obvious. According to her proven successful benevolent standards, Marge should have covered David's genitals. But Marge is a painter. Marge could see this art was great, this work was beyond her simplistic standards, and people should have access to true full art even if it meant breaking her standards. She showed the statue. If this particular piece of art was greater than her standards, then she had no right to impose her standards. Other pieces also might be great, and she might not know it. She might deprive people of great art while shielding them from bad art. The loss is more than the gain. People have to be free to judge for themselves. Great art has to be free to enter minds even at the risk of bad art entering minds. Having good taste means being able to understand that we personally are not the final arbiters of taste, art, or morality; if we think we are, then we don't have good taste. The best we can do is to explain good art, explain good behavior, and then urge people to choose good over. Marge stopped censoring entirely. She let kids turn the TV back on. Life in Springfield town fell down. Instead of playing, children watched drivel on TV. Family members ate in isolation. Nobody talked to anybody else, got any exercise, did any chores, or took care of nature.

-Half-truths can do more damage than lies. We need to think hard about what is true and false, and try to take the true while overcoming the false. Sometimes in doing this we make mistakes. That is alright as long as we can recover. We might need some help to recover.

-Here is an example of a half-truth that we need to think about: To appreciate a good ideology such as the teachings of Jesus, sometimes you have to transgress the ideology. To appreciate beauty, you have to see ugliness. To appreciate morality, sometimes you have to sin, or at least you have to see sin up close.

-Here is another example: Breaking rules makes us free. It makes us free in ways that can't be imagined by people who never break rules and who live by a moral ideology all their lives. God wants us to be free. He made us with free will. To achieve great freedom is more important than to achieve great morality. We should not let Jesus' teachings stand in the way of freedom, the freedom that God intended. We should break rules to achieve freedom, and then we should live free.

-The real hero of the great science fiction movie "Blade Runner" is Roy Blatty (Rutger Hauer), the leader of the artificial humans, the "replicants" or "blades". I do not explain the plot. In confronting his human maker, Roy confesses that he has done "questionable things". That is putting it mildly. He is an attack soldier; a mass murderer of innocent people; he cares mostly for himself; and he will sacrifice others of his kind, other artificial humans, to get what he wants. Roy's maker points out that, despite doing some "questionable things", Roy also has done great things, and the maker says "the candle that burns twice as brightly burns half as long". Then Roy kills his maker. Before Roy dies, Roy teaches Decker, Harrison Ford, to love every moment of life, teaches Ford what fear is, what slavery is, to overcome fear, not to be a slave, to fight for life, and fight for people we love – he teaches Decker how to make the world better. Sometimes we need to just act without worrying if we do good or bad. Sometimes we need to be selfish. Sometimes amazing things come when we don't worry about good or bad but instead just do. This is like the amoral mechanical universe giving rise to life, and like automatic natural selection giving rise to beings who are intelligent and who can see beauty and morality.

I cannot go into long agonized evaluations of how true all this is. I am trying to get you to act the way people do after they have gone through naughtiness and badness, have come out on the other side, and now want something better. I am trying to get you to act as people do after they have taken all the drugs, real and metaphorical, have come through to the other side, and now want better. Before you embrace petty badness and disdain goodness, think how you would like the people around you to act. If you want them to act that way, why don't you have to act that way? The other people wonder the same about you and they question the motives of people around them including you. How long before you get bored with naughtiness too? If you have children, think about how you act around them, how you want them to act, and how you want people around them to act. How do you find a balance of goodness, independence, rule-following, rule-breaking, naughtiness, and badness for children? How do you prepare children for the real world? You do not let them indulge naughtiness and cheap thrills no matter how you glamorized naughtiness and cheap thrills when you were an adolescent. You do not protect them entirely from the world. You let them get real does of a real world even if they get hurt sometimes. At the same time, you try to keep them from getting lost. They have to learn to make their own way without becoming bad. A lot of the thrill of being naughty lies in our imagination. Without imagination, we could not appreciate Michelangelo's "David", so, yes, to appreciate art and life we have to appreciate naughtiness and have to be bored with goodness sometimes. Yet our imaginations lead us astray if we indulge them. Nobody is ever successfully naughty enough not to be bored too. For an imaginative view of going through badness to (overly sweet) goodness, see the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell, which I describe in the chapter on Hinduism.

The Victory of Good Solely Because It is Good.

This section anticipates a section in the later chapter on common themes in major religions. This section prepares the way below for more consideration of order, disorder, and myth.

Most people want good to defeat bad just because it is good. We don't want good to win because it is bigger or stronger, and we don't want good to win mostly because the bigger, stronger, more clever people are on the side of good.

If good wins because it is stronger, then good has not won, bigger and stronger has won. If bigger and stronger can win in this case, then bigger and stronger can win when they side with bad. It seems bigger, stronger, and cunning are on the side of bad more often than on the side of good. If bigger, stronger, and cunning decide the contest, then bad is far more likely to win than good. To make sure good wins, good has to win not because it is big, strong, or cunning. In fact, good has to be able to defeat big, strong, and cunning without being big, strong, or cunning.

More than that practical argument, though, people want good to win because it is good regardless of bigger or stronger and not against bigger, stronger, and more cunning. There is just something in good that we want to win out only because it is good and regardless of other considerations. I do not here go after what it is about goodness that makes us feel this way about goodness. Please think about it and try to feel it. In the same way, we want bad to lose because it is bad and not through any temporary loss of power and advantage.

Our desire that good win just because it is good shows up in stories that we tell about good and how it wins. We want sweet young innocents as main characters, and for them to win against corruption, vice, and evil. We don't want tough guys to do it all for the sweet young innocents. We want bad to do badly. Think of "Vanity Fair", "Lord of the Rings", or almost any Dickens writing even though Dickens is full of bad powerful strong big cunning people who win often – but not in the end.

People are not stupid either. They know that bad usually is bigger, stronger, and more cunning, and that those traits almost always win. So people allow that goodness can borrow from mostly-good but flawed people who are also big and strong, if not so cunning. We allow that good have its champions. We ask big strong people to protect goodness, including weak young innocent people. We know that the mix of goodness with experience and toughness is more likely to win, and so seek that. This idea is prominent in a movie that I mention many times: "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

(Accident also plays a part in the victory of goodness, especially if we hold that it is not really accident but is really evidence for modest well-timed intervention by higher powers. To quote Gibbs from "NCIS", "I don't believe in coincidence". Frodo did not win over the Ring, and neither did Gollum; instead, accident won when Gollum fell over the cliff into the fire. I do not go into the role of accident.)

There is another way that good or bad can win besides intrinsic virtue or power. Good or bad can win as a result of a prevailing system. The system itself need be neither bad nor good although we think of a system in which good wins often as good and a system in which bad wins often as bad.

When good wins as a result of the system, we can take that as a victory of goodness itself and not as a result of power, bigness, or strength. We can take it as an overall victory for goodness. We can feel

comforted that good really does win because it is good. (When good wins as a result of the system, I think that cunning has won more than good in itself. I do not stress this point here.)

Of course, we have to set up, nurture, correct, sustain, and improve good systems, or else we risk letting good fail and bad win; but that is another issue that I don't go into in this section.

When the system is a good system, when it runs better than alternatives, and we take an active part in the system, we can accept the goodness that comes out of the system, and we can even see that result as a win for goodness in itself. In real life, few systems run so well that we should allow ourselves to see them as the instrument by which goodness wins because it is good, but we do it anyway.

Some Bad Hypocrisy along the Way.

When we think good wins due to the system, then we let ourselves "off the hook". We give ourselves an excuse. If we participate in a good system, that is good enough for us. We don't also have to work hard for good. Instead, we just do what makes us feel good, hope that contributes to the system, and hope that contributes to the victory of good because it is good. We can thank God for his foresight and for letting us be born in a world where good really does win just because it is good. This is how most people think about idealized capitalism and idealized democracy, and what they do as a result.

Sadly, since 1950, and especially after 1980, this is how people think of membership in an ethnic, gender, religious, regional, political, or age group, or a church. Our group is good, it is the best chance for a victory of goodness over badness, and all I need to do participate in the victory of goodness is to be a righteous member of my group.

This attitude is an excuse to do what you want, congratulate yourself through congratulating the system, and not worry about good, bad, order, hard work, power, strength, big, or cunning. Democracy works; all the smart people say democracy is the best political system, I vote for my guy; and that is all I have to do to help goodness win; so now I am free to indulge in opinions and bad group politics. Capitalism works; all the business people so say; I have a good job; that is all I have to do to help goodness win; so now I can buy a big house and a trophy spouse with whom to have trophy kids. I belong to the heaviest gang; we take care of business; we protect the neighborhood; I am a stand-up guy in the gang; and that is all I have to do to make goodness, my kind of goodness, win. I belong to the right ethnic, gender, religious, and etc. group; we are wronged because we are in that group; being wronged makes us right; making us right is a victory of goodness; so all I have to do is be a stand-up member of my group. This attitude is not a win for good just because it is good, through a system or otherwise. This is a victory for badness through cunning.

Good for the Sake of Good versus A Selfless Act.

A common theme in books, movies, and TV shows is the plight of a "sort of" hero (including women) who is almost but not quite good enough to go to heaven, and can go if he-she can get beyond him-herself and can do one big completely selfless act. The act cannot be done for the sake of going to heaven. It has to be done when the hero has given up all hope of heaven and does it for the sake of the recipient. This theme underlies the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" and the TV show "The Good Place". A variation on

this theme is when a man (almost always a man) loves a woman so much that he sees he is not good enough for her and so decides to let her alone to find a truly worthy man or he even decides to help her find a truly worthy man – of course, that is when she comes to love him truly. This version is a big theme on the TV show “Lucifer” and in many “chick flick” movies and TV shows. Doing a big selfless act is much like Jesus’ admonition(s) to love our neighbor as ourselves and love even our enemies.

If you do good for good’s sake, then, eventually, you will have to do something good that is contrary in a big way to your own worldly self-interest. You might have to do a big selfless act. You will face this test not once but many times. Each time, you will redefine yourself. So, the two ideas do overlap somewhat. Yet, most of the time, doing good coincides with our self-interest, or doing good helps the people that we love and the people around us so much, and hurts our self-interest so little, that there is no real contest. What friend-of-the-family has not gone to a match, recital, or play by the children of the other family, or waded through countless online images? So, the two ideas are not exactly the same.

There is not much point here in arguing the merits of either idea. I go into that topic briefly elsewhere.

I prefer to think of doing good for its own sake. I prefer to think that way because goodness does often coincide with self interest and with the obvious interest of many others. People who do good for its own sake can practice in those arenas before they face harder arenas such as a big selfless act. People who think of doing the big selfless act often freeze and can’t do any good in any arenas. People can’t get over the idea of doing good not for the sake of good but to go to heaven. Thinking of heaven and salvation actually does more harm than good. When people try to do good for the sake of good rather than for any reward, eventually, they often do learn how to be selfless in small ways that eventually add up to a lot of selflessness and that sometimes prepares them for something big. I would rather have that outcome than people striving for a giant act of total self-denial.

It is wrong, misleading, and causes more harm than good to define good in terms of against-the-self. There is much good in the world that is not against my self or any other self. We are not always against each other. If you take as the mark of goodness and morality that it is (they are) contrary to self-interest, then you badly distort the world and hurt the world. The idea is fine for drama and it is quite beneficial to think about the cases where they do conflict but it is also beneficial to think about the cases where they do not conflict. You can be a hero just by being useful. People and God will love you if you are only useful and do not save the world through self denial.

If you want to think in terms of overcoming the self then go ahead. If you think in terms of overcoming the self so as to get to heaven, likely you will never get out of the trap.

PART 3: How to Eat the World.

This part warns against falling for doctrines, even the beautiful well-rounded theologies of major religions, and even beautiful adventure stories. Goodness win by idealized capitalism and idealized democracy also are examples of such doctrines. Enjoy the beauty but stick to simple ideas on which you can base useful action. If you have the temper for theology, myth, or argument, then go ahead; but do not expect that you have proven anything and do not expect other people to follow you. Do not get lost in your own imagination. Do use your imagination.

Idea Systems that Eat the World.

Most ideas are limited in scope, and, for most ideas, we can figure out if they are workably true or false, even if we do argue a bit: “The traffic lights on the Parkway should be reset to go along with the speed limits”. “Global climate change is real, and it is mostly caused by people”. These are fairly clear, usually are not dangerous, and are not the subject of this chapter.

The major idea systems of the world since about 1000 BCE (BC), including the major religions, and, until recently including Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, are not like this. Pop culture “big trends”, such as being hip, cool, or a “gangsta”, are like this. They want more. They try to explain everything. They are aggressive in attempts to explain. I say they try to “eat the world”. They are not clear, are dangerous, and are the subject of this part of the chapter. I warn against them. To help us not fall into their traps, I explain a bit how they work.

Science does try to explain as much as it can. Still, in its best practice, it is not a system that tries to eat the world. Science accepts that it makes mistakes, and it provides ways to show mistakes and correct mistakes. In its everyday practice, science can be like a system that eats the world but usually is more helpful than harmful. This book is not about science and the scientific stance, so I don’t explain more about science in these terms or contrast science with other big systems of explanation.

Rigging the Evidence.

Systems that eat the world are like cults. Even when a system that eats the world is a beautiful religion such as Christianity or Buddhism, it is still like a cult. Once inside, it is hard to get out. You begin to think in terms of the system. Soon enough, you can’t think outside the system. You evaluate other views in terms of the system, and reject other views. Once you begin to think in terms of White Power or Black “gangsta”, you act that way, and you reject other ways such as reason. Once you begin to think in terms of social misfit, you act that way, and you reject other ways such as compassion. Once you begin to think like an academic careerist, you look at the whole world that way. Once you begin to think in terms of a major religion, you act that way, and you reject other religious views.

Cults, and major religions, are able to do this because they rig the evidence.

Systems that eat the world give a set of categories by which to view the world, such as soul, self, cause-and-effect, Dharma, original sin, justification, salvation, “nigger”, “Whitey”, “Chink”, grant proposal, donor, publication, and review. Everything important in the world has to fall into these categories. You cannot use any ideas that do not fall in these categories. You must use some of these categories to explain life. In some forms of Christianity, all good comes from God and only from God; humans cannot originate any good or do any good on their own; all bad comes only from demons or from humans. So, if you want to do good, you have to give up normal ideas of being a human and accept ideas about God as given in those forms of Christianity. In communism, much the same was true of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, or Mao versus ordinary humans.

(Using categories can be very useful and usually is more good than bad; but that is not the issue here. Here we see how using categories can harm us.)

The categories reinforce each other. In Christianity, you have to be justified to be saved and only Jesus now can justify you. In Buddhism, the goal is to stop suffering; to stop suffering, you must accept the insights of the Buddha; and one of the insights of the Buddha is that the goal is to stop suffering. In Islam, one of the necessary beliefs is that Mohammad is the most important prophet of God; and we know this because Mohammad, the most important prophet of God, told us.

The system uses contradictions to keep you within the system. Christians need both faith and works, and have never worked out the relation between them except through the intervention of God's grace; yet if we are only saved by God's grace, then why do we need faith or works? We just do, and that is what we have to live with. In Buddhism, clinging leads to suffering, and so we should desire release; but to desire release is a form of clinging.

In particular, the ideas and issues of other systems are reduced to the ideas and issues of this system. They are trivialized or made bad. The gods of other religions are really demons out to fool us.

If necessary, the ideas of other systems, and any annoying empirical (factual, sensual) evidence, are simply suppressed. George Orwell used this ability to crunch truth terrifyingly in his book "1984" where "freedom is slavery". Captain Picard from "Star Trek TNG" fought against it when, even after torture, he would not say that four lights were five lights: "there are four lights". Mostly the effect happens at milder but more pervasive levels as when advertisers convince us that their clothes make us look thinner, and we are not really fat, despite the obvious rolling bulges.

Systems that eat the world are like "self-fulfilling prophecies". For example, people treat Asian kids as smart; teachers see them as smart; thus they get good grades; their good grades prove they are smart and prove we were right to treat them as smart all along. People treat Black or Hispanic kids as hard to teach; so they get bad grades; their bad grades prove they are hard to teach and prove we were right to treat them that way all along. Black and Hispanic kids believe about themselves that they will not learn anything useful; so they don't really try; they act badly; so they are hard to teach. A powerful leader fears a young hero (boy or girl) will arise, and kills all the children in a village to stop it. The young hero lives miraculously, and the massacre leads the young hero to assume leadership and thus to defeat the tyrant. What the tyrant did to stop his-her downfall leads to his-her downfall. Jews think of Pharaoh trying to kill Moses; Christians have Herod trying to kill Jesus; Muslims have the clans of Mecca trying to kill Mohammad; and pop culture fans have Beast Master, Red Sonja, and Luke Skywalker.

Systems that eat the world seem to explain everything. They seem to explain a lot and they don't worry about what they can't explain. They are like con artists trying to sell you land on the sunny shores of Bangladesh. They are like a Ponzi scheme where they give you a big return on your investment right away so you put even more money into the scheme and never question it again. There is nothing more important than a career in academics if your name goes down in history and your work as an academic helps solve world problems. Christianity and Islam, using the Fall, original sin, human depravity, God's Will, rebellion against God, pseudo free choice, works, faith, and grace, explain everything that they want to know about human behavior and society. Using "in accord with the Tao" and "not in accord with the

Tao”, Taoists do the trick with simplicity. Using Dharma and karma, Buddhists and Hindus explain who we are, how we got here, where we are going, and what we need to do. Using “cool” and “uncool” or “gangsta” and “wimp” modern pop con artists do the same.

When a person converts to a system that eats the world, sometimes the priests of the system have to use hard methods such as torture, brainwashing, blackmail, sleep deprivation, sessions, and peer pressure. But usually they don't have to get nearly that hard. People internalize they system just as in Stockholm Syndrome and as when young people who are kidnapped eventually come to stay with their captors and do voluntarily what originally they were forced to do. People go along with major religions because they come to really believe and because they fear the void in case their religion is wrong. People do the same with careers in a particular business firm or university.

It takes a lot of practice and hard work to get out of systems that eat the world if we have been raised in them or have fallen into them. Who could bear the thought of not being cool or a “gangsta”? But it can be done and should be done.

Explain a Lot but not Everything Yet.

Explaining a lot is not necessarily a bad thing. We want a system that explains a lot. Science aims to explain everything – on one level from one point of view – and I admire science. Buddhist psychology explains a lot of how the human mind works, and its insights go along with evolutionary psychology. We learn a lot about people when we think about free will and what happens when we corrupt ourselves through bad acts. We want rocket scientists who can tell us exactly where the rocket comes down. We want biologists who can tell us which genes cause cancer, which genes we can put up with in modified organisms, and which genes we have to fear.

Still, there is a difference between systems that are good at explaining versus systems that eat the world by explaining everything. We feel that systems out to explain everything are wrong and the motives of the practitioners are bad. I don't here try to untangle this issue. I only point it out so that you do not reject all good systems that explain a lot just because you fear slimy systems that eat the world. You have to learn to cultivate judgment through practice.

From Worse to Better, Hopefully.

Usually we can get out of one system only if we have a clear sense that another system is better, and that we can get there (new system) from here (old system) fast enough so we don't fall apart on the way.

If my advice about Jesus and working hard to make the world better helps people leave bad stances to get to good stances, then I have used reassurance in a good way. This book is partly about getting you to a system that I think is the best among available options; that is not a bad goal even if it is carried out in the context of a system.

Most people live their lives without committing “whole hog” to any particular system that eats the world, although they have to make their peace with the systems that prevail around them. Most people do not

become zealots or fundamentalists except during hard times or when converting. Normal lax Christians have to make peace with rigorous Puritans if they happen to live in a Calvinist region.

If your only option is a bad system, as in Stalinist Russia or Maoist China, then it is better that you don't commit deeply. It is better that people "skate" within a bad system trying to retain as much of their deeper humanity as they can.

Although people can live without committing "whole hog" to a system and becoming a zealot, people do not usually live without any system at all. Our minds don't work that way. We need categories even if the categories are not totally accurate. We also need to organize our categories into a system. We are more at ease and live better if we follow a framework that has worked well in the past for other people who are mostly like us.

On the whole, it is better to commit to a good system than to float aimlessly without a system. The better the system is most of the time, the better that we commit to it. If we follow Jesus, the Buddha, or the Tao, and we act better as a result, that is good. The later chapter on codes is about this issue of committing to something.

The trick is to avoid mistakes, avoid bad systems, find good ideas and acts, and find good systems. We don't have to fall "whole hog" into a better system even after we find it but we should be willing to accept a better system and we should go along with it as much as we can without violating deep principles.

I think people don't usually fall "whole hog" into a cult or religion, yet people do better if they live mostly within the context of a system, because of our evolutionary history. To commit whole hog to a system is to give up too much control to other people. Usually big-giving-up led people to less evolutionary success (fewer descendants) than if people retained more control. Usually when we give up a lot of control of our lives to other people, they use it for their benefit more than our benefit. Then, even if we do benefit some, we do not benefit as much as they, and so we suffer a net comparative loss. Giving up a lot of control to other people only worked in dire straights such as feuding. Natural selection would have favored people who could step back a little most of the time and opt out when necessary.

Natural selection also would have favored people who did accept some system from other people even if they did not go "whole hog". It takes a lot of trouble to reinvent the wheel, and it is better if we accept ideas from other people as long as those ideas do not open us up to control too much. Ideas work better if they are organized, that is, if they fall into a system. So, in accepting tradition and other people's ideas, we also accept their system somewhat, including their ideas about gods, spirits, kin, neighbors, enemies, and what is important in life.

Natural selection favored people who could accept a system somewhat but not entirely, and use it well. Most people are like that now. Natural selection favored people who could keep a balance of acceptance and rejection, other people's ideas and their ideas, ideas within a system and deep principles that seem to transcend system. That is what I am trying to help people do.

Deep Principles by Which to Judge Systems.

Systems that eat the world provide the standards by which to judge everything. You cannot get outside them to judge them. Yet I advise people to step outside, use deep principles by which to judge systems that eat the world, not allow systems to suck you in and eat you up, not trust systems that eat the world, and go from a worse system to a better system. Where do we get principles outside systems by which to judge systems? And how do we apply principles if systems that eat the world if we are in such a system, as likely we are?

There are no good answers. The simple answer is that we just can much of the time. We can't always do it, and some people suffer greatly from being trapped. But, just as most people live most of their lives not sucked deeply into a bad system, so most people can step outside enough to get a better view and apply good principles.

Just as evolution gave us both the propensity to accept systems and the ability to step outside systems, evolution gave us some good principles almost regardless of system and gave us the ability to apply principles almost regardless of system. The Golden Rule does not really belong to a particular system even though Jesus stated it well and it is important in his teachings and life. We got an idea of the Golden Rule from our evolutionary history. We can use the Golden Rule to step outside of systems and assess systems. We might even find that some systems hold up well.

Since at least late Victorian times with heroes such as Sherlock Holmes, literature has been filled with examples of people who were able to step out of the system, see something better, do something better, become something better, and make the world better. They do this without necessarily going from one system to another but by relying on deep principles such as compassion, the Golden Rule, and reason. Since 1945, thousands of movies and TV episodes have cheered us on to jump out of a system trap to something better, usually for men to stop being careerists and to start loving their families. Jesus, the Buddha, Chuang Tzu, Mohammad, and other religious heroes encouraged people to do this, although, of course, they also encouraged people to dive into the systems they had built. I am not only jumping on a cultural bandwagon when I think people can do this and I encourage people to do this. I think this recent cultural bandwagon points out both a problem of our times – people cling to bad systems even when they don't work, and do bad things in the name of bad systems such as fundamentalism – and that people can stop supporting a bad system if they want, can step out, and can step up to something better based on deep principles.

I hope this book helps you to find deep principles, feel comfortable with deep principles, and assess the religions and thought systems around you on the basis of deep principles.

Some Useful and Not too Complicated Examples.

Modern economics is an example of a thought system that eats the world but that is not overtly religious or metaphysical. In official modern economics, people act only out of self-interest, everything they do serves their self-interest, they never do anything that does not serve their self-interest, and they know the best ways to achieve their self-interest. They are "rational". In terms more familiar to non-economists, a person always acts to get the most satisfaction that he-she can from all situations, and that is all a person ever does. If a person watches a building burn without trying to rescue the people inside, that inaction serves his-her self-interest because he-she rationally calculates the great risk, and rationally calculates

that he-she does not get enough satisfaction from saving others to override the loss of satisfaction that comes from getting burned. If another person rushes in to rescue kittens from the same burning building, that person gets does get more satisfaction that way than holding back. In this circular way, economics can explain everything that people do in terms of self-interest. Economics can get away with this ploy by saying that people are just differ subjectively in their tastes even if they are the same in wishing to get the most satisfaction. Some people like apples while other people like oranges, and some people like kittens while other people like to torture kittens. Yet everybody acts to get the most satisfaction. In fact, people do act mostly for self-interest even though the idea that they do it has some logical faults and sometimes is not factually true. I do not explain here how to deal with this problem or explain what is good and bad about economics.

The idea that people differ subjectively is a “hole” in the center of the system of ideas of economics. This hole in the center of systems that eat the world is important, all of them have some kind of such hole, and we will see it again later in systems that are built from mystic visions. The hole in the middle of a thought system makes it hard to test the system and makes the system impervious to evidence.

Another example of a system that eats the world that is not overtly religious or metaphysical is “depth” psychology in which psychologists (or psychiatrists) explain in terms of id, ego, superego, life impulse, death wish, sex, anger, fulfillment, childhood experiences, etc.

Examples of thought systems that eat the world and that include a strong component of religion and-or metaphysics include major religions, political correctness, all zealotry, nature worship and working to serve nature, market worship, power worship, art worship, fashion worship (“The Devil Wears Prada”), fascination with demons, seeing the Devil behind all evil, cosmic awareness, and all kinds of conspiracy theories whether there is a real conspiracy or not (see the movies “Conspiracy Theory” and “Enemy of the State”).

A traditional thought system that eats the world, and is important in religion and metaphysics, comes from Plato and Socrates. People always do what is good. People only do what is good. People never do what is bad. People only do bad things because they do not have complete knowledge or they believe something false. If people fully understand themselves and their situations, they always do what is right. If a person ever does anything wrong, that person acted on the basis of incomplete or wrong information. All people are always capable of seeing the truth once it is presented to them, and all people are always capable of seeing the link between the truth and acting well. Nobody is too stupid. Nobody is too clever. Teachers and politicians are responsible for making sure that people have enough knowledge to act well enough to make sure that they do their duty as citizens and that the state runs well. I do not explain how this view has shaped Western political, moral, and psychological ideas and our ideas about knowledge.

If a person has a chance to steal a lot of money and to get away cleanly but does not steal, that person did not steal because that person rightly knew the importance of morality. If a person has a chance to steal and does steal, that person did not rightly know the importance of morality. Morality can always defeat selfishness, greed, power, lust, laziness, etc. when people deeply understand. This is the same kind of circular subjectivity we find in economics.

(Plato confounds this argument with arguments that moral action is also good for us and good for the state, both practically and in hazy ideas of goodness. I do not go into the problems here.)

When I first studied ecology, I was amazed at the attitude that prevailed then, and still often prevails now. I could understand the good motives behind the attitude but the attitude was plainly false, and people should have been more willing to update their attitude to accord with reality. Everything in nature was part of a system. All systems were closed. All systems supported themselves and perpetuated themselves. Every animal and plant played a part in the survival and reproduction of its species. Every species played a role in the survival and perpetuation on the ecosystem. We could completely understand every species by the role that it played in the ecosystem. We could completely understand every animal and plant by the part it played in service to its species. Ecosystems were divided into “trophic levels of production” beginning with plants and microcellular beings that directly converted energy from the sun, through herbivores, carnivores, and ending in top carnivores. The upper levels controlled the lower levels, something like the idealized class system in Feudal Europe or modern capitalism. Every plant or animal provided food for some specific other plants-or-animals or limited some specific other plants-or-animals. For example, herbs, deer, and wolves danced together so that each limited and yet also encouraged the others. Every noxious pest and disease played some role by limiting or encouraging species, including mosquitoes, malaria, flesh-eating bacteria, HIV, cancer, tapeworms, and poisonous mold on peanuts and in houses. The fit of a particular organism or of a species was its “adaptation”. All particular organisms and species were well adapted no matter how they varied. If you did not have allergies, you were well adapted; if you did have allergies, you were well adapted. Brown, grey, and white bears were well-adapted. Biologists and anthropologists could find rationalizations for how any particular individual creature or any species was well adapted, and how any feature was part of an adaptation.

This thinking has much truth but is not entirely true. The ways in which it is not true cause real problems and leave open important questions. There are adapted features such as the color of a bear or the mane of a male lion but the features are not always for the good of the species or the ecosystem. The course of biology since about 1970 started as a reaction against this thinking. Individual organisms seek their own reproduction. In seeking, they act and interact in ways that lead to somewhat stable systems but not to the ideal “everything has a place” kind of system. For example, lions have prides in which female lions, usually sisters, cooperate to hunt and to raise cubs; that looks like a system of “everything has its place”. Yet male lions kill all the cubs in a pride when they take over the pride from the old male. This act cannot be explained by how it serves the pride, species, or ecosystem but only by how it serves a particular male even at the expense of the pride, species, and ecosystem. People who think nature is all one glorious self-perpetuating romp build their big houses in the forest, clearing patch after patch, thinking all will be well because they are now part of holy systematic nature, and, by building there, cause large fires and mud slides. People build houses right on the beach thinking storms will not strike them because they are now part of nature. When we see nature as one glorious self-perpetuating romp we cannot assess how various farming practices affect nature. We can only take care of nature by accepting that it is not one glorious self-supporting system.

These systems can have their charm. In the European Middle Ages, ideally, everybody had a place and all places were part of God’s sacred society. All productive activities were part of God’s plan, and priests could find an explanation for all productive activities. Even warriors and priests were part of productive

activities. People had a reason to live. If you were willing to find a place in the social world, you could find a reason to live.

Despite the charm, the world of the European Middle Ages was stagnant. Only by shaking up Feudalism could capitalism arise with all its benefits. Now that modern capitalism has arisen, it has formed a new quasi-system, and the people that benefit from the new quasi-system see it in the same way that lords in the Middle Ages saw their quasi-system, as something with places for everyone and in which everyone can find a place as long as he-she does what benefits the system and its rulers. People who benefit from capitalism now think of its roles as sacred, and can rationalize every role that they want. "Job creators" are not simply business people out to make a buck but holy agents of God. "House flippers" used to be creative sacred innovators who moved goods (houses) to people who wanted them until the market crashed. The same was true of mortgage dealers. Speculators in petroleum products are sacred agents who stabilize the price system for all of us even if speculators sometimes drive up the price and even if they benefit greatly themselves.

The Worst Effect: Lack of Judgment about Ideas.

The worst aspect of thought systems that eat the world is that they make it hard to draw the line between a true useful idea and a bad harmful idea. Even good useful ideas can become bad hurtful ideas when they become part of a system that eats the world. It is true that people act largely out of self-interest but when we make a system that eats the world out of the idea that people act only out of self-interest, and never for any other reasons, then we undermine the idea that people often act out of self-interest. This is what happens in the market-worship version of (neoclassical) economics and in modern evolutionary theory. We see a few cases when people do not act out of self-interest, and we grow suspicious of the whole true idea. We don't know how to draw the line between selfish, self-interested, and altruistic; and we can't tell when it is important and not important to draw the line. People who have not had much of a moral education do act worse than people who have. A clear idea of morality can override selfishness, greed, lust, power, etc. much of the time. When we see situations clearly so that the moral component stands out, we are, in fact, more likely to act morally. So the idea from Plato and Socrates is largely true and it is important in making a good society. But it is not always true. Sometimes people see quite clearly but still succumb to lust, power, etc. This is a point that Paul made in his letters, and it tormented him greatly. It is an important point in modern society, and an underlying argument in the "culture wars" between the Left and Right.

(1) The Mediator at the Center.

This section and the next explain in some more detail just how systems that eat the world do it. They do not explain everything. If you wish, you can skip them for now, but the ideas will be useful later when assessing major world religions, in particular Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. The two major themes, the mediator and the hole in the middle, go together, strongly imply each other, and likely could not keep up without support from each other; but it is useful to treat them separately. I repeat these ideas at other places in the book in case you don't recall them from here.

My comments here do not apply to religious systems other than those that originated in states based on agriculture such as Israel, India, and China, to their successor religions in similar states, such as Islam,

and to their modern forms in industrial and post-industrial states such as Christianity in the United States. There are divine mediators in religions found among hunter-gatherer-foragers and among horticultural tribal societies but I say nothing about them here.

For reasons that I do not entirely understand, people in states want a semi-divine or divine mediator between them and God, Dharma, or the Tao. They feel they cannot get in touch directly with God etc. themselves, and must depend on a mediator. With the mediator, they feel comfortable with requests, such as for healthy children, that they feel might not be appropriate to ask God about. The mere fact of the mediator means they are automatically “in good” with God etc. if they do the right things for worship and some right daily practices such as meditation. Without the mediator, they cannot get “in good” with God etc. on their own no matter how gifted. With the mediator, they are saved; without the mediator, they are doomed. With the mediator, they can be successful in both religious life and in daily practical family, business, community, and political life.

The obvious mediators are the obvious heroes of the major religions (“heroes” is a gender neutral term that includes female heroes). Maybe Jesus fits the pattern most obviously but he is hardly the only figure to meet the pattern. Even when religions stress the humanity of their heroes, they act toward their heroes as if the heroes were divine or semi-divine. (I do not distinguish between divine and semi-divine, as a Christian has to.) The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, insisted that he was only a man but his followers treat him as a divine mediator. Mohammad insisted he was only a man but Muslims act toward him, or toward his words, as if he were a semi-divine mediator. Officially a bodhisattva is only a human being but Mahayana Buddhists hold them about on the same status that Christians hold the high archangels. Judaism is absolutely clear that no man can be God but they treat Moses, David, and, sometimes the Macabbees as if they were so close to God as to be semi-divine; they effectively worship Moses and David. Hindus are honest about the divine status of their mediators, the avatars.

It helped me greatly to understand the mediator when I began to see the mediator in the context of whole systems. For that, I had to learn several distinct systems. The mediator is part of how the system works. Without the mediator, the system would not work well. Oddly, God cannot play this role because God is needed to keep other parts of the system high, out of reach, and powerful.

(2) The Hole in the Center.

(2.1) World-eating ideologies typically have several ideas about how we Realize the Supreme Spirit and our links to everything, and about how we Ascend and are Saved. The ideas are not sharply defined, and relations between the ideas are not sharply defined. For example, even after millennia, it is still not clear what the persons of the Christian Holy Trinity are, what their relations are, and what their relations are to Mary the Queen of Heaven. It is still not clear how we get grace, who gets grace, and relations of grace to free will and our own efforts.

When many related but indefinite ideas are available, it is easy for people to project on to the system what they want, of course within some broad limits. When people can see what they want, they can do what they want. When they are part of a system that allows them to do what they want, they support the system. Always some people have more power and can interpret the ideas to their favor, and against the advantage of other people, but that is part of the overall situation too.

Think of an abstract painting. It is made of lines, triangles, slashes, bolts, and other figures that are like figures from geometry but are not exact geometric figures such as exact diamonds or pentagons. You can see in it what you wish such as the clash of civilizations over history, the Big Bang, the March of Art, or March of Science. Some Cubism, Joan Miro, or Piet Mondrian also sometimes are like this. Turner's work often is a swirl around an almost-empty center but with something important near the center. Even Baroque and Mannerist painting often was organized this way.

That is what systems with many ideas are like. That is how they eat the world, by absorbing it. You can see what you want in accord with the fashions of the times although it might be easier to see some things than others. You can see both militant conquering of the world or soft love in Christianity and Hinduism depending on fashion.

If paintings don't work well for you, think of the Grand Canyon or some other large canyon with a river running through it and lots of different scenery on all sides of it. Think too of an urban landscape with a lot of variety such as all of New York City – not just Manhattan – or think of all of San Francisco or Los Angeles. Usually major cities have rivers running through them too.

(2.2) Imagine the same painting but with a "hole" in the center, such as a big grainy uneven splotch. Everything seems tied to that hole in the center even without lines or any deliberate links. Everything seems to revolve around that hole in the center even when there is no obvious circular motion in the painting. Even when things seem to deliberately swirl away from the hold in the center, they are still connected to the hole in the center. The connection works better when the thing at the center is a valley rather than a mountain. The hole in the center is like a theme in a song that gets stated at the beginning, gets lost, pops up, gets lost, pops up, and so on. Even when the other music in the song is not directly related to the theme, it seems as if the other music is related to the theme, and it seems as if the whole piece is built on the theme. Pop song usually is not like this, but, if you know any famous stereotypical symphony, such as "Beethoven's Fifth", often it is.

A good example both of "splotches" and the hole in the center is the movie "Pulp Fiction". The splotches are the various scenes, especially evident as splotches because they are out of temporal order and you can read a lot into them. You can see the characters as "splotches" and read what you want into them too. The hole in the center is the briefcase from which comes a golden light. People read many things into that nothingness, and relate what they see in the case with what they make of the other splotches. Vincent and Jules do a lot of their own reading in as the movie goes along.

(2.3) The hole in the center is both positive and negative, both the absorber of the world and the emitter of the world.

(2.4) The hole in the center is closely tied to cosmic principles such as Goodness, Life, Never Ending, Truth, Reincarnation, Freedom, Mutual Dependence, Creativity, Interestingness, Justice, Fairness, Justification, Salvation, etc.

(2.5) Not everybody can relate to cosmic principles so the hole in the center is also tied to lesser but still very important principles such as Business, Prosperity, Family, Family Success, Pride, Honor, Our Group,

Art, etc. These slightly lesser principles sometimes associate with particular splotches in the rest of the painting. People can project these lesser but still important principles on splotches.

(6) Sometimes the center is God or the equivalent such as Dharma, but not as often as you might think, not even in theistic religions. God is too big and powerful. More often the center is a heroic semi-divine person. People need to find their position in relation to the hole in the center but people can only relate well with another person. So, if the hole in the center is filled with another person, then people can relate to the whole system-that-eats-the-world much more easily. All major religions have a person of some kind in the hole at the center.

(2.7) The person at the center is both divine and human.

(2.8) Few people can relate to cosmic principles in the abstract, such as “emptiness”, and most people find it hard to relate to lesser principles in the abstract, such as “family”. People like to personify cosmic principles, to embody cosmic principles. The semi-divine mediator being at the center of a system that eats the world usually embodies cosmic principles and thus makes them accessible to normal people. Jesus and the bodhisattva embody cosmic Love. Krishna embodies cosmic Joyous Duty and the Perpetuation of Dharma.

(2.9) The semi-divine mediator being at the center of a system does not represent only one cosmic principle. People need an array of cosmic principles. The being at the center takes on various cosmic principles as needed in situations. The cosmic principles are not always compatible but that is not often a problem. Jesus embodies the cosmic principles of Love and stern Justice. Hindu avatars embody the cosmic principles of both Stasis and Change.

I cannot here “hold forth” on how the hole in the middle ties together the system. The hole is like a secret at the heart of a conspiracy movie. When the ideas of religious system contradict, as they usually do, rather than undermine the power of the hole in the center, contradiction deepens how effective the hole in the center is for tying it all together.

Besides painting, much art is like this, especially in giving a screen on which we can project. Sometimes I imagine as many scenarios as I can while listening to long jazz cuts. Some of the most “out there” jazz lends itself well to imaginative projecting such as Eric Dolphy and Thelonius Monk. Ballet music is great for imaginative projecting when you learn to get the original ballet out of your head, as with Tchaikovsky (“The Nutcracker”) or Copland (“Rodeo”). Rock “jam” bands from the 2000s, such as Phish or Moe, work the same way. As far as I know, there is no good theory of the evolution of the capacity for art that takes these aspects of art into account.

I do not evaluate ideas such as “Jesus saves” or “Only Mohammad knows the will of God” according to truth. I put them in other contexts and explained them by the role they play, in this case as roles within the context of mystic systems that eat the world. Just because we can look at an idea in several ways does not mean the idea is true or false. Just because we can look at “Jesus saves” or “Only Mohammad” in terms of its role in a system that eats the world does not mean the idea is true or false. After we have seen an idea in various ways, we have to go back to assess the idea on the basis of its truth, as best we can. Sometimes, the use of the idea in other ways can bear on how we assess its truth, but not often.

We cannot explain away ideas by looking at them crookedly. It is a good idea to take ideas at face value to begin with. You have to practice seeing ideas in many ways and in many contexts, and then assessing their truth. I have not yet found a system that eats the world that is fully true in itself; only parts of such systems are true.

Annoyed at Embodied Cosmic Principles.

I dislike the idea that a semi-divine being at the center of system embodies cosmic principles. You will see why as we go along in the book. We don't need it. We get confused by it. If you can do it, you are better off relating directly to God, using the hero of your religion as a guide.

The fact that I don't like systems that eat the world does not mean that every aspect of them is false and bad, or that every such system as a whole is false and bad. Every system relies on some deep and good truths. The fact that I don't like systems that eat the world, with a hole and a semi-divine person at the center, does not mean some systems are not worse than others, and some systems are not better than others. It does not mean all systems are equally false and equally bad. You have to assess for yourself. I hope this book helps.

If you are comfortable in such as system, such as a major religion, then I suggest you think it through to find what is true and good about it, or unreal and maybe bad. You don't have to junk it. Act on what you consider its best principles in line with what you consider to be the best principles in general, such as the Golden Rule. Take a good honest look at other religions. Be honest about their good and bad points. Then do what you think is best.

A Bad Focus-Hole in the Center.

Even in bad systems, the focus-hole in the center usually is good. People wrongly do bad things in the name of good but they still do them in the name of good. Nazis, Empire Communists, Empire Capitalists, and Empire PC people do bad things in the name of something that is good. Most people don't like the idea that the hole in the center might be bad or amoral. They do not build systems around immoral centers. Even Satan worshippers see Satan as a good center, and as a comforter, in relation to them.

In contrast, partly out of suspicion of bad systems, since the 1920s, and especially in detective fiction and in stories about families, American culture has consistently called the center bad. We have repeated images of corrupt politics with corrupt people and corrupt families buried at the center. Every supposedly good family has a skeleton in the closet, and the skeleton still moves. The detective has to peel off layers of hypocrisy and cover-up to find the eventual root of all badness. The psychologist has to unearth layers of bad memories, repression, abuse, and complexes before finally revealing the bad truth that might, or might not, set some of the family members free.

Why we should see systems in these terms in our times is a wonderful question that I can't go into this book. I get into it in other essays on pop culture. The fact that I do not work through the question here is not another instance of a cover-up of a bad system.

Society.

Thought systems that eat the world depend on vagueness and on the ability to project meanings into the vagueness. Dharma and God's Will are examples. This use of vagueness is alright up to a point but too much vagueness is counter-productive, especially for guardians who want to interpret systems in ways that serve them. Priests are happy if God wills that people should give a regular offering to the Temple in Jerusalem but not that God allows people to make an offering on their own at any "high place" nearby them. It is good if a warrior has the Dharma to protect our city and to conquer our neighbors but not so good if a neighboring king has the Dharma to conquer our city and put all of our priests to death. Dharma and God's Will need some social limits.

People who interpret thought systems usually interpret them so as to reinforce the society in which they want power, status, and security. Thought systems go along with particular societies, usually stratified state societies such as in traditional Europe, India, China, the Middle East, and the United States.

Particular societies, such as India or Europe, mold their major thought systems that eat the world, such as the Dharma system and Christianity's version of God's Will. On the flip side, thought systems mold the societies that they come to attach to. Exactly how this happens is much too big a topic to go into here. I go into it some in the chapter on Hinduism.

How much do traditional thought systems that eat the world change when the society to which they are tied changes? As Hinduism moves away from traditional India into the modern world, how will the Dharma system change? As Europe and America moved away from traditional agrarian and industrial societies into capitalism and intensive technology, what happens to good versus evil?

PART 4: Myth, Chaos, Order, God, and Society

Part 4 and Part 5 explain the influence of some ideas-in-myths from Jewish and Western cultures. Part 4 explains ideas about order, disorder, culture, society, and people. Part 5 explains ideas about rebels and the "Remnant". The myths-ideas shape how we act, how society turns out, and our roles in society. The myths-ideas are not merely grandiose versions of entertainment for kids. Usually people follow the myths unconsciously without knowing where they got the ideas. In conforming, people think they act freely, naturally, rightly, and independently. No American President since at least John Kennedy has been elected without unconsciously appealing to these myths.

Sometimes the myths-ideas lead to good. Yet when society has root problems that people will not face, as we have now, the myths-ideas lead to excuses and to reinforcing bad organization.

Do not dismiss the ideas just because they are in myths. The ideas might still be correct enough to guide us. Rather, as with other ideas that evolved beings have, assess according to truth and usefulness even if the ideas are embedded in myths. Use the ideas-in-myths to think with as long as they are useful. Let the myths guide you to better understanding as long as you don't also let them mislead you.

After the West became important around the world, these myths also shaped non-Western life. Non-Western cultures have their own versions of similar myths but I cannot here describe them. Take what you find here and apply it as you can to non-Western life.

Introduction: Bad Chaos, Good Moderate Order, Bad Hyper-order.

Like Goldilocks' porridge, order can be divided into hyper-order, moderate order, and disorder or chaos. Each type has good versions and bad versions. Each type is more likely or less likely to come with the decent persons that we like to see. Chaos can arise from no order at all, from too much order, from the overlap of different kinds of order, even the overlap of different kinds of moderate order. Chaos can be like the disorder from owning too much stuff, seeing too much TV, or having too many choices. I don't specify what causes chaos; and I call it all "disorder" or "chaos".

Almost every group and every person says that, in theory, too much order and too much chaos are bad while moderate order is good.

Within "good moderate order" are many varieties. Cultures, political theorists, and economists differ on the details of what order is good or bad. Nearly all cultures think they have the right kind and amount of order, and the good people that go along with it. In America, in a car, we tolerate teenagers draping their feet high on the seat in front while in Japan and Thailand they do not. In America, we think creativity and chaos go together. We think too much order stifles creativity. We would rather err on the side of chaos-and-creativity than on the side of order. Until recently, most of the rest of the world preferred to err on the side of too much order.

Sometimes whole assemblages of order, culture, society, and kinds of persons come together, mutually reinforce each other, and are fairly stable. Despite charming confusion, a "farmers' market" is ordered, you are likely to see some kinds of people there but not others, the general atmosphere encourages that kind of person, and that kind of person encourages the general atmosphere. Despite apparent disorder, American society is stable and is ordered along lines of socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender, age, and religion; the apparent disorder and the real underlying order produce Americans; and Americans produce American order. Stalinism was highly ordered, produced particular kinds of awful people, and was stable. The kinds of people that Stalinism produced helped reproduce Stalinism.

We would like stable assemblages to make good people, and good people to make stable assemblages, but that doesn't happen as often as we need. When it happens, we should hold on to it. Some countries have that.

Usually people want chaos to turn into good moderate order, as when a forest arises again after a fire or an economy builds again after a recession. Sometimes people see good moderate order as coming from hyper-order, usually by toning down hyper-order: the end of the Middle Ages due to the capitalist free market or loosening of European and Japanese societies due to influence by Americans. Often hyper-ordered societies have to be broken first, and go through chaos, before they can find good moderate order. Americans see this breaking in the demise of fascism and Communism. Now the world sees it in Luke's overthrow of Emperor Darth Sidious in the modern epic "Star Wars". It remains to be seen what kind of moderate order will arise in a galaxy far away. Hindu myths also record these ideas about order, and about preserving good moderate order, as when Shiva shakes loose (destroys) a hyper-ordered bad society (world) and Vishnu restores good moderate order; see the chapter on Hinduism.

Rarely does good moderate order stay in the middle where the best of everything lies. Good moderate order wobbles. It veers toward chaos (looseness or laxness) or toward hyper-order (strictness). People used to say it swings like a pendulum. Societies, and subgroups within societies, differ about whether it is worse for order to be a little too loose or a little too strict. They differ on which tendency is likely to be more dangerous and lead to bad problems, which tendency is likely to break good moderate order out of orbit altogether.

Stereotypically, young people enjoy some chaos but fear hyper-order while old people fear chaos and feel comfortable with some hyper-order. Conservatives fear that bad hyper-order comes from looseness (left wing ideology and behavior); and Conservatives tolerate some hyper-order to avoid bad chaos from bad looseness. Liberals fear that bad hyper-order comes from any hyper-order (strong Republican business state) and are willing to tolerate much chaos to avoid that bad result.

Ideas about order, disorder, right people, and right institutions, usually do not use terms of hyper-order, moderate order, and chaos but terms of a dual opposition between “yes” and “no”. It is easier to think in terms of “yes” and “no”, “good” and “bad”, than to think of gradations and process, and try to find a mixed good middle. But the “yes” and “no” were themselves set in a broader stage of chaos, moderate order, and hyper-order.

For a long time, the “no” and “yes” of duality was “chaos” versus “order”. Chaos was badness, and good order arose from it. People didn’t worry much about hyper-order unless they were oppressed by foreign invaders, and, even then, as long as taxes were no higher, still didn’t worry about hyper-order. “The enemy of our good order is chaos. Chaos is bad. When our good order breaks down, what we get is bad chaos. When we tame bad chaos, what we get is good order, our good order.”

One reason people think in dual terms rather than in terms of hyper-order, moderate order, and chaos is that people fear one pole more than the other. If you fear chaos more than hyper-order, then you fix on the border between chaos versus good moderate order, and think in those terms. You don’t worry about hyper-order or you glamorize it. Your group’s order is good moderate order even if it is really fascism. If you fear hyper-order, then you fix on the border between hyper-order versus good moderate order, and think in those terms. You don’t worry about chaos or you glamorize it. Your group’s order is the good moderate order even if your group is really is plagued by self-indulgence, broken families, living off the state, aimless lost lives, hollow education, gangsters, and a reaction against general order that amounts to another version of fascism.

Since about 1800, Americans often think in terms of bad old rigid hyper-order versus good new somewhat chaotic order. In the past, ideals of good order were more akin to hyper-order than to chaos. Now, ideals of good order are more akin to chaos than to hyper-order. Real hyper-order, real strictness, is bad. Hyper-order is the new bad chaos. It is better to err on the side of too much chaos than on the side of a little hyper-order.

I don’t like the platitude that extremes turn into their opposites (too much love becomes like hate) but here is a case where it is useful. Allowing too much hyper-order becomes a kind of chaos; it stultifies us into chaos. Allowing too much chaos brings compensating bad hyper-order, such as cults, desperate need for

political or religious leaders, silly ideas of rebellion, and chronic bad attitude for no good reason. We lose the middle and the self. All this is one theme in the movie "The Breakfast Club".

I know the usefulness of thinking dually and I too despise bad old hyper-order. Still, that thinking is too simplistic, not mature, and not up to the needs of citizenship. Adept citizens should see varieties of order, chaos, moderate order, and hyper-order. We need to think what causes what. We need to think what is good and bad. We need to think what we want and how to get it. We need to realistically see whether chaos or hyper-order makes the most danger, and when. We need to get past Conservative and Liberal.

Don't get confused, especially by Liberals and Conservatives. Much of their attitudes have more to do with what people tell themselves than with what they really think and really do. In reality, Conservatives tolerate a lot of disorder in the economy and among the "lower classes" as long as the disorder serves them and they keep their order at the top. Disorder among the lower classes keeps them fighting among themselves. Most Liberal disorder is fashion statement, youthful drug use, and youthful sexual dalliance. Liberals are rebels for a few years. Liberals praise disorder among the other classes because it helps to insure that Liberal kids go to the best schools and have the best jobs. Some Liberal groups are among the best ordered I have ever seen, especially those organized by non-traditional genders such as some lesbians and gay men. Working class people are rebels in their own minds when they drive big cars or off-road vehicles, or when they get fat watching violent sports on TV. Really they lead lives well-ordered by the needs of work, and their kids fall into line when it comes down to rules for hard partying and the rules for making a living.

Tanakh (Old Testament) Myths (1): Description.

Contrary to popular misconception, the Bible has more than one origin story (myth) about how the world began. In each myth, God imposes the right good moderate order, the best that is possible between bad chaos and bad hyper-order. I focus on story (3) below about Tiamat. Search the myths on the Internet. The numbering below intends to make reading easier, not to look like a math text and so to scare you.

(1) Genesis, Chapter 1, Verses 1 to 23 (Genesis 1:1-23). The first myth is the familiar story of God willing (saying, speaking, declaring, wording) things into being, such as light and land, over six "days", and then resting on the seventh day. God is good, and his creation is good. God is creative, alive, and the source of life. Life gets its life from God's life. God asserts godliness through commands, that is, laws. People participate in the order of God when they know his commands and follow them. When people follow his commands, they get stable well-ordered good society, a good life, a long abundant life, and participate in the creativity of God.

(2) Genesis 2:4-24. Here is the familiar story of Adam, Eve, the Trees, the Fruit, and the Serpent. In story (1), God makes Adam and Eve together while in this story (2) God makes Eve from Adam's rib to insure Adam has help and does not get lonely – see the movie "Adam's Rib" with Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn. The beginning of this story shows God asserting good balanced order between chaos and too much order, as when God makes the Garden and gives Adam and Eve everything but one Tree. The end shows God restoring the best balanced order possible after Adam, Eve, and the Serpent ruined the original best balanced order. I do not stress this myth here and so I do not dwell on my interpretation as just given. My interpretation does fit in with what I have to say using myth (3).

(3) Job 41:1-34. Hebrews, and so Jews, share the third myth with many peoples of the Middle East. The third myth tells how God tamed chaos to make stuff such as safe land, to make our ordered world, and foster society. In Job, chaos is “Tiamat” the “dragon”, “worm”, or “crocodile”. The King James Version translated the Hebrew word as “Leviathan”. Leviathan is now the traditional term in English. But that term overlooks the Hebrew original and the link between Hebrew stories and other stories in the Middle East. It is better to use “Tiamat”. Tiamat is not a fire dragon as in European myth but a water dragon more like Chinese myth. In Job, God also is good and his creation is good. God is creativity and life. People get all the same benefits of following God’s commands in this myth (3) as in myth (1). In modern terms, we say Tiamat “symbolizes” bad chaos but in mythic terms Tiamat just is without implying any particular symbolism. Tiamat and chaos are not necessarily morally bad but they are dangerous, and it is better when they are subject to order. Where the myth likely originated, in the marshes of Southern Iraq, flood was a problem. People who have grown up in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition know how important the first and second myths are but do not often know how important this myth is. The names of the players, and their exact identities, change in different times and places but the drama stays the same: chaos is powerful, and a powerful being has to tame chaos so as to make stuff, impose order, make life secure, promote, goodness, and life, and allow society to flourish.

(4) Genesis 5:32-10:1. This is the story of Noah, the Flood, and the Ark. For a fun version with political messages, and with morality overcoming bad politics, see the movie by Steve Carrell. For a version that is aggressively vivid, just dark enough and so modern, see the movie with Russell Crowe, Jennifer Connelly, and Emma Watson.

(5) Isaiah 34:14. This passage mentions “Lilith”. This passage does not tell the story of Lilith or give a clear idea of what the name “Lilith” refers to. That material is in several other places in Jewish literature and other literature of the Middle East. Even then, the reference is not clearly to one person or being. The story is not relevant here except that Lilith was usually taken as a negative chaotic female dark force (“night spirit”) that has to be controlled by a positive orderly male light force of God, usually through a representative of God, usually by a man. Then this view was seen as patriarchic and bad, and Lilith was redeemed to be the symbol of the original natural complex multi-faceted feminine. See feminist literature and “vampire” literature, movies, and TV where Lilith serves modern ideas of gender. Search “Lilith Fair”. See the TV show “Supernatural” about the Winchester brothers.

(6) The “Pentateuch”, or first Five Books of the Tanakh (Old Testament), is the origin story of the Hebrew people, Israel, and the later Jewish nation. In particular, the story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt and to the Promised Land of Canaan is an origin story of the (later) Israelite nation, if not the whole world. The Exodus story and the story of making Israel have many instances of a good balanced order between chaos and hyper-order but I do not pursue them here.

(7) The entire New Testament, especially the Gospel of John. (7A) John says Jesus was present from the beginning of time and was the actual creator of the world, apparently acting on the authority (Will) of God the Father. In myth (1) (seven days), in the Christian view, God created the world through his Word, and, in John, Jesus is the Word. The Word is God too. The Word creates and gives order. John does not make clear if Jesus is the one (Word) who parted the land and water, made the sun and moon, etc. John does not make clear if Jesus is the Spirit that carried out the commands and that “moved on the

water”, and does not make clear Jesus’ relation to the Spirit in the Tanakh. (7B) Effectively, the world is totally recreated spiritually due to Jesus being born as a human, living, being executed, coming back to life, and going up again to Heaven in Glory. Jesus plays the new Moses but more creatively and on a much larger scale, leading all of humanity to the new world that he just (re-) created. I would guess that, in the standard Christian view, the new order of Jesus is the best balanced order between chaos and hyper-order but neither John nor other New Testament writers make a point of this view, so I do not stress it here either.

(7 continued) Whatever ordering that God the Father does, can be credited to Jesus as well; and Jesus does his own ordering of chaos too, as when he organizes the poor, casts out demons, heals people, provides food, and institutes the Eucharist. As a sacrament that combines flesh and spirit, the Eucharist is a balance between the poor order of the body and the hyper-order of only-spirit. The Devil revolted at precisely this balanced mixed better order.

(7 continued) As far as I can tell, orthodox Christian theology interprets the idea that Jesus created the world to mean that Jesus and the Father are outside time. So, although not completely correct to say Jesus was “before” time, that way of saying gives the sense of Jesus as “beyond” time and as creator of the world. Orthodox Christianity rejects the idea that God the Father made Jesus within the flow of time-as-we-know-it, and then, later in the same flow of time, Jesus, as a creature of God, made the world. Jesus and God are co-eternal and co-creators.

It is wrong to think of absolute chaos on one side versus the absolute rigid right order of God on the other. That thinking misses the mark and leads to mistakes. Rather, God sets order that is a good compromise between the two absolutes and that is superior to the two absolutes. He finds the good compromise in the middle. God’s order is creatively goodly flexible. Originally in stories (1) and (2), God’s compromise order is the absolute best that could be achieved under any circumstances. In story (2), God’s best order is ruined, so God finds the best compromise good order that can be achieved in the new situation. In the terms of C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and other theologians, when the Devil turns God’s good into evil, God makes a responding good that is even greater-and-better than the original good. The better middle is a major theme in Buddhism as well, the “Middle Path”.

God does not eliminate chaos; he tames it. He calls on chaos when annoyed, as when he sent the flood in the time of Noah and sent fire down on Sodom and Gomorrah. Examples of hyper-order and of how God does not like hyper-order are not as common as examples of dangerous chaos. When the Hebrews had chiefs and prophets but not kings and high priests, the Hebrews wanted kings like the neighbors; see below the story of David. God told the Hebrews that this order is hyper-order, is a mistake, and would turn out badly in many ways. The Hebrews persisted in jealousy of kingly neighbors. Finally God let them have their way anyhow – and bad results did follow. Worshipping mammon and power is a kind of hyper-order and it is wrong. Insisting on pure spirituality without any admixture of materiality, sensation, and life is a wrong hyper-order whether the mistake is made by fallen angels, Agent Smith, or super smart machines. Most hyper-order is like chaos in its bad effects. In the New Testament and Christian writings after, bad hyper-order is the Pharisees – this view is wrong but accepted. In modern views, hyper-order is Fascism, Communism, Left PC, big business, plots for world security and thus world domination, and the Sith Emperor. In “Harry Potter” books, bad hyper-order is both the English middle class which represses magic, as with Harry’s aunt and uncle, and the Pure Bloods and Death Eaters who want rigid

blood-based class-based magic-powered fascism. Hogwarts, with love, friends, magic, “mudbloods”, and clever naughtiness, is the happy middle.

Life, Reason, Emotion, Creativity, Inspiration, and Art.

- (A) (1) Matter; (2) Life; (3) Clever Hyper-Ordered Systems, often now with Machines
- (B) (1) Reason; (2) Creative Inspiration; (3) Emotion
- (C) (1) Craft; (2) Creative Real Art; (3) Imitative Artificial Derivative Poser
- (D) Mechanical; Organic, of Life; Super-Organic Hyper-Ordered, akin to Death
- (E) Death; Clever Creative Organized Life; Overly Complex Social Institutional Life
- (F) Socially Culturally Unaware but OK Person; Real Genuine Person; Poser
- (G) Mere Factoid; Real and True; Unreal, Illusory, Delusory, False
- (H) Dependently real and so unreal; Becoming; Fully real and enduring
- (I) Mere Rote or Technique; Creative Cleverness; Uncreative Hyper-Cleverness
- (J) Mechanical; Nature, Natural, and Lively; Social, Imitative, Contrived Life
- (K) No Choice; Choice leading to best outcome; Too much choice that amounts to no choice
- (L) One kind of bad hyper-order; Good moderate order; Another kind of bad hyper-order

This section describes some sets of ideas that Westerners use to understand and assess order. I do not deal with all the sets listed above, only A, B and C. The issues come up again later. The ideas here link up with ideas above about God giving order but I do not point out the details.

Here I write using triples. People also think in terms of twos, threes, fours, fives, or more but it is clearer here to use one format. You should see links and parallels between the sets of triples.

Do not expect consistency within triples or between them. Contradiction happens even if it shouldn't. Interplay and confusion is part of the fun, part of how ideas hold minds, and of how people use ideas to control themselves and others; but I can't go into all that.

I do not assess much for truth or usefulness. Liberals (Left) and Conservatives (Right) both rely heavily on these categories but in different ways.

(A) Mere matter consists of things such as particles of dirt and billiard balls. Matter is still matter even if it is totally unorganized. Matter can be organized but not usually by itself. In contrast, we have Life. Life is made of matter but is more than mere matter. Life is not life if it is not organized, and life organizes itself. Matter gets pushed around by other matter but Life also acts on its own. Life is creative. In contrast to both mere matter and to moderately organized Life, we have clever hyper-ordered systems that act alive, such as mad computers and malevolent storms. The modern symbol for such systems is the super smart machine. A bad system is instantiated in matter so that the matter moves and has intent but the matter still is not alive, like vampires were before they got glamorous. Matter is morally neutral and matter can be used for bad (Death Star) or good (Robbie the Robot). Hyper-ordered machines and hyper-ordered society are bad. Life is in-between. It is ordered but not hyper-ordered. As something in-between mere matter and hyper-order, Life transcends both. Life should be all-good although it can fall to the bad. Life is creative and inspired in a way that mere machines cannot be; see below.

God is Life, the source of Life, model for all Life, and inspiration for the Life in all living things. God is the source above mere matter and hyper-ordered systems. God is creative and the source of creativity. Evil is the cunning artificial imitation of God, the Life in God, the Life from God, and God's creativity.

For a fun apt modern “take” on this three-fold contrast of mere matter, Life, and hyper-organized system, read about complexity theory. Melanie Mitchell wrote an excellent non-mathematical popular introduction. Some theorists make a point of seeing Life as on the cusp between chaotic no organization and rigid hyper-organization.

(B) Westerners have been plagued by a contrast between emotion and reason. Just as matter and mad machines have their in-between so does emotion and reason. It is: inspired reason, driven by emotion, and guided by morality; inspiration as the guide to emotion, morality, and reason; and inspiration informed by reason and morality, and driven by emotion. Think of Dr. McCoy as emotion, Mr. Spock and Sheldon as too much dry reason, and Captain Kirk as the successful inspired blend. Inspiration as the good mix of reason and emotion is one big source of life and the success of life. Reason, emotion, and inspiration can be good or bad in their own ways but we think of them as good when good people do them.

The bad version of inspiration is “cunning”. It is too much reason, too much emotion, and too much order, with no guidance from morality, and no guidance from the reasoning of others, as when Hitler rose or the Emperor Darth Sidious in “Star Wars” planned and carried out his rise. In the “Star Wars” movies, when Jedi are overly-committed to reason with no emotion, they cannot defeat the Sith. The Sith use emotion but guide their emotion not with the proper mix of reason and morality but with a bad use of cunning – the Sith are more than just emotion unbridled, they are more than Dr. McCoy. The best result happens when the Dark Side and Light Side are unified in true inspiration guided by reason and morality.

(C) Craft happens when someone whittles a stick to produce the image of a pet guinea pig. Art happens when someone knows what he-she is doing and produces something pleasing, and-or new, and-or we can learn from it, and-or the result is clever mostly in a good way, such as painting the Mona Lisa, writing “King Lear”, or whittling on a rock to produce “David”. Art is Creative. Artifice is making things that might be useful but are not art. Artificial things can imitate art. Most of the things that people build are either craft or artifice. Artifice is mere technique where art is inspired and lively. Art is the Gettysburg Address by Lincoln; craft is what we get from an honest news source; and artifice is what we hear too often from politicians and commentators. Art can be bad or good but modern people see it as mostly good. Craft can be good or bad, but, in real life apart from myth, often is good, as when engineers build a suspension bridge using no new techniques, but one that is still great. Modern people see artifice as phony, fake, derivative, merely imitative, often bad, not fully real, and conducive to death. Art is genuine, creative, alive, and real. The original meaning of “artifice” was “made through an art”, much like what we now call a craft; now anything not made with inspiration and creativity we see as merely and entirely “artificial”, as dead in its way and as promoting death. Artifice can seem creative and inspired but really it is neither, it only imitates the true creativity and inspiration of art. True art seems an inspiration from God while artifice is merely human-made or Devil-made. The most artificial clever cunning artifice is from the Devil – a false poser artist. His work looks interesting and fools many people, but, at bottom, it has no true new creation, life, and inspiration. No matter how clever, artifice is artifice, mere imitation, and leads to death. The Devil always loses the fiddling context to a true creative inspired human artist. God is Creative and an artist. His greatest creation is the work that we call the world.

People “into” alternative rock see most pop music as modestly malevolent posing phony fake artifice that serves to quiet the masses. People against abortion see the procedure as a mere artificial technique out of control, and a tool of death. People who support choice, and allow abortion, see the procedure as a useful craft, one that also supports Life when used correctly. Craft is a house; art is a home; and artifice is the Hotel California (the place in the song, not the song, which is art).

(1) Low order or chaos: Taking each motif (“emotion”) above as a singlet with no attempt to link them or arrange them. (3) Hyper-order leading to mistakes and bad effects: Forcing all motifs into sets of triples, each triple to represent a theme, all triples into one big scheme, and forcing perfect parallels between all triples. (2) Proper modest order: Hopefully about what I did: Find what patterns help explain how people think and what they do, and take into account cultural history and natural links such as between matter, strong systems, and machines.

It is fun to look at media to see how writers, directors, and actors play with these ideas. It is fun to think about where nature, society, and gender fit. Who is more full of Life, Inspiration, and Creative Art, women or men? In what arenas? If men are more artistic, does that mean women are necessarily artificial? Is society art or artifice? Who is the artist or artificer? Was David Bowie more art or artifice? Was David, King of Israel, more cunning or inspired? What is R2D2? Is nature merely matter?

Tanakh (Old Testament) Myths (2): Historical Developments, and Comments.

I collapse the third (Tiamat, Leviathan) and fourth (Noah and flood) myths under one, and refer to it as the third myth. I describe modern versions of order, chaos, and hyper-order to show how the myths have influenced our ideas of society, politics, and economics.

(3A) The third myth about chaos and order became more important in Western culture than the first myth but not in exactly the same terms given in the Bible. The third myth changed its terms somewhat before outdoing the first myth. The fact that the third myth changed its terms does not make it a different myth; it is the same myth in other clothes. To make this shift even more complicated, the third myth comes in two versions, and the two versions of the third myth fought with each other for popularity and dominance. It is the mix of the two versions of the third myth that displaced the first myth.

(3A) The first version of the third myth is similar to the Bible. For readers who remember political science from school, the first version of the third myth (3A) was stated by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Nature is naturally “red in tooth and claw”, that is, chaotic. Natural people are individualistic, not sociable. Natural people are not noble but beasts, always at war with each other. Life is nasty, brutish, and short. Only by giving up some natural freedom to a greater authority, that is, to society and the state, can people tame nature, tame their own nature, and have order, peace, long life, abundant life, and real practical lasting freedom. Only by imposing order on chaos can people find life, goodness, security, wealth, and abundance. Real practical lasting freedom is truer freedom than natural freedom because it is securer and longer lasting.

Modern evolutionary theory has its version of 3A. Originally evolving humans had naked self-interest but no morality. Interactions without morality are chaotic. For various reasons, mostly due to the value to

evolving human individuals of regular ordered interactions, humans evolved morality as a way to sustain ordered relations. These people out-competed the people without morality. The evolutionary version is a variation of Hobbes and Locke and a variation of taming chaos. That does not mean it isn't true. I think it is true even though the original idea might have had roots in a myth. Remember, we judge ideas by their truth rather than their origin.

To Hobbes and Locke, the American revolutionaries added: A good society mixes natural individualistic chaos with the hyper-order of tyranny. A good society seeks good moderate order. A good society builds institutions that preserve good moderate order and that let individual people rebuild good moderate order each generation. Depending on historical situations, several such compromises might be workable in different societies-cultures or in different periods.

To Hobbes and Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau added: Society orders nature, subsumes nature, and orders individual humans into a greater whole. By doing that, society-culture is in effect God; the rules-and-traditions of society take on the force of the Will of God; and the supposed Will of God is really the will of society, the General Will, in disguise. In its role as order-maker of the world, usually society is creative, good, and the basis of life. Rousseau had several views of relations between individuals and society. Rousseau did not always distinguish between the "general will" as what arises from individuals in a group but then persists, such as in a democracy, versus the general will as what comes from society apart from the individuals that make up society and that dominates individuals in a society. In one view, society dominates individual minds through appearing as the Will of God. Individual people are within society and secondary to society; society is what matters. In this view, society can be good or bad. This view influenced sociology and anthropology, which, until the 1980s, usually took society to be good. In one variation of this view, society is bad. One socio-economic class, the aristocrats and priests, usurped the right to speak for society, dominated the other classes, and stole from other classes. Variations of this view contributed to Marxism and other Leftist critiques of society. Different groups that wished to see individuals and society differently adopted the version of Rousseau that suited their agenda. (100 years later, Emile Durkheim explicitly, and wrongly, identified society-culture with god (religion) in society; people worship society as god; religion is the rules for worshipping society and the rules by which society makes and remakes itself. That is another story.)

Later religious zealots made trouble because they insisted that society, especially hyper-ordered society, is indeed god on Earth. To follow society is to be godly and to be at odds with society is to be demonic. We use this hyper-religious version today when we call for "law and order" and seek the basis for our laws in the Commandments of God and only there. John Calvin always strikes me this way.

(3B) A second version (3B) of the third origin myth (3) grew increasingly important after about 1600, and pretty much dominates today. It is similar to the idea that goodness wins because it is good but does so through a system, a special kind of system. Chaos does not need an external agent to order it and chaos does not need a social contract to order it. Eventually chaos orders itself. Chaos is indeed at first chaotic and bad, but, if left alone, under the right conditions, order arises naturally out of chaos. Chaos orders itself as if it were a big person, as if it were God or society. God works through chaos. Chaos is creative as God was creative in Myth (1). Chaos represents God. Order not only arises but order persists unless something harsh happens. The order could be good or bad, but, again for reasons I can't go into here, order that arises naturally and persists is almost always good. Creative Chaos is good, just as God was

good in all the myths. When chaos-and-people are left to their own devices they do not make a Golden Calf or any other idols but instead naturally seek the implicit order-Laws of God. People have to submit to the good order that arises naturally, and that submission is not usually hard. Submitting to good natural order does not require giving up much of our natural nature as in version (3A) but only involves stressing some parts of our nature while de-stressing other parts. We adapt to the order, we do not impose the order and the order does not impose itself on us directly. We have a system. The Laws of God have now become the laws of system, society, culture, tradition, government, and economy. This is what American Revolutionaries had in mind with their balanced compromises.

(3B1) The second version about order spontaneously arising from chaos plays a big role in modern ideas about a good economy and good government. The idea in economic terms (3B1) was first stated well by Adam Smith in 1776 in his famous book "The Wealth of Nations". If people play the market game fairly; and if people buy and sell freely, without much arbitrary external regulation imposed on them; then the result is always good. The end result usually is much better than could be achieved if any state ordered the economy. In this case, individualism leads not to chaos but to good moderate order. A system arises by itself and sustains itself. This good outcome happens not because people are good at heart; indeed they are not very good at heart, and they are always self-interested, although they are not often wicked. This good result of Smith's model happens not because people seek the greater welfare but just because they seek their own interest. We are better off not fighting for the victory of good directly through the state but letting good win by itself through a self-making system. Along the way, Smith did criticize business people loudly. He criticized the hyper-order that comes of business firms colluding and when state helps firms as with "corporate welfare". Smith's version is not entirely realistic but it is fairly realistic and it is realistic enough that it can serve as a basis for policy if we accept that a real economy has serious faults and that well-intended well-educated civil servants have to regulate any real economy.

Instead of realistic Smith, what prevailed is the purposely unrealistic version of the Business Right Wing: the state, labor unions, workers, interest groups, watchdogs, and non-business private people can never set up a system in which good wins. Nor can they serve as the champions of good. They are the untamed Tiamat. Only business people can set up the proper moderate order and the proper system so that good wins through the system that rests on them. Business people do so by seeking greatest profits, sometimes (really often) with the help of the state. It might be that individual firms and business people seek the Golden Calf. But, collectively, business firms, and the people through business firms, miraculously find the Law of God, a good economy, abundant life (goods and services), and good society. They create indirectly but they still create. Good arises out of chaos, not out of prior good. If we want a stable orderly economy that leads to the most good, then let business firms do as they will.

There is an equally unrealistic version from the left but I don't present it here. You can take the chapter on Romanticism as a criticism of the left version.

(3B2) The second version of the myth in terms of democracy: People naturally love freedom and they naturally respect both their own freedom and the freedom of other people. You can't have freedom for only one person in a group, yourself. If anybody is to be free, all people must be free. Sadly, freedom is not found in most human societies. Most people live in non-freedom. In most cases, non-freedom is a kind of chaos. We have to move from bad non-freedom to good freedom and good democracy. Luckily, we can do so just by waking people up to the fact that they are metaphysical persons who thus deserve

political freedom, and-or just by removing the tyranny of a despot or of bad institutions (such as slavery or the rule of wealthy people). Culture, religion, society, history, ecology, material conditions, poverty, and socio-economic class don't matter. If a kind wise person explains that they are persons and thus should have mutual regard and democracy, almost inevitably they will develop mutual regard and democracy. Not only do people seek freedom abstractly and for themselves personally, they seek concrete freedom in particular practices such as voting and free enterprise, and they seek freedom for other people and for society as a whole. People can naturally find the right institutions for freedom. The right institutions for freedom are bundled together as democracy. So people naturally seek and find democracy whenever they are not bound by some chaos, including tyranny. Out of chaotic bad non-freedom will come good freedom if we leave people alone. This freedom is creative, life giving, and good.

Unlike Locke and Hobbes, now we think of people as being not-free free not so much due to chaos as due to tyranny. In fact, likely people are fettered as much by chaos now as by tyranny, for example, the chaos of the "free" but unfair market leads to as much bondage as the direct tyranny of business firms and rich people. Business firms use the chaos of the market to enslave debtors. Sometimes they cause chaos to get more debtors or to make people more in debt, such as with manipulation of terms for buying a house. Let these issues go to focus on bondage that is caused by tyranny.

Tyranny is a type of hyper-order, like the Hebrews wishing for kings instead of judges or Russian people wishing to return to Stalin. I could argue fairly successfully that hyper-order is almost always bad and it is a kind of metaphysical chaos. Rather than indulge that way, I simply assert that hyper-order, especially kinds of tyranny, is one of the conditions that lead to freedom and that, ideally, can be cured simply by telling people that they are persons and urging them to act accordingly. We take the same approach to curing hyper-order and tyranny as to curing chaos. We seek the right good moderate order and we do so by showing people that they are persons. All the rest follows naturally without needing to do more. This is the method that Captain Kirk used to save planets run by computers or enslaved by Klingons, and that Captain Picard used to destroy the Borg Collective from within.

In modern politics, (3B2) means that, for true democracy to arise and persist among any peoples, in any nation, any religion, or any culture, with any historical background, and any historical arc, all we need do is remove bad government. We don't have to interfere to install any particular institutions, not even good democratic ones. We don't have to educate. We don't have to prepare. All we have to do is help people to "develop" and-or to burst away from tyranny and then people automatically naturally will find and hold the best democracy themselves. In fact, if we do try to educate, prepare, or set up, we thwart the natural self-ordering out of chaos that leads to robust democracy. We lead to hyper-order badness and death instead of to the moderate good order, goodness, creativity, and life that is typical of natural freedom and democracy. We violate the "prime directive". We do not have to, and should not, "nation build". We see this myth (3B2) in stories about a cowboy who comes into a town to fight bad ranchers, saloon keepers, or miners who have terrorized the people, and the people rise up to make democracy. See "High Plains Drifter" and "Open Range". Outside the Old West, rock and roll can liberate a town as in "Footloose" and "The California Kid". We see it when labor union activists strive to help workers rise up and organize themselves as in "Norma Rae". America freed Europe after World War Two, and all Europeans, who had been under Fascist tyranny, quickly set up robust lasting democracy. After America knocked off Saddam Hussein, Iraqis were supposed to set up a Western-style democracy although Iraq was a mix of at least

three hostile ethnic groups. After America kicked the Taliban out of Afghanistan for a while, Afghans were supposed to set up a Western-style democracy right away.

In the Enlightenment, scientists held to the first version of the myth (3A) where God defeats chaos. They thought in terms of God as a “geometer” who imposed order on some kind of original chaos. Since the rise of Quantum Mechanics and ideas about the Big Bang, after about 1935, scientists lean more to the version in which chaos orders itself (3B). The universe came out of nothing. Natural laws spring from nothing. Modern ideas about biological evolution are about chaos ordering itself.

Without going into a lot of hoopla, all non-scientific versions of this myth are partly correct but all non-scientific versions are also mostly wrong. If we take them at face value, it is better to think of them all as wrong because of the harm that they potentially do. We gain a lot from a free economy but we cannot have unregulated capitalism in which the rich enslave the poor; we need to regulate capitalism; the trick is to do the job well; and that trick we have not mastered. All people do not automatically easily find robust democracy if all we do is remove oppression. People need education and need help with institutions. It is much better if they have traditions that support education and the right institutions. That is why people in Japan and Korea do much better at democracy than people in Africa.

For scientific versions of the myths, it does not matter where the ideas came from; it only matters if the ideas can be assessed scientifically, usually by seeing if they are wrong or if they are more correct than alternatives. Assessing scientific versions requires skills apart from telling myths, skills from within science itself, and I cannot go into that topic here. It is good that myths generate ideas for science; and it is even better that science can then assess ideas according to science and apart from the logic of myth.

A few more developments of the second version of the third myth (3B) of “chaos orders itself” are important. These developments are related to the version in which all people naturally grow democracy but I label them here separately so as not to confuse.

(3B3) The third development is that “The People” are always correct. When intellectuals differ from “the people”, the intellectuals are always wrong and “the people” are always right. The people are a fund of knowledge and wisdom, and intellectuals cannot fathom this fund. When the people need guidance, or whenever the need is great, wisdom will spring from the repository of the people, and save the people. We find this idea in stories of Robin Hood where Robin personifies the people and their wisdom. We find it in “Lord of the Rings” where the wise could not figure out how to destroy the Ring and defeat Sauron the Evil. It was left to Hobbits, the people, to find a way. The way of the people led to the end of evil and death from hyper-order (Nazgul) and chaos (orcs), and led to the return of the King, good moderate order, life, abundant life, society, and creativity. The people, as represented by four hobbits, bow to no one. This development too often leads to simplistic populist hyper-democracy. I found this myth in Thailand as the modern idea that the “house people”, villagers, (“chaaw baan”) always are smarter than intellectuals, politicians, and urbanites, and always know the right solution if only the politicians would listen to them. It is likely this development was imported into Thailand by students and NGOs who both had been trained by Westerners.

(3B4) In a corrupt society, the wisdom of the people is found in the underbelly of society and in rebels. It is not found in the obvious rulers and moral examples of society, the politicians, churches, clerics, official

artists, and not even in the majority of the people themselves. Almost all modern societies are corrupt. When Hebrew state society went bad under Saul, the spirit of a true good society was invested (literally anointed) in the rebel David and his gang of outsiders. In a corrupt society, the majority of people have been duped. In this development, the rebels and outsiders are like the Hebrew prophets who had to forcibly lead the people to God's goodness. The rebels and underbelly are the true creative chaos of society. They are creative. Other people are not creative. They are closer to the "Living God" and to "Life" than other segments of society. Only when the ideas of the rebels and underbelly suffuse society can society throw off its coils of chaos and order itself in goodness. If you want to participate in creative chaos, Life, and godliness, then live with rebels and the underbelly rather than with the tyrannical chaos or uncreative chaos of other groups. This view is so common in the modern world, and so common in all art, that it is hard to mention any major movie or TV show that does not use it. Any sci-fi epic, such as "Star Wars" is based on this myth. See below for more about rebels.

(3B5) The fifth, Conservative, version of chaos ordering itself was well stated by Edmund Burke in the late 1700s and early 1800s, partially in response to Adam Smith's assertion that unfettered individuals always lead to greatest good, partly in response to the successful American Revolution, and largely in response to the horrible French Revolution. Unbridled individuals are chaos whether in nature or in a bad state such as a revolutionary state. Chaos does order itself but only indirectly and slowly. We cannot look to unbridled individuals to rise above chaos; this is a lesson of "Lord of the Flies". We need something to control individuals and to keep order. We need something to guide the self-formation of good order. The truly important actor is society rather than individuals. Slowly, over decades, society builds itself, society overcomes individualistic chaos. Society builds rules and institutions. The rules and institutions are more than a contract among previously-natural individuals to maximize freedom, although rules and institutions usually do create quite a bit of individual freedom. Rules and institutions are creative. They are organic, in that society is like a life form, institutions are the living parts of the living organism, and each institution depends on others. Institutions are good, and institutions lead to abundant life under the circumstances of the society. Sometimes particular individual actions do lead to a new development in social order, but individual actions rarely lead to wholly new order, and big individual actions, such as the rampage of Napoleon, often lead to grief. Rather, it is best for individuals to work through the rules and institutions of society and thus slowly to add more adaptations to what is already a good whole. Society does have a will and does give laws. In this way, society is indeed like the will of God and society indeed is creative. When we participate properly in society we participate properly in God.

These added versions (3B3, 3B4, and 3B5) are not true either. As with previous versions (3B1 and 3B2), they have a grain of truth, but, if you have to choose "true" or "false", choose "false". To take them at face value is highly appealing but too dangerous.

(3B6) The sixth version of the second form of the third myth (ugh!) is that Life always is good and always creative, and the proliferation of Life and of its creativity always is good. Life is the key category after God and Life is THE force, as in "Star Wars". Life is the ordering force of God on this Earth. It is like the Holy Spirit. Life represents God. The ordering force of Life represents God. Whatever represents Life, the ordering of Life, or the Creativity of Life, also represents God. Whatever represents God should also represent Life, promote Life, and promote Lifelike Creativity. Creative Life is what orders the chaos of mere matter into biology and what orders mere non-sentient species into sentient-moral-aesthetic beings (people). For many modern people now, from staunch supposedly traditional Christians to people who

are only dim heirs of the tradition, Creative Life has taken the place of the Holy Spirit and Creative Life is the face of God for most purposes. This idea of the importance of Life has roots before modern times but modern people give it their “spin” by linking it to ideas of society, freedom, order, and spontaneous order. Because Life and God are so basic, it is easy to state the other instances of all these myths of order as variations on Life but I avoided doing that here.

Life is the source of some chaos but, far more importantly, Life is the source of self-ordering good chaos. Yes, Life does produce some violence and bad things along the way but Life also produces goodness, good order, beauty, and good emotions, and those far outweigh the violence and badness. It is better to let Life entirely alone to “do its thing”, and to put up with some of the inconvenience, than to try to guide Life into what we mere humans think is good and is good self-order. We can fight the bad things as they come up but we should never try to thwart the self-development of Life.

It is easy to see how this idea of Life stands with the idea of the People as the source of all good and the source of proper self-ordering good free society. Let the People do what they want. Simply tell them that they are free metaphysical Life-Beings, and good self-ordering society is sure to follow after a short time of chaotic revolt.

Life orders chaos. To have something to order, Life needs chaos. Because life orders chaos, it does not fully order chaos but only partially orders chaos. So, overall, Life is messy. Abundant life is abundantly messier. So the most Lively people are the messiest, most disorderly, loudest, rudest, least educated, most disrespectful of rules, most creative, and most artistic. That is where all great ideas and institutions come from ultimately. If any group is messy, disorderly, loud, etc., that group is the carrier of Life in our times and should be highly respected.

Although Creative Life orders chaos, and needs some chaos on which to do its creative work, it is wrong to think of chaos as before Life in terms of time, importance, realness, or status. If Creative Life is close to God, then Life is before chaos, more important than chaos, and has a higher and qualitatively different status than chaos. Chaos is merely the stuff on which Creative Life works. Chaos is not a big deal unto itself apart from Creative Life and God. Even so, modern confused people often give glamorized chaos an importance and status nearly equal to Creative Life itself.

For some people, Creativity (and thus Art) is on a par with Life and is pretty much the mark of God, even more so than Life. The universe is Creative even though it is not alive, art is creative even though it is not alive and even if it comes from life for now, and God can be creative even if all life on this planet and all other planets has gone extinct. Creativity is important in Romanticism. However, in nearly all cases for now, Life and Creativity are so mixed there is no point in trying to separate them. Take them together. In a similar way (but not identical), Love is part of the mix. Love cannot simply be the same as Creativity or Life, but it seems Life and Creativity aim ultimately at Love. Love guides Life and Creativity – even ugly art if it is the best art. Love cannot guide them in any way that is now clear in physics or biology, but it does so anyhow. Anything against Love is against Life and Creativity, and vice versa. They come in a set. When I say one, you should think of the others.

When people want to bolster their social, political, or economic cause, they get self-ordering spontaneous good Life on the side of their cause and put Death on the side of their enemies. This is why anti-abortion

crusaders speak in terms of “pro-Life” and paint the pro-Choice movement as pro-Death. In American ideology, especially, ironically, for the Right, “Choice” is good and on the side of Life. This is why the “allow abortion” side has taken up the identity of “Pro-Choice”; not only is it pro-Choice, it is also pro-Life. This is why, since about 1980, Roman Catholic theology has developed as a large idea the “Life Culture” of the Church versus the “Death Culture” of secular society. Every religious, ethnic, and gender group claims Life.

Planned economies such as national health care are too orderly to be of Life. The free capitalist market is disorderly but it is disorder that orders itself, so it must be of Life. If you support Life, support unbridled capitalism. Alternatives are all of Death. Big business is an intrinsic part free capitalism, and, these days, is the essential way the market expresses itself and works for the good of all. Anyone who fetters any size business fetters Life and so aids Death. By the way, as far as I can tell, the Roman Catholic Church includes unbridled capitalism and big business in the Death Culture.

It is easy to re-interpret the Big Bang, cosmology, and evolution in terms of good Life as emerging from chaos, as the self-ordering of chaos, and the culmination of self-ordering chaos. It is easy to see Nature in these terms. Cosmology and evolution are the means by which God orders chaos by leading chaos to self-order. By seeing this way, you can put the force of Cosmic History, Cosmic Chaos, and Cosmic Life behind ideologies. I avoided using cosmology and evolution to support overly strong ideas of life (Life) because that view is misleading, wrong, and, more often than not, bad.

Some Assessment.

Not every natural thing is good and not every good is simply natural. Sometimes you have to choose between natural and good. Likewise, good does not win just because it is good, through cosmic magic or through the magic of a system, however natural the cosmos and the system, or apparently god-given the cosmos and the system, no matter how much you love C.S. Lewis and Narnia, love rock or hip-hop, or love your religion, nationality, ethnic group, gender, occupation group, or socio-economic class. You have to figure out what is bad chaos, good chaos, proper good moderate order, and bad hyper-order. You have to figure out if good moderate order really is the best. You have to figure out what is the best order, where the best order comes from, and how to get there from here. You have to figure out what to avoid and how. This is what the first two chapters of the book were about.

Unfortunately for all the myths above, chaos does not always order itself; when chaos does order itself, the order is not always good; and tyranny cannot be undone simply by pointing out to people that they are metaphysical persons. Chaos is not always good and does not always lead to good. Chaos is not always creative, and, when it is creative, the creativity does not always lead to goodness; read Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities”. Usually creativity must subdue chaos to express its work. (In “A Tale”, the old aristocrat falls back on the craft of shoemaking when good creative moderate order fails and when arises the bad hyper-order-and-chaos of the Revolution and arises the ever-knitting mechanical death-dealing artifice of Madame De Farge. In this case, the legal trade is a mere inadequate craft too. Mere craft is not enough, not even intellectual craft.)

Life did originate from self-ordering semi-chaos but that does not make Life a metaphysical category and a metaphysical Force. It does not make all life good and all things that come from life good. It does not

mean we should put up with everything. Infections, malaria, plague, cancer, and rudeness are all of Life, just as much as are humans, but they are not good, and we should not put up with them. Evil tyranny is from Life as much as good democracy is from Life, and we should not put up with it. Sometimes we have to choose, even among what is living and natural. Most life is good, and we should cherish life, but we betray life when we have to make it a metaphysical category in order to cherish it.

The noisy, rude, selfish, dirty, racist, bigoted people of all colors, religions, and genders are alive but they are not thereby automatically good and they are not thereby automatically the source of all progress and goodness in society. They are not automatically the best source of creativity and art. In fact, not all art and creativity is on the side of Life and good. So, even when they do create, their works do not always help Life and good.

The people are not "The People". They are not one thing. They are many groups, and the groups do not always get along. They do not have mystic unity. They do not have a secret deep fund of wisdom and knowledge. They are not always right. They do not always know better than intellectuals and scientists. The mistakes of the majority are why the founders gave the United States representative democracy rather than simple populist democracy, set up checks and balances, and insisted on a Bill of Rights. Simply giving people apparent freedom does not insure they will develop democracy or good democracy. People need to be educated and prepared. People need proper institutions as background, including the right attitudes and culture.

The people can be duped. This sad fact does not mean rebels and social outsiders always know better than the people when the people are duped. Rebels and outsiders are fooled as often as the people, and they fool themselves with clever ideologies. Rebels and social outsiders do not often lead the people to good democracy. Rebels and social outsiders are not the magic source of goodness, life, and creativity. They are not modern day David and modern day prophets.

Society is not always the best solution, the best moderate good order between bad chaos and bad hyper-order. Society is not always the long accumulation of beneficial compromises that lead to good moderate order in their time and that collectively sustain the best moderate order now. Sometimes old institutions once were good but now are behind the times and thus comparatively bad. Sometimes small groups of individuals have to band together to change society. Changing society quickly and forcefully often does lead to more bad than good.

The fact that rapid change usually is bad does not mean society should never change, all change is bad, only Conservatives can tell between good and bad change, and only Conservatives can implement good change. Conservatives are not automatically aware of the proper balance between chaos and hyper-order. Conservatives are not automatically on the side of God and so on the side of creativity, goodness, life, abundance, and proper order. When lords had power, Conservatives used Conservative ideas to justify aristocracy; when capitalist came into power, Conservatives used Conservative ideas to justify big business. Conservatives have never been clear about what they wish to keep (conserve) as good and as the will of God, and so choose what suits power on that basis. Instead, they choose what serves power and then claim it is Conservative. They worship power as their Golden Calf, using society as its clothing. Moderate order between populist chaos and hyper-order tyranny is better than the extremes but it is not easy to find this useful compromise; it does not appear magically in Conservative rhetoric. Nor does this

useful middle order does not appear magically by itself. The good middle order is hard to hold when we do find it, and easy to lose.

Society does not have a simple clear General Will. The will of society is not like the will of God; and living properly in society is not often exactly like living with God.

The TV series "Family Guy" has an episode in which Baby "Stewie" and the dog Brian join the Army and go to Iraq. Scenes show what happens when American style democracy comes to Iraq. Scenes that begin as typically Iraqi morph automatically into what Americans wrongly think of when they think of the good democratic life. In one scene, a group of fully-veiled-and-fully-dressed modest Iraqi women at work in the house become a group of young women washing cars outdoors, dressed in bikinis, on full display, squirting each other with hoses so that they are effectively naked, kissing each other, and loving it all. The episode not only satirizes American belief that all things American are better and that our better-ness arises out of limitless freedom. It also satirizes the conservative, often Muslim, belief that any democracy, and any liberty for women, is a slippery slope inevitably down to chaos and evil - so it is better to impose rigid hyper-order dominated by men, and to impose it by any means necessary. The episode does not offer a balanced livable middle, but neither have our politicians and religious leaders.

We will meet these ideas again later in the book, as in the chapters on Romanticism and Decency. I do not usually refer back to here when they come up again.

It can seem a long way from myths in the Tanakh to ideas about economics, politics, and rebels. Not only does the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition have myths about chaos but so do other cultures, and thus the ideas that I described as coming out of this tradition are not necessarily tightly linked to this tradition. This warning is true but it does not invalidate what I said. Important are: conflicts between chaos, some order, hyper-order; some ordering principle; self-ordering; God; life; creativity; good; and society. The fact that other cultures have ideas about chaos and order without necessarily getting them from the Tanakh only means other cultures can assimilate in their own ways Western developments of myths about chaos and order that began in the Tanakh, such as myths about economics, rebels, society, Conservatives, and self-creating. In any case, I don't defend my story because that would take too long. The rest of the book is partly a defense of my thinking, and you can judge while reading.

PART 5: Rebel and Remnant from the Tanakh (Old Testament).

Rebel.

David is a prototype rebel. I do not tell the story of David in any detail; find it on the Internet and read it in the Tanakh. For a few more details, see the section below on the Remnant.

Around 1050 BCE (BC), the Hebrews asked their prophets to ask God if they could have a first king. God advised them against it, saying it would lead to trouble. But the people persisted, and finally God granted them a first king, Saul. As God said, Saul's reign was a long string of troubles, the biggest of which was that the enemy of the Hebrews, the Philistines, often invaded and defeated the Hebrews. Rather than represent good moderate order, Saul's reign represented the resurgence of hyper-order (unneeded king)

and chaos (Philistines and war). The Bible blames Saul personally but that account likely is an excuse written later by the descendants of the man who replaced Saul.

Saul had bad headaches, likely migraines. Saul hired a young musician, David, to play, sing, and soothe Saul's aching head. Besides musician, David was a daring smart warrior and ambitious. Saul saw in David a rival, and tried to kill him. David escaped and became a guerilla. He was cunning, treacherous, and successful. He was from humble origins, a true "man of the people". Men came to him from Saul. His followers loved him. After years of guerilla war, David killed Saul and took the throne. David routed the enemies of the Hebrews, murdered own rivals including some former allies, took Jerusalem from its native people, and set up the Kingdom of Israel. The messiah of Jewish lore is supposed to come from the house of David. Christians claim David as an ancestor of Jesus.

Likely David did not write all the Psalms, songs about religion and politics, but he still gets credit. The people loved David for his songs and his dancing. David was a successful Creative Artist.

David also was a womanizer, and he murdered the husband of a woman that he wanted. He was not a "family values" guy. Because of his moral failings, at the end of his life David was estranged from God, he felt cold and miserable, he was sexually impotent, and his family life was miserable. His own strong order as king, powerful man, artist, and seducer was not enough without the right order of God. David's strong order created chaos, as when his best son, Absalom, tried to take the throne while David lived, and his other children fought after David died. After their own teenage rebellion, modern parents tell their children this misery is what happens to all rebels. Later Israelites worked to gain the right order of God rather than merely the orders of war, chaos, strongman, king, priest, power, wealth, and lust.

As a successful rebel, creative living being, musician, and dancer, David is a big precursor to Romantic musician rebels of the 1800s, many "young men with a horn" in jazz, rock rebels with a message, hip-hop angry "gangsta" rebels, and people who think they should make it just because there are cool at dancing and singing but with no marketable skills. David was the prototype for Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, Kurt Cobain, "Grrl" groups of the 1990s, Joni Mitchell, Sheryl Crow, all the women of Lilith Fair, and most rockers. I don't know hip-hop (rap) well enough to say who is like David. Thankfully the "big names" often have better morals than David.

People use the story of David, usually unconsciously, to justify a rebel pose, and to glamorize artists as the tools of God, God's creativity, and the new superior social order. Despite that David was a usurper, murder, seducer, and the ruin of families, Jews and Christians still love him. They love him because he was a successful artist and rebel, and he was a lowly man of the people. His story works with the idea that (1) God uses chaos to create a system in which (2) good wins through the system and that (3) God dislikes hyper-order and tyranny. Parents, teachers, authority figures, and right wingers wrongly think that the modern attitude esteeming rebels is entirely modern and is a result of bad modern ideologies. Modern ideologies, bad or good, do contribute to the idea of a rebel and do allow people to sustain the pose of a rebel even when there is little to rebel against or when the pose of a rebel does no good. But modern ideologues did not invent the pose and its myth. David the rebel was an agent of God. In his time, only a rebel could have acted as the agent of God. So, if you want to be an agent of God, be a rebel. If you want to feel justified, be a rebel. If you can't be a real rebel, pose. In loving David, the Judeo-Christian, and now Muslim, tradition lays a solid foundation for excusing, enabling, justifying, and

glamorizing rebels, especially if they are tied into popular culture. How this stance plays out is left to later chapters. The myth of the rebel used as justification for an attitude is not confined to the Left but plagues the Right just as much. There we find it in images of the business entrepreneur as innovator and pioneer, the Tea Party as rebels, and anti-abortion activists as rebels against a decadent dominant Saul-like Left. Donald Trump became President almost entirely by using the myths of rebel, businessman as leader of the Remnant, and businessman as the agent of good's (God's) victory.

The true problem here is not that rebels have no real grievances but that they waste their energy on the wrong issues, wrong methods, and on poses. We need them to rebel over the right things and to use the right methods for real problems. As long as rebellion is led by this wrong myth and poor understanding of human nature, democracy, and capitalism, then rebels will use wrong methods for wrong problems, and so do little good. Often they help the power structure and the chaos that they wish to defeat.

Remnant.

The story-and-myth of the Remnant is best exemplified by the story of the "Captivity" of some Israelites in Babylon. You can find details on the Internet by searching "Babylonian Captivity". I retell this story in a later chapter when it is needed there.

Moses likely lived in the range 1600 BCE (BC) to 1300 BCE, mostly likely in the range 1380 to 1300. In the period from about Moses to about 1050 BCE, a group called "Hebrews" took over most of what is now the state of Israel, including Judea, the "West Bank", Samaria, Galilee, and some of the Golan. Then, all that land was called "Canaan". The Hebrews felt God had promised them this land. When the Hebrews settled Canaan, they became "Israelites". At first, there was no state of Israel anymore than there was a state of grunge rockers in the 1990s. The first king of the Israelites was Saul. David took the throne from Saul about 1030 to 1010 BCE; took Jerusalem from the original owners; and set up the capital of Israel at Jerusalem. That is about when the state of Israel began. A big Temple goes along with central authority in the King and priests. So, David began work on the Temple in Jerusalem and his son Solomon finished it after 1000 BCE.

Israel had two major divisions: (1) Northern Israel, also called "Israel" by itself; and (2) Southern Israel, also called "Judea", after the major group of Israelites who lived there, the "tribe" of Judah. A Jew was a member of Judah, a resident of Judea, a person within the sway of Judea, or now, a person who follows the religion typical of the Jews after the events related below, or a person who is born to Jews whether or not he-she follows the religion. Citizens of the modern state of Israel are called "Israelis" but I don't refer to them here. Most Israelites, especially Northern Israelites, worshipped God, El-Yahweh, in "high places", hills and mountains, the most important of which was Shiloh in the North. Judeans, Jews, worshipped El-Yahweh in the Temple at Jerusalem. Eventually all Israelites were called "Jews" because Judea and Jews dominated the whole of Israel. Here the term "Israel" refers to combined Northern and Southern Israel unless qualified. The peak of power for Israel came after David, with Solomon and the next generations of kings, around 980 to 850 BCE. Then, Israel controlled a territory larger than Canaan - but likely the larger territory was not considered part of God-given Israel, the Promised Land.

Northern and Southern Israel were never on perfect terms, for reasons I don't go into here. The disputes were argued in terms of religious differences. Non-Jewish Israelites, the people of Israel of the North,

said they could worship God at Shiloh and other “high places” while Jews in Judea in the South insisted the only true place to worship God was the Temple at Jerusalem. Each accused the other of falling from the original religion of El-Yahweh and of carrying on wrong practices that made El-Yahweh angry with the entire state of Israel.

Beginning in the 700s BCE, the rising state of Assyria harassed Israel and whittled away its power and land. Israelites blamed their decline on their lack of strict adherence to God’s Law, and Israelites saw the Assyrians as God’s instrument of punishment. A similar attitude still prevails among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, at least: if we are lax or do wrong, God will punish us by giving us domestic problems, and letting strangers immigrate, defeat us economically, or defeat us in conflict. On the other hand, if we are strict in observance and worship, God will punish our enemies and reward us with power, prosperity, land, and good commerce.

By 700 BCE, Assyria had invaded, conquered, and pretty much destroyed Northern Israel, or “Israel”, but left Judea intact, and took Judea as a subject state. After that, some customs of the North were not what we now think of as typically Jewish: the South had ideas and practices that the North did not; and vice versa. In particular, the areas used a slightly different ritual calendar. Details are not important here but will be if you read more. It is not clear if Northerners continued their distinct traditions after the Assyrian invasions or if their traditions changed greatly due. Part of the North became Galilee, where Jesus was from, and part of the North became Samaria, which had a bad name for religious decadence (likely not deserved) even into the time of Jesus.

Babylon (Iraq) conquered Assyria and took over Northern Israel. In 587 BCE, Babylon entered Judah but did not devastate it, instead leaving it a vassal. Babylon took many people to the city of Babylon, likely educated and skilled people such as scribes and artisans. It is not clear how many people but likely at least 10,000. It is not clear where the captives came from but likely Jerusalem. Among them were priests of the Temple and Palace. This is the famous “Babylonian Captivity”. Listen to Bob Marley.

In about 540 BCE, Medes and Persians conquered Babylon, and allowed captive Jews to return to Judea in 538 BCE. The returning captives took over the city of Jerusalem and the governing of Judea. In effect, after that, Judea was all of Israel. The North was no more part of Israel. All Hebrews and Israelites had become Jews, or, more aptly, Jews had come to be all of Israel. The returning people rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem around 520 BCE. The rebuild took several decades so an exact date is not useful here.

The priest Nathan led the people who returned, in religion, politics, and military affairs. The returned exiles had clear ideas about what Jewish life should be and how the Jewish state should run. With help from Persia, they imposed their ideas on Judea, at least officially. Officially, they punished transgressors harshly. They looked down on the people who had remained, especially on peasants, whom they called mere “people of the land”. It was not clear how much the returning exiles really could change the daily life of average people. They were angry at most of the Jews who had remained behind. They explained the fall of Israel and their anger by saying that all Jews had been, and usually still were, lax in their worship of El-Yahweh. Jewish men married foreign women, allowed wives to worship foreign gods, and allowed children to follow foreign mothers in worship. Even worse, Jewish men worshipped foreign gods along with their wives. Backed by the Persians, the people who returned imposed a strict order and clung strictly to the Laws of El-Yahweh as seen by their priests. The people who returned chose a few from the

Jews that had remained as having held closest to the Laws of God. These select remaining people got positions and power in the new political and religious order. Most practices that later became Judaism had their basis in that time including worship at the Temple only, ideas about the Sabbath, the calendar, purity, and about family life and personal life.

For the needs of this chapter, the people who returned, together with the few who had remained that were designated as pure enough by the returnees, are the "Remnant".

It is not clear how much the ideas of the Remnant were really from the past and how much their ideas were current at the time; how much their ideas were about how things should be in their present, to suit them; and how much they used vague ideas about an unreal idealized past as a rationale. I suspect a big chunk of ideas were borrowed from Babylon and Persia, the ideas served to bolster the Remnant, the ideas were kept for that reason, and the ideas and the Remnant were justified by referring to an idealized unreal imaginary past. After the captives returned, Judah did not flourish as in the time of Solomon but it did do better after the Remnant imposed their order. The Remnant and their followers credited their new strict worship, and the returning favor of El-Yahweh, for the better life.

Without details: In 330 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Persia, and took the North, Judea, and all the local area. Over a span around 150 BCE, Rome conquered the Greeks. Rome allowed local rule by aristocrats. Herod and his family rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, around the time of Jesus, into one of the greatest structures in the Roman Empire. During the time of Jesus, Rome ruled what had been the North (Israel) and was then Galilee and Samaria, with on-again off-again co-rule by Jews of parts of the North. Jews did not think of Galilee and Samaria as part of Judea or Israel; they seemed to exclude the North from the tradition of El-Yahweh. I don't know what Galileans and Samaritans thought; some did go to the Temple in Jerusalem for holy days and formal worship. Rome severely punished Jerusalem in 70 CE (AD), trying to destroy it as the center of Jewish life. About 125 CE, Rome destroyed the Jewish holy places in Jerusalem and expelled all Jews from Judea. Judea-Israel ceased as a state and a homeland for Jews. What happened to people of the North has never been clear. Jewish religious leaders, often Pharisees but not always, developed ideas about worship, family life, social life, and relations with non-Jews among a people that had once insisted on a homeland, Temple, king, and state but no longer had them. Early Jewish-Christian relations should be seen in the light of striving to maintain a Jewish identity. The ideas of Jewish religious leaders sustained Jews for 1900 years. So it remained until 1948 with the coming of the modern state of Israel.

Some Jews and Christians see the 1900 years without a Jewish state as another Babylonian Captivity, this time for all Jews, and see the return of the Jewish state as another return of the Remnant. I don't know what ratio of Jews and Christians see it this way. If this way is true, I don't know what that means for the role of Jews and Christians in the world and for how God sees us. Jews are not re-ordering the world now as some Jews re-ordered Judea-Israel when they returned from Babylon. Maybe we should expect from Jews not that kind of re-ordering but solid citizenship in modern states and contributions to commerce, science, medicine, and the arts. Jews might not serve as the role model for the world but might serve as one of the better role models. We seem to be getting that.

(If you care about these issues, you have to decide: who are the true Hebrews, true Israelites, and true Jews; who are the true followers of El-Yahweh (God and Allah) and his prophets; what is the true way to

worship; where is the true place to worship, if any particular place to worship is needed; whether Galilee and its people, including Jesus, should have been part of greater Israel-Judea; whether Samaria and its people should have been part of greater Israel-Judea; what rights Jews have to their old homeland of Judea; what rights Jews have to the traditional land of Israel that included both the North-Israel and Judea-Israel; whether Jews have rights only to Judea; and what rights people have who lived in Canaan after Jews, for 2000 years, sometimes Palestinians but not only them. Listen to authorities but think for yourself. Avoid bias. Good luck.)

You don't have to be a Jew, Christian, or Muslim to take the pose of the Remnant. Any group that is unhappy or that wants more takes the pose of the Remnant. It claims to be the only group that has continuous ties with God, it knows his mind best, knows what he wants, knows what order he wants, and it has a right to compel others. It is holier than other groups (than thou). It uses an imagined better time-and-place as justification. Think of Republicans when Reagan wanted to return to a Golden Age before Social Security and to make America a shining city on the hill for the whole world, and think of Trump's "Make America Great AGAIN". It works. People buy it. Democrats refer to the times of Roosevelt and Kennedy. Blacks use King and the 1950s-1960s fight.

To Christians, although Jesus is only one person and not a group, Jesus is the true "people" who came back from Babylon and he is the true remnant who stayed faithful in Israel. He is the true Remnant who brings all people back to God. He is Remnant and faithfulness embodied. The returnees from Babylon and the people who remained faithful in Israel only foreshadow the true faithfulness of Jesus. Jesus, his disciples, followers, and eventually his Church, are the true people who return from the captivity of not-yet-truly-knowing-God and the true people who remained-faithful-to-God-as-best-they-could-and-so-were-always-open-to-his-call-and-Grace. They are the true Remnant under the kingship of Jesus. They are the worldly fleshly embodiment of the ideal spiritual of faithful Remnant, the proper worldly mix of flesh and spirit. All others prior to Jesus only foreshadow at best. Any group now that claims to be a Remnant can do so only partially and derivatively from Jesus and his Church. Any group that does not accept the prior perfection of Jesus and his Church as ideal Remnant risks the sin of Pride, risks deluding followers, and risks causing badness. Your group can claim to be a politically active remnant but if you don't see the prior greater role of Jesus and his church, you do so only at risk. If you think this stance is extreme in the case of Christianity, ALL religions exalt their leaders about as much. This is a case where you have to assess ideas. Please keep this stance in mind for comments below using J.R.R. Tolkien.

Rebel and Remnant at the Same Time.

It might seem that the idea of a Remnant is almost exclusively the property of the right wing. They use it to complain about the world, to yearn for an imagined golden past strictly ordered by rigid rules of their religion, use it to blame others, and to control others. It might seem that ideas of Remnant and rebel are mutually exclusive. Neither of these restrictions is true. People are more clever. Both the left and right make up ideas about the past and what God really wants so they can claim to be a Remnant. They want to remake the present more in line with their ideas of God's ideal, and they would not wish to do so unless other people who are not-so-godly have power, so they also are rebels. Even if their ideas are new, they say their ideas are more in line with God as shown in the past.

The story of the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt can be seen as both a story of a rebel (Moses) and of a Remnant (Hebrews) that returns to about where their Father (Abraham) originated.

I have always been amazed by how much people will buy into various odd assortments of these myths so people can feel good about themselves by adopting a mythological role. I find entertaining the rock-and-roll rebel as David returning us to the age of tribal equality and the Conservative rebel slaying dragons of the decadent left and so restoring the golden family and golden state that never were.

I like the myths, and have used them, but I also “see through” them and take them with salt. I use them to help thinking, not control it. If I act too much like a character in a myth, I stop myself.

In “The Lord of the Rings” and other material from his “Middle Earth” sagas, J.R.R. Tolkien tells the story of the Remnant twice and mixes it with motifs from the myth of the rebel. His parallels with the Bible are deliberate. Part of the success of LOTR is an unconscious appeal to of myths that have become a part of our culture and are a driving force in our culture and politics. If you are bored of “The Rings”, then skip the paragraphs between the marks “LOTR”.

Begin LOTR. (Remnant1) God sung his plan for the world, Middle Earth, to the angels. Morgoth was one of the highest angels. Morgoth offered an alternative song (plan of order). God rejected Morgoth’s song and God sang Middle Earth into being. Singing matters. Morgoth rebelled and took Middle Earth. Some angels followed God while some followed Morgoth. Morgoth waged war on the various native peoples of Middle Earth and the high elves that had come from heaven to fight Morgoth. Sauron was an angel, of next-to-highest rank. He followed Morgoth as captain of forces, and led the war. Eventually God sent a high angel to chase Morgoth from Middle Earth. I leave out features that support my case but take too much space such as the elves as Remnant and how Morgoth corrupts through false imitation.

Sauron want back to heaven for a while but then he returned to Middle Earth. Sauron bided his time and feigned being good. He forged the One Ring of Power. Using it, Sauron conquered much of Middle Earth except for some areas held by elves and a big island to the west, Numenor.

After Morgoth left, many of the best men of Middle Earth went to Numenor where they cultivated science and the arts including what seemed like magic. Numenor became the greatest society on Middle Earth, like Egypt in its time, like Atlantis of fable, stronger than Sauron and his armies on the mainland even when Sauron had the Ring. In the movies, the “seeing stones” or “palantiri” originally were inventions of Numenor, as was the tower where Saruman lived (Orthanc), and were not evil.

Rather than fight directly with Numenor, Sauron corrupted it from within with lies. Through Sauron’s conniving, Numenor rejected God, and so fell, much as Egypt rejected God when God asked Egypt to release the Hebrews. All through their history, the Israelites never felt they were conquered by external enemies so much as they defeated themselves by internal corruption, especially by following the idols of their spouses and neighbors.

Despite Sauron’s corruption, a few Numenoreans clung to the ways of God. In their land, in their times, they were rebels. They escaped the destruction of the island. They returned east to the mainland, where they began a great kingdom, with a northern part, Arnor, and southern part, Gondor. Their path parallels

the Hebrews out of Egypt when Moses and Joshua defeated the tribes in the Holy Land, took the Holy Land for the Hebrews and for God, and founded Greater Israel, which consisted of lesser Israel in the North (Samaria and Galilee) and Judea in the South. The Remnant people of Numenor, in Gondor and Arnor, joined with the elves, and together they defeated Sauron, as Joshua and the next generation of fighters defeated Jericho and the local powers to fix control of Canaan.

When Sauron was defeated, Isildur, the intended heir of Gondor, took Sauron's One Ring but did not destroy it. As long as the Ring remains, Sauron cannot die and, with it, he can regain power. When Isildur was murdered, the Ring fell into the River Anduin, where it waited for Sauron. These last scenes are shown in the movies of "The Lord of the Rings".

(Remnant 2) The second version of the Remnant is the main story of "The Lord of the Rings" from books and movies. The story picks up after the combined forces of the first Remnant from Numenor and the elves defeat Sauron but Isildur does not destroy the Ring. The faithful-to-God Numenoreans who had survived the fall of Numenor were the stock for the line of true kings in Middle Earth. The story of Arnor and Gondor reflects the story of lesser Israel in the north and Judea in the south. As with Jerusalem, the "City on the Hill", the capital of Gondor in the south is a shining city on a hill.

Sauron, without revealing himself, by using the Chief of the Nine Nazgul (Ring Wraths), destroyed Arnor, Kingdom of the North, as Assyria destroyed Israel in the North. The end of Arnor stunned Gondor and led to disarray just as in Judea after the North fell to Assyria. The line of true kings in the South had been lost with the death of Isildur. So, to most men, for a long time, it seemed there was no true king of Arnor-Gondor, just as it appeared there was no true king in Israel-Judea after the line of David faltered in the South. Rather, Gondor was ruled by stewards just as Judea was ruled by local aristocrats not of the true full line of David.

Luckily, the line of true kings in Middle Earth was kept in the North, although Arnor had fallen, as Jesus the true king, heir of David, came from Galilee in the North although Israel in the north had fallen. At the time of the events told in the books and movies, the true king of the two kingdoms was Aragorn, although only elves and the human Remnant in the north knew so, just as only close followers of Jesus knew he was the one true king and one true Remnant of God. Not quite a rebel, still Aragorn is a person on the fringes, looks disreputable, and knows much lore. He does not take on the airs of a king but mingles with the common people and works endlessly to keep them safe. He consorts with other disreputable people on the fringes such as Gandalf. All this is true of Jesus too. Jesus was not a rebel, not even to the extent that David was, but to the authorities of his time, he was a rebel, he did some rebellious things such as chase the money changers out of the Temple courtyard, and officially he was executed for treason while really he was executed simply for potentially causing trouble.

Helpers of the one true king of Middle Earth, humble folk, hobbits, came from the North just as disciples of Jesus were humble folk from the North. Before becoming heroes, Merry and Pippin were rascals and even thieves, about as close to rebels as hobbits can get. The true King of Middle Earth, Aragorn, and true leaders of the hobbits, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, unite Arnor and Gondor and save the world, just as Jesus, in theory, united all Israelites, and used his disciples, especially Peter and Paul, to save the world. Although Jesus was of the North, he did most of his work in the South. Although Aragorn, Frodo,

and Sam were of the North, they did their best work in the South. When the hobbits returned home, they were not treated as heroes but as disreputable characters on the fringes.

Sauron had a lot of comebacks. His followers had a lot of comebacks. In this, Sauron was an imitation false leader of an imitation false Remnant, was a false Remnant, and his followers were a false Remnant. This is the case with many groups and leaders that claim to be a Remnant. End LOTR.

The idea (myth) of a Remnant requires enemies, violence, and the violent defeat of enemies, not only in Tolkien's version but in the common version inherited by many ethnic groups from the Bible. Good wins, partially because it is good, but largely because big strong violent and-or clever people take up arms. The idea of a Remnant requires the ideas that good is defeated largely by corruption from within, many problems have their roots in not-enough-purity, and most people don't see corruption from within, so an effective Remnant has to be pure, has to see what others don't, and has to be willing to strongly urge purity on the rest of society. The idea of the Remnant is a way to mix old and new, to be new but present yourself as old and new.

Even political parties that have been in power a long time can see themselves as a Remnant if they are not the majority and they feel themselves in danger from a misguided public. Examples are Communist parties and parties of the rich. If their policies keep the public modestly unquiet, as usually happens, then a feedback cycle can develop, and bolster their identity as a Remnant.

Conservatives in America like to pose as a mix of rebel and Remnant. Every time Conservatives "come back" after Liberals have had power for a while, they act as rebels fighting against the near-Stalinism that self-deluded Liberals always lead America to the brink of. Then, when Conservatives have power, they portray themselves as the Remnant back from power exile, set hard on the task of restoring God's order after the chaos of Liberal rule. They tell themselves they are the minority smart guys leading an unquiet public to a better life despite the fact that the public would not like their policies if it understood the reality of the policies. Voters buy it often enough.

Liberals also want to show themselves as rebels and Remnant but they are not as adept. They can sell the rebel role because it is easy to portray Conservatives as hyper-order even when Conservatives cause chaos such as the housing crisis of 2007. It is harder for Liberals to portray themselves as the Remnant because it is hard to see them as once having been legitimate, more orderly than Conservatives, then wrongly kicked, out. and now coming back to restore God's order. If they cast themselves as humanistic have-a-heart order that is good for society as whole, they do better as Remnant. If they cast themselves as the heirs of Thomas Jefferson back to restore social justice, they do better as Remnant.

Living in Alabama, the American "Deep South", I have many chances to see church on television. White preachers do not dwell on these themes much except as the preachers see conservative Southern virtue in conflict with northern bad liberal hyper-order or degenerate Liberal moral chaos. Southern Whites are the true Christian Remnant saving us from the disorder of Yankee Liberalism. And Southern Whites continue the tradition of the Southern Rebel.

Black preachers dwell heavily on the Remnant. They return often to the ideas that Black people are like the Jews in exile in Babylon, are badly mistreated by all the people around them who are all unlike them,

and yearn for home. Home cannot be Africa but instead is their proper due place in America. God will restore them to their proper home in America, to their rightful political and economic place as befits their moral superiority and their unrecognized economic contributions. Martin Luther King was both THE rebel and the greatest original leader of the Remnant. Black leaders refer to the classic Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s as the imagined ideal past to which the Remnant, them, holds the key and from which they derive inspiration and methods. In their minds, and at odds with the facts, the issues have not changed since 1950, and so the same exact struggle is just as much a road to justification. At least since 2000, since I have lived here, Black preachers have also called for leaders who are rebels like David, like what Jesse Jackson presents. Sadly, that image has been thoroughly mixed with bitterness. That mix is what Al Sharpton puts on, many Black music and pop culture people put on, and far too many bitter Black people put on.

More on the American Version.

Because the American version of these stories has been spreading around the world through pop media, it is useful to look at it again briefly. I do not explain why Americans think as they do. I return to these themes in the chapter on Romanticism.

As far as I can tell, Americans are the best example of a culture-society which does not contrast good order with chaos but contrasts good order with hyper-order. The badness of hyper-order is worse than any badness of chaos. Hyper-order is always bad. The worst badness comes from hyper-order. True badness can come only from hyper-order. When Americans think of badness and bad societies, they think of fascist Europe, Stalinist Russia, and North Korea. When Americans think of improving society, they think of improving hyper-ordered societies so as to make them less hyper-ordered and freer. That freedom always leads automatically to better moderate order.

In the American view, chaos is not necessarily bad and can be good, even quite good. Chaos is similar to freedom both for individuals and societies. Groups that can present themselves as a bit chaotic can come across as free and good even when they are really bound by strict rules, such as motorcycle gangs and the mafia. Without chaos, there would be no creativity, creativity is always good. Creativity not only needs some prior chaos but also often makes chaos. That more chaos then leads to more creativity, and so on. Art is good creativity. Art requires some order (the media and the genre) and it imposes further order (the artistic vision of a particular world) but true real deep art springs from nowhere, and good artists are always a bit eccentric and chaotic, so art is more akin to chaos than to hyper-order, and true art is always good. Without good chaos there would be no creative art.

Like everyone, Americans assume their order is the good moderate order, but Americans do not often speak about their order as good moderate order. They prefer to think of it as no order, even if it is not chaos. It is the order that comes of spontaneity and naturalness. It is nature and spontaneity as order. It is true that the founders of the country wrote of good moderate order but they also recognized the need for continual revision and for spontaneity, and that trend won out.

Americans are suspicious of anything that self-consciously calls itself "order", "good order", or even "good moderate order". Americans do not deny the goodness of moderate order but they suspect that anything calling itself good moderate order is not good moderate order but is hyper-order oppression calling itself

good moderate order as a way to sneak up on us and get us. When faced with a choice between an order that calls itself good moderate order versus chaos with maybe some potential harm, it is still better to choose chaos.

Live the untamed free life. It is more artistic and creative, and therefore more satisfying.

Over time, what was once new good moderate order tends to become old established bad hyper-order. Then, the system has to get shaken, and chaos has to prevail for a while. Out of the chaos will come a new better good moderate order.

It is not hard to see where rebels fit in. Rebels don't accept hyper-order and don't even accept moderate order. They are the leaders in the shake up that ends the old order, allows brief chaos, and brings in the new good moderate order. Thomas Jefferson is notorious in his time for saying that a good democracy needed a revolution every generation.

Of course, true rebels don't fit into moderate order either, and they have a certain personality type, but that is alright. They are useful even in good moderate order for keeping people on their toes. Better to be a rebel just in case good moderate order turns into bad hyper-order than to be a complacent sheep who helps good moderate order turn into bad hyper-order.

The Plight of the Reasonable Person and the Conservative.

Chaos and rebellion can be fun, but we should not romanticize chaos or rebellion. We do need some kind of order. Moderate order is more likely to be good than chaos, rebellion, hyper-order, or blind faith obedience. The West is lucky to have been given an excellent set of tools to find good moderate order. Hopefully we use them well.

At least since about 1920, Americans have dismissed much Conservative argument as special pleading for hyper-order, the rich, the powerful, their lackeys, and other fascists-in-the-making. Most modern conservative thinking is apologetics. But not all conservative thinking is that. In dismissing all of it, we miss good points about moderate order, chaos, and hyper-order. Believe it or not, some conservatives know that moderate order is best and they seek moderate order. Some conservatives fear hyper-order and seek to avoid it. The difference is that conservatives think hyper-order is more likely to come from leftist-induced chaos than from moderate order. They have in mind the French Revolution, Russia from about 1850 onwards, and Germany after World War Two. In those cases, they are correct. Chaos did not lead to natural spontaneous good moderate order but to horrible tyranny. Conservatives fear that America is becoming like France just before 1789. They have some justification for their fears.

It is not clear that those cases of tyranny from leftist-induced chaos apply to America. It is not clear if America is more in danger of falling into bad hyper-order, that is, into mom-and-apple-pie fascism, from leftist-induced chaos, Liberal-induced political correctness, middle class soccer culture, Republican aid for business and the military industrial complex, Tea Party backlash, "thug culture" among any ethnic group, or from generalized fear as we move into the world economy. We are in danger from all the sources, and we need better ideas to avoid danger and do what is best.

I do not argue the case here. I only say we need to look at all reasonable arguments, and at least a few facts, before we give in to myth or propaganda. We need to use our minds to find good moderate order. Do not fear modest chaos or moderate order. Fear badness in any kind of order.

The Victory of Good, and other Myths, Again.

Above I said that most people want good to win just because it is good, and one way to do so is for good to win as the result of a system. I also said this way avoids thinking about good, the system, your role in serving good, and your role in a system. If you do moderately well, and if your group does well, then you can say that the system is doing the work, and you have the right to get on with getting as much as you can. Or, if you and your group are not doing well, then you say your group should be the one that orders the system of the best moderate order and the greatest victory for the most good. You are the rebels and remnant, and should be doing the ordering. All this is what the myths of good moderate order arising from chaos or from a reaction against hyper-order enable. I hope this critique of the myths and them groups that use them is clear enough so that I don't have to go through it. I don't assess any particular claims here.

The myths of goodness winning because it is good, good coming out of a system, and the system being ordered for the best by particular guiding groups, are not realistic enough. We have to do better. We have to step back from the myths and think for ourselves. Because most of us rely on these ideas too much, then, at least sometime in our lives, we have to repudiate the ideas for a while until we can think better. If we don't, then good will not win because it is good, good will not win because it has the right champions, good will not win because a system produces good, good will not win because it arises from chaos in moderate order, and good will not win because it arises from a revolt against hyper-order. Good will lose. Don't depend on divine intervention.

As with other ideas that come to evolved beings, we should judge myths not just because they are myths but on the basis of their truth and their usefulness. Fun is part of usefulness. I don't want to get rid of all myths. I love myths. As evolved humans, we have to think through myths at least somewhat, we cannot get rid of myths, and we should not try. Rather, we should learn to do two things. First, put aside myths temporarily to think in terms of boring objective reality. Second, learn to think through myths to better truth. The two methods depend on each other. You can only learn to put aside myths for a while if you can learn to think through them "to the other side". You can only learn to shrug off the bad myths of other people if you can learn to think in good myths for yourself. Maybe Donald Trump really is the rebel savior businessman who will lead God's remnant of middle and working class America back to God's great order again. Or maybe you should stop thinking in those terms for a while, start thinking in terms of reality, and, after another while, look for the right inspiration and right inspirational leader.

Recall the myths around Jesus. He came from the chaotic lower classes, the people, the repository of all wisdom and good. He ordered that chaos into a movement that changed the whole world. He tried to get around the hyper-order of the rich, Jewish leaders, the official Jewish Church, and the Romans. He was a rebel in his way. He represented the remnant of the people who truly knew God and who worshipped God in the right way. His life, death, and resurrection led to the victory of good because it is good and not because it is strong. His life, death, and resurrection led to the correct system of moderate order, the system that assures the victory of good because it is good, and the system that assures the greatest

good, that is, the Church – at least for some people with the right mix of membership, grace, works, faith, and Justification. The Church properly orders both chaos and hyper-order. In that way, as the heirs of Jesus, the Church does the proper creative life-giving ordering work of God.

We should not reject Jesus or his teachings just because people see Jesus mostly in terms of such myths anymore than we should with any leader. We should assess the truth and usefulness of his teachings and of what people believe about him. If a particular belief, however rooted in myths, does not undercut his teachings, then we do not have to declaim about the myth.

By dwelling in myths, people do overlook Jesus' teachings and so miss the mark. People would benefit by having it pointed out that: much of what they think is important about Jesus is mere myth, they should focus on the teachings, and it is easier to focus on the teachings if they repress the myths for a while. Some people do use myths to enable acting badly. But people respond poorly to argument that it is all "only myth". They cling to myth whether the focus is religion, politics, pop culture, academic doctrine, or the idea that evolved beings can think entirely free of myths and metaphors. Busting all myths leads to backlash, even greater dependence on myths, and even more resistance to simple truth. Think of all the myths that you cling to about political leaders, pop culture leaders, your little cultural clique, and your socio-economic class. You want to bust their myths but not yours. I have no general advice here on how to handle the problem.

If you are sick of seeing "Star Wars" on TV, then skip the rest of this section. In his original vision for the "Star Wars" saga, George Lucas had in mind nine movies-episodes. From him, we got the first six of the nine. The first three (the second three as they were released in 1999 and after) were about the fall of good. The middle three (the first three as they were released in 1977 and after) were about the return of good. The last three were supposed to be about how good governs in a democracy. Because of all the stress on uniting the two sides of the Force, I would guess that the last three were supposed to be about how good governs once good has reunited in a stable balance with badness, or at least once reason and emotion have been reunited in a stable balance. We never got those.

Instead, a production company bought Lucas Films (I think Disney), and we got "The Force Awakens" and "Rogue One". There is nothing wrong with those movies. The problem is that they do not follow Lucas' original hope. They do not tackle issues of how reason unites with passion, how good unites with bad yet keeps control, or how the unified force governs, especially in a democracy. In comparison to the original hope, they are merely slam-bang heroes-v-villains action movies. There is not much difference between them and most action movies. They continue the theme of "feisty girl" as it had been developed elsewhere. Rather than use Lucas' mythology and work through it, they fall back on the stock mythology of action movies. That tactic works well at the box office. Something similar happened to "Star Trek". This is what it means not to think through myths but rather to let them control our thinking.

If Lucas had carried out the original conception, and done it well, that might have been an example of thinking well through myths, or using myths to think well.

This Book is not Primarily about Politics.

With the American twist on old myths, and with the plight of the reasonable conservative, I have moved over into politics. This book is not primarily about politics. True, I did give my political ideas in Chapter Two, and I do use them to assess religious stances. But I do not describe many political stances and I do not use my ideals to assess those stances. I do not assess Liberals and Conservatives here. Political stances are the subject of other work.

06 Codes

From Dion and the Belmonts:

“I got my two fists of iron but I’m goin’ nowhere”

Introduction and Synopsis.

Codes guide: soldiers, martial artists, detectives, knights, tough guys, bar fighters, stand-up guys, moms, dads, feminists, bimbos, right wingers, left wingers, golfers, football players, con artists, nature lovers, right to lifers, pro-choicers, righteous crusaders, martyrs, and trophy-hunting Predators (don’t kill pregnant women or women without weapons). Codes are a big way by which to deal with a confusing world. Codes are stances. This chapter explains the idea of a code and assesses a few codes.

In the modern world, especially in modern pluralistic nations, most people don’t understand the dogmas of traditional religion, New Age, and politics. Even when people fight for dogmas, often they don’t get them. Usually conflict is more about “us” versus “them” than about “our ideas” versus “their ideas”. Just because people don’t focus on ideas does not mean people don’t need ideas. People seek a simple set of ideas, a code, to live by, that they can understand, and can defend.

I do not distinguish much between: way, way of life, role, occupation, profession, station, “act”, “shtick”, role, and code. Compared to the other items, I think a code is more coherent, smaller, more focused, and more likely to center on principles. A person could follow a soldier code while carrying out the occupation of business. A person could follow no real code while following externally the guidelines of a profession such as teacher, banker, or soldier.

Most codes can serve as havens against uncertainty. Rather than flounder in uncertainty, people adopt some code as a haven. People adopt a particular code because of their own personality and history. Most people just fall into a way of life and a code. Except for remarks below on a person’s “true you”, I don’t consider why much people adopt particular codes. I do want people to adopt a particular code for the reason that it is a good code.

At any time in human history, but especially in the modern world, you could not be everything, and you could not know firsthand the results of every life. You cannot be man and woman, child and adult, hunter and farmer, artist and ruler, Chinese and French, Muslim and Taoist. You have to choose, and, then, stick to it. You hope your choice works out well for you and the people around you, and in general; but you can’t know for sure.

To live by any code alone is not enough. First, you have to believe in the code. Second, the code has to go along fairly well with your “true you”. Third, and most important, you have to live by a code based on the right principles. So, fourth, “your true” you and the right principles have to get along well enough even if not perfectly. Fifth, you hope your code does more good than harm.

Once we see the right principles, they are more important than any particular code. Good codes are only the means by which to live out the right principles, under particular conditions. You hope your particular way promotes right principles well enough. In my view, the right principles are the ideals of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values.

Right principles are not simply a list. Right principles are based on an underlying spirit. Right principles need judgment based on the underlying spirit. From the TV show “NCIS”, even Gibbs’ list has a guiding rationale, even if we can’t easily state it.

In the sappy “Twilight” books and movies, and “Underworld” movies, it is not enough to be a true-to-the-code vampire or werewolf. Most vampires and werewolves do that much. You have to adhere to deeper better values. You have to be better than bad vampires. You have to be better than average vampires and even better than ruling vampires. You have to be better than the good vampire clan (Cullen) and the good werewolf clan (Jacob) before they became friends. You have to be as good as they are after they made friends. You have to adhere to values that can create friendship across group lines even while you are kicking the crap out of bad guys and defying autocratic rulers. Adhering to those values allows you to bring out the best in codes, yourself, and all groups. It allows you to defeat bad groups and bad rulers. Even if this vision is one version of Christian idealism, it is true enough to take seriously.

Insisting on rules without judgment leads to zealotry. It squashes the empathy and sympathy that are part of the underlying spirit for the right principles. At the same time, judgment is not mere relativism and it is not a self-serving excuse to do what you want. “Principles” means “principles”. Having a spirit behind principles means keeping that spirit through the judgments of particular cases.

Not everybody can feel the principles and the underlying spirit. Most people have to rely on a list of rules as in the “Bro’ Code” of the TV show “How I Met Your Mother”. Even people who do understand usually find it easier to live by a set of simple rules than always to ponder judgment. When we personally are not adept at principles, then we have to live by codes. Even when we are adept, always referring back to principles is a lot of work and is not always productive. We fall back on codes as a more realistic way to deal with a complex world. We fall back on codes as “rules of thumb”: “detectives never betray a client” especially if she is young, pretty, and in trouble.

Regardless of how adept you are at principles, sometimes life punches you so hard that you have to fall back on the list until better days come, as in movies and graphic novels about people who take righteous vengeance until they can “re-humanize” with new friends and family.

People who do see the underlying rationale have to steer other people toward codes that are based on right principles without forcing the other people. That is part of what it means to be a good teacher or a good religious counselor.

We hope our codes do much more good than harm. We hope they are a good way to live even in the confusing modern world. We use codes that have proven themselves over time, such as for respected professions like soldiers, doctors, teachers, homemakers, and business people. We use codes that are

based on simple proven principles even when we know that one set might not cover all cases all the time correctly, such as the principles of personhood, honor, hard work, or being useful.

When we see that our code is not working out well, we try to find a better code. The feeling that our old code is failing can be scary. To a veteran doctor or teacher, the idea that the “tried and true” methods don’t work anymore, and that you might have hurt your patients or students, hurts your guts. The search is just as scary. To find a new code, we have to assess various codes against basic principles. If we could assess with this degree of skill to begin with, we could have adjusted our old code and would not have to look for a new one. The fact that our old code didn’t work out well is evidence that we will have trouble looking for a new one. Still we try.

Accepting a code that does not use right principles invites abuses such as glamorizing criminals, even when some aspects of the code have merit. This is a serious modern mistake.

Usually being faithful is a good part of a good code, but not always. Being true to a code is admirable but being true to a code - intense commitment - does not by itself make you right. It does not justify you and save you. Being faithful to a bad code does not make up for the code being bad. Being faithful to a bad code does not make up for the bad ideas and acts. A faithful gangster can be admirable in a limited way but he-she is still a gangster, and that is bad. Living by a bad code is living a bad life no matter how faithful you are. Only when Darth Vader stopped being faithful to the Sith code could he become what he really should be: good family guy. The conflict between commitment and principles is the core dilemma of some classic “films noir”, of which some of my favorites star Alain Delon.

If you live by a reasonable code, with the right intent, and stay faithful, but then the code does not work out because of nothing that you could reasonably help, or your actions lead to bad results that you could not reasonably foresee, then you are not to blame. Then your commitment is praiseworthy in itself. Sometimes things just turn out badly and it is not our fault. This assessment is not the same as the excuse “I was only following orders”.

Knowing right principles but not living up to them is worse than no code. Once you know right principles, then you are bound to seek a code that works with them.

Sometimes, in one situation, you live by one code, then things change, and you live by another code. If things change again, so does your code. This is the premise behind “vengeance” movies such as “The Punisher”, “Taken”, and “The Losers”. Hopefully you don’t do anything too bad while you are taking care of business. The fact that we sometimes shoot up a place of business after getting fired, or shoot up our in-laws, shows we can err. In theory, there is one set of principles behind the apparently different codes for different situations, but I can’t go into how that works here. It is like the switch from “flight” to “fight” and then to “calm after the storm” among animals.

Even within the same time in life, or even on the same day, we can act according to more than one code. The same man can act according to the husband code, game warden code, angry sports fan code, and community citizen code, all in the same day. Again, in theory, one set of principles underlies all the codes and the switches, but the topic is too much to go into here. How this works out is the subject of some TV shows such as “The Good Wife” and “Revenge”.

What if the right principles don't go along with your true individual nature and deepest desires? Is it better to be an honest adept "true you" who does not work hard for a better world or to be a bumbling strained fake do-gooder? Is it right to give up a chance to express your "true you"? Is it right to force yourself to act against your true nature? To force yourself against yourself seems not to help the world. Is it right to force yourself to be a superficial do-gooder if your true nature is to do commerce, write silly pop songs, or even cleverly con people? For Americans, this way of posing the question pre-answers in favor of being your "true you" no matter what. Being a "true you" more than makes up for not working to make the world better. The America view is not usually harmful but it is not always true.

Most people can mix their "true you" with the right principles, with working hard to make the world better, and with "do unto others". Codes can help people find ways of life that merge their true nature with acting well. You don't need to dedicate yourself to charity and then give away everything that you own. Even cartoons and silly pop songs help the world. See the movie "The Travels of Sullivan". To go along with your "true you" you can aggressively fight bad economic development. You can fight for good economic development. You can fight for the free market.

People have to struggle to find the balance but the struggle is worth it. The modern world could not have been built without this struggle. We would not have the rule of law and would not have a good mix of ideals and reality without it. Fun TV shows are built on characters who struggle to mix their "true you" with the right principles, and mostly win, but don't always win, such as "Happy Days" (Arthur Fonzarelli), "Magnum, PI", "White Collar", "The Mentalist", "Law and Order", and most police shows.

If you can't merge your "true you" with actively doing the right principles, then it is better to be your "true you" as long as you do no harm. If you want to sit on the couch watching sports or "rom coms", then do that as long as you do no harm. "Faking it" uselessly does more harm than good.

If your "true you" leads you to act badly, then it is better to fight your "true you". If you lose the struggle, if you must do harm and-or live by bad principles, then it is better to kill yourself. If you must be a bad person who hurts other people, then it is better to die. It is better to kill yourself than to molest children, kill innocent people in the name of God or to keep power, abuse state help, torture animals, or despoil nature. See "Dial 'M' for Murder", "Pickup on Main Street", "8 mm", or any good film noir. If you are a bad person and can't kill yourself, then expect other people to do it.

Even people who act badly feel as if they have to act badly by a code. The ideology of codes can enable people to act badly while feeling righteous about it. People can merge their bad "true you" with a code, and feel good about it. Movie villains, real dictators, bad bureaucrats, bad bosses, and some careerist academics, all act by their idea of a code, and use it to excuse what they do. The organized fantasy of some serial killers is a code. It serves not just to enable killing but also to let killers feel as if killing means something. Gangsters act badly and feel righteous about it, especially when we glamorize them. All this is why we have to be clear about codes and principles.

In the modern world, we ask a lot from the fit between our codes and our selves, maybe too much. We want the fit between our codes and our selves to come naturally without much work, like being a "natural" at tennis or baseball. We yearn for codes that lead to success, let us feel that we make the world a better

place, express our “true you”, and allow us to “be ourselves”. We hate conflict between what we want versus what we should do. We detest conflict that we can’t resolve and that causes much pain. We don’t mind a little conflict and pain if it makes us seem nobler and if we can resolve conflict in victory. We want our code to grow out of our sense of self rather than have to adjust our sense of self to a code. We want our self-expressive code to serve greater good even if it is not an obvious do-gooder code such as poor nurse’s aide. At the same time, we want to make money and live well by following our code without effort. Even if our code involves violence, intoxication, self-intoxication, and crazy driven focus, we expect our code to serve the greater good, as with the detective. We expect to be a bit naughty and to have fun. In fact, we expect to live up to our code better if we are naughty and have fun. If we have to choose among established codes such as “honest business person”, we expect to find one that fits us personally well. We expect destiny to guide us to the right code.

We can see modern expectations about codes in formulaic cutesy fantasy detective shows in which the hero and heroine have slightly flawed characters but not really bad characters, make the world better by catching bad guys, still act out their own “true you” slightly naughty character, and have fun doing it; see the list above; see “Hart to Hart”, “Macmillan and Wife”, “Burn Notice”, “The Mentalist”, “Elementary”, “Castle”, “Psyche”, “Rizzoli and Isles”, etc. In modern versions, such as “The Mentalist” and “Castle”, the heroes and heroines need an evil opposite who lives by an organized life style fantasy, a code, but a bad code. For the modern beginning of cutesy couples, read “The Thin Man” by Dashiell Hammett.

Even people who feel all-out rage can build a code on that true self and can act on it as long as they kill bad guys and save good guys. For an early version, read “Red Harvest” by Dashiell Hammett. See any movie based on righteous vengeance such as “Four Brothers” or the movie from which it likely came, “The Sons of Katie Elder”.

We have so many TV shows and movies telling us that we can find what we want by starting from the self because we know, in real life, we can’t have success that way and that easily. We need to be convinced of what is not true, and the media make money by helping us convince ourselves. They give us fantasies to make us feel better.

Unluckily, rationalizing our life in terms of a contrived code based on our “true you” has costs, especially when the media gives us so much help. We are not sure we are correct. We lose the ability to assess codes, decisions, results, and ways of life. We lose the ability to assess links between principles, “true you”, codes, the good and bad we do, and the greater scene.

One reason we need codes is because, in an uncertain world, we are not sure where the world is going. If we want society to go to a particular place, we don’t know how to there from here. We don’t know how to steer society. In the modern world of democracies, that means we don’t know how to govern well. We can’t place our code in the context of a good society because we don’t know what a good society is and we don’t know how to get one. For decades, our leaders have offered us no vision or plan. We can’t be sure our code is really good enough. To assess the issue of codes in the modern world, I would have to explain why we can’t self-govern well, and what to do about it. That topic lies beyond the scope of this book.

When we can't be sure of the rightness of our code, paradoxically, we fall back harder on our code. We "double down". We find codes that were widely accepted in the past such as the detective's (knight's) code, and we find codes that make sense because they seem to come from human nature such as the parent's code, teacher's code, protector's code, and martial artist's code. We look for codes that demand hard irreversible commitment such as the soldier's code or code of righteous revenge. We hope the code is correct enough. We hope relying on a proven code can absolve us somewhat in case society is so screwed up that we chose wrongly. For a limited human being, often that is the best that can be done. In these cases, more than ever, we need guidance from leaders, and should get it, but, more than ever, we don't get it. For a good movie with most of these ideas, done well, see "Man on Fire" starring Denzel Washington, Dakota Fanning, and Rachael Ticotin.

Commitment.

I am not sure how long, but at least since the 1920s, the West has taken commitment as the primary sign of good action within a code and the sign of a good person. If you act with commitment, then you have done well, even if your code is accidentally bad, and even if the results are unfortunately bad. We admire people who "stick to it", even to a hopeless cause, or sometimes to a bad code. We admire gangsters, even the Al Pacino character in the movie "Scarface", and the Jimmy Cagney movie characters from the 1930s. We admire dedicated Nazi and Confederate soldiers as long as they personally acted honorably, such as Erwin Rommel and Robert E. Lee.

Commitment is common to every code, even for bimbos, gigolos, and heartthrobs; see the Rob Schneider comedies about male gigolos. Commitment is a point of stress in codes where people face opposition and temptation such as for police, soldiers, lawyers, and teachers. As far as I can tell, commitment is the only thing that is necessarily common to all codes. So commitment comes close to being the essence of a code. That is one reason we value it so highly. Commitment is not quite like other values, such as honor, "always get your man", "never leave a comrade behind", or "if you've got it, flaunt it", but it is enough like other values so we can think of commitment the same way and commitment can seem like the essence of codes. See the Bibliography for more on commitment as part of game theory and in our evolutionary past.

We think good people are more committed than bad people in general, except for crazy bad people who want to take over the world. Good guys stick it out while bad guys run away to save their own skins. We take commitment as a sign of good actions and a good character. Usually, at least in the short run, it is harder to be good than bad. It is hard to resist temptation. If you can resist temptation and stick to your code, then maybe you are a good person. You are committed, and that is a good sign. Maybe you are a good person in general even if some of your actions are bad or your code is bad. You have character, and you have potential. If we could make sure your children stuck to the good side rather than the dark side, we wouldn't mind if our children married your children.

This is one reason why we think any code is better than no code. It is better to have a code, any code, even if your "true you" is simply being shallow. If you have to make a code of being shallow, then that is better than just being shallow accidentally. If you have to make a code of being a selfish woman hunter, that is better than just chasing women willy-nilly. Thus we have "woo girls" and "Barney Stimson" on the TV show "How I Met Your Mother", and a legion of side-kick girls in teen shows and movies. One of the

first characters I recall that made a code of his foibles was the sidekick played by Andy Devine on the old TV show "Wild Bill Hickok"; he might be descended from Falstaff.

If you are committed, and so are more likely to be a good person than bad, maybe your code is good too after all, or at least good enough. Maybe your code is only misplaced in a bad situation. A soldier really has a good character and good code, but he-she might apply it to the wrong situation in a bad war.

In the modern world, it is so hard to tell a good useful code from a bad harmful code that, too often, we give up on assessing the code and its results. Who can tell if a soldier, lawyer, or even doctor follows a good code with good results, especially in these days of "spin" and of ads on TV?

We need a sign that a code is working out. For all the reasons given above, we still use commitment as that sign. So, the less we are able to assess codes and principles, the more we take commitment as the sign of good acts, codes, and character. We stand on commitment instead of principles. We substitute commitment for principles. To some extent, we also substitute blind emotion for reason, but I don't want to push this point here.

In committing to commitment, and using commitment instead of principles, too often we glamorize it. We accept any character and any acts in the name of commitment. We accept bad characters and bad acts in the name of commitment. We also glamorize blind emotion over reason.

For codes that do little harm except maybe to the actor, such as the bimbo code, "valley girl" code, "frat boy", or "rugged outdoor guy", using commitment as the index of goodness does little harm. I don't care much about these codes.

In other cases, commitment alone is admirable but is not enough. Maybe in our evolutionary past, using commitment as a sign of good acts, code, and character, even in a bad situation, might have been reliable, at least as a sign of character. Somebody who was determined to defend the "good guys" in the group even when they made a mistake might have been an admirable person. In our modern world, blind commitment is only weakly reliable at best as a sign of good acts, good code, and good character. By itself, it is not enough. We have to commit not just to any code but to a good code that is likely to lead to good results in our world. We have to commit to a good code with good principles, and we have to pay attention to what happens as a result of our acts based on the code. We have to know the police officer's acts really do help good guys and do not go against the principles of good guys. We cannot glamorize bad acts and bad codes because actors are committed; we cannot extol junkies. When the bad pirate in the Tom Hanks movie about the ship "Maersk Alabama" declares "I am captain now", and means it, we don't think he will now resolutely act the role of a good captain.

In cases where we can't judge well acts and results, then we can admire commitment but we still can't extol or glamorize commitment by itself. We can admire loyalty to a business firm as long as we have no reason to believe the firm does bad things. When we think the firm destroys nature and-or exploits poor workers in poor countries, then we cannot excuse loyalty. We might admire honor among thieves who steal jewels from rich people without any violence; we can't glamorize honor among pedophiles. We can admire "school spirit" but not when the school chews up student athletes, ruins their bodies, allows them to rape, allows them to not learn, and never graduates any.

This chapter cannot reverse the glamorization of commitment and the resulting bad codes, people, and acts. Maybe this chapter can help us see the need to look at codes in terms of principles, and help us to think about right principles. At least we can get over some stupid glamorizing. This was the point of the Jimmy Cagney classic anti-gangster movie "Public Enemy". We can start to admire people who try hard to act well by what they hope are good codes. These comments apply to Existentialism below.

Disclaimer: "True You".

This section "covers my ass" against some criticisms. Americans assume people have a "true you", and I go along for here. The idea that we all have a "true you" might not be fully true but it is true enough for what I need here. I correct the idea somewhat in a later chapter on the self, and also in the chapters on Buddhism.

A "true you" comes both from genes and learning. I take no side on "nature versus nurture". Learning comes partly from society. Society partly determines our "true you" but only partly. I don't draw the line between individual and society, at least in theory. In my own mind, I tend toward American independent individualist versions of "true you" that minimize social determinism and struggle against it.

Your "true you" can change. It can change as a result of situations or from choices that you make. If your "true you" can change, then we can debate over how "true" and "you" it is but I don't enter that debate. At any moderate period of time, your "true you" is true enough.

To some extent, you can make yourself. You can get better and can get worse. If you could not make yourself, then it would be hard for your "true you" to change, and to get better or worse. Choice would not make the same sense it does now. It sounds odd to say a "true you" can make its own self but I go along with the idea anyhow. There are limits on how much your true you can make its self. It is hard for a meek decent person to make him-herself into a self-gratifying bully; and hard for a dedicated bully to make him-herself into a moderate decent person; but it has been done, and is the topic of teen epics. I cannot go into the implications of making yourself.

If (a) your "true you" changes as a result of making choices, (b) your "true you" can make its self, and (c) situations can change your "true you", then (d) all those facts imply there is a "real true you" deeper than your apparent "true you. The "real true you" that underlies your apparent "true you" really makes choices and really sets situations. Perhaps you have a secret true soul that is in touch with the one great cosmic soul; all people are really just different aspects of the one true Buddha mind. Maybe your "true you" is a secret darkness in touch with cosmic evil; really, you are a hidden witch who hurts everyone around you without knowing or consciously trying. I think this is a misleading way to think about "true you" and what drives your "true you", and I do not accept it.

Human nature evolved. Each particular person is, to a large extent, the unique combination of a group of evolved abilities. Our evolved self is not a simple consistent whole but a bundle of abilities. It is not clear how well our evolved selves are integrated. Likely we are not nearly as well integrated as the American idea of a "true you". It is not clear if our evolved selves are integrated well enough for the purposes of this chapter; but I think they are; and I rest with that declaration for here.

Mission from God.

A “mission” is a code in a code. It is actions aimed at a goal, all governed by a set of principles, a code. Whether a mission is a good mission or a bad mission depends on who ordered the mission or what situation called for the mission, who carries it out, the goal, the guiding code, the methods, who gets hurt, and who benefits. All this is covered by Christian-Muslim ideas of a just war and by American military ideas of “rules of engagement”. Sometimes the mission is ordered by a respected authority as in “A Team” adventures, sometimes the needs of a good person require it as on the TV show “Burn Notice” to help a “client”, and sometimes a situation arises that calls for a response as in the movie “The Losers”. There is not much more I can say about missions that I don’t say below about codes.

A fun example of a mission from God is in the movie “The Blues Brothers”. I agree with Jake and Elmore that they were on a mission from God. This is the kind of mission from God that most people can “get behind”. You can assess if the benefit is worth the damage. Another funny but instructive example, and a good movie, is “Dogma” by Kevin Smith, with a great cast.

Aside from Jake and Elmore, most people who think they are on a mission from God are not. They are self-deluded. They use the idea to fool themselves and to enable themselves to do something they want to do for other reasons. They use the idea as an excuse to hurt other people if they have or want to. Terrorists are on a mission from God. They use the idea to hurt themselves or keep themselves in a box for most of their lives. Self-delusion for selfish reasons is likely true of most self-appointed missions even if they are not from God, but I don’t know enough to go further into it here. Be careful around people who are on a mission from God; other characters in the movie even had to be careful of Jake and Elmore, and they really were on a mission from God. Of course, “God” also includes “Dharma”, “Heaven” and the “Tao”.

Pascal’s Wager.

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician and religious thinker in the 1600s. To help out a gambler, he pioneered probability theory. The computer language “Pascal” was named after him. Pascal offered a religious “wager”. Here is my version. (A) Suppose God exists, and you believe in him. You get a rich reward in heaven, and likely get one on Earth through fellowship and through business deals with other believers. (B) Suppose God exists, and you refuse to believe. By not having an anchor to God, you might be able to gain more materially while you are still alive. More likely, you will be hurt by society now for your bad acts and punished by God in the future. (C) Suppose God does not exist, and you wrongly believe in him. You are not likely to lose much, and most of the loss will come from moral acts that you would do anyway. Besides, you might gain from good relations with other believers and by being a good member of society. (D) Suppose God does not exist, and you do not believe in him. You gain little, and you might lose on the whole because society dislikes you. If you look at the options rationally, you should believe in God. That is how you stand to gain most; that is the best bet. Ever since Pascal, apologists for religion have offered versions of his wager as a real argument for belief.

The most common version of Pascal’s Wager is social. Religious believers think only other believers are fit for society. It is better if other people believe in the same religion as us but it does not have to be the

same religion as long as their religion does not conflict openly with our religion. Any religion is better than no religion. Atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, and religiously lazy people cause problems. Most people want society to work. You, personally, want society to work both because that is good in itself in general and because a working society is good for you and your children. To make society work, you should believe in a religion, teach your children to believe, and encourage other people to believe. Belief tends to follow behavior. So, to make society work, you have to go to church-temple-mosque regularly, take your family, and get other people to go too. Apologists for religion really do offer this argument. If you don't believe, then society will fall apart. So, believe, conform, and get others to believe and conform too. Ideally, you should believe as we do. Since the rise of Political Correctness, the Left says the same thing in its own way. Even political leaders who really don't believe in much of anything want the people to believe in something because it makes them more governable. The social version of Pascal's Wager was one of the key themes in social science from about 1890 onwards when social scientists assumed that people went along entirely with social rules.

Pascal's Wager raises issues of purity of motive, codes, principles, and "true you". The idea has echoes in modern economics and politics. Pascal tried to substitute his idea of objective self-interest for the true self. Rather than act on the basis of true self, we act on the basis of objective self-interest, and then that self-interest becomes our true self. Yet, in contrast to Pascal, most us don't want to believe or not believe through a rational calculation of costs and benefits. We want to believe because deep in our heart we think it is true. If, in our heart, we don't think a religion is true, we cannot make ourselves believe just because we hedge our bets and want to gain the most. Our true self is not simply rational calculation. We cannot make ourselves believe because it is good for us, good for society, or good for Big Brother. True human beings don't work that way, or ought not to work that way. True human belief does not work that way. You either believe because you think it is true or you do not. You either believe because it is an expression of "true you" or you do not.

Pascal's Wager points to a contradiction. People are free to choose, and must be free to choose in order to make religious progress and to decide Pascal's Wager. But to accept belief along the lines of Pascal's Wager is to distort free will and even to negate free will. To believe because of cost-benefit rather than because of truth goes against how we think free will works. If cost-benefit determines will more than truth, then will is not free as we think. To believe out of self-interest, rather than because we evaluate evidence and freely choose, amounts to hypocrisy, posing, false belief, and bad attitude. If you believe in a religion that depends on free will, such as Christianity, then you cannot believe in it because of Pascal's Wager. You cannot believe along the lines of Pascal's Wager or you betray free will, belief, God, and the religion that you supposedly choose. If you accept Pascal's Wager, then you negate the basis for the Wager. If you believe because it is part of your true self to believe, fine; but, then, you do not believe because of the self-interest in Pascal's Wager, you believe as an expression of your true self. (I do not go into relations of the "true self", will, and truth.) In the "Matrix" movie series, Agent Smith could not understand why Mr. Anderson kept getting back up and kept fighting when it was so obviously not cost effective and was so obviously irrational. Neo answered "Because I choose to". In the early 1800s, Artur Schopenhauer put the issue another way when he said: You can will but you cannot will to will. You can will to go to the mall but you cannot will to will to go. You either will or you will not. You cannot will to believe. You either believe or believe not. "You do or you do not, there is no trying". You either follow your "true you" or you do not.

Sometimes your “true you”, your will, and what you believe, do not coincide with your senses, facts, evidence, science, reason, and apparent truth. People who oppose evolution are like this. This is an important issue but it is another issue. This issue is not relevant to the main issue here.

I disagree with Pascal and I agree with his critics. We cannot believe as an expedient. We can believe only because we believe. We have to go along with our true selves. We have to go along with what we think is true. If it is in our true self to go along with evidence and reason as a way to belief, then we have to go along with evidence and reason. I remember reading Pascal's Wager as a child and wondering how people could be so foolish, selfish, self-deluding, and self-manipulative. God would rather have honest muddled atheists – who still act well – than have self-serving believers who follow Pascal's Wager.

Pascal's Wager is seductive because it makes us think we follow good principles, our true selves, and self-interest all at once. Pascal's Wager makes morality, God, logic, our true selves, and self-interest all seem to coincide and get along. It is so logical. It leads us to God. It depends on the fact that we identify God with goodness automatically. We seem to freely choose. We choose benefit rather than loss, like adept modern business people. Our salvation is an expression of our true selves and of our self-interest at the same time. We can easily overlook that we ignore free will. What could be wrong about something so neat? Although almost four hundred years old, Pascal's Wager is a good example of modern thinking: calculations of cost and benefit aimed centered on the self, even in non-material realms.

Suppose we had strong evidence that God wanted us to act badly. In that case, we could re-frame the Wager so we come out ahead if we do act badly and do not act well. It would be just as rational, and it could be just as much an expression of our true selves. But we would reject it, and we would not want to think of our true selves in that way at all. We could see the contrived accord between logic, goodness, God, self, self-interest, and selfishness; and reject it. We would rather change our true selves if we could. We would seek a true self that aligned with correct principles rather than a true self that fooled itself into aligning with selfishness and badness.

Pascal's Wager shows that we are not consistent in what we think about the self, reason, circumstances, strategic action, freedom, choosing, belief, principles, our “true you”, and how our “true you” connects with God. Rather than break into these topics here, it is enough to say we seek to reconcile them but don't often make it. Likely they can't always be reconciled. When we find a reconciliation that works well enough to let us succeed in normal life without bad feelings, we tend to stick with it. Sometimes that is the basis for whole societies and sometimes that is the basis only for codes.

Four points: First, people can make themselves really believe something out of self-interest. You really can talk yourself into something. You really can talk yourself into something so that you can succeed in life. That is sometimes why people adopt particular religions. Americans are really uneasy about calling this true belief but it does happen. Americans hope it happens only to people of weak will and bad character, and that is how it is shown in the movies, but sometimes it happens even to people of normal will and modestly decent character. Careerists do it to themselves all the time, even careerists for whom freedom is supposed to be a special point such as academics. People really believe because they need comfort, help, protection, etc. Missionaries of all faiths sell their gods primarily by saying their gods (or ideas) can deliver what we need and not by explaining how their god (or dogma) is true. As beautiful as it is, the statue of Jesus without outstretched arms in Rio de Janeiro sells Jesus by what he has to offer

rather than by the truth of him. Allah (Mohammad), Krishna, Kwan Im, the Tao, and the Force all offer the same.

Second, sometimes, other people can make us believe. Other people can override our free choice. This is a theme of the novel “1984”, and the movies “The Manchurian Candidate” and “Brazil”. Usually other people don’t use force and don’t use long-term clever coercion. Instead, they use clever manipulation and persuasion. Other people do this to us by first appealing to our self-interested need to succeed, as Pascal did, and then by using that as leverage to get inside us. That is what the Devil does in countless movies and TV shows. Whether from force or manipulation, our susceptibility to other people making our beliefs and making our “true you” scares Americans. I don’t know what these points say about the nature of the real self and about true belief.

Third, if we can’t resort to Pascal’s idea of self-interest to mold free true selves, is there a reliable way we can get people freely to adopt codes based on good principles? Is there a way to make sure self-expression and good values coincide? Can we get correct principles to mold the self without hurting the self? That is the dilemma of parents, teachers, and state crafters. That is the dilemma of good political correctness. That is the dilemma both of every “free spirit” and every stubbornly self-promoting careerist. I don’t see any way to absolutely do this. The best we can do is to explain the situation and live correctly. Luckily, evolution gave us a good base to work from. Most people are mostly good most of the time, and are susceptible to reasons and good institutions. Under good circumstances, usually that is enough. If not, then we resort to bad reasons, bad religion, bad atheism, and strong government.

Fourth, in its own way, evolution (natural selection) gets our “true you” to coincide with what is practically good for us (fitness) regardless of whether what is practically good for us is objectively true (usually) or not true (too often). If “to believe in God despite no evidence or despite contrary evidence” led to greater fitness, then natural selection would mold our brains (to tend) to believe. Biologists and economists who want to substitute fitness or utility maximization for Pascal’s practical benefits of believing in God use natural selection to do the trick. We can make ourselves believe because it is obviously practical to our evolved minds. We screw ourselves up to believe in God because we can see it is practical to do so or because other people can get us to. Natural selection certainly did shape our ability to make ourselves believe in what is useful and shaped our susceptibility to other people. We believe not because it is true but because it is practical. Our “true you” really is our “practical you”. We make our “true you” into our “practical you”. Our “practical you” always guides our “true you”. Pascal’s Wager is only one instance of the general trend of “practical you” making “true you”. The fact that natural selection molded our minds, at least somewhat, weakens the naïve American view of the “true you”. In this chapter, I put arguments so they do not go against the idea that natural selection shaped our minds. Despite the fact that evolution shaped our minds, we can still salvage enough of the naïve American view of the “true you” to make this chapter useful. We have a “true you” that often does, yet sometimes does not, coincide with practicality. Our “true you” is not just the part of us that transcends practicality but is in both the parts that do go along with practicality and that do not. I make no guess here as how to partition this all out. I can hold both to the view of a “true you” and “practical you” without feeling too contradictory. Other than this declaration, I don’t go into the debate any further.

Pascal’s Wager and Meeting God.

Many times in this book I say: (1) If you do as Jesus said, without thinking of him as God, you will be alright when you meet God. (2) If you do not do as Jesus said, even if you think of him as God, you will be in trouble. (3) If you do not do as Jesus said, and do not think of him as God, you will be in trouble. (4) If you do as Jesus said, and think of him as God, then you will be alright, but don't get all proud about it. Although I put this issue in practical terms about what happens when we meet God, really I want you to do what is right because it is right, and not because of anything you get out of it in this world or when you meet God. I want you to fashion a code based on what is right, as best you can, given your "true you", and the situation that you face, even if your code is not perfect. I want you to merge your "true you" with the principles of Jesus as best you can. Wanting to do right because it is right without worrying about God is not necessarily an argument for atheism; the stance still acknowledges God without stressing him; see the chapter on atheism.

Superficially, my advice is like Pascal's Wager. I advise based on what I expect happens when we meet God. Hopefully, what I say differs enough from Pascal so the difference matters. First, what I advise does not require you to mangle your "true you" much. It is not hard to follow Jesus' advice mixed with practically and Western values, as long as you know you will not be perfect, and you can expect some trouble. Second, I don't expect you to believe much. I do expect you to believe you will meet God, and so expect you to believe in God, but I don't expect you to believe Jesus is God. Without going into details, Pascal did expect you to believe a fair amount, and all religious teachers who use him (whether they know it or not) expect you to believe a lot. Most people can go along with what I propose. Third, what matters is not what you believe but what you do. You don't have to believe in God or Jesus-as-God, and so don't have to mangle your "true you" much if you don't want to believe in Jesus as God. Even if you don't believe in God, but still act well, I think you are alright. Fourth, I don't think the punishment for not believing in God and Jesus-as-God is Hell. As long as you act well, I doubt you are in much trouble. If you do not act well, then it doesn't matter what you believe because you will still have a hard time when you die. If you refuse to believe in God, and act badly on that basis, then I don't know what to say, and I would not try to talk you out of your stance with my usual logic. We will both find out when we die. Fifth, I would leave practicality out of the issue entirely except that people insist on putting these questions in a practical framework of what happens after we die. If we can forget about practicality, then we are entirely away from Pascal's wager, and the issue is the relation of morality to our "true you". I think most people can go along with Jesus' ideas of morality, and I leave the issue up to you.

If you insist on seeing my view as conniving, using the appeal of practicality, using the appeal of a good outcome when we meet God, using fear, regardless of our "true you", to determine our behavior, then it is hard for me to argue you out of your view. I don't see the situation that way. For people who believe in God, and trust God, then practicality is not relevant. Do what you can consistent with your "true you" and the situation, and things will work out alright for you in the end.

Now Back to Codes.

"Ours is not to question why, ours is but to do or die," from "Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I could not resist quoting that line.

When Jesus worked for the Kingdom of God, he believed it would come, knew what it would be like, what the citizens would be like, how to work for it, and what the citizens would do. When Jesus died before the

Kingdom arrived, his followers could be sure of none of that anymore. They had to remake it all. If you know your goals clearly, and know your actions will aid your goals, then it is easy to know what to do. If not, then it is hard to know. It is easy for me to say we should work hard to build a better world but unless I can be clear about the better world and how to build it, then I have not said much. If I think it might be impossible to build a better world, and I still want us to try, I better have good reasons.

Sometimes for a while the world makes sense, as apparently it did to many people in Medieval Europe, during the time of King Asoke in India under Buddhism, or during one of the great dynasties of China. In those times, people have well-defined roles. The roles are structured by a code, such as a knight, cleric, bureaucrat, or peasant. Even when the world does not make as much sense, the roles and the codes live on. People can still live by what used to be good, still makes a lot of sense if not perfect sense, and gives structure. They do this even though the codes and roles might be corrupted and seem silly, as the codes do in Chaucer or in Cervantes. For a while after Jesus died, I think people did just that until they could live by new roles and new codes in a new world that made sense.

When I ask people to work hard to build a better world although I think we might not get a better world, and I ask people to be decent in a world that is often indecent, then I am asking people to live by old codes that might make sense in the transition, might help the transition, and might make sense in the new world. All I can do is hope this is true.

John the Baptist was Jesus' teacher and likely his mentor. During John's time, the Romans had taken over Israel. Romans and Jews (Israelites) both were concerned with proper behavior, especially under such confusing conditions. Roman soldiers and Jewish officials wanted to know what was proper for them. John told them to do their jobs. Follow obvious standards of justice. Don't abuse their positions. Don't use their positions to squeeze money out of the people or merchants. Don't think to get rich from their positions. Do use their positions to give mercy. In giving this advice, John combined the idea of a role-with-a-code with the idea of greater moral principles that might apply in most societies under most conditions. The idea of a role-with-a-code already made sense to both Romans and Jews, so they could follow John readily. Jesus picked up John's ideas. We have been using the ideas ever since. This is one basis for the "work ethic".

People like to think the modern world is more confused than anything that went before. I think that is not true, but, in any case, it is usually hard to know what to do in the modern world. Our response has been to develop roles with codes, to carry out these codes, and to live by these roles. As much as possible we base the roles-and-codes on universal ideas of morality, decency, and dignity. We look to the recent past for models. We hope that, as long as we act these roles sincerely according to the codes, we do well enough. The "work ethic" is one such code, and it still is effective. The idea of a "calling" or "profession" is another.

If you have seen a movie made after 1930, or seen a TV show made in the 1950s or 1960s, then you have seen classic roles-and-codes remade for the modern world. If you have seen a movie or a TV show about a soldier, detective, police person, CSI tech, or medical examiner, you have seen the same. If you have seen a movie or TV show about a lawyer, doctor, or gangster, you have probably seen it. If you have seen a Western, you were soaked in it. My favorite is the private detective genre, probably because of the movies I saw as a child, and then from reading Dashiell Hammett ("Maltese Falcon") and Raymond

Chandler (“The Big Sleep”) in my youth. The detective is the modern knight. The modern equivalent to a knight on a quest is the detective on a case. If you live sincerely by the detective code, then your life is alright, no matter what else. You have to really mean it; you have to make you and your code one; you have to live sincerely by your code-self. In “The Maltese Falcon”, Sam Spade turns in the woman he loves to the police because she murdered his partner, although he detested his partner and he was using his partner’s wife as a sex toy. Since the 1970s, space movies and martial arts movies have been the biggest arena for the knight-detective’s code. Obiwan Kenobe tracking down the assassin-bounty-hunter is Sam Spade on a case. Obiwan Kenobe fighting the newly-become-bad Darth Vader is Sam Spade turning in the woman he loves.

We try to live by a code but we can’t know if our code is “in synch” with life and we don’t know for sure if our code will help make the world a better place. So, even if our code follows clear moral principles, we are playing a game again. All these roles and codes are a game. Children figure that out right away. The game might be serious, might be a good game, might be a necessary game, might be the only thing an honorable person can do – and I think it is - but we don’t know and can’t know. So we have to think about what kinds of games are better than others.

It is easy to satirize roles-and-codes, especially in their aspect as games. “Don Quixote” was the first such satire, done in the 1600s, although the book was written with love. At least since the “Batman” TV show in the 1960s, it has been easier to make fun of roles-and-codes than to figure out what is really needed. Often, a little satire is needed, especially with codes.

“I and Thou”.

Martin Buber, around 1930 (date unclear), in the book “I and Thou”, gave a great description of relations between persons. We people might be individuals but we are not isolated. We need to see ourselves as persons, and we need other persons in our lives with whom to relate. We need to see God in the same terms. We need to see God as a person with whom we can relate, need to think God wants the same, and wants to relate to us as persons. God really is a person and really will relate to us. Judaism gives plenty of precedent for thinking of people and God in this way. Christianity and Islam have carried on with the Jewish precedent.

Buber’s ideas imply that good codes can arise only out of relations among persons. Codes have to be made by persons who deal with other persons. Other persons usually have to relate to us as persons too. The ideals of the code can be important in themselves, but they have to be ideals with bearing on being a person. Even for the loner detective, the ideals, such as honor and duty, are about relations that normally take place with other persons.

Not all people are naturally social. There is a place for monks and other solitary people in the world of codes, roles, and persons; but here is not where to go into that issue. At least, they can relate to God as the most important other person in their lives. Some people can relate to animals and to nature.

Buber’s work fits with evolutionary ideas of the role of selves in the evolution of sentience and morality. Persons evolve only in the context of other individuals that are evolving as persons too. To be a person, we have to accept and respond to other persons as persons. As evolved persons, we never lose the

sense that much of our self depends on the relations that we evolved to have with other persons, that we normally do have those relations with other persons, and that we are ourselves only through the relations that we normally have with other persons.

Existentialism.

“Existentialism” was the “hip” philosophy of the middle 1900s. It was a formal version of codes and roles. The basic ideas are: People do not come with a built-in nature. We make who we are by what we do and the choices we make. We make a code for ourselves that becomes our true nature. Our code need not be set out in formal principles; our basis for action come out in what we do. We do best when we live true to the code that we made for ourselves. Two of the chief thinkers were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, both of France. She was a founder of modern Feminism. She wrote a clear short introduction to Existentialism.

Most people of my age learned of Existentialism in high school through reading Albert Camus’ short good books “The Plague” and “The Stranger”; listen to the song “The Stranger” by The Cure. For a brush-up on popular Existentialism, see any movie starring Alain Delon and see most French “New Wave” cinema such as directed by Francois Truffaut. All have been dubbed in English. They show how Existentialism got mixed up with Romanticism (see later chapter) and with romanticizing underbelly beautiful tough guy loner losers – a situation we live in to this day.

Among the critics of Pascal was the Dane Soren Kierkegaard in the early 1800s. He saw that this life is real, people are free, we have to take real risks, we cannot be everything, we have to decide, we have to commit to finite programs (points of view, types of people, and codes), and we might fail. We have to decide and commit out of our “true you”. Kierkegaard detested when simple cost-benefit thinking typical of small capitalists and frugal workers was misapplied to Jesus, God, relations to other people, and life. He disliked raising the mechanistic view of some science to a metaphysical dogma. He foresaw that Romanticism would seep into modern thinking to distort all modern life, and he rejected Romanticism, about a century in advance of his times. Kierkegaard wanted people to see the good Jesus, decide for the good Jesus, and commit to the good Jesus. His ideas helped fuel modern feelings of a direct personal relation with Jesus and God although most “born again fundamentalist Christians” and other people who use the ideas now do not know the ideas come through him. Kierkegaard was not sure how to get free people to follow him into a close relation with Jesus, and he knew free people instead would make mistakes. That is part of freedom, risk, and the reality of life. That dilemma disturbed him and still disturbs many people. It is not clear to me that Kierkegaard understood that God knows of this dilemma. Existentialists borrowed Kierkegaard’s ideas on the reality of this life, freedom, risk, limitations, decision, and commitment but redirected them away from Jesus toward individual programs. Kierkegaard is fun to read, and worthwhile, but his style can be difficult.

In 1952, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a book called in English “Saint Genet”, about a man named Jean Genet. Sartre used Genet as the paradigm of a person who knows himself, creates himself on the basis of what he has to start out with, accepts himself, creates his own code to express himself, follows his own code sincerely, and endures what he must to remain true to himself and his code. Jean Genet is an Existential hero-saint. Genet had a difficult childhood. He was small, homosexual, and a habitual petty thief. He educated himself and became a poet and playwright. Genet saves himself through self-acceptance,

commitment, being himself, sincerity, and expression. As Sartre portrayed him, Genet was not harmful, and was rather charming. In those times, to be a homosexual was highly stigmatized, and so for Genet to be openly homosexual was brave. Sartre chose Genet because there was nothing heroic about him in the standard sense, and much to put people off. But Genet was a spiritual success anyway because he knew himself, made himself, and remained true to himself. Genet had to find himself (invent himself) despite society rather than through society. Genet later became a hero to the early Gay movement, and was referenced in a song in the 1970s from the band Dire Straits, called "Les Boys". People similar to Genet, in being on the outside of normal society but true to themselves anyway, are heroes of Romantic anti-society.

About 1944, Sartre wrote a play called in English "No Exit". Three dead people arrive in Hell. Contrary to stereotype, Hell is not torment-by-fire-or-ice but consists of being locked without relief in a room with self-centered people, including, of course, yourself. Each of the damned has a distinct personality, which we can think of as a code-and-role. Nobody has any empathy or sympathy for anybody else. They never really talk to each other but always talk past each other. When they do interact, they cannot help each other but only hurt each other. They can imagine other joys, but, when it comes down to it, the only joy they can pull off is the joy from inflicting psychic pain. They come to hate each other, and, sometimes, to see they hate themselves too. There is no "I and thou" of distinct but interacting selves, who support each other. There is only "The Wall" as from Pink Floyd and Roger Waters. This is the all-too-common gap between people of different ethnic groups, cultures, religions, genders, and socio-economic classes. It is the gap behind the culture wars in America.

You can't have it both ways. You can't extol somebody for knowing himself and sincerely carrying out his-her own code regardless of anything else, and then complain when his-her project leads to a social hell. It is good for people to be their own self and to carry on sincerely with their codes, but the selves, and the codes, have to connect them to other people as people, and have to do it the right ways. If the selves and codes are not based on deep principles of morality and human nature, then the selves and codes are likely to hurt the person him-herself and other people. The selves and codes can be based on deep principle of morality and human nature without forcing us to deny ourselves or to become insipid robots of society and of some ideology. The only way we can become our selves and not become robots of society or ideology is to align our selves with deep principles of morality and human nature. There is plenty of room under that umbrella for self-expression. Ideologies to which we become slaves include Romanticism and Existentialism.

In recent slang in America, a sincere person, especially one who tries to be true to him-herself and who lives by a code, is a "real" person while an insincere person who imitates real people is a "poser" or a "phony". Sartre said posers have "false consciousness". Imitation is an important evolved proximate ability and people are adept imitators. Most of us are posers much of the time. The problem of real person versus poser is the same as the problem of sincere faith or sincere moral action. Existentialism and modern American attitudes about self and codes arose in part as a response to insincere self-serving posers that dominate in large states with corporations, labor unions, and bureaucracies. Seeking alternatives to false people is admirable but we should not let it mislead us.

If selves and codes look to general principles, they cannot be exclusively subjective and individualistic. The self to whom you are true cannot be just any self. No matter how talented you are and how much

you want to be true to yourself, you cannot make up your own world without reference to general human principles and still expect to live in it as a person. You have to find a balance between a sense of self, the code that expresses self, and the general needs of morality and humanity. This result goes against the idea of a pure self and pure code somewhat, of being true-to-yourself, but not necessarily too much.

It was easy to overlook this reality in Sartre's portrait of Genet because Genet was mostly innocuous, often charming, and sometimes helpful. Genet was like the gay man who is a common staple of TV now after "Will and Grace": a combination of Jack, Will, and Karen, a bit bitchy, self-centered, vain, but often insightful and helpful, and you could rely on him if you and he were true friends. He could guide you into finding your new true you and your new true life. Genet was a cure for the supposedly repressed 1950s. Genet was sometimes disgusting but we didn't really have to deal with that no matter how much Sartre pretended we had to deal with it because, for most people, Genet was a character in a book. Sartre romanticized Genet; and the romantic portrait overlooked how much Genet took his values from a list that Sartre and most people approve of.

Sartre used Genet to make us accept that we are mixed beings, that we have a dark side. In the 1950s, apparently that insight was a revelation. Sartre was fighting conventions of goody-goody morality and Christian spiritual pseudo-purity. Sartre was fighting hypocrisy. Listen to the Vaselines' song "Pure Enough". In the 2010s, the fact that we have a dark side seems tame. Most people's dark side is only a few shades of gray anyway. We can stop finding status as a self-styled romantic existential hero through accepting the fact that we secretly despise a lot of people. The hypocrisy now is not in repressing your true dark self but in trying to live it through self-indulgence. The modern Genet is the obnoxious "trashy" person on a pseudo-celebrity reality TV show. We can stop trying to be him-her. Instead we can figure out what to really do. Most people can deal with their dark side without becoming repressed, cramped, and self-contradictory.

Genet's "dark side" consisted of some odd sexual acts. As long as Genet confined himself to consenting adults, and did not cause any physical damage that raised the cost of health insurance, then I wouldn't care. Some people have a dark side that will cause real damage, such as the person wants to abduct, rape, torture, and kill. Then the person must repress that dark side, give him-herself to the police before doing anything bad, or kill him-herself. I can see nothing romantic Existential heroic about living up to that bad true self. There are lines. They lines come from outside us as well as from inside us.

A self-made entirely self-oriented sincere person with a circular code is not a hero but a demon. Sincerity is necessary for a successful existential hero but sincerity alone is not enough. Being true to your self is necessary but it is the wrong thing to do if your self is bad. Being sincere and true to your self does not guarantee that you are good and will do good. Some bad people and selfish people have codes and are really sincere. In the TV show "Lost", one character was a torturer for a theocracy, and he was sincere. In the movie "8 mm" with Nicholas Cage, the bad people are sexual sadists and killers. They are freely that way; that is their true self; the worst of them makes a point of saying that no bad childhood made him that way; he just likes it. They have a code, with elaborate fantasies, and they live up to their true selves, code, and fantasies. They are Romanticism and Jean Genet gone horribly wrong. Modern literature is fascinated with serial killers for the same reasons. Bank robbers can be logically consistent and genuinely sincere. Modern robber barons who don't mind impoverishing the middle class can be logically consistent and genuinely sincere.

The “culture of victimization” is one logical conclusion of “Saint Genet”. The true modern version of Genet is not an existential post-punk rocker working class hero but the whining self-indulgent self-styled victim on a TV talk show seeking acceptance and enabling. In contrast, when Dr. Phil scolds a self-indulgent manipulative harmful person, and scolds that person’s enablers, he puts into practice the good lessons of “No Exit”: get real and get human at the same time, and thus get out of hell.

The codes of bad people often mimic good codes but have a deep flaw that makes them deviate. Often they see the world entirely in terms of “us and them” and they mistake good general society for a bad “them”. The “them” is not really persons, not really human. They construct a bad group around them for an “us”; their small group consists of the only “real” persons. Magneto in “X-Men” is an example. So is the scarred villain in “The Phantom of the Opera”. Quasimodo, the hunchback in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame”, just barely escapes this fate, as does Oliver in “Oliver Twist”. Writers speculate on where these people go bad and how we can avoid their misstep.

In literature, movies, TV, and comic books, we explore the need for the balance between an unusual self, a strong code, and principles that have to do with personhood. We explore through characters that are in-between. These characters are sometimes helpful to society but cannot live in normal society because of who they are and because of their codes. Their self, and their code, make them both helpful and unacceptable. The smart-mouth detective of the 1920s probably was the first in this line. In the movies, this in-between person is forced into righteous vengeance, rights a wrong, but now cannot return to the society he-she saved. On TV, it is the person, or duo, who have been scarred by social injustice but still go around helping victims: “The Lone Ranger” in various updates, including the doubly-aptly named “Person of Interest”.

A beautiful cinematic version of a once-useful loner who has problems connecting is in the movie “The Searchers”. Uncle Ethan (John Wayne) lives strictly by a harsh code, and, because of that, can do for society what no other man could do. But because of the same code, he cannot live in normal society. His value for society makes him unfit for society; other people are destined to gain the rewards of his life while he is destined to gain only loneliness. In the famous final scene, Uncle Ethan is framed standing in a doorway through which he cannot pass, standing outside a social world that he protected but into which he can never enter. He makes a world for other people in which he cannot live himself. Sarah Connor from the “Terminator” movies has the same problem. We can see her go from normal person to obsessed loner back to hero over several movies. Even gentle Frodo must leave Middle Earth when his wounds prevent him from connecting with the people he saved. Many young people think himself-herself is one of these in-between persons, useful to society but unappreciated and unable to enter society - which is why we have Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse Comics. This situation raises a logical question about paradox, into which I cannot go here.

In real life, this situation of making a world for others in which you cannot live yourself is the problem of “wounded warriors” who return from fighting wars but now cannot fit back into society. It is a genuine problem about which we ought to do all we can to help.

Much of the pain of modern life comes from bouncing between the options of “Saint Genet” and “No Exit”. We want to be ourselves but we also want to have friends and be a part of society. We want society to

be a community. We want to be good useful contributing members of a community. We want to be good members through being ourselves and we want our contribution to come about through being ourselves. We want other people to appreciate us for who we are without our having to conform too much: "If you want them to live you, just be yourself". We want to be able to appreciate other people for who they are without their having to conform too much. Yet we do not want to be alone and are willing to compromise to be in a group, to be "in with the in crowd".

Meaning and Existential Projects.

On the whole, Existentialism is silly, and is typical of the modern tendency to center life, existence, and metaphysics around our selves. But it does have aspects that I like. These aspects are not limited to Existentialism, but they were expressed well in Existentialism.

First, Existentialism stresses that there is no intrinsic meaning to life. Whatever meaning we find in life, we make. This insight goes along with the fact from evolutionary biology that evolution is an automatic process without any intrinsic goal. Evolution does not necessarily lead to big, smart, fast, complex, interrelated, moral, or beautiful. Evolution is only reproduction followed by reproduction with a slight difference; over and over again. Whatever meaning we find in life, we put there. I think the fact that morality, sentience, and art are bound to evolve together points us toward finding meaning in those. I find meaning in science, curiosity, imagination, and, when I can get it, companionship. You are free to find meaning elsewhere.

Second, we conduct our lives well, and we likely conduct our lives best, when we have projects. Just as we make meaning in the world, so we put our selves into the world, we project ourselves into the world and onto the world. We have goals. We work toward our goals. Even if our goal is only to experience the world and to have fun, that is a goal. Even if the goal is to escape the world, or to let go of the world, that is a goal, at least until we succeed. Trying to live without bondage to ideology is a project, even if it is also an ideology. We change the world a little by being in the world.

Third, people make themselves in interaction with the world and with other people. People do not exist in a vacuum, even if they decide to stand on their principles and live by their code. People and the world mutually make each other. People and other people mutually make each other. We meet resistance from the world, and we overcome the resistance. We impose ourselves on the world. The world imposes back, often in surprising and fun ways. We and the world mutually shape our selves.

A project can be as small as teaching kids to play checkers or as large as a unified field theory. People who have projects seem happier and get along better. They are like people with hobbies. People with projects understand other people with projects and get along with them. Finding yourself often is a matter of finding meaningful projects.

Not everybody needs a conscious organized project to feel good and succeed as a person. Life provides obstacles every day that we have to overcome. That is a project without trying to make it a project. So is raising a family. Simple decent people who have little ideology about being decent do not necessarily need a project to succeed. If a project becomes a binding ideology, a project defend wrong ideas, or a project gets in the way of better things, then it is time to undo the project.

The Bhagavad Gita.

The “Bhagavad Gita” likely is the most famous poem in the world. It is Hindu, part of the longest epic poem in the world, the “Mahabharata” (“Great Story about Bharat [India]”). The “Gita” is self-contained and short. It has been translated into many languages. You can see a good short fun cinema version of the Mahabharata, in English, about five DVDs long, but easy to watch and well worth the time. Below I give my version of the Gita. Please don’t trust me but consult a translation into your native language. This section shows a code that very nearly works because it is based on principles that are great but the code does not entirely work because the principles have flaws. The flaws are part of the tremendous appeal of the principles. Principles can be too beautiful and too profound.

The stars of the Gita are Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna (“Ar joon na”) is the best fighter in the world, of the noble warrior (“Kshatriya”) class. He is one of five brothers, all exemplary, with only a few minor faults. The brothers have been drawn into a war with their cousins. The cousins are mostly good, but have done bad things, and now face the results. Both sides gather huge armies of the best fighters in the world, human, godly, animal, angelic, monstrous, and demonic. The final battle will be horrible. Hundreds of thousands of people will die. Innocent families will be ruined. On the eve of the battle, Krishna says he does not want to fight. It is better to surrender than to kill so many people, mostly innocent, and destroy so much goodness, just to make a point. Krishna is Arjuna’s charioteer and mentor. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, one of the three main gods of Hinduism, the god who sustains the world. Krishna scolds Arjuna. I offer the gist of what he says:

“Grow up. You were trained as a warrior. Your cause is just. Your elder brother is the leader of your side and of you personally, and he says to fight. You have a social duty (dharma) and greater duty (dharma) to fight. You must do your duty and live by your code as family member, brother, younger brother, and warrior. Yes, many people will die, but most are not civilians and not innocent. Even among the innocent, nobody lives forever, and nobody is entirely innocent. More people die every day of natural causes than will die in this battle. Of the people who die here, this is their day to die, and this their means of death. If they do not die this way today, they will die another way tomorrow.

Besides, if you think anybody ever really dies forever, you are wrong. People live this life now and die this death today, but this was not the beginning and this will not be the end. People return again to lead other lives and die other deaths. They have lived countless lives before, and they will live countless lives in the future. The world you see here today is only one world among many. The real world is the world that includes the world here today, the world here tomorrow, and countless other worlds like it. Today some people will lose and die; in future lives, they will win and live. Today some people will win and live; in the future, they will lose and die. Everybody gets countless turns to win and live, and to lose and die. If some people did not lose and die today, there could be no happy victors today. If the happy victors of today did not lose and die in the future, other people could not win and live then. The world sustains by turning forever like a wheel on which people take places according to their acts in previous lives and in this life, and in which people exchange places with other people according to everybody’s merits. People were made as instruments in the past to do what they do now. For the world-of-worlds to go on forever, it must change constantly in the present.

Nobody is entirely good or entirely bad. The people who are mostly good in this conflict still have bad parts of their personality and bad deeds they have done. Think of what your own elder brother did to draw you into this war. The people who are mostly bad in this conflict still have good parts of their personality and good deeds they have done. Think of the honor and bravery of your cousins and of the heroes who fight with them. You do not betray goodness, and you do not sustain badness, by fighting here. Rather, you carry on the relation of goodness and badness, which is even better than either.

Even if the present world does not really change but only appears to change, still we must go through the appearance of change in the current world or the greater world of which this current world is only a small part would not go on.

If you refuse to fight, refuse to do your duty (your personal dharma in the system of dharma), then you force the world-of-worlds to stop, you deny the winners of today the victory they earned from deeds in the past (their personal dharma), deny the losers of today their victory tomorrow (their personal dharma), deny the idea that the actions of your cousins must bring consequences (karma), deny that the actions of you and your brothers must bring consequences (karma), deny that all deeds must bring consequences (karma), deny there is a system (dharma), deny the world-of-worlds its great joy from continually coming into being and going out of being, and thus deny the world-of-worlds its great joy from forever simply being. Arjuna is one part of this greater whole. Arjuna was made who he is, to do what he is supposed to do, as part of this one great joyful world. As one part, Arjuna represents the whole and is the whole. The whole shows itself in Arjuna, and the whole depends on him for its arising, continuation, changing, and persistence. Be this Arjuna of this world this day and thereby be the whole world-of-worlds forever and beyond time. Do your duty (your personal dharma) so that all duty (all dharma) persists even if you die today. Fight.”

This is amazingly beautiful. It has inspired many hundreds of millions of people. People apply it not just to being a warrior but to being a teacher, police officer, grounds keeper, house spouse, banker, and any occupation or any role-with-a-code. If life were just like this, it would be easy to accept this stance and to live by this stance.

Life is not quite just like this. This argument-as-a-whole has many subarguments, to which I cannot pay the attention they deserve. Here I focus on what is directly relevant. For now, I assume that Arjuna was bright enough to work things out and make up his own mind if he had time enough. Below I mention the case in which people need a strong guide. The criticisms here do not apply only to Hinduism. They apply to any elaborate high-sounding religious, moral, or political system, especially to one that takes us away from a direct feeling for what is simply decent and away from a direct tie between our “true you” and what is simply decent. I use Krishna and Arjuna to illustrate the problems because Arjuna and Krishna are noble people and Hinduism a noble religion; if it could happen to them under Hinduism, it could happen to anybody under any elaborate dogma.

(1) Krishna replaces Arjuna’s good judgment with doctrine. In this particular case, Arjuna’s judgment might be off track, and Arjuna’s doctrine has much good about. Still, in general, it is wrong to replace judgment with doctrine. Doctrine does not have to be wrong for it to be a mistake to replace judgment with doctrine.

If we strip away the amazing mythological cosmology, Krishna's argument boils down to "don't think too much, do your duty, live the code that has been given to you, and follow properly given orders". Arjuna's problem is neither a bad character nor flawed ideas about a just war. Arjuna's code comes from good ideas about society, duty, and justice. Arjuna's code is based on the good doctrine that Krishna explains. In many cases, Arjuna's code would lead him to do the right thing. In many cases, Krishna's view of the code and his advice to Arjuna would be correct. But not in every case, and that is the problem. Krishna's glib placing of this case in a cosmic context leads Arjuna not to assess this case and would lead Arjuna not to assess any case. By placing this case in cosmic context, Krishna cleverly also replaces the good judgment of Arjuna with doctrine. Krishna glibly talks Arjuna into acting without also thinking hard about the specifics of this case or any case. Arjuna does not make up his own mind about the ideas of the code and how they apply in this case or any case. Arjuna should stop to think about his actions in this case in terms of universal principles. Only with such practice would Arjuna be able to apply universal cases in other cases. If Arjuna had such practice in the past, likely he would not have gotten so confused in this case. Even if Krishna is correct in this case, because Arjuna did not himself assess and did not make up his own mind, he is insincere and has erred. Arjuna has not cultivated judgment. Arjuna is likely to be wrong in other cases. We cannot put codes, and decisions, in contexts that allow us to fool ourselves, not even into grand otherwise correct contexts.

(2) When we replace good judgment with doctrine, even with good doctrine, we cause problems. One problem is that we open the door to evading responsibility and to bad action, to "I was just following orders" or "I was just going along with everybody".

Krishna creates a similar problem that Sartre did with Genet and "No Exit". Krishna tells Arjuna to "follow orders, do your dharma duty, be a spoke in the wheel of Dharma". Soldiers who do bad things say, "I was just following orders, I was just doing my duty". Bad police officers and bad agents of the state say that when they hurt people in the name of the state. Serial killers invent mythologies to make into a duty what they really do to please themselves. Good vampires override the vampire code of killing to adopt bigger principles while bad vampires simply follow their vampire dharma to kill. Doing your duty is not enough even when it clearly is your duty. You must do more than your apparent duty. Sometimes no duty is enough. Sometimes duty is not the right response. Sometimes duty is not the right response even when it comes from the cosmos as dharma. You must assess your duty to the extent that you can. You cannot let duty be your only self. You must assess your code to make sure it is good in this case according to the best principles even when your code originally came from good principles. You must consider if there might be better principles than in your code, or if the same principles should be applied better in this case. The United States military faced this issue after atrocities in Viet Nam led to the distinction between legal-moral orders versus illegal-immoral orders. Each soldier must decide if an order is moral.

(3) In substituting doctrine for judgment, we allow the big whole to subsume away the small individual. We overlook individual importance and responsibility. An important part of the "true you" gets submerged in social duty. We give the individual means to evade responsibility by alluding to the whole.

In American terms, Krishna talks Arjuna into letting social duty define him, thus letting society define him, and thus letting the whole subsume away the individual. Arjuna becomes simply the instrument of duty and of the warrior class. Because the warrior class is part of society, society defines Arjuna. Because

society is part of cosmic dharma, dharma defines Arjuna. When dharma defines Arjuna in this way, it defines away Arjuna. In contrast to what Arjuna does, we can resist being subsumed away into society and doctrine. We can insist on defining ourselves even if we make mistakes sometimes. We can define ourselves without also becoming vain and proud and without necessarily fighting the dharma and society. We can insist that our “true self” not be defined by society and the dharma even when, as a matter of fact, we always act within the law, never act badly, act socially, and help. Even when we act to make a better world and better society, we need not let society and the dharma define us. We can seek the correct way between self and society and between the self and the dharma.

In more abstract terms, Arjuna chooses and changes in a way that negates his self, ability to choose, and ability to change. Arjuna changes his “true you”, but, in that change, he does not continue as a personal agent who is able to act by choice on a good code. In accepting Krishna’s advice to bow to the dharma, without also examining the dharma according to universal principles, Arjuna’s chooses to stop choosing. Arjuna lets the dharma define him, and in so doing, stops being a human. Arjuna chooses to not become a person who can choose. Arjuna changes so as lose his ability to change. Arjuna chooses and changes so as to stop being what we consider a real person. Arjuna changes so as to lose himself in a bad way. Arjuna changes to allow himself to be subsumed into society and the dharma, and, so, from here on, is not really the person that once was Arjuna. Only if Arjuna personally looked into things, and decided, on the basis of broad good principles, to fight for reasons intrinsic to this situation, would Arjuna continue to be an independent person as well as doing his duty, helping society, and helping the dharma.

It is good to recognize that God and the world are bigger than you are, and good to feel part of something bigger than yourself. It is good to submit to God (Allah). At the same time, we can do this without losing our selves. Usually even mystics cherish the part in the middle of the whole. We accept the whole in a way that preserves our selves. If the whole made us, then the whole made us as persons, and wants us to act on our personhood in a way that does not negate our personhood.

(4) We give other people the means to manipulate us, and we give ourselves the means to rationalize what we want to do and to fool ourselves. The more elaborate and high-sounding the system, the greater is the scope for manipulation and self-deception.

Krishna is the voice of the dharma and of society. Krishna has great sway over Arjuna. Krishna can get Arjuna to do almost whatever Krishna wants. In this case, we trust Krishna to do the right thing and to get Arjuna to do the right thing. But not everybody, every doctrine, and every society, is like good Krishna. When we submit blindly to the dharma, we submit blindly to society. Then society, or people who control society, can use us as tools. They can use as tools to do good things or do bad things. Usually they use us as tools to do bad things. Only if we use our God-given (dharma given) ability to assess and choose can we avoid becoming the tools of bad people and only then can we make ourselves into the instrument of goodness. Even if other people use us to do good things, still we have been reduced to the status of “tool”, and so reduced to the status of a thing that does not have self, choice, or change.

As other people can fool us, so we can fool ourselves, and rationalize what we really want to do. From the poem, it is clear that Arjuna is honest when he says he doesn’t want to fight, and when he agrees to fight anyway. But not everybody is like Arjuna. Suppose Arjuna really wished to kill, rape, plunder, take territory, wealth, and power - yet not get blamed. It is easy to feign a high mind, even to yourself, and to

let other people talk you into doing your duty so that you can really get what you want. This attitude is the staple diet of soap operas at all times of the day and all around the world. We can see it in nearly all political ads, especially the negative ones. It is something children learn by the time they are five years old, and something spouses learn to do to each other to get what they want.

(5) The high mythological cosmology doctrine is beautiful but its beauty obscures that we must assess this particular case and that we must live here and now in this particular life. We cannot let beauty fool us. We cannot fall into any doctrine because it is beautiful, and then rest content with that beauty and its consequences.

In particular, we cannot live in other lives when we live this life, and we cannot make choices about other lives while we live in this life. This life is real, it is the only real life, and it is the only life that matters. If we do wrong in the present then we do wrong always. We cannot make up in the future for what we do wrong now. Only if we act well right now do we act well forever. In contrast, the high airy mythological cosmology of the Gita makes this life, all lives, and life, a game, an ephemeral lightweight game. Think about the context of a never-ending wheel in which life-is-death, death-is-life, right-is-wrong, wrong-is-right, change is needed for sustenance, and change is needed for ultimate fulfillment. Such a context allows a bad Krishna to excuse anything. A child molester, rapist, torturer, dictator, killer, or religious zealot offers the same argument and it makes sense. The only way we can be sure that we are doing right and not rationalizing wrong is to look at this case in its own terms right now. We have to take this case out of the cosmic context and look at this case as if it were real. If we want Krishna's advice, we have to trust that this Krishna is a good Krishna. The only way we can know this Krishna is a good Krishna is to examine the principles on which he stands now and that he uses to argue about the present. So we don't need the mythology and we are better off not to dwell on it.

From the movie, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel", set in India, the hotel keeper says something like, "It is all alright in the end. If it is not alright yet, it is not yet the end". As a matter of fact, that is not true, and we have to live in the world where it is not true. Even if it is true, we do not live in the happy ending all the time. We only live in the present all the time.

(6) Krishna uses the ideology of waking up to bend Arjuna's mind to what Krishna wishes. He tells Arjuna to wake up to the real world, and gives Arjuna a world to wake up to – the high mythological world where everything turns out alright even if we live by a bad code true to a bad self – as a way to get Arjuna to do what Krishna wants Arjuna to do. Krishna could have awakened Arjuna to another world that would have led Arjuna to put down his weapons for this battle or to put down his weapons for all battles. Other versions of Hinduism, and related versions of Buddhism, do just that. We have to be careful when people tell us to "wake up". We have to assess the worlds and the lessons to which we wake up.

(7) The system of many lives includes good guys and bad guys. In it, the bad guys are as necessary as the good guys. The good guys sometimes become bad guys, and vice versa. Without bad, there could be no good in contrast just as without some ugliness there is not beauty. Without bad guys, there could be no joy in goodness and there could be no bad guys. Goodness and badness depend on each other. In this situation, it is good to be a bad guy. If you are a bad guy, revel in being a bad guy. If you want to become a bad guy because it suits your character, it is more fun, or just because you want to be a bad guy, go ahead.

This point of view is a version of moral relativism. This point of view is a version of the idea above that you can excuse bad behavior as “just following orders”. It is a version of “I was compelled to act badly because of my genes, learning, and brain chemistry”. Hinduism does stress compassion, and makes clear that goodness is better than badness. Hinduism condemns badness. But, at the same time, it opens the door for dwelling in badness, and it cannot shut the door.

(8) If the high mythological cosmology is not taken too seriously then it can help rather than hinder. Some people are nervous and worried. If we tell them a story, they calm down and do what they should have done anyway. (That is only partly what this book does.) The high mythological cosmology of the Gita might be offered this way. If people think it is true, and go ahead with what they need to do anyway, then there is much benefit and might be little harm. Especially if the mythology allows them to evaluate this case on the basis of its particular merits without worrying about the great beyond, there can be benefit with potentially little harm. If a person would make a serious mistake unless the person had a “crutch” of some kind, such as high mythological cosmology, then it is better to offer the half-truth of a good story than to allow the person to make a serious error. Some Mahayana Buddhists interpret Hindu high mythological cosmology in this way. They call it “using expedient means”.

Although stories can be useful, they can also be misleading. Once you have seen the truth beneath the story, if you can do it, both Hindus and Buddhists advise getting rid of the stories (expedient means). The Western philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called this “getting rid of the ladder once you have climbed up the ladder”.

I do not think the original writers of the Gita meant the high mythological cosmology in this way, mostly as a convenient means to get people free to act rightly. I think they believed high mythological cosmology literally. I think they meant this high mythological cosmology at face value, and did not mean it primarily as a method to quiet minds so that people could assess properly and do the right thing. I am not sure what later Hindu thinkers have made of the Gita.

I am wary of the stories (expedient means) because they are easily abused. People who learn through one story (expedient means), such as a high cosmology, too often never can get beyond that particular vision to the real issues of morality and life that lie underneath. They cling to the story and it becomes another kind of trap for them. People who learn several stories (expedient means), and thus catch a glimpse of what lies beneath, too often become rather arrogant, and thus betray what they glimpse.

Hinduism has high principles by which to make decisions and to practice Krishna’s code of duty and honor in particular cases. Hinduism has some of the most sensitive and admirable principles ever stated. Hindus could see out what to do in particular cases. In the particular case of Arjuna and the war, Krishna likely gave Arjuna the correct advice. That fact does not argue against my point, it supports my point. If we already have high principles, and base our action on those, then we do not need dogmas, such as the high mythological cosmology and the false waking up, especially when they lead us astray. We should simply practice our high principles as they are needed. Do the right thing, right now. Elaboration adds nothing no matter how grand it is. Reality is more interesting, and ultimately more useful, even than the greatest fantasy.

Some people can't think through many particular cases. They need guides. Nearly all of us get stuck sometimes in cases that we can't think through. We all need guides sometimes. Codes and laws are guides. Teachers are guides, largely because they can interpret codes for particular cases. Sometimes we have to trust the judgment of teachers. This is a big part of the guru-student relation in India. But this is not what was going on with Krishna and Arjuna. Arjuna was no fool. Given time, he could have made up his mind, and should have made up his mind before the battle. Krishna does not represent the good teacher that we need because we have limited abilities. Krishna represents an ideology that is used to control Arjuna and, eventually, to subsume Arjuna away. We should resist ideologies like that and resist teachers who push ideologies like that.

When teachers have students who cannot make up their own mind, then teachers have an obligation to get it right both for themselves and their students. Teachers have an obligation to move their students to the point where the students are as independent as possible. Even military officers have this obligation with their subordinate soldiers. Some situations are not about figuring it out but about acting quickly and decisively, such as in the military or in martial arts. In those cases, the ideas that I have been describing have to be modified. They don't have to be abandoned. These are examples of particular cases that we have to figure out. These topics do not undermine what I have said so far and so we don't need to go into them anymore.

It is hard to live in a confusing world, find a deeply principled code, realize we have to assess our code ourselves, actually do it, and relate to people while we are doing all this.

The Illiad.

The usual name for what Americans now call "Greeks" was "Hellenes" ("hel-leens") because in myth they descended from a man named "Hellene". Their homeland was called "Hellas" and the Hellenes were also called "Hellas". "Hellas" is often called "Achaeta" ("Akhea", "Ahea", "Achea", or "Ashea") and the people called "Achaetans". "Greece" was one part of Hellas-Achaeta. "Ilium" was the Hellenic name for the city-state that we now call "Troy". Ilium was on the west coast of what is now Turkey, flourishing before 1200 BCE (AD), well before Kings David and Solomon in Jerusalem. The Trojans likely were Hittites, cousins of Greeks and Romans. Their name for their city likely was "Wilusa" (so "Ilium") or "Triwusa" (so "Troy").

The "Iliad" ("story about Ilium") is an epic poem about the war by the Hellenes against Ilium for control of the Eastern Mediterranean. The war likely happened before 1200 BCE. The poem likely was recited by 1000 BCE, and written down before 600 BCE. It was already a treasure from the far past by 450 BCE. It was written about the same time as the Pentateuch and the histories in the Tanakh (Old Testament).

The woman "Helen of Troy" is called that because she went to Troy but originally Helen came from Crete, Mycenae, or Sparta (the story comes in versions). Helen was the daughter of Leda of Mycenae or Sparta, and sister of Castor, Polydeukes (Pollux and "Polioudakis"), and Clytemnestra. Helen was the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, but she ran away to Ilium with Prince Paris of Ilium. Paris was the youngest of two princes of Ilium. Then, "Paris" was a boy's name. This silly affair provided an excuse for a war by which to achieve bigger goals. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon was king of the pre-eminent Hellenic city-state Mycenae, sister state to Sparta, and thus Agamemnon was one of a few kings entitled to lead all Hellenes in a crisis. In this event, he saw an excuse to unite the Hellenes against Ilium and so

to gain power both for Hellenes and him. The King of Ilium was Priam (“Pree-am”). Besides Paris, Priam had a son named Hector, the eldest Prince, brave, honorable, noble, the second or third best fighter in the world, and a good family man. He was a model man for Ilium and the world. The “Iliad” ends before the famous Trojan horse. The Trojan War has been made into a movie many times. “Troy” starring Brad Pitt and Eric Bana was good, and gave the main theme well. The ending is a bit sappy and it differs from the feel of the poem but that fault is not serious.

Really, the Iliad is the story of one warrior, Achilles (“A-kil-lees”, or, in my parents’ dialect, “ah-shil-less”), and of the change in Achilles. Achilles was a Hellene, the best fighter in the world, and knew it. He took nothing from nobody. He never backed down and he never gave up a chance for glory. Glory was immortality. He did not look for frivolous fights, did not oppress people, did not kill weak people, but he did not mind killing, and could enjoy it. He was leader of the soldiers from his city, the “Myrmidons” (“ant people”), the best force of Hellas and thus the best in the world. Nobody thought less of Achilles for how he acted. The Hellenes and the world knew and respected him. They knew he lived by the code of a fighter. Achilles was not a dolt or a brute, and had been raised well by a famous civilized teacher; but glory and honor overrode all. Achilles was like the characters played by Charles Bronson, Steve McQueen, and James Coburn at the start of the movie “The Magnificent Seven”. Achilles was not like the Yul Brynner character, Chris, the “gunfighter in black”. Achilles was like a modern smart tough guy in a “hood” who is over-sensitive to disrespect (“dis”), and fights constantly, but Achilles always won.

Achilles and Agamemnon had a running conflict because Achilles would not accept the personality or the authority of Agamemnon while Agamemnon envied the fighting skill of Achilles and the respect given him. Achilles took captive a woman named Briseis (“bris-ay-ees” with “ay” as in “play”). Then, in a roundabout way, as part of their conflict, Agamemnon claimed Briseis because he was King of Hellas for the war, and so technically outranked Achilles. Agamemnon used Briseis to show his superiority to Achilles in the only way he could, and everybody knew so. Achilles threw a snit fit, refused to fight in the war, and refused to allow the Myrmidons to fight. Although Achilles liked Briseis personally, that was not what the argument was about. Achilles denied that anybody came before him; and he asserted that nobody had any right to take from him what he had taken in a fight. By his code then, Achilles was right.

Without Achilles, the Trojans nearly routed the Achaeans (Hellenes). To save the Achaeans, Achilles let a lifelong friend, Patroclus, wear his distinctive armor and lead the Myrmidons into battle. The Myrmidons saved the Achaeans but Hector killed Patroclus in single combat. Hector had done no wrong but Achilles was furious anyway. Achilles and Agamemnon patched up, and Achilles went to war against Troy. Achilles faced Hector man-to-man, and killed Hector. Instead of giving Hector’s body back for funeral rites, as was the custom among Hellenes and Trojans, Achilles dragged Hector’s body around behind his chariot, and dragged it back to the Achaean camp - a serious breach of ethics and a base insult. Achilles was within his code as a fighter but dragging Hector’s body and keeping it was vile anyway. Achilles judged badly.

Risking everything, Priam, King of Troy, father of Hector, snuck into the Myrmidon camp at night to beg Achilles for Hector’s body. For the first time in his life, Achilles saw not an opponent but a simple human, a father, in pain, with simple needs; and Achilles could help this man. He recalled his own father and the better teachings of his youth. Achilles changed. He began to judge well. He gave Hector’s body back to Priam, made sure Priam got back to Ilium, and enforced a peace between Hellas and Troy for twelve

days so Priam could give Hector the full rites that he deserved. Achilles saw that something was more important than glory and revenge. In the movie, Achilles saw that Hellas was more important than his glory, and he fought for Hellas. (In the poem, the gods get a lot of credit for sending Priam to Achilles, and for predisposing Achilles to accept Priam. Giving credit to the gods was natural for the time. Even so, I think the main emphasis is on people, and I stand by my interpretation.)

Achilles' ability to see Priam his enemy as another person is like Jesus' teaching to see other people as persons like us, and even to love our enemies; but Achilles never reached that level. He was able to see his enemies as persons like himself, and that is a great good thing. Achilles ability to see Priam his enemy as another person like himself is like the teaching in the Hindu Upanishads "you are that" and the teaching in many Hindu documents to love all life. Achilles does not rise to that level either but it still is along the same lines. Once we get Achilles' ideas of simple decency and its connection to seeing people as persons like us, we can use the idea to appreciate other principles, adopt other principles, and assess the principles that other people hold.

Achilles was never as good a man as Arjuna or Hector. Even after he changed, Achilles did not become a thoughtful nice man. Achilles rose maybe to the level of the Steve McQueen character at the end of "The Magnificent Seven". After the change, Achilles chose to fight in this particular war, just as Krishna urged Arjuna to fight in his war. Achilles' newfound feeling for persons did not make him a statesman or wimp. Still, however modest, the change in Achilles is important. Achilles looked at his code and saw that the fighter code was not the best he could live by, even if he could live by it and get respect. Achilles saw that he lived as a person, and that the fighter code did not allow him to act best as a person. Achilles saw that the fighter code was not the best application of his principles in this case, and he sought the best application. Achilles saw that the fighter code was not the best in general, and sought something better. Achilles did not rationalize his new self or new actions. He said no grand speeches. He had no ideology or system. Achilles simply responded to decency and humanity. He used his talents as he could to make a better world right then right there as much he knew how. Achilles woke up. He woke up by himself. Nobody woke him up to show him a particular world with particular rules. Achilles did not wake up to any mythological metaphysical system but to the simple world around him, made of people with values, who struggle to live by their values.

Achilles "true you" changed in response to the situation and as the result of his choice. He made his new self in response to the situation and to better principles. He became a good responsible soldier instead of a glorious fighter. Whether there was a deeper truer self "in there" all along, a person who was somehow in accord with better values, it makes little sense to debate. It is enough to see that Achilles did change and that his new true self was more in accord with correct principles.

The idea of simply waking up to obvious decency, without serving an elaborate system, is why I tell this story. Once we wake up to that, we can make a code for ourselves as befits our raising and our situation, in line with the principles of simple decency and with our true selves. If we pursue ideology later, that is fine, but we should not let ideology get in the way of seeing simple decency and following it. We should not cling to a code that harms basic decency. Seeking simple decency first does not always work but it is the best place to start. I find it much easier to move from simple decent good acts to the ideals of Jesus, practicality, and Western values about persons and good government, than to get there from any other

starting point, including the grand beautiful cosmic-social duty of the Bhagavad Gita, the logic of Pascal, the call of Existentialism, political correctness, Libertarianism, or any political ideology.

Is simple decency enough of a base on which to build a code? By itself, it is not. But along with simple decency we have the ideas of people like Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, and Krishna. We have enough to extend simple decency. If we start with decency, we can extend it using other ideas without letting other ideas fool us into compromising the original sense of decency. We can extend decency into different situations in different way. We can see if our extensions compare well with other extensions, and can use our basic feeling of decency to judge other codes.

I don't think Achilles chose to fight again because he bowed to the pressure of society, to his social duty, to his dharma, or to the great dharma. If he felt like that, he would have fought before. I hope Achilles based his decision to fight again on his new principles and his new sense of a true you.

I am not saying here that all aspects of Hellenic-Western culture are better than all aspects of Hindu culture. Hindus certainly understand Achilles and his change. I am saying these issues are old, and we can learn from what other people have thought. It is good to have a code and to be true to your code. Sometimes that is the only way we can live. Sometimes even vengeance makes sense. It is best if your code is based on deep principles of morality, decency, duty, honor, and human relations. If you find better principles than the principles that you use right now, you have to change your code and yourself accordingly. If you find a better application (interpretation) of your principles, then you have to adopt it. You have to look at your code and principles from time to time to make sure what is best to do. You have to look at your context, of this case, in this life, now. That is what Achilles did. When you change your code to accord with better principles, you also likely change your "true you" for the better. In that respect, Western-Greek principles are better than Hindu principles.

To be honest, in a later chapter, I do criticize Hinduism, and what I said here sets the stage. Although Hinduism knows of the correct principles, and knows that codes should change to accord with the right principles, it does not commit to the right principles. It gets trapped in a metaphysical system that allows people to override simple decency, rationalize self-interest, and bolster a bad class-and-sexist society. Hindus are not committed to the ideals of Jesus mixed with practical reality and Western values. Most Hindus are not enough like Gandhi and Nehru. Hinduism developed the ideals of the Bhagavad Gita in the wrong ways.

Waking up to something bigger and better than yourself is a theme of the movie "Hero" with Jet Li. More important than personal revenge, or than sectarian revenge, is your nation and its welfare. Waking up to something bigger and better than yourself, to true good principles, is one theme of "A Few Good Men". More important than following orders is protecting people who can't protect themselves, such as Private Santiago. A true officer is not a person who expedites matters but a person who gets to the bottom of issues and who makes a system in which honorable soldiers do protect the innocent. Maybe the people who do examine their codes have trouble handling reality, as the Jack Nicholson character notoriously proclaimed ("You can't handle the truth"), but so do the people who doggedly impose a code regardless of who gets hurt. We need a constant search among principles for best codes and best applications.

Achilles has many descendants, even if few are as heroic or profound. Not every character that changes and grows is an Achilles, but, still, some characters do echo him, especially if they come to feel common humanity, dignity, decency, and something bigger than themselves. One of my favorites is in the movie "Casablanca" in which Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, comes to see that his issues "don't amount to a hill of beans", and that the war for freedom is far more important. In the movie "The Magnificent Seven", the young man who wants to be a gunfighter, and who grows up during the movie, is like Achilles. The book of Jonah in the Tanakh (Old Testament) likely was written a few hundred years after the Iliad and it has similar lessons. Although Jonah the Israelite hated the Assyrians for conquering Israel, God made Jonah go to the capital Nineveh to preach to the Assyrians. When the Assyrians took God to heart, Jonah came to see the Assyrians as human like him and as followers of God like Jews. The real change was not the Assyrians but Jonah. A real human man, Malcom X, an American Black Muslim, started as a bigot hating Whites. Then he went to Mecca, felt common bonds with Muslims of all colors from all over the world, and gave up his hate. Many characters in the media recently have come to see Gay people as real people, and to see their humanity as more important than sexual (gender) orientation. The Australian movie, "Strange Bedfellows", with Paul Hogan, likely was the prototype for the American movie, "I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry". In the movie "La Cage Aux Folles", "straight" people had to make a leap to greater humanity. The TV shows "Will and Grace" and "Modern Family" helped modern people to do the same.

Even characters that are not always noble, characters that hold a righteous grudge, such as the Hulk and the Punisher, still can come to moral high ground. They stop hating their enemies even if they can't stop fighting their enemies. They come to see a small group of humans as helpful and friendly. They find their lost humanity. Figure out for yourself if Jean Genet is a descendant of Achilles.

Sadly, Achilles and his change are now abused by the culture of "15 minutes of fame" and "victimization". People can feign the need to change, and can fake a big change, just to get in the spotlight and to gain sympathy. Bad people appeal to good people using the Achilles paradigm. The bad people pretend to change, and the bad people allow good people to feel like Achilles becoming a better person, so that the bad people can get money from the good people. "You can help me overcome addiction". "I can help you overcome addiction and stop being a burden on your family". This is what comes of substituting bad ideology for good judgment.

We like Achilles more because he does a good act and he changes into a good man than because he was a good man all along and did a lot of good all along. Achilles is like the Prodigal Son rather than like the good son. In the Iliad, other characters are much better men than Achilles and do much more good than Achilles; Nestor and Odysseus come to mind. Yet they do not change from bad to good, and so do not attract us as much. In the movie "Casablanca", several characters are better than Rick and do much more good than Rick all along, such as Rick's old girlfriend, Else (Ingrid Bergmann), and her husband, who is a key figure in the resistance. Even the French policeman is better than Rick in general. We are not as fascinated by the consistently good characters as by Rick the changed person. In the Tanakh (Old Testament), David is really a reformed bad boy with a lot of the old bad boy still around. Here is not the place to go into why we are more fascinated by characters who change into better people than by people who are good along. I don't know how long the idea of a reformed bad boy or girl has been a theme in Western and Hebrew literature, and how widespread the theme is outside of Israel and the West.

The idea of a reformed bad boy or bad girl shows up now in many ways, many of the ways are not good, and how we treat the idea is not always good. First, rather than focus on the good acts and the change in character of bad boys and bad girls, we are fascinated by the bad part. We romanticize the bad part. We cling to the bad part. The badder we were, the better we are, and the better we will be. This attitude shows up in later chapters, so keep it in mind. Second, we wrongly think everybody can change and everybody has a good person waiting inside to come out. In the movie “Knocked Up”, the bad boy, Seth Rogan, changes into a good respectful respectable responsible husband and father, even though, in real life, that change does not often happen as women want. Not everybody can change, and not all of us can be saved. This situation too shows up often enough so you should keep it in mind. For a movie that is more PC “gender distributed” and shows many of the other themes too, see “My Super Ex-Girlfriend” with Uma Thurman and Luke Wilson.

Code as Game.

Hopefully this poem “The Lost Master” by Robert Service is out of copyright:

“And when I come to die” he said,
 “Ye shall not lay me out in state,
 Nor leave your laurels at my head,
 Nor cause your men of speech orate;
 No monument your gift shall be,
 No column in the Hall of Fame;
 But just this line ye grave for me:
 ‘He played the game’.

So when his glorious task was done,
 It was not of his fame we thought;
 It was not of his battles won,
 But of the pride with which he fought;
 But of his zest, his ringing laugh,
 His trenchant scorn of praise or blame:
 And so we graved his epitaph,
 ‘He played the game’.

And so we, too, in humbler ways
 Went forth to fight the fight anew,
 And heeding neither blame nor praise,
 We held the course he set us true.
 And we, too, find the fighting sweet;
 And we, too, fight for fighting’s sake;
 And though we go down in defeat,
 And though our stormy hearts may break,
 We will not do our Master shame:
 We’ll play the game, please God,
 We’ll play the game.”

Toward the end of the movie “Conan the Barbarian” starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Conan has to face a horde of expert fighters sent by the evil wizard Thulsa Doom, and Conan has for allies only three friends. Conan says, long after this fight is over, what people will remember is not that good faced evil, or that ordinary people faced a wizard and his minions, but that a few faced many. People will remember the battle, not why it was fought. I understand but disagree. What matters about D-Day is not that Allied casualties, in the first wave of the assault, were nearly one hundred percent; what matters is the battle was for the future of the world, the right side won, and the right side fought rightly. Dedication to the game is laudable but dedication to the right principles in the game is much better.

To live by a code is to play a game. Genet, the doomed souls in “No Exit”, Arjuna, Krishna, Achilles, and, Chris, Yul Brynner’s gunfighter dressed in black, all play a game. This poem extols commitment alone as sufficient cause to praise a comrade. But that is not true. What the poem does not make explicit, but what we assume, is that the game was not a really bad game, even if it was a rough game, and might have been a good game. The fallen comrade played “the game of life”, and we assume that is always a good enough game. Then we might take commitment alone is good enough. The necessary unspoken background questions are: What kind of game really? How do we play it best? The Iliad makes clear that Achilles plays the wrong game at first. We make a mistake if we play the simple game of “make your own code and be true to it” that Sartre offers in “Genet”, and if we turn the game of justification offered by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita into a game of rationalization and excuse. The best way to get clear is to compare specific various codes, games, types of people, and situations.

I feel strongly the appeal of the kind of person praised in “The Master” and the appeal of his commitment to the game over any mere tokens of winning or losing. The master does not appeal to me just because he plays any game. The master appeals to me, and to his followers, because he plays a particular kind of game, and he has the character (“true you”) that goes along with commitment to that kind of game. This kind of person was valued when I grew up in Oregon. I don’t point out what kind of game it is or is not; most Americans can figure that out by looking at what the master does values and does not value. The kind of game in the poem is not only one particular kind of game such as soldier, hunter, prospector, or dedicated worker for goodness. This kind of game is really family of games. The games in the family might seem less on the surface than the obvious game of the poem but really are just as important if we commit to them and their values, and play them fully: parent, husband, wife, good child, good citizen, honest business person, and honest politician. This game cannot be one in which the fighting is valued only for the sake of fighting without also paying attention to what you are fighting for; it cannot be a game for mere killers – you can save that for video games.

When most people think playing a game well is enough regardless of the content of the game, really they do care about the content but not as they wish people to know. They seek to live in the kind of made-up games that allow them to feel good about themselves. They play at games that their culture says are worthwhile so they can feel justified, regardless of whether they personally have considered the value of the game. Usually they superficially play at superficial games derived from more serious games. They get lost in glorious losing; they play the demon-haunted reluctant hero. They see themselves as warriors out to protect the “hood” rather than as thugs or racists. They see themselves as poets trapped in cruddy jobs, who make life worthwhile by going to hip places on weekends. They see movies about warriors in a last stand against “the man”. They see TV shows about long-suffering abused victims. They dream of

being a Klingon dying a glorious death in battle whether the battle is fought between the stars or in a dysfunctional household. The way out is to examine the game, and not to assume that, just because you play a game approved by some subculture, you are automatically justified. “Hate the game, not the player” is just an excuse for self-indulgent rationalization. If the game is silly, then so are you. If the game is good, you stand a better shot at being decent, although, whether you make it, does depend on how you in particular play.

Here I can only repeat what religions have said about just wars for millennia: If you are in a good game and you play it according to good principles, then fine. If you are in a good game but you play it along bad principles, then you are wrong. If you are in a bad game, but don't know it, and you play it as best you can according to good principles such as decency, then you are alright. If you are in a bad game and you know it, then get out, regardless of what principles you play by. If you are not sure about the game, try to find out; if you can't find out, then play by good principles. If you are in a good cause, and you want to play by good principles, but the people on your side, or your enemies, play dirty, then you have a hard problem, and I can't settle it here. You get the idea, and should do what you can.

Duty and Honor as Good but Inadequate Principles.

Arjuna and Achilles lived by a fighter code. Thankfully, the American military knows quite well that the fighter code is not enough. The American military usually live by a higher code that includes duty and honor. Arjuna also lived by the code that the modern American military would understand, including duty and honor. Achilles came to understand that code, and more. Duty and honor are good values. There is nothing wrong with them. It is hard to live by principles such as “work hard to make the world better”, “pay it forward”, “do unto others”, “applies equally”, “responsible adept citizenship”, “the greater good”, “rule of law”, and “put office before person”. Rather than try to live by those principles, isn't it good enough to live just by duty and honor? Aren't those good enough? If you personally really can't understand more than duty and honor, they are enough. But if you can understand more, then they are not enough, and you have to try to live by more, as, eventually, Achilles did.

Although we might not recognize it, Americans debate this question in our popular culture. We are apt to put it in terms of revenge-and-justice as with the Hulk and the Punisher. This issue includes movie characters such as the man with no name in the Clint Eastwood “spaghetti” Westerns. It includes the undercover police officer, and the spy, who have to become like the bad people he-she fights in order to fight them. It is the dilemma of Donnie Brasco. Duty and Honor sometimes require revenge. In pursuing revenge, sometimes we have to become almost as bad as the people we kill. If we do become that bad, then we have betrayed the honor and duty we set out to advance. We have to be able to put honor and duty into a greater context or we are likely to lose them in pursuing them. At the same time, we do have to stop the bad guys, and we need honor and duty to find the strength to stop the bad guys. This is a real issue for which there is no simple solution. The fact that we continue to debate it, even if in the popular media, is a good sign. Tyrannies do not debate this issue.

Principles and Judgment.

Having a code implies strongly adhering to the rules of the code, as with a soldier or detective. Strongly adhering to rules without judgment usually undermines principles, and kills the empathy and sympathy

that are at the basis for most correct principles. Even if you don't have sympathy for bad guys, you do have to have sympathy for the good guys that the code ultimately means to protect, such as in the movie "A Few Good Men". Finding sympathy guided Achilles to a better code with better principles. Relations between principles and judgment are a large topic that I don't go into here. If a code consistently lacks sympathy and consistently hurts good people, then it is using wrong principles or is following rules without also using judgment.

Theory and Practice: Literary Cases.

It is easy to say we should use "applies equally" and the Golden Rule as our basic principles but that is not the problem. Nearly everybody agrees in theory on these as basic principles. The problem is that these grand principles need to be interpreted and broken down into smaller rules for specific cases, and people quickly disagree at that level. That is what we should expect with animals that evolved their sense of morality. "The Devil is in the details". People are just doomed to argue about codes and behavior at the level of particular cases. We work out our humanity by arguing specific cases. This section presents a contrast between similar codes, in two more literary cases, to show we have real disagreements and that we have to think it out for ourselves.

In an episode of the classic TV show "Law and Order", a working class father wants his son to go to a prep school so the son can have a good education and good connections. The "preppies" look down on the boy, exploit his desire to fit in, and exploit his particular working class code of brotherhood. One clique fools him into acting as their stooge. The leader of the preppy boys gets the working class boy to kill a man while the leader looks on. The police figure it out. The preppy leader is happy to incriminate the working class boy to save his own skin. The police cannot act against the preppy leader unless the working class boy "rats him out". The working class boy refuses even though it means another ten years in jail at least, and even though he knows a bad person will go free. The working class boy is true to his code, which is based roughly on "do unto others in our group as we need to do, as an ideal member of our group would do for us". The working class boy is true to this code even though he knows the other person is not true to the same code, does not respect that code, and does not treat the working class boy as he would wish to be treated. The preppy leader is true to his own code if we take his code to mean: first save your own skin; then treat other people of your class as you might wish to be treated; and you may abuse people of another class.

Along with Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler is the best of classic detective writers. In "The Long Goodbye", the hero, Phillip Marlowe, makes friends with a man named Terry. Terry once had a good basic character but lost it through dissipation. Terry gets in trouble and then disappears without saying goodbye and without explaining. Marlowe feels it is his duty to find out what happened and to help Terry if he can. Marlowe hunts him down. In the process, Marlowe gets abused by police, gangsters, and assorted bad people. Marlowe learns that Terry disappeared in part because of his bad character. When it is clear to powerful people that Marlowe will not give up, and he might make too much trouble for big people along the way, the people who arranged for Terry to disappear arrange for Marlowe to meet him. When Marlowe meets him, Marlowe tells Terry what an ass he is, and then leaves. The powerful people who hid Terry assumed Marlowe went through hell because he was loyal to Terry personally. Marlowe did like Terry personally despite Terry's faults but that is not why Marlowe found him. Marlowe went through hell because Terry was a friend, regardless of his personality, in the same way an American

soldier tries hard not to leave a fallen comrade even if the comrade is an ass. Marlowe was loyal to the idea of friendship rather than to the particular person who might happen to be in the category of friend. Marlowe did his duty in a code in which he expected another friend would do the same for him as a friend, regardless of whether he deserved it as a particular individual. Marlowe did it for who Terry ideally was, and might have been, not for the real Terry.

I think the working class boy was wrong and Marlowe was right.

It Takes All Kinds.

When faced with annoying behavior, my father used to say, “It takes all kinds to make a world”, usually to hide the fact that he had no idea what was happening and what to do. If everybody acted according to high moral principles, the world would work out fine. When some people act badly, the other people, who want goodness to prevail, often have to abandon their high principles except among themselves. Then, we need tough guys, self-righteous guys, bulldogs, muscle, shooters, schemers, persuaders, whiners, and even lawyers. We need vengeance, anger, retribution, punishment, and fear; and we need the kind of people who can do that. The people who can do what needs to be done sometimes don't have hearts of gold and love sweetness. Sometimes it is only a lucky accident they are on our side. All these kinds can serve as the basis for a code.

Even when people don't act badly, people don't spend most of their lives acting according to high moral principles, nor should they. Not all codes are basically moral. People have regular lives. We have to go to work and mow the lawn. People just do things. Being a good mathematician might be governed by a code but the mathematician's code isn't necessarily moral. We don't always respond according to a code based on high moral principles. Sometimes we don't respond according to any code. Sometimes we just respond. As long as we don't break high moral principles, all this is fine.

Natural Codes.

Western people want their codes to have deep roots in nature and human nature. We want the validation of nature for our personal way of life. If we want to live the code of a “brave heart”, it would be good if the code of a brave heart had roots in our past as hunter-gatherers and helped in the evolution of morality. Western people like thinking of ourselves as the noble savage.

Unfortunately for our longings, few codes have such a pedigree. Few codes are simply natural. No code in modern life has simple roots in our evolved nature and only there: tough guy, avenger, femme fatale, tough woman, gangster, soldier, professional, business person, clergy person, professor, activist, techie, teacher, farmer, etc. None of these people existed as such in our evolutionary history. Hunter-gatherers did not have soldiers, farmers, priests, or feminists. Even if we could twist our history to find a basis for these people in the past, that is not the same as a warrant for a code in the present.

We have made up our codes out of a combination of natural abilities, culture, society, history, economics, politics, etc. It is hard to decide which dominates. It is not likely that any other force could go against evolved human nature for too long but that does not mean some kind of pure human trait is the key to any particular code. We evolved a general ability to play particular games, and no particular game could go

against our evolved nature for any long. We can understand some aspects of some games on the basis of evolved capacities, such as that golf might be based partly on an evolved joy in hunting and gathering outdoors. But, when we want to understand a particular game, we are much more likely to find what we seek in the history and cultural background of the game. We learn more about golf from knowing it began among shepherds in Scotland, spread around the world with the American military, and is often played by aspiring members of the middle class. Similar analyses work with codes such as the code of politically correct people or religious fundamentalists.

Sometimes the best we can hope is a code that has a basis in an attitude with roots in our evolutionary history and that does no wrong. The super hero as a fighter for the underdog, defender of morality, and scourge of bad guys, might have roots in the tendency to moral indignation of our past. The good parent certainly has roots even if what it means to be a good parent changes with time and place. The faithful spouse definitely has roots in our past.

Even here we have to be careful because not all of our tendencies that have close ties to our evolutionary past are good. The Black Widow, Prostitute, Cad Seducer, Spouse Abuser, Unfaithful Wife, Unfaithful Husband, and Killer all likely have roots in our past but we do not want to teach our children how to make lifestyle codes out of those characters.

We can look for simple personality types and for simple attitudes that make sense given our evolutionary history and that are useful today. We can make codes out of tendencies. Hunter-gatherers did not have soldiers but they did have men and women who would fight to defend their families and groups and who would argue vigorously for right. Out of that we can make a good template for soldiers who serve a good policy. Our ancestors took care of sick and injured people, and gave hungry people food. Out of that, we can easily make roles for medical personnel and for people who work in charities. The modern "artiste" did not exist among hunter-gatherers but people who could draw a picture, blow a tune on a flute, sing a song, chip a good stone spearhead, or weave a colorful basket were respected and did well. Out of that we can imagine modern singer-songwriters or even Mad Men.

Whether a code has roots in our past does not matter as long as the code is fun, useful, makes the world more interesting, does no harm, and gives people a regular way to get by in the confusing modern world. If the code also makes the world better, follows moral values, and promotes moral values, then so much the better. Let people live a regular life according to their "true you" as long as it does no harm. That is a good code too.

07 Romanticism

Romanticism is the dominant stance in the West, and, thanks to pop media, likely the world. Briefly: it glamorizes the world and it gets people to trust emotion, ideology, attitude, role, and crusades rather than reason. Romanticism gets people active in mid-level causes such as against abortion and thus stops us from dealing with deep issues such as chronic unemployment. Romanticism began in the middle 1700s and replaced the Enlightenment. Almost all of us now look through biased Romantic eyes. Romanticism is one of the most powerful of “systems that eat the world”. I disagree with Romanticism. I regret that it replaced the Enlightenment. I write more about Romanticism outside this book.

From about 1700 through 1850, the rise of capitalism, industrialism, machines, science, and democracy, overwhelmed old institutions and opened the door to new ideas. Traditional religion did not catch up with changes soon enough to offer ideas and institutions for the new world. Romanticism did, and it “set in”. After it had set in, no alternative has been able to displace Romanticism. The cure for Romanticism is to know deep issues and to offer realistic ideas and institutions for dealing with deep issues. Until we can offer that to people in general, we should expect middle level issues to recur, people to run around “acting out”, dogma, attitude, demagogues, fads, and glamour. Neither the left nor right is close to facing deep issues and to offering realistic solutions.

PART 1: Introductory Notes

What Romanticism is Not.

Romanticism is not the romantic imagination and is not romance in novels, movies, and TV. Romanticism is not necessarily charging against canons, “Valentine’s Day” writ large, chivalry, dark “Gothic” stories, or TV shows about the grandeur of the universe. I like romantic imagination; I try to be romantic but fail; and I dislike Romanticism. Romanticism as a culture system is related to Romanticism in the arts from about 1780 to 1930, but it is more than art, and Romanticism thrived after Romantic art faded. Nearly all “art” or “classical” music from Beethoven after 1800 to at least Rachmaninoff in the 1920s is Romantic.

During Romanticism, the West has had other movements. In academia recently, the most familiar might be post-modernism. In pop culture, there is no big movement that is not basically Romantic. All “space epic” movies at least since “Forbidden Planet” are Romantic, as are crime movies since “Public Enemy”. Romantic music influenced rock-and-roll, pop, country, and hip-hop. Even revivals in traditional religion, such as fundamentalism, are as Romantic as they are orthodox. I see nearly all modern movements as variants of Romanticism. Romanticism can make and subsume them even when they are not compatible with each other. They cannot overcome Romanticism, and Romanticism always returns after a variant has had its run. Lesser movements can be interesting, fun, and have value just as “art” jazz and movies about fairy tales are interesting, fun, and have value; but we don’t have to take lesser movements nearly as seriously as mainline Romanticism. We are still in Romanticism. So I ignore variants.

Romanticism can seem like a gigantic pouting whining adolescent carried on into adult life. It might have roots in pouting childhood, as did Anakin Skywalker, but is more than that, as Darth Vader became more. To a righty, Romanticism seems like the typical lefty who sticks his-her nose into everything and always has a plan based on dogma; but Romanticism is more. Romanticism infects people of the left and right equally. Romanticism might be more obvious in lefties but it is as active in righties. The Tea Party is a Romantic movement. Republicans since Goldwater, and especially since Reagan, are Romantics. You can be a Romantic as much by always saying “small government”, “unleash the market”, and “tradition” as by shoveling money at minorities. To self-styled practical hardheads, Romanticism of the left or right seems like airy-fairy silliness; but it is more. The ideas of supposedly practical people are as much off-the-mark and unrealistic as leftie fantasies. Refusing to see real capitalism, denying the pain of nature, constant economic develop as the cure for all ills, militarism, and calling for “the market alone” are as airy-fairy and selfish as communes of the 1960s. America as the new Israel bringing “the American way” to the world and restoring law-and-order at home, are Romantic. The business person’s dream of being a great innovator and empire builder is Romantic. I do not on purpose show how Romanticism infects righties as much as lefties but I do try to offer examples from both sides.

Method.

Romanticism shares almost all its features, such as seeking adventure, with other stances, the greater Indo-European culture, and with other cultures. Some features of Romanticism seem to come right out of evolved human nature, such as upwelling emotion, although features are always shaped by conditions. Romanticism stands out by how it selects and uses features. I don’t define how Romanticism is unique. You will get a feel for it. Romanticism is like Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. All three are Indo-European and express general tendencies in human nature. Despite similarities, it is wrong to see all as variations on one, for instance, as variations of Hinduism. Romanticism interacts with ethnicity, religion, gender, and socio-economic class. In a Romantic system, all socio-economic classes are Romantic but in different ways. I can’t sort out all these topics here.

I write as if ideas in Romanticism caused behavior. Most of the time, it is probably the other way around: people want to act in some ways, and Romanticism provides a good rationale. I can’t sort out how ideas and behavior interact, so I take the typical stance in anthropology and continue to explain by reference to socially shared ideas. Terms that begin with big letters (“Spirit”) show ideas that were raised to a high level in Romanticism, and often began with capital letters in Romantic writing.

To explain Romanticism, it is useful to write as if it were an ideal culture-social-formal system (much as what Max Weber made), and compare it with other ideal systems such as slash-and-burn horticulture, feudalism, capitalism, orthodox Christianity, and Hinduism. To do this, for reasons of brevity in a chapter that is already huge, I have to overlook many problems in social science. If you know of the problems in working with idealized systems, then good, but don’t hold it against what I say here if I do not take care of apparent problems.

Romanticism is a mixture of human nature; Indo-European culture; social patterns caused by the rise of nation states, industrialism, and capitalism; and particular historical trends. A book on Romanticism might try to tease apart these forces. This chapter cannot. It would be fun to show how the human need to see the world as lively contributes, and how it meshes with the feeling that something is wrong even under

apparently successful capitalism, to lead to ideas of Empires and rebels; but that fun adventure cannot be part of this chapter. Try working it out for yourself.

A Bit on What Romanticism Is.

The major deistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have always wanted people to go out and act on the world. Jesus wanted to usher in the Kingdom of God, wanted people to act as if they lived in the Kingdom of God, wanted us to work hard to make a better world, and wanted his followers to “talk up” other people. I follow Jesus in urging us to work hard to make the world better. Romanticism is a bad distortion of this good activism. While people in Romanticism might not intend badness, the results of its distortion often are wicked.

These days, even people who hold to traditional religion often are as much Romantic as they are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist. In this section, I do not discuss the relation of Romanticism to standard religions. I do not assume simply that the decline of traditional faith led to Romanticism or the other way around. I do assume the decline of traditional faith and rise of Romanticism are related.

Modern people want to feel Justified and Saved as much as any traditional Jews, Christians, or Muslims. We want Faith. We want to feel that our daily lives are sacred enough. We want to feel our lives matter and we have added to the world. We want our lives to have a feeling of adventure. We want feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment. We want to feel as if we have contributed to a grand cause, and that our contribution made a permanent difference for the better. We want our inner nature to match the bigger nature of the world and for that match to make a difference for ourselves and the world. We want all this to add up to having Faith and feeling Justified and Saved.

Not often can people really contribute to a grand cause in a way that makes an obvious difference and still live normal satisfying family lives and professional lives. Romanticism is a system that gives people a sense of success in their normal lives and spiritual lives, for the modern world.

Romanticism might have begun around the time of big causes such as the American Revolution, French Revolution, and socialist communes, and it still tries to work through big causes such as Communism, Fascism, the Great Society, and Saving Nature. But most of those big causes failed, succeed only in minor ways far behind schedule, or had unforeseen bad effects.

Romanticism might have begun in part to deal with big problems such as the good and bad of capitalism, political changes such as democracy, relations between business and the state, race relations, relations between major religions, and the need to save nature. But so far we have not cured any. Our attempts to cure them have created unforeseen bad effects and created additional bad problems.

Within the big causes and big problems are problems that are still big enough but “littler” in comparison such as Voting Rights, Civil Rights, Gender Rights, education, pollution in one particular place, bad race relations, religious conflict, abortion, prayer in schools, immigration, guns, etc.

People did not give up the need for Faith, Justification, and Salvation and the need to work in a cause so as to get Faith, Justification, and Salvation. People use alternative ways to see them, and use substitutes to get them.

One substitute was to put emotion above reason and to sanctify emotion. People use in emotion the way that traditional religions use Faith. Emotion is the new faith. If people feel the right emotion strongly then they are “with God”, Justified, and so Saved. Along with sanctifying emotion, people denigrate reason, including science.

People turn to “littler” causes for substitutes. “Littler” causes can still be important. People treat “little” causes with as much fervor as big causes, and hope for as much Justification, Salvation, and Satisfaction from little causes as from big causes. Commitment to any is a kind of special kind of emotion and so is the same as Faith. If you throw yourself into a cause, then you have Faith. We treat a battle over a bus stop like World War Three. A victory over the toilet seat is the same as the victory of Michael over Satan. We treat the argument over abortion like Armageddon.

People use dogmas for substitutes as long as the dogmas don't get at basic deep issues. They cling to these ideas as dogma: the sanctity of all life all the time; “choice” both in personal arenas and as a dogma of false capitalism; heaven or hell only; pure total populist democracy only; rule by the rich for the public good; materialism; determinism; the soul is eternal; back to religious fundamentals; liberty, equality, and fraternity; moral relativism; moral absolutism; moral subjectivism causes all problems; the market cures all problems; etc.

People use glamour as a substitute. They glamorize standard things such as movie stars and fashions but they also glamorize ideas, dogmas, causes, and all the other substitutes below.

People take attitudes as substitutes. An attitude also is a kind of emotion, and so also is equivalent to traditional Faith. People hold an attitude as a substitute for connecting their small self to the bigger-than-me, for acting naturally, and for Justification, and Salvation. Attitude includes willingness to jump into causes and to intrude. Left or right, the attitude comes first and pushes people into causes. Causes enact the attitude and so make the attitude real and effective. Causes are not chosen for their merits but for their ability to make us feel good as we push our attitude onto the world. Having an attitude makes you into an embodied angel, that is, a mix of spiritual and material who does the will of God and who has good results on the world. People “act out”.

People take on roles and poses, with attitudes. The most common roles are “Rebel” and “Remnant”; for which see the chapters on issues and see below. People divide up ideas, attitudes, causes, poses, and roles into “real” and “fake” much as people used to divide up religion into belief in orthodox religion and belief in heresies or divide faith from works. A real attitude, role, etc. is rooted in genuine connection to spirituality and a helpful cause.

People want their lives to feel adventurous, somewhat dangerous, and somewhat thrilling. To feel this way makes us feel Passion and makes us feel as if we are doing something important.

People want to act naturally and spontaneously. They want their attitude, works, and the effects of their works to flow naturally from their deep selves. They want life and good effects to come naturally as golf, baseball, or tennis come naturally to some gifted athletes or math came naturally to Isaac Newton and Leonard Euler. This makes them feel connected from the small to the big. It validates what they do and makes serves as a substitute for Faith.

People turn to belief with a strong emotional component whether within traditional faith or on its own. The standard examples are cults, Beats, hippies, New Age, Indian religions, and punks. People also take this stance of Passion in revivals within traditional religions, fundamentalism of all kinds, seeking spiritual gifts as in charismatic groups, and in movements within major religions such as Methodism and Mormonism. People conduct political causes as if the causes were a religious cult; a common example is Marxism and Communism in Russia (Soviet Union) and China. People even throw themselves into abstruse academic movements such as post-modernism.

People learn how susceptible people-in-general are to Romantic ideas, and the first people use the ideas as dogmas to get what they want for other reasons. People use emotion, take attitudes, act out, put on glamour, take on the image of rebel, moral remnant, victimized minority group, victimized business group, and victimized middle class, to gain special consideration.

As part of this complex, modern people excuse and enable far too much bad behavior and bad people. The worst of the bad behavior and bad people I discuss in the chapter on decency. Badness includes thugs, criminals, rudeness, strident political correctness of the left and right, pushiness, holier than thou, cults, hypocrisy, and anti-hypocrisy. Bad Romantic behavior includes terrorism, including evil done by Christians and by non-Christians such as by Muslim terrorists.

The underlying big problems are still there. Because the big problems are still there, many of the "littler" problems cannot be solved such as gender relations and race relations. We can take steps to deal with some little manifestations, such as by securing voting rights in the 1960s, but the root problem keeps shooting up in other places in other ways.

The fact that we won't deal with root problems puts us into a self-supporting "system that eats the world". Because we don't deal with the root problems, and the symptoms recur, we always have "little" issues to work on. Because we always have little issues to work on, we don't have to deal with the big problems. We can keep our complex of emotion, attitude, causes, roles, and bad roles.

For a "littler" cause to serve us this way the cause does not have to succeed fully. If it did succeed fully, we would move on to another cause. It is better if the cause keeps us busy, like the never-ending search for good race relations or gender relations. Causes that seem worthwhile but never succeed are more useful than causes that do succeed fully. So it is fortunate for the system that people can work on never-ending little causes that keep them from solving big problems.

Despite taking attitudes and working tirelessly on causes, modern people seem selfish, materialistic, and trendy. People are restless but forever dissatisfied. Their dissatisfaction makes them more restless, and that fuels the complex.

The worst effects of Romanticism are to blind us to what really needs doing and to keep us from using our energy, time, and talent most usefully.

We refuse to look at the big problems. Through the work of scholars and thinkers, we now understand the big problems better and might be able to do real work on controlling them – as with climate change. But we are so used to overlooking big problems, taking an attitude, seizing one little issue after another, and finding satisfaction this way, that we can't see real solutions, keep perspective, or work on problems in the order of their real effects and real need. We can't order the little problems under the big problems, and so cannot deal with everything most effectively. We would rather run around like headless chickens and get little satisfactions for short times.

Romanticism gives people a lot of energy. Romantic energy is not all wasted on projects that can't be completed. People have accomplished much using Romantic energy. Without Romantic energy, we would not have movements such as for civil rights, gender rights, saving nature, the Conservative revival, and research cure cancer. For all that, I am thankful.

Romanticism also has hurt us, and it has blinded many able people who should have seen better and had better lives. I have seen a lot of suffering from Romanticism; "the needle and the damage done". It has kept us from dealing with the root issues so that now it is too late to deal with some root issues such as saving the abundance and diversity of nature.

Romanticism always fails. In a longer work on Romantic logic, I would show how its apparent failure really supports its ability to persist as a system even while its long-term failure makes it less able to serve deep human needs. Here I only say that Romanticism does not solve deep problems or littler issues. Romanticism does not give people long-term satisfaction. Romanticism leads to conniving, confusion, contortion, and bad dogma. Still people continue to hope emotion and commitment lead to Justification and Salvation.

In practice, on the state level, Romanticism is another level of control. Acting according to Romantic guidelines, people can think they are fighting the machines when really they are reinforcing a more subtle and pervasive machine. Groups in power learned to let subordinates agitate along Romantic lines so the subordinates would think they are doing something important but really they change nothing or they help groups in power. Examples include anti-abortion, women's empowerment, widespread welfare and other entitlement, small-scale national medical care, gun rights, gun control, hug a tree, rock-and-roll, hip-hop, Black Lives Matter, White Lives Matter, and most trends in the social sciences. People in power did not invent Romanticism as another level of control. They are not that gifted. They are astute enough to use an ideology when it arises and can help them keep power. If you want to escape this level of control, you have to think for yourself, see real issues and real solutions, and then act accordingly.

Almost everyone wants some magic in the world, but not for everybody, only for some special people. The large majority of us cannot control magic even if we can see magic, like Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Almost everybody wants to be one of the special people who can really feel magic and use it. People embrace an ideology that lets them be a magician. Most people want to be a good magician, like Merlin or Yoda. If there are good magicians, there have to be bad magicians, like Morgan Le Fay or the misguided Prospero in "The Tempest" and "Forbidden Planet". But that is alright because

then good magicians have something to do to feel useful and justified. They can defeat bad magicians. They have to protect ordinary people who are not adept with magic. They can protect goodness-truth-light-and-love, and help in the advance of goodness etc. In the end, it works out. In the modern world, bad magicians always ally with the King and Queen, the “system”, which also is bad, not like good King Arthur. Bad magicians and bad powers thwart the Spirit moving through the world creatively beneficially reshaping it. Magicians are prime tools of the Spirit. They help the Spirit creatively beneficially reshape the world. In the modern world, bad magic consists of knowing how to succeed in business, applied science, politics, nasty glamour, or systematic religion – mostly all that rational, technical, and impersonal stuff. Good magic shows itself to most people first through art such as pop music and through good emotions such as caring, true patriotism, and love for nature. Just as bad magic can feign goodness, so good magic always has a touch of naughtiness; often that is how you tell it is good magic. When good magicians defeat bad magicians and power, they also unite the goodness of good magic with its naughtiness and with the power of bad magic, of course always in a good way. Good magicians always go to Heaven.

If you want two people who exemplify Romanticism, begin with the Frenchman Jean Jacques Rousseau from the middle 1700s, and commentaries on him. Second, read the German Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (G.W.F.) Hegel’s “Phenomenology of the Spirit” and early writings on Christianity, from the early 1800s. For a contrast, read Edmund Burke’s work on the American and French Revolutions from around 1800. Burke is the founder of the sensible conservative movement. For more contrast, but which shows the growing internalization of Romanticism, read: Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton “Everlasting Man”; Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis “Abolition of Man”; Russell Kirk “America’s British Culture”, “Roots of American Order”, and “Conservative Mind: From Burke To Santayana”; a collection that Kirk edited called “Portable Conservative Reader”; and a collection of Kirk’s essays called “Essential Russell Kirk”. For the best critique of Romanticism, of all flavors, in a short wonderful novel, read “The Warden” by Anthony Trollope. The novels of E.L. Doctorow are a fun commentary on Romanticism in America. “Ragtime” describes well the maturation of modern Romanticism in the early 1900s as primarily a political tool.

I repeat that the best cure for Romanticism is to better know deep issues and to offer realistic practical solutions based on sound principles. Neither the Left nor Right has done this or accepted the situation. Until we do this, Romanticism and “acting out” will reign.

God to Fill the Void and Good Sense to Fill the Void.

Briefly, I say that people face a void at the center of their lives; instead of filling the void by dealing with deep issues, people run around; and the running around sustains the void. People are caught in a self-sustaining system around a void. A traditional religious person would say that people can fill the void with God and can fill the void only with God – or Dharma, Tao, Heaven, Love, etc. The lack of God is the root of all problems.

I don’t dispute that finding God can fill a big void in human life. I don’t dispute that not having a sense of bigger-than-me makes it hard to fill the void. If that were enough, I would refer people to religious tracts or New Age makeover books instead of writing this. The problem is that the deep problems still remain after you find God. You feel good knowing God loves you but that does not find a job for everyone who is qualified and energetic. Finding God does not save nature, turn people into adept citizens, stop terrorists,

and save us from bad policy. Church announcements don't cure worldly problems. You still have to work on the world, and working on the world can make the void return fast. Unless we also get clear about deep issues in the practical world, we risk Romanticism. We can love God truly and still act like Romantic idiots or other idiots. We can love God truly and carry out projects not because it is part of God's plan but because we need to feel good about our self. Besides loving God, we need good sense. To get it, we need to get over Romanticism. Thinking by itself won't fill the void that only God can fill but you need to think about what to do after you find God or if you don't find God.

I do not say all emotion, causes, activities, ideologies, attitudes, and roles are simply Romantic foolery. Nearly all activities etc. have a lump of truth and usefulness to them or we wouldn't do them. Activities etc. can have value even when people do them for wrong reasons or fool themselves.

I am saying that we can fool ourselves even in a good cause. Even people who feel God strongly can be mistaken about abortion or fight abortion for the wrong reasons. People who feel the unity of nature can fight to save the salmon for the wrong reasons. People who think God made everybody in his image, everyone should be free and equal, and the state should not stick its nose into our private business, still can fight for gay rights for the wrong reasons. People who achieve real good in activities can do it for the wrong reasons. We still need to think. We still need to step back to assess what we do and why. We still need to mistrust causes, etc. We still need to seek deep issues vigorously and still need to assess our time, talents, energy, and other graces in that perspective.

I am not asking that people have perfect motives or be perfect. I am asking that people look at what they do in light of what I say here. The people on this planet are not doing well enough despite huge amounts of energy, a thunder of sermons, and sea of ink. We need to ask ourselves why and do better.

Few people on their own can even recognize deep issues. Fewer can see through to the bottom of deep issues. Fewer can see the relation of deep issues to other issues. Fewer still can figure out what to do. We need guides. I have had adept guides even when they disagreed. Hopefully this book helps. You are not expected to do it all for yourself. You are allowed to ask for help; and I think you will get it. After you have gotten what you can from this book, go to other guides for help.

PART 2: Background Ideas for the Romantic Attitude.

We can see all of the points above as in the Romantic attitude. Romantics take the attitude with them to relations with people, nature, institutions, and society, and to issues. This part of the chapter goes into ideas that lie behind the attitude. I do not say that people have to clearly say they believe in any ideas described here. People only have to act as though they believe in these ideas, and they do that.

Selfishness, Isolation, Materialism, and Trendiness.

It is useful to begin by pulling on what might seem a small thread. Religious critics of modern life say our life is ruined because people are isolated individuals, selfish, materialistic, and craven slaves to trends. Modern people can't get real satisfaction in life. They feel bad. They feel modern "angst". Selfishness etc. is a treadmill that modern people can't get off of.

To explain selfishness etc., religious critics say modern people are moral subjectivists and relativists; for definitions of those, see below. Modern people lack a sense of objective morality; they assume they each personally are the final arbiter in all issues including all issues of morality; they do what suits them and call that moral or useful. They assume that whatever their group does is moral. They allow that whatever another groups does is moral for that other group as long as it does not harm me-us, and expect other groups to have the same attitude for us. If they don't like what other groups do, they can call that immoral without too much need for justification.

To explain selfishness etc. and moral subjectivism, critics say modern people lack faith and a relation to God. Christians lament the end of Christian civilization based on the Church. Hindus might say people lack appreciation for the total Dharma including how it structures society while Chinese might lament the lack of ritual ties to Heaven. Without God, we cannot have an objective view of the world. Without God, we make ourselves the center of the world and make ourselves kings and queens of the world. We must be selfish and must seek satisfaction in material goods and trends.

To explain lack of faith in God, traditional religious people say modern people took up ideas that were new after about 1700 or 1750 and turned the ideas into bad dogmas. Not all the ideas are compatible, and that is part of the point. The ideas-dogmas make us "kind of crazy" because they are un-natural, un-Godly, and hyper-rational. You do not have to fully get the ideas to succumb to their bad effects. To turn the ideas into dogmas, it helps not to get the ideas deeply. The new ideas include: "liberty, equality, and fraternity"; the individual person as the basic unit of thinking, society, family, and life; the individual person as a separate autonomous agent in all spheres; the individual as isolated moral agent; the individual as an isolated economic agent; deriving family from the individual; deriving society from the individual; rights rather than responsibilities; absolute freedom; absolute equality in all aspects of life including political, religious, social, family, and sex; lack of feeling responsible for our fellows; absolute sameness between genders; society has a "general will" about what is right and wrong and about what is practically good; we should bow to society in all affairs because society has general will and knows general good; using "the greater good for the greater number" or "utility" as the highest goal; putting society above moral action by individuals; making society the basic unit of thought, acts, and institutions; capitalism; being wealthy makes one correct; being powerful makes one correct; the free market; no government regulation; much government regulation; strong populist democracy; and rule by a small group who knows the general will and general good better than the people, knows how to get things done, and represents the people.

Bad dogmas displace good ideas, good morality, and good institutions from Christianity. Bad dogmas inevitably lead us down dark paths to wickedness.

According to critics from traditional religions, these bad ideas came from science and-or from naughty philosophers from about 1750 to 1850. I do not explain in this section what features of science led to these ideas. I do not explain why people began to believe scientists and philosophers after about 1750 when people had hardly paid attention to them for many millennia before.

Recall from the chapters on issues that we can derive any nonsense from contradictory statements, and much nonsense has been supported by using mutually incompatible ideas from above.

Non-religious critics of modern life, especially leftist critics, also say people are selfish, materialistic, and trend slaves; but blame capitalism. You will see below how. Non-religious critics approve lack of faith in traditional religion. The critics encourage many ideas above. They do not see the ideas as bad dogma but as intriguing insights and good guides. In their view, problems come because society, or sometimes the individual, cannot reach full potential, that is, full utility. The individual and-or society are stymied by capitalism and traditional religion. Capitalism causes people to select among ideas those that are bad for society and themselves and causes people to actually follow the bad ideas.

Most sensible non-dogmatic people see that we have to compromise among these ideas, as for example, between rights and responsibilities and between individual and society. Righties and lefties each have their own ideas of what a compromise is and how to find it. So they are unable to compromise among themselves; American politics since Reagan is an example. Each side picks the ideas that suit its goals and claims the other side picks dogmas that do the most damage.

Populist democracy is a difficult case because people both want to have it and want to blame it. I say a bit about it below.

Some Terms.

“Materialism” or “materialistic” can mean either-or-both of two ideas. Writers are not always clear which they mean. First, (1) materialism means a drive to buy a lot of stuff and seek happiness in stuff (including material goods such as smart phones and services such as a concert). It implies people are unhappy with buying as a life, but pursue it harder because they see no alternatives. Second, (2) materialism is the idea that the world is made of nothing but matter, and everything is only a re-arrangement of matter, including plants, animals, processes such as storms, feelings such as love, and sensations such as the scent of roses. In terms of high school physics, everything is an arrangement of electrons, protons, and neutrons (or quarks). (I omit the difference between matter and energy. I omit considering the status of the forms that matter takes.) For now, I care only about the first meaning. Sometimes critics blame the first kind of materialism on the second but (2) does not cause (1) very often.

“Consumerism” has two meanings. First, (A) people seek satisfaction from buying stuff. It implies that people can’t get satisfaction from buying, but have no choice, buy more, and are stuck. This meaning is like the first meaning of “materialistic”. The second meaning is almost opposite. (B) People are at risk in capitalism from bad business firms that offer poor goods and conniving terms, including financial firms. Consumers need help. “Consumerism” is helping consumers. Good versions of consumerism are the journal “Consumer Reports”, product reviews on TV and the Net, and stories against scams. Champions of consumerism include Ralph Nader and Senator Elizabeth Warren. When people blame materialism (1) on materialism (2), they also blame consumerism (A) on materialism (2). Because of how rightist thought works, people who dislike materialism and consumerism (A) rarely support consumerism (B).

Moral subjectivism says that each isolated individual, or each isolated group, can judge morality for him-herself or itself, and is the final judge of right and wrong. Nobody else can judge right or wrong; no other group can judge right or wrong. Moral subjectivism is rarely clear on the relation of groups to individuals. People and groups who claim to be final arbiters are rarely clear on relations of groups and individuals.

Moral subjectivism and doctrinal subjectivism go together. Moral subjectivism and doctrinal subjectivism lead to fracturing of groups, denominations, sects, and cults. They fractured Hinduism and Christianity. They constantly fracture the left wing so the left wing often defeats itself, or, if it does not, allows the right wing to defeat it easily.

Moral subjectivism leads to both moral absolutism and moral relativism. On the one hand, we have a plethora of groups each of which insists it is dead right and all the others are dead wrong. On the other hand, not all of them can be right, and they all have to get along somehow. It is easy to say they are all right in their own way for themselves and there is no one overall objective right and wrong. It is hard to compromise. Which horn of this dilemma wins out depends on particular histories and situations. Both extremes hurt democracy.

Romanticism is able to use moral subjectivity, doctrinal subjectivity, moral absolutism, and moral relativity all at the same time to strengthen itself.

The Complex-System-Syndrome of Romanticism.

I do not minimize the bad effects of isolation, selfishness, materialism, and trends. I hate people walking around with ear buds oblivious to the human world and traffic. As a motorcycle and bicycle rider, I hate people who drive and use phones. But I don't think explaining entirely by moral subjectivity, pride, lack of God, science, capitalism, weird philosophy, or populist democracy is satisfying. I look for deeper relations that might tie all this together better.

Regardless of ideology, evolved human nature tends to self-interest, using material goods for success and fun, and paying attention to what other people do. The extent of self-interest, etc. varies. Whether self-interest etc. become selfishness etc. depends on way of life and on particular conditions within a way of life. Our evolved nature has not changed even if our acts are more aimed at selfishness etc. now. Even if our acts are more aimed at selfishness etc. now, it is not clear how much – I think not much. We have more toys and trends now than in Medieval England, and we can hide in apartments clicking on the Net, but that does not mean we are vastly more selfish etc. Read the satirists of Classical Rome, and read Chaucer or Boccaccio; they are still funny and accurate, and people do not sound much different. Individualism is a part of Hebrew-Jewish Law, and Western heritage, and has been a key value since the rise of democracy in the 1700s. It is integral to democracy. I doubt critics would like to blame selfishness etc. mostly on the rise of democracy.

Ideas of strong individualism, social domination, moral subjectivism, moral relativity, etc., and the ideas of science that might support them, are more common now than they were in the middle ages but the ideas have appeared before and did not cause chaos. They were known in ancient Greece and Rome and did not cause chaos. When they arose before, they came in times when people had many ideas of God and no one idea dominated. It is not clear that not-having-a-clear-dominant-idea-of-God alone caused moral subjectivism etc. in those times and so I doubt is the only cause in our times. It makes more sense to say that great turmoil in any times cause confusion in faith etc, and then to look for turmoil and the reasons for turmoil. It is interesting that selfishness etc. are more common now but we need to see if deeper reasons cause selfishness etc.

Science, capitalism, and widespread populist democracy are almost unique to our times, and they are part of large changes that began in the early 1700s. Antecedents for capitalism, science, and populist democracy all have appeared before but none developed into a full-blown socio-economic system as now, and at no time before did they all appear together strongly enough to reinforce each other as now. None alone caused selfishness etc. But coming together in times of turmoil, with ideas in Romanticism, likely did. I cannot prove my view. I have to offer a plausible account of how it might have happened, how it relates to Romanticism, and how Romanticism relates to selfishness etc.

I am less saddened by selfishness etc. than by the Romantic complex, by the fact that we obsess over a plethora of “littler” issues and do not think through to the root. Some self-interest etc. are part of human nature but they do not have to be part of a complex that keeps us from dealing with the real problems of our world. Not even selfishness etc. have to be part of that kind of complex.

Briefly, what happened is what I mentioned above: Changes had been building since at least 1600, got faster after 1700, and much faster after 1789. The changes included capitalism, science, a mechanistic reductionist style in science, individualism that went along with capitalism, individualism that went along with populist democracy, populist democracy, religious divisions that undermined the natural authority of traditional religion, new religious ideas, and new ideas in philosophy that I don't go into. Old institutions could not cope with the new situation. Traditional religions did not adapt fast enough to give people ideas and institutions that would allow them to live decently in modern life and to keep the old ideas of God, decency, responsibility etc. At the same time, the ideas in Romanticism came to the fore. The ideas in Romanticism blended with capitalism, science, populist democracy, new forms of authoritarianism, and other new ideas and institutions, to form a system. It is a strong system that “eats the world”. Once in that system, we have a hard time getting out. The system even absorbs and shapes traditional religion and conservative ideas to serve it. The extent to which we are selfish etc. and moral subjectivists etc. varies with conditions within Romanticism but the variation never takes us out of Romanticism. That is where we are now.

Whether ideas in Romanticism were latent in the culture and only came up again after 1750, or developed new in response to the period, I don't go into. I believe they were latent in old Indo-European culture.

Contrary to what critics and old people say, modern life is not all that bad. Contrary to what I say, even Romanticism is not all that bad. It can be a lot of fun. We get a lot of good work done on middle level issues such as gender relations and clean air. I love gadgets and pop culture. How selfish etc. life is under Romanticism depends. In America in the 1960s, people were not too selfish; in the 1970s and 1980s “me generation”, more so; less in the 1990s; more so again in the Republican 2000s; and maybe less again in the early days of the Obama Presidency.

Romanticism works best when people are always a bit skeptical of their institutions, as they have been since the rise of populist democracy. Yet, even in Romanticism, especially in it, people always see the ideals of service and selflessness, and gladly act well when they believe enough in their institutions and think their actions do lasting good. People act more selfish etc. when they feel their institutions fail them much and that good acts toward other people do no good or even backfire. Regardless of how selfish or selfless, what people do serves to reinforce Romanticism.

People distrusted their institutions, even democracy, during the time when Romanticism consolidated its power, in the early 1800s, and that distrust led people to adopt Romanticism. After they had adopted Romanticism, the extent that people trusted or distrusted their institutions varied but never undermined Romanticism. Romanticism is compatible with both distrust and modest faith in institutions as long as some distrust remains. The modicum of distrust in institutions helps keep us from looking clearly at deep issues and fixing them. Romanticism feeds the distrust that keeps it alive. Our times always lead us to distrust our institutions enough to provide a solid base for Romanticism.

To repeat: the real problem under Romanticism is that we do not pay attention to deep issues and that, as a result, we are sliding into a world where life is like what we find in "Third World" cities such as Manila, Lagos, Mexico City, Mumbai, Bangkok, Los Angeles, and Oakland, CA; and where people will always act a bit too selfish, materialistic, and trendy.

It is too much to look at all the factors that fed development of the Romantic system-complex-syndrome, and at all the factors that feed it now. I focus on capitalism and the ideas about the Spirit that lie behind Romanticism, with passing comments on other factors. I explain how Romanticism works to support itself and to keep us in it.

Why Not Populist Democracy?

I said in Chapter Two on political values that populist democracy is failing largely because we will not face deep issues; clearly Romanticism plays a role in that failure and so populist democracy and Romanticism are linked. Populist democracy lets people think they are acting on deep issues when they are not. It lets people think they are heroes when they are not. Under democracy, people feel the failure of institutions because they create the institutions; only the people who made the institutions can fix them; but won't. All the dogmas listed above are part of democracy. During the era of democracy, I think Romanticism became stronger, if we can judge by how it pervades pop culture, how it has fueled the American culture wars, and how it has shaped American politics.

Why, then, go at the problem of Romanticism from capitalism rather than from populist democracy? A good answer involves a lot of social science, which I avoid. Briefly: Capitalism came before democracy and enabled democracy. Without capitalism, there would be no modern populist democracy. We can't know modern democracy well without knowing capitalism. The same ideas about individual, selfishness, subjectivism, moral relativism etc. are evident in capitalism as in democracy. If I use capitalism as one way to explain them, then I might as well simplify and get what I need from one approach. Despite its failures, people don't want to see anything bad about democracy. Only a few conservatives are skeptical about populist democracy as I am, so, if I use democracy, then I will get little support and much resistance. Since 1980, after several recessions, and after gaps in wealth became obvious, people are more skeptical of capitalism now than when Reagan gave it as the dogma of God. It is easier to explain the categories of analysis with capitalism than with democracy. I can use capitalism with fewer problems.

Idealized Good Community Subsistence Agriculture.

To begin, it helps to contrast idealized capitalism with idealized self-sufficient farming. Although idealized self-sufficient farming never existed, we think it did, and we use it as the model for how we want life to be

and how we think life really would be if only bad things did not stand in our way. We find things to blame when life does not turn out like this.

Imagine a large area of farming families, all families nearly all the food they need, and, amazingly, also produce nearly all they need such as wagons, lanterns, books, and computers. While the Amish are not nearly this self-sufficient, still, imagine along those lines. Particular families can specialize in some goods that they make well, and trade among each other, such as cakes for candles. Specialization and trade do not undermine self-subsistence. The families can produce a surplus above what they need, which they sell on a market to buy goods such as computers. If the market suddenly disappeared, they would feel inconvenienced but they would still get along fine.

Because each family is an independent unit, we might think each family acts as an isolate by itself but this is not the case in real life. In fact, just because families don't need each other, and they do specialize and trade, they interact and form a community.

The end result is something like the ideal farming communities and small towns of American lore or the idealized peasant communities of social science lore before about 1990: Smallville the home of the Kents and Superman; or the birthplace in Iowa of Captain Kirk. People trust because they have nothing to gain from stealing or otherwise hurting, and they have enough to lose by cutting ties through bad behavior. They need not all go to church (temple, mosque, etc.), or to the same one, but, in fact, people do go to some church, and usually the community has only a couple. The children go to a few small schools. They play on sports teams and in sports leagues together, and against the teams of other similar places. Life is interesting. They all help each other out in emergencies. Not everybody is equally wealthy but everybody gets along and everybody succeeds enough. A teacher of mine used the term "warm puppy school of anthropology" for the social scientists who really thought rural social life was like this. Middle class people, especially in suburbs but also in some urban neighborhoods, think of themselves and their community in these terms.

It might seem that subsistence supports isolation, moral subjectivism, etc. but it does not. Ideally, it is the other way around. People in communities share the same morality, and that morality closely approaches to the one real objective morality. People need to hold similar morality to trade, marry, and not to hurt each other; and they settle on the one best true morality. The fact that economic and social relations drive people to one morality, the one true morality, does not mean we can reduce morality, or the one true morality, merely to economic and social relations. It just means, that, in this case, society and morality happily coincide.

In their own eyes, the biggest reason that a population of self-sufficient farmers can be self-sufficient, autonomous, yet not isolated, and tied into one moral-economic community is because the basic unit of social life is the family rather than the individual or any big subgroup. Families are made of several generations. Family members learn the best balance between individual and group, and they teach it automatically. Families learn about division of labor, and learn about the need for everybody to pitch in. They teach responsibilities more than rights. They teach taking care of people who can't take care for themselves. Because families can't marry within, each one family has to consider relations with several other families. The relations overlap so that, in a few steps, nearly all families are tied to all others. The same is true of participation in the market economy. Few families have a member who is adept at every

skills, so some other families are better at some other skills, so it is useful to let another more adept family make wagons while we make lanterns to trade for wagons. In this way, the population is tied through a few steps altogether as well. The “family” becomes an important idea in morality and social relations. The family takes on an almost-mythic status. People have idealized visions of what a family should be like, work to make their families like that, want other families to be like that, and prefer relations only with other families that are as close to the ideal as possible.

Of course, the reality is in between. Where people don’t compete directly, the success of one person-or-family does not detract from the success of others, and where people can gain from mutual help, relations can be good. Relations are rarely communal. People always compete. People are never as friendly and helpful as the ideal. People cheat, lie, gossip, connive, backbite, and swindle. People flaunt wealth and use it for comparative advantage such as to get better marriages for their children. Some kind of socio-economic class system often develops. People share much of the same morality but still differ and still have moral disputes – not just disputes about economics, marriages, and self-interest but real moral disputes about right and wrong. The community might approach the one true morality but it rarely closely, and two different communities made of self-sufficient people might have different moralities that approach the one true morality in different ways. Judgment is still needed and still a skill to cultivate.

The actual conditions that prevail in any place depend on all the factors that I usually list: geography, climate, ecology, economy, technology, culture, history, and previous social organization. Some rural places are nice and some are mean.

People use the idealized rural community not just to contrast with capitalism and to explain the changes in capitalism but as a subconscious model of all aspects of how we wish life was but is not. It is like the way that early movies imagined that Native Americans used the idea of the “happy hunting ground” or like I imagine our hunter-gatherers ancestors dreamed of happy hunting-and-gathering grounds. People want their family, office, business, factory, labor union, school, academic department, sports team, community center, country club, and community to be like the idealized rural community. People use the fact that these arenas in their lives are not like the idealized rural community as way to indict modern life and to blame what they want to blame. We would be better off if we could see these arenas as they really are and work to make them better as what they really are. One of the tragedies of Romanticism is that it does not let us see these arenas as they really are and make them better that way but keeps pushing us to see them as unreal ideals and keeps us dissatisfied and active as a result.

Idealized Bad Selfish Capitalism.

Here briefly is the idealized nasty capitalism of simplistic social science. This picture has more than a grain of truth to it no matter how much you dislike simplistic social science and lefties.

Every person and business firm is in it for him-herself or itself and only for the isolated self. We are all isolated selves and only isolated selves. All isolated persons and firms interact with any other isolated self, person or firm, only for narrow personal gain. The rest of the badness necessarily follows.

Each person has wants. He-she uses available resources to fill wants as efficiently as he-she can. If you live in the forest, you use a gun and ax to hunt and gather what that particular forest gives. If you have a

job in the city, you use your salary to buy what you want in the order and amounts that give you the most gain. Business firms make goods for people, and do so efficiently, but only for profit. Whatever makes a profit happens; whatever does not make a profit, no matter how morally good, does not happen. People get jobs at firms; with their salaries, people buy the goods that firms produce.

Together people and firms make a closed system. The system provides for material wants and for trends to chase but it does not offer any more and it actively deletes any more. Rather than church or saints, people take the business firm as their model. Just as business firms seek profit and nothing else, people grimly seek personal satisfactions and nothing else. Just as business firms do not help any community unless it serves their particular narrow desires, people do not. More than merely self-interested, people are isolated, selfish, cold, and coldly efficient. They don't help others. People think that the success of everyone else detracts from their own success, so they view everyone as a serious competitor and treat everyone that way. They can be superficially polite as a means to an end but there is nothing to it other than that. The only human bonds are based on the model of a contract among business firms. Parents, children, and spouses all begin to see even each other that way. Nobody can form real bonds. Nobody can think that there might be something more to this closed system such as God or morality except when they use God or morality as a tool to manipulate other susceptible people.

People are selfish rather than merely self-interested. People can't get satisfaction from human relations because they don't have the ability and because other people don't have it either. So, instead, people seek satisfaction from buying stuff, usually material good such as cars and smart phones. People can't get satisfaction in the long run that way either but can in the short run, so they keep doing it. Trendiness is an extension of selfishness, materialism, and the first kind of consumerism. People can't get long run satisfaction from knowing all about the latest fad but they can get short run "kicks" so they keep doing it. The lack of long-term satisfaction does not make the system break down; it makes the system all the stronger.

Capitalism generates some serious problems such as unemployment and unemployment, adds to socio-economic class conflict, and adds to other conflicts such as racial strife. It is a strong force in destroying nature. Capitalism does generate wealth and eventually improves the lives of most people but the very wealth that it generates can be a problem in itself. Wealth corrupts. Wealthy people jealously guard their wealth. Even middle class people use wealth to distort politics. People believe in wealth rather than God, Dharma, or Tao. I go into the problems of capitalism more elsewhere in the book so I don't go into them anymore here.

Most of us are familiar with the syndrome that I label "just get mine first". In social science, one common example is called "the Tragedy of the Commons" and the syndrome is often modeled by a game called "Prisoner's Dilemma". When a big problem looms, especially if people share resources, people often do NOT respond by pooling resources-and risk and rationally communally fighting the problem to get the most for all. Instead, people grab what they can for themselves, hoping to get enough to weather the problem, and then come out alright at the end – or at least better than their fellows. Everybody trying to grab what he-she can makes the problem worse, but that is not the concern of most people. We can see this syndrome now in the demise of nature. People buy their own plot out in the forest hoping to get away from it all, and then, when enough people have bought enough plots, the forest is gone, and the "get mine" people get landslides and fires instead. Usually market "bubbles" such as the housing crisis and

“Great Recession” after 2006 have “get mine first” as a strong contributor when the bubble builds and when it collapses. Financial firms and their human operatives certainly are astute at getting their loot first on either swing of the pendulum.

Capitalism makes this syndrome worse. Capitalism generates, or enables, problems that people try to get away from such as the end of nature, class strife, and market bubbles. Capitalism gives the average person enough wealth so he-she thinks he-she can get ahead of the problem, get his or hers, and then get out “sitting pretty”. In fact, people are wrong and make the problem worse, so the wealth of capitalism works against people rather than for people.

Economically isolated individuals are almost inevitably moral subjectivists. Although it might appear that they are like self-sufficient farmers, the end result is quite different. For each economically isolated individual, only that person knows what he-she likes; nobody else can decide for him-her; and he-she cannot decide for anybody else. This attitude transfers directly over to morality. They know what is right and wrong, and only they know. Other people may hold opinions as long as their actions don't impinge badly on me; when their actions do impinge badly on me, then they are necessarily wrong and I am necessarily right. If a lot of opinions about morality happen to coincide, then that is a happy accident but no more than a happy accident. It is not the basis for a community. We might use it as the basis to form a group but our group is not cohesive in the same way as a community. When our opinions no longer coincide, we part company.

Reality differs from lore. Evolution gave us a desire for relations with family, people, community, morality, and spirits. People do not usually see everybody as a grim competitor for the same job; a mid-level clerk in a chemical factory is not competing with a mid-level clerk in a university. Because of modern travel, apartment life, and the isolation of jobs in a big bureaucracy, people do feel isolated. But people reach across boundaries to interact with co-workers, go to churches, go to recreation centers, experience art, listen to music, work in causes, and start families. People can get real satisfaction from material goods and activities. Firms can provide the means to get some of this real satisfaction, both by providing people with jobs and by providing them with the goods and services that people but with their salaried. Some job-and-living situations are nice and some are mean.

People do pursue careers as individuals and people sometimes do feel they are in a “zero sum game” where they gain only at someone else's expense and someone else gains only at their expense. But people also feel they are in it together as when a whole firm succeeds or the capitalist system as a whole delivers the jobs and goods that people need. People do not pursue a career in a vacuum but almost always have a career in a firm, government unit, or academic unit. Business firms cannot produce goods willy-nilly and force people to buy the goods. Firms need customers; they have to please their customers. Business firms even need other firms such as suppliers and consultants. Where competition is not head-to-head, people have feelings of cooperation and achievement. I have seen competition between business people that is friendly like sports as long as the business people are not in direct competition for a very limited market.

I am not sure if “get mine first” is worse in capitalism than in other socio-economic systems. I doubt the underlying natural propensity is much worse among people in capitalism than other systems; I have seen selfish conniving people in rural areas and non-capitalist markets. If the syndrome is worse in capitalism,

then it is not much worse. It is bad because it has worse results in capitalism than in other systems. The fact that it can have worse results in capitalism is not the fault of people in capitalism and does not mean they are more selfish, materialistic, or trendy but is a fault of how the whole system works, especially within nature.

Capitalism is important not because it forces people into selfishness, materialism, and trendiness, even if it does push people in those directions sometimes. Capitalism is important because it generates some of the deep problems, such as unemployment, that support other problems, such as bad relations among ethnic groups and genders. Capitalism generates some of the deep problems that we won't deal with and it reinforces some of the lesser problems that keep us busy flitting among causes and so keep us from dealing with deep issues. Capitalism supports Romanticism and can seem to be a big cause of it. But I doubt capitalism alone could cause Romanticism. Once Romanticism is in place with capitalism, then it pushes tendencies in capitalism toward selfishness, isolation, materialism, and trendiness; and it is a bigger force for those bad feelings than capitalism. If we would face up to the big issues then capitalism alone would not fuel other issues and we could avoid Romanticism.

Individuals and Teams.

In lore, people in capitalism are necessarily narrowly selfish, mean, and grasping. Natural selection made sure we are self-interested but not necessarily mean and selfish. Usually the most successful people in our evolutionary past learned to reach out to, and work with, other people around them so as to promote everybody's self-interest and mutual interests. The degree of cooperation or selfishness depended on circumstances and here is not the place to go into how that works. In my experience, unless people are locked into a bad system, they do find ways to connect with other people.

In lore, people in capitalism are isolated individuals who cooperate with other people only as a means to their own success. People rarely require other people for success in capitalism (or not the full range of humanity but only some aspects of a person such as his-her math skills). Because people in capitalism see everybody else as a competitor, people act as isolated individuals and never cooperate. They never form teams except to the small extent that a team directly helps individuals to make short-term goals.

Again, reality differs. Except in bad situations, people like to act in little teams. The team is usually the unit of action, not the lone-wolf isolated individual of tough guy movies and the villains such as Tom Little (Voldemort). People leave teams when they get cheated and when they do worse than if they struck out on their own or formed another team, but people will put up with a lot from the present team before they go. Americans are supposed to be the most individualist of all peoples but, in fact, they insist on teams as the unit of action. Most of the sports that Americans care about are team sports. We won World War Two through team action. Guerillas have prevailed against America because they formed good teams. The Japanese learned to emulate American teams and did really well in business. Super heroes make teams such as the Justice League. Batman and Superman were a team. Americans like to think of their families as teams, and to think of teams as families.

All team members do not have to hold exactly the same morality but their morality has to be similar. The members of the Justice League are heroes, and do not join the bad guys, because they share the same morality. For a sports team, it might be enough all to want to win a title but for most human teams more is

required. Even people on sports teams need camaraderie. That “more” appears in the common goals and morality of teams.

A team is like a small community. The ideal of a community is like a big team. A community is looser than a team. I don’t want to draw the distinctions now; I do want to point you to the similarities.

We have three possibilities: isolated individual, team, and communal-honeybee-like society. Reality can lie anywhere on a continuum between the extremes but very rarely at the extremes. People can want all three at the same time. People have ideas about all three. In the same life, people can be in different situations that require a different response. Ideas can differ from the situations that people are in. All this leads to conflict. We will see examples of the conflict in Romanticism. How Romanticism handles ideas about the individual, team, and community, and handles conflict, shows its nature as an ideology system.

“The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”.

In a book of the title above, Max Weber, in the late 1800s, explained capitalism partly as the result of ideas that Protestants earlier had developed for religion and then applied to the new commercial life that grew up after about 1650. The ideas that helped make Protestantism and capitalism also helped make Romanticism. The ideas that Weber describes reinforce the image of capitalism as only selfish and materialistic, and, ironically, they help explain how traditional faith in God dwindled. The ideas are not all consistent. I do not point out inconsistencies. The inconsistencies in the Protestant ideas also are in Romanticism but I don’t usually point that out either. I have one quibble with Weber that is worth noting: the ideas were typical not only of some Protestants but of many Roman Catholics too. People accepted the ideas where people gathered for commerce almost regardless of their faith. The ideas helped people succeed in the new commercial life of the time. If the ideas had not helped with the new commercial life, people would not have adopted them as quickly and deeply as they did.

People seek Salvation. To be Saved, people need to be Justified. People cannot earn Salvation or Justification. People have Faith in God. God then grants people with Faith Justification and Salvation. It is not a matter of enough Faith, although having only a little Faith will not do. You cannot force God’s hand through quantity of Faith. It is through God’s Grace, and only through His Grace, that you can get Justification and Salvation. You cannot do anything to earn Justification, Grace, and Salvation. Not good works, power, wealth, piety, acts of piety, giving to the Church, being an official of the Church, or anything else can earn you Grace, Justification, and Salvation. To think they might earn Justification and Salvation through works would be to think a human can compel the Will of God – a serious blunder. The keystone is Faith. You must have Faith. If you do not have Faith, you can have nothing else. If you do have Faith, then likely all else will follow. Exact relations between works, Faith, Grace, Justification, and Salvation were never clear.

Protestants sought Grace, Justification, and Salvation as individuals. You could not get these from any institution, not even the Church. You must have a direct relation with Jesus (or God). A group of Christians gathered together might help each other but, in the end, these were matters between the individual and God (Jesus). The individual had to develop the best ways of seeking God, opening the way for God’s Grace, and so getting Justification and Salvation. People actively sought a personal relation with God (Jesus).

People went on a Spiritual Quest to find Faith and to open their hearts to God. The Spiritual Quest first required people to give up themselves, their selfishness. After giving up yourself, then you can find Faith. Then you can find everything else. When people could get away from themselves, then eventually they could return to themselves and to God, and find everything, more than they had lost, that is, find Grace, Justification, and Salvation.

Protestants seek to dedicate their lives to God. Protestants feel Called by God. They answer a Calling. In following their Calling, they Profess God, they are Professors or Professionals. In the past, a calling to God usually was a calling to service and-or a church office such as pastor. However, a person could now dedicate his-her occupation, and his-her life in his-her occupation, to God. One could be a “tin smith for God” or a “banker for God”. To do so, a person had to follow the occupation by strict moral standards, as recommended by John the Baptist.

Because Protestants who felt a Calling to God through their occupation and were supposed to be honest, they were good to do business with. Especially Protestants who did business with each other often did quite well at business. They were materially successful and had social standing.

Protestants began to see material wealth and social standing as Signs of Grace, Justification, Salvation, and going to Heaven. People respected successful Protestants not just as successful in affairs of the world but in affairs of the Spirit. People began to seek wealth, power, and standing not only for their intrinsic value but as Signs of God’s Grace. People began to emulate the manners, wealth, power, and social standing of Protestants so as to signal God’s Grace and so as to gain the benefits of wealth etc. and of God’s Grace.

Although each individual was responsible for his-her own Salvation, people could help each other. Even in the Spiritual Quest, people always did better when they worked with other people as part of a team. Protestants formed tight-knit often closed communities, and communities could be large, as they were in Switzerland, Scotland, and the American Midwest. People found success not as isolated individuals but as part of teams (Professions, Occupations, Firms) and as part of communities.

In doctrine, each Protestant is an individual responsible for his-her own salvation but I personally have seen Protestants take pretty much the opposite attitude. They get quite concerned about the quality of another Protestant’s conversion and his-her personal relation with Jesus. They don’t only question each other, they grill each other. A person does not have an authentic conversion and authentic personal relation with Jesus unless the rest of the community ratifies the experience and relation. One group disparages the experiences, relations, and institutions of another. I do not here judge. I do point out that this situation is confusing and can allow people to emphasize different things according to the group and according to their needs.

When it suits their needs and they can get away with it, Protestants emphasize individual autonomy in religion, business, politics, and life. When it is forced up on them, when they can gain from it, or when they can use it to control other people, Protestants emphasize the group. There is no resolution to this tension and it shows up in all aspects of their lives. I don’t know what Roman Catholics do but I have seen something like this among these as well, probably not as severe.

In seeking all this, forming communities, and acting honestly in business, Protestants created the ideal social background for capitalism. Protestants transferred their ideas of God, morality, person, and church from religion-and-church to commerce-and-firm. They saw their occupations, and later business firms, as Professions of seeking God. They saw their firms as another Quest for God in which they had to give up first in order to get more later on. They saw the success of their firms as signs of God's Grace. They carried out their Professions, their businesses, with ruthless efficiency so as to increase the Glory of God. They acted in teams and communities. People who act like this are likely to succeed in business. They see business in ways that leads to the creation of business firms and the development of individual people dedicated to success. What began as the withdrawal of the individual into poverty to let God find him-her ended as a community of dedicated business people seeking wealth, power, and standing.

We have two shifts. The first is from the Protestant Ethic to the Spirit of Capitalism. What caused the morality that is pertinent to community to become the morality of hard-nosed business? Mostly because it worked. People that did this succeeded. People imitated the people who succeeded. Later apologists for business and religion then offered rationales. A good account would require more but here we don't need more here. I do note that this kind of shift is common in successful religions and in successful ventures of all kinds.

The second shift is from the Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism to Romanticism. In Romanticism, Faith became emotion and emotional commitment to a cause. The profession became the project, especially the cause. Commitment has to be strong. The cause has to be about the world and had to have real effects in the world just as the business enterprise had to be in the world and had to have real effects in the world. People are individuals but they are part of teams who together do God's work. A cause can fail as a business can fail but that does not mean the cause was in vain or that the overall work of God will fail. We all still have to keep working despite our individual failures and the failure of any one particular cause. Acting honestly toward God became acting as a real person and not in a role or as a poser. Other particulars fall into place.

What caused the shift from seeing in terms of the Protestant ethic etc. to seeing in terms of Romanticism? I explain the history a bit below. To see clearer, we need to know two other parts of Romantic ideology, the Spirit and Creative Chaos.

PART 3: Cultural and Mythological Background to Romanticism.

The Spirit.

In a time when religious leaders fear widespread atheism and amorality, it might seem odd to insist that few people are really non-religious. People try to find the beliefs that allow them to pursue success and that make their daily lives seem sacred enough. People seek beliefs that allow them to avoid hard issues while they still work toward success. That is what Romanticism does for our world. That is why people believe in Romanticism even when they don't say so. People are not a-religious, they are religious in a new way rather than as in traditional medieval Christianity. This is a reason why I do not blame modern angst on lack of faith alone.

The core idea of Romanticism is “the Spirit” and a chief helper idea is “Creative Chaos”. I do not say all people openly profess the Spirit and Creative Chaos. I only say people act as if they believed. The end result is the same and it reinforces the system just as well.

The Spirit is like God but is not the God of Christianity or any major religion. The Spirit is like the energy (mind, self, spirituality, consciousness, love, or dharma) that infuses the world and makes the world what it is but also stands above the world. The Spirit is both the form of the world at any particular time and the evolution of particular forms. The Spirit is the form of the whole world over time as the world takes on particular forms at given times. Most Christians who think they worship the official correct God of formal Christianity really think of God more in terms of the Romantic Spirit. When people say they are “spiritual but not religious” there is a good chance they reject formal religions but embrace the Spirit that I describe here even if they cannot say in detail that is what they believe.

The Spirit made the world. The world is the playground of the Spirit. The Spirit unfolds itself in the world over time. The Spirit does what it does through particular material and spiritual conditions including us as material-spiritual beings. Although the Spirit is non-material, it uses material stuff for its ends such as biological organisms; and it uses material-based stuff for its own ends such as cultures, ideologies, and science.

We are the Spirit acting through the world. The Spirit plays out its desires through us. Sometimes we are the agents of the Spirit in this world.

As the world goes along, the Spirit reveals more of itself. The Spirit is never entirely revealed at any one time. Yet, to people who can see, the Spirit is partially revealed at all times. At any one time, one nation, religion, race, mind set, world view, culture, business, moral movement, culture, political movement, art, or any institution might embody the Spirit and might best embody the Spirit.

The unfolding of the Spirit through the world is done as a series of projects: the Big Bang, the making of stars and planet systems, the evolution of life, the evolution of sentient beings, invention of agriculture, Classical Greek and Roman civilization, Judaism, Christianity, science, various art, nations such as Egypt and China in their times, and various kinds of political institutions such as divine kingship and populist democracy. The Spirit shows itself in the world through its projects. It is not always clear to me which projects are of the Spirit and which not. Usually at any one time, there is only one leading project of the Spirit, and the lead project shows up in several ways at once including art, nation, and government type. During its time, the leading project guides the whole world. At one time Israel was the guiding nation of the world because it taught belief in one ethical and powerful God. Americans think America is now the leading nation teaching American pop culture and American style democracy. The projects of the Spirit became the causes of Romanticism.

It is good to do the work of the Spirit. People feel good when they do the work of the Spirit. The Spirit likes when people help unfold its work. The Spirit likes when people contribute to the culture, business firm, labor union, etc. that is the vanguard of the Spirit in our times; people know that; and people feel good when they do contribute. People seek the vanguard of the Spirit and to do its work. The Spirit is more tolerant of opposition to its plans than most human people are but, after all, the Spirit has to move, the Spirit will win (“Thy will be done”), and opposition to the Spirit must be cleared away. People dislike

opposition to the Spirit, actively fight opposition, and put it down. If an old order opposes the Spirit, it must be overcome. To oppose an old order in this case is to actively do the positive progressive work of the Spirit, and it makes people feel good to know they do this. It feels being a good rebel to do the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is like the idea of “Dharma” in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism.

The situation is as if the Spirit were a playwright writing a never-ending series of plays. Each play is a work of art in itself. Each play has to be known in its own terms. No play can be reduced to any other play. No play can be reduced to any set of themes although, of course, the plays show themes and teach us how to act. We are the characters in the plays. It is not clear if we are actors who show up in more than one play, as in reincarnation, and I don't need to settle that issue here. The Spirit works his-her art through us. We are the means by which the Spirit works his-her art, and likely the only means by which the Spirit could work his-her art in this world. We have some leeway in how we interpret roles but we do a lot better when we perform our role in accord with the spirit of the play we are in at the time. Other lesser playwrights, mere nature or mere humans, write some plays, those plays might be great in their ways, and we might act in them; but, in the end, none can rival the plays of the Spirit.

Some people think the Spirit is Love that infuses and drives the world at all times through various forms of the world, each form is a local modification of the same underlying Love, Love makes particular forms in their time, and Love breaks forms when their time is over. Some people think Spirit is Power, Progress, Justice, Complexity, Self-Awareness, Art, Creativity, or Emotion. A philosopher might say the Spirit is none of these exactly but can show itself as any of them either in a particular project-episode or through several project-episodes. We can only know the Spirit fully when it reveals itself to us fully for its own ends, that is, when the Spirit extends its grace to us.

The Spirit is closely tied to Creativity, Life, Being, and Being Genuine. What is of the Spirit is Creative, supports Life, has greater Being (is more Real), and is Genuine; what is Creative, Living, Real, and Genuine is of the Spirit. What opposes the Spirit is fake, imitative, empty, and deadly; what is fake, empty, imitative, and deadly opposes the Spirit. The apparent creations of bad beings are only imitations of the much greater creations of the Spirit. The best people are those who participate in the Creation, Life, Being, and Genuine-ness of the Spirit; the worst are those who merely imitate the Spirit and so fool people in to Bad Destruction, Emptiness, Unreality, and Bad Death. Artists and Rebels are good people of the Spirit. Politicians and the advocates of outmoded and-or false religions are bad. Unfortunately, I cannot take up these major themes of Romanticism, how they play out in daily life, and how they support Romanticism as a system that eats the world.

Creative Chaos.

I introduced Creative Chaos in earlier chapters about issues. Creative Chaos is the disorder that prevails before something new and better arises. It is the headache that artists get before they suddenly see the light. It is the trees before we see the forest. It is the free market that brings what people want to people, and provides raw materials and workers to business firms. The Spirit uses Creative Chaos to build new forms and destroy old forms before building new forms. Sometimes Creative Chaos is called “underlying vitality”, “underlying force of life”, or “spark of life”. Before it was politically incorrect, people identified it with “the brown races” or the lower classes.

Because the Spirit uses Creative Chaos to do its work, people also feel good when they can find Creative Chaos and when they can identify with Creative Chaos. They like to be the blender that stirs up the new tasty drink. They like their group to be the embodiment of Creative Chaos for our times. They like their movement to be the movement that stirs things up, sets things right, and starts a new pattern. Rebels think of themselves not as simply destructive but as Creative Chaos. People think of marginal groups such as the criminals, artists, ethnic groups, the underbelly of society, and small religions as the Creative Chaos in the vanguard. They think the ideas for a new society come from these groups. They like to think of themselves as in one of these groups, or like to identify with one of these groups, because then they have an excuse to be a little rebellious and destructive and because they think of themselves as creative as well. People take on the airs of one of these groups so they can think of themselves as destructive in a good way and so creative. It is also an excuse to be bad-ass and selfish.

People who want to preserve aspects of the socio-economic-political order can also see themselves in the vanguard of the Spirit and as agents of Creative Chaos. Newness does not arise from out of the blue without any background. Newness usually rearranges old parts that were already there. Newness is re-order, not entirely new stuff in new order. At one time, the old order was the vanguard of the Spirit, did serve the Spirit, and was good. It hardly makes sense to throw away entirely what was once the tool of the Spirit and was good. It makes sense to preserve it and use it in a new better way. People who do this are the real rebels and the real vanguard of the Spirit.

Romanticism and Some Judeo-Christian Themes.

Romanticism borrowed from Christianity and re-cast Christian themes into its own terms. Most themes originated earlier in Judaism. Please see the story of David, to Creative Chaos, rebels, and the Remnant in the chapters on issues. We now see themes primarily in Romantic rather than Christian terms, and we even see Christianity in Romantic terms. The "Spirit" is God (Yahweh) recast, or, as Romantic thinkers might say: "the Spirit revealed itself to Hegel after it had hidden in the Jewish-Christian idea of God for a long time". I think the Church Fathers would see Romanticism as yet another heresy built from Christian ideas and they would condemn it. In its time, Christianity borrowed ideas from Judaism and recast them in its terms. Medieval Christianity did the same to early Christianity. Here, I note only three themes. These themes are so successful because they also come from human nature and not only because they began in Judaism and were developed by Christianity and Romanticism.

God works through rebels. At any given time, only a small group can see the impending work of the Spirit clearly enough and so do the work of the Spirit on Earth as it should be done (nobody ever sees all the work of the Spirit in perfect clarity). The rebels must overthrow the old outmoded order. The rebels have to lead those willing to following into the future, into the new anticipated (promised) order. Abraham was the first such rebel. Moses might have been the biggest rebel and set the mold. David continued when he overthrew Saul and set the stage for the building of the Temple and for Temple Judaism. Jesus was a rebel and led a band of rebels to a new order. People who are called to be rebels for the Spirit should never ever give up

God does not only work through rebels. Sometimes the most important work of the Spirit is to maintain what was built painfully in the past, and to use tried-and-true features (ideas) to keep people in touch with the Spirit and so ready to do more work of the Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit needs conservatives. The

mass of people eventually forget about the Spirit. Then the true rebels of the Spirit are the people who remind everyone else about the Spirit and bring everyone else back to doing the true work of the Spirit. Then, the true workers of the Spirit are the Remnant. They are the Jews who returned from the Exile in Babylon to restore true worship of Yahweh to the fallen Jews. They are moral revivalists. People outside the Rastafarian movement think of them as simple destructive rebels but they saw themselves as the Remnant coming to restore the true just order of God. Blacks in America see themselves the same way; half the sermons in Black churches on TV are about the return of the Jews from Babylon and how they took their rightful place at the head of the nation. Jesus said he did not come to undo any Tanakh (Old Testament) scriptures but to fulfill every single one.

God chooses nations to work through. The Spirit chooses nations, cultures, art, philosophy, religion, socio-economic classes, economic systems, criminals, law-abiding citizens, etc. At any one time, one such institution represents the best work of the Spirit now. In particular, nations succeeded Israel when Israel refused to accept Greek rationalism and Christianity. Then Christianity and a parade of Christian nations became the New Israel. America thinks of itself as the present New Israel. Islam thinks of itself as the present New Israel.

The people who did the work of God in the past succeeded. The work of the Spirit will always succeed in one way or another. The people who do the work of the Spirit will always succeed in many ways.

The people who did the work of God in the past were entitled. Abraham founded many nations. Moses led his people out of Egypt, assumed the leadership of Israel, and saw the Promised Land. David got to be King. He and his descendants were judges over all the people of Israel. He and his descendants will judge all the peoples of all the world. When Nathan returned to Israel from Babylon, he got to judge the people and was rewarded with a place in the government. Jesus will be the king of everybody and will judge everybody. Peter was the rock upon which the Church was built, and, along with Jesus, he decides if a person goes to heaven or hell. People who do the work of the Spirit are entitled to feel special and be treated special.

Anticipation: My Ideas, Dogma, Romanticism, and Conservative Ideas.

I have said often that I dislike dogma. I say Romanticism keeps us flitting from one dogma to the other so that we cannot attack real issues. Conservatives also complain that modern people live by bad dogmas. I overlap with conservatives and I don't mind the overlap but I also differ. I see conservatives as caught up in Romanticism and dogmas as much as anyone; and conservatives would dislike that view of them. I mention this issue now so readers do not think what follows is just another conservative attack on modern life. I bring up the issue again later after we know more about Romanticism.

PART 4: The Romantic Attitude in More Detail

Again: People do not have to openly espouse the ideas in the Romantic attitude; they only have to act as if they hold the ideas; and they do. Romanticism is not consistent nor seeks it. One of America's leading Romantics, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the early to middle 1800s, wrote something like "consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds". I neither point out nor try to resolve inconsistencies. Often they are fun.

I do not point out how Romantic ideas merge with ideas from capitalism, the Protestant Ethic, the Spirit of Capitalism, or anywhere else, to make modern attitudes of selfishness, materialism, and trendiness. I hope it is obvious from what I said above about capitalism etc. and say below. Sometimes I do make a specific point.

Lack of Good Clear Ideas about God and Morality.

It is easy to say Romantic-like ideas spring up when people do not have good formal ideas of God and morality; Romantic ideas are poor substitutes for God and objective morality. Partly that is true. Lack of clear formal ideas of God and morality from traditional religion helped Romanticism get going. But, once Romanticism did get going, formal ideas from traditional religions were irrelevant. They would not stop Romanticism unless they told us clearly what to do in the modern world to compete comparatively. They would not be able to displace Romantic activity.

Besides, traditional religions are hardly clearer about God and morality and they do not address what people need to do now to succeed while feeling good about themselves. It misses the point to criticize the people-in-general as if they should all be educated priests. Under Romanticism, ideas about God and objective morality are not as clear as the ideas that a traditional priest might have (not always) but the ideas under Romanticism are about as clear as ideas people had in the past under traditional religion. "Jesus Saves" and "the Dharma" are not clear. The lack of clarity in traditional religions helped them to succeed in their times. Sharpness on some issues, such as abortion, might help recruit and hold some believers but do not sustain the religion as a whole. Ideas of the Spirit and spiritual life in Romanticism seem to be enough for people to pursue success and to feel their lives are in tune with God, especially when Romantic ideas merge with traditional religion.

If a traditional religious person insists people now don't have clear ideas of God and objective morality, why don't we? If the people in general ever held clear ideas from traditional religion, then why have we seemingly abandoned those ideas? Why don't we adapt traditional ideas of God and objective morality? What keeps those ideas out? Why do Romantic ideas "stay in our heads" better than clear ideas of God and objective morality from traditional religion? Why are Romantic ideas more satisfying in the modern world than traditional supposedly clear ideas of God and morality?

The lack of clear ideas of God and objective morality is the counterpart to not seeing deep issues and not seeking practical lasting solutions. The lack of clear ideas about God and morality goes along with not seeking deep issues and lasting solutions, to keep Romanticism going. It worked with traditional religions in their day too.

Causes and Activities.

Because of when I first saw the Romantic complex, mid-1960s to early 1970s, I think in terms of political causes such as Civil Rights, feminism, repealing Social Security, and the Tea Party. A better term might be "activities" except "activities" does not get across the semi-religious fervor in Romanticism. People not only bomb abortion clinics but also go to aerobics, do yoga, do Tai Chi, diet, buy exercise equipment, watch football, learn the Macarena, wear penny loafers, take kids to soccer, go to flash mobs, condemn economic equality, attend mega-churches, and go to concerts. People do not merely engage in activities,

they immerse in causes. "Activities" does not get across the flavor of rabid PC. To keep the feeling, I use "causes" but please apply the same feel to all activities. I first saw Romanticism as much in Goldwater and Nixon Republicans, and in Christian revivals, as in the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements and New Age silliness. I participated too.

In using the terms "causes" and "activities" I do not necessarily imply any shallowness or that no good or harm comes. Seeking ethnic justice has been shaped by Romanticism quite a bit but it is a deep cause from which both good and bad has come. The New Deal was Romantic. Nazism was Romantic. Both major political parties in the United States operate as Romantic enterprises. I do not imply that people always-and-only "dabble" in causes although people do dabble. People can live by their causes, and do great good and great harm through living in their causes. In what follows, I use examples from American pop culture because they are vivid in the minds of readers. I do not entirely avoid strong examples such as the Tea Party and Black-ism but I try to work around them because they stir such emotion that people stop reading objectively. See the assessment at the end of the chapter.

Projects.

"Project" literally means something like "positive going out from". The Spirit goes out from itself into the world of material stuff, ideas, culture, and history to create real things.

No one project every entirely captures all of the Spirit. Each project is only a finite selection from what is likely an infinite Spirit. There is always more to the Spirit than we find in any one project or any collection of projects. Not even the total historical progression of all projects is as much as the Spirit.

Each project is a thing in itself. Each project has its own logic (logos), reasons, order, goals (if any), feelings, method, ways, rhythm, structure, process, language, vision, art, etc.

No project can be fully understood in terms of any other project. Certainly no project should be judged in terms of any other project. A project should be understood and judged only in terms of itself, in the terms provided by itself. America should be judge by American standards; China by Chinese standards. White alternative progressive independent rock-and-roll should be judged by its standards; Black hip-hop by its standards.

To a large extent, projects are isolated from each other and insulated from each other. To the extent that individual people make their projects, and make their lives into projects, one individual cannot fully know and judge another individual, and individuals too are isolated from each other.

In particular, we cannot use Reason to bridge the gaps between projects.

Still, projects are of the Spirit, and, properly appreciated, lead back to the Spirit. So there is a way to get between projects: Passion. We can use Passion to appreciate, and participate in, various projects. It is not clear how much Passion allows us to participate in more than one project at once. If we are naturally in one project, such as rock-and-roll, it is not clear how much Passion can allow us to fully participate in another project, such as hip-hop. It is not clear how much we can use Passion to bridge the gap between individuals but Romantics seem to think we can use Passion to connect us fully.

Over history, it appears that projects of the Spirit get deeper and deeper. It appears the Spirit puts more of itself into successive projects, and reveals more of itself. Whether this is true or only an illusion of our times, is not clear. G.W.F. Hegel thought it was true. If it is true, the end result is a “culmination” of the Spirit in our time; for which, see below.

Faith, Emotion, Reason, Intuition, and Wit.

Emotion is more important than Reason to the Spirit, and for relations of people with the Spirit, the world, and other people. Reason can be a useful tool of emotion but it is not as important. Sometimes I call emotion by the technical term “Passion”. Passion puts us in touch with ourselves, with others, the world, the projects of the Spirit, and the Spirit. Nothing else can. The Passion has to be real and honest but still it is Passion and not Reason. Passion is the Faith of Romanticism. If we have Passion, then we can get the other gifts of the Spirit. If we don’t have Passion, we can get nothing.

We can understand the projects of the Spirit as the Spirit using Reason to bestow its Passion onto the world. Passion uses Reason to act. Each project is a combination of Reason and Passion with Passion dominating. Each project has a typical Passion, or feel, that is the key to that Project. We feel French culture or the Renaissance as much as we can find specific criteria in logic.

True emotion can show up as anger against the enemies of the Spirit. If an economic development feels wrong, it is wrong, and don’t do it. If abortion feels wrong, it is wrong, and don’t do it. If capitalism feels wrong, it is wrong, and you should fight it. If this-or-that ethnic group or business group is holding back the nation, then we have a right to feel angry, deny help, and cut them out of mainstream life. Anger can lead to bad emotions and to working against the Spirit but that is a worthwhile risk.

Passion is not only obvious emotion such as love and not only obviously bad emotion such as bitterness. It is also the actions that go with love such as sex and with bitterness such as revenge.

Passion is not only stereotyped emotions but includes Intuition and Wit. Intuition is what we sense about a situation but might not be able to put into words. Intuition is our best guide. This idea of Romanticism was made famous in the Star Wars movies by the line “Trust your feelings”.

Wit is a combination of Passion, Reason, and Will with Passion leading the way (I cannot write about Will here). Here Passion definitely includes Intuition. Wit is “thinking out of the box” led by Intuition. Looking back after action, Wit can seem like Reason but it is more than that. Reason can understand what Wit did in retrospect but it could never have figured out beforehand to do that. It is Passion using Reason to achieve higher ends. It is not mere wittiness as in fun with words.

The best way to see the relations of Reason, Intuition, and Wit is through the acts of heroes. In Star Trek, Mr. Spock is Reason, Dr. McCoy is maudlin Passion and sometimes vague Intuition, and Captain Kirk is Intuition, Wit, and Will. More accurately, Captain Kirk is the right blend of all. In “The Odyssey”, Ulysses wins not by his considerable physical skills but by his Wit. Surprisingly often, super heroes win more by Wit than by their physical skills. Hercules won more by Wit than brawn. Superman often faces enemies who hold an advantage and still defeats them by Wit. James Bond is a walking bundle of Wit, and he

combines Wit with Passion through his relations to women and his love for country, freedom, and honor. Spiderman is always outmatched and he wins by Wit. All the toys of Batman are a material manifestation of Wit.

To me personally, modern times seem awash in emotional excess and superstition based on the needs for emotional gratification and Justification through Passion. This is not just emotion but bad dedicated irrationality. Even academics are mired in bad emotion. Below, I criticize the bad effects of irrationality on science. I like emotion. I like not being repressed, especially because my parents came from repressed Greek culture. I like Witty heroes and heroines. Still, Romanticism has gone way too far. People not only hold Reason below Passion and use Reason as a tool, they disparage Reason and reasonableness. They think any emotion is justified and any emotion is good for the emoting person and for everybody around. I have tried to see if other big eras in the West were like this, and I can't find any, although I am not a good historian.

Individual Projects.

People like to be part of the projects of the Spirit but they can also have their own projects. Each of our projects is a combination of Reason and Passion with Passion guiding Reason to best results. Each of our projects has its own feel about it. The feel is the key to the project. Our projects identify who we are as unique individuals just as the projects of the Spirit identify its unique character at any one time.

People can have a few projects, one central project in their lifetimes, or many projects. Why people might have few or many projects, and the relation of their projects to projects of the Spirit, are good questions but not ones I can address here.

People want their projects to be like the projects of the Spirit. They want to feel as if their projects serve the projects of the Spirit even if they personally do not succeed in each project. People spiritualize and glamorize their projects. A success for an individual is not a success merely for an individual but for the Spirit as well. Anything that is not a success for the Spirit is not really a success for the individual even if it satisfies mundane wants such as family and career. People need more and seek more.

Life is an Adventure.

The Spirit has an adventure in projecting itself out through the world. It might not be theologically correct to say the Spirit has fun, but it is close enough. Even if the activity of the Spirit never ends, but it always seems to be moving to a resolution, and, no matter how many and hard the hardships along the way, at key points it always turns out well. If there is a final end, that promises to turn out well too.

Likewise, our lives should be an adventure no matter how hard or frustrating at times. Our lives should turn out well, if not for us personally, then for the people we care about and for the good people of the world. The system is good even if not every particular life in it is happy. If things have not turned out well yet, then they are not over yet for everybody even if they are over for us. If it is not glamorous adventure then something is wrong and we are "out of tune". In Christian terms, life should be full of grace and charisma. Even if the world has fallen and some people go to hell, many other people can still receive grace and go to heaven. To have grace is to serve the Lord in whatever tasks he gives us. Adventure is

what ratifies our lives, tells us that we have the Grace of the Spirit and that we are Justified in the Spirit. If we feel the adventure, then we can feel confident we are on the right track.

The Road Goes Ever On and On.

Even when particular projects fail, goodness, love, etc. cannot be stopped and must succeed in the end. The resistance encountered along the way makes the eventual progress forward all the more fun. It is more fun to overcome obstacles than simply to sail in.

Life is a series of projects in service to the Spirit. We might fail at any one project. When we enter a project, the project might not be ready to succeed yet, as with early workers in Civil Rights, Feminism, and the Right Wing Renaissance, so it might seem as if we fail. Our failures don't matter. Eventually good causes succeed, and we succeed because our heart is in the right place. What matters is that we keep working for goodness etc.

Emotion Justifies Projects.

Commitment is a big part of emotion. They are inseparable. From now on, one term implies the other.

When you take the right attitude of emotional commitment to a project, you make that project worthwhile, and at least partially right, even if that project is not the central project now and even if it fails. Even if you switch projects later, that project was worthwhile while you were doing it. If you decide that saving the whales or saving American business is the right thing to do, and throw your emotional commitment into it, then it is the right thing to do now even if later you switch to something else. Emotional commitment is more important than thinking through to the best right thing to do.

Attitude about Attitude.

If you have the right attitude, the right emotion, felt strong enough, then you have Faith, are Justified, and Saved. Attitude is the key. You don't have to have right beliefs as in formal Christianity or any formal religion. You don't need right beliefs as in a political program. You have to have the right attitude. If you have that, the Spirit is with you, and details don't matter. If you have the right attitude, then you have a personal relation with the Spirit. In Christian terms, if you have a personal relation with Jesus, you don't need anything else, and a personal relation with Jesus is self-validating.

If you have the right attitude, then you will succeed even if you are not prepared, don't have an education, have not done your homework, and don't really know what is going on.

It is a small step from having the right attitude to having "an attitude", that is, feeling bad ass and getting up in people's faces. Any bad ass attitude will do. If you have "an attitude" then you will succeed even if you are not prepared, don't have an education, etc. "An attitude" is faith; "an attitude" is the right kind of faith; "an attitude" is faith enough.

People have always known that changing your outlook on a situation can change the outcome of the situation even if everything else remains the same. People also have always known that there are better

and worse attitudes for particular situations. If somebody pushes you on the subway, then, if you get angry things will go one way, but if you say “that’s alright” things will go another. If somebody repeatedly pushes you, in the days to come, if you continue to say “that’s alright” things will go one way while if you say “knock it off” things will go another way. This is nothing new.

The following attitude about attitude has been around for at least 2300 years but the modern version is distinct and it is part of Romanticism: All that matters is your attitude. The situation doesn’t matter. We can change any situation any way we want by having the right attitude. We can get whatever we want by having the right attitude. Women can “have it all” if they have the right attitude. Men can be the boss if they have the right attitude. You can succeed with any member of the opposite sex if you have the right attitude. With every decade, every new soft drink, and every new daytime talk show, supposedly comes a new generation with a new attitude. You don’t have to change the world. You don’t have to understand the world. You don’t have to work on big problems or little ones. All you have to change is you, change your attitude. To make sure you change your attitude, and to make sure other people don’t impede you, you should hang around only with other people with the same attitude. Try to make all your friends have the same attitude, or at least give in to your attitude.

A Kind of Materialism Higher than the Angels.

Sometime in early Christianity, and definitely in medieval Christianity, Christians developed the idea that a combination of a material body with a spirit (soul) is better than a spiritual body alone. Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity have always stressed the importance of sacraments and how the material and spiritual come together only in sacraments such as the Eucharist and Baptism. Humans are better than pure-spirit angels. That is why God loves us and why angels feel jealous of us. That is one reason Lucifer rejected God to set up his own order. Although long, Milton’s epic “Paradise Lost” is fun to read, and you can find out about the idea there. God is better than humans and angels even if, in our limited view, God is pure Spirit; it is better to think of God as beyond either spirit or matter.

Likewise the Spirit is beyond matter and beyond what we think of as spirit although the Spirit uses both. Here, the most important point is that the Spirit does use both, especially including matter. All projects of the Spirit are combinations of matter and spirit (ideas). The best way to think about it might be as art, which always has to use a medium such as sound or paint. We don’t want to look down on matter or to exalt spirit too much, especially as humans are a combination of both, and much of our good work gets done through the use of both. Our ecology and our economic system is, hopefully, the right use of both. In order to be like the Spirit and to work with the Spirit, we have to use both.

Reason is too much like pure spirit alone without the right mixture of matter – too much like angels who are jealous of God and humans. Passion is the right mixture of matter and Reason. Projects of the Spirit are always the right mixture of matter and Reason. Art, some science, and some technology show the right mixtures for humans. The weapons of good super heroes are the right mixture. We seek the right mixture in our lives with the right mixture of love and sex and with the right mixture of gadgets as a means to intrinsic satisfaction but not as an end in themselves. Usually Wit uses both. We seek the right mixture when we carry out the projects of the Spirit.

Rebels.

Rebel bad boys and bad girls are representatives of Creative Chaos and the Spirit. Rebels show correct emotion and emotional commitment. They have one of the right attitudes. They take their right attitude to Life and to various projects in Life. It does not matter exactly what you do as a rebel, exactly what cause you push, as long as it is not wildly immoral. What matters is that you apply your rebel attitude to life. You can even be a “rebel without a cause” because the attitude itself ties you to the Spirit and to the next advance of the Spirit. What is good now is doomed to pass and therefore bad. It cannot pass without some rebellion to tear it down. Rebellion is good in itself.

If you apply rebellion to a cause, you don't have to worry much about the intrinsic validity, truth, or value. You don't have to think if rebellion is the best way to achieve the cause. You don't have to assess your personal time, energy, and talents to see if they are best used that way or are best used by acting as a rebel. The fact that you are a rebel Justifies whatever you apply your attitude to. Applying your rebel attitude to a cause Justifies you and the cause. Going around with a rebel chip on your shoulder is simply “leading with Spiritual emotions”; it is not irrational; it means that you follow the Spirit; it means that the Spirit is with you and your cause. Rebels can be the standard unkempt Lefty hero or can be inventors, innovators, legal innovators, business entrepreneurs, or political strategists.

Rebels excel in the right use of both matter and spirit; rebels excel in the right use of Wit; rebels excel in the right use of weapons. Rebels can combine rebellion with guarding the social order as the remnant. I suggest watching the movie “The Avengers”.

Other Roles Etc.

Rebel is only one role among many that can serve as a vehicle for you to do the work of the Spirit and as cover for confused thinking. Almost any attitude can generate roles; and vice versa. Almost any dogma can generate attitudes and roles. Almost any role can find a dogma for justification. All roles, attitudes, and dogmas come with a set of approved and disapproved causes and activities. Use your imagination for examples of what you both like and dislike. Posers are bad role users.

Reason, Passion, and Cunning.

Reason is subordinate to Passion and is the tool of Passion. When Reason and Passion get along well together, they are a powerful team. They serve goodness. They do good things. Only good Passions prevail and lead Reason, Passions such as kindness, generosity, a spirit of kinship, and the feeling of the Golden Rule. This is a Graceful union. A graceful union excludes bad Passions such as fear, revenge, guilt, and desire for power.

Much as we would like good Passions to dominate always, they don't. Then both Passion and Reason change. I don't describe bad Passions; I suggest a good dose of daytime and nighttime soap operas. Reason changes into Cunning. Cunning uses the same tools as Reason but uses them in a different way and uses them for the ends of bad Passion. It is the difference between good White magic and bad Black magic. Cunning is the bad versions of Intuition and Wit. I am totally inept at Cunning; I can never see it coming; I have no idea of what to do about it at the time; and I have no idea how to fix the bad effects of it after. So I don't try to describe it more.

Bad people have Bad Passion and Bad Wit. Evil villains in modern “epics” usually have a devious plan for conquering the world, and the “bad woman” on soap operas has a devious plan for ruining the name, spirit, and life of the heroine. The weapons of the villains are the material manifestation of their bad Wit as the weapons of the heroes are the material manifestation of their good Wit.

The Spirit can use indirect means and “fakes” in its projects. G.W.F. Hegel calls this “Cunning” but I think he has in mind a style of thinking more benign than what I have in mind. I am not sure if the Spirit can use Cunning in the sense that I have in mind. The Spirit can use what appears to be badness in the short run to gain greater good in the long run, and so the Spirit might use Cunning in the short run. I don’t know if the Spirit can use Cunning in the long run or overall.

More on the Correct Passion (Emotion).

Imagine three conditions embodied by three kinds of people. All the people are with the Spirit, and have great powers as a result of being with the Spirit. All have a role to play in the adventure of the Spirit but not all are equally good and equally desirable.

First is the Jedi, who is rational, that is, Reasonable. He-she represents Reason and everything we can get done with Reason. The scientist or good lawyer is like this. The Jedi Council, or the league of peer-reviewed journals, are the community of Rational people.

Second is the right combination of Reason and Passion. These are the people who I described above. They follow their Passion and use Reason to get the job done in a good cause. This is like a good White magician, like most people see Merlin.

Third is a person who has fallen into bad Passion and uses Cunning. This is like a bad Black magician, like most people see Morgan Le Fay, Mordred, and the Devil. This is like a Sith, more like a Sith Master, and more especially like Darth Sidious (Emperor Palpatine), whose name reflects (means) “insidious” or “devious, cunning, and able to infiltrate without our knowing”.

Romantics all want to be like the second person, the good White magician. Nobody wants to be a stodgy rational Enlightenment Jedi. People think they can lead with their emotions, their emotions are always accurate and morally good, and that they use Reason totally without Cunning. If they use something like Cunning, it is only Reason in the service of a good cause.

In reality, when people try to be like person two they usually end up like person three, like a bad Sith apprentice. Romanticism is filled with bad Passion and Cunning. It is not full of the happy union of Reason and Passion. This is part of the general failure of Romanticism. I return to this failure below.

The Loneliness of the Long Time Spirit.

Robert Frost: “And miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep”

The issue of this section impacts all major religions but I think it is most acute in Romanticism. It also shows how Romanticism “co-opts” ideas to make them its own. The lines from Robert Frost are true and beautiful in their own right but, when seen through the eyes of Romanticism, they are something else, and not what they should be. This issue here is equivalent to asking why God does what he does, why God does this thing rather than another, why God does anything rather than nothing at all, and what benefit God gets from doing some particular thing rather than nothing. It is another way of seeing the issue of individual versus community.

The Spirit embarks on many projects. The whole Spirit is never in any given project; only part of the Spirit can be in any given project. What is in any given project is not the Spirit but is something a bit different from the Spirit. What is in the project is of the Spirit but also not the Spirit and not of the Spirit. To use a little jargon, a project is of the Spirit somewhat but it is also “other” than the Spirit.

We know the Spirit only through its projects. Only some mystics, philosophers, and artists can know the Spirit in anything like its wholeness. The Spirit is never itself in any time that people can know. We know the Spirit not just by the small part of it that is revealed to us in particular projects but also by what it is other than the Spirit, especially also as revealed in projects. It is a curious problem.

In any given project, at the least, the Spirit forgets itself. At a little worse, in any given project, the Spirit is alienated from itself, cannot be its full self, cannot know itself, and does not know itself. The Spirit is alone and isolated. The isolation of the Spirit is reinforced by the qualitative distinction of each project. As long as the Spirit resides in any one project, it cannot know itself in other projects, and cannot know itself as a whole.

The Spirit has been out on projects for a long time, well before humans, and all the time humans have been around. That is a long time not to be one with yourself and not to know yourself fully. That is long enough so it might seem like the natural condition of the Spirit, at least to human beings who can know the Spirit only through the fractured incomplete projects of the Spirit. Even if the Spirit does not reckon time as humans do, and the Spirit will eventually reunite with itself, that time is still long.

Doesn't the Spirit feel lonely? Isn't being one whole integrated thing better than dividing up yourself, often into disreputable parts, and questing all the time? If the Spirit can never be whole, or can't be whole for a long time, and the Spirit is anything like a human person, the Spirit must feel bad. It feels bad to be at odds with yourself.

Why doesn't the Spirit bring itself into a community of itself? Sometimes the Spirit does, but I cannot go into that subject much here. We are more concerned with the isolation of the Spirit. Even when the Spirit does form a community, even that project is never the wholeness of the Spirit all at once, and even that project suffers from isolation.

As the Spirit is, so are its people. Individuals in Romanticism feel the call of Passions and projects but they also feel the loneliness of projects and of being stretched out in projects. They feel a part of all that the Spirit is, a part of the community of the Spirit; but they also feel separated from their own parts, their selves, and separated from the community. They are always in pieces, an individual, yet never a whole

individual; they are part of a community, but a community that is never completed. They can get some solace by feeling they are doing the work of the Spirit but they must also always feel pain.

When Romanticism becomes a system with capitalism and modern issues, these forces are accentuated to feed the isolation of modern life.

The Loneliness of the Fractured Qualitatively Distinct Spirit and Its People.

The Spirit goes out on many distinct projects. If the projects were pretty much the same thing dressed up in different clothes, there would be no point. The projects have to be qualitatively distinct. Nobody except maybe the Spirit can directly fully compare one project to another. Each project is its own measure, its own standard. Each project has its own feel, Passion, Reason, art, morality, etc. No project can be seen or evaluated in terms of another project. The distinctly different projects add variety and fun to the world. They make it fun to go out into the world and to come back from a project to the Spirit self. Without the qualitatively distinction, the world would not be a playground.

As individual people, we are like particular projects of the Spirit. We are distinct, qualitatively different, and unique. We know what we like and dislike. We have our own standards, including morality, and we don't like other people to impose theirs on us. We know of general principles, and might adopt some, but we don't have to adopt all and we don't have to let them rule all aspects of our lives. This individuality makes our lives fun, interesting, and worthwhile. It makes life more interesting when distinct people can reach across the boundaries of their distinctions to really connect, often seeing similarities to help us get along but never surrendering our distinctive uniqueness.

Uniqueness sounds great when you get your own way but uniqueness has drawbacks. "Solipsism" is the technical term for absolute uniqueness, usually bad, in which no individual gets across to another. Totally unique individuals have not enough in common around which to relate. They are alone. They are lonely. They can't communicate or share. They are sad demons trapped in isolation hell, not happy agents of the Spirit. Even when they are in the same activity supposedly together, such as sex, they cannot know how the other person feels, if the other person really feels good, or is just "faking it". They don't share interests; their interests overlap. When interests stop overlapping, people part. People end up sitting alone in their apartments or walking down the street "plugged in" to their own mix oblivious. Even when people join a cause, they do it not for the sake of the cause but to feel good themselves.

Critics of modern life blame this situation on lack of religion or on capitalism depending on their ideology. Critics seem unable to talk to each other any better than the people they criticize.

Luckily, evolved human nature helps us somewhat. People are different just like faces are different but they share a lot in common just like faces do. People can stand on what they have in common as people or as members of the same culture-society and work their way toward how they are unique. In that case, how they are unique can unite them rather than separate them. We evolved to be self-interested but not necessarily selfish. We evolved to be social. People like groups. We expect a certain amount and kind of sociability in ourselves and others and we can build on that. Evolved human nature cannot bridge all gaps. People are still lonely. But it can provide a base.

How isolated people are depends on all the usual factors and might tend to more in some conditions than others. Sometimes close group life is not satisfying but oppressive. When my wife and I lived in the American Midwest with people who shared our interests and backgrounds, and could relate to us outside of defined groups, we were not lonely. In the South, where nobody shares our interests and everybody relates through church, family, race, or hunting, we are lonely despite our best efforts. Peasants in old-style villages often were packed together and everybody knew everyone else's business but people still felt lonely and isolated. Some people are happy with Internet friends.

Capitalism, Romanticism, most modern technology, modern populist democracy, modern legal ideas and the modern legal system, bureaucracy, and Protestant ideas about the individual and God, all reinforce individual isolation. I don't know which is the strongest. Romanticism is a powerful enabler of glamorized isolation. When the other forces help push people into isolation, Romanticism then can lock people in and push them down a deep well. That is what happened in the West after about 1780.

Just Me and the Spirit Alone Together.

This section is optional. Romanticism, in the 1900s in particular, is famous for isolated tormented souls spending years alone with God, Art, Philosophy, Science, etc. The first great Romantic musician, Ludwig van Beethoven, set the pattern. Rock-and-roll artists have to spend time brooding alone or they are not real. Rap (hip hop) musicians are lonely tortured souls even in the midst of their "posse". An interesting version is the Protestant alone with Jesus. All you need is Jesus. If you have him, nothing else matters. If you have Jesus, the Church and "all that" are not important. If you don't have Jesus, you have nothing. Some people always have had this personality. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics, monks, and saints spent time alone with Jesus, God, or demons. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness alone with his alter ego the Father – until Satan came along to spoil it. But this attitude did not become a wide cultural type until the 1600s, about the time the Protestant Ethic was laying the base for capitalism and Romanticism. This stance did not become a common type, almost necessary among intellectuals and artists, until Romanticism. This stance makes more sense from a Romantic view than from a traditional Christian view in which relations with God, Holy Spirit, Jesus, Church, community of Christians, and even non-Christians, play a role in life. In Romanticism, it makes sense to be a solitary soldier for the isolated Spirit, seeking a project of the Spirit, or the project of the Spirit, and devoting yourself as a project to the project of the Spirit. If you have that, you have it all. If you don't, you have nothing. If you have that, then you are Justified before the Spirit and before all humans, so your lonely brooding makes sense. Lonely brooding is a sign that you do have that, so are Justified before the Spirit, and Justified before all people. Lonely brooding with the Spirit, Jesus, or an equivalent, makes sense, and it attracts the appropriate gender. The lonely brooder alone with Spirit-Jesus is a reason why often I see people who publically hold to a traditional religion as Romantic and why I see supposedly non-religious people just as religious as most Christians.

Moral Relativity and Moral Absolutism.

Each project is a thing in itself. It has its own goals, its own rules, its own way of proceeding, and its own kinds of people. It also has its own morality. The right-and-wrong of one project cannot be used to judge the right or wrong of any other project. Each project offers its own morality by which to judge itself. The morality for urban hipster pseudo-nouveau-Bohemians can't be used to judge the morality of traditional

Christians, and vice versa. This attitude is clearly one small step away from moral relativity, easily takes the step, is easily used to justify moral relativity, and often is. I don't go through the details.

Morality is about relations and strongly implies groups. Projects are about the Spirit in the world, often changing the whole world, so projects most often are group efforts. So it might seem the moral relativity of Romanticism puts the group ahead of the individual. One group cannot impose its morality on another group but the group can impose its morality on the individual. This is usually what happens.

But, as in the section above, there is also the relation between the Spirit and the isolated individual. The Spirit has used prophets, lawmakers, politicians, scientists, and artists to change the world. As if these people were a species (group) unto themselves, they cannot be judged by the standards of other people and groups. So the moral relativity of Romanticism can also be used to support moral subjectivism and moral relativity of individuals. It can reinforce individual isolation. This tension persists through all of group and individual relations in Romanticism. I can't say more about it here than to point it out.

It might seem Romanticism is morally relative on the level of both groups and individuals but that is not so. When a project is clearly a project of the Spirit and the project needs individuals, the group has the right to dominate individuals morally. The morality of the group appears as absolute morality to the single individual. This is how individuals feel when they are caught in a strong church or a cult.

In the same way, from the point of the view of a particular group, not all groups are equal, and this group, our group, is best. Our morality is best. It is the only real true morality. We have the right to impose our morality on other groups. Not all projects are equal to the Spirit. At any given time, usually only one, or a very few, project is the vanguard of the Spirit leading the world. That is what the world will become. If our group represents the Spirit in its lead project, then our group has the duty to impose its morality on the whole world, all the groups in it, and all the people in all the groups.

The tension between relativism and absolutism also runs through Romanticism. It might seem Romanticism should settle into a comfortable attitude of "live and let live" along with some principles by which to relate to everybody, it does not. It bounces between subjectivism and objectivism, between relativism and absolutism. It reinforces strong emotions on all sides. It reinforces excuses and enabling on all sides.

Love is All We Need.

Each project is a thing in itself with no necessary connection to any other project. Each individual is a thing in itself with no necessary connection to any other individual except through their roles in a shared project that subsumes them both. The Spirit travels a long way before going home. The Spirit is never quite fully at home in this world. We can be alone together with the Spirit and should be.

All this adds up to a lot of isolation, seemingly unbridgeable. Using logic, reason, or any kind of traditional faith, the isolation is unbridgeable. But it is not entirely unbridgeable. Each person, no matter whether in the current main project of the Spirit, and no matter how seemingly at odds with the Spirit, still is in the Spirit and of the Spirit. Recall that morality cannot be reduced to logic; it is a kind of Passion. The Spirit feels Passion when pouring itself into projects. Each project has its own Passions. Passion is the new

Faith. We can bridge the gap between individuals, and even across projects, with Passion. People differ on which particular Passion they think is most effective in bridging the unbridgeable gaps but most people in modern Europe and America seem to have settled on Love as the dominant Passion that can bridge all gaps. This idea of Love rises, falls, and rises again on parts of the world outside Europe and America as pop culture spreads the idea. I don't go into the details of how Love does the trick, and I don't offer much criticism here because I assume most criticism is fairly evident.

I have nothing against Love and I wish we had more of it. I wish we could live up to Jesus' teaching to love even our enemies, and I wish we could live up to the compassion taught in Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. I wish we could live up to the spontaneous affection taught by Taoism. I regret that Love does not do the job all by itself.

Here I only point out the tension between Love, different moralities, and different projects. What if Love does not fit into a project, or fits in only as a relation between members and not as a relation between individuals of different projects? What if we can Love the people in our group but should hate the people in other groups as part of the Spirit-given project of our group? Love can serve as a bridge only when it is in accord with the rules of the project. It cannot bridge when it contradicts the rules of the project. And, so, in the end, love is not any addition to the project and it cannot serve as a universal bridge. Yet, if this is true, we need Love all the more. And so on. Whether other systems offer a solution to this dilemma, I do not guess here; but Romanticism does not. So Love becomes part of the bouncing around between subjectivism and objectivism, relativism and absolutism. That is not how I see Love.

I avoid almost all issues of relations between Romantic Passion love and romantic love.

For Love to serve as a universal bridge, it must be above all mere Reason. Even Christians tend to see Love this way. If Love has no Reason, then it could seem capricious to mere humans. We don't want the Love of the Spirit (God) to be capricious, and we don't want the deep compassionate Love that we could extend even to our enemies to be capricious. This raises a problem. To get at the problem, I work with the idea of romantic love. Assume romantic love reflects Romantic Love; for ease, I call "romantic love" "affectionate love". At least Americans do take affectionate love to be capricious in that we are free to fall in love with anyone we want, and love seems to come on us out of nowhere; and now other parts of the world seem to do the same as Western pop culture expands.

Affectionate love should be entirely capricious in that anybody could fall in love with anybody else. But that is not what happens. When one person falls in love with another person, the other person should fall in love with the first one too; otherwise we get awful awkward scenes when the "L bomb" drops. There should be barriers of class, race, or creed to affectionate love, but, in fact, people fall in love within their class, race, and creed. There should be no barriers of number, so that one man could fall in love with six women or one woman with six men; but we don't want that. There should be no barriers of gender but people also fall in love in a pattern of man-and-woman. We are willing to bend the edges a bit to keep the dogma of affectionate love: we now accept homosexual love. But bending the edges brings the problem back. As right wingers say: if we allow that two men can fall in love the way that a man and woman can, then why not a woman and a dog or a man and a cow? If we limit affectionate love to a man and woman, then why should men and women fall in love at all? If we limit love partly, why can we restrict it to those two categories? Why not do away with love entirely? If we don't want to do away with love entirely, then

how can we restrict it to something between the categories “man” and “woman” and limit it to one man and one woman? Why does the Spirit Love everybody, and, if the Spirit does, why can't we see it? Why does the Spirit seem to Love some people more? Why do some people Love some other people more and Love some other people less?

Modern Darwinism certainly gives some good reasonable answers to these questions but Romanticism, and traditional religions too, don't want to go that way. Within Romanticism, there are no good answers. Love should cross boundaries but can't cross all boundaries. If Love can't cross all boundaries, then Love is bound by logic, and then it isn't Love. This tension in Love mixes in with tensions in morality and persons too. I don't think there are any good answers within traditional religion either, and this vacancy supports Romanticism.

Busy Bodies.

On this world, the Spirit is never quite whole. No project entirely captures the Spirit but each project tries in its way. While any particular task might end, the succession of tasks never ends until maybe the grand end. We want to do right by doing the work of the Spirit, but know we will never quite be one with yourself and the Spirit. This all lead us to feel restless. Restlessness pushes us into working for causes, leads us to jump into trends, and leads to what I call “flitting”. It adds to the tendency of Romantics to be busy bodies and busybodies.

If you are not involved in this project, you should be involved in that project. Always be involved. Always be emotional. Always be committed. Always be emotionally committed. Have faith. Stay busy. Stay busy working on issues with people, society, religion, politics, nature, or all of them together. Always be working on a cause. If you are busy working this way, you are one with the Spirit. If you are not busy working this way, then you are not one with the Spirit. People flit from activity to activity, like “channel surfing” with the remote control on TV. The flitting helps people not feel isolation and not feel the fact that most activities are empty; but it never quite makes the feeling go away entirely.

When I lived with peasants, I saw that they also keep themselves busy, but in a different way, and the difference is telling. Peasants kept busy weaving roof thatch, sewing, making little things to sell, making food items to sell, tending animals, etc. These were not activities in the Romantic sense. They were tasks that people could to make some money or at least to help along the family farm. Even in the United States, I saw the same. People from Central America moved in below my wife and I in our apartment complex. Somehow they got paid for weaving wires and for other tasks for the construction industry, so they never just sat idly but always did one of those tasks.

Modern people are not busy in the same way. They do not do tasks for economic gain though they think of activities as “for the family” or “intrinsically worthwhile” in many ways. People go from task to task in the same way that people “channel surf” on TV. You have to be watching something all the time, and you seek the activity that is most “spiritually” satisfying.

Western people, and modern people, tend not to do tasks, they attack activities. They are furious in what they do. I can't blame this attitude entirely on Romanticism but it seems to intensify under Romanticism. I once saw a good illustration on TV. A Native American and a White man were chopping down trees,

each working on his own tree. The White man chopped furiously and did chop his trees in a little less time than the Native American but he also wore out quickly and had to take many breaks. At the end of the day, he was useless. The Native American swung rhythmically, always finished his task, and never got so tired that he had to stop. At the end of the day, he could sleep well. The Native American pointed out this difference to the White man but the White man could not change his habits. People even pursue leisure with the same fury so the leisure hardly helps.

Besides being busy, Romantics tend to be busybodies, always to have a scheme, and be intrusive, Left or Right. People who act this way are Romantics whether they think of themselves as Conservatives, Liberals, Gay Activists, Anti-abortionists, Christians, or Muslims. Romanticism brings out the part of our personalities that is like this even when we know better.

Glamorize to Romanticize.

I cannot explain here what glamour is. It is not just “high fashion”, which, ironically, is one of the lowest forms of glamour. Marlon Brando on a motorcycle is glamorous, even in a silly outfit, and even though his bike was not a Harley. While fad foods are still a fad, they are glamorous. Sometimes duck hunting is glamorous; sometimes not.

I can give a quick sense of some glamour with a little jargon. We glamorize by putting things a distance; we have to use the right distance; we can't make them too far or they would be so strange that we can't relate; we can't make them close or we wouldn't be awed and interested. “Distance” is reckoned in terms of “like us” rather than meters or minutes. We glamorize by “making other” in the right ways. Americans like clothes from Europe; the most glamorous are from France or Italy. Americans don't wear clothes from New Guinea or Toronto. It helps if the thing glamorized shows intrinsic power as well, such as kung fu, shows intrinsic wealth such as a Ferrari, or shows intrinsic connection to spirituality such as E.T. We can more easily glamorize some animals such as a Phoenix than other animals such as dung beetles. A skilled artist can make almost anything the right distance with the right attributes, and glamorous, such as Fargo, North Dakota.

All stances glamorize projects, causes, groups, and types of people according to what the stance values and to what sustains the stance. Christianity glamorizes priests, and Buddhism glamorizes monks, even beyond their considerable intrinsic value. Christianity glamorizes the Church.

I think glamorizing is more important in Romanticism than in most other stances. In Romanticism, we can never completely know the Spirit or its projects, but we are part of the Spirit, and we want to participate in its projects. The Spirit and its projects are “out there”, somewhat connected to us, not fully accessible by us, yet highly desirable, shiny, alluring, powerful, and often wealthy. The projects and things of the Spirit are glamorous because they are “other”, partly like us but different from us, and so likely better than us. If we can be part of a project, we are important. If we can be glamorous and “other”, then we are likely part of a project and therefore important.

Glamour is the sanctity of Romanticism. People want to feel glamorous so they can feel in touch with the Spirit and can feel sacred. Glamour is the new sanctity. To glamorize is to spiritualize. Something made spiritual is also made glamorous, and most things made glamorous are also made spiritual. I do not here

distinguish between true spirituality as defined by any traditional religion and the glamour of Romanticism that they would call false spirituality and false sanctity. Even the supposedly spiritual acts of traditional religion would not really be spiritual if they were done more in the spirit of Romanticism.

So we look for what is desired by other people, shiny, alluring, powerful, and wealthy. We assume that thing is of the Spirit. We try to “hook up” with that thing so we can be important too. If we hook up with something that is glamorous, then we have succeeded spiritually, not just materially. If we succeed, then we are glamorous too.

People take advantage of glamour. If one person wants to make something appealing to other people, the first person makes that thing glamorous by making it seem to be linked to the Spirit and-or making it alluring, shiny, appear to be desired, etc. This is a key to advertising. Whether a thing is actually tied to the Spirit doesn't matter as long as the purveyor can make people think it is. I don't go into how “ad men” and other purveyors do this.

Glamour is an important part of trying to be unique and connected at the same time, and it suffers from the same contradictions. This conundrum is obvious in the car and beauty industries where every car really is just a car and all women are women first but car makers and women go to great lengths to try to make themselves unique.

Some glamour in Romanticism is fairly persistent, as, for example, the glamour of artists, rebels, playboys and playgirls, underbelly of society, and some criminals. Safe middle class people glamorize non-White lower-class semi-dangerous marginalized people, including some criminals. That is one reason why we have so many movies and TV shows about marginal people who are really human after all. Even acts that do not seem very glamorous to an outsider seem glamorous to an insider such as trudging through a slimy bog to save a toad or trudging the mean streets outside clinics to save unborn babies.

The pursuit of glamour likely is the largest task in Romanticism, taking up the most time and energy. It is never done. It is never completely achieved. There is always more glamour to be harvested, and there is always some other activity that is more glamorous than the one right now.

More on Marginal, Glamorous, Dogma, and “of the Spirit”.

Marginal people are more like Creative Chaos and thus more likely to be the tools of the Spirit and more likely to be close to the Spirit. They are more real. Artists are creative and alive, and thus close to the Spirit in those ways, and closer to Creative Chaos and so closer to the Spirit in that way too. Artists are closer to the Spirit in at least three ways. Romantics like to think of themselves as creative and alive like artists, and they like to emulate artists, or to think of themselves as artists.

Romantics tend to get more of their ideas about what to do, what causes to join, from popular media and art than from traditional sources such as the Church. Even when Romantics act in causes sanctioned by some church, such as anti-abortion, they still likely get most of their cues from popular media such as TV shows on religion. Left wing Romantics get much of their ideas from rock, hip-hop, and movies.

The Romantic view of Life and Art as glamorous adventure, with artist rebels leading the way and always correct, is not true. It never works out. Even when Romantics win, as in the French Revolution, it never works out. It can work out partially but it never works out with as much satisfaction as Romantics hoped, and it always causes more problems. If anti-abortion activists ever get their way and ban abortions in the United States, it will not work out, and we will be worse off. Rock-and-roll might have built this country but this country could never run according to rock-and-roll. Why this happens, I do not explain here. It is important to see that it does happen, and to see the results.

Romanticism glamorizes ideas and so turns them into dogmas; Romanticism glamorizes its dogmas. A dogma can't be a dogma unless it is glamorous; whatever idea is glamorous either is a dogma or part of a dogma. In Romanticism, people not only have an idea of a project, they heavily glamorize it. In one of its glamorous forms, the next project of the Spirit is "the next big thing" in music, fashion, TV, or fad foods. In Romanticism, Creativity is not just an idea and an attribute of the Spirit, it is heavily glamorous as one of the most sacred things that people can do and it leads to artists as one of the most powerful sacred kinds of people. Intoxication is the same because it is non-rational super-rational and so leads us closer to the Spirit. Romantic glamour is part of the power of dogmas of both liberals and conservatives. That is a big way in which their ideas become dogmas. The idea of Tradition is sensible by itself but that is not enough for conservatives who turn it into sacred dogma. The sensible idea of political freedom becomes dogma in different ways for both sides, and they invest it heavily with the glamour of soldiers dying and of Civil Rights marches. The idea of fairness for the genders in the workplace is sensible but the idea of absolute sameness of the genders is a glamorous misleading dogma. Because I dislike dogmas of all kinds from any source, I return to the subject later in the chapter.

Inversions and Doubling Down.

Ideally, Romantics should define themselves through the positive contributions they make by being in the vanguard of the Spirit and doing the work of the Spirit in creating a new order. Sometimes this is the case as when Gay people brought a positive new image of "gay-ness". Often, Romantics define themselves by what they oppose, especially against other groups. They present their cause positively but the real fervor underneath comes from opposing. They have a sense of opposition as Creative Chaos but really below it is just anger and bitterness. Two examples from our times are "Pro Life" and "Pro Choice". The "just say 'NO'" of Republican Congresses is a clear example. People who are "pro family" rarely have thought out what forms a family might take in the modern world but really are against gays, single mothers, and the family style of ethnic groups they dislike. The stereotype of feminists as frustrated "man haters" was cruel but had more than a grain of truth.

Thwarted Romantics do not become rational. They "double down". They get stubborn. They attack their enemies rather than fight for goodness. Thus we get the "culture wars".

The Romantic attitude is crusader, rebel, zealot, busy body, self-styled saint, self-styled expert, guardian of a "cause territory" such as saving the US from do-gooders, constant chip on the shoulder, feeling that nobody "gets it", feeling everybody is against you and your group, and minor cosmic visionary.

“The problems that I care about are the relevant ones even if you show me other issues that are deeper and that cause the problems I care about. The problems that I care about are the ones that working on will bring my group most, and that is what really matters.”

Groups with Special Appeal.

People want to be close to the Spirit so they want to be close to groups that are close to the Spirit. In traditional religion, they want to be close to priests; in most systems, they want to be close to people who are wealthy, powerful, successful, and glamorous. In Romanticism, they want to be close to those people too but some groups have particular appeal. People want to be close to rebels, the Remnant, artists, entrepreneurs, and marginal people such as some criminals, some losers, and the underbelly of society. These groups are most likely to be seen in glamorous terms although not all Romantics would understand that they see these in glamorous terms; Americans really do see losers in glamorous terms but don't like to admit they see losers that way even when they admit they feel sympathy toward losers and admire tough guy losers or big-hearted losers.

Supporting Special Groups.

I can understand some sympathy toward downtrodden, marginal, excluded, and unlucky people such as people with cancer or people who get stuck unemployed and underemployed in capitalism. In the West, before Romanticism, small groups of Christians would minister to the downtrodden but, despite the clear teachings of Jesus, people in general were not much sympathetic to the downtrodden, and rich people were scornful. The character of “Scrooge” is no aberration. With Romanticism, people are sympathetic and are inclined to give marginal groups power, money, and state support. People seem to feel guiltier about the relative plight of others and more inclined to help not only on a case-by-case basis but through permanent institutions such as welfare, Social Security, the Farm Bill, and tax breaks for business firms. Americans are often surprised to learn that Social Security was originally the idea of the powerful German Chancellor Bismarck in the 1870s, one of the peaks of German Romanticism.

One reason that people are more inclined to support the downtrodden is that some downtrodden have a close link to the Spirit, as, for example, we attribute Creative Chaos to the poor and to ethnic groups that differ from the dominant ethnic group. A second related reason is that taking care of the children of the Spirit makes people feel close to the Spirit and feel good. It is a cause, a project. Another reason is that distrust of traditional institutions is an intrinsic part of how Romanticism works; see below. People did not trust the old ways of taking care of the downtrodden, such as church charity or poor houses, so people wanted to take care of the children of the Spirit in newer better ways. So people devised new institutions to take care of the poor and to make themselves feel good.

Likely the biggest reason why people support marginalized groups through institutions has little to do directly with Romanticism. Except for a few Christians, comfortable people don't want to deal directly with marginal people if the marginal people are not a glamorized group. Even then, people don't want to deal directly with real marginalized people, such as real criminals, but with glamorized versions of them such as small time drug dealers. Instead, people set up institutions to deal with the symptoms of marginal people. Rather than deal with the problems of capitalism that generate unemployment, we can set up unemployment insurance. Rather than deal with the fact that farms should be turned into business firms

just like every other mom-and-pop operation, we set up farm welfare through the farm bill. I can tie this attitude into Romanticism but it is better just to let it lie openly as it is.

Getting back on track: Problems arise when we deal with marginalized people through new institutions because we don't trust old institutions. New institutions become old institutions quickly enough, and then we don't trust the solution that we made ourselves. This dilemma is now true of almost all the institutions we created to deal with marginal people. The old institutions didn't work for the good reason that almost no institutions can deal with problems such as poverty. The new institutions can't ultimately deal either. The response depends on which side of the fence you sit and whether you like the group and institution. If you like the people who receive help, then you push for more institution and more money, as President Obama suggested that community college be free for everybody, and as Republicans push for tax breaks for oil producers. Otherwise, you hate it, as many people hate welfare and some people hate "defense" spending. People "double down" as explained above. Any way you see it, you can think of yourself as on the side of the Spirit.

Using Romanticism.

In any stance, once people have figured it out, and see that people in general are susceptible to some ideas of the stance, these clever people use the stance to manipulate other people. Glamour shows how this tactic can work in Romanticism. People manipulate Romanticism by taking on the airs of a group that can ask for special privileges such as artists, rebels, racial minorities, business people, entrepreneurs, farmers, small business owners, women, the underbelly of society, and victims of overseas disaster. I am amazed at how susceptible people in general are to claims. People in general automatically give groups special status and privileges so as to feel they participate in the Spirit themselves. Clever people take on the airs of a marginalized group so they can get respect, wealth, and sex from other people. The longest running standard dodge has been the rock-and-roll rebel artiste but that game is mostly fun and does little harm other than a few misplaced lives. More harmful, since the rise of Reagan-ism, has been the ability of business people to present themselves as besieged marginalized victims in dire need of state help even while they attack a big state and attack others for getting help. I am shocked that business people can portray entrepreneurs as marginalized beleaguered victims trying to act as agents of Creative Chaos and the Spirit, as "job creators". I am amazed that people in general buy this crap along with buying all the claims of Blacks, Hispanics, and White thugs. I am amazed the people like the Tea Party can rail against the benefits that other people get while overlooking all the benefits received by the middle class, especially in Republican states. Manipulating Romanticism for the gain of self and group is a serious danger to democracy. We will see more at the end of the chapter.

Culmination.

If we believe German Romantic philosophers such as Hegel and pop artists such as Bob Dylan, nobody really knew the Spirit well before they came along. On purpose, the Spirit didn't even really know itself. All projects of the Spirit before modern times were done without the Spirit really being aware what it was doing, or that it was doing, including even such grand projects as Buddhism and Classical Greece. Only now is the Spirit aware that it has been doing it all along. Romanticism is the Spirit aware of itself at last. In words that I learned from California New Agers, Romanticism is nature aware of itself just as people (sentient beings) are nature's way of being aware of itself. Nobody talked about the Spirit unfolding itself

until recently; but now we do. It is not clear why the Spirit chose to reveal itself to itself through us at this time, but it has, and we have to assess the results.

The self-awareness of the Spirit is like other great culminations. It is like the second coming of Jesus the Christ, from which Romantics likely borrowed the idea. It is like end times. It is like the bodhisattva who finally sees how the world works and chooses to save all sentient beings. It is like a great Buddha or like great avatar such as Krishna who do the same. It is like political utopias such as Communist heaven, Fascist heaven, free market heaven, or PC heaven.

Most of this belief would be charming except it has bad effects on attitude. It intensifies attitude. If this is the time of the Spirit, if this is the last project of the Spirit, then we had better be on board. We had better be doing the work of the Spirit. We had better be children of the Spirit. If we are not actively working in one of the important projects of the Spirit, then we are "left behind". To paraphrase Bob Dylan, "He not busy being born is busy dying". Whatever good comes at the revealing of the Spirit will not be good for us. This belief intensifies seeking for projects and makes even stronger the already strong commitment to some projects. It leads Romantics to oppose people on the other side harshly and even denigrate people who are not with them.

The Romantic attitude from culmination is much like the attitude of other end-of-this-world-start-of-the-next-world crazies although most Romantics do not see it consciously in those terms. I think that kind of feeling has been more common in the West since the Renaissance, and more common in the last three hundred years with the rise of Romanticism. I am not sure which caused which. I am sure they support each other even when the people in one branch disdain the people in another branch.

If it makes you feel better, academics are not immune. It is unlikely any one paradigm can explain the whole human experience, not even my favorite evolution. Academics who study people usually are Romantics like other people. They see their work as part of the work of the Spirit although they don't usually say so and don't like to think of themselves as like other religious people. Academics seize on fads such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and modernism as if the fads were dewdrops from the brows of the Spirit, and work with as much zeal on their project in these final days of the Spirit as any religious fanatic preparing for Jesus, the victory of Islam, the coming of Krishna, or the coming of the Jewish Messiah.

Some Synthesis; Mostly Bad News; Some Good News.

The individual in Romanticism can be isolated, part of a group as part of a project, or have a mystical feeling of union with the Spirit. Few people choose mystical union although modern times have more than their share of lost seekers. Most people want to be in a group that is like a community and want to feel that their community is part of a project of the Spirit. In social science jargon, people seek a church.

Capitalism does not have to drive people toward isolation but it has that tendency more than to lead people to a healthy community (unless people belong to a healthy business firm; when I wrote this, Apple and Google were used as examples). The isolation of capitalism can be overcome by the group-and-project tendency of Romanticism as when people get off work to work on a common cause such as Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, or Save Trees. Isolation can be overcome when people join a common-interest group

such as Tai Chi Chuan or when they join a religious church. Far too often, the isolation inherent and the isolation inherent in Romanticism combine to make people feel really alone – alone to the point of wacky. Which tendency wins out depends on all kinds of factors that I leave to sociologists and anthropologists.

Capitalism does not have to drive people to moral subjectivism at the individual level or group level but that tendency is stronger in capitalism than any tendency to drive people to seek the one true objective morality. Romanticism also has a drive to subjective morality because each project is its own world and own standard, including morality. The drives to moral subjectivity can combine with the drives toward isolation at the individual or group level. When the two drives toward moral subjectivity combine, then we see many isolated individuals each his-her own little moral demon. These people suffer. More often, we see small bands of individuals united in small groups, each group having its own morality. We get cults, 30,000 Protestant denominations, fundamentalists, terrorists, zealots, and I-don't-know-how-many political causes. I doubt this could happen without the combination of Capitalism and Romanticism, plus a few other changes such as mobile fractured families that I can't go into here. But it does happen.

The good news is when the ability to share interests in capitalism combines with the ability to join projects in Romanticism, and with a good sense of morality descended from the morality that is common to all the great religions, to give us useful healthy groups and useful healthy people. These are the dedicated but not crazy groups that do community service or provide beneficial activities.

One very big task of critics of modern life, of citizens, religious leaders, and politicians, is to swing the balance from isolated moral subjectivity of individuals and small groups to modest communal useful groups without killing our sense of democratic individualism. To do this, our leaders have to see big deep problems, have to understand why we avoid dealing with them, have to see how to deal with them, and have to explain it all clearly to us. I see little evidence this is happening.

Romanticism and Some Big Bad Groups.

To overcome the potential for feeling isolated and morally adrift, people join groups. The trend is strong in times of trouble with the economy, politics, and the family. Moral subjectivity as a political theory does not alone cause this tendency. The tendency comes out of economic and social conditions far more than out of philosophy, theology, or social science. When people join good groups, and the groups can help with the problems (or at least the symptoms), then there is little problem.

Sometimes people join good groups in bad times and help the times get better. These groups tend to have good ideologies. Examples include the community action wing of the Black Panthers, many church groups, Red Cross, Red Crescent, Doctors without Borders, and people within the major political parties who want to really understand modern problems and do something about them.

Problems come when people join groups that have a bad morality or bad ideology. Critics say that the bad ideology-morality turns the people in the group bad and turns the group bad but I think this view is much too simple. More often, people join groups with a bad morality because they feel bad and think they will feel better in the group. That is why people join gangs. The bad dogma can further shape people after they join but it does not alone make them bad. People are not bad in modern times because

of philosophical ideas about the supremacy of the individual and moral subjectivism but people gravitate toward groups that use those ideas to justify bad acts.

A little bad group is a cult or a gang. I don't dwell on them anymore. Sometimes they grow up to be big bad groups.

The real problem comes when people join big bad groups, especially when Romanticism ratifies a big bad group. Almost any big bad group can find ratification by interpreting Romanticism. Romanticism is well suited to supporting big bad groups. I don't know if it is better suited than other ideologies such as pro-capitalism, Christianity, or Islam; but I think so; I don't argue the question now. Romanticism supports such groups by allowing them to believe they are rebels or the Remnant. They are the force of the Spirit even if they do a few bad things. They are the spearhead of the Spirit. They do not need a relation to any major religion for or against; they can ignore standard religion if they want; or they can accept any endorsement that suits their needs.

For reasons that I don't go into here, often big bad groups have a racist base. Examples include Black and White gangs, and Black and White Supremacists.

Sometimes they combine race and religion. The religion does not have to be a standard religion or even a religion that people recognize as a religion. The most famous example of modern times is Nazism. The Nazis actually did use a religion as a base, a religion that took features from Spiritualism and from other religions such as Celtic mythology, Norse mythology, and Egyptian religion. The "Indiana Jones" movies make fun of this aspect of Nazism. Nazism was a quintessential Romantic movement gone bad. Against modern critics, it was not caused primarily by moral subjectivism or other bad ideologies although it used those ideologies-emotions to recruit and hold members.

The first two big bad Romantic groups-and-movements were the French Revolution and the sweep of Napoleon Bonaparte across Europe. I mention those later in this chapter.

The third big Romantic group-movement was Communism. I cannot go into the differences among the groups in Communism to show which were more or less Romantic. Marx was a student of Hegel, and Hegel was a founder of Romanticism. Although Marx tried to get away from Hegel, he could not get away from prevailing Romanticism. People do not think of Communism as a religion but it is. Communists like to play fast-and-loose with moral relativity but, in fact, they have their own morality that comes from life in a collectivity and from grasping power. Communists use the progress of the human race as their project; they conceive of this project in terms that can only make sense if we think of it as the biggest project of the World Spirit in our times. Marxists are the rebels, Remnant, and chosen people serving as the tools of the Spirit to create the form of the Spirit for our times.

In fairness, both the major political parties in the United States, and their offshoots such as the Tea Party, and allied groups such as feminists, think in much the same terms but are less nasty. Major churches, especially when they actively proselytize, also think in the same terms. This is where we can see the combination of Romanticism with traditional religion. Watch the Protestant and Roman Catholic TV channels. If you can get it, listen to a Muslim broadcast.

To channel people into good groups and away from bad groups, we have to have a good grasp on the conditions that make people seek groups, seek good groups, seek bad groups, on good morality, and on bad morality. We have to see deep problems and be willing to address them in ways that people think will lead to good results. Again, I don't think we have done this and I don't think we will soon. I do not push the idea that we all must inevitably fall into bad groups; I just think it will be all the harder to form and find good groups.

PART 5: The Failure of Romanticism.

Romanticism does not fail as a system that supports itself and that eats the world. At that, it is a great success, one of the greatest in the history of the world as far as I can tell. I don't go into Romanticism that way here.

Romanticism always fails because it does not deliver much satisfaction unless people happen to be in a triumphant group or a good little group – and that is usually short-lived. It does not give people access to the Spirit. In the end, it does not make them feel as if they are contributing to a project that will lead to the triumph of the Spirit for the whole world.

In fairness, I repeat that Romanticism does a lot of good along the way. It gives people commitment and energy. It focuses people on real short term problems that need work. It has contributed greatly to the success of important movements such as Civil Rights, gender equality, saving nature, pro life, pro choice, and the conservative revival.

Romanticism also contributes energy to bad movements such as bombing abortion clinics, the nasty self-righteous versions of PC, terrorism, and glamorizing of thugs. Romanticism does not fail mostly because those movements are more important than the good movements. All good religions also contribute to bad ideas and bad movements, and that does not make the religions bad. These bad movements contribute to the failure of Romanticism but they do not alone cause the failure. These movements are what most people think about when they think of the failure of modern ideology but we could deal with this crap if we could think straight otherwise.

To fully explain how Romanticism fails, I would have to explain how bad systems that eat the world work, and what life is like in such a system. I can't explain here; I do explain in other writing. Think of living as a real gangster or living in Stalinism.

Romanticism fails because it does not solve deep problems but instead keeps people busy on lesser problems and deliberately steers people away from deep root problems. If people could solve most deep root problems, or even see them clearly, Romanticism would not be useful and would disappear. Seeing exactly how Romanticism avoids deep problems would require going into the logic of Romanticism more than I can in this chapter but I go into it enough so you get the idea.

Romanticism fails because, ultimately, it does not rest on any deep true morality. Romanticism is not an idea; it is a process. A process does not need a particular idea. If a process did rest on an idea, it would be in danger of failing when the idea was not right enough, or too wrong, or when a better idea came up.

As long as a process does not rest on a particular idea but can pretend it rests on a lot of little ideas, then it can keep going indefinitely.

Just because Romanticism does not espouse any particular morality does not mean it espouses moral relativity, moral subjectivism, or the morality of power. It can use them but it does not base itself on them any more than on traditional Christian morality. Romanticism simply uses whatever morality works best in keeping itself going. That might sound like moral relativity or subjectivism but is not. I cannot pursue this topic anymore without pursuing it a lot more, so I drop it here.

Romanticism fails because emotion and commitment alone cannot solve our problems. When we rely on emotion and commitment alone or even predominantly, we do not get good white wizards who combine Reason with Passion. We always get dark wizards who mix bitterness, jealousy, anger, and revenge with Cunning. We never get Luke Skywalker or Obiwan Kenobe; we never get the Jedi after they are allowed to marry and have families; we always get the Emperor Palatine the Sith Darth Sidious. We don't get the Three Musketeers; we get Cardinal Richelieu, the one-eyed swordsman, and Madame De Winter. We rarely get Washington, Jefferson, or Lincoln; we get Stalin or Hitler. We rarely get the good American Revolution. We get the bad French, Russian, Chinese, and North Korean Revolutions. We don't get a sensible right or left; we get the culture wars, huge debt, stagnating wages, and widening wealth gaps.

Recall that systems-that-eat-the world usually have a big hole in the center onto which people can project whatever they need. That is how the system keeps going. Romanticism has that in the Spirit and in the things that we do in the name of the Spirit but that really serve us. Like Jesus, God, Allah, the Dharma, or the bodhisattva at the center, Romanticism has the Spirit, on which people project whatever they need but which is ultimately empty itself. That is a source of great strength if you want to succeed as a system but a failure if you want to give people a real moral meaningful useful godly life.

Romanticism fails because it overlooks real problems and distracts us with short-term problems. We feel Passionate, Justified, and Saved when we accuse a co-worker or racism, sexism, or coddling terrorists and forget about what causes racism, sexism, or terrorism.

Romanticism skips the square-meal diet to give us a diet of yogurt with a lot of sugar, "power bars", and honey-glued oat bran, or nothing but pizza, fried chicken, burgers, and barbecue, all while convincing us that this is healthy. Romanticism leads us to self-induced diabetes while it convinces us this is how we should eat. For our self-induced diabetes, we take pills rather than find out what ails us, find out what is a good diet, eat a good diet, and exercise well.

The effects of the failure of Romanticism are the same as the effects of Culmination. We feel more alone and isolated even in the middle of causes. The failure does not lead us to re-evaluate, quit what we are doing wrong, and change. The failure leads us to "double down". We accentuate the bad tendencies in capitalism. We become more selfish, materialistic, and trendy. We jump from cause to cause. We seek God in some really strange ways. We try really hard not to think too deeply. To escape isolation, we hold to Romanticism even more. The effects of the failure cause us to embrace Romanticism all the more, and so we live in a bad system that eats the world.

PART 6: Brief History A: Real Problems and Self-Made Institutions

Romanticism derives much of its strength because we feel that our institutions don't work well enough, so we should connect to something else, something deeper. Romanticism solidified in a climate of distrust. At the same time, Romanticism gives us mid-level issues that we use to avoid deep issues. Not seeing deep issues perpetuates our distrust of institutions.

The Insoluble Issues.

For a list of insoluble issues, see Chapter Two on my political stance.

Ourselves to Blame Makes it Worse.

Traditional religious people say people in general believed in the Church and Christendom before about 1600. I am not sure Romanticism would disappear if people believed in their institutions now as in that ideal past. Romanticism does better when people are skeptical enough about institutions but have to keep them. Romanticism doesn't take much skepticism; we have more than enough in democracy no matter how well things are going.

Conservatives say that institutions that develop on their own almost always are better than the institutions that people make deliberately, especially in Christendom where conservatives say the Holy Spirit had a hand in developing institutions. We distrust our institutions now because we made them; we did not allow enough space for the Holy Spirit to guide the natural growth of our institutions.

We distrust institutions enough to foster Romanticism and it is not likely we will grow to trust them much more in the near future. I think we distrust them because they do not succeed well enough, regardless of the Holy Spirit. They do not succeed well enough because they are not up to the problems of the modern world. Democracy is not up to the modern world. Democracy is not up to the modern world partly due to Romanticism. Romanticism, the failure of democracy, distrust of democracy, and more Romanticism, feed on each other. It is easier to see this dilemma in historical context and in light of democracy as an institution that we make for ourselves.

Until about 1700, people did not consciously make their own institutions. Institutions grew in conditions; and institutions dealt with local conditions well enough. Two examples might be Medieval England and town-level America in the 1950s. People believed in the leaders, ideas, and institutions even if nobody consciously made them into a rational system. In fact, people believed more just because ideas and institutions were not the obvious products of the human mind but seem to come on us like God setting things right.

By 1600 in England, and certainly after 1776 and the American Revolution, people deliberately did make their own political institutions. That is a large part of what democracy is: people making their own social and political lives. By the standards then and for the next 150 years, Americans made their institutions pretty well. We took into account human nature, nature, and good ideas from the past. Yet American people-made institutions did eventually fail then and still fail. Even when we adjust them to make up for failures and for new conditions, they still fail. We have not had institutions that grow on their own, and that work, to replace the institutions that we made ourselves, that don't work. We are stuck in our own

self-made, ideology-based, rational, systematic, as-good-as-we-can-do institutions that still fail. Although capitalism did evolve on its own somewhat, I include it among the institutions that we mostly made for ourselves, for reasons I don't defend here.

The facts that institutions that we made failed, we can't come up with anything better, and we can't adjust them to work, forms a problem that compounds itself. We made the institutions to solve other problems, and now the institutions have become among the most serious of problems. What institutions do we now make to solve the problem that we can't make institutions that work?

Because we will live in some version of democracy for the near future, all the institutions to come will be made by people. Even if the stems come up on their own, as with the Internet and social media, still, institutions will be shaped by deliberate planning. All the institutions will be made by people in the sense that the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution were made by us. Such people-made institutions have failed in the past and likely will fail in the near future. Our institutions are pretty good but they are not good enough.

Institutions that evolved on their own before 1600 succeeded because they had to deal only with simpler problems – invading barbarians, how much to tax whiskey - than after the Revolution: industrialization, capitalism, big business, worker poverty, cities, and issues listed in Chapter Two. It is hard to imagine self-arising institutions that could deal with international capitalism or the demise of nature. We should not fault people-made institutions hard for not being able to deal with the world. No institutions that we have now, or are likely to have in the near future, can deal well with the problems that we face now. We are likely to need a bigger dose of inspired individual people.

PART 7: Brief History B: How Romanticism Came Together

Old History.

Something like Romanticism has arisen several times in the West. In the time of Augustus Caesar in Rome, about the time of Jesus, old patterns did not work; Augustus pushed through new patterns. At the same time, Neo-Platonism mixed with yearnings of uniting ecstatically with "the One". People indulged many cults, believed belonging to a cult was doing the work of the Spirit and coming closer to the Spirit, and believed cults deserved special privilege. Saint Augustine was a Christian Neo-Platonist. His use of God and the City in history is like the Romantic use of the Spirit, nations, and material stuff in history. In the middle ages, the Albigensian movement gave France and England minstrel culture with ideals of love – I think it is a parent of opera, blues, pop song, rock, and even hip hop. The Christian Church killed it. Celtic and Norse mythology seem more similar to Romanticism than Greek-Latin-Christian rationality is similar to Romanticism, and, I think, they contributed to Romanticism.

The Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment lasted from about 1600 to 1850 in northwestern Europe and the parts of the Americas under the control of Northwestern Europe. Not all people in Enlightenment areas were wise because people still burned witches. The Enlightenment thrived where people of different classes, cultures, and religions mixed in an orderly place, usually in towns for commerce. Nearly all the major people in the

American Revolution were of the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution are Enlightenment texts. Although it no longer guides America, Americans know Enlightenment ideals: decency, reason, rationality, thoughtful belief in God, natural morality, universal morality, distrust of raw emotion, moderate emotion, comfort in moderate emotion, science, natural laws, rule of man-made law in government, stewardship of nature, progress, seeking greater good, individual freedom, individual responsibility, democracy, not simplistic populism, representational democracy, naturally gifted people (natural elites) as leaders, compromise, and distrust of class society.

Collapse and Romantic Rebuild.

Traditionalists and conservatives blame science, philosophy, and new political ideas for the collapse of the old social-religious order and the rise of modern angst, particularly after the French Revolution of 1789. They blame those forces for modern isolation, selfishness, materialism, trendiness, lack of faith, cultish dogmatism, power struggles, populist democracy despotism, and bad feelings. Traditionalists and conservatives are partly right but mostly wrong. Changing economic and social conditions were more important factors although people always used ideas to justify what they wanted to do and to intensify changes that were made possible for other reasons.

Capitalism changed the social order beginning in the early 1600s. Industrialism and science changed the social order quickly after about 1750. A new group of people arose with wealth and power. Often they were at odds with the old order, old aristocracy, and old religion. Along with them had come another new group of workers who were poor and isolated. These are the conditions that Dickens relates in his books and that form the basis for the stereotyped view of bad capitalism.

The new business people saw themselves as self-made and individualistic men (rarely women). They adapted the Protestant Ethic to Capitalism. They wanted justification for their new way of life. When they adopted the Protestant Ethic, at first they secularized it because traditional religion and institutions could not provide them with the ratification they needed. A good example is the Autobiography of Ben Franklin. Better examples are Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jeremy Bentham. This is what modern traditionalists and conservatives see in philosophy of the time and wrongly blame for changes. The situation in Europe and the United States around 1800 was like the situation around Nepal at the time of the Buddha when the rising warrior class rejected Brahmin religion for the individualism and self-determination taught by the young Buddha.

While the new people rose and the old social order fell into disarray, two important events shaped how people thought about the changes. The American Revolution succeeded and seemed to validate the idea that people could rationally make their own institutions and their institutions could succeed. At first, the American Revolution brought about only a modest rational version of the new ideas. The Americans kept historical context, especially their legacy from England, and they changed only what they needed. Then the French Revolution of 1789 erupted and failed. It brought stronger versions of the ideas divorced from any historical context. It brought chaos and death. People did not stop pushing the new ideas because it was hard to go back to the past, especially when past institutions clearly could not deal with modern life. People did stop believing humans could rationally make their own successful institutions based on human reason. People sought order in something other than rationality. They turned to the spiritualized emotion and irrationality of Romanticism. New thinkers believed Passion could give them new institutions just as

old thinkers said the Holy Spirit had given them old institutions. Passion could guide the new ideas to the needed new institutions. If reasoning with the enemy won't work, then out-yell the enemy or out-connive the enemy. The work G.W.F. Hegel clearly shows this new direction.

In Europe and the Americas, if traditional religion had assessed the new situation and responded quickly, the new capitalists and workers might have kept traditional religion strong. But traditional religion was too slow, so the people turned to something else. They turned to Romanticism, in behavior if not in name. It is important to see that people could be Romantic and hold to the forms of traditional religion at the same time. Like Hinduism, Romanticism does not demand you reject your old religion, at least in outward form. Like Hinduism, it does change your inner view.

Romanticism offered people ratification through working on projects of the Spirit and through working on your own projects that you could think of as of the Spirit. Projects had to use rationality to the extent that they used Wit and Reason but projects were ultimately based on Passion, that is, Faith. You could be both rational and emotional at the same time or more in particular situations as needed. You could base institutions on the faith (Passion) that they were projects of the Spirit and use Reason to carry them out. You could use old traditional ideas as useful and discard otherwise. People could take the role of rebel or Remnant, or both, as desired. Romanticism could apply to individuals, middle-sized groups, or the whole society. Romanticism fused the Spirit with the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

When Romanticism arose, capitalism and traditional religion were at odds. Also, capitalism had not yet served society in general and had not yet raised the standards of living for everybody. It did give many individual people enough wealth and independence so they could think of themselves as self-made men and see in their wealth the basis for their autonomy, power, and social position. It served as the material basis for rising new democracies. Yet people then had no simple single ideology they could turn to, and they faced a plethora of new confusing Protestant groups. Again, the old religions and institutions had failed. Under those conditions, the combination of Romanticism and capitalism, stressed the tendencies in both toward individualism, isolation, selfishness, trends, dogmas, and irrationality under the guise of rationality in projects. The idea of Progress from the Enlightenment became, in Romanticism, the dogma of the perpetual unfolding of the Spirit, always going on in various particular projects, never complete in any particular project or in the parade of projects.

After about 1850 in Europe and after the Civil War in the United States, capitalists had consolidated their power, wealth, and hold on politics; and workers began to be better off. Capitalists and workers began to see themselves in terms of groups rather than only as isolated individuals. Capitalists wanted to make sense of the new world and their new dominance as kings had done in the late middle ages with Divine Right. Capitalists and workers sought ratification in traditional religion, and traditional religion sought to lean on their power and wealth. Thinkers arose to interpret traditional religion in terms to make capitalists and workers feel better, or feel better about forming groups and doing battle. We get modern American versions of Methodism, Baptists, Lutheranism, and eventually Roman Catholicism. We get the success of new Christian religions such as Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the fundamentalism that arose after 1910 in Los Angeles. We get moderate middle class socialism as in the "Fabians" and the "Bloomsbury Group" in England. Selfishness, materialism, and trendiness did not go away – Protestant sects of all kinds and Roman Catholic specialist groups still sprung up like weeds – but selfishness etc. took other forms and might have abated somewhat. Materialism and trendiness held up

pretty well in the “Gilded Age” of the late 1800s and “Jazz Age” of the 1920s. Yet just because capitalists, workers, dogmas, selfishness, materialism, trendiness, and traditional religion all adjusted to each other, Romanticism emerged stronger and more entrenched. Rather than traditional religion, Romanticism lay beneath it all. That is where we still live now.

We can get back to the thread that we pulled to begin with, selfishness, materialism, and trendiness, to see how they fit into the history, after we look at modern life in Romanticism.

PART 8: Modern Life in Romanticism.

Because most of us live in Romanticism, trying to see Romanticism objectively is like a fish trying to get out of the water to see water objectively. I know of the similarities between my stance and Romanticism but I don't bring out the points to defend my stance. The best way to get out of any bad stance is to have a better stance that you can adopt. Even then, it is hard. If you don't like my stance, make an alternative yourself. If you think your Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, atheism, mechanistic philosophy, or academic trend is not Romantic, and is a real alternative, you might be right, but I think you should think more deeply.

Romanticism Is a Process.

Romanticism is a process more than it is a set of ideas, symbols, attitudes, or a world view although it has all those and uses them. It has some typical content but it does not require any particular content. It is a way of keeping people engaged in particular affairs while leading them to think they are engaged in affairs more important. It is a way of keeping people from seeing whether what they do makes a difference and instead to keep them focused on gratification from the situation right now.

Romanticism is a process in which people can feel heroic, spiritual, hip, cool, justified, and important, by indulging emotions, taking attitudes, keeping busy, joining causes, opposing bad guys, feeling entitled, sampling exotic other lives, fighting as rebels, fighting as a small remnant band to save the correct way of life, living the good life, or, sometimes, just getting rich. Romanticism glamorizes the world rather than shows the native beauty and value of the world. In glamorizing, it takes away from true beauty and value. Romanticism makes people dissatisfied with the merely real, true, and worthwhile. Romanticism makes things other than they simply are, to glamorize them and spiritualize them, so people can feel distracted fooling around with otherwise mundane and boring life. Romanticism co-opts other dogmas (ideologies, ideas, and religions) to serve it even when another dogma thinks it has nothing to do with Romanticism or opposes it. Romanticism expands to use up much of our minds and lives. It is a way of getting what we want while seeming to work for something bigger and better. Romanticism is the “drama queen” and “reality TV queen” of Western stances. It is a never-ending series of engaging episodes in which nothing ever really changes much. It is a sanctified mix of romantic comedy, action movie, video game, and endless show about nothing. Rarely do people feel indulgent when they follow Romanticism to indulge themselves; they feel correct, justified, heroic, they represent everybody's deep rights, and entitled.

Hopefully a Short Way to Get a Feel for Romanticism.

The best way to get a feel for Romanticism is to sample the social world around us, including social ideas of nature. It is all mostly Romantic.

One shortcut is to intensively sample hyper-Romantic views. Watch a lot of TV for a week. Just because you have watched a lot of TV your whole life doesn't mean you noticed the right things. Watch everything including especially what you don't like. You will get a feel for how it all presents a world to you, a world that is created from a bigger world. That smaller created world will be one version of the Romantic world. If you can't sample a lot of different TV, try this: if you don't like country music or hip-hop, then watch the Country channel and Black channels. If you don't like romantic comedies, watch those. If you don't like sci-fi or adventure, watch those. If you can't stand religious channels, try those. Watch only children's TV. If you have watched any of these before as a member of a social group, watch alone. Any of this watching will shock you out of some parts of Romanticism even if not all the way out. If you can't stand that much TV, try books that you would not usually read such as romance novels or sci-fi novels. Until you have seen a lot of pop culture, avoid "serious" media and literature. The bias is just as strong on "classy" shows such as "Downton Abbey", but is more clever, hidden, woven into deeper themes, does not stand alone, and easier to miss. Video games are heavily Romantic but I don't know enough about them to make many suggestions. Even the childish sexist games with scantily clad women with huge teats are heavily Romantic.

If you feel brave enough, go to a series of religious or political meetings from groups not your own. If you are a lefty, go to at least half-a-dozen meetings of the young Republicans. If you are a Republican, go to at least half-a-dozen meetings of the local "save nature" or feminist group. If you are a Roman Catholic, find charismatic Protestants. If a Protestant, find a Roman Catholic Church in which the members are active and follow the traditional liturgy and offices.

Then go back to what you usually like and try to see it as a variation of what you didn't like. Try to see yourself as a variation of some of the characters that you just saw.

A Brief but Hard Way to See; and the Implications.

After you read this chapter, pick one problem of modern life, such as capitalism, and think it all the way through to the bottom in human nature, technology, human social life, and as a system. Don't rely on what experts say or on textbooks, although you should consult them. Then read about the problem, from all sides, and think it through again. Think it through completely yourself. Think until you are sure you know how to solve the problem in a way consistent with human nature and human social life, a way that would work if it could be put in place. Think about what your ideas say for Romanticism. Think about what you believed all along before you thought it out.

As a citizen of a democracy, regardless of Romanticism, and apart from any mental exercises, you are responsible for doing this task, not just to know capitalism, but for all the issues facing your nation and the world. You, personally, individually, without allowing anybody to think for you, must think through all the issues that your democracy faces. If you do not, you are not entitled to be a citizen. If you cannot, then you should think about what the implications are for democracy. How is democracy supposed to work if you, a smart citizen, cannot think through the issues? How do you expect to be able to elect people to

think out the issues for you, your representatives, if you cannot think out the issues yourself? How does your failure support Romanticism?

Keep Romantic Failure in Mind.

In the end, Romanticism fails as a way for many people to find a good life and fails as a way to organize society so that most people in the society find a good life. The Dark Side wins. Even when experienced people try to unite the Light Side and Dark Side, the Dark Side prevails. Romanticism always goes bad. We cannot unite the Dark Side and Light Side into a good way. We cannot unite reason and emotion in a good way that merges them both in a bigger better unity. Romanticism does not necessarily fail for some minority of people, some minority of people can do quite well, but it fails generally.

Romanticism goes bad in the same way the French Revolution went bad, Lefties always squabble until they fall apart, Fascism failed, raw capitalism fails, marriages go sour, politicians sell out, young people age, and zealotry never delivers the shiny new world that we hope for. It is not just that reality can never live up to our ideals, and our ideals are far away from real human nature, but, more, there is something about the process of pushing dreams that insures they go bad. In particular, there is something about relying on emotion to be always good and always to lead us to the best outcome that insures it will turn nasty and lead to a bad place instead. Something about trusting raw emotion turns reason into cunning. When we rely on emotion, it always turns into nastiness and cunning. I can't explain entirely why this happens here; see the additional material on the logic of Romanticism. For here, accept that it happens.

Suited to Our Times.

Romanticism is suited to our times in the same way rock-and-roll is suited to middle class kids who, in a few years, have to give their lives over to work but don't have to work for their lives yet, might have a job now, have free time and money, and glamorize the unknown lifestyles of other socio-economic classes, races, cultures, and nations to make their own lives tolerable. It is suited to our times in the same way Black kids, and White kids who have never seen a gangster, stupidly glamorize "gangstas". Romanticism fits the way White kids in America used to glamorize working class rockers, the way Black kids think all Black people are put down by "the man" and think Black people could solve all problems for themselves by overcoming "the man". It fits the way Black people think White people have everything and are in a giant secret cabal to keep it. Romanticism fits the same way urban half-educated college grads in the Third World glamorize peasants in their own country. It fits the same way business people glamorize entrepreneurs, "job creators", and anyone richer than they are. It fits the same way college professors want to appear on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and wanted to appear the defunct Colbert Report. It helps individual people and business firms rationalize their entitlement check.

The movie "Travels of Sullivan" by Frank Capra shows the kind of flitting and seeking after the Spirit that is typical of our times, and the harm that comes. It shows what good comes of giving up Romantic flitting and instead working as a useful person by doing what you do well. It shows how to escape Romanticism for people of our times. It is really fun to watch.

Some Allusions.

Living in Romanticism is like living in the movies "Rear Window" and "Vertigo" by Alfred Hitchcock; the TV show "Castle" did a fun version of "Rear Window". Living in Romanticism is like being trapped in the TV show "I Love Lucy" when Lucy runs a scheme - always. The famous episode in which Lucy and Ethyl try to eat their way out of a chocolate assembly line is pretty much life in Romanticism. Rather than accept the reality of our abilities and of the task at hand, we stuff our mouths with sweets that should be a great delight but only make us sick. Each piece of chocolate is a dogma, cause, attitude, or role. Rather than Lucy "splaining" to Ricky, we have to explain to ourselves.

We live not only in one episode, we live in a never-ending series of episodes like a never-ending story. Rather than think it through, we "just know" that we know more than other people. What we know could avert disaster. Other people should help us but instead they scoff and hinder. We are rebels out to help people who should help themselves but don't know enough. We are rebels out to save a situation that many people don't even know needs saving. Despite the resistance of others, we cling to our beliefs. Finally a few people believe us enough to go along for awhile. Little clues begin to add up. We are right. Last minute action saves the day. We don't expect a reward but are gratified by gratitude. The political versions are commitment to dogma such as "freedom", "justice", "equality", and "save the unborn". Then it all begins again. The academic version is commitment to an ideology such as, in anthropology, "social facts", culture, structure, contextualization, deconstruction, process, evolution, Darwinian psychology, commodity theory, power, etc.

Modern stories about detectives, ghosts, bizarrely crazy people, aberrant mindsets that make their own kind of sense, criminal masterminds, people who want to take over the world, serial killers, and dedicated men-and-women who stop them, all arose in the early 1800s with Romanticism. Americans know Edgar Allen Poe and give him the honor of inventing the detective story and modern horror story but the honor likely belongs to the German Ernst Theodor Amadeus (Wilhelm) (E.T.A.) Hoffman a decade before Poe. He wrote the story that became "The Nutcracker". To show links between Romanticism and these forms is another book but here I can point out a few ties between Romanticism and detective stories. The detective story depends on a secret, usually about a crime that happened in the past, often because of an aberrant mindset or deed. The story needs a social misfit rebel to uncover the secret. Usually the secret is about a family that seems normal outside but grew from a twisted root. When the detective uncovers the secret, the family, and society, comes to a resolution and a new better order begins. Then the detective goes on to solve the next crime in an unending process. Think how the other kinds of stories match the Romantic pattern.

In some fairy stores and other Celtic stories: this world would be the best heaven we could have if it didn't suffer the troubles artificially made by people and especially by lords. If the world were well run, then the normal life of romantic love, marriage, family, work, crafts, kin, farming, drinking, eating, and celebrating would be as good as a sentient-moral-aesthetic being could want. Squabbles would not ruin this world and actually would enhance it. This kind of world could go on forever and nobody would get bored. Time does not pass in this world as in ours. For charming modern variations on this vision, read the short stories of J.R.R. Tolkien or think about Hobbit land after the War. Then something always undercuts paradise. This motif might be more widespread in Indo-European culture than fairy and Celtic stories. Something like it also shows up in Taoist stories from China.

Romanticism promises something like the never-ending heaven-like joy of normal life. Then the world of Romanticism goes wrong not in a small way that enhances the world but in a big way that ruins the world. Romanticism does not account for how it goes wrong. Romanticism never sees that what goes wrong is in Romanticism itself. Trying to glamorize never-ending-normal-life forces life to go wrong. Glamorizing this life is what both makes Romanticism possible and makes sure it will fail.

Most people have had situations in their lives that feel like home and to which they want to return: finding your music, hunting with buddies, seeing the whole Star Wars saga, have a great run of parties, etc. This is the modern equivalent of a fairy land that goes on and on in its own time, a world much like our world and that is better than heaven. This is what Romanticism offers but cannot deliver. The yearning for this kind of fairy land can be deep and not getting it can be as painful as any drug withdrawal. We would do a lot to live in it always.

Some Pop Song.

The musician Lou Reed both promoted and satirized Romanticism. Below are excerpts from his song “Heroin” – maybe excerpts will promote sales and so I can avoid a lawsuit. “Smack” is heroin. The Spirit tries to use sticky material stuff (“smack”) as a means to spiritual ends. The eyedropper is a particular project of the Spirit. The movement of the Spirit that should end in the fusion of the material and the Spirit ends in the sadness of bad Passion and Cunning. The final worst is politics. Compare Reed’s “Heroin” with Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses” – it is easy and fun to read. Van Dyke Parks’ album “Jump” shows: going out from self, forgetting self, dividing into self and other, excluding other, alienation, anger, blaming, sin, class struggle, and inevitable politics. It is also fun and has catchy tunes. The duet that Parks sings with his son about God not forsaking us is chilling. Van Morrison in all of his phases is Romantic, romantic, and always charming. Like Reed, David Bowie both used and satirized Romanticism. Some is biting and funny, such as “Young Americans”. His work shows the role of attitude, such as “Fame”. All Bob Dylan’s work is Romantic. I like him through “Self Portrait”. Then, bad glamorizing wins out. Dylan’s albums of the 1970s are paradigms of how the bored American middle class uses Romanticism to fool itself, self-indulge, feel heroic, identify with a fantasy rebel underbelly, and evade reality, in particular the album “Blood on the Tracks” and the hit songs “Tangled Up in Blue” and “Hurricane”.

From “Heroin” by Lou Reed:

I have made a big decision
 I’m gonna try to nullify my life
 ‘Cause when the smack begins to flow
 When it shoots up the dropper’s neck
 When I’m closing in on death
 I wish that
 I was born a thousand years ago
 I wish that
 I’d sailed the darkened seas
 On a great big clipper ship
 Going from this land here to that
 In a sailor’s suit and cap

Away from big cities
Where a man cannot be free
Of all the evils in this town
Of himself and those around
Everybody putting everybody else down
All the politicians making crazy sounds
All the dead bodies piled up in mounds
And I guess but I just don't know
And I guess but I just don't know

Romanticism has shaped pop ideas of journeys of discovery, artists, vampires, werewolves, zombies, evil geniuses who want the world, heroes who fight evil geniuses, heroic archaeologists, bad ass daughters of archaeologists, luminal suspension, death, living on in death, in-between shadow lands, suicide, serial killers, people who hunt serial killers, religion, religious conflict, and politics.

Detectives, Mad World Conquerors, and Serial Killers.

Particular projects of the Spirit are qualitatively distinct; one project cannot measure another; and often one project cannot even understand another: Hindus cannot understand Taoists, and Protestants cannot judge Roman Catholics. Individual people are like projects. We are unique. One person cannot judge another; and often one person cannot understand another.

This view forces a gap between projects, cultures, societies, mindsets, art, and persons. While the Spirit is unfolding, as long as the Spirit revels in particular projects, and as long as we are satisfied with our role in particular projects, this gap is not so important. But if we really want to understand the Spirit, especially as the Culmination of the Spirit is upon us, and we really want to be in the mainline of the Spirit, then this gap can be a problem. We have to be able to read across mindsets and people. We have to be able to see into people. We have to see how their mindset makes them do what they do, how they “tick”. We have to be able to infer a mindset, even a complex convoluted mindset with motives unlike ours, from what people do and the clues that they leave.

We have to become mental detectives. We have to expect odd criminals with elaborate mindsets, and we have to be able to unravel even an odd perverted mindset. To do this, we have to be able to put ourselves in the heads of even demented criminals. We have to use the clues they leave, and their acts, as evidence to get inside their heads. Thus is born the modern detective. I add nothing here.

The Spirit is the spirit of the whole world. The Spirit does work through particular projects but some of them are really big. In the end, in the Culmination, the Spirit will reveal itself to the whole world as the Spirit. “In the end, there can be only one”. This is already happening.

It is good if we work with the Spirit and know it, but not everyone works with the Spirit. The world is full of leftover projects of the Spirit and leftover persons; in modern terms, of leftover programs as in the movie series “The Matrix”. Like the Spirit, and like Satan the Adversary in Christianity, these people want to be the world. Because they cannot be the world in the same sense as the Spirit unfolds into the world and is the world, they do the next best thing for them: they conquer the world. Villains always want to conquer

the world. They are not satisfied with sex, money, sensual gratification, or artistic achievement. They are not satisfied to be as powerful as other villains, and as free from harm as anybody on Earth including free from the harm of other such villains. They want it all. They want to impose their will. Rather than unfold themselves by helping other persons act, as the Spirit does with persons, these villains want to impose their will and make their will the only will. To defeat them, we cannot use force alone, as Jesus would not use force alone against the Devil. To defeat them, we must do what the Spirit does, like James Bond, we must use our wits and we have to enlist the aid of friends and other good people. We have to get into their heads. We have to be detectives and fighters. Thus is born the agent of good against evil, even if he-she doesn't know that is what he-she is.

The Spirit and Life have a close relation. I do not go into the logic or the history of this link from Judaism and Christianity. The Spirit promotes life. The birth of a new project is like the birth of a new life. While the Spirit also takes away projects and life, the Spirit does it in the right time, with the right emotion, and with the right reasons. Who imitates the Spirit but is not the Spirit and so interjects the wrong time, bad emotion, and Cunning? A serial killer is like this. The killing is part of a scenario, that is, a project. It has reasons like a work of art but it has bad cunning reasons. Because the killing is only an imitation of the Spirit, it can never give satisfaction as does the work of the Spirit even if the killer gets a temporary thrill and thinks he-she is satisfied. New killings are not new projects like the projects of the Spirit. They do not make anything new even if they are conducted like dramas. To stop all this, we need someone who can get into the mind of the serial killer. We need the mental detective again.

In daily life before the modern world, most people lived in one mindset, culture, society, or paradigm. I do not say they had no hardship or confusion, only that most people lived in one world. In daily life in the modern world, we face many projects, worlds, mindsets, cultures, societies, groups, paradigms, and kinds of persons. These "others" want things, often things we don't understand. We have to give them what they want or deny them. Even in one family in one culture, life can seem like this because parents are not children, children are not of the same age, and boys are not girls. We have to be mental detectives whether we like it or not. We are not always sure we are on the right side, and we can drift into dark bad thoughts. It is comforting to see on TV or in movies, people similar to us but maybe smarter than us, who have to deal with the same problems but on a vastly larger scale. It is comforting to see them win almost all the time even when they undergo hardships and have to pay a price. It is comforting to see a good guy take on the mindset of a bad guy, become a bad guy, and emerge on the other side still sane and good. That is one reason why we find mental detectives so appealing even when they fight serial killers and villains who want to take over the world.

Economics as Romanticism.

It helps to look at something that we think is un-Romantic as Romantic. Because of its important role, capitalism is a good choice. To describe capitalism as Romantic does not mean economics is not a solid social science or capitalism is a plot that does no good. I like economics and capitalism. Still, cultural ideologies intrude into our lives where we least expect. Ironically, most critics of economics attack it from a Romantic point of view, thus showing how Romanticism really does "get us coming and going".

In economics, people are made of Passion and Reason. Passion comes out in all the desires for goods that people want, including material goods (bread, cars, TV sets), services (manicure, watching sports on

TV), social relations (friendship, gossiping), deeper social relations (spouse, children), and even choice of religion (Lutheran or Methodist). Reason is how people go about satisfying their Passions. Reason serves Passion. Under the right conditions, that is under a fair economy, Passion is overwhelmingly good. Passion and Reason is rational strategic thinking. In economics, Reason in the service of Passion is smart shopping. Economists don't usually stress this aspect, but a person can be "chaotic". Passions are irrational in that they are not necessarily rational. They just are. People want what they want, and that is that. This is a kind of chaos. Yet, in the right situations, the chaos of each person can be creative. The right situations are when Passion guides Reason to smart shopping in a fair economy. Then people are Creative Chaos using Reason to serve Passion to create themselves and recreate the economy.

We need food, clothing, shelter, and raw materials from the material world but the material world is not rational, it is chaotic. The material world acts on us, too often hurting us. We need to tame the material world and to get out of the material world what we need. That is what business firms do. They impose Reason on the chaos of the material world to make chaos creative. They impose scientific production processes on the material world to create stuff. They use Creative Chaos to make stuff that we consumers want. They are smart producers as consumers are smart shoppers.

Business firms do have a Passion, and that is Profit. They pursue their Passion with complete rational Reason. Passion guides their Reason. The Reason of scientific production and the Reason of pursuing profit are aspects of the same Reason that serves the Passion of firms. Thus Reason serves Passion, that is, Profit, even among business firms. Whether the drive for Profit is an example of Creative Chaos, I do not go into here, but the simple answer is "yes".

In pursuing Profit with their Reason, business firms make the goods that consumers want. That is how firms and consumers get together. They get together on the free market, they get together best there, and that is the only place they get together best. So, in the right situations, a fair economy, this relation harnesses chaos to make it creative and to serve the Passion of consumers. It is Reason in the service of good Passion. The free market is the "good family arena" of capitalism.

In a fair economy, the Passion of consumers united with Reason of Consumers meets with the Passion of business firms united with the Reason of business firms, to harness chaos, make chaos creative, and find the good Passion needs of consumers and firms. People get what they want and firms make a proper profit. Smart shopping and smart producing are good Passion united with Reason to create a beneficial economy. This is the ideal free enterprise fair competition capitalist economy.

As long as the economy is fair, the union of good Passion with Reason (the smart shopping of consumers and smart production of business firms) results in the greatest welfare for all consumers (most happiness, satisfaction, and goodness). This is truly good Passion guiding Reason.

Business firms meet consumers in the free fair market. The free fair market is where good Passion unites with reason to tame chaos, make chaos creative, and find the greatest welfare for everybody. The free market is where the new order is forged (synthesized) and re-forged from potential chaos and potential opposites. The free market is where the proper order overcomes disorder and avoids hyper-order. The term "the free market" is shorthand for all of this.

When consumers act as smart shoppers to choose goods (and services), and business firms act as smart producers to make goods, both use their Wit to unify Passion and Reason in a higher movement and higher form.

The role of Intuition and Wit shows up best in new ideas, inventions, products, marketing, shows, and movies. Business firms show Intuition and Wit when they dream up and develop new products. Looking at the life of Steve Jobs, can anyone doubt the role of Intuition and Wit? Not only firms but consumers show some Intuition and Wit when they respond to new products or develop new technology in the areas that please them. The development of social media and Internet videos is the expression of consumer Intuition and Wit, and one of the most important new forms of the Spirit.

Like almost all human products, nearly everything sold in the market combines both material and idea or material and spiritual. A smart phone isn't just a device; it is a way of life. You don't just eat a fast food lunch; you give yourself what you deserve. You don't just drive a car; you drive a wild strong animal or a classy luxury name from the days of car glory. You don't buy insurance; you buy peace of mind. You don't watch a TV show; you watch what your guys watch. The modern economy combines the material and spiritual. The modern economy is an extension of the essential human combination of the material and spiritual that the Spirit likes so much. The modern economy is project of the Spirit that is realized through the combination of producers and consumers, material and spiritual.

Bad chaos intrudes partly in the acts of business firms who are "crooked" and make bad products or offer bad services. Economists use the term "deliberate unfair competition" or deliberate "market structuring" for what people call the Cunning of bad business firms. As long as the economy is fair, the union of good Passion with Reason suppresses bad chaos, bad Passion, and Cunning. Bad business firms and bad products go away automatically. Because consumers are smart shoppers, they unite good Passion with Reason, they are able to keep track of good and bad firms over the long run, they shop exclusively with good firms over the long run, and thus they drive out bad firms over the long run.

Creative Chaos, good Passion, and the Reason of the economy is best represented by business people, innovators, entrepreneurs, and "job creators". When the economy is running smoothly, these people are its Reason-based Jedi, like the old Jedi council. When the economy is "out of whack" and threatened by bad Passion and Disorder (bad Reason), then these people naturally arise to set things right again. They are the rebels that unite Sith Passion and Jedi Reason into a system that is better than either. Then they are like Jedi united with good Sith to make something even better.

Sometimes, the actions of bad firms call attention to the system, and we want to intervene in the system. In this case, bad hyper-order comes from an interventionist state that seeks to take over our Passion (our demand). Bad hyper-order is like chaos that has not yet been made creative. These interventionists are like the hyper-ordered non-creative sterile Jedi council before the Jedi united with the Sith. They are the misguided Liberal state that seeks to force all the people into one seemingly rational, but wrong, ideal of what is best. They tell us what we want, what to make, and how to make it. In this situation, Cunning is collectivist policy. The best antidote is a freer fairer economy that again makes chaos creative and unites good Passion with smart shopping and smart producing.

Hyper-Reason interventionist policies actually serve to invite the bad Passion and Cunning of bad firms and bad people. Bad policies turn Creative Chaos into simple chaos. They invite bad Sith to arise as bad business people, products, or political leaders. They invite bad people to institute their own hyper-order as fascism, and to do so in the name of a false free market. Cunning is the kind of cooperation between business and government that we see in the classic Fascist states of World War Two, in China, and in the pro-business policies of the Republican Party. It is what economists used to call “mercantilism”. Bad interventionist policies invite bad Passion and Cunning. Economists say business firms and people arise who “seek rent” from the government. The correct antidote is taming chaos to make it creative through Reason in the service of good Passion, and so to create the proper new order based on smart shopping from consumers and smart producing from business firms.

This picture is closer to reality than naïve critics of the free market know. Regardless of how realistic all this is, we do think this way. If you believe this story is a fantasy tale with no effect on how people think or what they do, or no effect on state policy, then talk to a free market economist, politician, or right wing TV commentator. Read the classical texts of economics. That does not mean it is false.

Back to Selfishness, Materialism, and Trendiness.

Recall that the Spirit is alone even in wholeness, and is fractured, isolated, and alone when it is out on its many projects. We are like small versions of the Spirit. We drift into isolation, unable to connect to other people. They are unable to connect to us. We “do our own thing”, carry out our own projects, convinced that we can gain satisfaction that way, but failing. When we fail, we do not assess our situation but instead embark on another project hoping that will give us satisfaction where the previous project failed. This is not yet selfishness but it is easy to see how it can lead to selfishness in the right conditions.

In ideology, capitalism thinks in terms of isolated strategic individuals and isolated strategic competing business firms. Firms that do not pursue profit, and only profit, with ruthless efficiency, disappear. The satisfaction, or “utility”, of one individual cannot be compared to the satisfaction of another. The only thing people want, and the only thing that people can get, is satisfaction. We can only know what we want and we can only go after what we want. We cannot help anybody find satisfaction and we can't really get our own satisfaction from the happiness of anybody else. In reality, this is not true, but it can be true enough so that people do feel alone.

When Romanticism and capitalism combine under the right conditions, then people can feel the isolation and selfishness that critics of modern times complain about. On the other hand, people do not have to feel this as much as critics complain about. I am not sure if Romanticism-plus-capitalism leads people to feel more isolated and selfish than other systems; as I said before, I have seen selfish isolated farmers, and ideally they are supposed to be happy community members. Probably when we feel our institutions are not working properly and that our actions are useless, then we probably also feel alone and turn to selfish behavior and selfish buying. That might be easier to do under Romanticism. It seems to happen enough for it to be a chronic problem but not so strongly that we can't fight it.

The Spirit uses the material world for spiritual ends. Christianity teaches that we are a blend of material and spiritual, the material can serve the spiritual, and the blend is superior to either pure extreme (except with God who is a pure spirit but superior to us). We can only get at the spiritual through the material. So

I can imagine Romanticism that is not crassly materialistic. I can imagine materialism that deliberately seeks a good blend of the spiritual and material in proper projects, such as, feeding the poor, making a discovery in science, or even helping to feed and house your own family. Yet, when conditions thwart spiritual work, when the institutions that we made ourselves don't work as they should, and, at the same time, institutions such as the capitalist market give us a lot of toys to play with such as TV sets, smart phones, "phablets", cars, and drones, then it is easy to seek in material stuff the satisfaction that we do not get in spiritual work. It is easy to see in toys minor projects of the Spirit and to seek in them what we should seek in greater projects of the Spirit. It is Spiritual to be on the cutting edge of technology. It is spiritual to be a smart shopper and to buy a lot. We can't get real satisfaction that way but we can chase a Spirit substitute in the form of another material-semi-spiritual toy. We can see another movie, buy a nice car, or buy clothes that just look and feel really good.

The Spirit always has a project and never runs out of projects. The Spirit never settles into one project for all time. Each project must end, and another project must begin. On the other hand, projects of the Spirit are amazing and can last hundreds, thousands, or millions of years. The Earth is a project of the Spirit, and it has been going for at least four billion years. Humanity is a project of the Spirit, and is at least five million years old. Even projects that the Spirit uses people to do, such as Classical Greece and Rome, India, or democracy, are big and take hundreds of years. Even with human projects, the Spirit has only a few big ones going at once. So, if we imitate the Spirit, we keep busy, but we keep busy on projects that make a real difference, and we have only one or two at a time.

By now, you should see where this is going. A project can be a trend and a trend can be a project. If we do not feel deep satisfaction with any activity (cause etc.) then we can feel it is not really of the Spirit, and we should drop it. Because we never settle deep issues, we can never really deeply feel that our actions are of the Spirit. The capitalist market is tremendously successful not only at giving us material goods but at giving us trends. Instead of settling the question of chronic unemployment, we can listen to another piece of hip-hip, rock, or hip-hop culture or watch another movie. We can figure out the latest big thing. We can find the latest quality must-see TV before anybody else. When other institutions are not working well, trendiness is not only a cure for boredom but is positively spiritual.

Where the actual balance falls, how trendy anyone is, depends on the personality of that person and on how that person can find real activities to get interested in other than trends. Because our institutions are not working as they should, we always feel a little off-center and willing to dip into trends. It is only natural to do wonder what others are doing and to do it too. What is the latest academic idea from Europe? So nobody except a dedicated monk ever totally avoids trends, or should. If our institutions are working well and we feel that our actions have real good results, then we don't waste our life in trends, we only have some natural fun with them. I don't know how to compare recent America because no other place in the history of the world has had so many opportunities for trends. Even if we felt tremendously satisfied with our institutions and our contributions, we would still have more opportunities than the most unhappy peon in Medieval Europe and would play with more trends than the Czars of the 1700s. Every minor league "foody" in America eats better than most French kings until about 1600. Marketers and our friends are amazingly clever at getting us involved in trends. As a wild guess, I would say that Americans are a bit less satisfied with their lives and a bit more trendy, especially more than I dream about, but they are ready to put down trends and so some hard un-fashionable work when called on and when they think it will help.

I leave it to you to assess how much blame should fall on Romanticism alone without other conditions. The real point is to see the overall pattern and to seek ways out while still having some fun.

Dogma.

This section is an introduction to a larger issue that I can't go into here. For fun, see the movie "Dogma" by Kevin Smith, who also did "Mall Rats", "Clerks", and "Jersey Girl". I think he is a good sincere Roman Catholic Christian who, through his movies, tries to interpret Roman Catholic ideas so they are relevant to our world and not mere dogmas. Contrasts between noise and silence in the movie, especially by God, comment on dogma. His idea of forgiveness in "Clerks" is far beyond any forgiving that I can muster, and, I think, what Jesus had in mind.

I have said that I dislike dogma. Dogma differs from principles mixed with practicality; and the teachings of Jesus are not dogma. Some conservatives dislike dogma. They see nearly all the ideas of the left as dogma, and blame that dogma for all modern malaise. I agree a bit but disagree more. As they are used, conservative ideas are as much dogma as ideas of the left. Conservatives cannot offer a program based only on old traditions, without using ideas, without using new ideas, and then those ideas turn into bad dogma. If it were used correctly, the idea of the free market would be good but in conservative practice it turns into a bad dogma, and could be used by them no other way. To show how I see dogma and how I compare to conservatives would require looking into how ideas turn into dogma under any system and then especially under conservative practice. That is too much for here.

Consider the idea of "freedom". As people commonly understand the idea, it does more good than harm. Who wants to live under political, social, or cultural tyranny? If we do not hold the idea strongly enough, then we lapse into slavery. We have all heard "freedom is not free", and it is true. Now consider absolute freedom. Everybody gets to do what he-she wants with little regard for any other person or thing; and everybody expects the state to back him-her. Obviously this has become right without responsibility and is wicked. That is typical of ideas turning into dogma. Consider the idea of "equality". Gross inequality of wealth or rank is disgusting, morally disgusting, hurts society, and hurts the economy. On the other hand, it is not true that everybody has equal ability and equal drive. We want people to be rewarded according to ability and drive, and we want people to be able to give to their families according to what they have earned with their talent and work. We cannot make sure that everybody has the same income or wealth. We cannot make sure everybody has a good job, nice house, excellent schools, state-of-the-art medical care throughout an un-naturally prolonged life, and absolutely the same say in all political affairs. We cannot make everybody just as smart and just as talented. Trying to force too much equality turns into collectivist tyranny and another form of even-worse inequality; that is the lesson of "Animal Farm" and of the short-story-turned-into-movie "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut.

Ideas tend to turn into dogmas under systems like liberalism, conservatism, traditional religion, and Romanticism. Sometimes, as in good Buddhism, the middle path is the best way to see an idea and use an idea, and the best way to keep it from turning into a dogma. But the middle way is not always best. What we need is experience and good thinking. That is just what dogma blocks. Dogma sustains itself. Dogma is often part of a system that eats the world. Both lefties and righties are equally blameworthy.

How this happens, and to what ideas it happens, varies with the socio-economic-cultural system, and it varies with particular conditions of the system at particular times. There is no good short analysis of this effect to refer to.

So, the questions for here should be:

- Is dogma more prevalent in modern life than before?
- Do people live more by dogma in modern life than they lived by good ideas before?
- What kind of dogmas are most prevalent, and why?
- Does Romanticism turn ideas into dogma?
- Is glamorization of dogma under Romanticism distinct from the spiritualization of dogma in traditional religion?
- Do the common dogmas in modern life serve Romanticism?
- When does Romanticism lead to more or less dogma?
- How does trust in institutions and belief in the good effects of our acts influence how good ideas turn into bad dogmas, and which ideas turn into dogmas?
- How does the Romantic idea of the project lie behind the Romantic treatment of ideas and dogma?
- Does the Romantic use of ideas and dogmas favor moral relativity and moral absolutism?
- What roles do capitalism and populist democracy play? How do they interact with Romanticism? Which system takes the lead?

The brief answers are: Modern life has more ideas than previous periods. We do tend to turn ideas into dogmas, and we stick with them enough to cause harm. We also hop between dogmas like trends when that suits us. We treat dogmas like projects. I cannot go into which ideas we tend to treat as dogmas. I think Romanticism is more prone to dogmas than some other systems; I don't know how it compares to traditional Christianity or to ideal liberalism. The Romantic use of dogma leads to both moral relativity and absolutism. Romantic glamorization is much like spiritualization in traditional religion. The Romantic use of dogma reinforces Romanticism. Capitalism and populist democracy started carrying the ball but not Romanticism has picked it up and controls the game. Capitalism and populist democracy continue to play big roles helping Romanticism.

PART 9: Assessment of Romanticism.

Recall that Romanticism always fails for people in general and for society as a whole, at least in the ways that matter. The institutions that we make to serve the Spirit in democracy don't work out. The labor we

should do as part of the Spirit doesn't work out. Failure creates anxiety. We can't alleviate the anxiety by quitting on democracy or the Spirit. We find other reasons for failure. We look for people to blame other than us. Rich people blame poor. Poor people blame rich. Black people blame Whites, and vice versa. And so on.

The people who get blamed, even the rich, conservatives, and Republicans, can now claim status as a marginalized group, part of the underbelly, the rebel vanguard of the Spirit, and entitled. They have even more right to blame other groups and to receive benefits.

So a strange self-sustaining vibration develops between many groups, all claiming to be the vanguard of the Spirit, to represent creativity and life, to be at the center of democracy and the Spirit and marginalized at the same time, and all claiming entitlement. Sometimes this situation is funny but mostly it is sad.

So Much Spirituality.

Almost everybody likes to think of him-herself as spiritual and likes to think of his-her life as in tune with the Spirit and adding to the work of the Spirit. Before Romanticism, people wanted this but not everybody thought he-she really was holy and working for the Spirit. People might have thought they were part of a social body and the social body was sanctified but they did not think they in particular were sanctified. In Medieval Europe, a bishop was sanctified but not a cobbler. A king might have thought he was sanctified but a peasant thought he-she was sanctified only through playing a good part in the kingdom. People did not think they were participating in God if they joined a movement such as peasant revolt. I doubt Lady Godiva thought not paying taxes was holy even if justified.

Now, whether we admit it or not, we hope we often participate in the Spirit, and that our projects, if not our jobs, are of the Spirit. We seek movements that link us to the Spirit. "Pro Life" and "Pro Choice" are not just movements, not just about women, and not even just about morality, but about the work of the Spirit in our time. The sociologist Max Weber might have said this is a natural extension of the Protestant idea of the "calling" to God and of our life and occupation as a "profession" of God. I would not dispute Weber but I think this desire to see of our lives spiritually also is a tendency that has roots in human nature and Indo-European culture, and comes out strongly with Romanticism.

All this might be merely one of the charming features of Romanticism except that it has a couple of strong results, two bad and one good.

First, we want to think our occupations are part of the work of the Spirit. In fact, a lowly clerk actually is an important part of a big system and he-she helps other people more than he-she knows. But we don't feel that way. We feel tiny in our jobs. We feel our jobs hinder the work of the Spirit. That feeling makes us restless. It contributes to the search for projects to make us feel holy. It contributes to confusion over our relation to the Spirit and the play of the Spirit in the world.

Second, except for Robin Hood (Wood) and his Band of Merry Men (and women), people did not think bandits were doing the work of the Spirit until about the same time Romanticism arose, about the middle 1700s. Then we get the romantic and Romantic "highwayman". Even Robin Hood in his modern form does not date to the middle ages but to Walter Scott in the late 1700s in novel "Ivanhoe". Peasants have

long glamorized bandits as rebels against lords but nobody saw bandits and nasty people as more sacred than a farmer or worker. Nobody would have glamorized gamblers and thieves as we now do the lower classes and some criminals. Think of they appear in many movies after about 1980, including a couple of really good movies such as “The Grifters”. All “film noire” glamorizes the underbelly of society even if the characters “get theirs” in the end. Glamorizing the underbelly and bad people has had bad results, the least of which is that our minds are foggy.

The Sherlock Holmes saga, especially the recent movies with Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law, is an exercise in heroes joining the underbelly while trying not to lose themselves in it. Moriarty and Holmes take on aspects of the lower classes and use them. Yet both also draw a clear line between themselves and the lower classes and make a point of being able to jump out of the lower classes. Watson remains aloof although he often has more human sympathy toward poor people than either Holmes or Moriarty. Charles Dickens is drawn to the lower classes and criminals, and sees their humanity, but does not make the mistake of trusting them or wanting to be them. His heroes (and heroines) want to get out of the typical crime-ridden lower class. Fagin was not a good guy. Oliver Twist had to betray Fagin. Modern people are not as good at getting into and out of the lower classes as Holmes, Moriarty, Watson, or the man characters of Dickens.

Sometime after Dickens and Doyle, we stepped over the line into glamorizing the underbelly without also seeing its faults. We have fallen into our own trap of glamorizing the lower classes and non-White ethnic groups. We want to be the glamorous version of them, not the real one. Movies such as “Donnie Brasco” and movies about soldiers who do “questionable things” in battle, such as “American Sniper”, show what happens when we cross the line and struggle getting back. The “Spaghetti Western” series starring Clint Eastwood, and his movie “Grand Torino”, show people straddling the line more than Holmes but finally drawing a line and staying on the good side. Some Bond movies push this theme. Revenge movies such as “The Losers” show what happens when some good guys do lose their way.

Especially since World War Two, we have let bad people get away with a lot of bad crap because they put on the Romantic mantle of the downtrodden lower classes and non-White ethnics. We do a lot of silly things because we take on our own made-up role of the glamorized lower class rebel. I take up this topic again in the chapter on decency and indecency.

One of the bad mistakes we make is to demonize the police, especially in their relations to Blacks and other non-White ethnic groups. I am not trying to “whitewash the cops”. I know about mistakes and bad attitudes. The police do far more good than bad and they are not the agents of the devil oppressing the Spirit as the Spirit tries to rise out of the Creative Chaos of non-White ethnicity and the social underbelly. Romantic glamorization makes us unable to assess correctly and do the right thing. We need to get rid of Romantic blinders so we can see clearly and figure out the right thing.

Glamorizing the lower classes and identifying with them goes with demonizing rich people and business firms and wanting to reject them. It goes along with seeing the police as simply tools of the rich. How socio-economic class and Romanticism fit together is beyond the scope of this book. It is a mistake to think one simply makes the other but they do interact.

Third, on the good side, allowing that people other than aristocrats might be doing the work of the Spirit has gone a long way toward extending human kindness beyond the usual limits of our group and our lords. Modern people are good at seeing the human side of other people even if we glamorize it and make it unrealistic. Glamorizing the humanity of other people is better than refusing to see it at all and so making an excuse to hurt them. Extending the Spirit to other people is doing the work of Jesus even if we have to glamorize it. Without being able to see other people as children of the Spirit and as doing the Work of the Spirit, we would not have had the Civil Rights movement, Gay rights, feminism, or the labor movement. We would not have helped poor people in the Third World. We would not have sent food and medical care.

(1) Assessing Bad Effects.

All the numbered sections in this sequence belong to my assessment of Romanticism.

It is hard to assess Romanticism briefly. First, it includes features that are found in other stances but it uses the features differently. Second, when we find a dominant stance that we don't like, we blame all problems on it. So, when people are selfish, entitled, zealous, or overly herd-like, I can say Romanticism did it even when it didn't. I would guess that Romanticism causes about half the pain while particular faults and other stances cause the other half.

One way to assess a stance is to list effects, find what effects have in common, find what makes an effect distinct, and trace it all back to themes in the stance. I can do that with Romanticism but don't have the space. Instead, first I state a few assessments and then focus on one relation: how Romanticism adds to the problems in democracy.

I prefer the stodgy Jedi Council to dramatic Sith and glorious rebels. The Enlightenment view, relying on a good mix of reason and emotion, is true enough while the Romantic view is more than false enough. I know reason cannot give us all we need. I enjoy passion and think it is an integral part of our lives. But I prefer the mix of passion and reason not be a glamorized mystical union, not be ruled entirely by passion, and not be awash in bad passions and cunning. Passion alone cannot save us. The union of Passion and Reason, supposedly led by good Passion, cannot save us. When we indulge our passions, inevitably we fall into bad passion and cunning. I am not at all cunning and I don't want to develop that skill. I want to keep good and bad. I want to enjoy good passions and control bad passions. I prefer that the mix of reason and passion lie closer to the feeling that comes with simple acts of decency and goodness. I prefer that the mix actually includes a big helping of reason by way of principles. Principles are one big correct way to mix reason, passion, creativity, and goodness.

(2) Romanticism Helps Erode Democracy.

After the Great Depression, the rise of big government and big business, the rise of one world economy, and the oil shocks of the 1970s, democracy could not handle most international problems and many domestic problems. The people will not support political parties that tell the full truth and will not elect officials who tell the full truth and really do something. Each subgroup insists on a minimum of power and prosperity and is willing to diminish the total power and prosperity of the nation to get it. We are happy to destroy nature for power and prosperity now. We would rather indulge in short term acts that make us

feel good now than deal with big problems over the long term. We willingly hurt our own nation so much that eventually it must diminish and our own group suffers too.

This behavior is not limited to democracy, or to democracy under Romanticism, but Romanticism makes it worse in democracy. When world conditions got bad enough, Romanticism made this kind of behavior so bad under democracy that democracy started failing. This is where we stand now.

In describing how Romanticism hurts democracy, I don't describe all the problems of democracy or the worst problems. I choose among problems to convey an idea. I don't describe simply seeking power as when political parties curry favor with ethnic groups, immigrants, and the military. I disparage Left and Right equally. I repeat from Chapter Two on my political values. The causes that serve as the focus of bad Romantic action are not necessarily bad in themselves. In fact, usually they are good and quite worthwhile. The people who pursue them for Romantic reasons do not help the causes and sometimes hurt the cause. They pursue the causes out of proportion (irrationally) so that they do not get at the roots of problems and they neglect other more pressing issues.

=> People learn how to use Romantic ideology for their gain even when they don't know it is ideology or Romantic. The fact that anybody does this, along with the specific things people do, undermine self-government and undermine relations between groups in democracy. People, and groups including ethnic, gender, religious, and socio-economic class, present themselves not only as disadvantaged and entitled but also as people who have a special relation with the Spirit and are specially entitled. They present themselves as rebels or as the Remnant. They present themselves as lively, creative, artistic, and the embodiment of Creative Chaos. Blacks have rhythm while Whites have harmony and melody and so both are the Creative Chaos of the Spirit and entitled. Blacks are rebels while Whites are the Remnant preserving order. Blacks are the holy Remnant who bring back to us ideas of humanity and kindness. Whites are the creative rebels who drive business and science, and so bring a better life to everybody. All these special claims hurt everybody.

=> As I wrote this, a flood of women and children were coming into the United States illegally from Central America. They said they were coming to avoid the drug gangs that had arisen along new drug routes in Central America after the U.S. slowed smuggling through the Caribbean. Allow that what "illegals" say about drug gangs is true. What will happen if we let them stay? In three years, or five, another wave will come using the same reason. Along with them will come many tens of thousands who do not flee drug gangs but take advantage of the situation to seek jobs in the United States. It will happen over and over again. We cannot deal with this issue until we deal with the drug market in the United States. In the meantime, we cannot allow hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants into the U.S. annually. Yet the Left, including Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, supports allowing these people in. As far as I can tell, the Left gives no thought as to the root problem in the drug wars, does not say how to solve that problem, and ignores that waves of illegal immigration will recur and recur. It cannot separate fleeing for safety from coming to the U.S. for economic gain. Why does the Left champion these "illegals" but gives no thought to the causes and the future? Because to do so allows middle and upper class people on the Left to feel good about themselves. The typically middle class families of the Left will suffer little in the short run while the working class families of the Republican Right will take the biggest hit. The Left can feel like rebels against the heartless Republican power structure. They put their feelings before the true needs of the nation, the countries that are being hurt by drug gangs, and the world. Illegal immigrants, and some

of their supporters here, know that Americans are susceptible to this kind of argument and so cast themselves in light of this predicament regardless of reality.

=> The spending habits of the United States federal government are insane, and the spending of the states is not saner. The Right blames personal entitlement while the Left blames military spending. Because I just criticized the Left, here I criticize the Right. Ignore the dubious benefits of heavy military spending. If the United States dominated the world economy as it did from after World War Two until about 1970, then the United States could afford to play world police officer and it might even gain more than it lost. The world has changed. We cannot spend our enemies into defeat now. We must have help dealing with Russia and China, and fighting Muslim extremists yet we get help only from a handful of long-term allies. No matter how much a country badmouthed us in the past, when any country needs help, they call on the United States, they expect to get it, and we do give it. America leads the fight against Ebola. We can't afford this and it is not bringing us more than it costs, not even in goodwill. Despite what Vladimir Putin did to the Ukraine, we will not fight a tank war in Europe. We do not need tens of thousands of American soldiers now in South Korea. We do not need even half the military bases we have. We could end half the weapons systems we have and stop development of half the systems that are in the works. A smaller military that worked better with global partners would be more effective. Yet any attempt to scale down meets a Republican chorus for more military, soldiers, missions, bases, and weapons. The defenders of the military think they are patriots and are the rebel minority crusaders against the liberals who would sell out America. They are a small band of heroes keeping the dream of a godly kingdom alive. They are the small hard kernel of resistance against bad chaos. They are both rebels and the remnant. They are the only ones able to harness Creative Chaos. If America can keep the peace on its terms long enough, eventually world capitalism will triumph, there will be a new synthesis, and their order will be the right new order. Running around helping countries is part of the price the Right Wing pays for being the moral leading edge and keeping the moral leading edge.

=> As I wrote this, fast food workers around the United States were calling for a raise in the minimum wage from about \$7 per hour to at least \$10 per hour. They hoped for about \$15 per hour. I don't know what the leaders had in mind for benefits. If we accept that the minimum wage defines how Americans should live at the least, then activists had a point. Compared to average wages and to the buying power of wages, the minimum wage in 2014 is the lowest since the 1970s, maybe ever. In contrast to before 1990 when most fast food workers were young people without families, now many, likely most, fast food workers are full adults with families. The minimum wage will not support a family and will not even make a significant contribution to a group of adult earners trying to support a family together. Republicans allowed the erosion of the minimum wage despite inflation and changes in the work force as their way of eliminating the minimum wage altogether – if the official minimum wage is below the market minimum wage, then, in effect, there is no official minimum wage. The Left was solidly behind workers and against Republicans. Again, the Left did not think it through but jumped on a rebel train instead.

Much as I dislike giving Republicans credit for any sense, they are right about some things. Here is what the Left overlooked in its crusade to be the small band of rebel working class heroes representing the aching masses who cannot represent themselves: Most jobs that would fall under a raise in the minimum wage could easily be mechanized. Look at the register at a fast food place. It does not have numerals; it has little icons of food. It is easy to replace a register operated by an employee with a touch-pad in which customers directly enter orders, even at the drive-through. It is easy to replace a janitor with a small robot

that cleans floors. Even if a job cannot be mechanized, employers will simply do without positions that do not pay for themselves. If the minimum wage rises, many people will be out of a job entirely, and the rate of unemployment will rise. Many people are not smart enough, and do not have enough real education (not a phony piece of paper) to get a decent job. If crappy jobs are not available to them, they will not find a job at all. If they are displaced from a crappy job, they will not find another crappy job. Who says that all jobs in the United States must pay enough so that one person holding that job, that is, a single parent, can raise a family, all by him-herself? It is unreasonable to think this. Only if we had few single parents and a lot of other people who held good jobs and could afford to support the single parents through their taxes can we think this. Now, we have a lot of single parents and few people who can afford to help them through paying taxes. If a person thinks he-she might be a single parent then he-she should make sure he-she can support a family on whatever job he-she gets. He-she should not expect the state to be the other parent or to take over in case of an emergency or in cases inflation overtakes borderline wages. If he-she can only get a crappy job (as long as the market is fairly fair), then he-she should not expect help from the state to support his-her desire to reproduce. If he-she cannot get a job good enough to support a family then he-she should not have a family. The people of the United States have to think about the world economy, the place of the United States in the world economy, what kind of jobs the U.S. can have for a variety of people with a variety of skill levels, if all those jobs can provide enough to raise a family, what to do about people who cannot get jobs, and what to do about people who can only get jobs that are not enough to raise a family. What role will education play? Can we make phony paper education into real education? We have to think about why there are so many single parents with crappy jobs out there, and why they expect the state to raise their family for them. We won't do any of this as long as we act primarily on the basis of being rebel crusaders for our favorite dogma.

=> The Tea Party arose after about 2008 and it was behind a couple of shut-downs of the government. At first, Republican leaders drove the shutdowns because they mistook the situation. The Tea Party sees itself as the rebel band leading the next coming of the Spirit. The Republicans thought they could play rebels too, play magicians, or both. That only works if your guys win. When the last big shutdown lost heavily in the eyes of the American people, the Republican Party had a setback until it swore that it would never shut down the government again. The shutdown of the state cost the whole nation, not just the government, dearly both in terms of business now and in terms of reputation and business in the long run. We need to be clear why the Tea Party and Republicans did what they did. A few Tea Party members thought they were helping America but not many Republicans were that foolish. The vast majority of Republicans did this as a dogma stunt. They were setting up the Romantic scenario and their part in it. They were willing to do this regardless of how it hurt the country. Fortunately, the American people saw through this drama and made some good decisions.

=> In 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, the young Black man Michael Brown assaulted a police officer, and then the police officer shot and killed him. I don't give details. As I wrote this, a grand jury decided not to indict the police officer for any crime. For weeks after the shooting, protests, violence, riots, and lootings occurred around Ferguson. With the grand jury decision, they resumed more intensely. The majority of the activists were Blacks but a few Whites joined. Most Blacks were young; the Whites ranged in age. They complained that White people still look down on Blacks, and White police officers stop more Blacks, search more Blacks, hurt more Blacks, and kill more Blacks than police officers of any color do to Whites. Statistically, in some ways, this is true. We have to ask: Are police officers largely justified? Blacks and supporters say officers are not. I believe police officers are largely justified. But that is not the main

point here. Assume Blacks are correct, so that racial prejudice distorts how police officers treat Blacks. While a big point, that is not the main point that should be taken. The fact that protesters made a big deal out of police prejudice and violence toward Blacks covered up a more important point. The covering up is only possible because of the Romantic mindset that lets protestors think they are rebels against “the man” and fighters for a new order when really what protestors are doing is making themselves feel good while avoiding a worse problem. I am not blaming the victim here but I will be blamed.

The real problem is violence among Blacks and what creates violence among Blacks. I cannot go into detail about what lies behind Black crime and Black-on-Black violence. Structural forces play a role such as lack of good jobs and the abysmal Black schools. Cultural forces play a role such as a generally high tolerance for violence and the belief that violence solves problems well. Unless Blacks take care of Black crime and Black-on-Black violence, then protests against police violence against Blacks are a token at best. They are a criminal self-delusion at worst because they cover up the real problems.

Every year in America, a couple hundred Blacks, nearly all criminals, are killed by police officers. I don't know how many of the officers are what ethnic group. Every year, thousands of Blacks kill Blacks. The murder rate among Blacks is higher than for any other major ethnic group. The crime rate among Blacks is higher. As long as crime and murder rates among Blacks are so high, the police must be suspicious and must be ready to respond to violence. Even Blacks need wariness by the police to keep order within the Black community. Some police officers might use wariness as an excuse to vent prejudice but the underlying problem of Black violence is still there. Until underlying Black crime and violence diminish, then, even if police act out of prejudice, police still must act. When police act, some Blacks will die. If police could totally eliminate prejudice, then the rate at which Blacks died would lessen by a small amount but only a small amount. White people are only a small part of the problem. The police are only a small part of the problem. The damage done to the Black community would lessen far more if Blacks would diminish crime and violence among Blacks. Energy spent fighting crime and violence in the Black community would do far more good than energy spent fighting prejudice among Whites even if the police are badly prejudiced. Blacks do stage token rallies against crime and violence – to which Whites almost never come – but the rallies do nothing to stop crime and violence.

Blacks know all this. If Blacks know all this, then why do they spend so much energy against police and so little energy fighting Black violence and crime? By the same logic that a Black person might use to blame a White person, I must say Blacks do it because it makes them feel good, not because it really helps. The same is true of Whites who join protests. When I see a Black leader protest police violence, I know he-she has not faced up to Black crime and violence. I see a Romantic hypocrite using and hurting his-her own people. Blacks won't face up to, and deal with, the real issues.

Blacks can't afford this anymore. Other ethnic groups can't afford it. Democracy can't afford it.

=> Everybody knows that America has the highest murder rate among developed countries and that murder is done by guns. Both sides of the gun issue are self-deluded Romantics, and their delusion allows them to feel good about themselves while pushing focus off the main issue. We might not be able to do much about the main issue but we can face what is going on and stop fooling ourselves. Fooling ourselves about issues like this shows how we fool ourselves in general. For example, take assault weapons and background checks. Despite the use of assault weapons in some truly horrible mass

murders, assault weapons are used in less than 1% of gun murders in the United States. I don't know what percentage of gun murders are done by mentally deranged people but I doubt it is 10%. The vast majority of gun murders are done by people at home or in the neighborhood; who get into an argument over sex, booze, or drugs; and grab a handy pistol. I am not sure since the rise of the 9mm, but, a few years ago, most murders were done with 22 caliber pistols that would not be stopped by current laws. We would stop only a few murders if we forced background checks and banned assault weapons. Checks are costly and they annoy decent gun users. Still, it would not be much trouble to have some checks. Likewise, assault weapons have almost no practical purpose. They are not good hunting weapons. They are not good for home defense. You can't carry them for self-defense. Their main purpose is to let a small group of silly grim guys shoot up the range. It is not a great hardship to ban assault weapons. People against guns would do more good if they forgot about background checks and assault weapons to instead focus on cheap available handguns. Gun lovers would protect rights better and do more good if they allowed checks and they stopped touting assault weapons. So why do people argue about background checks and assault weapons while overlooking the problem with cheap readily available handguns? That would be a hard problem to solve. People who defend gun rights fear that background checks and banning assault weapons is the first step in getting rid of all handguns. People who want to control handguns see that gun lovers will never face the greater issue of gun crime. Both sides say they are the small band of rebel crusaders for the true rights of Americans. They are the rebels fighting for the true order against a horrible oppressive other. Both insist they are on the side of life; I don't explain their arguments for how they are on the side of life. They keep themselves busy fighting over non-issues so that they can feel good and so they can avoid the real issues.

=> Is "we hate all abortions and all people who have abortions" really "pro life"? Is "please just let me alone to have my abortion in private and to get on with my life" really "pro choice"? Then why do the groups present themselves as "pro this or that"? I have written about abortion elsewhere (see website) where I explain that the state must allow some acts that particular groups hold against their private morality. A modern pluralistic democracy likely has to allow some abortion even if many citizens believe abortion is immoral. It is not necessary to accept my stance to get what I say here but I like readers to know my stance. The key insight here comes not from the "pro" part of the positions because everybody wants to be pro something. The key insight here comes from "life" and "choice". While not only Romantic buzzwords, these are Romantic buzzwords. They are used by a group of people to present themselves as those who know better intellectually and spiritually, and who safeguard morality and life from the large clumsy current state (government) that is anti-life and anti-choice. They are rebels of the Spirit. They are the better new order. They defend the downtrodden innocent who can't defend themselves. They are the voice of Creative Chaos. Especially in the "pro life" movement, the real force seems to me less love for life than dislike for some people and the desire to control the families and reproductive lives of young women. The force behind "choice" is most obvious not among the Left but among the Right who use "choice" as a Romantic buzzword to confuse people and gain power for business groups and politicians. Women of the Left have adopted the Right use of the word and so have adopted the Right ploy of confusion and control. When we get confused about something as basic as "choice" and "life", we are really confused.

=> Women need to get past general feelings of dissatisfaction and rebellion instead to focus on a few issues that can really make a difference for them and everyone. I suggest focusing on equal pay for equal work. Despite some solid gains, crusading as sisters in the vanguard of the new world has not

helped them to reach what they need. The leadership of the movement need to stop seeing themselves as rebels for the new order, see themselves as something else, and see the whole picture. Women in general need to reject leaders who sell themselves primarily as rebels and who want them to act mostly as rebels. Figure out what you want most, figure out how to get it, and then do it.

I think Sigmund Freud said “What do women want?”, and I now throw myself into the despised camp of mere men. In the 1970s, I saw a TV show in which a man about sixty years old, an old activist, was trying to talk with a young woman activist. The two talked past each other. Eventually the woman insisted that men were pigs because they wouldn’t put the toilet seat down. The man looked sheepish and said “Why should the toilet seat be down?” The woman got angry. Clearly he meant: in an equal society, neither men nor women are privileged; people have to take responsibility for themselves; to demand that the seat always be down is to demand a social order in which one gender is publicly privileged over the other; and that is exactly what women should NOT want; to insist men guard the toilet seat is to say women can’t take care of themselves, men have to take care of women, so men are superior to women; and we have to get beyond simple chivalry to talk human to human. Toilet seats are not the great symbols of respect and equality. The woman missed the point. Women have been asking for chivalry for tens of thousands of years. If all women get is chivalry, then we all have lost ground. It was painful to watch.

In the 1960s, women burned bras. In the 1970s, women poured into the workforce, wore combat boots, and bought clothes from Diane Von Furstenberg. In the 1980s, women moved into professions, wore big shoulders and big hair, or wore their stockings outside their dress. In the 1990s, women invaded the arts, wore bad shoes again, and got tattoos. In the 2000s, women ran up against the world economy, and rediscovered fashions from the 1960s before about 1967. I am not sure what happened after about 2010. In each wave, women saw themselves as rebels. In each decade big business firms were able to sell products by appealing to women as rebels, empowered, and in charge of your life; if you buy the right toilet cleaner, you are an empowered rebel in charge of your life.

At this point, I was going to provide a list of all the causes that women have take as “women’s causes” but the list got so long that the exercise pooped out. I invite you to make a list. There are three points. First, women could not possibly go after all these causes to the extent that they cause deserves or needs if it is to be solved. Women have to choose. When each woman chooses her own, no cause is well supported and adequately achieved. Women feel guilty about all the causes they don’t support, especially if a cause they don’t support fails badly or succeeds despite their absence. Second, the vast majority of causes are what were stereotyped “women’s causes” long before the women’s movement, such as daycare for working mothers or getting men to stop telling sex jokes in the workplace. There is nothing wrong with these causes but they have little to do with women as humans rather than as female family leaders. Third, some of these causes are not really women’s causes but causes for the whole society, and benefit the whole society rather than just women, such as good education and good healthcare for children. They should be pursued in that way rather than as part of the women’s movement. The women’s movement can take up these causes after it has achieved the goals that pertain to it specifically. These uses of the women’s movement misuse the movement and detract from the focus that is needed for success.

About 1970, women got about 65% of what a man got for comparable work; in 2014, women get about 70% of what a man gets for comparable work. Before about 2000, in a recession, women lost their jobs;

since 2000, in a depression, men lose their jobs. Now women have to support families on their 70%. At the same time, the cost of raising a family has increased tremendously, primarily because we won't deal with the problem of getting a good education (mostly for your children) and the effect that the search for a good education has on housing, job, and credit markets. None of this is enough progress. Buying the right stuff so you can be an empowered rebel taking charge of your life is not working out as it should. I suggest focusing on equal pay, and letting bras, toilet seats, and sex jokes take care of themselves. If women need a couple of causes at a time, they might add day care and paternity leave into the mix, but not much more.

Why do I as a man have to tell women all this? Because the women's movement was run as a Romantic movement, so it did not often enough focus on issues that really mattered and it fizzled when its thrill as a rebel cause ran out.

If women are mired in symbolic rebellion, and are easily manipulated by advertising, while women make up most of the voters, then democracy is not representing what women, men, children, and everyone really needs. I am not saying men would do a better job; they haven't; and wouldn't. I am saying nobody does a good enough job because we all see ourselves in ways that don't do enough real good, wander off into activities that use our energy uselessly, and don't let us focus on the right moves. Women are not magically more adept citizens and better people because their cause is just.

I am not trying to make women feel guilty. If they fail utterly, that will not by itself cause America to fail. If they succeed completely, that will not by itself save America. Every big part helps. To contribute as much as they can, it would help women to get past Romantic mistakes.

(3) Other Romantic Problems.

In the modern world, rebellion does make some sense. But most modern rebellion is silly self-serving posing even when it costs posers dearly. When rebellion is useful, it is best not to think of it in cosmic heroic terms but instead simply to get the job done. When rebels think of themselves in cosmic terms, they rarely do a job that lasts a long time. The Chinese Communist rebels did not get very far until they in effect gave up cosmic Communist ideology for practical export-driven capitalism.

Romanticism supports ideologies that seem incompatible and it supports ideologies that can only be called bad. I cannot think of any good ideologies that rely on Romanticism for their primary support. It is not clear what the ideologies have to have in common for Romanticism to support them but might be that the social whole dominates the individual or that one socio-economic class dominates society. Fascism and Communism both were Romantic ideologies with the same roots in German Romanticism. German Fascism was a racist ideology where the people of Northern Europe represented the Spirit in its current rise. Communism was supposed to be a class-based ideology although it too had ethnic roots and it was seen along ethnic lines in Russia, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and Latin America. In accepted Communist ideology, if not official ideology, the rise of Communism is the rise of the Spirit now. Marx borrowed the process of Communist ascent from Hegel's ideas on the rise of the Spirit in our times and from general Indo-European Christian culture. American business ideology is in the same mold, with a mix of racism and religious parochialism. In its view, American business comes from Northern European

Christians and only them. Capitalism, and only it, promotes Progress. Progress is the rise of the Spirit in our times.

The Spirit can make use of individual prominent people such as Napoleon or Darwin but really a rise of the Spirit is a social event. What counts are movements, cultures, art, religion, etc. not the particular passing people who are their instruments. This attitude leads to the stress on collectivism, herds, trends, “the next big thing”, and the social whole dominating the individual.

Along with the rise of Romanticism came the rise of capitalism and the ideology of the individual. At first, this seems like a contradiction but it is not. In fact, the ideology of capitalism does not stress individual much. It stresses individuals in service to business firms, labor unions, schools, socio-economic class, technology, enterprise, etc. Individuals are interesting for their contributions to these causes.

The stress on the individual comes through the Romantic storyline and the rebel. Rebels by definition are apart from the current obvious social form even if they are the vanguard of the next dominant social form. If the rebel really represents the next big thing, then to be a rebel is to fight for the Spirit and so to be sure of being a good guy. People like to see themselves as rebels even when they are solidly on the side of the dominant social group, as with business entrepreneurs and lawyers who recall law school.

Eventually the tension between the rebel and society has to be resolved. It is almost always resolved in favor of the social group. Steve Jobs spent his life inventing gadgets for the middle class no matter how cool the gadgets looked and worked and no matter how much the gadgets made the middle class feel it was distinct and in the vanguard. The resolution in favor of society is much like the end in “rom coms” where the bad boy has to grow up and learn responsibility. Also as in rom coms, rebels never quite give up believing they are staunch individuals but hang on to their rebel clothes and rebel manners well into old age. Hans Solo always keeps the blaster handy and ghetto gangsters carry their “9”. Every hipster rebel looks exactly like every other hipster rebel. Every hard guy and hard girl individualist has tattoos just like all the other individualists.

In Romanticism, the Spirit works through Creative Chaos. The old order is too much order while the new order, as it rises, seems like chaos to the old order. In democracy, the people are chaos but out of them arises order, justice, and prosperity. In economic dogma, the market is like chaos but out of it arises satisfaction for people who are willing to work or are clever, and general prosperity for all. The order arises not through anybody’s plan but simply out of interaction. These are all fine myths and are even partly true but they are not all true. Sometimes chaos is just chaos. Sometimes it is bad and supports other bad things. Not every revolution leads to the American Constitution. The revolutions in Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and North Korea led to hell. Not every biker bar is a bastion of free souls who have interesting ideas. The free market sometimes leads to housing bubbles, collapses, and recession. Democracy sometimes supports bad leaders and bad ideas such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Sometimes they are bad enough to drive a country to ruin.

Creativity is more than upwelling passion. It is not something that comes of its own unbidden and brings us goodness without further work. As Thomas Edison famously said, genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. We don’t do the ground work for true creativity and true advances unless we understand how much we need the groundwork and how hard it is both before and after the ideas.

Acting naturally can't save us. Art can't save us. Smart shopping can't save us. Entrepreneurs and business people can't save us. Charismatic spiritual rebels can't save us. Soldiers can't save us, not even if we call every soldier a hero. I want to keep science.

Different episodes of the Spirit each have value but they are also qualitatively distinct and one order cannot be assessed by the standards of another order. The order of machines and humans before Neo, while humans still had Zion, was valuable. The order after Neo will be valuable but different. The order of the Jedi before Sidious, Vader, and Luke had value but it is not the order after Luke defeats Sidious. The Middle Ages had value, and set the stage for modern democracy, but the two orders are qualitatively distinct.

We can look at each person as a manifestation of the Spirit. Thus each person has value, each person is distinct, and people are not comparable in the same way that a pound of apples is comparable to a pound of potatoes. Like people, ways of life are also valuable and qualitatively distinct. A movie star might make more money than a computer programmer but movie stars are not really better. Business is not necessarily a better way of life than teacher, or vice versa. So far, this way of looking is not so bad, and has had some good effects. Everybody likes to be a unique valuable individual and everybody wants the teacher to see his-her kids' particular abilities and needs.

Problems arise when we push it too far. What if everybody really is totally unique and not comparable? How do we make laws for everybody? How do we judge court cases? What if every way of life really is unique and not comparable? How do we decide if it is better to be a plumber or a brain surgeon, not for people in general but for us in particular? How do we decide how much to pay anybody? Taking it too far is what Romanticism naturally does. Taking it too far allows people to use the ideology to get what they want. Taking it too far leads naturally to feelings of entitlement.

Making everybody and every way of life strictly unique and not comparable has its funny sides. It leads to reality TV shows starring Paris Hilton and then to some really fun ads starring her. But funny reality shows are really just the happy tip of an otherwise bad iceberg. Romanticism resolves the individual-social dichotomy for the social so it seems it should pull people together. But, if people are really qualitatively distinct, and ways of life are qualitatively distinct, then people cannot be completely pulled together. Rather than draw similar people together in a common enterprise, Romanticism puts up an insurmountable wall. People become the gods of their own kingdoms but the kingdoms are sparsely populated and bleak.

People flit from way of life to way of life like the proverbial never-ending college students who goes from major to major (see the first "Librarian" movie). People wonder if another life would be better. The grass is always greener. Nobody is ever satisfied. Nobody knows how to be satisfied and nobody can know how to be satisfied. People who are dissatisfied with their own lives cannot see there is some satisfaction in the world even if they are not satisfied. They see only their own situation, which, inevitably, is a big chunk of dissatisfaction: "I Can't Get No Satisfaction", neither can anybody else, and so there cannot be any satisfaction. When everybody is unique and valuable, we can't assess in general. Where everybody has unique value, it is not that everybody has equal high value. Everybody has the same low value or non-value. People become chronically jealous. They cause problems for neighbors. They magnify their

sense of entitlement as a way to go after a satisfaction they can never reach. This is all the results of what philosophers used to call “solipsism” and what modern religious teachers bemoan as an excess of individualism and selfishness.

(4) The Worst Damage.

The worst damage done by Romanticism is to shape other ideas in its own image. It steals thoughts and so poisons them. All of the above cases are examples of Romanticism perverting otherwise good ideas from other frames of reference. Romanticism took its idea of the Spirit from the idea of God and its idea of the movement of the Spirit from Progress. It gets much of its force from the desire of people to build a better world as Jesus taught. We would be better off directly thinking about those ideas rather than the Romantic remake. We see everything in terms of the basic Romantic plot and characters. We miss other real and interesting kinds of people and storylines. Romanticism is bad relativism. It sees other thoughts only as lesser versions of itself and thus it denies their own distinct validity.

Romanticism extols creativity, passion, and life but really stifles them by discrediting creativity, passion, and life that don't serve it or fit its mold. Rather than see the simple beauty, awe, fearfulness, and truth of nature, we see all of nature now as the Spirit. Romanticism glamorizes nature and so takes away from the better bigger reality that nature is – in the same way that glamorizing women or young men takes away from the better that they really are. By glamorizing nature, Romanticism makes sure that we can't steward nature as we should.

Romanticism took away our ability to see true strength and weakness in America. Sometimes we need a small group of people to recall basic principles of humanity and American life, and return America to its principles – but if they see themselves in Romantic terms they will cause more harm than good and will divert us from the principles they seek to recover. Romanticism subverted true useful needed justifiable rebellion with silly glamorized ineffectual rebellion. It replaced social protest with hooliganism. It glamorized socio-economic class and so kept us from seeing the real basis for class and how to deal with problems of class. Not all chaos is creative; some chaos causes damage. The People are not simply the embodiment of Creative Chaos; they are less than and more than that. Non-White ethnic groups are not a purer form of Creative Chaos and so a purer form of the People. We need some Creative Chaos and some of it has to come from the people in general and from people outside the mainstream. We also need order and to suppress bad chaos. We won't get the right balance as long as we let Romanticism tell us what social life and social changes are all about. Romanticism put causing mischief in place of working for true better changes.

Romanticism allows people to avoid reality while rationalizing what they want. Romanticism blocks better understanding of the real world. It keeps us from doing what we need to do to make our world better. It wastes energy in acts that do no lasting good, and too often make things worse. It makes us vulnerable to ideological hucksters such as “rebel” conservatives and liberals who enable. Romanticism enables an indulgent self, enables self-serving, lets people pursue foolish mistaken codes while thinking they are true and noble, and allows people to do bad things in the service of ideologies.

Romanticism is well-suited to various groups of disaffected modern people that, at first glance, seem to have little in common. People do well when they spice up their lives with a little fantasy. Romanticism

takes advantage of normal human need by putting its own fantasies into people's minds. Bored people can pretend their lives are interesting by taking drugs and having mildly kinky sex and-or by working for a cause. Marginalized people who want "a piece of the pie" can blame "the man" or "the Liberals", and can avoid seeing their own fault in their own problems. People who wish to be free of a self they don't like can invent a heroic beautiful self that secretly swims in a deeper truer cosmic current. People who wish to be free of a society they don't like can condemn the obvious social system as an evil anti-spiritual gang even while they live in a wannabe imitation parody of what they condemn. Romanticism goes well with the "beautiful loser" flawed demon-haunted morally pure outsider who can't save society-as-a-whole but sacrifices to help particular people. Romanticism fueled both pop culture and fundamentalist religion. As much as any adolescent rebellion, Romanticism powered rock and roll. Romanticism helps rulers keep the people in line by giving potential trouble makers a bit of rebel ideology that makes no difference or that even indirectly supports the power structure. Romanticism is so mixed with modern ideas of bad boys, bad girls, and rebels that it is not possible to think of these people except in Romantic terms.

(5) Romanticism, Emotion, and Irrationality.

People who like the Enlightenment with its ideal of Reason, such as me, also complain that modern life suffers from a mass indulgent return to emotion, superstition, simplistic religion, and habits that come of emotion such as buying stuff and trendiness. Much as it would be easy to blame any unhappiness of life by faulting emotion, that assessment is not true. Only a few people in the Enlightenment really pursued Reason vigorously. Most people were content to act like normal human beings and to use the findings of Enlightenment Reason when it suited them in our own lives. Even Isaac Newton was far from rational in the sense we wrongly see in Mr. Spock or Dr. Sheldon Cooper.

We don't have any dogmas and institutions that we really trust to serve as the Light and Reason of our lives. If people could still trust well-thought-out religion such as formal Christianity or Buddhism, then people would seem reasonable even if they were not more reasonable than average or than people in other religions. If modern institutions were really well thought out, and people really trusted populist democracy, simplistic capitalism, mass education, and formal religion, then people would seem more reasonable even though really they would only be more trusting.

Modern people don't trust their institutions. Our institutions are not as well thought out as we would hope, not even when we had really good thinkers such as Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison to start them for us. Without a foundation in reasonable institutions, people have to turn to emotion and their emotion is more obvious. If you don't trust democracy or capitalism, turn to religion and spiritualism, or, better yet, forge an alliance between religion and capitalism or spiritualism and populist democracy. To an outsider, your acts seem irrational, but they are not flagrantly irrational, or at least not much more than for most people in most situations in human history.

Which brings us back to Reason versus Passion and the role of Passion in Romanticism. Passion is above Reason in Romanticism. Passion is the way to the truth and the Spirit. There are few other ways, and none better for most people. We get lost when we don't trust our Passion, that is, when we don't indulge our Passion. Romanticism enables indulgence in emotion.

But Romanticism does not alone by itself cause indulgence in emotion and rejection of reason. People are always about the same mix of reason and emotion and emotion almost always leads the mix. Faith in Jesus and faith in the Buddha are emotions even when highly rationalized. Sometimes conditions mixed with the right stance lead reason to be more stressed than usual, as in the Enlightenment, but that usually doesn't last long. Sometimes conditions allow the right stance to stress emotions as modern times do with Romanticism. Then it seems the stance caused emotional indulgence to explode but that is not so. We need a correct view because we don't want to mistakenly think that debunking Romanticism will alone lead people to adopt reason. The correct hope is that we can lead people to put their emotions behind good causes and not put them behind bad causes, and that we can allow some unusually level-headed people to find their good mix of reason and emotion.

If the baseline modern conditions stayed the same, I am sure people would find another ideology like Romanticism to take the place of Romanticism. It might even be Romanticism with another name. It might be Mahayana Buddhism or Hinduism.

If people could get rid of Romanticism, think out their institutions, and adopt well thought out institutions, then we could say they were more rational in our times than in other times. We could even call it the Enlightenment returning. That is not likely to happen.

When people can't rely on the rationality of their institutions, and turn to emotion as a result, usually they don't go overboard but sometimes they do go overboard. That is when we get the profound irrationality that makes trouble. We get Communism, Fascism, Jonestown type cults, psycho-babble, Republican spiritualism, knee-jerk patriotism, Muslim terrorism, etc. That is what we see in the news. When that is what we see, we think we live in times besotted by irrational emotion and nothing else. Because our times are not guided by reasonable well thought out institutions, we do live in times guided by emotions but probably not too much more than in other periods of confusion in human history. We are distinct because we live in times in which emotion and Romanticism have allied. I don't know if there were other times of confusion in which emotion allied with a dogma like Romanticism to produce times like our times. I could guess, and I hope other smart people do guess, but here is not the place.

(6) Saving Science.

One aspect of the return to emotional irrationality deserves attention because it does a lot of harm and we can't afford to put up with it anymore: denigration of science and abandonment of science. I include math and logic in science. When I was in school, most "social scientists" did not include social science as science; but I did; I leave it up to you. I was shocked and dismayed by the bad attitude of Americans in general, and academics in particular, to science after about 1970. I know what bad patronizing attitudes scientists can take, and I know how politicians and business people have misused science, but none of that justifies the stupid irrational "dumping on" science after 1970. To understand, it helps to listen to an album by an old comedy group called "Fire Sign Theater". They narrated a day at "More Science High School" so they could criticize the 1950s stress on simplistic technological fixes and the thinking that goes along with it. Their problem is they throw out the baby with the bathwater. Their solution is typical of the 1970s and Romanticism: better personal relations and relations with the Spirit.

Science has never been fully accepted by “the masses”. They tolerate it because it brings improvement to their lives. Contrary to the fear of scientists, the masses are not against science any more than they are necessarily against anything else they can’t understand. Science is magic done by magicians. As long as it doesn’t come too fast, and it is white magic, it is fine. Nerds are lovable now. But after about 1955, science did come too fast and changes were too deep. For example, advances in science allowed both safe abortion and allowed protecting fetuses, and so underlay the abortion issue. Fast deep change was how we got into Romanticism to begin with and it tends to bring bad resurgences.

In the 1950s, people began to use science as the scapegoat for the ills of modern life, as some people use emotion as the scapegoat, and some religious people use selfishness, materialism, and trendiness. Science is rational, emotion is better than rationality, so we have to promote emotion over rationality, have to oppose rationality when it opposes emotion, and so we have to oppose science.

Regardless of whether you put any stock in that line of reasoning (!), we can’t afford the attitude. First, we have dug ourselves into a deep hole. We have hurt nature badly. A simple dose of science won’t fix the problem but we can’t know the problem well enough to fix it without big doses of science. We need research, and need to believe it. To apply science in big doses, we need the right attitude, which means we need to change our attitude from what it is now. We cannot afford idiots who deny global climate change. Second, the world economy is now based on competition between nations and between big business firms. Recall that there has been, and will be, a clear relation between investment in science and later economic gain. (This relation is not true among little nations and small firms but the exception doesn’t matter.) Ironically, the more the investment is done in “pure” science that does not pay attention to immediate gains, the bigger the eventual gains. The more investment is done with immediate gains in mind, as with Reagan-ism, the less the eventual gains. To do pure science with little thought for eventual gains, we cannot hate science or rationality. We have to trust, value, enjoy, and promote pure science. For that, we cannot simply oppose reason to emotion and take the side of emotion or reason.

I doubt people could have “dumped on” science after about 1970 if we were not living in Romanticism. Romanticism certainly enabled dumping on science. But, after the 1970s, supposedly rational business people also tried to denigrate science in the issue of global climate change when science got in the way of profits. We have had Romanticism since about 1800 yet people did not hate science until after about 1970. So Romanticism helped but it is not the only reason why people dumped on science. How we can live in an emotional Romantic world and still value science, I do not speculate on here.

08 Decent and Indecent People

Lucy Brown from "Peanuts": "I love humanity, its people I hate".

This chapter defends decent people and attacks the glamorizing of indecent people. It does not support a return to prudery. It supports a natural non-dogmatic sense of decency. Decency is not the property of the Left or Right. Both the Left and Right extol their versions of indecent people while denigrating simple decent people. This mistake hurts everyone in general and hurts particular groups such as ethnic groups. Do not confuse my idea of "decent" with the Christian-Muslim "saved" or Hindu-Buddhist "enlightened", and do not confuse "indecent" with "damned" or "unenlightened". Indecent people are "lost".

In his novel "Darkness at Noon", about a disgraced Soviet official, Arthur Koestler looks at decency and indecency. He sees that indecency makes us demonic and makes the world hell. Adopting any dogma uncritically is a broad road to indecency. The author Charles "Bucky" Bukowski believed the dogma that goodness hides below a scruffy surface while outer politeness means inner badness, so he staggered through a long quest to find decency in broken characters, naughtiness, bad decisions, drink, sex, and the underbelly of society. He did write well. The movie "Bar Fly" is roughly about him. Most detective fiction is about outsiders who are superficially indecent but inwardly deeply decent; they work in an immoral world cursed with big secrets; in it, hypocritical superficially upright people are all really indecent. The singer Jimmy Cliff went from romanticizing bad boys to appreciating simple decency. Listen to "The Harder They Come" and compare to later work. At first, the character "Rudy" seems like a kick-ass "stick it to the man" hero until we see that Rudy does more harm than good. Listen to the 1970s post-Ska band "The Specials" for a satire of stereotypes and for appreciation of the decent man Nelson Mandela. In their own silly ways, the movies "Enchanted" and "Clueless" are about the right mix of simple decency with reality. The movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" is a prayer for the triumph of decency.

Is and Is Not.

Decency is not prudery, prissiness, slavishly following arbitrary conventions, and being shocked by even a small misstep. Decency does not defend hurtful hypocrisy and hurtful social conventions. Decency is not the same as defending social order against all enemies. Indecency is not the same as freedom, honesty, getting in touch with deep Life, seeing through bad hurtful conventions, and struggling for justice in an unjust world.

I do not want to return to prudery. I dislike prudery. Not much has changed since the so-called prudish 1950s except we elevated some former "low life" types into dogmatic chicness. I am not a grumpy old man who sees the world "going to hell in a hand basket". I try to look at facts without dogma blinders.

I know all this already: We all have a little badness and naughtiness, and that can be a good thing. We need both good Kirk and bad Kirk and both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. "To make an omelet, you have to break some eggs". The poor fight the rich through small acts that seem like indecency. Some rebellion is justified due to unfairness and to the demise of nature; this rebellion can seem indecent; and indecent people use it to justify themselves. Social powers use the idea of decency for control, so sometimes we

have to scuttle simplistic ideas of decency to get free. The American revolutionaries were rebel “bad boys”. Rule breaking, naughtiness, and badness have roles in art. Sometimes we need tough people to fight bad people. We need strong emotions, they can be useful, and strong emotions cannot always be good. Intoxication can be fun and useful. At times, you have to be cruel to be kind. The Golden Rule is not all sweetness. Indecency can be like creative irrationality. Fun is good in itself. The world is boring much of the time. Decency can be boring. A bit of naughtiness or badness can alleviate boredom for a while.

I am not against “all this”. I don’t want to put “all this” under another layer of prudery and hypocrisy. But we can’t live by inversions and half-truths. In this case, half-truths are lies worse than lies. We go too far the other way. We indulge. We glamorize indecency to cover our frustration and justify our indulgence. We enable indecency and indecent people. We denigrate decency.

We romanticize indecency because we don’t know what else better to do. We have no good ideas about how to run a society and save nature. We don’t see how decency can point down a better path, and we don’t see how to fight our way down the better path using energy from decency alone. If you can’t make the world better through decency, you can have fun with naughtiness, denigrate simple decency, and find rationalizations for your indecency.

I am sorry we can’t save the world with simple decency but that is still not an excuse to enable indecency and hurt decency. We can do better. We can blend decency, social order, personal expression, social critique, rebellion, and activism better.

The obvious answer is to be your self and respect decency, unless your self is an indecent asshole or a criminal. If it were that simple, I would not have to write. We need to look at what is indecent and decent, and then practice doing what we should have been able to do naturally in the first place, until we can do it as if it were natural.

I urge people to be as simply decent as they can with as little reliance on dogma as possible. Don’t try to be perfect. Don’t look down on simple decent people. Don’t romanticize, imitate, enable, or tolerate indecent people and indecent groups. Don’t try to prove yourself to glamorized chic indecent people. Be brave enough to be simply decent as best you can. Use your energy to understand real problems and work on them. If you do that, you don’t have to worry about making a few mistakes, you will do good, you will feel good, and, sometimes, accidentally you will be naturally decent.

Game Plan.

I focus on: (A) simple decent people; (B) passably decent normal common people; (C1) indecent people who are indecent by nature; (C2) indecent people who make indecency a stance by invoking excuses of social injustice and a hard life; and (C3) indecent people who milk the system while looking polite. I do not dwell on C3 because space prohibits and because they do not affect daily life as much as C1 and C2. I do not dwell on fake prudish hyper-decent people because we already see through them. I overlook some egregious indecency such as sexual harassment and crime.

When I told this story simply before, people took the story to extol themselves as truly decent people and to condemn their un-friends as immorally indecent or as prudish-hyper-decent-moral-fake indecent. We are doubly good; they are doubly bad. So I now tell a longer story and give some history. The chapter comes in three parts. Part One is the main message. It stands alone. Part Two is historical and mythical background. Part Three is examples. You should read Part One. You can skip, or read, Parts Two and Three as you will.

The Ideology (Dogma) of Indecency.

Part Two explains the Ideology of Indecency but it helps to have a synopsis here. Americans think of rebels as the vanguard of truth and social justice, as the force of creative chaos now in our world. Rebels are Life. We think of all established order as hyper-prudish hypocritical stultifying Death, and as working to maintain unjust power and wealth. The common people are the unwitting dupes of power, wealth, and Death. We wrongly put decency on the side of Death. Life seems indecent outside but is decent inside no matter how indecent it seems outside. Death seems decent outside but really is indecent inside. The more indecent you seem outside, the more decent you are inside. The more decent you seem outside, the more indecent you are inside. To make yourself decent inside, act indecently outside. The more indecently you act outside, the more decent you are inside. To be a really good decent person inside, you have to be a rebel and externally indecent. Externally indecent people embody all the good traits that we really need, and only they do.

This is all dogma. While this dogma seems like mere extended teen rebellion, it is more than that. Now it is a widespread stance in American culture; a system of values; of presenting yourself in everyday social life; of what we expect of other people; and of how we assess people.

Most of this dogma is half-right, so mostly wrong. The dogma would be mostly harmless, and sometimes do some good, except that indecent people have seized on it as a tool. Indecent people fool otherwise moderately decent people because we are susceptible to bad dogma. So the dogma of indecency is bad. I don't explain why we are susceptible to bad dogma.

Indecent people use the dogma of indecency and use guilt about social injustice to act out, get legitimacy, get stuff, benefits, power, protection, and state programs, and avoid punishment. They claim they are deeply decent inside by being indecent outside through clothes, music, art, and behavior. They add fear when guilt and legitimacy alone are not enough. We wrongly think obnoxious indecent people have a right to act that way because they might have been the victims of social injustice (C1) or might have had a hard life (C3). Indecent people put on the face of rebels advancing Life, creative chaos, and art, so as to cover their own deep indecency. They use bad dogma, guilt, and fear to cover being indecent. Normal people "buy" this excuse and accept being taken.

Some indecent people are adept at milking the system while looking good such as some professionals, business people, politicians, religious leaders, and activists (C3). These people are genuinely indecent but this chapter is not much concerned with them.

Before about 1980, using dogma to cover indecency was a tactic mostly of the Left and of ethnic, gender, and religious groups associated with the Left. Since 1980, the Right has vigorously adopted this strategy.

Now we get fantasies of dominant stultifying Death-dealing Leftist Socialist hegemony, Conservative Rebels, and thuggish louts of the Right. We get dogma of the free market as the creative chaos of Life and of business people as the creative rebels of the market.

In reality, usually what you see is what you get. The large majority of people who seem indecent outside really are indecent inside too. You are not more decent inside because you put on a pose of indecency, rebel, tough guy who sees through the bullshit, or artist. The big majority of indecent people of Left and Right are simply loutish, inconsiderate, rude, loud, dirty, pushy, greedy, irresponsible, and liars. They are agents of Death. They are not creative chaos, not fun, and do not aid social justice. We excuse and thus enable indecent people. We have to stop letting guilt lead us to enable indecent people of either the Left or Right. To enable indecent people stands in the way of real social justice and real Life.

PART 1: DECENT AND INDECENT PEOPLE

(A) Decent People.

Decency is good. Decency is not a mistake or a mask for something sinister. Decency is not prudery. Decency is not social rigidity and Death. Decency is a big source of Life. Decency is nothing to be ashamed of.

There is no point in giving examples of decent people. A reader would not know the people in my life who are simply decent, and it would take too long to give their account. I do not know personally any public figures, so I have nobody in common with readers that I can be sure is simply decent. Think back on your own life to recall simply decent people. I cannot get across the feel for simple decent people by writing more. If you can develop a feel for them, that feel is the best guide for this chapter.

True simple naturally decent people see persons in all people and life in all animals. They value people, dignity, and nature. They are considerate by habit and on purpose. They follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. They see when a little gain for themselves causes a greater loss to the community, and forego their gain. They see when a little loss to themselves might cause greater gain to the community, and willingly take the loss. They don’t try to get away with much. They don’t think they are above rules. When they have to break rules, they expect to take the punishment. They have fun. They understand working hard to make the world better, and see that people with ability should use their ability. They do what they can. Decent people live by simple decency in the same way that a real soldier lives by honor without making a big deal of it. Decent people often are interesting. Simple decent people are a small minority.

Decent people are not superficial hypocritical moralists. Decent people see when bad acts cause hurt but decent people act more to help than to condemn. They don’t like immoral or indecent behavior but they aim their reaction more toward the effects rather than the instigator. They assess acts morally but, rather than condemn, they lead people to see the practical value or harm. Decent people are not judgmental, they just judge and they are just decent. They do not make a point of their own decency; often enough, they don’t even know they are decent. They lead by example.

Decent people usually are not too assertive but they are not wimps. Most decent people are tough both physically and mentally. They can “take it”. They have to be tough to be decent and still survive.

Some simple decent people are boring like plain applesauce, housewives in a 1950s sitcom, or a cartoon character – but few. Most decent people are like everybody else. They have ups and downs, foibles, temper fits, interests, passions, and stupidities. For a while, they can be fooled by ideologies. They do not have a direct line to God or the one true theology. The difference is that, when fooled, simple decent people revert back into decency as the default. They always return to decency, usually quickly. They have a center, the center holds, and they go back to the center naturally, gracefully, and without pretense. They might take a mulligan on a golf course but they don’t embezzle. They might drink too much at a party but they don’t persistently chase a neighbor’s spouse. They might gossip briefly but they don’t slander, and they make sure the truth is out there.

I have met simple decent people everywhere in every religion. They are among the best people in the world and are a jewel of God’s creation. The best people I have ever met were decent people working hard to make a better world. Many decent people are simple believers in their traditional faith. Not all are religious. None are perfect. They are more interesting than average. Some are fascinating.

Simple decent people, and simple decency, can be ruined by bad dogma, bad society, bad upbringing, and bad laws. I wish this were not so, that God had made decency was impervious, but it is so. To hurt simple decent people and simple decency is one of the greatest crimes that can be done. The strangling of simple decency is one of the greatest tragedies of modern life.

(B) Normal Common Passably Decent People.

Most people are normal-common-passably decent. Normal people see decency, and usually follow it, but they don’t live by it in the sense that a real soldier lives by honor. Mostly, passable people are decent because it is easy enough and because human nature, including their own, overall is more moral than immoral. Those are good reasons. Passable people behave well enough to get along most of the time. They don’t like to let go of gains, they rationalize too much, try to get away with stuff sometimes but don’t make getting away with stuff a way of life, are lax about working hard to make a better world, but get the idea and do little bits for it now and again. They use their abilities for their own advantage rather than to make the world better. They understand rules, such as “do not cheat”, and know the common good, such as parks, clean air, and quiet; but they are easily tempted to break rules, and easily tempted to use up the common good.

Some people on the good end of normal feel the duty to defend decency, like the soldiers in the movie “A Few Good Men” or “Saving Private Ryan”. People on the good end of normal understand working hard to make a better world, and understand using their particular talents wisely. I cannot say if accepting these ideals moves a normal person into the category “simply decent” – I doubt it -- but accepting these ideals does make him-her special beyond other common people. Sometimes common people do extraordinary things, such as give a kidney or pull a dog out of a burning car, but that is not how they run daily life. I cannot say if doing some big extraordinary act makes you special but I doubt that too. It is still something to be proud of and happy about.

We cannot make ourselves into simple decent people. I am not a simple decent person. I am only normal partly decent passable. The best we can do is work hard to rise up to the good end of normal, help simple decent people, help decency everywhere in everyone, work to make the world better, not stupidly glamorize indecency, and fight indecency when it threatens good people and good society. That is a lot, more than enough for most of us. This chapter aims to help in that goal.

Normal common passably decent people need principles but they also need dogma, and therein arises a big part of the trouble. We are susceptible to stupid ideas such as chic indecency, Rebel Conservative, Postmodern Irony, bi-polar politics, voodoo economics, and nasty religion. Even smart normal common passable people, professionals and business people, are susceptible. That is part of real evolved human nature.

Normal people fear they will be taken for an insipid un-chic old-fashioned decent person, so they avoid appearing as a half-way decent person. They over-compensate. They value being chic and being clever above decency, and so pretend to be worldly wise. They need to imitate indecent people so they are not branded with the stigma of traditional prudery and so they can participate in the cool of naughtiness. Most people who think they are a little indecent, a little naughty, a little “bad boy” or “bad girl”, really are normal common passable people acting out for a while, as in the movie “Hall Pass”. All this is too bad not because it is bad but because it so silly. Their lives would be easier if they knew better.

When common people want to have some fun, they turn to naughtiness like booze, drugs, sex, cars and clothes. Common people (used to) feel they need an excuse to have fun, and feeling a bit naughty and indecent is the excuse. There is nothing too wrong with all this except, to excuse fun and naughtiness, common people buy into the dogma of indecency. Naughtiness is their way of being Alive. Life excuses fun, naughtiness, and indecency. When common people see the implications of their naughtiness for supporting the dogma of indecency, rather than back off, re-assess, and find better reasons for fun and even for naughtiness, they double down. “We are alive because we are naughty and we are naughty because we are alive.” They are trapped. To not feel trapped, they excuse and enable indecent people. “If they can do it, then so can I; if I can do it, so can they; and if I feel right about doing it, so can they.” Indecent people seize the opening, and we are off.

Common people need to feel justified. Rather than dig in, research issues, fight for good causes, and volunteer to help needy people, common people would rather be naughty rebels. Even if they do adopt a cause, they want a cause that helps them be naughty rebels. There is not much wrong with that stance except it leaves them ignorant about how the world really works, leaves good work undone, and leads common people to buy the dogma of indecency. Again, rather than back off and re-assess, they double down. They are trapped. To feel less trapped, they excuse and enable indecent people. “If I am a bit indecent as part of rebellion against injustice, then the indecency of indecent people also must be rebellion against injustice; if their indecency is rebellion against injustice, then my naughty rebellion must be against injustice too, and so justified.” Again, indecent people seize the opening.

I love fun, naughtiness, and a little rebellion. I wish I could buy nice clothes and a nice house. If I were young, I would chase some crazy women for a while. Sometimes I have worked on causes that made me feel good as a rebel. But none of this is any reason to excuse and enable real indecency. Stop thinking of indecency as chic rebellion and chic justification. You don't need an excuse to have fun. If you want to

get stoned, get stoned. If you want to feel justified, do your homework. If you want to help yourself and other people, give up seeking justification and simply act decently.

Even though normal common passable people are susceptible to bad dogma, they also usually shuck it off eventually. They don't live according to bad dogma for too long. Unless bad dogma gives them a big consistent edge in daily competition with neighbors, normal common passable usually end up paying only lip service to bad dogma while acting passably decent and being all-around good neighbors, as Roman Catholics and Muslims have adopted birth control and abortion despite formal teaching. Normal common passably decent people usually don't want to kill people of the wrong religion, race, or class for very long. Sometime in their twenties, they give up wanting to be a kick-ass biker or the glamorous star of their own reality show. They fall back into normal common passable decency eventually.

By falling back into normal common passable decency, normal people are an insurance policy for overall decency. They get us back to passable decency even if they don't get us back to simple natural decency. If, like me, you are a common passable person, don't get a big ego over the fact that your tendency to go back to happy ignorance saves the world from some grief. I don't know if God planned it this way.

Even the limited extent and limited time that normal common passably decent people support the dogma of indecency is enough to keep the dogma going. It is enough to keep the cycle of self-delusion going. It is enough so children pick up the bad dogma from their parents. It is enough to enable indecency and indecent people. Because we don't have a good acceptable alternative to the dogma of indecency, this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future.

Normal common passable people help make the world interesting. They are not the only source of fun in the world but they are a big source. That idea is behind movies like "The Goonies", "The 'Burbs", "E.T.", "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids", "Meet the Parents", "Couples' Retreat", and "Knocked Up". Normal common passably decent people do not usually interfere with other sources of interest such as pop culture, art, politics, science, and nature. Often they support them. If the world consisted entirely of normal common passably decent people it would be interesting enough but not as interesting as a world that had simple naturally decent people too. If we add indecent people, the world might be more interesting at times, but the added thrill is not often worth the pain.

(C) Indecent People in General.

Simply put, indecent people are the opposite of decent people. Indecent people are selfish, annoying, rude, immoral, obscene, tasteless, loud, louts, inconsiderate except when they are considerate to serve their own selfish ends, and make the world dirty. They are thugs, bullies, and "orcs". Usually they are only aggravating minor thugs but sometimes they make it to the level of dangerous thugs. Indecency is not creative benevolent chaos. Indecency causes bad chaos. Goodness does not often come because of indecency but despite indecency. Indecency is almost always bad.

There are many kinds of indecency and indecent people. This chapter looks at only three.

This chapter does not describe people who are indecent through prudery, that is, through feigned hyper-decency, such as moralistic churchy people. This chapter does not describe the indecency that comes

from “political correctness” (PC) of either the Left or Right. This chapter does not describe the indecency of power and wealth; you can go to the Tanakh and New Testament for that. Politics and religion abound in indecency; there is no use dwelling on it. I skip obvious criminals. Sexual harassment is indecent; I can only mention it. I don’t care about people of all genders who act slutty. Sluttiness is more symptom than cause, and is more an offense to taste than to decency; I find it silly. I don’t write about people who seduce a neighbor’s spouse. I don’t write about people who are harsh only to themselves or to other consenting adults but cause no harm in general. Nobody is hurt by the local drunk except the drunk, as on the old Andy Griffith Show; nobody is hurt by a “Goth” who extends the act into his-her twenties; and nobody is hurt by the neighbor’s kinky boots. I know people are hurt by drugs, including alcohol, and by violence, and that the hurting is often indecent, but I don’t go into it here.

The first kind of indecent people are indecent by habit or natural character. They are rude, loutish, and make bad neighbors.

The second kind of indecent people make indecency a stance. They get satisfaction from it. They use dogma as a cover for indecency. The most common covers are “rebellion as social critique” and “I have a hard life that makes me angry, lash out, and take”.

The third kind of indecent people are adept at politely milking the system. The tactic of politely milking the system is a big topic, so I mention these indecent people only briefly.

The three kinds of indecent people overlap. People who have a tendency toward indecency are good at using dogmas as tools. Thugs with an excuse, type two, make bad neighbors. Thugs with an excuse use their abilities to milk the system. Anybody who milks the system for long takes on the character of a thug even if he-she is polite on the outside. I don’t sort out the overlap.

Indecent people don’t see persons in people, don’t see life in animals, and don’t care about public good. They never sacrifice their gain for public good. They know that rules lead to greater good for everybody, and, indirectly, for themselves, but they don’t care. They are above rules except when they get caught. They are special and can do what they want.

Maybe the best short way to say it is that indecency is a kind of rude selfish betrayal. It betrays what we could be as people. It betrays our duty to self, others, society, and nature. It betrays how we should feel about people in general, people who need our help, and people who cannot fend entirely for themselves. It betrays the rules, values, and institutions that we set up to realize our best goals.

Loutish behavior betrays what it means to be simply human. Using the dogma of indecency betrays true ideas about chaos, society, creativity, life, and death. Using dogma as a tool betrays the ideas that lie behind the dogma and that intend to help everybody such as freedoms, rights, and responsibilities. Using dogma as a tool prevents people from looking at real problems such as unemployment and race. The people who deal in ideas do the same as people who use dogma but they push actions off onto other people so the people who deal in ideas don’t have to feel directly guilty. Half-truths are big lies, lies are bad, and lies are bad in an indecent way. The system should work for us, and especially it should work for people who don’t have their own power and wealth. People who milk the system for themselves destroy the idea that institutions work for us. They betray the idea that institutions guard and embody our

values. They betray democracy, the church including non-Christian churches, schools, charities, and communities.

We should not fool ourselves. Indecent people are bad even when we can see their underlying humanity, their common bonds to other people and nature, their good points, and that they are useful in some ways. At some point, you are what you do. When we can, we should expose and resist them. If we can, we should get the authorities to help us control them. We should never excuse or enable them.

(C1) Indecent: Bad Character.

In daily life, the first group of indecent people usually causes the most harm. Bad neighbors, people who trash the local park, stay up late blasting an action movie, let their dog shit on your lawn or the apartment lawn, tell lies easily, dent your car, throw trash, cause havoc at the public pool, dress like cheap hookers of any gender, scare old people at the mall, jump lines, people who cause you grief so they can indulge the full extent of their tiny official power as bureaucrats, threaten to “get all up in your face”, and who pick fights, are all truly indecent and cause grief. Most people who are indecent by character think they are normal common passably decent people but they are not. They are indecent.

I wish I could get across how obnoxious and painful these people are but I can't. I am sorry most of us have had enough experience with them so I don't have to. I am sorry most of us, me too, are one of them sometimes. I am happy most of us are not like this by habit or character. Because most of us are not like this, we don't have to feel guilty about disliking these people and about not putting up with them.

You cannot easily change their character but you can limit the damage. When you can, call them out. Shaming them won't do much good but calling them out will get across to bystanders that there really is decency and indecency, and it matters. Don't act like a prude but simply speak from the decency in your heart. Don't call them out if you are afraid. When you can, get authorities to pass rules and get them to actually enforce the rules.

(C2) Indecent: Always an Excuse.

The second group of indecent people is thugs with an excuse. They use dogma to excuse themselves, manipulate others, and get others to enable them. These people do all the same indecent things as the first group, and more, but they have an excuse. Usually their indecency is obvious through bad manners and dress but not always. Even when they are polite on the surface, middle class, professional, or go to church on Sunday with their mommas, they are thugs with an excuse. This indecency has no particular political affiliation and comes out of no particular ethnic group. But, from about 1900 until now, most of these indecent people used ideas of the Left as the basis for their excuses, and we are more familiar with these people and that stance. After about 1980, they used ideas of the Right. These people sometimes act criminally. I don't talk about criminality, so think of your own examples.

The two biggest excuses are (A) social injustice and (B) hard life. As with the Soviet officials in Koestler's novel, these turn into dogmas that make people demonic. Any excuse will do. The real reasons these people are indecent is they “get off” on it and it gets them rewards. Usually the two excuses of “social injustice” and “hard life” go together. To paraphrase “West Side Story” they are “depraved on account of

they are deprived". If you "get off" on being indecent, it is easy to find some excuse, and the two excuses above are accepted by society. Indecent people with an excuse don't really get the ideas behind social criticism but they learn quickly that they can use the ideas to manipulate, so they learn the right phrases and the right people to go to. They know their rights and they know everyone else's responsibilities but they know nothing of the rights of other people or of their own responsibilities.

(C2A) Indecent: Social Injustice

The particular social injustice includes all the standard discriminations: age, gender, religion, ethnicity, economic, social class, geographic origin, etc. The indecency is similar despite the particular claim and the group using the claim so I don't point out how a particular bias affects the kind of indecency common in any particular group.

The stance based on social injustice leans heavily on "us and them". There are versions for people who think of themselves as on the bottom or the top. The two versions hardly differ except for who is in the group. I present the bottom version because it is the one that most Americans likely face and because the top version has been massively discredited for decades, in art and in the media, as the excuse of snotty fascist rich people. Even so, the top version is not dead, and people who milk the system while looking good (C3 below), and Rebel Conservatives, use it. I leave it to you to make up the top version with proper substitutions. The bottom version goes like this:

"Society is corrupt. We are victims of society. Really we are big benefactors of society behind the scenes because we work hard to clear the land, make it safe, build railroads, build cities, create art, tend the sick and old, make jobs for the poor; hold families together; give sexual and emotional gratification; run shops; run small business; we do all the shit hard work such as care for the old in homes and run offices; but we get no recognition or reward. We get paid less than we are worth. We have little security. We have no recognition for anything. We are cheated. Everyone else benefits from what we do but we do not benefit from what we do or from what they do either. We are the banished in Babylon.

The basic situation is "us the victims" versus "them the oppressors". We are the outsiders and so we are the righteous rebels seeking justice, social justice, good social order, and LIFE. We are the people that God really loves. We have God's grace inside. We know how to enjoy life and have fun as God wished. They are the dry, dead, unjust oppressors.

As victims of injustice, we cannot be biased in terms of race, gender, age, religion, etc. We see clearly what is going on. We are more than fair to others. ALL other groups are TOTALLY biased and never see clearly. All other groups, and everyone in them, is always unfair.

Advances in society come only out of creative chaos. Life comes only out of creative chaos. We often act disorderly, true, but we are the chaos that brings advances and goodness. We are the vanguard of Life. We are the only people who are the true vanguard of Life. We are Life. Whatever opposes us is hyper-rigid, hyper-decent, prudish, and Death.

All other groups, and all the people in other groups, disrespect us, secretly or openly. Half of what they say is open disrespect and the other half is secret disrespect. They disrespect us as persons and as

members of our group. They disrespect what we do, say, our music, cars, fun, etc. The only reason they don't openly disrespect us all the time is that they are afraid of us.

So, we have a right to an attitude. We have a right to be "bad ass". We can (may) do what other people may not do. We can get back at oppressors in any way by any means. We are entitled to act out and to take advantage. We are entitled. We may take. We should take. We deserve it all. We deserve. The only reason we don't have what we deserve is because other groups unfairly stops us – Jews, Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, elitist intellectuals, socialist politicians, or big business. They are getting more than their share so we deserve what they have.

If we wish anything, including material good such as a TV or a service such as concerts in the street, then we have a right to that thing, and other people have a responsibility to give it to us. We have no duties to do anything for any other group. They cannot expect anything from us.

Half of what any person in our own group tells us is hand-me-down-lies from the people in power. All of what any person in any other group says is a trick to boss us around and keep us down. We can't listen to what others say. We can't listen to ideas about how the economy, society, or the world works unless those ideas get us what we want. Those ideas are all lies to talk us out of what we deserve. Ideas are lies. We have to trust our feelings. We have to trust our feelings of being screwed and needing to get back.

We are not like other groups and they are not like us. We can know them enough but they can't know us at all. We have our culture and ways. We have our "thing". We have our walk, talk, clothes, places, hair, and tats; they all show the power that we saved out of our oppression. We are entitled to our ways even if our ways are at odds with the mainstream of our own ethnic, gender, religious, or political group. You can't impose your standards of sexism, racism, religious bias, or any other bias.

All groups have art that lets them express what it means to be human. But their art is limited by their bias and their need to protect vested interests. It is fake art, outmoded art, like seventy-year old people who still worship Elvis. Our art is the real expression of what it means to be human in our times for real living people like us. Even if our art seems obnoxious, startling, and loud, it is the true art. We have a right to our art no matter how offensive at any time and any place. Other people do not have a right to their art within our area. The same is true of our fun and their fun.

All other groups are prejudiced against us but we see reality clearly, see the other groups clearly, and see ourselves clearly. What looks like prejudice against others by us is our right response to the reality forced on us. We cannot be prejudiced.

We make other people feel guilt and fear so other people will enable us, excuse us, give us benefits, give us things, and do things for us. We know how to scare other people. Scaring other people is fun and it makes them do what we want. We carry a big chip on our shoulder. We make sure nobody else, in our group or out, disrespects us ("disses us"). We take half of what everybody says as insult. We use what people say as an excuse to get them as in the movies "Cab Driver" and "Goodfellas".

Any attempt to shape what we do is really an attempt to dominate us even when other people cite public peace, order, decency, or the ultimate benefit of our group. We have a right to fight back and do what we want. We go against whatever other people tell us just because they tell us.”

Some specific acts these indecent people do are: They wear their pants with their butts hanging out. They wear skirts with half their butt crack showing. They wear clothes that are half-gangster but not gangster enough to there is no question or so they will get roused by the cops. They blast loud non-music out of cars. They blast loud movies out of home brain-death entertainment systems. They throw cans, bottles, wrappers, boxes, and trash around. They “trash” on purpose. They do not clean up after using public parks and pools. They take as much as they can get at public events such as civic dinners, company parties, picnics, and distributions of school supplies even when they are employed and have a good salary. They drink too much, drink in public, use drugs too much, and use the wrong drugs. They race cars and motorcycles on the streets. They date rape and just plain rape. The men coerce women into sex even if it is not out-and-out rape. The men impregnate women without caring about the baby. The girls get knocked up at age fifteen for a lot of bad reasons that I don’t go into here. Both men and women beat up women to control women. The men don’t take care of their children. They threaten people when people don’t look scared enough. They bully people at work and in public places. They mug people. They steal. They get in fights with their friends. They get in fights period. They fight dogs and cocks. They torture dogs. They beat up queers (“gay bashing”) or “hippies” or “yuppies”. They get in fights with people from other ethnic, religious, or gender groups. They ruin the scene at bars and clubs. They carry guns and get in shootouts at bars and clubs. They shoot people in parking lots. They gang up on people. They gang up on people to beat them up. They extort money from small businesses and from vulnerable people such as vendors, prostitutes, and strippers. They are gangster wannabes, and they sometimes graduate to real gangster. A person doesn’t have to do all, or even many, of these things to be indecent. All it takes is the attitude and to do a few.

When indecent people use “social critique and rebellion” as a cover for selfish indecency, in addition to betraying humanity and good ideals, they betray all the good causes that are trying for something better and they betray the part of us that wants to tell the difference between a good-cause-with-truth versus a lie. When eco-activists put spikes in trees, that act is not social protest but indecency. When men say that bullying women “is in our culture, and you cannot judge us from the outside” that is not political correctness, it is selfish manipulative indecency. When young people start fights in shopping malls, that is not social protest over indulgent consumerism, social critique about what poor people cannot afford, or free speech, it is selfish indecency.

(C2B) Indecent: Hard Life

I cannot draw the line between what is a hard life and what is not. I cannot draw the line between a hard family life and an easy family life. I don’t know what it takes to make a person justifiably bitter. I do know that nearly all people have had enough hardship in their lives, even people who look sunny, clean, and at ease. Many people who might have the right to be bitter rise above it and try hard to be good to all the people around them. See the movies “Happyness” and “John Q”. I focus on people who blame everyone but themselves and who take their bitterness out on other people. They use hardship, especially a hard family life, as an excuse. It is easy to mix the excuses of a hard life and social injustice because social

injustice leads to a harder-than-average life. I don't try to untangle the two excuses. I do not critique the "culture of victim" that grew in America after 1970.

People who slip into bitterness also make themselves bullies and thugs. I have seen bitter people pick hard on other people at work. I have seen bitter people pick on other people to the point where it drives other people almost really crazy and drives them out of a job. I have seen bitter people attack people at work, push them down, and break arms. I have seen bitter people pick on an apparently happy person and gossip about that person until they have turned other people against that person. I have seen bitter people pick a scapegoat who has done nothing to anybody, and then work against that person until he/she breaks down. I saw a bitter supervisor at work pick on a talented diabetic old man until the old man had to quit and then died a few months later. Bitter people claim "I have six kids and twelve cousins to support so I have a right to not pay my share in social events at work, take more than my share, steal, and make other people do my work." Bitter people never see the big part the play in their own hardship. They never see how much everybody makes his-her own bed. They never see what they might do to make things better for themselves and other people. Bitter people think they are entitled and deserve more than anybody else to make up for their hardship. They are entitled to the breaks at work and in life. Every gain by every other person is a slight against them, and they take that other person as an enemy to hurt and to bring down. They build themselves up by bringing down people who don't whine and who don't share stories of hardship.

In taking out their bitterness on other people, bitter conniving people undermine the idea that we should feel for other people and help other people. They undercut normal human empathy and sympathy, and so undermine what is human. They destroy our ability to tell normal hardship that we all have to endure from extra hardship that we all need help for. They undermine the Golden Rule and the idea that rules apply equally to everybody.

Before the late 1980s, we saw bitter conniving indecent "culture of victim" people as coming entirely from the poor and the Left. Since then, I have seen middle class, upper middle class, and wealthy people adopt the culture of indecent bitter conniving. They blame the poor and the working class because they are not wealthy enough. They see tax laws as aimed at hurting them personally, John Smith and Joan Jones. They think every law about taxes and the economy is aimed at killing off their particular business or undermining their position as a house owner. They know that the poor and working class pay more proportionately in taxes than they do, yet they find excuses to further reduce their own taxes and further hurt the poor and the working class. Doctors and dentists overcharge working people because "now all working people are in unions and have health insurance, health insurance companies are unfair to us, we have to provide everything for ourselves, and so working people are actually over-privileged compared to us". I have also seen some decent doctors and dentists undercharge working people because they knew their families were having a hard time.

(C2A and C2B)

Both kinds of indecent people abuse programs such as welfare, food stamps, Social Security Disability, Aid to Dependent Children, Affirmative Action, anti-discrimination rules, tax breaks, aid to small business, aid to research, aid to farms, and aid to big business. They know all the right phrases to get programs to work for them. They know all the right phrases to attack some person or some agency with a charge of

racial or gender discrimination. They know how to get a job and keep a job using Affirmative Action, even when they are not as qualified as other applicants, are not really qualified, or don't work after being hired. They know all the rules that they can use to advantage. They know how to attack a fellow employee who is not "one of them" by charging bias. They know how to attack administrators, teachers, TAs, fellow students, fellow employees, and bosses with charges of bias. They know how to milk the system from their position.

Constantly they pout, whine, connive, connive to get around somebody, connive to get ahead, connive to put somebody else down, chew on grudges, complain about "the women" and "the men", complain about other ethnic and gender groups, "those people", point out faults, and justify themselves. This is not just the grumbling that all humans do.

Indecent thugs with an excuse are not limited to any ethnic or gender group but show up in all groups with adjusted dogma to fit the group. There is not much difference between a Black minor thug and a White minor thug except the cars they drive, music they blast, and some of the imagined insults for which they hit. It takes no more excuses to enable a White skinhead than it does a Black "gangsta".

Indecent thugs with an excuse know they don't really get the issues that their dogmas intend to explain or get the dogma. They don't care. They want an excuse to act out harshly and to promote "us" against any convenient "them". That is all that the dogma, or any ideas, really mean to them.

(C3) Indecent: Milking the System While Looking Good.

Indecent people of type 2 (social injustice and hard life) milk the system because, first, they find excuses that work, and, second, they manipulate programs such as welfare, ADC, and the courts. That is not who I am after here. I focus on people who look good while they milk the system. I am not after rich people as such. I don't care about people with toys. I don't care about people who "flaunt it". They might be low class at heart, uncouth, annoying, and clutter the airwaves, but they really cause little harm. I don't care about people who cause little harm.

Many indecent people who milk the system while looking good are the slick rich and powerful people that the Bible warned us against, and that I said I am not concerned about here. Even so, I have to mention them because they cause damage, to leave them out enables other indecent people, and there are some type 3 people that the Bible did not warn us about. I say only as much as needed here.

I have in mind bad professionals such as some professors, lawyers, doctors, and teachers, school board members, school trustees, business people, politicians, and bureaucrats. Dentists who charge \$50 for a five minute consultation to validate what the hygienist already saw are indecent no matter how much they tell themselves it is part of the profession, and they are entitled because of their education and the needs of an expensive office. Professors who get grant money, and finagle a high salary, are just as adept at milking the system as welfare mothers with six kids or spoiled athletes. I have in mind business people who know how to get grants for their own business, grants that were originally intended for small firms or to help nature. They are worse than greedy dentists and professors. Business people who know how to donate to campaigns to get tax breaks and reduced liability, even as they whine about big government and benefit programs for the poor, are as bad as drug dealers. Farmers who know that support for farms

is outmoded, promotes corporations more than families, and is overall hurtful, are as bad as people who ride on unemployment insurance. In the housing debacle of 2000 through 2012, the finance industry in the United States severely hurt the overall economy of both this country and the world, for its selfish gain. People that invested in houses to flip rather than in homes to live in, and people that took mortgages that were just too good to be true, are as much at fault as the finance industry. Middle class people who pay less in overall taxes than the poor pay, get benefits from mortgage relief, get benefits from services such as police, schools, fire protection, recreation, and government-back insurance, and yet refuse to honestly evaluate the tax system, are indecent. Business people who distort an industry (in economics jargon, add to “structuring”) such as farming, banking, oil, or natural gas, distort the economy for their benefit and hurt everybody. Too often, indecent people get privileges by giving to legislators.

Three kinds of person who milk the system I find particularly disgusting.

First, I dislike people of one race, religion, gender, or any group, who wait for their declared enemies to misstep, pounce on it as if the world were at stake, persecute the mistaken person, thus gain greater praise from fellows, gain a feeling of justification for him-herself, never go beyond this event to see the true problems, and thereby betray his-her own group and all society. Black people who wait for a White person to screw up so they can pounce on him-her, without really getting to underlying problems, are indecent. White people who pounce on all Black people when one Black person lives down to a stereotype are indecent. Women who wait for men to “act out as pigs”, without trying to know human nature and the root of gender roles, are pigs too.

As bad as it was, the incident of Trevon Martin and George Zimmerman did not deserve the spin it got. Every year, far more Blacks kill far more Black people than Whites kill Black people. As I finished this chapter, a White policeman outside Saint Louis, Missouri shot and killed an unarmed young Black man, Michael Brown. The details of the shooting had not been released as I wrote this. Michael Brown had earlier beaten up the proprietor of a convenience store, a man half his size, and robbed the store of a pack of small cigars. For at least five days after the shooting, Blacks rioted and looted. Al Sharpton rushed to the scene to condemn the shooting. As bad as it might be, the shooting of Michael Brown is not much worse than the rioting and looting. The shooting is less a crime than the bad education that is acceptable to Black parents. Every year, about 100 Black people are shot and killed by Police officers. Every year, Blacks kill far more Blacks than police officers kill Black people. Blacks cause far more fear among Blacks than Whites do. Black people spend little time protesting Black schools and Black crime, far less than they spent on Martin and Brown.

Second: I dislike people who use rules (laws) that are supposed to promote racial, religious, gender and other equality for their own narrow benefit, especially if they hurt others. This is the same as a business person in a big firm exploiting laws that were intended to benefit small firms, as when a big firm starts a subsidiary company to get funds for research that were originally intended for small firms. When a person uses Affirmative Action to get into school, stay in, get a job, hold a job, or to get a promotion, regardless of qualification, that person is indecent. Affirmative Action should apply only when people are otherwise equally qualified, and then only in limited doses. Affirmative Action was intended to help mostly Black people. I think the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative Action have been White women while Black men have benefitted little. This does not mean Black people do not abuse Affirmative Action or White women have not done a good job, but it does show distortion, distortion that amounts to indecency. The same

applies when a person abuses a charge of sexual misconduct. A bad charge hurts not only one person but all people who might have benefitted from the system if it worked properly. The same applies when a group of one race or gender inside a workplace “gang up” to control the workplace environment to harm other people and the gang uses laws that were intended to protect victims as a cover.

Third: I dislike people who abuse programs that were designed to help poor and sick people in unusual distress even if the abusers themselves are poor, sick, and otherwise good people but are not in unusual distress. Welfare was originally designed to help poor people, for a while, who faced sudden intense hardship. I find indecent the people who have more children than they can directly support and count on the state to act as a surrogate parent. A mother who has even one child, but she cannot support that one child, and instead counts on the state to act as the father, is indecent even if she is poor and otherwise a good person. The more children a woman has that she cannot expect to support herself but counts on the state to act as daddy, the worse she is. To abuse programs like welfare undermines the program and abuses people that the program was originally designed to help. People who get a doctor to certify that they are unhappy and therefore deserve Social Security Disability are indecent even if otherwise they are good people who want to stay in their home towns and who go to church regularly.

These type 3 people cause harm both directly to society as a whole and indirectly through bad example. They know it. It doesn't matter whether indecent people of types 2 or 3 cause the most harm. What does matter is that they both cause considerable harm. They are both thugs with excuses.

One of the biggest harms done by indecent people of type 3 is to provide an excuse for indecent people of type 2. As long as everybody can see that some people milk the system, get away with it, are helped by the law, and look morally good doing it, it is hard to tell other people to stop feeling angry and to stop being indecent in type 2 ways.

If we stopped all people of type 3, that doesn't mean we would also stop type 2. Thugs find an excuse. If we take away one excuse, they find another. The point of stopping type 3 is not to stop type 2. The point is that type 3 is indecent and bad itself. We need to go after it for the damage that it does. We can never completely stop people from milking the system any more than we can stop all thugs with an excuse. But we can minimize milking the system. We can get across the message that we know what is going on, we don't like it, and we intend to take realistic steps to stop abuses. This we have not done in America for a long time.

Purveyors of Bad Ideas.

Where do indecent people get the ideas behind the excuses? They pick up excuses from anywhere, and have been doing so since childhood. The actual formal ideas come from ideologues, rebels, pop culture, the entertainment industry, activists, and purveyors of half-true ideas such as politicians, TV and radio commentators, TV and radio talk shows, comedians, and so-called news shows on cable TV – all on both the Left and Right. Sometimes indecent people get excuses from bad decisions of the Supreme Court. Ideologues, rebels, comedians, commentators, etc. purvey half-truths that are n worse than lies. I cannot be more specific for fear of being sued.

Where do the purveyors of half-truths get their ideas to hand down to truly indecent people? Mostly they inherit ideas from past economists, philosophers, artists, jurists, and good politicians without knowing where the ideas first came from. Almost always the ideas that are handed down are not the full ideas but are only distorted abused bad half-true versions of better ideas. The idea that capitalism works well when left alone is true if seen properly but that is not how it is used in propaganda. The idea that America is rich and should take care of under-privileged people is basically true but it has to be combined with reality so we see that America cannot take care of everybody comfortably; and that realism is just what does not happen when the idea excuses clients of the state.

A Warning to People Who Fool Themselves.

Everybody acts indecently every so often. If I do only two indecent acts per week, I am happy. Most of these indecencies are small, and I am not worried about them for this chapter.

Nearly everybody thinks he-she lies on the good end of normally decent. Few of us really lie on the good end of the scale. Most of us are more indecent than we admit. Some of us are indecent but think we are normally decent or better. Most of us fool ourselves. Remember: eventually you are what you do. If you are rude, a bad neighbor, bad co-worker, shirk work, are noisy, dirty, not considerate, cause grief, abuse power, lie, milk the system, find excuses, have attitude, or wait to get up into people's faces, then you are an indecent person even if most of what you do otherwise is passable, even if you also do some decent things, and even if you carry many family members and fellow church people on your back.

Even if they do not cross the line into being an indecent person in general, many normal passably decent people skate by consistently on the low end of the scale, or cross the line into indecency much too often, even if they later cross back with a "good deed"; and they fool themselves about it too. You can do better than that. The people around you deserve better.

Indecent people are good at fooling themselves, probably so they can live with themselves and can better use other people. Nearly all indecent people see themselves as passably decent people who might live a tougher life than average. Some see themselves as heroes who must do tough things in a tough world, like John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Clint Eastwood, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Shaft (Richard Roundtree), or Machete (Danny Trejo). This is all crap. You are what you do. Someday, with God, you will have to look at yourself, and you will see you are not a tough guy entitled hero. You are just rude and selfish, and cause other people trouble. I doubt many indecent people will read this book, but, if you are indecent and do, use it to wake up.

Eliminating Excuses.

People have had hard lives since forever. Everybody thinks his-her life is tough but, if you ask other people, even people who look calm and happy, you will find that everybody has faced his-her share of divorce, cancer, unemployment, bad schools, arrests, and no money. Social injustice is real and has been real in horticultural, agricultural, and industrial societies, including the states that we all now live in, for ten thousand years. If you are a poor powerless person in such societies, your position can excuse some bad feelings. If you have been a middle class person in America since the 1970s, then you have been hurt by unfair entitlement programs and the world economy. You are entitled to some grumbling but

that is all. I know about social injustice as much as most Lefties or Righties. Social injustice is not a general excuse for everything. It does not excuse indecency and it does not excuse milking the system. You do not deserve anything extra because you have been a victim or have had some hardship. Acting badly does not make up for anything. The only thing that does make up is finding the root causes of problems and working on those. Think about that responsibility rather than about any suffering and any supposed entitlement.

A Vicious Circle.

Imagine the world has been forced into two artificial poles: prudes on one side with naughty chic people on the other. Both sides, in their ways, can damn the other side and can resort to mental and physical violence. Suppose a reasonably decent person tries to talk to either side. Prudes hear only a defense of self-indulgence and badness. They hear only moral relativism that excuses and enables whatever badness people wish. They hear only the glamorization of badness. To reinforce their position, they act prudishly. They are strict, accept no missteps, and punish all mistakes harshly. In contrast, chic naughty people hear only boredom, refusal to face life in all its complexity and richness, and fear. They hear excuses for the rulers to continue domination through guilt. To reinforce their position, they make a point of breaking rules, stress moral ambiguity, and seek people who cannot live by prudish standards yet have satisfying lives. They make a point of having fun in ways that prudes cannot use such as drugs, and in showing that these ways do no real harm. Both sides see selfishness and willful blindness. They talk past each other. Nearly every American has heard this non-dialogue and has been forced into one side or the other.

Talking past each other insures there is no sane middle ground. There can be only two poles. The two poles reinforce themselves by contrasting themselves with the other pole. So they reinforce each other. If either pole were to accept a sane middle, it would undermine the other pole but, in doing so, it would also undermine itself. It is always easier to go to a pole, and to hide in the safety of its dogma, than to find the sane middle. Sadly, in the real human world, two opposite poles are more stable than one sane middle. Two opposite crazy poles arise out of one sane middle. This process is the same split-making that leads to two stable political parties or to two stable enemy-camps-with-many-members in wars. It is easier to have bad guys and good guys than to have human guys. This is an example of what I called "systems that eat the world" applied to decency, prudery, and indecency. Because of this tendency, I don't expect us ever to find a good lasting resolution. I am glad evolution prepared middle moderately decent people who eventually get over their diseases of prudery, indecency, and chic naughtiness.

Bad Effects of Enabling Indecency.

-The worst effect is bad thinking. We can't think straight. We deny an important part of ourselves. We buy into the Romantic myth in the hope of making sense of inversions. We begin a vicious circle in our minds where the myth supports bad ideas and we cling to the myth to make sense of the bad ideas. We lose the ability to think outside the circle.

-We turn young people away from being simply decent or as decent as they can be.

-We hurt decent people.

-We stifle the contributions that decent people could make.

-Indecent people are wasted sentient beings. It is not so much that their lives are not productive as that their minds stay forever dead (asleep). They have wasted the opportunity to be human. They are lost. Of course, inside they are still residually human, and sometimes they do a decent thing in a crisis. But their humanity is not usually available. Indecent people are as screwed up as an animal that has long been tormented in a cage.

-There really are social problems (poverty, abortion, teenage pregnancy, bad education) that need hard work to understand and to help. Indecency diverts us away from them. Indecent people blind us to the real problems and to what really needs to be done. Indecent people fool concerned people into thinking indecent people are relevant. Concerned people fool themselves into thinking they really do something merely by acting out. Genuinely concerned people are co-opted. Concerned people get fooled into enabling indecency. On the other hand, people that want an excuse to ignore social problems use the indecency of complainers as an excuse.

-Showing off can be fun. Indecent people give showing off a bad name.

-Indecent people cause trouble and annoy other people. Indecent people hurt the hearts and stomachs of other people, even other indecent people.

-Resources have to be wasted on indecent people, and wasted guarding against indecent people.

-Indecent people ruin neighborhoods.

-Indecent people ruin their children. Indecent create indecent copies of themselves. Their children grow up never even knowing what decency is. By the time a child is five years old, if they child has grown up among indecent people, that child likely will never change.

-Indecency forces us to choose between trying to save the children of indecent people versus enabling the indecent parents.

-Indecency leads to violence.

-Indecency adds to conflict between groups even when most members are common passable people, such as conflict between ethnic groups.

-Indecency leads to bad politics. Enabling indecency leads to worse politics.

-Enabling indecency leads decent people and ordinary people to feel guilt where they should not feel guilt at all. They feel bad about the bad that indecent people do. They feel responsible for the original issues such as welfare kids even when they did not cause the original problems. In a vicious circle, the guilt allows them to be further used and made into enablers.

-Enabling indecency leads to tolerating indecent behavior that should not be tolerated. It allows indecent people to take advantage of decent people and ordinary people. It allows indecent people to force decent people and ordinary people into the role of enablers.

-Enabling indecency allows some groups to take advantage of others. It allows Blacks to use White guilt, gays to use "straight guilt", Jews to use Christian guilt, Muslims to use Christian guilt, and the Irish to use middle class guilt. It prevents ethnic groups from "calling out" bad behavior by other ethnic groups; or it encourages calling out instances of bad behavior that don't really matter much. It allows bad business people and rich people to cheat the public in the name of creating jobs. It allows all business people to say they are romantic entrepreneurs when really few are.

-Enabling indecency prevents us from knowing when programs work or not. Enabling indecency prevents us from making a good personal welfare system and from making a good system of supporting business.

-Enabling indecency leads young people to misuse (overuse and underuse) alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and sex, and to indulge in too much violence and bullying. Enabling indecency leads young people to strange damaging ideologies of both the Left and Right.

-Indecent people are not needed to make life more interesting, challenging, creative, and, indirectly, better. We can live with far fewer of them.

-We have wrongly romantically inverted the real world to make decency indecent, uncreative, stultifying, boring, and the tool of social injustice while we make indecency decent, creative, creative, interesting, and the vanguard of social justice.

-Indecent people think they are passably decent; but they are not. Indecent people think they are heroes of politics, gender, ethnicity, religion, the owning class, the middle class, the working class, or free people; but they are not. Indecent people think they are hipper and cooler and more interesting; but they are not.

-Indecent people are not the world force of disorder that allows for creativity, progress, and an interesting world. We do not need indecent people to make the world better. Indecent people do make the world more interesting sometimes just as HIV, herpes, the flu, mosquitoes, stupid politics, parasites, a tsunami, cancer, car accidents, disease, famine, war, and bad love can make life more interesting. That does not mean we should confuse indecent people with the world force of creative disorder.

-Indecent people are not "beautiful losers" and demon-haunted outsiders fighting spiritual decay while retaining moral purity. Indecent people have learned to think of themselves that way and to present themselves that way because it works to fool better people. Real beautiful losers and demon-haunted outsiders were not originally indecent until they learned to make themselves that way by internalizing stupid social myths.

-We wrongly think indecent people are creative people while decent people are uncreative idiots.

-We wrongly romanticize indecent people as rebel secret warriors for goodness. We wrongly think all decent people are stooges of the corrupt regime. Wrong political correctness, Right and Left, makes us

pretend indecency is something else, and wrong political correctness makes us enable indecency. Not every angry picket for the Tea Party or for Black Justice is a rebel warrior for goodness. Not every rap song, country patriot song, rock rebel song, or song about a misunderstood criminal is the paean of the people.

-We wrongly think indecency is effective. In fact, nearly all indecent self-styled rebels achieve little good. Few true rebels fighting for goodness are indecent. Few indecent people are secretly rebels who fight for true goodness.

-Self-romanticizing indecent people almost always hurt the causes that they think they help. Black hip-hop “gangsters” and White Supremacists set back the true struggle of Black and White people. Martin Luther King did not die so Black fools could show off their butts and ride around in rolling boom boxes; Thomas Jefferson did not write the Declaration of Independence so White fools could flood the airwaves with lies and ride around shooting out of pickup trucks.

-Indecent people almost always make bad citizens. Besides hurting their own group, they hurt the nation as a whole. Decent people don't always make good citizens but they don't often make bad citizens.

Ethnic Groups, Religious Groups, and Other Groups.

If your group has many indecent people, even if they are a minority, and even if your group has many normal people who obviously value decency, then still other groups will look at your whole group as indecent. Whether this skewering is unfair on some high level doesn't matter because it is part of human nature, and it is a reality of this world. If your group has many people who are loud, dirty, drink a lot, abuse drugs, steal, lie, bully, abuse women, do not value education, are hyper-sensitive to being “dissed”, violent, drive boom boxes, commit assault through noise, commit assault through dress, have unrealistic opinions about race, religion, or politics, wait to catch people in other groups in mistakes, or manipulate the economic and political system, then your group has a serious problem. The bad behavior hurts your group much more than the bad behavior gets back for any prejudice by other groups.

I was a juror in a murder trial in which two young Black men killed a third young Black man, out of a wrong glamorized sense of tough “gangsta” indecency. Their bad idea of respect ruined two families. Over the 4th of July 2014, Chicago had over 200 shootings, most Black-on-Black. In August 2014, as a response to the shooting of a young unarmed Black man outside Saint Louis, Missouri, Blacks rioted for four days and looted stores. What does looting have to do with justice for that Black man or social justice? How is looting anything but indecent? About summer of 2012, close to where I live in Auburn, AL, a young Black man (allegedly) killed two nine-year-old Black twins and their White caregiver, for no reason other than to take the old man's car. The alleged perpetrator had earlier allegedly killed at least two other young Black men but had escaped conviction. In 2012, at a party at an apartment in Auburn, AL, a young Black man shot six other young Black men in a fight over a Black woman. Three of the victims died on the spot. The accused man claimed self-defense. Too many young Black men, and some young White men, think it is unmanly to do school work and to care about mental achievement. Young Black people call doing school work is “acting White” or “acting Chinese”. About 2008, a White fraternity at Auburn University satirized Black people in a play where White kids put on blackface – the school rightfully abolished the fraternity.

All this is a huge price to pay for enabling indecency. The price is paid both on a personal level and at the level of the community. The normal people struggling to be tolerably decent and to raise their children in a tolerably decent world pay the biggest price. In Chicago, Black parents who simply want to send their kids to school, to learn how to make a living, pay the biggest price. It is not a joke.

Every major ethnic group has a subgroup of romanticized indecent fake heroes: Black “gangstas”; White skinheads and low-lifers; White “gangsta” imitators; Hispanic gangster champions of “la raza” and the barrio; and tough up-and-coming on-the-go hustling me-first people of all races. Even if these people are physically tough, and clever in some ways, they are still indecent. These people wrongly see themselves as rebels in the fight for freedom and fairness, and warriors against “the man”. The people in the neighborhood, who are not overtly tough, and who likely are scared, tend to go along. See the English movie “Attack the Block”. In fact, these people are cheap tools of the power elite. Rather than help their ethnic group, help fairness, and defeat “the man”, these people stifle their ethnic group, foster hatred, bleed off energy in useless stupid fake rebellious acts, blind people, and keep smart people in their own group from seeing truly and seeking real solutions. The most successful people in the fight for fairness are not blinded by ideology but seek truth. Decent people are more likely to have clear sight and are more likely to do long-term good than “gangstas” even if “gangstas” see a few things decent people don’t see. Even if your big motive is your own group, and you don’t care about others, still you should also fight ignorant indecency and should promote clear sight and decency. If you believe the myth of indecency, then you are part of the problem, and a traitor to your ethnic group.

A Bad Effect You Didn’t Worry About But Should.

You live in a nice suburb or a good building in a nice neighborhood in a city, and don’t worry much about indecent thugs with excuses. You live in a bad neighborhood and indecent people are so pervasive that you can’t do anything about it, feel you shouldn’t do anything about it, and feel the absence or presence of a few more indecent thugs with excuses won’t matter. You are both wrong.

Already indecent people are a big drain on America through disruption, crime, abuse of programs such as welfare and aid to business, and by keeping us from achieving the efficiency that we need to compete in the world arena. No matter what indecent people say, society carries them more than it exploits them for gain. Indecent people are a net loss. As America moves into the world economy, we will not be able to afford the burden of many people that we carry now: uneducated, borderline criminals, real criminals, people who have children too young, have too many children, people who abuse programs, have no aptitude for a job that is suited to a modestly successful life, and people who milk the system. We can raise the minimum wage as high as we want but that won’t make indecent people productive members of society; it will only screw up the economy. We can give business firms huge tax breaks and all that will do is erode the tax base. Something has to change. Most likely, from desperation, we will stop caring for indecent people and willfully unproductive people. I don’t know if they will end up in prison but I doubt it because we can’t afford that option either. Somehow, we all will have to deal with this issue. Either we prepare or we suffer.

If you are in a racial group or religious group, Black, White, or Hispanic, Christian or Muslim, with a lot of indecent people who brandish excuses, they will bring your whole group down with them. Your group as a whole will be excluded from whatever accord America finds in the future to preserve the highest

material standard practically possible in the real world economy. Like it or not, groups will still matter in the real world, and, if your group has too many assholes, then your group as a whole will be pushed aside to let other decent groups find security. Your group will be pushed aside even if most people in your group are decent but a big minority is indecent thugs. The presence of indecent thugs in your group threatens your grandchildren directly and harshly, no matter how much you got to church and how much you teach basic skills. They hurt you and your grandchildren. I don't like this but I have seen it.

Go Ahead and Judge, Go Ahead and Band with Good People.

Except for some unusual people such as Taoist adepts, it is not possible to be human without judging other people. Decent people and normal people have to judge. Judging in itself does not make you bad, and judging in itself does not make you judgmental. We have to judge if we are not to promote bad acts, enable indecent people, and allow indecent people to hurt people. Too much indecency prevails in the modern world because ordinary people have bad judgment through bad ideologies. The trick is to judge correctly. I do not run through how to judge correctly. Only by practicing at judging can we avoid becoming a bad judge and a bad person. Only by practicing can we judge correctly. We can only judge correctly if we do not romanticize indecency and if we do not let fear of moral ambiguity make us pretend that we do not judge when really we do. It is better to judge openly than in stealth. Once we have confidence in our ability to judge, we should band together with other people of decent judgment to make a better world and to control badness.

Decency, Indecency, Fun, and Interestingness.

Of all the mistaken ways to denigrate decency and glamorize indecency, maybe the worst is that decent people are necessarily boring while indecent people are necessarily fun. See David the bon vivant really fun tough rebel guy in Part Two. "I don't want to go to heaven because all the interesting people are in hell". If you want to have fun, you have to be indecent. If you want more fun, you have to be more indecent. All indecent people have fun; all people who have fun are indecent; people who have fun have fun only because they are indecent; no decent people have fun; all decent people are boring; most of the boring people are decent. All this is just false.

Sometimes life is boring and naughtiness can be fun. To deny this is bad. To deny this is the same as to deny that drugs, including booze, can be fun and can alleviate the boredom of life. But to admit this is not to assert that naughtiness is always fun and always alleviates boredom. After a while, naughtiness gets more boring than normal boredom. Doubling down doesn't help. After a while, you have to find some way other than naughtiness to make life work. If naughtiness is all that makes life work for you, then you have to expect that eventually you will meet grief and other people will shut you down.

If the world were made entirely of simple decent people, life would be slightly more boring in some ways. Even so, a simple decent world would be better than a slum of annoying indecency, and the world would still be interesting enough. The world would not be boring in general, and it would be better. Because the world would be better to live in, it would be more interesting and less fearful to the many people who are frightened of indecency, so the previously-frightened people would participate more, and the world overall would be more interesting than otherwise. Even if we had to forego the thrill of a few naughty chic-indecent acts, we would do other things more effectively and the world would be more interesting for that.

We would enjoy ourselves, fight poverty, cure disease, recover from typhoons, save nature, explore the cosmos, make art, and sell tasty doughnuts. See the movie "Pleasantville"; even if it is corny it is true. We would not have bad censorship, as in the great "Michelangelo" episode of "The Simpsons". There is little chance the world will ever be made mostly of simple decent people. There is no chance decency will overcome the real world and make the real world deadly boring.

I am not sure where decent people rate on a scale of being interesting and making the world interesting. Many interesting people are decent at heart while many indecent people would be hell to live with. If there is a hell, it will not be full of truly interesting people that you can get along with. It will be like "No Exit" by Sartre. The vast majority of indecent people that I have met are not creative or interesting; they are energy-sucking assholes. People might think indecent assholes are creative and interesting, but they are not. I have met annoying selfish conniving people who have minor talent but not enough to excuse bad behavior. There are plenty of talented decent people that I would rather spend time with, and I am likely to get a lot more out of time with them. Some creative people appear indecent, but mostly that is a pose they take because they have fallen victim to the false dogma that scuzziness goes with creativity. If you look behind the pose, often you find a passably decent person. Apparently that was true even of Lou Reed. I find this pose of scuzziness by would-be creative people sad, funny, and wasteful. If you want to be creative, dare to be decent, dare to embrace the half-way decent person inside.

A small minority of indecent people do contribute. They fight big indecency such as when tough guys in the movies kill gangsters. They have talents other than their indecency that lead us to put up with their indecency. An episode of "Law and Order SVU" showed the military protecting a man who molested boys because the man was a genius with guidance systems. Indecent people make the world more interesting sometimes, although not as much as romanticism makes out. Indecent people do add some things that decent people cannot contribute, and that even passable people cannot contribute. I do not sort it all out here. To deny that indecent people can be interesting is ideological blindness, like denying biological evolution or denying that drugs can be fun. But accepting that some indecent people can be useful or fun sometimes is not an excuse for indecency. Watch the English movie "Attack the Block", and make up your own mind if the movie excuses badness.

The key is not to romanticize and not to enable. You cannot make yourself interesting by making yourself indecent first; you just make yourself indecent. You cannot make yourself more interesting by making yourself more indecent; you just make yourself into an asshole. Great people have flaws. We cannot make ourselves great by imitating their flaws. Jesus drank a fair amount of wine and Winston Churchill drank too much whiskey; drinking more does not make us into Jesus or Churchill. If you want to make yourself interesting, make yourself interesting first. If you want the world to be more interesting, make yourself interesting first.

Sometimes a sitcom or drama on TV adds a little "edginess" to a character to try to make him-her more interesting and maybe more realistic. Sometimes this tactic works but mostly it turns out silly. Mostly it returns attention to the basic underlying decency of the character. In my memory, the first big character on TV who was a deliberate mix of decent guy and naughty boy was "Maverick" from the late 1950s. "Maverick" worked. I loved "Maverick". "Maverick" began a trend. I like mild bad boy characters. But what sticks is their basic underlying decency rather than their surface naughtiness. When Magnum put

his neck on the block to help his friends, he was being decent, not a fun bad boy. The same can be said of the never-ending parade of dysfunctional families following the trail of “Married with Children”.

J.R.R. Tolkien (“Lord of the Rings”) valued all life, and stressed the value even of indecent life. A deeply decent person, Frodo, could not destroy the Ring. In the past, the good guys had spared the indecent evil Gollum when they should have killed him. If Gollum had not lived to destroy the Ring accidentally, we all would be living in a horrible world. We need even indecent people to make a full and complete world. This might be true and it might even be what God had in mind. But Tolkien’s lesson does not excuse indecency. You cannot indirectly save the world by emulating indecency. Acting like a Gollum rebel bad boy does not automatically make you a savior of the world or of your group. Tolkien was not a champion of romanticized indecency, at least not on purpose. Tolkien was fighting British prudes, fighting the death penalty in England, he followed the New Testament in extolling common people, and he was arguing for the value of all life; so he went too far the other way. He romanticized too much when he made his point. In contrast, Frodo needed Sam, a deeply decent person, and physically tough person, to protect him from the indecency of Gollum. Frodo needed Sam more than he needed Gollum. LOTR might have been less as art if, in the end, Sam had taken the Ring from Frodo and tossed it into the Lake of Fire; but LOTR would have been more accurate about how the world works, how the world should work, and how we need to see the world.

After you get to a certain age, you need to do what you think is fun, not what other people think is fun. We all take cues from people around us, but, in the long run, we shouldn’t do what we think the cool kids think is fun, and should not depend on rebels, rockers, bad boys, bad girls, true conservatives, or what Ronald Reagan would do. If you can’t figure out fun for yourself, then take time to pick a good reference group. Don’t let TV, media, or myths pick one for you. If fun for you is deeply indecent or criminal, like getting drunk four times a week, beating up your girlfriend, or beating up queers, or if you think you have to do that crap from time to time, then you have some serious issues that this book can’t help with. You are wrong and bad, and you need to stop.

Decency Needs Indecency; Good Needs Evil.

This section is important for a later chapter on the problem of evil. See above about Tolkien.

Some decent people are born fully decent and don’t have to learn to be decent. These people are like walking angels. They appear in all cultures, races, and religions. These people do not have to learn about indecency in order to be decent. Decency can exist apart from indecency. Sadly, naïve decent people are also easy victims, and they disappear quickly unless they are well buffered by a lot of other nearby decent people and other halfway decent people.

In contrast to natural decent people, most decent people start out with a predisposition to be decent, and then learn to be even more decent. Most halfway decent common people have to learn about decency so as to stay as decent as they can be. To learn to be decent, we need experience of indecency. We experience a lot of indecency by meeting normal common people who make mistakes, but even that might not be enough. To learn about indecency, we need to experience really indecent people, survive the experience, and then not be so traumatized that we can’t learn from what happened. Sadly, I have met decent people who have been so badly hurt that they remain “frozen”.

Except in some ideal managed world of the future, wherever there is decency, indecent people arise to prey on decent people. That is what happened in our evolutionary history. As a matter of fact, decency and indecency will almost always appear together. When we see two things that always appear together, we are tempted to read a lot into their co-existence. We are tempted to see them as needing each other in a deep way, and as necessarily forming each other. We should not make this mistake. We can see the co-existence of decency and indecency, and even see relations between them, without also assuming anything metaphysical.

To achieve our full potential for decency, we need indecent people. This sounds as if I am saying that, to achieve full goodness, we need badness, or, in other words, good and evil depend on each other and make each other. One could not exist without the other. Set aside for now that question. What I am saying is we should not romanticize relations between goodness and badness, between decency and indecency. Decency can be made better and more decent by its encounter with indecency but we should not raise indecency into a co-equal cosmic metaphysical principle.

We would need decency even without indecency and evil so as to handle the problems of a hard and uncertain world. We need decency to handle storms, fires, accidents, childbirth, disease, and old age. Not all arguments, conflicts, and wars are born of indecency. We need decency to handle those too. Decency can exist on its own apart from indecency.

In some individual cases, decent people become better when they encounter indecent people. They could not have become as good as they are if they not encountered indecent people and suffered first. In some cases, people need to encounter indecent people in order to become decent in a deep qualitative way that they could not have become otherwise. Some victims of violence, stealing, and war, as a result of their encounters with indecency, become good in deep ways that other people cannot reach. However, in some individual cases, decent people do not become better, or do not become enough better, or even completely collapse, as a result of evil. Evil really does hurt.

Decency adds to the total of goodness of the world while indecency subtracts. When decency makes up for the hurt of indecency, sometimes it adds more than enough goodness to make up for what indecency took away from the world. Sometimes it does not. One mark of evil is that it cannot be undone; evil cannot be made as if it were never. It is not clear if we can add enough good after evil to make up for the harm. In some cases, at least, maybe many, we cannot. If so, then it is not clear that the total sum of goodness in the world is greater because of evil, because decency adds enough more goodness when it counters indecency to make up for the loss of goodness. Of course, even if decency cannot make up for the harm of evil, decency still has to try, decency still has to remain decency. We cannot see good and evil, decency and indecency, in terms of mutual dependence where evil spurs decency to be even more decent and to make the world overall better.

I do not know what to make of all this. I admit some evil can make us better but I do not think evil was put here to make us deeply better. It is more like something we have to endure. I do not think the factual co-existence of decency and indecency means something metaphysical and that good and evil are somehow interlocked siblings.

I am not sure how Western people thought of these problems before Romanticism. In the recent world of romanticized pop culture, we can get a sense of how people see the issues in such movies as “Legend” with Tom Cruise or the “Batman” series. Especially in the “Batman” comic books and movie series, the Joker and Batman make each other. If the Joker had not killed Bruce Wayne’s parents when Bruce was young, Bruce would never have become the Batman. If the Batman had not arisen, the Joker would never have been inspired to his great crimes. Neither can ever finally defeat the other. Each inspires the other to go beyond himself. This relation was evident even when Heath Ledger played the Joker because the Joker did not necessarily cause the rise of Batman but the Joker makes clear that they need each other now. The same relation is extended to Batman’s other enemies, and the enemies in many comic books, movies, manga, and movies about vengeance. Good and evil make each other and need other. This view makes for some really fun movies but it is deeply wrong.

Decency, Indecency, and Meeting God.

I can’t say what happens to people after they die on the basis of decency, because they felt the need to make the world a better place, felt the need to use their talents, did something extraordinary once or twice in a life, were ordinary passable people, or were indecent, trash, or a criminal. When we die, we face God, and, if God wishes, he makes us confront who we are and what we have done. Maybe the worst fate for an indecent person is to make him-her think, see who he-she is, and feel the harm done. Thai Buddhists call this being forced to face yourself.

I think God likes decent people, enjoys normal people who work hard to make the world a better place and who try to use their talents well, admires people who do extraordinary things, likes passable people and indulges them, and gets rid of indecent people and criminals after he forces them to see themselves. God does toss the trash. The New Testament makes a point of valuing common-passable-normal-ordinary people, and likely knows more than I do, but that attitude still does not make clear what God will do with them. The New Testament does not guarantee they will be saved. In fact, it implies that most of them will be discarded. Fiction writers distort passable people so as to stress how lovable common people but usually distort decent people with annoying flaws. Many of Dickens’ characters fit this mold. Every sitcom since “The Honeymooners” has done this.

Decency as a Reflection of the World.

I have said the world is as it is, and is not otherwise. Decency is not a fully rational approach to the world based on a realistic vision of how the world works, except in rare cases where near-decency prevails. Simple naïve natural decency makes sense in an American or Japanese middle class neighborhood but not in an American urban blight zone – although, when done there, simple natural decency does make a different kind of transcendent sense. Yet I still urge decency. How realistic it is to try to make the world a better place depends on how amenable the world is to your efforts. Decency has not remade the world. Even if the world is not much amenable to decency, I still urge us to try. I urge us at times to go against how the world really is, and thus I imply that the world is not as it is. This is a contradiction on one level. I don’t think it is a deep contradiction, and it doesn’t bother me. This topic also is too much to go into here, so likewise I pick it up again later in the book.

The remainder of this chapter is optional. If bits of it are tedious, skip around.

PART 2: THE IDEOLOGY (DOGMA) OF INDECENCY

What follows is not a history lesson. I don't guess why things happened. I only narrate what happened as it is relevant. I don't expect you to read any philosophers so I don't cite specific works. You can skip this part without loss of continuity but it is sort of fun, especially the story of David.

European Stage.

The West has appreciated, and sometimes glamorized, outsiders and the underbelly of society at least since Roman times. Low-life people, drunks, prostitutes, pimps, criminals, and Cynic philosophers were a source of fun. Despite glamorizing outsiders, Romans did not emulate them or think they were spiritually superior. All states societies know that rich and powerful people sometimes act badly but put on prudish hyper-decency to cover themselves and to control others. Tanakh (Old Testament) prophets skewered these people and this hypocrisy. Corruption of the rich and powerful does not mean all society is corrupt, indecent, and invalid. The West accepted that truth can come from outside standard sources including from the underbelly of society, outsiders, and criminals. Yet the West did not usually look to them as the source of the best and deepest truth. The West usually has not advocated adopting the ideas, outlook, manners, dress, speech, and life-ways of outsiders, the poor, rebels, etc. While Jesus felt sympathy for the poor and for people on the outside, and insisted we act kindly to them, he did not say to emulate them just because they are outside. Thoughtful people in the West said glamorizing outsiders, underbelly, etc. could be silly and wrong. Fiction writers both recognized the tendency to glamorize low-life people and they made fun of the tendency.

Fascination with outsiders etc., yet not emulating them, appear clearly in Chaucer from the late 1300s. The ideas are well-said by 1610 by Shakespeare, especially his Henry plays, and Cervantes, not just in "Don Quixote" but in stories too, for example, "The Little Gipsy Girl" and "Colloquy of the Dogs". Prince Hal could glean wisdom from Falstaff but he did not rely on Falstaff or become Falstaff.

Sometime after 1600, glamorizing outsiders, rebels, outlaws, and criminals became more earnest. John Milton, in "Paradise Lost", in 1667, did not intend to make Lucifer a fascinating seductive "bad boy" but that is how Lucifer came off; what happened to Milton is typical of what happened in the West in flirting with badness. The early modern poetic statement that "indecent satisfies in a way goodness cannot" is "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" by William Blake in 1790; it might be the West's first modern graphic novel. A rebuttal from the mid-1900s is "The Great Divorce" by C.S. Lewis.

Western thinkers began to wonder how society worked on its deepest level, usually to figure out how to govern best. We got Hobbes and Locke. In the early 1700s, thinkers began to see European society as intrinsically corrupt. Under ideal conditions, society might work well. But under the real conditions in Europe, society did not work well. People from within society could not see the deep problems of society. A person had to stand outside society to see what was going on and to give advice that was not tied to the interests of some group in society. People outside standard European society were better people than Europeans, in their turn: peasants, hunters, artists, craftspeople, Bohemians, Gypsies, Celts, Slavs, Greeks, Chinese, Hindus, Africans, etc. Europeans developed the idea of the "noble savage", who lived far away in the Americas or the Pacific islands, somewhat as we now think of Sasquatch. Thinkers saw

the order of society as the order that stifles and brings Death. Rebels were the creative chaos from which all future goodness comes and which brings Life. At first, these ideas served the Protestant rebellions. Later the ideas served the democratic rebellions such as the French Revolution. We still believe these ideas. If one thinker can serve as an example for this trend of thought, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the middle to late 1700s.

I think: Society does have problems, and often we do need to stand outside to see clearly. Yet, to stand outside society, and see how things really work, you do not have to be a rebel, low-life, member of the underbelly, worker, peasant, criminal, or artist. Philosophers, for over two thousand years, had advised standing apart so as to think better and see clearly. They did not say a person had to become a rebel, member of the underbelly, etc. to stand outside and think clearly. They did not say a person had to be apparently indecent to think clearly, know what to do, and be really decent.

After about 1750, some Western thinkers did say just that. You could only really see clearly and do the right thing if you stood outside as part of the underbelly. As a committed outsider, you would seem a bit indecent, and, in fact, be a bit indecent by prevailing standards. You could be indecent on the outside but, really, decent inside. Corrupt rich powerful people who ran society were the opposite: apparently decent on the outside but indecent inside. Society necessarily has a big secret about evil and corruption living deep in its heart. Society does not work well and does not serve the people.

Thinkers in the West not only enjoyed outsiders, underbelly, etc. as the Romans and Chaucer had done but glamorized them as rebels against social injustice, people with unique insight into deep truth, whose life-ways were deeper and better. Outsider rebels are the creative chaos that brings new better orders. Thinkers disparaged not just rich powerful people who perverted decency but other types that had once supported society and morality: old people, parsons, merchants, craftspeople, farmers, squires, soldiers, doctors, and lawyers. In their old beneficial appearance, these types were good-if-a-bit-silly-common-normal characters in Jane Austen and Walter Scott. Then they became stupid, their ways of life invalid, the carriers of hypocritical prudery, and servants of the rich and powerful. Rebellion is on the side of life while staid decency is on the side of death. Society necessarily kept deep bad secrets that benefitted the rich while hurting the common people. Powerful people tried to bury the truth while rebels and outsiders revealed it. Wittingly or not, the common people helped powerful rich people to put down outsiders and rebels and helped to bury the truth.

The “bad boy” side of Lucifer came into its own. Novelists admired the “saucy manners” of the rebel and highwayman. By the early 1800s, the Bronte sisters (“Jane Eyre”, “Wuthering Heights”, and “Shirely”) replaced Jane Austen. Henry Fielding (“Tom Jones”), Charles Dickens (many novels), Robert Louis Stevenson (“Kidnapped”), Alexander Dumas (“The Three Musketeers” and “The Man in the Iron Mask”), and Victor Hugo (“The Hunchback of Notre Dame”) replaced Walter Scott. The detective story and the story about demented genius were born, as in E.T.A. Hoffmann. Sherlock Holmes adopted disguises from the lower classes to investigate the shocking truth hidden under layers of lies.

To keep perspective, I point out some cause-and-effect: Not all goodness comes from creative chaos. Not all chaos is the birthplace of beneficial order. Some chaos is just bad. Even if some chaos is the birthplace of future goodness, not all rebels and outsiders represent that chaos. In fact, they might work against that creative chaos. Not all orderly society is bad. Not all bad society is orderly. Some orderly

society is good. Some bad society is chaotic. Society really has problems, and we need to think clearly about them. To think clearly and act well, sometimes you need to stand outside. Standing outside, you might seem indecent. Yet not all outsiders who act indecently also are true rebels who see clearly and act well. Not everybody who appears indecent outside is decent inside. You cannot make yourself into a true rebel, a decent person inside, and do the right thing, by first standing outside and acting indecently. You only make yourself indecent. You cannot become Stephen Hawking by sitting in a wheelchair; you only cripple yourself. You cannot become Albert Einstein by learning to play the violin and to sail. At best, you develop some hobbies. Most indecent people are just indecent. Most people outside society are not inwardly decent rebels, seekers of truth, and workers for justice. Many people outside society are indecent. Not everybody who appears decent outside is indecent inside. Not all common traditionally decent people are lackeys of the rich and powerful. Most people who are decent on the outside really are half-way decent or try to be decent.

Sadly, people did make all the mistakes suggested above, and the pattern of mistakes became a stance. Chaos is the birthplace of all good society, chaos is the only birthplace, and rebels are the only bearers of good chaos. Rather than become seekers of truth and social justice first, without regard to indecency, people identified with the underbelly of society and acted indecently first. People believed that being a marginal person and acting badly made them into a person abiding in truth and justice who acted well. External decency always is a cover for social injustice while external indecency is always a sign of deeper decency. So you could and should act indecently first. If you act indecently first, you necessarily uncover the truth, serve justice, and become a glamorous rebel outsider. If you act indecently while “other people” act decently, you are right while they are wrong. This is part of the ideology of indecency. Nearly all this ideology is wrong. Read the novels of Joseph Conrad, particularly “The Secret Agent”.

The stance became a source of indecency and of excuses for indecency. If you wish to act indecently, for any reason, good or bad, you can claim to be a rebel in search of truth and justice. Thugs could claim that, really, they are outsider rebels fighting for truth and justice. You can do whatever indecent thing you want, and claim that you are indecent on the outside but decent on the inside. If you want to act out and indulge, just claim you are a victim and a rebel. If you wish to discredit any group, first describe them as people with power who use hypocritical fake prudish hyper-decency to bury the truth, or describe them as stupid common lackeys of indecent powerful people. Listen to “Oliver’s Army” by Elvis Costello for the bad rebels in the Cromwell Protestant rebellion in England and their modern counterparts.

Without going into any details, the idea that true rebels stand outside and seem indecent, while the rich, powerful, and corrupt stand inside and seem decent, goes well with other Romantic inversions. Briefly, the old guard is the old form of the Spirit that is about to be superseded. While their external decency might once have been decent, it is indecent now. The rebel outsiders are the new form of the Spirit about to ascend. Their manners seem indecent because they must overcome the rigid behavior of the old form of the Spirit. The old guard is the Spirit providing resistance to itself while the rebels are the Spirit as it overcomes its own resistance. This is all silly but people buy it, often without knowing so. Most people who embrace the ideology of indecency also embrace Romanticism and its excuses, and vice versa. The two seem to come as a set.

While the dogma of indecency is silly, it is artistically fruitful. Without it we would not have Frankenstein, Dracula, vampires, werewolves, spies, the modern seductress, detectives, mastermind criminals, rogue

cops, gunslinger cowboys, good hearted gangsters, good hearted whores, tough girls, rock and roll, hip hop, shamans, wizards, and so much more. If you can enjoy the art without falling into the dogma, that is a good thing. The excuses that come of the dogma are another thing altogether. They are bad. I look at them in sections below. Don't fall into excuses and indecency. Don't let art fool you. Listen to all of "The Clash" for a band that both bought the dogma and knew it was wrong.

Again, the obvious course is to act decently, search for truth and justice, seek other decent people, seek other people who search for truth and justice, and trust your intuition about decent and indecent despite appearances. If you have to stand on the outside for a while to get a better perspective, then do it; but don't make a virtue out of standing on the outside for its own sake. Again, if it were that simple, I wouldn't have to write. I only urge again what philosophers have been saying for thousands of years.

To be fair, not everybody who takes the stance of a glamorous outsider rebel is a criminal using excuses. Most are harmless. They add to the spice of social life in the modern world, and some glimpse more truth through taking that stance than if they had merely plodded along as a slave of the system. Conservatives deliberately mistakenly brand all scruffy people as criminals. We need to develop our ability to sort out: simple decent people, people who seem odd because they stand apart in a search for clarity, people who take the pose of the indecent artsy rebel, people who temporarily act indecently from desperation, really indecent people who use the stance for excuses, and people who milk the system while looking polite. One aim of this chapter is to help us do this.

We are susceptible to the dogma of indecency. Indecent people adopt the ideology it because it works. They fool themselves for their gain and fool other people to their loss. Regardless of where the dogma began, now it has spread beyond Europe and America. Any full account of why we are susceptible to the dogma of indecency would require looking both at various cultures and at the evolution of human nature – a task beyond this book. One goal of this chapter is to un-fool us about the dogma of indecency, a task made harder by our susceptibility to it.

(Technical note: Soren Kierkegaard, around 1820, explicitly advocated life on the fringe as necessary for honesty, for choosing Life, and for choosing Jesus; he advocated commitment to values; and he fought against Romantic silliness. In his time, his stance almost had to seem contradictory to his fellows. His stance is not contradictory, but he might have been the only one then who knew. Kierkegaard's situation likely added to his cramped style and to later confusion about him. He is worth reading but reading him is like chewing aromatic wood.)

The Ideology of Chic Indecency in America.

As part of the West, America has had three hundred years of a running war between "life stultifying" (Death) versus "life promoting" (Life). Americans misapply this dichotomy in many arenas, one of which is decency. Americans wrongly put decency with prudery, death, social rigidity, and injustice. They wrongly put exuberance, naughtiness, thrills-that-make-us-feel-alive-for-a-bit, and rebellious social criticism with Life and creative chaos. So America also has had a running war between "decency always mistaken as un-chic prudery" versus wrong "chic naughty indecency". To be on the side of Life, people adopt the manners, dress, outlook, naughtiness, and work of people of the underbelly, low-life people, rebels, petty

criminals, artists, and media secret agents. Americans do so even while trying to keep the affluence of the middle and upper middle class.

In the United States, beginning by 1900, and obvious by 1920, non-working-class Americans wrongly identified the working class, artists, gamblers, spiritualists, charlatans, some criminals, and gangsters, with truthful full-of-life outsiders. The working class is full of glamorous rebels and artists forced into crime. In this view, all normal middle class people and working class people with traditional ideas are aides to the hypocritical fake-prudish oppressors. To be on the side of social justice and truth, you have to live like a working class underbelly artist rebel forced into crime and menial labor. Some working class people adopted this ideology as well because it glamorized an identity they could take up and use. Most working class people do not make this mistake but they do get the strategy of glamorizing rebellion and their supposed life ways, and use it when they can: "Joe the Plumber". Thugs and petty criminals from all classes did get the ideology and do use it adeptly for selfish gain. To see the idea, and a critique, watch as much "film noire" as you can stand.

Until recently, the ethnic group that dominated America was Whites. Americans wrongly identified people from any-ethnic-group-but-White with truthful outsiders while all White people are hypocritical fake-decent rigid oppressors. Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and sometimes Asians, are all rebel truthful social critics, especially marginal Blacks and Hispanics. All non-Whites are creative chaos Life while all Whites are rigid hyper-order Death. For instance, all Black musicians are great undiscovered artists. Any Black who followed traditional decency was an "Oreo" (Black outside but White inside) even if he-she worked for social justice. Any Hispanic who went along with traditional decency was Brown outside but White inside. Sometimes one non-White ethnic group gets jealous of the other for taking the lead in being the most secretly deserving. In 2014, Blacks are nervous about Hispanics becoming the chic ethnic group. Hard working middle class Blacks and Hispanics do not really fool themselves that they are all outsider rebels who work against the system and for truth and justice but they do get the ideology and use it. Indecent and criminal Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, and people of all races got the ideology and used it fully for their advantage. To some extent, the same is true of "ethnic" Whites such as Appalachians, Cajuns, rednecks, and "White trash".

This dogma set the mold for action. If you want to push a cause, then identify your cause with rebel outsiders on the side of deep truth, social justice, creative chaos, and life. Find a group who oppose your cause, and label them as rich powerful hyper-prudes using fake decency on the side of rigid order and death. The majority of society serves as their unwitting helpers, at least for now. We are really decent on the inside even if we seem indecent outside while they are really indecent on the inside just because they seem decent outside. Think of your enemies in terms of a conspiracy. In this spirit, women accused men of being fake-decent hypocritical oppressors living in a cabal of "good old boys", and women became rebel outsiders. People of non-stereotypical gender identity ("the gays") accused most "straight" people of being prudish hypocritical semi-closeted oppressors, and took on the identity of rebel outsiders forced into outlandish behavior just to get a fair hearing. Conservatives accused Liberals of eating babies (over indulging in abortion). Proponents of illegal Hispanic immigrants accused Whites of selfishness and of forgetting their own immigrant roots. Rock-and-roll and hip-hop are such rich fields for this game that I don't even touch them.

One, poverty, ethnic fairness, and gender fairness are good causes. Two, some of the energy leading to success came from the ideology of indecency. One and two do not invalidate the other facts that, three, people in causes too often are duped by the dogma of indecency, four, people in the cause abused people in general to help them, and, five, the causes could have succeed as well without the indecency.

Americans support the dogma of indecency because they have no better ideas. Truly indecent people, and criminals, of all groups, support the ideology of indecency just as gangsters supported Prohibition. They flaunt it, because it serves them well. Americans who should know better excuse indecency and enable indecent people even though they see the damage done. Rather than try to deal with the whole situation and come up with a better ideology, they finagle so the damage falls elsewhere.

Most working class people, middle class Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and moderately decent people of all groups resent the ideology of indecency when they realize the implications. They do not wish to have to live as stereotypes “on the outside” to be full humans. Living on the outside is not a good long-term life for their children. Yet they still use the ideology when useful. They try to have their cake and eat it too. This bind has caused a lot of anguish since about 1970.

I do not wish to quell exuberance or naughtiness as long as mild naughtiness does not turn into badness. I do wish to quell naughtiness and chic indecency when they throttle decency and enable badness. This confusion is a serious error with many bad effects.

In the confusion, Americans disdain simple decency and tolerate too much real indecency. We have made chic naughtiness and chic indecency the new fake chic decency while refusing to see what we have done. New-fake-chic-indecency-as-decency is as prudish as the old prudery.

New inverted chic indecency has rules, and, if you don't follow them, you are the new bad. If you aren't cool enough; aren't a bit naughty; a bit “hard ass”; have not been a rocker; lingered in the underbelly of society; gone through a “bad girl” or “bad boy” phase; seen through the Left Wing Conspiracy and stood up as a Rebel Conservative; hit back at “the man”; hit back against an ethnic, gender, or class group who is the enemy of your group; seen through the Jewish-Israeli conspiracy or seen through the Muslim-Arab conspiracy; then you are not decent and not fit for “good society”. If you haven't been indecent, you are not decent. You only get to be decent by being a bit indecent. If you haven't made your first kill yet, you are still one of the half-ass cowardly people who help oppressors. Post 1970s movies and TV satirized this stance because it is funny. Yet it lingers on. The mistake causes real damage. Chic indecency is not “just a phase”. It ruins lives and groups. We see the effect in young stars who have to be “bad”; sometimes they survive to go on to better work; sometimes not. Two who did go on to better work are Dru Barrymore and Robert Downey Jr.

Maybe the first big statement in American fiction that “good is bad, bad is good” and “showing decency in public is a sure sign of deeper indecency” is “The Scarlet Letter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne. I like the novel but it is too easy for people to fool themselves with it. A good modern re-make is the movie “Easy A”. A clear statement both of glamorized inversion of decency-and-indecency, and how much the confusion leads us astray, is the novel “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel is more than a sappy story about doomed love. Much as I like his music, Woody Guthrie shows both all the good insights of adept social criticism and all the bad stereotypes of romanticizing bad boys. His student, Bob Dylan, said

something like “to live honestly, you have to live outside the law”. I return to Dashiell Hammett, the father of modern tough guy detective fiction, in the 1920s and 1930s. He was a real sleuth for Pinkerton, and had a clear view of outsiders and criminals: takers, users, opportunists, and losers who live by the wrong code if they have any code. Middle class people are the dupes of the ideology of indecency. Indecent people and criminals know that, and know how to use it for gain.

From about 1900 until about 1970, things cooked along, sometimes with chic romantic indecency fueling outbreaks of anarchism and pop culture; read “Ragtime” and “Billy Bathgate” by E.L. Doctorow; both have been made into movies.

Contrary to misconception, the 1960s did not see massive indecency, although it did host an increase in romanticizing that enabled indecency later. Indecency, incivility, and disparaging decency increased in the 1970s, and again with the rise of Conservatives in the 1980s, and have stayed high since. The increase in indecency of the 1970s came mostly on the Left, and with ethnic groups allied with the Left, but not because indecency is inherent in the Left. At first, the Left produced the ideologies that allowed selfish people to excuse themselves and manipulate other people, in particular ideologies about social injustice and a hard life. Beginning in the late 1960s with Nixon’s “silent majority” and working class Republicans, and then exploding with Reagan Republicans, the Right caught up, and surpassed the Left in indecency. The Right saw that the ideology of indecency was a powerful force, and figured out how to use it. Conservatives turned into rebels. The Right has ideologies to excuse its indecency by putting the Left on the side of powerful prudish oppressors, such as: all PC is really Left Wing Fascist mind control; the market would be a perfect chaotic system but Liberals perverted it with regulation; Blacks, Hispanics, and poor people are systematically sucking the life out of the White middle class; Liberalism is really all about imposing rigid soul-killing socialism in which all people are reduced to cogs; the real agenda of Liberalism is a great secret that Conservatives must uncover; all Liberals think all abortion is better than all children; and all liberals hate Christianity and want to kill it by attacking Christmas, Easter, Holy Days, Holy Words, Symbols, and Places. Both the Left and Right offer ideologies that have been used to glamorize and enable selfishness and indecency.

Since the 1980s, indecent people of all ethnic groups, religions, classes, genders, and politics have used ideologies on both sides for their advantage. People of all groups still buy into the ideology of inverted chic indecency. We still glamorize rebels who do not really exist. We still enable indecent people and indecency. We still denigrate decency.

The Myth of David the Rebel.

As an example of how ideas can shape us, and for fun, I return to an old story, a myth that has produced ideas of what it means to be a citizen of a state under God. Few Right or Left Wing rebels, activists, or purveyors of half-truths know the links between this story and what they do. They do not draw the same conclusions from the story as I do. Still, it is fun to get a sense of where ideas come from, especially when they come from religious traditions. Stories are part of how we are susceptible to ideologies, and are one way that people fool themselves. They are not the only way. So, looking at a story helps us to get a better feel for what is going on but what follows is not a full account of how we are susceptible to the dogma of indecency or any dogma. What follows is not a general theory of decency, God’s Will, God’s grace, social justice, the just state, tough guys, rebels, or fun.

In the Tanakh (Old Testament) story of David, Saul begins as the anointed (messianic) King of all Israel. Saul commits a slight sin and loses the grace of God. Partly as a result of his sin, Saul suffers from bad headaches and bad temper. He is not fun. Because the king sinned, the entire society is unrighteous, that is, unjust. Originally David was a tough guy guerilla for hire but he came to the attention of Saul, and he could soothe Saul's headaches with music, so Saul kept him on as both musician and guerilla fighter. David likes to sing, dance, and play music, and is an all-around fun guy. God decides to replace Saul with David. God tells David of his destiny and has a prophet anoint David as king (a "messiah"). David now has God's grace. David leads a band of rebel outsider underbelly-of-society bandits in a guerilla war against Saul. David and his band of merry men hide out in the forest, sing songs around the campfire, conduct raids on the powerful and rich, help the people, and restore just society. Soon enough, David defeats Saul, becomes king, restores the Will of God to authority, and restores social justice. Through David, God defeats Chaos and opens the way for Life. David paves the way for the greatness of Israel and the Order-of-God-in-Good-Society under Solomon. David tells the people to sing and dance, and David promotes fun.

David was a real person. The myth of David is an official story written by political priests, after the facts, so as to condemn past enemies of the present dynasty, "them", and to extol ancestors of the present dynasty, "us". David comes off as a humble talented fun servant of God reluctantly accepting God's grace and reluctantly waging war to restore order and social justice. In reality, David was a conniving usurper, bon vivant bad boy, murderer, and coercer of women, who waged guerilla war until he wore down the kingdom and took power for himself.

After David is in power, David does some bad things because he feels he has God's grace and feels he is entitled. Apparently, rebel bon vivant fun guy tough guy saviors of social justice are entitled. Among the bad things, David indirectly murders the husband of Bathsheba and then directly takes her as another wife. David acts indecently. As a result, David loses God's grace and spends the end of his life in lonely misery. Even being a rebel bon vivant fun tough guy savior of social justice cannot make up for abusing the feeling of entitlement, abusing God's Will and grace, and acting indecently.

About the only really decent person in the story of David is Saul's son Jonathan. Jonathan and David became best friends. Their friendship becomes the standard by which other friendships are measured. Jonathan would have been king if God had not anointed David to become king instead of Saul. Jonathan dies in battle, likely at the hands of David's men. In effect, the story says that decency is the first casualty of power-hungry indecency.

No matter how priests fix up the story, David is not a decent man such as modern "family values" people or PC people want as spouses for their children. In the beginning of the story, sometimes decency, the Will of God, grace of God, and fun are NOT together. In that case, it seems we must do the Will of God and seek the grace of God instead of decency. Decency comes behind. It seems people who are a little indecent, a little "bad ass" tough guy, are effective, that is, do God's Will; and they enjoy the grace of God, that is, have fun. It seems people who aren't a bit indecent aren't effective, don't enjoy the grace of God, don't have fun, and don't cure social injustice. Rebel outsiders enjoy the grace of God and do His Will just because they are rebel outsiders. If you want to have fun, enjoy the grace of God, and do His Will, then find a situation of social injustice and join a band of rebel outsiders. It is not hard to find social

injustice because there is some everywhere. Cultivate fun, music, and a “bad ass” tough guy attitude but don’t worry about decency.

I don’t like these implications. I have nothing against rebel outsiders, I like fun, I hope people figure out God’s Will in general and not just to suit their own ends, I hope we all find grace, sometimes we need tough guys, and we must cure social injustice and save the planet. I just don’t like seeing the ideas this simplistic way. The ideas are dangerous when taken simply (“mis-taken”, “miss the mark”, “sinful”). The ideas might be true sometimes but it is bad to take them as true always, and it is a good idea to think hard if you put anything ahead of decency and goodness, especially if you put your ideas of the Will of God and the grace of God ahead of decency and goodness.

Being indecent does not mean you have God’s grace, know his Will, have fun, are a righteous rebel, are a tough guy, and will cure social injustice. Being a rebel does not mean you are a righteous rebel, have God’s grace, know his Will, are fun, will cure social injustice, and are decent enough. Being a tough guy does not mean you are a righteous rebel, have God’s grace, know his Will, are fun, will cure social injustice, and are decent enough. If you want grace, it is not a good idea to make yourself indecent to get it. That was the point of Saul’s original fall from grace and the point of David’s eventual fall from grace. If you want to know God’s Will, it is unlikely you will find it in dogmas or in stereotypes of rebels, tough guys, or fun guys. If you want to have fun and cure social injustice, you might have to do something other than, and deeper than, act out as a naughty tough guy rebel bad boy musician. You have to figure out for yourself the something more and the relation between God’s Will, his grace, decency, and what you do. If you err too far toward indecency, privilege, and entitlement, then God will get you.

At least in the West, all rebels, Left and Right, reflect David. Rebels are fourth-hand David. They all put their ideas of grace and God’s Will ahead of simple decency. Left Wing rebels find grace in coolness and fighting social injustice. To be cool is to have God’s grace; God’s grace is coolness. If you are truly cool, then you have been anointed, have the grace of God, are a fun guy, are a tough guy, what you do is the Will of God, and you will right social injustice. All Right Wing rebels think they already have the grace of God because they are good Christians, Muslims, Jews, or Hindus; and they seek to make real the Will of God in their idea of a proper social order. They can do whatever they want to get there. They have their own version of coolness as a substitute for the grace of God but I don’t go into it. Their version combines religious fervor, political fervor, and smugness. They think they are more fun than other guys because their fun is real and not the put-on forced intoxicated fun of Leftists. Neither side relies on simple decency to seek the Will of God or grace of God. Both sides scorn simple decency as inadequate and not fun.

Some rebels stress fun guy without tough guy, such as protestors from the 1960s and most crusaders for women’s rights, gay rights, and family life. Some rebels stress tough guy such as the bad revolutionaries of the 1970s, and some Black activists, White power activists, and, it seems, the Tea Party. Since the late 1970s, movies about vengeance have mixed the two but mostly they have justified tough guy, as with the “Terminator Series”, spaghetti Westerns, “Dirty Harry” series, “Punisher”, “The Losers”, “Batman” series, etc. Hard-partying tough guy bikers are the same. The fact that most crime fighters have a dual identity reflects the mix of David’s character traits. Most self-styled rebels try to find a congenial mix of fun guy and tough guy, including most campus rebels and rockers.

Both Left Wing and Right Wing rebels teach these ideas to indecent people who use them as excuses to do bad things. Indecent people think they are rebels, real tough guy bad asses, are fun, have the grace of God, and do God's will because they are the victims of social injustice, have had a tough life, or are smart professionals. They are seventh-hand David. In their view, being an outsider does not mark them as losers but marks them as God's fun cool rebels destined to restore a righteous state by defeating un-cool oppressors. Just because indecent people are outsiders, they can do what they want to get back at whoever they want. In doing what they want, they follow the Will of God and have the grace of God. All other people necessarily are oppressors, do not have the grace of God, oppose the Will of God, and are not fun. In Romantic terms, rebels are truly of the rising Spirit while the current power structure is the declining Spirit in opposition to itself.

More on Rebels.

The vast majority of Left and Ring Wing self-styled rebels are not really indecent, no matter how much they frighten old people. They are stylized naughty rather than indecent. I have a soft spot for them because I am like them. Still, rebels are a big source of distorted ideas to really indecent people, so I say something. Both Left and Right Wing rebels use their version of coolness as their equivalent to the grace of God. Both are on the side of creative chaos and Life. Both oppose rigidity and Death. Both use dogmas as their version of the Will of God. Both claim status as rebel outsiders like David because both claim the other side is like Saul, the other side has power, has screwed up the state, is in serious error (sin), and has lost the grace of God. Logically, both the Left and Right can't be David or both be Saul, have power and be outside, at the same time; but they overlook this problems and I don't clarify any of this here. Most readers will have a feel for the silliness.

Any indecency of Right and Left Wing rebels comes not so much from what they do but because they promote ideas even though they know the ideas are half-true and so mostly wrong, and know the ideas enable indecent people. The worst bad idea they convey is to scorn simple decency. One of the worst attitudes they give to truly indecent people is that it is correct to mock simple decency. Cool people like them are above simple decency. Truly cool people are natural rebels, have fun, fight injustice, have God's grace, and deserve the good things in life like David got. Decent people are boring instruments of state oppression. Social outsiders have the grace of coolness and automatically do what is Right, that is, act out the Will of God. If you want to be right and have fun, then be an indecent outsider rebel.

Left Wing rebels include campus rebels, "rocker" rebels, rebel "grrrls", some Goths, campus radicals, professors who think of themselves as radical, most activists, feminists, hipsters, and some slackers. They know something is wrong with society and the world, and want to do something, but can't figure it out. They don't really know the ideas that they espouse. They dress and act like warmed over updated versions of 1950s Beats and rockers. In the 1990s, they looked like James Dean movies made over into Grunge. Because they don't really get issues, often their stance is more a fashion statement, and more acting out, than about how to deal. They romanticize losers, bad artists, the underbelly of society, other rebels, outcasts, any ethnic group but theirs, ghettos, non-conventional sex, and minor gangsters.

In a non-political version, Left Wing rebels are bad boy and bad girl stock characters of comedies such as "Super Bad", "Knocked Up", "Kick Ass", "What Happens in Vegas", and the "Hangover" series. In a more serious mode, they fuel movies such as "Reality Bites", "Sin City", most of the "Batman" series, most films

from Lionsgate Studios, and good “indie flicks” such as “Juno”. The USA channel on TV makes a living from these people, especially as they age.

These days, Right Wing rebels are more important than Left Wing rebels because the Right Wing has co-opted Left Wing rebel ideology and tactics. People barely notice Left Wing rebels now but they do notice Right Wing rebels. No Right Winger can stray far from the prudish stereotype of the good family person and good Republican but Rightists know the prudish stereotype is unrealistic, often boring, and doesn't get the job done; so they want more. They want to be Right Wing David after he was king and before he lost the grace of God - but they forget that abuse must lead to a fall.

It is chic now among the Right Wing to be a rebel outsider. They talk about the Left Wing Conspiracy and borrow terms from the Left such as “hegemony”. They act as if Rightists are an endangered species, and so take the same attitude and privileges as Left Wing groups. They come from Campus Republicans and Young Republicans. They are like the Michael J. Fox character from the TV show “Family Ties”. They still blame their parents for the socialist takeover of America. Although rebels, they also see themselves as staunchly moral, pillars of the community, and the last defense against socialist horror. They do not reconcile the dual images. They are like David after he became king but they (think they) don't make the sins of entitlement but instead serve as guardians of the right order of God. They “call out” professors who espouse leftist ideas in class; and they guard the community against smut. Right Wing Rebels play blues guitar, call themselves “rednecks”, go to rodeos, NASCAR, and wrestling, have public conversions from a previous life of Liberal bleeding heart mistakes, own big guns, yearn to carry them, yearn to use them, sling mud in campaigns, stir up ethnic animosity, try to dominate their wives, try to appear submissive to husbands but really use passive-aggression as well as anyone in a Woody Allen movie, threaten gays, and defend Christmas. They quote Saint Ronald Reagan five times a day. Picketing abortion clinics is a rebellious anti-social act regrettably forced on them by the tyrannical Leftist anti-life agenda. Despite all this hard living on the edge, still they claim they never cheat on their spouses, get drunk, take drugs, or watch porn - anymore. They use state programs to help their business even as they scream against big government and entitlement programs for the poor. While they pay lip service to simple decency, in fact, like Lefties, they are too cool for simple decency and they disdain simple decent people. They convey this attitude to people who are much worse than they are.

As an educated fortunate White man, I find Right Wing rebels mostly fun, as with Left Wing rebels, but Right Wing rebels are not merely fun to all people. Just as Left Wing rebels used to scare oldsters and mothers, so Right Wing rebels scare non-Whites, non-Christians, many women, and people who have read about Right Wing uprisings of the past. American Right Wing rebels are not racist fascists but people like them were the source of racist fascism elsewhere.

Rather than get to the bottom of issues, both Right and Left Wing rebels accept ideas that let them act naughty, and then give these ideas to truly indecent people who use them for real badness. When rebels see the damage done by half-baked ideas, and see the damage done by truly indecent people who use the ideas for excuses, they do not modify the ideas but entrench in them. They “double down”. They are like anybody caught in a plausible fib and who has a chance of getting out of the immediate bind if he-she can push the point and then go away. Committing to an idea they know is not fully true, committing to a fib, distorts their own sense of self, and keeps them from being able to judge themselves and other people accurately. Doubling down has the bad effect of enabling truly indecent people even more. Then

the rebels feel guiltier, get more entrenched, and so on. All this folding and fooling is where the true indecency lies, rather than in adopting outmoded daring ideas. Their stock ideas of rebellion serve as a fund of excuses for truly indecent people, and truly indecent people quickly learn how to manipulate rebel “liberal guilt” or “conservative guilt” to enable indecency.

Both Left and Right Wing rebels think of themselves as the guardians of truth. Guardians of truth do not double down on bad ideas. Both Left and Right Wing rebels think of themselves as preparing the way for a better social order. A better social order does not enable indecency and denigrate decency. Both Left and Right Wing rebels have a duty, by their own standards, to be clear when their ideas are not fully true, could mislead, and are being abused. They have a duty to repudiate abuse of ideas. They have a duty to not enable indecent people and to “call out” indecent people. They have to do this without becoming prudish or fascist. Left Wing rebels have a duty to call out indecent thugs of all genders, races, religions, and socio-economic class. Right Wing rebels have a duty to do the same, including the rich. Anything less is self-betrayal and betrayal of what is high and important. Stop enabling ethnic blackmail, business blackmail, and deniers of climate change.

It is easy to dismiss these rebels as chic posers but often these people are more sincere. Eventually they see that the rebel game is silly and hurtful, and try to move on to better games. Eventually they become the professional people of their time – doctors, lawyers, teachers - and they are often the sincere, active, and socially useful professional people. They also serve as a storehouse of sympathy for the poor and other outsiders, and as a storehouse for some actually useful ideas.

Sadly the Right Wing has developed a hard indecent group to parallel the hard group on the Left. These are the people who scorn simple decency and who hurt simple decent people. These people find grace in forceful dominance either through the body or the mind. The coolness of God's grace is now the thrill of intoxication, domination, or violence. This group uses violence against immigrants and non-Whites, “beat up queers” (“gay bashing”). They are violent skinheads, are White Supremacists, jingoist voters, and your average disgruntled racist on a slow burn. They kill abortion doctors and nurses in the name of Life. They not only sling mud in campaigns, they use dirty tricks such as fear of crime against Michael Dukakis or Swift Boat lies against John Kerry. They buy elections by pouring money into local campaigns even when they have no local ties. They rig elections as in Florida. As with the Left, these Right Wing fully indecent people happily use ideology created by Right Wing Talkers and handed down by Right Wing rebels. They are happy to make Right Wing Talkers and Right Wing rebels feel good by paying lip service to ideology: “Everyone knows that White people have been victimized by Blacks, Hispanics, and all the Left Wing Socialists, so, whatever we do to get back is alright”. These people are the equivalent of the Left Wing Indecent people with the same bad attitude and same keen ability to milk the system but often they are better funded. They have the same nasty habits such as booze, drugs, fighting, attitude, chip on the shoulder, and trashing the place.

The Tea Party waves back and forth across the line between self-styled protesting rebels with half-true totally impractical ideas to political thugs who disrupt daily life and get bad people elected.

To stress: Indecency is not attached to the Left or Right. A White man in Appalachia, who has voted Republican for the last thirty years, but connives to get Social Security Disability, even while he curses Black Welfare Queens, is as indecent and stupid about real issues as a Black gangster wannabe who

shoves little Hispanic ladies at the mall, knocks up a fourth different woman so he can sponge off her check, and voted for Obama because Obama is half-Black, the only time he ever voted. A business man or male professor who milks the system is as bad as a Black woman who uses Affirmative Action to get a job or get ahead. Both groups use bad ideas of the Right (violence) and Left (bad entitlement programs). Both are adept at picking ideas to serve themselves. Both are adept at seeing themselves as victims so they can victimize others.

PART 3: SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF INDECENCY

I cannot always separate rude, selfish, criminal, anti-social, immoral, and indecent people; and there is no point in trying here. It is easier to explain with examples. Sometimes the examples criticize society, but that is not the point. Although full of indecency, I avoid politics, entitlement programs for both individuals and business firms, and PC of the Left and Right. When I use cases from these realms, it is to make an additional point. I skip over religious and political zealotry that causes harm even though it is among the worst indecency. I do not try to assign the examples to one of the groups above because various kinds of indecent behavior runs through all the groups.

Listen to “Maxwell’s Silver Hammer” by the Beatles for a satire of middle class selfish indecency posing as social critique.

Dog fighting, cock fighting, and all animal fighting for sport is indecent regardless of your cultural heritage. It does not make you more of a man. It is just wrong. Cultural heritage does not excuse everything. Social class and poverty do not excuse everything.

The bad neighbors in movies and TV shows are indecent. They don’t have to be ax murderers or serial killers to reach the level of indecency. They don’t have to burn your car or poison your cat. All they have to do is play loud music, play loud TV on a giant-screen home brain-death system, keep it all going late, throw trash around, let their kids run wild, park cars wherever they want, let toys and crap pile up all over, and get so drunk they are dangerous. This behavior is not “Loving Life” and it is not the exuberance of creativity running over.

This example might be surprising. In the 1950s, America had almost no sales tax. When Oregonians learned of a four percent tax in far away exotic New York City, it was a scandal of degeneracy almost like a Roman orgy - a sure sign of failed government. Now a ten percent sales tax is common. A sales tax is strongly regressive, meaning it hurts poor people while it hardly impacts rich people. With a ten percent rate, a poor person pays at least five percent of his-her meager precious total income in sales tax while an upper middle class person pays less than one percent of his-her ample income. A sales tax on food is disgusting and indecent beyond my ability to say. Legislators use a sales tax because they will not – they say “cannot” – levy proper income and land taxes. The middle class and the rich will not stand for fair taxes. The middle class and the rich would rather bleed the poor than face the facts of state finance. Legislators offer this insight into class psychology as justification but it is not justification. One of the most important points of having a government is to help the people overall. One main way to help is to protect people who cannot protect themselves, in this case the poor. Unfair taxes are bad government, hurt people overall, hurt poor people in particular, and set a bad example. For the middle class, the rich, and

legislators to allow a sales tax is indecent. It is a paradigm case of selfishness overcoming basic decency and of how blind we are when we want to be.

Bikers (motorcyclists) love freedom. Contrary to myth, they do not always hate “straight” society or look down on workaday people. They just can’t live like that, and they want the freedom to live in other ways. There is a difference between motorcycle clubs and biker gangs. All gangs call themselves clubs, and I do not sort it out here. To avoid getting sued, I can’t mention any biker gangs by name. Among other illegal income, biker gangs make money by extorting strippers and prostitutes. They “turn out” girls into prostitution, and force girls to work to pay the bikers (I say “girls” instead of “women” because the females are often less than eighteen). Regardless of what you think of prostitution, extorting money from strippers and prostitutes, and turning out girls, is hypocritical and indecent. To value freedom for yourself, and then to take away somebody else’s freedom so you can indulge your own, especially to put someone else into the slavery that you condemn, is hypocritical and indecent. Bikers hate the idea that society tries to “pimp them out” and yet they are pimps. The same assessment is true when bikers terrorize civilians. If you feel the value of not living in fear, how can you needlessly instill fear into other people? Simply saying that you value freedom does not always promote freedom and does not mean you really live free. If you value your own freedom, you have to respect the freedom of others.

Have a long conversation with a dedicated vegetarian or vegan. The issue here is not the lifestyle but the imposition of the lifestyle. Unlike bikers, PC people like to impose. In college, I knew some people who were into “Transcendental Meditation” as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Once they were among a group of friends together on a weekend when I suggested getting beer and pizza for dinner. They gave me a detailed description of how bad those non-foods were for me and gave me many suggestions for what is better. They thought they were improving my health and spirituality but I think they were trying to impose their dogma and lifestyle on me. See the movie “Scott Pilgrim versus the World”, or read the novels, for a funny assessment of the self-made glory and self-styled spiritual power of vegans. If people want to live a certain way, and other people are curious, then explain. Otherwise, imposing is indecent. Usually it is a mild form of indecency but it is still annoying.

While well-intended, much of what the Tea Party does is indecent. Black leaders who wait to pounce on the (often unintended) mistakes of Whites, never explain reality to Blacks, and never offer realistic ways into the future other than “make Whitey pay”, are just indecent. White people who indulge in stereotypes of Blacks, especially with little experience of Blacks, such as “all Blacks are stupid”, are indecent. Blacks who indulge in racism against Whites – and, yes, this does happen – are indecent.

Recently our downstairs neighbors gave me several lessons in indecency. They barbecued with a giant grill made of a split oil drum. The barbecue sent up clouds of acrid smoke which they didn’t suffer from because they lived on the ground floor and the smoke went past their door. The smoke got caught on the big roof overhang and funneled into the upper apartments, where residents choked, and where we live. When I asked them to move their barbecue out a couple of yards, we almost got into a fight because they assumed I was telling them what to do. They couldn’t let anybody outside their clique trample on their freedom, especially somebody who might not be of their socio-economic class or race. Even when I explained the problem, they only moved the barbecue when it was clear I would make a fuss. They liked the idea that they could do what they wanted, and get pleasure, while other people suffered, and other people could not do anything about it. They liked having excuses based in imagined class and race.

They liked to have friends over several times a week to chain smoke cigarettes and chain drink beer. They threw all the butts, all the bottle caps, and half the bottles on the lawn. Children who played on the lawn got cut from caps and bottles and got sick from butts. Although the people downstairs had children of their own, they didn't care. All this might be dismissed as annoying rather than indecent but it fits into a bigger pattern. During their parties, the men liked to talk about how they had to knock around their girlfriends because bitches didn't respect them. Bitches "dissed" them ("disrespected"). The men liked to talk about the other men they had to beat up because the other men dissed them. "Dissing" could be anything from not getting another beer fast enough for a woman to looking at my girl for a man. They had no choice, they just had to hit. They used to obstruct the stairs and annoy my wife until I started doing martial arts practice on the balcony; they respect force. It is all part of the same mindset, and that mindset is indecency.

Once while walking back from the mailbox, I found myself behind two girls about fourteen years old. They were discussing what to do in case they got in a fight with another girl. The best strategy is to hit her in a place that would mean a lot to a girl even though it might not cause much physical damage, such as the face or the breasts. If you wear a ring and can threaten to cut her face, that attack is better. I know the need for smart strategic self-defense but that is not what they were talking about. What they were talking about is not just a juvenile phase; it is an indecent attitude toward people and social life.

Compulsive lying is indecent and it teaches indecency. My wife and I own an old Camry as our only car. While my wife was moving slowly through the parking lot on her way to work, a woman in a big Mercedes Benz sedan (unusual here) backed into my wife and dented the car. In the Benz with the woman were her two teenage daughters. The woman looked at us straight faced and claimed that my wife had run into her car while the woman was trying to back out. This was an obvious lie. It blatantly violated physics. I looked at her daughters as she told this lie, and saw that they were learning an important lesson about how to handle people and life. Someday compulsive lying will come back to haunt that woman just as stupid dogma and enabling indecency comes back to haunt the greater society. White lies make sense but lying, especially, compulsive lying, is indecent.

Everybody has seen movies where a person gets on a bus or subway to see obnoxious punks sprawled out on the seats, taking up too many seats, their legs blocking the aisle, blasting loud music out of boom boxes. This has happened to me on public buses. This is not just juvenile acting out. Usually the next scene in the movie has the punks robbing little old ladies. It is important to get the motives straight. The punks are not protesting social conventions such as sitting upright in chairs with your legs together and straightforward, like girls trying to protect their virginity. They are not asserting freedom to relax. They are assaulting other people in a context in which they can get away with it and in which they other people cannot avoid. It is deliberate assault. That is how the sprawling and noise leads to robbery in the next scene and in real life.

When I was young, we called "mooning" somebody "hanging a BA (bare ass)". Hanging a BA clearly is a form of mild sexual assault. It is more than just "acting out" by wearing a bandana or getting a fake tattoo. It is more tolerable than heavily groping somebody at a concert but the motive is similar. It is important to see the true underlying motive, and most people who moon, or get mooned, see the underlying motive of mild sexual assault even if they can't say it. Saying "moon" instead of "bare ass" hides the deep motive and makes the act seem like mere chic naughtiness. I think the fashion of wearing your pants below your

butt, and exposing your underwear and butt, came from making fun of old White men in Florida and California. That is why the young men who do it wear boxer shorts, and, of course, they don't want to get arrested. By now, most young men don't recall why it started, and have other motives. Like sprawling on a bus, you have to get the motives straight. The young men say it is part of their fashion, part of their world. They know hanging your butt out makes a statement but can't always say what statement. The statement is a form of sexual assault, like hanging a BA or mooning. The young men are really sticking their butts out at the big world beyond their own little world. They get away with it by wearing the boxers that are part of the outfit. The same is true of young women who wear their pants or skirt so that about half their butt crack shows, and wear a thong to make the display more striking. It is like a baboon in heat showing her big red swollen butt. It is a form of sexual assault that a woman can get away with. Women are usually the victims of assault, so maybe we can have sympathy for wanting to turn the tables. But that doesn't make the display tasteful. It doesn't make the display less sexual assault, and, like bikers, it is odd to perpetrate on other people just the assault that you hate getting. It is funny that boys who wear their pants down are showing off their butt like a girl in heat or like a desperate gay man in a bathhouse yet thinking they are fierce because they assault.

If you see a dead cat by the side of the road, you can look away. If you smell the dead cat, in a few yards the smell goes away. If you touch a piece of fruit and find it is rotten and slimy, you can pull away your hand. You don't have to taste anything you don't like. But if a big fire breaks out in a factory in the next block, you will hear the noise of the fire, sirens, and explosions regardless. When a big freight train goes by, you can turn your head but you can't stop the rumble. Sound is the sense that is hardest to avoid. I understand not being able to listen to loud music in your apartment, thus getting into your car for a drive and a quick fix. I understand when somebody drives around with the radio on, and other people can hear it from a few feet away; it is even fun if he-she is listening to something good like R&B. I don't accept obnoxious people who drive around in rolling boom boxes shaking tall buildings. Get into a car like that someday. You don't really hear music, you feel vibration. The content is irrelevant compared to the thrill you get from just blasting crap. The people who do it are not interested in an aesthetic experience. They are assaulting the world in the only way they can get away with and the one way the world cannot get away from. The point is not music but assault. They might not be able to understand all the words while they are in the car but nearly everybody else within a block can, so usually the words are racial slurs or sexist slurs. I don't like being assaulted.

I tried teaching martial arts at a local civic recreation center. Sometimes old people across the hall did square dancing. They were loud but they were loud because they honestly had hearing issues, and they turned down the volume if you asked. More often, a woman taught a type of vigorous exercise dance across the hall. Although her class had only half-a-dozen students, she brought gigantic speakers and blasted brain-numbing music that rattled the building. Once I asked her to turn it down, and told her that it was too loud. She exploded. She screamed at me for about five minutes, and then followed me down the hall for a bit more. Her voice was as much a verbal assault as her music, and as much of an assault as she could muster up without getting arrested. Although she seemed to say she would assault me physically (I couldn't tell), she didn't. She was not giving a course in life-giving exuberance, she was assaulting the center and all the people in it. She was taking the place over and dominating all the people who allowed. She is no different than people who drive around in cars blasting music about rape and racial hatred or who stick their ass in our faces.

In the South, when a person wants to get off a road, he-she speeds up, jams ahead of the car in front of his-her car, and careens off the exit or into the turn. Hundreds of times, while driving in the right lane of a highway, I have approached an exit ramp, with nobody behind me in my lane for half-a-mile, when suddenly an ass zooms over from the left lane, dives in front of me, and screams over to the exit ramp by cutting me off. He-she never looked to see that behind me the lane was open. If he-she had looked, he-she probably wouldn't have cared, and would have done the same thing anyway. I have asked people in the South if this is so, they confirm it, and admit they have done it, to their embarrassment. This cultural habit might be funny except I have also seen dozens of cars crashed off exit ramps. The problem is attitude and safety. These drivers are playing out a little social drama in their head and are willing to impose on themselves and others the results. People cannot succeed by succeeding well enough, they have to get ahead, they have to make sure others stay behind, and they have to make sure they come in first. If you can't do that in real life, you can do it on the road in your car. As a result, not only do they die but far too often they take innocent people with them.

Everybody still knows "keeping up with the Joneses" and most people still strive to do it no matter what they say. I get it – I dislike it intensely, but I get. That is not the indecency. The indecency is the feeling of entitlement that goes along with it now. The feeling shows up clearly in the modern version of keeping up with the Joneses because we can see the cars, houses, clothes, and lessons but the feeling is much bigger now than just keeping up with the Joneses. We feel entitled to have it all, to have it our way, and this is indecent. Even people who have only average talent and education at best still feel entitled. In striving and conniving to get it all, they are happy to push themselves ahead of their talent, push other people down, and twist the laws and economy to their advantage. You deserve this, you deserve that, and you are special. I do not list the details. On public television, Tiger Woods said that a feeling of entitlement led him to cheat on his wife not just with one or two women but dozens. Tiger Woods has great talent, and should not have to worry. If a feeling of entitlement drove him to that kind of ruin, it does worse, but in smaller ways, to people with lesser talent.

If you stood in the middle of a burning house, but you could still open the refrigerator door to get a cool refreshing bottle of soda, would you stop to get it and drink it in the middle of the flame filled kitchen, while not calling the fire department and not saving your family? Hopefully you would have better sense. Americans get angry when other people criticize our lifestyle as selfish and indulgent. If our lifestyle were only selfish and indulgent yet did not harm a world that was badly in trouble, I would not care. Some Americans insist they have a right to big houses, multiple big cars, huge electric bills, and a lot of wasted food because, through some honest enterprise and too much conniving, America can run a huge energy budget and some Americans can afford luxuries. We are in a world that cannot support our lifestyles, that is, we are in a burning house next to the refrigerator sipping soda watching our family burn. In this case, it is not just self-indulgent, it is stupid and indecent. You have to think seriously about where to draw the line between what you deserve as a result of hard work in a technologically rich society versus what you take from a world burning around you. At some point, selfishness really does become indecency.

I recall listening to scientists who knew better, but made their money through contracts with business, finding every excuse they could to deny global climate change (global warming). It was really sad to see smart people contort their minds. To a scientist, the evidence was clear a couple of decades ago. Even to a jingoist politician, they evidence has been clear for about a decade. To deny global climate change is not just selfish, it is now indecent, no matter what your party says or your constituents say.

I see why, in the pre-modern world, families might have six, eight, or ten children. I know why, even now, in places with uncertain life, couples want more than two children. But the world can't afford it anymore. It is not just China, India, and Indonesia that are packed full. The whole world is packed full. People in modern states such as America, France, and China don't see the extent to which everybody supports their children and all the children of the country. American children go to school not just on their parents' dime but through the good-hearted support of neighbors including old people, childless people, childless couples, the poor, the rich, and business firms. Sales taxes are used to finance education. Although Americans know how much a child costs them in particular, they still do not fully appreciate how much a child costs overall and how much of the cost is borne by other people. The world is now overcrowded. The world carries at least twice, likely at least three times, as many people as it can support. In these conditions, it is indecent to have more than two children unless you personally make ALL the money, and can command ALL the resources, that it takes to raise ALL of your present and additional children, and are willing to give to the public pot. Few people really command that much in resources and even few are willing to give a big share. If you cannot afford all the costs of a child, then don't have one. If you are a woman, and you have a child to hold a man but cannot afford to raise the child alone, you have done something indecent and destructive. If you are a man and do not fully support your wives and children, then you are indecent. If you have a congenital disease such as diabetes, don't have children. If you are fat, don't have children. If you have children that you know will be a burden to society as a whole and to the world as a whole, you are indecent.

The point of the following is not that welfare mothers are indecent. Some are, and some aren't. The average welfare mother has the same number of children, about two, as the average mother who is not on welfare. The minority of women on welfare are welfare queens, although some are. The point is that welfare has become a kind of blackmail, and the blackmail is indecent.

Conversation overheard in a large retail store: One middle age lady to another middle age lady: "(A) I'll be really glad when my daughter has her fourth child soon. (B) Why is that? (C) Because then she will get welfare payments for all four children and everybody in the house will be able to live good enough. (B) Who's the daddy of this one? Same as the last? Don't he have to pay child support? (A) The daddy is that no-good Howard, but we aint gonna tell the welfare people, and he aint the father of none of the others. Don't know where their daddies are and their daddies wouldn't pay no child support anyhow."

Suppose a woman has a first child and cannot take care of it or will not take care of it. She is a bad person, and we don't want to reward her. But, by withholding help from her, we also withhold help from her child. We don't want the child to be hungry, sick, unclothed, cold, and unable to learn. Even if the child survives, he-she is more likely to be a criminal or a burden. So we take care of the child. In taking care of the child, we support the mother, even if she is a bad person. Bad people quickly enough catch on to this blackmail racket, and milk it for what they can get. The bad people spoil it not just for the kind people who give support but for all the other good mothers who really deserve help, like a thirty year old mother with two kids and used to work hard but lost her job. The fact that the blackmail inherent in the situation often goes to support bad people makes the feeling of blackmail much sharper but the feeling of blackmail taints everything anyway and would taint everything even if nobody on welfare abuses welfare. The fact that we feel blackmailed even when we help good people makes us feel angrier and taints the situation worse. The fact that we can't separate the good people from the bad people without hurting a lot

of children makes it worse again. Everyone who does not take care of his-her own children when he-she could supports indecency. Everyone who does not plan ahead for situations like losing a job before he-she has children supports indecency. Everyone who has another child while on welfare, or soon after welfare, is indecent. Everyone who gets off welfare to have another child and then goes back on welfare is indecent. Everyone who lashes out against all welfare mothers without understanding where his-her own anger comes from, even if some anger is quite justified, is indecent. Everyone who supports welfare without understanding the blackmail, the taint, and the justifiable anger of people, is indecent even if he-she thinks of him-herself as good-hearted. Everyone who criticizes critics of welfare without seeing the blackmail at the heart of the system, and without feeling the heart of critics, is indecent.

Contrary to myth, education will not solve all social problems. In particular, education alone will not make sure everybody gets a job. I do strongly support education, and I want everybody to get some education so they will be a better member of society and better citizen. My view is not a contradiction but it is not straightforward, so I need to be clear. I live among families with children, so I have had a chance to hear and see school children. Many children disparage other children who like to read, like to play music, like sports other than football and basketball, and like activities other than cheerleading and dancing. Children learn to disparage a decent well-rounded education. Kids who get something from school, and who enjoy school, are called “geeks” and “Chinese”. Children learn to disparage school not only from other children as part of overall kids’ culture but they learn it from their parents too, who do not value education. Even though education alone won’t solve all social problems, we have to value education. It has to be a part of American culture. We have to be realistic about what to expect from it – again, it is not the cure for everything - but we do have to expect something from education and we do have to value it in itself. To disparage education in the modern world is indecent. To encourage or tolerate your children disparaging education and well-rounded educated children is indecent.

The eastside of Montgomery, Alabama was largely ruined by teens who formed packs at the shopping malls, stole, fought, terrorized other shoppers, and ruined business. The east side of the city today looks like a neighborhood in Syria. Montgomery built a large new shopping mall on the west side of the city. The teen gangs started going there, shoppers got worried, and merchants got worried. One day, a little old Black lady, who was active in her community, went to the mall and started yelling at the children to behave themselves. The police and the merchants supported her. As far as I could tell, the parents of the children were nowhere. The city instituted a curfew and rules about how many people could gather at once. So far, it all seems to have worked, and the malls remain open and prosperous. I don’t think I need to point out what is decent and indecent, and the motives of the merchants and city. It is useful to point out that indecency does have some really bad effects.

When the Western pension system was devised, people lived to be only about 60 years old, many people lived only into their forties, and people stuck with a job all their lives. People expected to get only one pension from one place, and employers expected to pay only one pension for one job for one lifetime of a worker. Pensions were set up so the majority of benefits could be claimed after about 20 years of work because that might be all the years that one worker worked lived, and his-her family needed the security after he-she died. Back before about 1980, America could afford to be generous like this to its workers. Although people could get most benefits after about 20 years, employers expected them to work for at least 30 years if they lived. Today people live much longer than 60. People start a job early expecting to put in 20 years at that job, quit, get nearly full benefits, then move to another job and do the same. Some

people do that with three jobs, and then get Disability or Social Security too. Not only do they get benefits from multiple sources, they get benefits for a lot longer than the plans originally were set up to cover. So, for a long time they drain resources from other people who are still working. While they might be legally and technically justified, they are not morally justified. Being clever and using the law does not make a person correct. These people are no more correct than the corporations who use the law and are clever. This is like abusing welfare and has the same feel about it as welfare blackmail. This is indecent. These people should be working to reform the pension system so that one person, and family, gets one pension per lifetime.

A “corp” is a “body”, a unified group (of people), as in “esprit de corps”. A corporation is an imaginary body, that is, an imaginary legal person. A corporation is an imaginary person made up so that a group of people can work together as a whole under the law just as a single person can work as a unit under the law. If not abused, it is a good idea. One of the most annoying rumors spread by foes of homosexual (gay) marriage is that, if a person can marry another person of the same gender, then soon people will be marrying a dog, cat, horse, rose, rhododendron, house, spirit, or something equally bizarre and offensive. In novels about Mississippi, William Faulkner had an idiot White Trash man in love with a cow. People needlessly fear this abuse of gay marriage but they do not need-fully fear the abuse done by made up legal powerful persons, that is, corporations. It is fine to give corporations some rights as a person so they can be overall useful to society as long as they are not a threat to real flesh-and-blood-and-spirit persons. It is not fine to give corporations rights under the law that undercut social welfare and the idea of a real person. Sadly, that has begun in America, and it is indecent. It is indecent in itself, and is more indecent because it is done to serve the power of the rich and powerful, including corporations. “LLC” used to be part of the name of many corporations. The letters mean “Limited Liability Corporation or Company”. Due to the laws about corporations, it is harder to sue a corporation than a regular person, a corporation cannot be sued for some things for which we can sue a normal person, and, even if a corporation is sued, the extent of liability is limited. This privilege was originally given to corporations so they could do business without many nuisance lawsuits and worries, so corporations would benefit the country as a whole. Now the law serves as a shield behind which corporations can do bad things. In a specific provision of the law set up by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney to enable the harvest of natural gas, corporations that “frack” for natural gas cannot be sued. Oklahoma used to have 2 earthquakes a year before fracking there. In 2013, it had 230. The good Republicans of Oklahoma who voted for Bush and Cheney might want to re-consider. It is hard to see how a corporation can have a political position as a real person can have. Yet the Supreme Court in 2014 gave corporations the right to donate almost without limit to campaigns, and allowed officers of corporations the right to assess workers over political views. It would be little surprise if, soon, corporations had the right to marry each other, marry physical things such as dams, or marry natural things such as rivers. That would certainly help consolidate business. The abuse of personhood by corporations is indecent while the use of marriage by gay people is not.

I don't mind ads for dentists on TV although the dentists who run ads are no better than the dentists who do not run ads. I used to not mind ads for lawyers until lawyers started running ads offering to sue the drug companies in case of any drug that might have bad side effects, one day after the FDA expressed any concern, and implying that anyone who ever took the drug, with side effects or not, “might be entitled to a large cash settlement”. The key is entitlement without talent, training, or effort. Lawyers pander to the idea that we are all entitled, and there is a magic legal doorway by which we can get ours, and get it

big. The indecency is divided equally between the mass of people who hope to live easily by winning a lawsuit and the lawyers who will sell their services based on mass greed.

I thought I could avoid skewering political practices but, as I wrote this, I had to live through Republican Primary elections and runoffs in Alabama and Georgia. Out of 100 ads, about 5 might be positive ads, the content of which pretty much just featured the candidate with his family at church or at home to show what a good decent guy he was – no ideas or policies. The other 95 ads were attacks on the opponent. In a nutshell, despite being a lifelong Republican, the opponent really is a Democratic Party demon in disguise, in secret collusion with the Teachers' Union and President Obama to take away all your guns and money, force your children to learn about evolution and hate God, and give your money to the same slime that now get welfare. In fairness, when Democrats get their turn, they are as bad. If any of these claims were true, we would have to put up with the practice. But it is all completely made up lies. If any statements were about real positions, issues, and laws, then we might have to think about it. But every message is about only fantasies and fears. The Republicans all claimed to be good religions Christian people, yet they lied, and Jesus would condemn them for lying. The worst part is that it works. Politicians invest in these lies because the lies work. People respond to this crap, and do not respond to real issues as real citizens should. This shows why Americans no longer deserve the freedom for which our soldiers are dying. The practice of politicians is indecent, and their indecency reveals something about Americans that is even more deeply indecent.

Every occupation in the modern world is part of a system. Every system has its quirks, and everybody uses the quirks now and then. Everybody takes a paper clip home sometimes. I don't care about that. On the other hand, every system has people who are adept at milking the system. They use resources of the system for their own good. They divert the system away from what it should be doing, and so deprive other people of the help they should have gotten. That is indecent.

Because I was in academia for a while, I saw indecent abuse mostly among professors. I don't know if academia is worse than other lines such as construction and computers and if some professors are worse than some people in other lines. Academia encourages abuse among professors but I don't want to blame the system. People have to take personal responsibility. The professors that I have in mind are adept at writing papers and books with little content or they repeatedly re-cycle ideas that were original twenty years ago. They are adept at writing grants that seem topical and seem as if the work will produce an advance in knowledge or in practical application but really doesn't. They know how to write a grant for any piece of money that comes up almost anywhere. If they are in the right field, they know how to attract money from business often by putting a pseudo-scientific jingle behind what business wants to hear. They support a team of students who do all the real work in exchange for degrees. The work of the team might have some benefits but not nearly as much as it seems. These professors get themselves called "stars" and so get salaries higher than their fellows, like a star in athletics – but usually not as much as the football coach. In their hearts they know they are not worth it, and know the distortion they cause, but they can't help it. The equivalent in politics might be a veteran legislator who is adept at stabbing pork into every bill that has a little life. He-she knows how to get re-elected and knows glamour issues but doesn't know, or care, what the country really needs. All this is no different than someone who indecently abuses welfare or Social Security Disability. They have good excuses too.

In a democracy, being a bad citizen is indecent. Voting without knowing the issues is indecent. Voting on the basis of party alone, ethnic group, or religion is indecent. People should consider why they want to help groups such as illegal immigrants. Many people within our country, such as the residents of Chicago and Los Angeles, live in conditions worse than the previous conditions of illegal immigrants. Should we help illegal immigrants from China as much as from Latin America? Should we spend resources helping illegal immigrants of particular races and creeds or should we spend resources on the people of our own cities regardless of race and creed? People must think about why they support breaking the law in some particular cases.

09 Atheism

This chapter argues against modern atheism. This chapter does not review arguments for God or against God. This chapter gets at issues through morality. Commitment to morality opens the door to the super natural and it makes responsible belief in God legitimate. I do not defend all belief, only good belief. All people should criticize stupid, silly, hurtful, or overly zealous ideas whatever the roots.

The world won't "turn atheist" soon. Modern confused avoidance of formal religion is not atheism. Nearly all people still believe in something super natural but don't have anything to commit to: "spiritual but not religious". So why bother with atheism? Smug atheists annoy me. People who are fine as individuals become annoying as atheists. Atheists make fun of simple belief. They assume all believers are crazy or are weak fools, desperately needing comfort and willing to sacrifice mind to get it. Atheists wrongly think they are skeptic freethinking rebels led to the lonely truth by their superior intellects. In fact, atheism is now one of the big default conformities for non-thinking. Atheism can be dogma as much as religious belief. Atheists misuse physics to deny God and misuse biology to say belief is merely a nasty evolved reflex like a bad temper. Despite pride in their morality and acumen, atheists have not worked out the implications of a commitment to morality. Atheists say we can stop bad politics and terrorism by rejecting God. Atheists think rejecting God makes all people give up all superstition, makes us ideally rational, makes us adept citizens, and so would save democracy and the world if we all did it. In their zeal to make us all rational in their image and so save us, they are like Prohibition, the War on Drugs, or calls for sexual abstinence outside marriage - another branch of the PC thought police. Atheists are like simplistic anti-abortion or pro-nature crusaders. They tout a policy that cannot prevail but their stance lets them feel good while not doing much good and not exposing them to much harm. I am also annoyed at rejoinders to atheism by believers. They think arguing against atheism proves their own version of Christianity. Atheism gives theists an excuse for superficiality. By arguing cogently against atheism, I might lead theists to "up their game". We can do better with both religion and reason.

I offer the same argument five times, twice in Part One and once each in Parts Two through Four. Read Part One entirely. Part Five is comments. I only restate what you should have learned in college from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant. Don't worry if you didn't go or didn't learn. It's not hard.

Supposedly in White Crane martial arts, the goal is not to thrash the opponent but to not get hurt. That is what I seek here. I don't wish to thrash anyone. I wish to show curious sincere people that religious belief is sane and reasonable. Religious belief has a strong foundation in Western tradition. Belief goes along with how we see morality, reality, the world, the super natural, and God.

Optional Technical Point: Arguments similar to the one that I make here through morality can be made through other ways including: the world's intelligibility, rationality, or formal organization, through the fact of persons, through the increasing complexity of life, the increasing centralization of life, the success of mathematics (logic) for studying some aspects the world, the failure of mathematics for studying other aspects, and the validity of scientific method. Kurt Godel gave an argument based on perfect attributes, similar to the ontological argument of Anselm. I do not cover any of this. The argument from morality is

the best. If you accept it, others are “frosting on the cake”; but, if you cannot accept this argument, others are not likely to convince. NO argument, including one based on morality, is proof of God. Nor are denials of the arguments proof against God. I don’t think there is any conclusive argument for or against God, we don’t need such proof, and likely we are better off this way. Think about what “faith” means and how to have faith without being foolish.

Skeptics, Theists, Agnostics, Moral Atheists, and Amoral Atheists.

Atheists see themselves as “skeptics”: people who don’t simply believe what everyone else believes; put reason above belief; doubt accepted ideas such as “capitalism is fair” or “capitalism is unfair”; and doubt politicians, priests, professors, and artists. Skeptics make up their own mind. Since 1500, skeptics have been the self-styled “bad boys and bad girls” of Western intellectual life.

Mild skeptics question “the Beatles were the best band ever” and “politicians in a democracy often put the country above their own interests”. Modest skeptics doubt “romantic love is real” and “God”. Strong skeptics doubt “love is good”, “act morally”, or “the Earth goes around the sun”. Full skeptics doubt “good is good”, “I”, “you”, “I am”, “avoid pain”, “seek likes, avoid dislikes”, “follow logic”, “something exists”, and “consistency”. People take the pose of a skeptic so as to feel astute and important. Almost nobody is a full skeptic. All agnostics and atheists that I know of are only modest skeptics at most.

A “theist” is a “religious person”, a believer in God, or, sometimes, a believer in an equivalent such as the Dharma, Heaven, or the Tao. “The” is from Greek “theos” for “god” or “God”. Since the Enlightenment (about 1700 to 1820), a “deist” is a person who believes in God but thinks God has intervened in the world little, or not at all, since he started it. Deists do not feel abandoned by God but want people to use their minds to make the world better instead of falling back on divine intervention. “De” is a variation on “theos”. A “theist” usually believes God intervenes much more. Most people do not hear the difference between “theist” and “deist”, and are not sure what kind of believer is meant when either term is used. Here “theist” and “believer” include “deists”; I do not deal with deists directly. I fall between Enlightenment Deists and the usual religious theist believer.

An “agnostic” “not knows” about God and prefers not to take a stance (“a” is “not” and “gnos” is “know”). These days, an agnostic view implies disappointment with formal religion. Mostly, agnostics avoid conflict while carrying on. I don’t blame them. Agnostics seem not to have clear ideas about moral stances and what having a moral stance implies for God or any super natural. Technically, I am an agnostic because I think we can prove little about God but I differ from most agnostics in that I believe in God, follow Jesus, and have thought out the implications of my moral stance for the super natural.

An “atheist” actively says “no god” (“a” is “no” and “theos” is “god”). Atheists actively assert there is no god. They offer proofs against god just as theists offer proofs for god. Atheists say: “Everything (that can be explained) can be explained without referring to god, so there is no need to refer to god, so there is no god. Accepting god usually causes more harm than benefit; so we are better off rejecting god; so there is no god. Human ideas of god can be explained away as merely evolved; and there is no scientific basis for human ideas about god; so, we should reject god. By rejecting god, automatically we also reject all superstition and nearly all bad ideas; so we become almost perfectly rational. People thus made highly rational are the only hope for democracy and the world, and are enough. This is the only way we

can be made rational enough to be good enough citizens.” Atheists see themselves as rebel crusading skeptics holding the line against evil emotional chaos and tyranny – “except for that silliness about “the Force, we few atheists are Jedi while all those believers are Sith”. But most atheists that I have met, read, or heard are not rebel crusading skeptics except in self-indulgent Romantic terms.

Roughly, atheists come in two varieties. The first, “amoral atheists”, doubts not only any god but also the validity of any morality. Few adult atheists do this. Rigorous doubt about morality is hard to keep up.

The second variety, “moral atheists”, commit to morality. They commit in the same way that everybody commits – see below. Their commitment to morality is not qualitatively different. Almost all atheists now who promote atheism say they are moral atheists. They are proud to reject God yet still be moral. They deny any arguments linking God and morality. Morality can stand on its own and does not need God to explain its origin or to back it up through punishment and reward. As examples, and as proof that people can reject God yet be moral, they offer famous moral atheists of the past such as David Hume, or offer themselves. They feel their superior rationality also results in better moral thinking and acting. Yet few moral atheists think out implications of any moral commitment for the super natural and. Moral atheists think they are bad tough guy realist rebel freethinking strong skeptics but rarely are.

I do not know any deliberately immoral atheists although some immoral people do deny God. Atheists do sometimes act badly just like all of us. Among deliberately immoral people who deny God, the immorality comes first and the denying God is an excuse. I don't know of any cases where reasoned doubting of God came first and led to deliberate immorality. Bad people sometimes use doubt about God to seduce victims into immoral behavior but, in those cases, doubt about God is not a cause but a tool. I doubt that atheists are more immoral than people in general although atheists sometimes flaunt naughtiness as part of a self-styled bad boy bad girl image. Indirectly, a deliberately immoral person asserts that morality is important – the Joker in Batman and naughtiness as part of a bad boy bad girl image. So, a deliberately immoral atheist can be classed in with moral atheists, and to argue against moral atheists argues against deliberately immoral atheists too.

Atheists usually allow that people do have moral feelings and that moral feelings are distinct from other feelings such as love or anger. People make moral judgments about right and wrong and moral judgments are qualitatively distinct from other judgments such as “painful”, “cheap”, or “beautiful”. But amoral atheists, and sometimes moral atheists, do not allow that moral feelings and judgments refer to anything distinct, real, or important in itself. Moral feelings and judgments are illusions, delusions, and-or roundabout ways to get something else, usually my self-interest. Because people in general share these delusory feelings and judgments, we can use the feelings, judgments, and use other people, to get what we wish. For example: when I declare someone stole my pudding out of the shared refrigerator at work, and I get upset about this venal trampling of goodness, really I am much less upset about the assault on goodness than about the loss of my pudding now and about the high chance that, if I don't scream now, it will happen again; so I yell about justice to get my office mates on my side and against the thief. If I am a conniving person as moralists often are, I even accuse my office rival, whether he-she did it or not. People in general have an uneasy feeling that manipulation goes on a lot but we don't call it each other because we want to use the tool when it comes our turn.

Before the rise of neo-Darwinism after about 1960, there were no good explanations for how people got the moral feelings and judgments, why we were so conniving, why we often went along with morality, and why we went along with using morality as a tool. Now there are good explanations. Without going into detail, we evolved the abilities because they helped us to succeed in our evolutionary past and we keep them because they help us now. These abilities are coded into our genes. That they are coded into our genes does not make them true, valid, real, or false, invalid, and delusory. That these abilities are coded into genes can be used to explain away morality as “nothing but”, and often is. The combination of doubt about morality plus a biological explanation for how morality serves success can be powerful.

The attitude (stance) of moral atheists confuses me. When moral atheists defend their own morality and particular moral judgments, they insist morality cannot be explained away as nothing but delusions based on our genes, and insist they do not use morality as a tool. They do not think evolution undermines their personhood and moral validity. Their moral judgments are valid and compelling. Yet when they attack the morality of others, in particular theists, they attack morality as a delusion, as based in our genes, and therefore nothing but a reflex like craving sugar; they say believers use morality as a tool to frighten and control others; and they think evolution undermines the idea of a person that is needed for the morality of believers and for belief of believers. This contradiction features in my argument against moral atheists. Moral atheists need to be consistent in how they see morality and commitment to morality, and need to see what a commitment to morality by anybody implies, including them.

This chapter ignores skeptics, agnostics, amoral atheists, and deliberately immoral atheists to focus on moral atheists including self-styled sometimes naughty bad boys and bad girls. Moral atheists do not see that to accept morality also is to accept some super natural. To accept some super natural allows other people to believe in God legitimately.

Interjection: Take-Home Message.

This take-home message is an interjection. It does not result directly from arguments that belief in God is sane. It comes from thinking about evolved beings living in the modern world. This message is what we come to after we are done bickering over theism and atheism. This message is not needed for argument below but please don't skip this message.

Quit bickering. Instead use your big intellect and zealous energy on deep practical problems.

Harangue by religious people, moralists, atheists, academics, activists, conservatives, feminists, or hip-hop artists cannot make people fully moral, good, not superstitious, and adept enough citizens. Trying to do so is like Prohibition, the “War on Drugs”, or total chastity outside marriage. People evolved not to be fully rational. People evolved to believe in something. Regardless of what we personally believe or not believe, we have to accept this situation and do the best we can with it. We can help people to the best ideas given evolved human nature.

Figure out and accept what you care about, what is really important to you, what really matters to you. Think about what is real. Besides persons like spouse and children, likely you care about moral issues. If you care enough about theism and atheism to read this chapter, then you care about something and likely you care about morality. Morality is real. Think out the implications for caring about morality, committing

to morality. What does what you care about imply for what is real in the world? What does all that imply for the way real people live in the real world? You don't have to be a "good two shoes" annoying hyper moralist to commit to morality, and, in fact, some human playing around usually makes us more genuinely moral otherwise.

If you reject God because you think that stance is correct, and not from chic cleverness, fine. Be ready to calmly state reasons. Don't force your opinion on anyone or think atheism will save us all. If you believe in God, Dharma, Tao, Heaven, etc, fine. Be ready to explain calmly and to describe what people should do out of belief. Don't force your opinion on anyone or think belief in God etc. alone will save the world.

Along with atheism or belief, we need other values from Western ideas of the person and the state such as described in Chapter Two, and we need a realistic view of human nature such as from Chapter Three.

Give good hard thought to what will make the world better without corrupting us.

Ideas do influence behavior and can lead people to do good or bad. People can be both led astray and helped by ideas. Sometimes we need to fight bad dogmas, such as racism and terrorism, before people can act well enough. But ideas alone rarely cause much good or bad without previous deep reasons for good or harm such as economic inequality, poverty, and political repression. Debunking ideas alone, such as theism or simplistic scientism, will not cause people to act well if we do not also work on deep problems. Working honestly and effectively on deep problems can lead people to act better even if we don't clear away all bad ideas first. People can still act well if they believe in God, Dharma, Tao, Heaven, etc. or if they actively disbelieve. If you enjoy bickering over odd metaphysical issues, and you do no harm, then go ahead. See Part 5.

Most people are good enough, often despite bad ideology, to respond when they see others working hard on real problems. They will "pitch in" too. We can count on this goodness for a while if we work hard on deep problems and we make progress. We don't have to make everybody conform to any belief system for them to act well. I don't know how long this door of goodness will remain open in the modern world of overpopulation, pollution, promising but flawed capitalism, and bad politics, but I doubt for long.

Atheists, and people who follow religion, should condemn bad ideas such as: we are good while others are evil, we are victims while they always gain, people not in traditional gender categories are evil, God wants us to terrorize, and the world is just fine as long we get ours. Do not wait for a priest, monk, rabbi, imam, holy person, teacher, or politician to condemn bad ideas. You personally must do it.

To help, all religions should teach good ideas, teach religion that is compatible with as much reason as possible, that inspires evolved human nature without forcing us into contradictions in our nature, and that promotes the values of Chapters One and Two. Religion should avoid stupid hurtful dogma and should condemn it. Religions should teach people to look for, understand, and work to solve, deep problems of economy, society, and ecology. All major religions can do this. You should look at your religion to make sure it does this, and, if not, you personally should change it. You personally are responsible. You may criticize other groups if you feel they teach anything hurtful – that is what good atheists want to do without being condemned by irrational theists.

Rather than try to talk people out of religion – like trying to talk us out of booze and sex – atheists should help most people toward good religion, largely by directing people to teachers of good religion. Atheists should attack bad ideas. Atheists should stop glamorizing their stance and stop feeling smugly superior. Atheists should lead in looking at, knowing about, and working to solve, deep problems.

It is ridiculous to think atheism alone would make people rational enough to deal with all the issues of the modern world. It is ridiculous to think any religion alone would make us good enough and adept enough to deal with all this. Neither religion nor atheism alone will save the world or damn it. What will?

PART 1: Moral Stances, the Super Natural, God, Physics, and Evolution.

-Nobody can prove either that God exists or does not exist.

-Where an idea comes from doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that the idea has a strong basis in evolved human nature and we have the idea largely because we evolved the capacity for it. What matters is how true and useful the idea is. Among other ways, an idea can be useful in imagination as long as we don't abuse imagination. I repeat often that the source does not matter. Please be patient.

-Learn about bad use of "nothing but" explaining away, and don't do it. Argue properly to the case.

-Morality does not need God to support it through rewards and punishments. Do good for itself. Act well for the right reasons. You can still believe in God and God can still take part in your life.

Synopsis.

(1)

-The standard view of morality sees morality as important, as "really important". Morality "really matters".

-Morality involves feelings and judgments. I do not say much about feelings. I subsume judging under the moral logic of the Golden rule, below, and so I don't get into it any more than that.

-Morality is the proper eventual judge of most cases in human affairs. Few things judge morality. Morality is what matters because it is the proper final judge in most cases.

-Morality has its own logic and follows that logic. The logic of morality follows the Golden Rule and "applies equally".

-The logic of morality is added evidence that morality is the judge of most human affairs.

-Morality requires persons (agents) with some free will. Morality is not done by stones, trees, robots, or machines. The will does not have to be absolutely free. I do not argue about how free the will has to be; a little is enough. Humans ordinarily think we do have enough free will. Persons need not have a soul as in the Christian-Muslim sense or a lesser sense, although most humans do think persons have souls. I do not say anything about souls.

-When I say morality is important, I include: feelings and judgments, is the proper judge of most affairs, has the logic of the Golden Rule, and morality requires somewhat free persons. I include all this without usually pointing out that I include it.

-Morality is non-material. Some people think morality is more important because it is non-material but not everyone agrees that being non-material makes something important, more important, or less important. Here I merely say morality is non-material and being non-material adds to morality's importance without implying anything about non-materiality and importance in general.

-Morality is important, is a high judge, done by persons, follows a logic, the logic of morality is that of the Golden Rule and "applies equally", and morality is non-material. All this is evidence that morality is real even though morality is not material. The simple fact that morality is important in its way is alone firm evidence that morality is real. The contributing points make the case fairly strong.

-The standard view of morality is that it is important, the proper judge, involves feelings, involves judging, involves persons, has logic, and is real. I add to the standard view that morality is non-material and that the logic of morality is the same as the Golden Rule and "applies equally".

-Although most people cannot explain the standard view, they hold that view, including my additions. I agree with the standard view including my additions.

-Due to all the ideas above, morality "points to the super natural". Morality is a fairly clear instance of the super natural. Morality makes a strong case that the super natural exists. I accept that morality points to the super natural. The idea that morality points to the super natural is in the standard view too although most people can't explain.

-Accepting the super natural for one arena, morality, allows people to accept the super natural in other arenas, God. Accepting the super natural in one arena, such as morality, does not require that people accept the super natural in any other particular arena such as God. The relevance of the super natural still has to be argued for particular arenas. Accepting the super natural in one particular arena, such as morality, does make the case easier for people who want to see the super natural in other arenas, such as God. This does not mean you must believe in God if you commit to morality. It only means you can-and-may believe in God without being an idiot, fool, dupe, sub-rational, irrational, criminal, desperate for solace, or mindless zombie of the common herd – as long as you are reasonable and responsible - just as you can commit to morality without being any of those.

-The world as a whole makes more sense if we think a mind is behind it all, that is, God.

-From the results with morality and with making sense of the world, I judge that God exists. My judgment is not a proof. It is sane reasonable warranted often-useful belief.

-This much might not seem a like a lot but it is enough.

-Wondering about more can be fun.

-Trying to prove more causes trouble and usually comes from prior mindset rather than from evidence and good argument. Arguing against this much usually is based on wrong “nothing but” and usually comes from prior convictions rather than evidence and good thinking.

(2A)

-Physics and biology do not undercut my conclusions. Science does not support or oppose commitment to morality, belief in the super natural, or belief in God. Science is neutral.

-Some things are real but not material such as freedom, justice, love, math, science, scientific method, morality, persons, and the idea of God. Some non-physical things are not real, as we wish to think of real, even if ideas about them have real effects, such as ideas of self-grandeur and ethnic destiny. We have to decide what counts as real and not real for our purposes. We have criteria to help us do this.

-The fact that we decide on what counts as real for our purposes does not mean reality is mere social convention. Reality is real despite human opinion. Real reality can intrude and force us to change our decision about what counts as real. The fact that we decide means we are finite imperfect beings who have to get at reality as best we can. Learn to live both with “reality is real” and “we decide what counts as real for our purposes”.

-Science can explain aspects of how non-material real things are used in real life, for example, how the real legal system administers abstract justice. Science can help us decide that some non-material things are not real such as unicorns and racial destiny. Science cannot explain away as “nothing but” all non-material real things even when science can explain how people use them. Morality, ideas of God, joy, persons, love, justice, and honor are non-material ideas that are not false, are likely real, and cannot be explained away as “nothing but”.

-People can be misled about which ideas are real, have real objects, and-or point to the super natural. We are misled by religion, evolved predisposition for liveliness and to attribute realness, confusion about science, social convention, simplistic scientism, ideologies, pop culture, academia, conservative dogma, feminism, etc. We can overcome bias through consideration.

-We have to decide: (1) what is real or not; (2) which non-material things (ideas) are real or not; (3) which ideas have objects that are real or not; and (4) which ideas and-or their objects point to the super natural or not. In all this, we have to be as consistent as we can.

-On the basis of the evidence, and by using the public criteria that I know, morality is real.

-The fact that morality is real supports the idea that morality points to the super natural.

-Knowing that morality is real and points to the super natural lets me legitimately speculate about other things that might be real and super natural.

-Knowing morality is real and it points to the super natural helps me to judge that God is real too.

-Although science can explain almost everything without using God, that fact does not make the ideas of morality or God empty, useless, or bad. Morality is still real and God could still be real. Morality and the idea of God can be true (not false) and useful.

(2B)

-Morality, belief in gods, and belief in God, have a strong basis in our evolved nature. We have ideas of morality and religion largely because evolution made us predisposed to have such ideas. I do not argue the roles of learning versus an evolved basis. Just because we evolved the basis for morality and religion does not mean morality is merely an evolved reflex or the idea of God must be null. That morality and the idea of God evolved does not mean they are necessarily delusory, crazy, or bad. Some ideas with a firm basis in evolved human nature are best seen as illusions such as fairies and witches. Other ideas are best treated as real or as having a real object. The idea of a dog has an evolved basis but the object of the idea, dogs, is real. The idea of dogs likely does not point to the super natural. The idea of justice has an evolved base but is not a delusion, justice is real, and usually the idea of justice is good. I think the idea of justice points to the super natural.

-So, I conclude again that morality is real and points to the super natural.

-On the basis that morality is real and points to the super natural, and on the basis of all the argument above, I judge that God is real.

(3A)

-Most people commit to morality, and commit in the standard way, tacitly if not explicitly. They commit to the ideas that morality is important and real. That is what I take a commitment to morality to mean.

-The usual commitment to morality also strongly implies accepting the super natural.

-Most people do tacitly accept that morality has something to do with the super natural, and that morality supports the super natural including especially God; but they are not able to say it well.

-To be a person, you have to commit either to morality or not morality, and you have to say so.

(3B)

-Moral atheists are committed to morality pretty much in the standard way that everybody is committed to morality. They accept that morality is important. So they accept that morality is important enough to be real although they might not know that they do so.

-Because moral atheists accept that morality is important and real, they tacitly accept the super natural in one arena. Moral atheists might dislike this implication of commitment to morality but it is true anyhow.

-Because moral atheists commit to morality, and thereby accept the super natural in one arena, they also open the door to adept guesses about God, and they have to allow other people to believe in God. To make morality important makes speculation about God and belief in God legitimate.

-(a) If moral atheists refuse to accept that morality is important and real, (b) for example if moral atheists claim morality is simply an evolved reflex like craving sweets, (c) if they explain away morality as “nothing but”, (d) then moral atheists don’t commit to morality in the usual way, (e) so they are not moral atheists as people usually understand “moral”, and (f) they lose credibility. They might be atheists but they are not really moral even if they act morally. They seem self-deluded or like clever posers.

-(a) If moral atheists want to be moral in the usual way, (b) if moral atheists say they really feel morality in the way everybody does, (c) they want to be credible, (d) and they want moral atheism to appeal, (e) then they have to accept the super natural and (f) so have to accept that belief in God is legitimate, at least for some people. Moral atheists might be moral but they are not atheists as they wish. If moral atheists do not accept any super natural but still want morality to be important and-or real, they have to explain.

(4)

-If you commit to morality, you have to accept all that the commitment entails. You have to explain your morality. You have to decide why morality is important; what importance means and implies; if morality is real; if real, how it is real; and if morality implies the super natural. You have to decide whether implying the super natural allows people to believe in God.

-If you use morality to support your belief in God, then you are obliged to be sane and reasonable in both your morality and your belief in God. You should explain your morality and belief. Using morality to support your belief in God is a privilege for which you have to pay with responsibilities.

-If you claim to be moral, and you are an atheist, then you have a privilege for which you have to pay with responsibilities including well-reasoned stances on the above issues.

-Morality can work with practicality and other values. See Chapters One and Two.

(5)

-All this argument, including “pointing to the super natural”, does not prove that morality is real, morality is super natural, anything is real, anything points to the super natural, or God is real. It does offer a good case that morality is important, real, and points to the super natural. I deliberately did not say much about “pointing” to the super natural or pointing to anything. All this argument does not prove God set up the world and evolution so some beings would see morality, non-material reality, and the super natural. All this argument does not prove God set up the world and evolution so some evolved beings naturally seek and find God. It does not prove God intervened in evolution to give us morality and religion – in fact, it says God did not need to intervene and so did not. These are other debates that begin after we feel the above arguments, after we accept or deny the force (importance) of morality.

-All that the above says is: some ideas with an evolved basis cannot be explained away as merely evolved; morality is one of those; if you accept the importance of morality, accept that morality judges affairs and affairs do not usually judge morality, then you accept the reality of some non-material things, accept that morality is real, see that morality points to the super natural, and see that allowing any super natural allows legitimate speculation about God. If you accept the force of morality, then: you cannot explain away morality as merely evolved even though you can explain away some other ideas as merely evolved, and you must accept the results of not explaining away morality including that morality is real and points to the super natural. If you deny the results of this reasoning then you also have to deny the force of morality and the force-and-reality of most other fun ideas. You have to say why justice, society, power, science, scientific method, this one Douglas fir tree, the species of Douglas firs, trees, forests, storms, logic, math, love, your country, red, etc. are real or not. You have to be ready to explain away all of them or you risk again allowing the super natural and God. If you are not ready to explain away those, then likely you cannot explain away morality, and you must accept the results of real morality including the implied super natural and legitimate speculation about God.

-The link between morality, reality, and the super natural is old wisdom in the West. Evolution has little to do with the core issue except that evolution opens another arena to argue about explaining away and not explaining away. Evolution gives more tools to argue about what is real, what is not, why, and how. In our day, the old argument has to be restated and it has to consider evolution.

(6) See argument below, toward the end of Part One about ideals, unusual people, unusual situations, and morality.

The synopsis is over, and more expansive presentation begins. The order below corresponds to the order above but there is no precise correspondence of sections and points. I do not repeat the issues raised in items (4) and (5).

Honesty about Your Stance.

-As a person, you have to commit to morality or to not morality, and you have to say so.

-You must make clear if you take any position below, and have to explain, including any implications:

=My view, as stated above, and as explained throughout the book.

=You deny morality is important.

=You deny morality is real.

=You deny that morality is the proper judge of many activities.

=You deny that a commitment to morality points to the super natural.

=You accept that morality is important and is the proper judge of human affairs but you deny it is real.

=You accept that morality is important, the proper judge, and real but deny that morality points to the super natural.

=You are committed to morality in a way different than almost everybody else.

=You are committed to morality in a way different than everybody else but still think everybody should follow morality (everybody should be committed in some way to some morality).

- =Your morality differs from most everybody else, and still everybody else should follow your morality because your morality is better in general.
- =There are different kinds of morality for different kinds of people.
- =Morality is merely convention, is nothing but convention, and can be explained away.
- =Morality is merely responses based on evolved capacities, is nothing but evolved responses, and can be explained away.
- =Morality is merely a mix of convention and evolved responses, is nothing but that, and can be explained away as that.
- =Morality can be grounded in reason alone. You have to show how.
- =We need more than reason for morality. You have to explain what it is and how we get it.
- =Your own version of morality is important but its importance does not imply that morality is real and does not imply any super natural.
- =Morality is merely an evolved response, or is merely an evolved response mixed with convention, BUT morality still is important and everybody still should follow morality.
- =God intervened directly in evolution to give us the genes for morality and-or religion.
- =Morality and religion could not possibly have evolved, so God gave them to us directly; whether God used genes to give them to us is not relevant.

-It is very close to a contradiction to say morality is merely an evolved response and-or merely convention AND to say morality still is important and we still should follow morality. You have to explain. You cannot say we should follow morality because to do so is a practical strategy given irrational evolved human nature and given that you have to live and work with irrational evolved humans. You have to come down on one side or the other: merely evolved versus important and real.

-People who commit to morality need to see they imply that morality is real, and need to see that morality points to the super natural.

-Similar points can be made about belief in God by substituting "God" for "morality". I do not spell it out here. Please do that yourself, and see below.

-You need to think what your stance on morality implies for the super natural and God.

Morality as Judge, Moral Logic, and Morality as Important.

Anyone who has endured "but that's not fair" from a young person or interest group knows that morality is important, has a logic, the logic can be twisted, and morality can apply to almost all human affairs. I am amazed at how broadly people apply "fairness". Juries are easily swayed by fairness. Morality does not apply to all human affairs. Usually we don't think about right and wrong when we buy a bag of apples or go watch a game. We do make compromises between morality and practicality. We are clever at twisting moral logic when it suits our self interest. The Golden Rule is not the only logic in morality although it is the most important. All this qualifying is much less relevant than that morality potentially applies to nearly all human affairs, we know how it works, and we respect it. In other writing, I say more about morality as judge, moral logic, and the importance of morality. For now, intuitive feelings are enough.

Morality and Persons.

In a piece on morality and the evolution of the capacity for morality, I would have to explain what I assert here. Now, I only assert. Even if you disagree with some points here, you can still appreciate the force of “morality is important, real, and super natural”. I do not stress the material here after this section.

Morality pertains to relations between person-agents and pertains to relations between person-agents and nature as in how humans treat tigers and gorillas. (When people feel morality toward nature, they tend to treat nature as a person, and feel a sense of “noblesse oblige” or sense of serving our better, sometimes both.) Morality does not appear among rocks, rivers, plants, and most animals. Some crude morality does appear among some animals but that does not affect what I say. Full morality appears only among humans. People evolved. Wherever sentient beings evolve rather than are made all-of-a-piece, morality and personhood always go together. In the future, it will be possible to make computers, robots, planned chemical-based organisms as in the movie “Prometheus”, or other artificial life that is sentient but does not have sense of morality or a human sense of morality. When that happens, someone might have to revise what I say here.

Morality and persons go together. If you undermine one, you undermine the other. If you support one, you support the other. It is not necessary to think people have stereotypical souls for this connection to hold well.

The idea of a person points to the super natural. Regardless of whether a person can be reduced to a mechanism, still, a person is not like a rock, forest, avalanche, river, or even galaxy. A person is more complex and convoluted, and has a sense of self and other selves that even great non-person processes don't have. Sentient self-awareness, the ability to appreciate others, and the ability to interact with other similar selves, are all awe inspiring. This awe points to the super natural.

When the idea of a person combines with morality, the two together point strongly to the super natural. If you support morality and the idea of a person, you also support pointing to the super natural.

If you reject morality so as to avoid the idea of pointing to the super natural, you also reject the idea of a person. Most atheists, moral or otherwise, would not reject the idea of a person. If you reject the idea that morality points to the super natural then you also risk rejecting the idea of morality and rejecting the idea of a person.

When people in one group wish to de-personalize, dehumanize, demonize, and discourage people in another group, often they first accuse them of immorality or amorality. “They are like animals. If they don't have morality, they can't be persons; and, if they are not persons, but act something like persons, then they must be demons.” When we wish to see other people as people like the people in our group, we notice how they have many of the same moral feelings and judgments that we do, as, for example, they value fairness. If they appreciate morality and their morality is like ours, then they must be persons and they must be persons similar to us.

Part of the desire not to reject morality is also the desire not to reject personhood for members our group and members of other groups. In these days of PC, anyone who rejects morality and personhood for members of other groups will be called a bad person and risks being considered a not-person demon. I

think moral atheists know of this need to keep personhood and morality for propaganda purposes but, more importantly, also they feel it genuinely and deeply. Still, they do not appreciate that accepting the self and morality opens the door for the super natural and God.

See the chapter in this book on free will and see other writings. I do not fully understand arguments that can have selves, determinism, and free will. For me, “free will versus determinism” remains a problem for which I have no easy solution. We do not have absolute categorical free will, that is not necessary, and nobody with any real world sense expects it. We are free enough to be persons and to do morality. We are free enough so our personhood and moral ability both point to the super natural. We are free enough so our modest degree of free will supports arguments below that physics and biology cannot explain away morality as “nothing but”. Further details about free will are not useful here.

Realness, Physics, and Ideas.

-Many things are real but not everything is real in the same way. Some real things: electrons, gravity, space, time, energy, atoms, molecules, pebbles, planets, stars, galaxies, orbits, apples, fruit, varieties of apples, dinosaurs, bluebirds, red, blue, color, math, science, scientific method, logic, art, bad art, stories, imagination, rules, good, bad, right, wrong, should, should not, smiles, joy, sadness, and morality.

-Non-material things can be real. Ideas can be real. The objects of ideas can be real.

-I do not deal with the issue of reducing everything to matter and energy, to physicality. I use the term “event” so as to sidestep the issue. That issue is not relevant here, and I don’t want people to use it to distract themselves.

-Sometimes people say things are “more real” or “less real” but it is confusing to think about degrees until you have a grasp of qualitatively different realness. Some people sort reality into levels, and assert that a higher level controls lower levels. This approach is common in sociology and anthropology. While there might be levels, any simple sorting is not accurate, and higher levels do not simply control lower levels. Physical scientists like to look at reality from the bottom up, seeing things in terms of parts and interaction of parts. I prefer this approach but it too is not always accurate. Nothing I say depends on looking at reality in terms of more and less, higher and lower, control, parts, or wholes. So I ignore these issues. We do have to accept that non-material things can be real.

-Almost everything that can be explained in the world can be explained by physical laws. The ideas that people have of God and morality are events such as rain falling, a tree growing, a fox chasing a rabbit, a mother cat teaching kittens to kill, hunting, rivers, belief in river spirits, science, scientific method, love, and kindness. This result tempts us to explain away all non-physical realness, ideas, and belief, including all commitment to morality and all belief in God, but we should not do so.

-Just because an idea such as knowing the recipe for a cake is an event similar to the coming of Halley’s Comet does not mean the idea must be empty, full, true, false, silly, profound, likely true, likely false, or anything else. We do not judge scientific method by the fact that carrying it out requires a series of events in our brains. We judge ideas by truth and utility regardless of origin.

-Just because an idea is an event does not mean the idea is a mere event and we can explain it away by saying it is a mere event. Just because the idea that planetary orbits are ellipses is an event does not mean it is a mere event and that we should not check if planetary orbits are ellipses. Just because the idea of amoebas is an event does not mean it is a mere event and does not mean amoebas are mere fictions. Just because we have ideas of art does not mean art is real or unreal, our ideas of art are empty or full, our ideas are true or false. We cannot use the idea that ideas are events to explain away ideas. This kind of “explaining away” is not allowed. We have to use various criteria to assess ideas. For some ideas we can say they are “mere ideas” but for some we cannot.

-Just because an idea is an event does not mean the object of the idea is necessarily illusory or real. We have ideas about the Sun but that in itself does not mean the Sun is real or unreal. We have ideas about rabbits but rabbits are still real. We have ideas about parabolas, and, although there are no perfect ideal parabolas in nature, what is represented by our idea is still real enough and useful enough. We have the idea of a unicorn but it is not real. We have ideas about geometry, geometry is real enough, and some of its ideas are real too such as the Pythagorean Theorem in Euclidean space or the ratio of the diameter to the circumference of a circle in Euclidean space, also known as “pi”.

-For over 2400 years, Westerners have developed criteria for when ideas are true and useful, and when the objects of ideas are likely real, real in what way, and how real. We should learn this history, learn the criteria, and use them. We use various criteria in various arenas. We judge the usefulness and reality of apples differently than hyperbolic geometry.

-Sometimes we can use the fact that the capacity for an idea evolved to cast doubt on an idea, as with ghosts, terrorism, and bad selfish economic policies. Ideas from physics and evolutionary theory will add to our stock of criteria and will lead us to re-assess some criteria. They will not cause us to re-assess all criteria; they will not cause a revolution. We should be careful using physics and evolution simplistically to discredit morality and religion through explaining away, “merely”, and “nothing but”.

-The most pressing issue often is not whether an idea is real or its object is real but (1) whether some people believe in a true real idea for weak reasons such as blind faith and-or (2) some people “believe” in a true real idea even for bad reasons such as to use the idea to abuse other people, as with religion and terrorism. In those cases, we are tempted to kill the idea so as to end the badness; and, to kill the idea, we say the object is not real: God is not real because the idea of God is a mere event or merely evolved, so all religion is false, so people must believe in religion only for bad reasons, so all acts based on faith are necessarily bad, so stop doing it. Although the motives in these cases can be good, the technique of rejection is faulty and can be as bad as the original abuse. Think about saying the same of morality, love, or justice. People abuse the court system all the time but the best response is not to deny there can be any real justice. The best response in these cases is to forget about abuse for a while and instead focus on truth regardless of why people believe. Then we can help people to believe for good reasons and to act well on the basis of their good belief for good reasons.

-The criteria for the realness of an idea and-or its object, and the use of criteria for morality, religion, and evolution, are topics too big for here. It is enough that we cannot use physics or evolution simplistically to discredit ideas.

-By the criteria and the facts that I know, I judge: We have realness in different ways. Not everything is real in the same ways that stones, apples, art, and even geometry are real. Some ideas are useful and their objects are real even if the objects are not material. Because some ideas point to real things, the ideas are effectively real and they are useful in themselves. Ideas can be real. Morality can be real. God can be real. I do not spell out how I came to the conclusions. The conclusions are reasonable even in a world of events.

-In addition, because some ideas help with my imagination, those ideas are important.

Morality as a Real Idea and-or as an Idea with Real Object.

From above, I judge that morality is important and real. Morality uses the logic of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. It is the judge of most things; most other things do not judge morality. These facts point to the super natural. This situation implies that the super natural is real. I do not spell out how I came to the conclusions. My conclusions are in line with the standard view of morality. These results are what moral atheists have to come to grips with, even if only to deny. As the reader likely has guessed, all this is good evidence that the idea of God is reasonable and that God is real; I say so explicitly below.

To assert that all this implies more, such as a detailed plan by God, is not useful. Do it with caution. In fact, I don’t think these points do imply a detailed plan although they imply some plan.

Evolution, Ideas, and Realness.

-Biology rests on physics. Most of our ideas have an evolved basis. I do not argue about the roles of learning versus an evolved basis. It is only necessary that an evolved basis plays a role. Ideas with an evolved basis include morality, spirits, gods, God, religion, ceremonies, sacraments, rituals, love, group alliances, group competition, friendship, family, music, math, science, and scientific method.

-The specific power of biology to explain evolved abilities, and to explain ideas rooted in evolved abilities, such as morality and religion, results from the general power of science to explain natural events.

-In the end, the results are the same in the specific case of biology as in the general case of physics but we have to go through evolution to get there. Just because the basis for an idea evolved does not make the idea empty, full, real, unreal, true, false, useful, harmful, profound, or silly. Just because the basis for an idea evolved does not make the object of the idea unreal or real. We evolved to sort nature into types such as rabbits, trees, species of trees, rocks, yellow stars, red stars, neutron stars, etc. Sometimes our ideas of types coincide with natural types and sometimes not.

-Some dubious evolved ideas: Sometimes we can say, because the capacity for an idea evolved, (a) the idea is merely evolved, (b) not important even if it seems important, (c) need not be taken seriously, (d) does not point to the super natural, and (e) the object of the idea is not real. Seeing illusions of water over desert roads is based in an evolved capacity for seeing, and we can dismiss the illusions as merely evolved, as not saying much about reality, and as not saying anything about the super natural. The same is true of fairies, witches, most superstition, and “the Force”. We have to argue about particular cases.

-Some good evolved ideas: Besides empty ideas, we can assert that some other ideas are not empty, and have real content, even if they too rest on an evolved base. The objects of the ideas are real, in their ways. We evolved stereoscopic vision (accurate depth perception) but space is still real. We evolved the ability to make ideas about types of animals and trees but the types often are real anyway. We evolved the ability to do algebra, and its results are real enough so we can see it as real too.

-Why we need to be calm and look at particular cases: Self-interest has a rock-solid basis in our evolved nature. Self-interest can lead to good ideas and bad. The self-interest of bourgeois merchants drove the American Revolution and shaped the American Constitution. Self-interest by Nazi Party members led to World War Two and the Holocaust. Self-interest can lead to good capitalism and bad capitalism. Self-interest often is grounds for doubt about ideas but even blatant self-interest can't always discredit an idea. A new mall, sports stadium, or back-to-nature park actually can be good although some people offer them out of self-interest without regard for the interests of others or of the whole. We should assess ideas and results on their merits and not primarily on the role of self-interest.

-Our capacity for reason evolved. That does not make reasoning always accurate or always deceitful. Our capacity for art evolved; some art is good, some is poor, and most is mediocre. Whether a capacity evolved is not key to assessing ideas. Whether ideas came from a capacity that has an evolved basis is not key to assessing ideas. We can use that information but it is not key.

-We cannot casually use the fact that an idea has an evolved basis to explain away the idea as "nothing but" or as "merely evolved". We can do this only if we are careful. Most people, including moral atheists, social scientists, and too often biologists, are not nearly careful enough.

-The same comments above about ideas as events (physics) apply to ideas as something for which we have an evolved basis (biology). We have been developing criteria for ideas and things for 2400 years, and we should learn to use those criteria.

Morality as an Idea with an Evolved Basis but still Real Idea.

-Keep in mind these points:

(1) The common stance: morality is important, the proper judge, has its own logic, is real, and is more than mundane.

(2) The common stance includes that morality implies the super natural.

(3) Ideas cannot be discredited just because their basis evolved. We have to assess them on merits.

-Just because we can explain human abilities for kinds of ideas by evolution does not mean morality is necessarily empty. Morality need not be merely an evolved delusion. Morality need not be false. The objects of ideas in morality (good and bad, right and wrong, should and should not) need not be false delusions. Morality need not be important or unimportant, real or unreal. Morality can point to the super natural or need not point to anything.

-We cannot use “merely evolved” to explain away morality, or to explain away that morality is important, is real, and points to the super natural. We cannot use “merely evolved” to explain away morality, or explain away that morality is important, real, and points to the super natural.

-I judge morality to be important, real, and point to the super natural; even though morality evolved; and even though we also evolved to make morality feel important, think morality is real, and think it points to the super natural. Sometimes evolution does not lead us astray but it leads us to the right place.

-For the case of morality, either: (a) you don't get it, and there is little more I can say; (b) you do get it but you don't accept it, mostly because you don't want to accept ANY super natural; or (c) you do get it and do accept it. I fall into category (c). All I can do is state the obvious negative arguments.

-The ideas that morality is important, is the judge of other activities, morality is real, and morality points to the super natural, are in the common stance about morality. Even if morality evolved and the supporting ideas evolved, morality and the supporting ideas are part of the common stance. If you deal with normal, evolved, mere humans, you have to see that this is what they think and they will respond to you on the basis of your attitude toward these points of their thinking.

-Besides evolving to act morally and to see moral logic, we evolved to think morality is important, morality is the proper judge of affairs, morality is real, morality is real in ways other than how material apples are real, and to think this kind of important realness points to the super natural. That we evolved to think all this does not matter. That we evolved to think all this does not make it all merely an evolved response, empty, an illusion, or a delusion. Evolution cannot be misused to explain way as “nothing but” the fact that we evolved to think that morality is important, the proper judge, real, and points to the super natural, without “gutting” morality.

-There is a jump from saying morality need not be unreal to saying morality is real. We do not make this jump by relying on anything in science. We cannot be stopped from this jump by anything in science as long as we hold to common ideas about the importance of morality etc. We have to use the established criteria of Western thought to help us decide.

-I judge that morality is real even if evolved. If algebra is real then morality is real. If scientific method is real then morality is real. If freedom is real then morality is real.

-There is a jump from saying morality is important and real to saying morality implies the super natural. This idea too is part of the common stance. We cannot be stopped from this jump by anything in science. We have to make this jump using the established criteria of Western thought.

-I judge that morality points to the super natural even if morality evolved.

-It is a mistake to go much further than this. It would be a mistake if theists used this result to argue for God's glorious plan to make us inevitably see morality and lead us to him.

-Without going too far, it is still fun to guess. I think God set up evolution so all this would happen. God set up the world so we would evolve morality, would evolve ideas that point to the super natural, and we

would think about the super natural, including thinking about God. God did not set it up so we inevitably come to the one truth about the one God. He set it up so we could think about many things, use our imagination, use judgment, and come up with some pretty good ideas. If God did this, then we owe it to him to use our minds well including using both our reasoning and imaginations well.

-You don't have to follow me in believing God set up the world this way. You have to decide about the realness of morality and the super natural, including God.

Confusion because Morality Varies and Morality can be Studied.

-There is a difference between the scientific study of morality versus commitment to morality. There is a difference between looking at morality from the outside versus commitment to morality from the inside. Scientists study morality from the outside: who thinks what, differences between groups, bias in use of the Golden Rule, etc. Commitment to morality is not needed in science. You need not be moral to study morality any more than you have to be an insect to study insects or a woman to study women. Scientists who study morality need no opinion about moral issues such as the death penalty but people committed to morality do need opinions. Scientists who study morality do not have to decide if morality is real but people who commit to morality need to see that their stance implies morality is real. Scientists who study morality need no opinion about the super natural but people committed to morality must form opinions about the super natural. The fact that some moral thinking varies by group does not mean morality is objective or merely conventional, true or false, real or made up, important or unimportant, super natural or merely natural. It does not mean that morality is profound and so true or that morality is silly and so false. People differ on abortion, and differences follow religion, gender, ethnicity, age, and class. That does not mean all abortion is simply bad or simply good, or morality is irrelevant and ultimately empty. We have to decide for ourselves. (I do not say the beliefs of a scientist may not direct work and cannot improve work but I do say belief in morality is not essential to study morality and need not get in the way either.)

-It is easy to think that, because we can study morality from the outside, and morality follows patterns of social life, morality is entirely a matter of convention, a matter of subjective belief, or morality is entirely a response based on evolved capacities; so morality is not real in the same way that rabbits and logic are real. This conclusion might be true of belief in ghosts but it is not true of morality. We should not make this mistake. If you commit to morality, you commit to something more than mere convention, subjective belief, or a response based on evolved capacities.

-Morality can be studied scientifically but commitment to morality, morality itself, is not part of science. Even so, the fact that morality is not needed in science does not mean there is no real morality. Morality is not an illusion. Morality is real and it affects how we act. Moral atheists think, and nearly all of us think, morality is important, morality is real, and we still should act morally anyway even if science does not say morality is real in the same way science says an electron is real. We are committed to morality. We have to decide if commitment to morality implies morality is real and implies the super natural. I think it must.

-Morality evolved in people. We did not get morality whole, all at once, and perfect. Whenever morality evolves, it must evolve among other forces such as bias towards family, friends, and allies, and against rivals. To be fully formed, morality must evolve in a context of society and culture. Morality cannot evolve as a self-contained perfect mechanism. If it came that way, it would not be evolved, and we would know

something was amiss in our physical world. The basic principles of the Golden Rule and “applies equally” would appear wherever morality evolved but how they are used would vary from situation to situation and from society to society. We should expect different styles of morality and biases in how morality applies. The fact that styles and bias occur is not evidence that morality is merely evolved or merely conventional but evidence for how real biological organisms must get morality in a real physical world. The fact that humans come so close to the pure morality of the Golden Rule and selfless love is more of a wonder than the fact that we don’t reach morality perfectly. These two facts are a cause for much wonder and joy: (1) We can see the logic of morality fairly clearly, and (2) we can act mostly morally but don’t have to act like prudes and we can act happily in other ways mixed with morality. Sometimes evolution really does do a good job and really does bring us to something real, good, and not material.

Confusion about the Unthinking Adoption of Morality and about Conventional Morality.

-Most people do not think through morality and most people merely follow the conventional morality of the group that they got socialized into recently. I do not talk about the relation of conventional morality to the moral logic of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. Conventional moralities can become outdated, and look silly. People cling to their morality for selfish reasons. But basic principles cannot become outdated and silly. People who criticize conventional morality think they debunk all morality but they don’t. Often critics of morality are quite moral themselves; they simply want a better morality than what prevails. They want people to think. It helps to return to basic principles. If you fault conventional or contrived morality, make sure you are moral. Think what principles your morality rests on. Think about the implications of any morality and of your particular morality.

-The issues of (1) morality is important, (2) “morality is real” and (3) “morality implies the super natural” are not merely issues of social convention or language. They are real issues that we have to decide.

-If we commit to morality, what principles guide us? What specifically is right and wrong? How do we get past convention to something deeper?

The Confusing Stance of Moral Atheists.

-(1) Moral atheists use these ideas in confusing ways and often self-serving ways: physical laws underlie everything including evolution, the capacities for morality and religion evolved, all things that can be explained by physical laws are not real, all that can be explained by physical laws can be explained away as “nothing but”, all capacities and ideas that evolved are merely evolved, all things that evolved can be explained away as “nothing but”, the distinction between scientific study of morality versus commitment to morality, and conventional morality. Other groups abuse these ideas too but I focus on moral atheists.

(A) When moral atheists stress their own moral quality, they act like committed standard moralists who have made up their minds on particular moral issues and who have unique moral authority. They seem to take the standard stance that morality is important, a judge, and quite real, and points to something real other than what is merely physically real, the super natural.

(B) When moral atheists attack religion, they act like scientists with a secret agenda who use data mostly as a way to treat both belief and the morality of believers like the mere fall of a pebble or mere belief in

ghosts. Morality is not real and is not as important as physics, evolutionary theory, or scientific method. Moral atheists explain away religious belief as mere false conventional superstition built on a mere shaky evolved base built on mere matter and energy. Moral atheists dismiss the morality of believers as merely another layer of mere convention-and-evolved reflex stacked on top of mere contrived evolved belief in unreal spirits. Morality only seems important due to convention.

When considering the morality of believers, moral atheists attack morality. When it comes to their own morality, moral atheists defend morality. When convenient, moral atheists stress morality and stress their particular morality. When convenient, moral atheists undermine all morality as contrived, built on evolved responses, and especially they attack the particular morality of believers. Moral atheists use physics and biology in the attack. Moral atheists take credit for their commitment to morality and their moral judgment but deny credit to believers. Moral atheists discredit the morality of believers as a way to bolster their own moral stance and their stance against belief.

(C) This approach is typical of groups that say “our morality and way of life is great but their morality and way of life is perverse even if it resembles ours in some details”. Fundamentalists use this tactic. This ability to twist ideas has a firm basis in evolved human nature.

(D) The facts that (a) this approach is typical, (b) this approach is often used nefariously, and (c) the ability to use it evolved, do not necessarily (d) make this approach wrong! We have to consider cases. Remember that origin is not a good reason. In this case with morality and religion, the attitude of “have your cake and eat it too” is not allowable. You should be able to see why.

-(2) If moral atheists want to be taken seriously as moral people, to be taken seriously by normal people who are not yet atheists, then moral atheists have to present themselves as normally moral, that is, they need to make clear that they take the standard stance that morality is important, real, and points to the super natural. At the very least, they have to say that morality is important in a way that little else in life is important. At second least, they have to say that the importance of morality makes it real in a way similar to scientific method and physical laws. Then they have to be honest about the implications for the super natural. When they do all this, moral atheists open the door to God. To gain moral credibility, moral atheists cannot be typical atheists.

-(3) To deny the super natural, moral atheists say morality is not real and is merely an evolved reflex. In that case, they lose credibility with normal people, the people they wish to convert. They also undermine their own morality and undermine arguments that anybody should follow their morality or any morality. When moral atheists say morality is merely evolved or merely convention, we may stop listening to them about right and wrong. If a police officer is not near, we may hit them on the head and take their money. If moral atheists say morality is important but moral atheists deny that morality is real or points to the super natural, they have to explain. They still lose credibility. To be atheists, moral atheists cannot be moral in the standard way and so cannot be moral atheists. They have to be amoral atheists, and so not credible to most people.

-(4) Moral atheists might say: “We act morally like everybody else. We are not sure why we act morally and what our actions imply. Maybe we are moral robots programmed by evolution just like religious believers and everybody else. But you can rely on us to act morally. So you don’t have to be afraid of us.

So you should take what we say seriously, including that God is not needed. So God is not real.” I think this is what moral atheists effectively do say but don’t come right out with. If so, this message might be some comfort to people who fear atheists but it is not an argument against belief in God. To be charitable to moral atheists, David Hume said much the same when amazed by his own moral life in the face of his arguments questioning morality and religion. Because I hold David Hume in high regard, moral atheists may take my remark as a compliment.

-(5) Moral atheists cannot both (1) have the cake of real morality with full moral credibility, and (2) eat the cake of morality-as-merely-evolved-reflex, as explained away “nothing but”. They cannot say: the morals of other people are merely convention because those people are religious, so that other people are mere religious dupes, while the morals of moral atheists are always better. They cannot be morally credible to most people and still deny credibility to religion. They could be morally credible to a small group of like-minded people in ways that I do not write about here and that are not important.

-(6) You can be as reductionist as you wish and be perfectly consistent. You can reduce the world to matter and energy. You can reduce all structure and all action by all organisms to the residue of natural selection. But you cannot take a fully reductionist stance and be a normally moral person too. So you cannot take a fully reductionist stance and be a moral atheist too.

-(7) All intellectual abilities evolved. The ability for atheism evolved. If atheism requires added intellectual effort, if only to stifle religious passion, then that ability for added intellect evolved. If “merely evolved” can automatically discredit religion then it can also discredit any intellectual ability and so discredit atheism, including any added intellectual power claimed by atheists. We need to consider how some ideas are valid while other ideas are invalid. Crediting and discrediting does not depend on evolved or not evolved. “Evolved” might play a role in discussion if is used wisely. Western thinkers have developed criteria for assessing ideas and objects, and we should rely on those criteria. By those criteria, neither believers nor atheists can unilaterally simply prevail.

(A) Is there is a difference between morality, religion, and atheism, one that allows “merely evolved” to discredit religion and the morality of believers but not to discredit atheism and the morality of atheists? What are the criteria for valid ideas about the world, morality, realness, and the super natural? If moral atheists try this task, likely they will find that morality is fairly valid and a is good candidate for real. So, moral atheists have to face commitment to morality and its implications. If atheists find criteria that make moral atheism more valid than bad religion, likely they will find the same criteria make good responsible religion as valid as moral atheism. If atheists discredit to morality so as to show their mental superiority and better grasp of criteria, then likely they have to discredit moral atheism too. If atheists discredit ideas about God, they might undermine other intellectual effort including their claim to superiority. Use morality to get a feel for what argument about real, super natural, and God should be like.

(B) Here is where battles between theists and atheists go awry. Each camp pushes criteria based on its ideas of science so as to make inevitable that we need God to explain the world or we do not need God. Theists assert a version of the “argument from design” (complexity of the world). Atheists incorrectly offer as proof that God does not exist the fact that physical laws can explain almost everything. I think the role of physical laws can be in the mix for discussion but it is not key. What matters is what is important and real. I used morality to get at that. If you accept morality as important, accept commitment to morality, so

think morality is real, but still deny God is real, then it is not likely the wonders of the world will convince you and it is likely you will use science to back up your denial. If you think God is real, then you will see each pebble and each good act as evidence. Both sides use science to support convictions held for other reasons. Neither side actually gets its convictions from science. I get to the best "other reasons". With that issue of other reasons clear, then I can use science properly, not as a mere tool. See Part Five.

-(8) Moral atheists need to be clear on the importance and realness of morality, especially to themselves. If they think morality is important, or is not important, they need to say so clearly and say how. The same is true of realness. If moral atheists think morality is important but not real, and so morality does not point to the super natural, they need to say how morality is important but not real. They might have to accept that some non-material things are real enough. If they think morality is important and real but does not point to the super natural, they have to explain. Atheists need to explain why we should follow morality if their view of morality is true. To clarify issues and their thinking, moral atheists might focus on comparing morality to scientific method. They are both similar and different in ways that bear on this discussion but that I can't go into here.

Implications.

-The evolved capacity for morality is NOT a case where the idea is empty and the object is not real. It is not a case where the idea can be explained away as nothing but evolved and-or conventional. Morality is a case where the idea has merit and the object is real even though the ability for the idea evolved and even though morality differs between groups. (Think of the objects of morality as acts, judgments, rules, and taking people as persons). Morality is evolved but not merely evolved. Morality is important although its basis evolved. Morality is real although its basis evolved. Morality points to the super natural although its basis evolved.

-Moral atheists must agree with the above if they wish to be moral in the normal way that they present themselves. They cannot assert that morality is important, the appropriate judge of most activities, or real but only merely evolved.

-If your commitment to morality is legitimate then so is the honest commitment of other people, with all that a commitment to morality entails. You and others will not agree on all points of morality but, if you hold a moral stance, you cannot discredit the right of others to hold a moral stance. If the commitment of other people is legitimate, so is their speculation on the links of morality to the super natural and God. If their morality is all merely contrived convention built on evolved responses then so is yours.

-Evolution sometimes leads us to have abstract ideas that are still real and-or have real things as their objects even if the things are not real in the same way carrots are real. Evolution led us to do math, logic, science, and love. I believe evolution led us to act morally and to have accurate ideas of morality and moral logic. This is a good thing, and usually enjoyable.

-My conclusion does not imply that: the Golden Rule is all there is to morality, everybody is fully moral even if they don't show it yet, everybody agrees on all points of morality, or that the role of evolution in bringing us to morality is conclusive evidence of God. There is more to morality that I have not written

about here, but here is not the place to go into it. Nothing that I left out alters any results. The argument here allows us to guess about God but does not prove God.

Similar Arguments Apply Directly to Belief in God.

-As with morality, belief in God is a real fact about human life that scientists can study but God might be real or might not. A scientist need not believe in God or disbelieve in God to study belief in God.

-As with morality, just because God is not needed in science does not necessarily make the idea of God empty, false, useless, stupid, and harmful. The fact that God is not needed in science does not imply that believers must be basically irrational. The fact that a scientist can study belief in God without believing in God and without rejecting God has no bearing on whether God is real or not. God might be real even if we don't see God clearly. The sun is real although it seems to us that the Sun goes around us. The idea of God can be useful like the idea of a field in physics. We can accept physics and still believe in a mind behind it all. Belief in God helps us see and belief can be done well. Belief in God can go with science. Science does not automatically discredit morality or God.

-Just because we can explain belief in God as resting on evolved abilities does not mean God is not real or the idea of God is empty. We can accept evolution and still believe in a God behind it all. Although the capacity to believe in God evolved, the idea of God need not be merely evolved, mere illusion. God need not be mere illusion. We can accept evolution and still believe God set up the world so sentient-moral-aesthetic life would evolve. Evolution does not automatically discredit God.

-When asserting that morality is not merely evolved and that morality is important even if evolved, we also imply the super natural. Even when we accept the evolution of the capacity for morality, a commitment to morality points to the super natural.

-We can argue the same about the capacity to believe in God. The capacity evolved but the idea of God is not merely evolved, it is important, and it arises legitimately when we accept that morality implies the super natural. Moral people can believe in God without being stupid, foolish, or insane. They still cannot prove that God exists, and they don't have to.

-A moral atheist tacitly asserts that the capacity for morality evolved but morality is not merely evolved, and morality is important. A theist argues the same for God. It is possible, but hard, to argue for one but not the other. To assert (a) morality is important and evolved but morality is more than merely evolved and (b) the idea of God is only merely evolved and CANNOT have a real object, is close to asserting a contradiction. It is even harder to assert one without the other when we see that morality points to the super natural and opens the door for God. To say this without contradiction requires hard careful thought of the kind that I have not seen among moral atheists or among theists.

-Once we accept that belief in God is sane, and usually tied to morality, then we can argue whether God is real and in what ways God is real. Then we can apply the criteria and arguments that have grown up over the last 2400 years. I do not do this here. I like thinking about the topic but not disputing it because people are not adept in how they think of "real", "nothing but", "not nothing but", and "good".

-There is a gap between saying the idea of God need not be stupid versus saying God is real. Even if we allow that morality points to the super natural, there is still a gap between allowing the idea of God versus actually believing God is real. I accept the gap and step over it.

-Based on all that I know including the fact that the idea of God evolved, I judge that God is real. The status of morality as important, real, and pointing to the super natural, supports my belief.

-I said above that evolution led us to act morally and to see morality. It is easy to say the same about God, and to think God planned all this, but I am cautious. In fact, I do think that, but I don't want to argue it much. There is no obvious "logic of God" as there is "logic of morality". Evolution led us to be able to guess about God, even to guess adeptly, but it did not lead us to the same clearness about God as we can have with morality. I am glad this result is thus. Theists should not "go bonkers" and abuse evolution to say it led us to God, and so is solid proof of God. God wants more spirit and imagination out of you than that. Atheists should be a tolerant of theists who read too much into evolution. They should sternly again remind those theists that evolution gave us the basis for racism, religious war, ideas of unicorns, bad politics, and atheism.

Further Comments.

-The fact that God and morality often go together does NOT mean that God is needed to enforce morality through rewards such as heaven or punishments such as hell. See Chapter One and Part Five. People do not need God to be moral. Religious people are not usually more moral on average than non-religious people or atheists. Atheists are not more moral than average. Religion does not necessarily cloud minds and atheism does not necessarily clear them – and vice versa. I do not discuss relations of morality and God other than to say morality leads to the super natural and allows belief in God. See Part Five.

-I have no idea, and it is not relevant here: if God made morality, morality stands on its own, or morality made God. I do not know if God must conform to morality. I am pretty sure he (she) does.

-If you wish to argue these questions, then you should learn how people in general, and Indo-Europeans in particular, use and misuse the ideas of "real", "moral", and "good".

-Regardless of what you decide about morality, the super natural, and God, you should accept that belief in gods (God) has a firm base in our evolved nature, like sex, booze, and bad politics. People want to believe in gods (God) and they will believe in gods (God) regardless of arguments. To browbeat people not to believe in God is to force us against a big part of our evolved nature. That hurts us. People won't stop believing and-or searching. Asking them to stop believing is like American Prohibition or campaigns against sex outside of marriage and not in "missionary position". Forcing them to (try to be) hyper-rational in an anti-religious way leads them to be more irrational in general. Whether you believe in God or do not, it is better to guide most people to good belief. Good belief cannot include merely civic ceremonies and patriotic slogans but has to include ideas about morality, the super natural, and God. Paradoxically to atheists, good belief actually leads people to be more rational overall. Once people are calm about the super natural and religion, then you can review cases for and against particular ideas from religion, for and against God.

-Maybe the simple person who tries to act well and help people, and believes in God, has got it right even though he-she acts on a strong genetic base while you use your keen evolved intellect to overwhelm the evolutionary drive to religion. Sometimes other people really are correct even when they are not as smart as you are. I am not giving you platitudes; I am giving you the results of my empirical observation.

-I am lucky because I can commit to morality, accept the super natural, and guess about God without going crazy. I can accept easily that evolution led us to: think well sometimes, conform to morality most of the time (act well), commit to morality, see moral logic, think about realness, think about the super natural, think about God, accept God, and make adept guesses about God. I am lucky because I think good religion, good morality, good thinking, imagination, and variety can come together.

(6) Ideals, Morality, Unusual People, and Unusual Situations.

See chapters One, Two, and Three. The label (6) continues from the Synopsis of Part One.

Morality is an ideal. We have abilities to see ideals and work with ideals. Ideals and our abilities for them can be rooted in our genes, and usually are. This does not mean genes specify abilities for any particular ideal such as calculus or ballroom dancing. Genes do specify our ability for morality. What we learn for other ideals can apply to morality even though we have genes specifically for moral ability.

Even as an ideal, morality can mix with practicality and usually does. Usually morality and success help each other – but not always. How well we do, how closely we approach the ideal, depends on us and on situations, in particular on human-made institutions. No human is perfect; none of our institutions are perfect; we should not expect that; and God does not expect that.

We have to reject two mirrored mistakes: (1) The first mistake is a version of explaining away as nothing but. Nothing rooted in our genes can be real in itself. Ideals can't be real ideals. They are only apparent, and are only a means to practical ends. Ideals are only convenient illusions. The fact that we think some ideas are ideals is part of self-delusion that allows us to think in useful ways, manipulate ourselves, and manipulate others in the service of our success. (2) Many ideals take us out of the normal physical world entirely to something else, something more exact, truer, and better. We can transcend our merely physical nature, and we do so through ideals. This something else we rightly can call the super natural or the world of ideal forms.

We have to reject the mistakes as they apply to morality: (3) Morality is explained away as with any ideal, as nothing but evolved behavior, really an indirect means to practical success, so necessarily morality is not a true ideal, is not real as we wish ideals were real, and morality does not point to the super natural. (4) Morality is so clearly super natural that it proves the super natural and God, and morality shows that humans totally transcend our merely physical evolved base even though morality originally came from that base. Any institution or society based in God-given morality must succeed and must succeed better than any society based merely in human ideas.

Here we need a dose of simple empirical observed reality. In a separate work, I would justify what I say but here I merely state it. We do have ideals. Our ideals are based on genetic abilities. We can have ideals even though we are genetically based organisms. We can have ideals even though they came out

of practicality and still intertwine with practicality. As of 2016, nobody knows for sure how this happens but it does happen. How it happens might not be the same for all ideals. We have ideals even though we don't live up to them. We have ideals even when some of us fall far short. I am not sure what it means to say our ideals transcend physical reality but I think it does not happen as some philosophers and religious writers say. It is unlikely that our ideals describe any separate distinct better, cleaner, realer world. The fact that some people almost live up to ideals does not mean ideals simply transcend this world or that another better world is real or realer. Even so, ideals can point to the super natural. That still does not mean they point to an ethereal alternative world. I have no definite idea of relations between ideals, the super natural, and any ethereal alternative world.

We have ideals of: peacetime; ethnic relations; stories; traffic patterns; a spaceflight to Mars; worship of God; enlightenment; meditation; teacher; student; family love; spousal love; romantic love; and a ballet. We might be wrong, and disagree, but we can still form ideals, and the ideals might even correspond to some best that could actually occur but almost never does.

Some ideals come directly from our hunter-gatherer past, but not all. We made up some new ideals to respond to new situations. Here are some ideals that certainly have roots in our evolved history, but did not play much of a role in our hunter-gatherer past, yet do play a role in other life: ideal Justice, ideal golf game, ideal multi-course meal, ideal rock song, the great American novel, ideal symphony, ideal baseball game, grand theory of everything in physics, most fields in mathematics, honor, ideal business firm, and ideal academic department.

Because we have the ability to see ideals and deal with them, for here think of ideals in terms of abilities. Some of our modern ideals-abilities seem so far removed from hunter-gatherer life that we don't see how they could have any basis in any genes selected for in that life. It makes sense that hunter-gatherers need to count, add, subtract, and maybe even multiply. But how could that modest ability possibly serve as the basis for calculus and hyperbolic geometry? Hunter-gatherers could hum tunes and, I think, had musical instruments even hundreds of thousands of years ago. But how could that be the basis for Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Babbitt? Hunter-gatherers had to run after rabbits and step carefully among the weeds for berries. How is that activity the basis for ballet or even martial arts? Hunter-gatherers debated fairness but they had nothing like the overly-elaborate American legal system with rules of evidence and testimony. Without further argument, I assert it is all so. Whatever abilities that we evolved as hunter-gatherers, they serve as the basis for the abilities and ideals that we have now, however much elaborated on the basis of our original abilities. Keep in mind that most of our skill, and much of how we understand ideals, was learned, and was built up in increments over a long time by unusual people. All that regular people had to understand was what the smart people said; and we can do that. God did not reach down to give us the ability for calculus, ballet, or the blues. The same is true of morality.

What of unusual people such as the musicians mentioned above, and including mathematicians such as Newton and Gauss, or physicists such as Newton, Einstein, and Dirac? How could their abilities, insights, and the ideal worlds of beautiful simplicity that they invoke possibly have roots in genes that evolved so people could chase rabbits, pick berries, and connive for spouses? Again, without argument, I assert it is all so. All the abilities, ideals, and hinted-at ideal worlds that we see now are based on genes evolved by about a hundred thousand years ago for lives different than now. To paraphrase what Newton famously said, even great minds see further only by standing on the shoulders of giants.

What of people who are inept at math, music, justice, dance, etc? There are so many mediocre people and there are even too many people who are downright inept. One night at a karaoke bar will convince any doubter that many people have no idea what a song is all about. Doesn't that prove that genes from long ago are barely enough for average performance, and could not be enough for ideals and good performance? Not at all. I repeat that whatever abilities evolved over one hundred thousand years ago were enough. Almost everybody can hum along with a tune well enough so that other people recognize it even if few people hum along exactly and even fewer can write a good song.

Which ideals are real in the way that ideals can be real? Which point to the super natural? Those issues are something that we have to work out ideal-by-ideal. Some of the ideals are real and do point to the super natural, including morality; and that is enough for here. Most of them don't.

The two opposite mistakes, noted above, about morality, show up even in (A) everyday life with its mix of ideal and practical; but show up more clearly: (B) when people are unusually good; (C) unusually bad; and (D) persistent living situations are unusually good, better than we might expect among our hunter-gatherer ancestors. The same issues can show up in (E) persistently bad situations, but I don't go into that option here.

(A) Even when striving to be moral, perhaps especially then, we rarely get beyond our evolved nature, we rarely act against the better interests of our selves, family, friends, and group. Morality usually serves practicality. This limit does not mean we do not see an ideal, there is no ideal, the ideal is not real in the way that ideals can be real, and the ideal does not point to the super natural. This limit does not explain away morality as nothing but. It also does not prove morality somehow has found a way beyond physical limits to a spiritual realm or morality has found a way to bend mere physical reality to serve greater spiritual needs. It only means we have evolved to see an ideal, even if we cannot live up to it fully, and that this ideal points to the super natural.

(B) Sometimes people do approach the ideal and do act against their own apparent better interests as with good priests and monks (not Cardinal Richelieu). Biologists can offer plausible explanations based on traits that would have been useful while we were hunter-gatherers, especially to give benefit to our kin, but can be distorted now, as when humans teach geese to guard a human house. In fact, in real life, the kin of priests often do well, and, so, by evolutionary standards, the priests indirectly do well too. I give no details. I accept the biological explanations for most cases.

Sometimes people do approach a moral ideal and there is no plausible biological account, as with saints such as Mother Teresa. Biologists see such people as rare "mistakes" that would have been ended by natural selection in our past. Whether these people somehow transcend our genetic base cannot be determined and is not a relevant issue even if fun to guess about. Most likely, they result from a bizarre accumulation of genes coupled with odd childhoods. Mostly I agree with this biological view. Still, though these people might have been mistakes in our past, they can also serve as inspiration now if we don't expect to do as well and don't fear God will punish us for not doing as well. Even mistakes can point out an ideal and can help normal people to see how to blend ideal with practical.

Biological rejoinders do not undermine my account, that morality is an ideal, is real in the way that ideals are real, and points to the super natural. On the other hand, an occasional Mother Teresa also does not mean we overcame biology and so we validate the spiritual. All that an occasional Mother Teresa does is to offer some support that morality is an ideal that points to the super natural.

(C) Sometimes people act quite badly, and our selfish nature is revealed. People ignore morality or act with deliberate immorality such as the infamous tyrants of fascism, communism, and even capitalism – Hitler, Stalin, and take your pick of a robber baron. Again, this fact does not undermine that morality is an ideal, has genetic roots, and yet still points to the super natural. Sometimes even a good natured dog bites its child, some dogs are nasty by nature, and almost any dog can be taught to be nasty. Usually, though, self-interest leads the dog and child to get along so morality and self-interest coincide. Likewise, the presence of some bad people does not confirm metaphysical evil and so in a roundabout way confirm the super natural. The presence of some bad people does not mean that practicality-and-genes have given us only illusions of ideals. Both strong bad and good are extensions of an evolved human nature. The bad extensions can tell us what not to do and can tell us what mixes of self-interest and morality seem to work out in the short run but don't work out well in the long run.

(D) Sometimes people act consistently well in some particular situations, beyond what we might expect in most situations in our hunter gatherer past or in most situations now. People in general can act well in Christian churches, Buddhist villages, and real-enough American middle class suburbs. Good institutions can raise us closer to the moral ideal, above what we might expect, and keep us at a higher level. So we find it hard to understand how the basis for sustained human behavior, that supports such situations, could have evolved in our hunter-gatherer past, where such good situations could not be built. This problem can seem more urgent than the case of unusual adept individuals, or good individuals, because it changes the behavior of a lot of us "average Joes" and so cannot be attributed to the accidental accumulation of genes in "outlier" individuals. Even so, this outcome does not prove that morality is super natural and so we can transcend our biological roots. People can do better than average for a long time under good institutions, and that is where most of the credit should lie. Even when people do better in these special conditions, people do not do all that much better. People don't all become full-on saints. Discord mars even the best Quaker, Mennonite, and Hutterite communities, and Roman Catholic monasteries. This outcome also does not prove we merely have evolved selfishness, selfishness that can be used almost any way, and so we can never see beyond narrow selfishness. We can see these nice situations as extensions of human nature but not only as modified selfishness. A group of dogs can be taught to live happily with a human family and a house full of cats but that does not prove morality is real and morality can uplift even dogs and cats to transcend their genes. It also does not prove that the human owners who taught them to live together did not have harmony in mind besides the narrow self-interest of a quiet peaceful house with watchdogs and rat catchers. As with unusual good individuals, unusual good situations teach us that there is an ideal, we can see the ideal, and what are the conditions that might bring us closer to the good ideal.

The facts that some of us can do calculus, play Bach, build skyscrapers, or survive long glides in flight suits (bird suits) do not mean humans have transcended our biological roots. They also do not mean we are never inspired by our biology to see ideals, strive for ideals, and mix ideals with practicality.

All good and bad behavior, good and bad institutions, and great human achievements, are built on our natural evolved abilities rooted in our biological past; and I am fine with that fact. I don't need actual proven transcendent sustained moral acts, good or bad, to accept that morality is important, real, and points to the super natural.

PART 2: Same Subject but Even More Talky.

The two numbered sections here are phases of the same long argument. Commitment to morality entails accepting some super natural, and accepting some super natural allows people to guess about God and to believe in God. I do not repeat points from above about the outside study of morality versus the inside commitment to morality. I do use those ideas and I do make the same points in other ways. If physicists can believe that fields and non-Euclidean space are objectively real, then, with only a small stretch of the imagination, I may believe in morality and guess about God.

(1) The Implications of Morality for the Super Natural; No Physics or Evolution Yet.

For now, don't think about whether natural science can explain everything, and don't think about the fact that the capacity for any ideas or preferences evolved, such as the capacity for morality, ideas about God, or desires for fatty food and sex. Just think that we have ideas and preferences.

It is not possible to prove either that God exists or does not exist. It is possible to show we do not need God to explain almost everything that happens in the world, and we do not need God to explain human abilities and ideas. We can explain almost everything important through science. That is not the same as proving God does not exist. Even the TV comedy "The Big Bang Theory" knows the difference between where an idea comes from versus the truth and value of the idea. Sheldon the physicist defended the truth and value of James Clerk Maxwell's ideas, as ideas, from the attempt by Amy the neurobiologist to reduce Maxwell's ideas to brain operation (mere events).

If anybody holds anything to be really important, he-she raises that thing to the level of the super natural whether he-she knows so or not. Think about what the term "really" implies in the following cases. If John thinks morality is really important, then John makes morality super natural. If John thinks amorality or immorality is really important, John makes that super natural. If Jane thinks power is really important, Jane makes power super natural. If Joe thinks wealth is what really matters, Joe makes wealth super natural. If Susan thinks family is really important, Susan makes family super natural. If Steve thinks pleasure is really important, then Steve makes pleasure super natural. If Anna thinks success is really central, Anna makes success super natural. If Bob thinks coolness is really cool, Bob makes coolness super natural. If Sally thinks "the Force" is really real, Sally makes the Force super natural. If James thinks a person is not the same as a stone, and that people really matter, then James makes "person" super natural. If Joy believes in love, Joy makes love super natural. If Frank thinks the Church is really important, then Frank makes the Church super natural. If Molly thinks reason is really central, Molly makes reason super natural. If Richard thinks science is really important, then Richard raises science to the level of the super natural. If Richard thinks scientific method is really important and privileged above other ways of thinking, then Richard raises scientific method to the level of the super natural. If Bertie thinks logic and-or math is really important, then Bertie raises logic and-or math to the super natural. If Alfred thinks process is how the world works, then Alfred raises process to the super natural. If Emile

thinks society is really important, Emile raises society to the super natural. If Ray thinks myth explains what the world is all about, Ray raises myth to the super natural. If Vern thinks cultural ideas explain what the world is all about and determine the reality of the world, then Vern raises culture and ideas to the super natural.

It is not correct to say we worship everything that we make super natural but it might help to get the full force of the idea “make super natural” to think that people do worship all the things listed above when they make them important. I have seen people worship wealth, power, fame, and success. I have seen academics worship reputation and success, and covet power to the point of worship.

Nearly all of the things listed above are non-material but some straddle the border such as “person” and “church”. Some we think of as real such as morality and love. Some take on the illusion of realness but we wish not to make them real such as “coolness”, “power”, and “success”. Some we would accept as judges of other activities, such as love; but some we don’t want to be judges, such as power. Imagine more items for this list. It is a good exercise to go through a list to decide which items are material, which abstract, and which straddle the line; which we want to be judge and which we want to be judged; which are important and which not; which we want to be real and which not. Then decide which items point to the super natural.

The ideas that (1) important things imply the super natural, and (2) we should use morality as the way to best review-and-access the super natural, were known in the West 2400 years ago. Modern people forgot. These ideas were maybe the main message of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Christianity leaned on them usefully. David Hume made points about the realness, or not realness, of morality; morality as judge; and how people feel morality. Immanuel Kant made important points about moral logic, morality as judge, and how morality appeals to people.

Interlude: What does it mean to “point” to the super natural or make the super natural “important”? Does accepting the super natural contradict the idea that science can explain almost everything in the world? Probably it does not. These are valid long-standing questions. I cannot go after them here. I don’t have to answer them to go on with what I need. I see no contradiction in the fact that morality – or things that we consider important in this world – point to the super natural. This comparison might help: The super natural plays the same role in religion and morality that the ideas of law, rule of law, order, fairness, and justice play in our legal system. Lesser ideas, such as the rules for evidence, are important in our justice system if they point to defining basic ideas. A particular case should use ideas that in turn point to ideals such as “fairness” and “due process”. Any particular case need not be decided by direct reference to an important ideal. Any particular case can be decided by particular laws that apply to the case; and those in turn point to ideals. That is what we mean by “pointing to”. The interlude is over.

Whether there is a problem between “pointing to the super natural” versus “science explains all” does not matter in the dispute between moral atheists versus theists. Moral atheists believe in morality the same way that everyday people do including theists. Moral atheists make morality important. Moral atheists make morality important in a way that entails morality is real. Moral atheists believe in morality in a way that points to the super natural. If moral atheists deny that morality points to the super natural then they are not moral atheists in the way that nearly everybody knows morality and as they present themselves. If moral atheists wish to believe in morality in a different way than everybody else, a way that makes

morality important and real but does imply the super natural, moral atheists have to explain. If they wish to believe in morality in a different way that makes morality important but not somehow real, they have to explain. If they think morality is important and real for them, yet does not point to the super natural for them, and morality is merely a convention response built on an evolutionary base for everybody else, they have to say so, and have to say how. They have done none of this. So, I take moral atheists to believe in morality in the same way that most people do, a way that makes morality important, real, and points to the super natural. That is all I need here.

For brevity, “making something super natural” can mean “making something point to the super natural”. “Raising something to the super natural” can serve to mean “seeing that something is so important that it points to something super natural”.

A person can raise more than one thing to the super natural, and usually we do. Think of the examples given above.

Making anything point to the super natural does not necessarily imply any details about the super natural. We don't know much about the super natural. People who think morality is important have different ideas about the super natural than people who think power is all. I don't go into this topic here. It is enough to know that we think of important things as somehow more than ordinary things.

If we make anything super natural, potentially we allow other people to make things super natural. At the least, we allow other people the right to make the same thing super natural. If Steve believes in love he cannot deny Mary the right to believe in love. We strongly imply that other people have the right to make things other than what we believe point to super natural. Steve has a hard time denying Jim the right to believe in duty. Opening any door to the super natural opens that door fairly wide.

We cannot allow people to make anything super natural willy-nilly but we cannot deny them entirely and cannot limit them only to what we think is super natural. If we think morality is important, then we have to allow other people to think reason is important. If we think morality is important, we have to allow other people to think power is super naturally important even if they are wrong.

We do not have to agree with them that what they think is important, real, and points to the super natural is important, real, and points to the super natural. We don't have to allow that shopping, football, politics, and power are super naturally important. We can review our lists of the super natural, and the lists of other people, to decide what is really on the list and what is not. We will agree and disagree.

Everybody has to give reasons for why he-she thinks a thing is so important and why he-she thinks other things are not so important. We should be amenable to reasons. We should accept some reasons and we can deny other reasons. I do not go into reasons or into when and why we should be swayed.

Usually when we think something is really important we imply that it is really important not only for us but for people in general. When we think morality matters, it matters not just for me but for everyone. When we think honor matters, it matters not just for me but everyone. When we think power matters, it matters not just for me but everyone.

People who think anything is important should think out the implications of their idea for what the world is all about, how the world works, what people are in that kind of world, and what relations between people should be. People who think anything matters should think out the implications for the super natural, and for the world, people, and the relations of people. People don't usually go to this trouble but still the fact that people do think some things matter implies these issues. Even when people don't bother to think it out, the way that they act on the basis of their beliefs implies things about the super natural. People who believe honor is important act differently than people who believe power is important, and the differences in their behavior imply differences in ideas about the super natural whether they know it or not.

Believing that a thing is important opens the door to the super natural in general and invites speculation about the super natural. We take a stand on the super natural whenever we think something is important even if we don't know that we take a stand. We might as well take the best and most consistent stand that we can. The criteria for saying things about the super natural are not easy. It is hard to come to firm conclusions. That is why most people don't do the work. But because thinking about implications for the super natural is hard does not mean it is impossible, demeaning, or scurrilous. It can be fun. Don't force your conclusions onto other people. Accept that other people can come to reasonable ideas about the super natural that differ from yours.

People naturally wonder if there is one set of right ideas about what is important and about the super natural. They wonder how we can know. These questions are reasonable, and they are the subject of theology and philosophy. I can't go into them here, and it is not important to answer them to go on with the issues here.

In the case of morality, it is almost impossible to think that morality matters, and not to think it matters for everybody, and not to think it matters strongly. When morality matters, it matters for everybody. We don't agree on all points of morality: people differ about when to lie versus to tell all the absolute truth. But the general idea of morality matters to everybody, and people do agree on all major points. People agree in principle on telling the truth but vary in particular applications.

So, when people think morality matters, then they think it matters for everyone, and they imply it is super natural even if they don't know they imply that.

The best way to get this idea across is face-to-face by challenging a deeply held moral view so a person feels how much the view really means to him-her and how he-she appreciates at a level that takes him-her above this normal world. People hold views that they think are not mere convention or merely bases on evolved abilities. When we see on the news that bad extremists raided a school, killed the teachers, took the women and girls captive, forced them to convert, and sold them in the market, are we really only upset as when our yogurt spoils? If a person beats your dog, are you really upset only about the hassle for us and the harm to our property?

People should think out the implications of their belief in morality and think about the implications that morality matters to everybody. Why is morality so important? Why is it important for everybody? What does that say about the world? What does that say about any possible world? What does it mean that only people can be moral agents? What are people?

If some people think morality matters, and matters for everybody, and so they have to think about the super natural implications of their stance, then other people who also believe in morality can think about the super natural implications of their stance and can come to their conclusions. People can come to conclusions that are reasonable, rational, and fairly forceful. People who think morality matters should be open to other people's ideas about why morality matters and what that fact implies for the world, people, and the super natural.

People who are not theologians, philosophers, or moral atheists can get confused when trying to take the step from knowing that morality matters to explaining its ties to the super natural. "Lay" people can get confused trying to give a good account of morality and the super natural. I certainly get confused. So we excuse "lay" people if they don't do this job strictly or if they accept the teachings of a church.

We cannot allow moral atheists the same excuse. Here, they are like theologians and philosophers. As moral atheists, by definition, they stress the importance of morality and they combine it with an organized strong stance about the world. So they have to give us a pretty good account of the super natural (if any), and of ties between morality and the super natural (if any), and have to argue against the accounts of other people such as theists.

Moral atheists rarely do this. They would rather avoid the super natural. If they allow the super natural, they don't give a systematic account. They don't like to give a systematic account of the super natural because it is easy to slide over into ideas about God. Yet any account of the morality in "moral atheism" inevitably requires some account of the super natural.

Instead, moral atheists point out that science, especially evolution, can explain a lot, including the evolved basis for our ideas about morality and god. They invoke this knowledge to explain away any connections of morality with the super natural and explain away everything about God. They do not understand that this kind of knowledge cannot explain away morality if we are committed to morality and cannot explain away God if we are committed to God. They try to explain away morality to defeat theists without seeing they defeat themselves as well. They use science and evolution selectively against others but not against themselves.

If atheists think morality is important and so we have to consider the super natural, they have to allow that theists can think morality matters and theists can bring in their ideas of the super natural too. That is only fair. As people who also believe morality matters and so believe in the super natural, theists can bring in God. There is nothing wrong with bringing in God as long as theists are not crazy. If the idea of God can make sense of the super natural status of morality as well as atheism can make sense of that status of morality, then atheists have to be patient with theists. The same is true of theists. They have to listen to atheists who make super natural sense of morality. In contrast, theists are not obliged to listen much if moral atheists deny any super natural implications for morality in general and their morality specifically but still insist that morality is really important.

It is possible to offer a good case that morality is important, and to give an account of super natural ties to morality, without bringing in God. I don't explain how. I do not find the case convincing. In other material apart from this book, I will look at in this approach.

As far as I know, the first important recent Western thinker to try this task was Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza in the late 1600s. Even in his ideas there is a single God but not a personal God. Like Dharma systems (see below), the world, including all the apparently diverse things apparently in it, is really one thing and is really quite moral. The details don't matter here. Immanuel Kant from the late 1700s and early 1800s strongly supports morality, makes morality point to the super natural, and can be read so we don't need God. But God can be found in Kant's system. I don't discuss Kant's own beliefs. Romantics combined Kant with Christianity to imagine "the Spirit". In the 1800s, thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, used Kant to argue that morality and God were merely human constructs; ideas of God and morality are best explained by culture, history, economics, and society alone; and therefore God, and maybe morality, are not really real. Then thinkers such as Karl Marx argued: not only is God unreal and morality relative; but ideas of God and morality have to be empty; and ideas of God and morality are often harmful. Artur (Arthur) Schopenhauer, using Kant and Dharma-like ideas, offered something like morality-that-points-to-the-super-natural-without-God. Schopenhauer was never influential and is not likely to affect modern thinking and moral atheists due to his pessimism and his views of women.

Dharma systems, as in Buddhism and Hinduism, can make morality point to the super natural without God-as-I-(Mike)-think-of-God. In those systems, the universe, being in itself, is intrinsically moral. Nature is intrinsically moral. Morality is among the laws of nature, like physics. That is why "what goes round come round" is always true if we wait long enough. Natural and super natural are one. The Dharma is all-of-the-natural-and-super-natural. Dharma systems have gods but gods do not make morality. Morality is part of the Dharma, and the Dharma makes gods. The gods are subject to the Dharma and its morality. The Dharma is not personal. Dharma systems almost always come with the paired idea of karma, which I do not describe. Karma supports Dharma-based morality with rewards and punishments. I said morality does not need rewards and punishments for support (to evolve, morality did need rewards and punishments – but that is a separate issue). That is another reason why I do not like Dharma-karma systems. Even when wise people in Dharma systems see a distinction between morality versus rewards-and-punishments, still the idea of karma-punishment-reward is intrinsic to the Dharma system, and so not desirable.

In China, the idea of Heaven might be morality-without-God but the Chinese think of Heaven much as Westerners think of God. So I see Heaven in Chinese thought as morality-with-God. I do not discuss Taoism in this regard here.

I doubt moral atheists have studied much of this material deeply; it does not appear in their work much or well. So these alternatives are not relevant here and I don't write of them anymore.

I don't know of any moral atheist who wants to say that morality is important and so accept that morality implies the super natural. So I don't know of any moral atheist who gives a good account of the relation of morality to the super natural. So I don't know of any moral atheist who accounts for the importance of morality so as to include the super natural yet gracefully exclude God. Moral atheists simply say they are moral and do not go into implications, including implications for the super natural. If they allow the super natural, they avoid God. This stance allows moral atheists to attack the belief and sometimes the morality of believers but not undermine their own morality. I do not find this evasion at all convincing. Go directly to their writings.

Although logically possible, I reject that morality entails the super natural but we can avoid God entirely. I don't reject this stance because I need God to explain morality or to fortify morality with hope of heaven and fear of hell. I reject the stance because it stifles my imagination and because God helps make sense of a big package that includes morality and the grandeur of it all. God is in a set of ideas that goes with morality. God is in a set of ideas that gives scope for my imagination. I bring in God because I find it hard to think of morality, the super natural, and the grandeur of the world without also thinking of God. I have the right to bring in God when I accept ties between morality and the super natural and because I am sane when I use my imagination. Moral atheists have to allow other people to guess about morality and the super natural which means they have to allow other people to guess about God.

If moral atheists could prove that God did not exist, then they could say that people may not speculate about God regardless of the status of morality and the super natural – but they cannot prove that God does not exist. Moral atheists can argue that we don't need God to explain anything but that argument is not the same as proving God does not exist. Even a strong argument that we can explain everything without God is not an argument for denying people the right to speculate about God.

I like imagination in general and I like it even about the super natural and God. I bring in God along with my belief in the importance of morality and with my joy in guessing about the super natural. I fear any giant systems that control behavior and that allow some people to control the behavior of other people. I know about bad ideas and bad religion. I know how to imagine without wandering off into those other traps. I resent people who limit my imagination.

(2) Now We Get Physics and Evolution.

Now we can think about these facts: (1) Almost everything that can be explained can be explained in terms of physical laws, and can be explained in terms of biology and evolution that are based on physical laws. (2) All this evolved: our capacity for ideas, our predilection for some particular ideas such as the ideas of gods and the super natural, our ability to make some ideas feel important, and our ability to make some important ideas point to the super natural.

Briefly, the above facts are not key. We can overlook them if we wish. Even if we take them into account, we come to the same conclusions as above. We have to assess ideas on merits as best we can. We have to accept that we make morality important, real, and make it point to the super natural. From there, theists have a right to think about God and believe in God. Although the above facts are not key, still they are misused and misuse does lead people astray. This section tries to correct a few errors.

Assume it is possible to explain whatever happens in the world through the use of physical laws without alluding to the super natural or God. Assume this reduction applies also to all evolved traits such as the capacity for morality and the ability to think of gods. To account for the world in terms of physical events only also reduces morality to physical events and reduces the idea of God to physical events. Feeling morality is like feeling pleasure at seeing an well-formed almost-naked person of the relevant gender or feeling sorrow when your team loses the national championship. I reject this view for both morality and God. I do not reject this view for some ideas such as animal spirit companions and contagious magic.

There is a difference between saying the capacity for an idea evolved, and so we can dismiss an idea as merely evolved, somewhat illusory, not important, and not pointing to the super natural versus saying the ability for the idea evolved but the idea is still important, real enough, and might point to the super natural.

“Evolved ability”, “real or illusory”, “important”, and “super natural” can vary somewhat apart from each other, and we have to assess each factor in each case. We evolved an ability to respond to sudden loud sounds but should not fear thunder and Thor does not make thunder. We see the rainbow because of how we evolved sight; but the rainbow is still fairly real; yet the rainbow does not imply a pact between Noah, humans, and God. We evolved to feel beauty but beauty is somewhat real and beauty is quite important. We evolved the ability to feel the grandeur of the world, the world is in fact grand, and I think that says something.

The capacity for morality evolved. Yet we do not see morality as we see rainbows, water over a desert road, or ideas of unicorns. We see morality more as we see apples, a forest (real but not in the same way as the trees that make it up), hot to the touch, fear, danger, momentum, or the theater.

David Hume, in the middle 1700s, led us to appreciate this: (a) A lot of what we see in morality we put into it. We don't just read right and wrong, should and should, directly from obvious facts. (b) Morality is somewhat independent of facts. Facts do not simply fix morality. Even when we know most of the facts, we still add a judgment which is not set by the facts. (c) What we add is a judgment. When we apply morality, we judge, and we judge facts. We do not simply see right and wrong as when we see a rose that is clearly red. We make a “judgment call”. We assess, evaluate, pronounce, extol, and condemn. (d) We shape facts as we judge them. We make perceived reality. We see according to how we judge as well as judge following what we see. (e) Moral judgment has force like emotion (passion), emotion that we add to situations as part of how we respond to them, shape them, and shape how other people act. The emotional force of morality is like how a “huggy” person over-responds or an always-angry person over-responds. (f) Emotional force is added to moral judging. Judging by itself does not get us to act. We act because we feel the force of passion. Without this force, we would be like watcher gods seeing human affairs from on high without participating. (g) Judging, feeling, and acting make us participants in human affairs. (h) We do not only judge others, feel, and act toward others; but they judge us, feel, and act toward us; and we judge ourselves, feel, and act toward ourselves. (i) Judging- feeling-and-acting is reflexive. It is not only toward others but toward ourselves as well.

For example, (1) A child takes an apple from a bin in a store and bites the apple. We don't know what to say until we know how mentally old the child is, if the child is hungry, the parents already paid, the child doesn't know what it does, or the child belongs to the manager. Morality is not in bare events themselves but also in context and how we see events including context. We get more upset if we think the child is old enough to know better, the parents didn't teach the child, and the parents do not control the child. (2) From a famous case in ethics theory (updated): Frank borrowed Bob's gun. Bob is furiously angry at Joe. Frank refuses to return the gun until Bob cools down completely although Frank has no legal right to withhold the gun. Did Frank: take an item; borrow an item; steal an item; or prevent a more serious crime through a less serious crime, which makes Frank's act no crime at all?

(3) On the other hand, once we know the facts of cases (1) and (2), we can more accurately decide the morality. Moral judgments depend on a mixture of attitude and fact. I do not try to separate attitude from fact here. People discuss incessantly what really happened, who did what, and why.

(A) The issues in the labeled paragraphs that follow are tricky but doable. Moral decisions are not simply triggered by facts but are partly the result of what people put on to facts. It seems people are a bit “above facts”. If people are “above facts” then something else is going on. People decide and choose. Thinkers have seen Hume’s lesson in various ways including the following. Thinkers have mixed the various ways. The details are not relevant. You don’t have to remember much of this. Focus on the style of explanation that uses evolution.

(B) The “something else that is going on” could be super natural. (1) Moral judgment is part of how we see the world and how we impose our view of the world on the world. Moral judgment cannot be simply in the world if moral judgment is how we see the world and organize the world. (2) People are souls with free will. (3) People represent the universe, Dharma, Tao, Heaven, etc. (5) People represent the world, Dharma, etc. doing its work through them. (4) People are one aspect of the Will of the world. (6) People represent a Morality that has rules and that imposes its rules on bare facts through people.

(C) (7) People are products of their society-culture. Society-culture has its own identity and will. Society-culture imposes its identity and will on people and on nature through people. Morality is one of the most important ways in which society-culture imposes its identity and will. Society, each and every particular society, and only society, gives all people a sense of morality. The sense of morality does not come from an evolved human nature or from any other kind of individual nature. Each distinct society gives to its members the particular rules (content) of their particular morality. I do not here say why or how society does any of this. (8) People are products of particular situations such as that they raise cattle or grow rice for a living. Situations lead people to see the world in particular ways and to have distinct particular styles of morality. Situations shape society-culture, which then shapes people. (9) The moral effects of society-culture and-or situations can change over time.

(B) and (C) again. (10) The changing effects of situations and of society-culture are part of an adventure in which the Spirit that made the world expresses itself in the world and imposes itself on the world. The adventure could be directional through history, cumulative through history, and-or progressive; or not. This is the Romanticism that I described in an earlier chapter.

(D) (11) People evolved. Judging, deciding, and choosing all evolved. What people impose on facts is evolved judging ability. People are evolved judging instruments. People are not above facts if we include evolved human nature among facts. Nothing is going on apart from natural processes. We cannot see all that goes on as we see colored pebbles, so it appears that something is going on other than facts, but that is not so. We should not assume anything other than nature without a strong case. This is how a working natural scientist takes the situation and how moral atheists take the situation when they wish to undermine theists and the morality of theists. We can use examples that show how an evolved ability to judge explains the situation pointed out by Hume. For example, in practice, moral judgment is biased in ways that we expect of an evolved self: by self-interest and by interest for kin and friends. The ability to impose interpretation of the facts, onto other people, by using morality, would be powerfully supported by

natural selection, and appears to have been powerfully supported by natural selection so that it is part of our evolved nature now.

(E) The fact that we have to follow logic when we use morality (The Golden Rule and “applies equally”) can be used as evidence in many ways. I do not go into this issue fully here. I do as needed.

(F) Rather than review arguments, I state my conclusion here and repeat it below. Moral judgment differs from other judgments such as “beautiful” or “hot”. It is another way that people see the world, act in the world, and be in the world. When we impose our moral judgment on facts, we shape facts to fit evolved needs and we follow moral logic. Yet other people will not go along with us in shaping facts if we stray too far from moral logic, from the logic of the Golden Rule. We do not have total freedom to say anything about facts. People will not feel the fervor that we wish if they too cannot see the facts with pretty much the same logic. When we all can pretty much agree on the facts and the logic, then we all feel fervor and act accordingly. The acting usually goes along with evolved goals such as family welfare.

(G) Although our ability for morality evolved, I do not think morality can be dismissed as merely a set of evolved ideas, often illusory, and not really important in the sense of transcendent, such as “I like vanilla better than chocolate” or “momentum is the key to football games”.. I do not think morality is merely an emotional force that we impose on situations to manipulate people to benefit us as in “making a scene”, although there is manipulation and mutual manipulation. Morality mixes logic, emotion, and strategy. Still, we cannot see it as merely emotion or strategy, even evolved emotion and strategy.

(H) Morality uses logic, depends on a consensus of people guided by logic, imposes a kind of reality on facts, and evokes strong emotion that makes people act. I think, as a combined result of those features, morality is important, real, and points to the super natural. Most people agree with me. Most people think morality is real, important, and implies the super natural. Moral atheists think morality is important, are not clear on how real morality is, balk at the super natural, want to have morality be merely evolved when that suits them in putting down theists, but also want that we respect them because they are moral, and want that we follow their moral view because it is moral and correct.

(I) The fact that moral ideas and acts have to conform to the Golden Rule (moral logic) in the long run is evidence that we face something apart from mere facts and emotions. I am schizophrenic on this point, as with “inside” and “outside” above. As a scientist, I overlook the super natural status of morality. As a person, the super natural matters a lot to me. I do not think we evolved to conform exactly to the super natural and its logic – if we did, human life would be better. I do not think we are merely tools of the super natural that works its will through us – in that case too, human life would be better. I do not think we are mere tools of society or economics – if we were, human life would be really bad. We evolved the ability to see the logic of morality and to act morally much of the time. The fact that we can see moral logic means that we escape mere facts sometimes. But the fact that we EVOLVED to see moral logic means that we don’t escape much. We stay grounded in the competing self-interests of physical reality. We catch glimpses of moral logic. Fortunately, moral action and strategic self-interested action coincide very often (“honesty is the best policy”). For my purposes here, this is enough.

(J) More is going on in the evolution of morality than evolving to conform to moral logic as in the Golden Rule, evolving to interpret moral logic to suit our needs, and evolving to get people to go along with our

interpretation so that we can get them to do what we want. That is not relevant here. I take up the issue in other writing.

The fact that moral action and strategic self-interest coincide often is enough for me here because I don't have to dwell on how far the ability to see moral logic raises us above facts or how closely moral logic takes us to the super natural. All I need do is point out that moral atheists see morality much as do we ordinary people – when moral atheists are not using science-like arguments to denigrate the moral and religious claims of rivals. Morality is so important that we take it as somewhat outside everyday life. Ordinary people, including myself, see morality as real and as pointing at the super natural. I think moral atheists take it as real although they won't say so. The importance and realness given to morality by moral atheists implies the super natural although moral atheists would deny that.

Not only did we evolve to make moral judgments, we evolved to see morality as important, see it as real, and see it as pointing to the super natural. We really did evolve as judging machines. Even so, I stick to my opinion. Even so, the crux of the matter for here is not the depth of the evolutionary argument but the fact that moral atheists don't take the evolutionary point of view when they argue as moral people. I say more about the fact that we evolved to make things important, real, and point to the super natural below and in Part Five.

Pretty much all the arguments that were used to place morality in the natural world of physics and biology apply also to the idea of God. Because there is overlap, I only briefly run through arguments.

Likewise the capacity for the idea of God evolved. What we make of that fact depends. We should not try to make too much or too little of it. I do not put as much emphasis on the fact that we can have the idea of God as that we can have fairly clear ideas of morality and moral logic that are consistent across most cultures, and in many times and places. I hold the idea of God as something that goes along with the super natural that is implied by morality but I don't want to stress much more than that here. If we take morality seriously, we have the right to wonder about God and believe in God but we can't do much to argue people into similar belief. We cannot base strong arguments for bad acts, such as terrorism, on this idea of God.

Unlike other ideas such as "gravity" or "apple", it is hard to tie the idea of God to a particular physical thing, event, or relation. It is impossible to tie the idea to anything that can be measured. It is hard to assess the idea of God and we have a right to suspect the idea of God, as we do ideas of "the Force" or "the mountain spirit". Ideas about gods might be a useful within an evolutionary strategy but are not likely true in the way that most people think them most of the time.

This remark is not necessary to the main argument but is useful: In my view, this situation is entirely as it should be. God did not litter the world with clues to his existence and solutions to moral dilemmas. He set up the world so sentient-moral-aesthetic life would evolve. He set up the world so we could learn and grow if we will. He wants us to do as much as we can on our own. He wants us to learn to do the right thing for the right reasons. So, in this situation, the world should be explainable almost entirely in its own terms as physical events. We see meaning through physical events, not directly in them. If we insist on not seeing meaning, we can do that, but we will lead impoverished lives of little imagination. Now back to the main thread.

In the next few paragraphs, I ramble, not so much to make a point as to get you comfortable with the fact that the idea of God has an evolved basis, and to let you feel where you might “sit” on issues.

By the standards of practical life and science, the idea of God is less likely true than the idea of an apple (thing), hurricane (process or event), danger (situation), or morality. If God exists, our ideas of God are not likely accurate. Still, the idea of God is not clearly false and it has a fair shot at being partly true. The idea of a field in physics is about as abstract, ethereal, and weird as the idea of God but eventually the idea of a field proved useful enough to be considered true. I doubt the idea of God will ever prove useful enough for most of us to consider it true in the same way as a forest or a field in physics but we cannot dismiss the idea out of hand. We can speculate about God, and the idea is useful.

The facts that (a) the idea of God is less accurate than the idea of an apple, hurricane, or field, and (b) the capacity for the idea of God evolved, do not allow a moral atheist to say: morality is important but we can forbid the idea of God. A moral atheist cannot say: even if we allow that morality implies the super natural, we can still deny everybody the idea of God and any other super natural, we can still forbid them to guess about this idea. That our idea of God likely is less accurate than the idea of curved space does not allow the moral atheist to draw a line between the super natural and God.

The capacity for morality evolved. Even so, assume morality is not merely evolved, is more than merely evolved, is important, and real. In that case, I can say that the idea of morality implies the super natural. The idea of God evolved. In contrast to morality, assume that the idea of God is merely evolved, God is definitely not real, an illusion, unimportant, and the idea of God implies nothing about the super natural. It is possible to hold these stances both at the same time but not easy. It is pretty much a contradiction to hold that “did evolve” does not discredit morality but “did evolve” does discredit God. If we want to give one status despite having evolved, then we pretty much have to allow the other some status despite having evolved. If we deny one status because the capacity for it evolved, we pretty much have to deny the other status because it evolved. I think moral atheists who rely on evolution to discredit belief in God are caught in a contradiction, and I see no easy way out.

“Atheists” means “moral atheists”. (1) On the one hand, atheists use the reductionist view including the assessment that God likely does not exist and that the idea of God is merely evolved. (2) On the other hand, atheists think morality matters but they do not offer an account of how morality matters if it is only another evolved feeling. (2A) In one arena, when they argue with theists, they stress that the idea of God is merely an evolved idea and is likely not true. When they argue with theists, they overlook that morality is merely an evolved capacity. (2B) In another arena, when they insist on their own moral abilities, appeal to the public, and promote atheism among the public, they stress that morality is important and forget that morality merely evolved. When they insist on their own moral abilities and they appeal to the public, they stress how people can act morally, yet still not believe in God, and they overlook the view that capacities for both morality and God evolved so that both ideas are merely evolved feelings.

I am not sure how moral atheists would argue against somebody who stresses that morality is important and morality points to the super natural although the capacity for morality only evolved. I am not sure how moral atheists would argue against somebody who said morality is important and points to the super natural and allowed that the importance of morality also allowed speculation about God. I guess they

would wobble and evade. If moral atheists allow that morality is important although it is evolved, they would try hard to avoid ties to the super natural. If they do allow that morality is important and so must have some ties to the super natural, even though the capacity for it merely evolved, they would try hard to disallow that the super natural can be used to argue for God. They allow in whatever of the super natural suits their needs and only that much. Moral atheists disallow that other people can admit much of the super natural even when other people admit the capacity for morality evolved and is important. They insist other people can't allow in any God even when other people admit that the capacity for morality evolved, is important, and implies the super natural.

The fact that our capacity for morality evolved does not discredit morality any more than that we evolved to feel weight discredits gravity. The fact that our capacity for morality evolved should have only little bearing on the importance of morality, its truth, and usefulness. We assess it on its own, not according to where it came from. The same is true of the idea of God. The idea of God is harder to evaluate because it lacks clear ties to any specific physical events but, in theory, we can find ways to talk about it.

The fact that the capacity for morality evolved is not relevant to the importance of morality and so to the fact that it points at the super natural. How an idea becomes important is not relevant to the fact that it is important. Suppose some people consider power important. The fact that the desire for power evolved does not make power less important to them. If they consider power that important, then power is cosmically important to them, that is, power points to what makes life important, what makes life to be life, and what makes us to be us; and so power points to the supernatural. The same is true of morality but this is really true of morality while it is not really true of power. We have to be able to offer reasons why we think one is real and points to the super natural while the other is delusory and does not point to the true super natural. If we consider love important, the same is true of love and morality. Where we get the idea is not as important as that we have the idea, it really matters, it points to the super natural, and we can offer reasons. The reasons have to be cogent but not definitive. You either get this or you don't.

Why do moral atheists insist morality is important but merely evolved? They want to have their cake and eat it too. They do want to be moral good people. They want to appeal to the public. But they don't want the crap that comes along with bad ideologies and bad religions. They want morality but not religion; to keep out religion they keep out God; to keep out God they keep out the super natural; to keep out the super natural they dance around the fact that morality is important even though the capacity for morality evolved. In some cases this is bad faith because they sense what they are doing and do it anyway. In some cases it is understandable exasperation. Either way, we don't have to go along with it. We should be able to make up our own minds and make our own cases for what we believe.

If we accept that morality is really important even though the capacity for morality evolved, then we can't keep out speculation about the super natural and we can't keep out speculation about God. Evolution is irrelevant. I like speculating about God even though I am sure the capacity for morality evolved. I see no contradiction.

I doubt that allowing speculation about God predisposes me to act more badly than I would otherwise. Even if speculation about God predisposes some people to act badly, stifling the imagination so people don't think about God at all does more harm than letting people think about God. The best response in general is to guide people to likely correct thoughts about morality and God.

The fact that we evolved to have the idea of God should make little difference in the truth and usefulness of the idea of God. We should evaluate the idea as best we can by using the best criteria that we come up with. We treat the idea of God as we do ideas of gravity, electrons, ether, fields, dark energy, and beauty. In doing so, we have to take into account that we believe in the super natural and that our ideas of the super natural bear on our ideas of God or not God.

Luckily or unluckily, it is impossible to prove God exists or doesn't exist. This means that it is even harder to speculate about God as we do about morality, power, duty, gravity, or the ether, but does not invalidate speculation about God or good ideas about God. It just means we have to be open and honest about our ideas and our motives. I hope that is what I have done.

I return to a previous topic. We need one last layer to the cake. Not only did we evolve capacities for morality and religion, we also evolved the capacities for, and tendencies for, (1) feeling some things are really important and (2) using the feeling that something is important to point to the super natural, and (3) linking what we feel is important and super natural to gods (or God). We need important things in our lives. Important things help to organize lives. We evolved the ability to think about important things in our lives as super natural. Because we evolved these abilities, it is tempting to dismiss important things and the super natural as "merely evolved". To make morality important is merely a way to say "I like meat more than spinach" – "I like honesty more than lying" - and that is all. To make morality point at the super natural is another way to say "I will use my life hunting meat and having a close relation to game animals while not thinking much about vegetables" – and that is all.

While it is true that the abilities evolved to make things important, to make important things point to the super natural, and to link important things to the gods, that fact does not mean important things are not really important and does not mean they don't point to the super natural. The ability to see birds evolved but that does not mean birds are not real, not even if we don't see them accurately. The ability to think that the path of a light ray around the sun points to the curvature of space evolved but that does not mean space does not curve even if we can't see curved space directly. We have to accept that our abilities to think about importance, the super natural, and ties to the gods evolved and then we have to think whether importance and the super natural are relevant anyway. We have to think about what we can fairly reliably know about them anyway. We have to be willing to talk to people about them anyway.

Skeptics cannot automatically say "our abilities to make things important, make important things point to the super natural, and tie it all to the gods, evolved so there is nothing at all to importance or the super natural". Skeptics can use the fact that our abilities evolved to make us think better but they cannot use the fact to impeach our ideas of importance and the super natural entirely.

Moral atheists cannot say "our ability to make things important evolved so important things are not really important, and morality is evolved but morality is really important anyhow". If moral atheists want to be really moral, they have to make morality important in a way that "merely evolved" does not allow. They have to say "our ability to make morality important evolved but morality is really important anyway". If they say other than this or less this, they lose any appeal to the general public. Moral atheists cannot say "our ability to think important things point to the super natural evolved so we can say morality is really important but it does not point to the super natural". They can use evolution as a way to make us think

better about the relation of important things to the super natural but they cannot use evolution to say there is no relation at all – if they want to hold that morality is important.

So moral atheists have to allow that morality is really important despite the fact that our ability for morality evolved, we evolved to make some things important, and evolved to link important super natural things to gods. Moral atheists have to allow that important things such as morality might really point to the super natural despite the evolved basis.

If moral atheists have to allow all that, they have to allow me to speculate about God too. They don't have to go along with me but they can't merely dismiss me. That is pretty much all I want.

Rational Response of Atheists to the Habitual Near-Hysteria of Common Theists.

Keep in mind my disparaging words about atheists at the start of the chapter. Here I reverse track.

Until recently, atheists were criminals on a par with national traitors. It was dangerous to be an atheist. In Auburn, Alabama, as late as the 2000s, the Unitarian Universalist Church, which is not atheistic, has been picketed by supposedly moral and broad-minded Christians and its members have had stuff thrown at them by supposedly moral and broad-minded Christians. Isaac Newton believed strongly in God but did not believe Jesus was God, and Newton hid his belief all his life because he feared public outrage and he feared he would lose his job – even after he was the most famous scientist in the world and was thought almost on a rank with the archangels. Theists can be nuts. Theism does not cause people to go nuts but it can enable acting nuts.

When atheists arise, theists attack them as if atheists carried the plague. Christians feel that atheists are harbingers of the antichrist and are a clear sign of the End. Christians are sure that, if people deny the reality of God, people will all immediately become amoral and then immoral. Morality needs God to back it up. Morality needs God to inflict punishment and give rewards but mostly to inflict punishment. Without punishment and reward, people must become less than animals. So the idea of God must be protected. I cannot recall where I heard that, in America, over several hundred years, as many sects of Christianity came to live together, people cared less about which sect you belonged to than that you belonged to some sect. Better any God than no God at all or society turns into burning hell. There are good reasons from evolution why theists might think this way but I don't go into them here.

All this is part of why atheists consider themselves Romantic rebel heroes. It is also why moral atheists stress the moral part of their identity.

In reality, theists, including Christians, need not fear atheism causing the collapse of morality and society. Even where people see supposedly amoral atheists walking freely among us without being struck down by God's lightning, people in general do not turn to amorality and immorality. Amorality and immorality are too much trouble and they don't turn out well in the long run. People want to succeed. People want families as part of success. To have a good successful family, you have to get along with other people. To do that, you have to act morally. Even if your morality is only a cover to seek success, still you have to act morally, and your morality-at-that-level is good enough for most other people and for society most of the time.

Evolution made sure that most people both act morally and believe in some kind of god. The example of a few atheists will not change that. It is in our character and our genes.

Evolution tied morality and belief in spirits (animism) together but not hard-and-fast. Morality would carry on even if religion somehow disappeared. Even if atheism managed to erode all belief in spirits including all the gods and the one God, even if people did not fear God would punish and reward, people would still act mostly morally. They would act morally enough so they could get along, raise families, do business, and continue society.

Atheism does not cause modern problems any more than theism causes them. The loosening of society, the gap between the haves and have-nots, selfishness, greed, and harmful zealotry were not caused by atheism any more than they were caused by Protestantism, Islam, Zen, New Age, or the return of Roman Catholicism. Those idea systems might have contributed to problems or contributed to good solutions, most likely both, but they were not the primary causes.

Maybe because atheism is now a basic stance for academics, hipsters, Hollywood persons, or Romantic rebels, people can cover the source of problems by blaming ideologies rather than seeking the true deep root causes. "The movies make us do it". If Christians would stop wasting energy worrying about atheists maybe Christians would turn energy onto curing problems at their roots.

The best advice I can give to theists that are worried about atheists is to stop. Figure out what you really believe and why. Find good reasons. Be honest about not-good reasons. Be ready to talk about what you really believe and why, or, in the case of atheists, what you really don't believe in and why. Don't talk if other people don't want to. Make sense and be tolerant. Think about what really causes problems and put your energy into curing real problems. Trust in God.

Pushy Question.

If ever a "Bible Bumper (Thumper)" annoys you, you can ask him-her to explain passages from the Old Testament (Tanakh) that call for such things as burnt offerings and stoning people who do not observe the Sabbath rigorously enough. Why don't Christians still do this?

If ever a moral atheist annoys you, you can ask him-her whether he-she thinks morality is really real and really important, or merely a convention based on evolved tendencies, like the convention to have some meat at most meals. If he-she says "really real" then ask what makes morality so. It helps if you have already thought out for yourself ideas about persons, souls, and the super natural. If he-she answers that morality is a mere convention based on evolved reflexes, I would suggest you punch him-her in the nose but that is illegal.

The Scope of the Word "Almost".

In other parts of the book, I write about divine providence, miracles, God interfering in the world, and God coming down into his creation, so I don't repeat myself here.

If there were never any violations of physical and biological laws so that absolutely everything could be explained by natural science, that still would not necessarily disprove the reality of God or destroy the usefulness of the idea of God. The triumph of science would not stop morality from pointing to the super natural. If science explained everything, I would be delighted. I would “chalk it up” to God’s planning. If science explained everything, that situation would discredit some churches and maybe some religions such as Christianity but that is their problem.

If there were obvious demonstrable gaps in what science now can explain, that result likely would mean science is not yet complete and has work to do. It would not necessarily undermine the power of science. If there were obvious breeches of natural law that could not possibly be explained by future advances in science, that is, if there were clear miracles, then I leave it up to theologians to argue whose religion and church those support most. I doubt anything they say will undermine this book.

Most possible breeches are small and inconclusive, are annoying to discuss, and don’t affect my basic stance, so I don’t write about them here.

Maybe the most likely breach of science is that God helps us as individuals in small ways. I have written about this issue elsewhere, and it is not worth going into here specifically.

To me, the most likely scenario is that God planned the world well and then the world carried on almost entirely by itself. We have to do all the work of taking care of the world including good self-governing and taking care of nature. God’s plan included lots of “plums” to help us such as good people, ideas, books, music, nature, science, art, institutions, government to work on, moral dilemmas to work on, etc. We can mistake these aids for direct intervention to guide us personally. I have no interest in saying for sure if these items signal good planning by God or small direct interventions by him. I don’t care about miracles small or big.

Why Bother with Super Natural Morality and God?

This issue covers ideologies that include the super natural but do not include God although I don’t sort out this sub-topic.

Suppose science completely explains absolutely everything including our ideas of morality and our ideas of God. All miracles have been explained away. The large majority of people behave morally. We can devise education and institutions to make sure the large majority of people continue to act morally enough so that society gets along well. Suppose further that God exists and God cares about morality, that is, the super natural exists and morality is part of it. Yet, although the super natural exists, we can’t learn about the super natural by the standards of scientific learning, and the super natural is irrelevant for scientific account or explanation. You can say the words “morality points to the super natural” but that phrase is essentially meaningless. So, under the conditions of this world, the super natural is irrelevant. It might as well not exist at all even though it does exist.

Some atheists seem to believe we already have this situation but disallow that morality is super natural or God exists. Because the super natural is irrelevant, atheists assume they can assert the super natural doesn’t exist at all. Given the above “supposes” nobody is sure how to argue against them.

Why then should we care about the super natural? Even if morality is super natural and God exists, why should we care, and why should we bother devoting time or energy to thinking about the super natural?

Here are a few answers, not all desirable:

Although society now works well enough without much reference to the super natural, this might not always be the case. People evolved to want super natural. The idea of the super natural helps control people. We should keep the super natural around as part of the control mechanisms.

People evolved to believe in the super natural. They get restless without the super natural. Even if we can keep the lid on without referring to the super natural, we will find it easier if we use the super natural. This is like the relation between machines and humans in the movie series "The Matrix". It is easier to let humans believe in the Oracle and the One.

People evolved to believe in the super natural. Trying to avoid belief in the super natural likely requires trying to suppress belief in the super natural, somewhat as China is trying to do with "Fulan Gong" and other practices based on the idea of "chi". That is like American Prohibition all over again. It is better to provide people with socially useful ideas of the super natural than to try to repress it. Not everyone is a chic academic self-styled free thinker liberated from all conventions.

We never have rights without responsibilities. I have a right to think about whatever I want to think about. Nobody has the right to tell me not to think about it. I have a responsibility to think ably and not to cause unneeded harm with my thinking. They have a responsibility to leave me alone to think.

On the one hand, moral atheists enjoy this situation. On the other hand, moral atheists don't enjoy this. They want other people to commit to morality, they want to seem like good guys, and they want to commit to morality too. Yet they are not sure what to say about their commitment to morality. They want to have a strong commitment to morality but not have it point to the super natural.

Truth is Truth. Truth has value. I like Truth. A lot of science is based on the search for Truth because of Truth's intrinsic value. If the super natural is True, I want to know about it. I want to be able to talk freely with other people who want to search for the Truth including the Truth about the super natural. Because it is not possible to test for the super natural (natural laws explain all), we will have much trouble finding any Truth about the super natural and making sure of any Truth about the super natural but we want to try anyway. Not to let us search for Truth about the super natural probably will stifle the search for Truth in other arenas including science.

Even if truth is not spelled with a capital letter, I want to know about truth. Practically, it does not matter a jot if my toaster works because of electricity or if inside there is a team of gremlins with hibachis. I still get my toast. But I like to know how things work, what is up, and what is what.

Thinking about the super natural takes effort and skill. Practice thinking about the super natural is good practice for thinking in general.

I like my imagination. I like the imagination of other people. Imagination leads easily into thinking about the super natural. I cannot limit thinking about the super natural without seriously distorting my fantasy. Thinking about the super natural is fun. I like fun. I can exercise my imagination, including thinking about the super natural, without going crazy and without falling into zealotry.

If God and the super natural might exist, I want to know about them as much as I can. God and the super natural are important. Even if I can't know anything for sure about the super natural (science can explain everything), the super natural is still interesting and still something important about the world. It is worth a little time and energy to do what I can.

PART 3: Belief in God is more than Superstition.

This part argues that belief in God need not be superstition and need not bring along with it a lot of silly superstition. Even though the capacity to believe in God and the capacity to believe superstition both evolved, the two beliefs are not the same, or don't have to be the same. Atheists treat all belief as if it were irrational anti-rational superstition on a level with "step on a crack and break your mother's back" or "black cat crossed my path". If they know evolutionary theory, atheists treat belief in God as a way to work on people's irrational anti-rational emotions so as to control people for the benefit of the manipulator. Belief is purely and only emotion, and necessarily anti-rational. All belief makes us susceptible to bad ideas. All belief is bad belief. There is no good belief. Believers are weak-willed indulgent idiots and-or conniving manipulators. I don't like that.

No direct logical argument can prove that God does exist or does not exist. If atheists were agnostics, and they accepted that the debate can't be settled, then I would have little issue with them. But atheists want more. Superficially, they want to prove that God does not exist. More deeply, though, arguments with atheists are not about God, they are about behavior. Atheists don't like bad behavior, they blame religion for the bad behavior, and they blame God for religion. Atheists argue against God as a way to subvert religion as a way to end bad behavior. This tactic won't work. You can't get rid of religion by proving God does not exist, and you can't get rid of bad behavior by getting rid of religion. Trying to get rid of God to get rid of religion to prevent bad behavior is like American Prohibition. Instead, atheists should point out causes of bad behavior in human nature, economics, society, history, politics, ideology, poverty, power struggles, socio-economic class, and, yes, some bad religion.

Some few atheists are atheists for purely logical reasons. This chapter is not about them. Most atheists are atheists for the same reasons that children say "no" at a young age and for the same reasons that teenagers whine and argue. The issue is not really about the obvious subject – existence of God – but about dominance, who has the debater's high ground, and about scoring points for "I know better than you". Most atheists use logic selfishly, not because it leads to any valid useful ends.

Even that conniving I would not mind except that, in denying God, atheists squelch my imagination. They limit how I think and wonder. When we hurt a big part of how we wonder, we hurt all wonder, imagination, and creativity. We stifle ourselves. Part of my natural wonder is thinking about God and about "what it all means" in light of God. When atheists cut that off, they hurt my whole sense of wonder and whole feeling as a person. I can think well, I can be quite rational, even about God, without turning off my imagination. I am more rational when I accept the likelihood of God than when I try to stifle myself.

There is good religion and bad religion just as there is good atheism and bad atheism, good ideology and bad ideology, good uses of ideas and bad uses. Bad religion is a kind of bad thinking. Bad religion does lead to more bad thinking, bad imagination, and bad action. Atheists should point out how bad thinking of all kinds leads to bad acts, and rest there. Atheists should point out ways to nurture imagination and to use it well even when it leads to speculation about God. Theists should do the same.

Because direct argument cannot prove or disprove God, instead of direct argument about God, we have to use other arguments. We use circumstantial evidence. We treat the question of God as we do other similar issues such as court cases and some scientific questions. By those arguments, I think the case for God is fairly good.

Imagine a set of "idea circles" with the widest circles mostly including the inner circles.

In the widest circle are magic, most of the supernatural, and morality, but not nothing (-ness). Traditional Christians rely on God-the-supernatural and rely on the magic of Jesus-as-God, his incarnation, death, and resurrection. Hopefully, they also accept the moral message of Jesus and really do act on it. They say the incarnation, death, and resurrection magically save believers. Their belief in the magic and in God-the-supernatural allows them to carry the message of Jesus.

In the second, smaller, circle are morality and some of the super natural but not magic or nothing. I rely on the super natural but to a lesser extent than do people who believe in magic and superstition. We can get rid of almost all the magic of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and mysterious salvation. We can rely only on God and on Jesus as his prophet (among others), and can keep the moral message. If we don't need the magic, we might as well dispose of it as long as we keep the message. Drawing the line this way is hard for normal evolved humans who need some magic, but many can do it.

I also say we should act well for the sake of acting well and not because we fear God. We should do the right things for the right reasons. If we can act well for its own sake rather than from fear, it seems we do not need God either. Yet I hold to this much supernatural out of wonder, because it makes sense in light of the evidence, and because of my evolved nature. I do not feel self-contradictory.

In the third circle is morality alone. Atheists try to dump magic and all of the supernatural while keeping morality only. They try to rely only on morality. If we don't need magic to keep morality, then we don't need the supernatural either. If we can keep morality while getting rid of both, then get rid of both. They stress that we should do well for its own sake rather than from fear of God; they say I contradict myself; and say I cling to God as magic no different than the magic of traditional Christians or silly people who fear ghosts. I say, it is hard to get rid of all the supernatural while still keeping morality, much harder than getting rid of magic only. I can keep the supernatural without using it as magic. To give morality the privilege that atheists wish to give it opens the door to legitimate speculation about the supernatural even while it does not open the door to magic.

The fourth circle is a little dot on the outside labeled "nothing". True skeptics take the logic above to its conclusion. They get rid of magic, the supernatural, and morality. They rely on nothing, no ideologies, not even nothingness. This is very hard. There are few true skeptics. Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and

Zen adepts are not true skeptics. No atheist who believes in morality is a true skeptic. Almost no atheists are true skeptics although they romanticize themselves as such. This chapter overlooks true skeptics.

This game is not limited to Christianity, God, and Jesus. You can make similar scenarios with magic, the supernatural, and morality in other religions. You can use dogmas in place of the supernatural and magic in case of ideologies that claim to have none, such as atheism, naïve scientism, and Marxism; they often use dogmas much as religion uses magic and the supernatural.

Which circle do we live in, and why? What do we let into our circle, and why? What about people who live in different circles? I am happy to let people live where they want as long as they act well and do not impose their ideas on me. I can get along with traditional Christians, moral atheists, people of most religions, and even people who believe in ghosts, witches, and voodoo as long as they act well and do not force their ideas on me. I say nothing about true skeptics. "Acting well" means acting according to the blending of Jesus' ideas, Western values, and practicality, even if other people do not see those as the sources of their acting well. I do not think I impose on other people when I ask them to act well along the lines of these ideas.

Atheists say: (1) natural laws alone can explain everything and there is no need for God. (2) The idea of God is nothing but an evolved delusion like the ability to believe in witches or an evolved compulsion like the desire to eat fatty meat. (3) The idea of God causes a lot of trouble. (4) Therefore God must not exist. (5) At the same time that atheists wish to get rid of the evolved idea of God, they strongly support the evolved capacity for morality.

(1) Just because there is no logical need for something does not mean that thing must not exist. Just because we can explain a lot about a thing using natural laws does not mean that thing does not exist and has no identity or integrity. There is no logical need that I had a mother but the evidence is reliable that I did, at least at this early stage of bio-engineering. Natural laws can explain everything about the self, so there is no need for traditional ideas of the self, but most atheists are sure they have a self and it is important. Natural laws explain everything about apples, but that does not mean apples don't exist and don't taste good. Natural laws can explain sunsets but that does not mean sunsets do not exist and are not beautiful. A "field" in physics is a made-up idea, like a "net" of forces around an object. We cannot see fields directly but only through their effects. That does not mean fields don't exist and are not useful. The idea of a field helps explain the movement of matter and energy. An electrical field helps explain your cell phone. The idea of a gravity field helps scientists keep in orbit the satellites that allow your cell phone to work. Other fields explain how atomic nuclei work and so how stars shine.

(2) Just because we evolved the capacity to perceive something does not mean that thing does not exist; in the same way, just because we evolved the capacity to think something does not mean that thing does not exist. Elephants evolved but they still exist. A rainbow is the product of an evolved mental ability interacting with specific external atmospheric conditions but that does not mean rainbows are delusions and do not exist. The ideas of fairness, scientific method, morality, and beauty evolved but that does not mean there is no fairness, scientific method, morality, or art. Just because something evolved does not mean we can explain it away or that it is "nothing but". Just because we evolved so that we can easily form ideas does not mean the ideas that we form are necessarily delusional and the things about which we form ideas are necessarily not real. The fact that we evolved to be able to make ideas about horses

and unicorns does not mean that either horses or unicorns necessarily exist or do not exist. The fact that we evolved to have an idea of God means nothing about whether God exists. The idea has to be evaluated on its own merits.

(3) Just because an idea causes trouble does not mean its object does not exist and we can get rid of the idea to avoid trouble. For dictators, the idea of freedom causes a lot of trouble, but, still, freedom is real, and I hope the “thought police” never get rid of the idea. Not only intoxication itself but also the idea of intoxication causes trouble, but we can’t get rid of either the fact or the idea by banning alcohol, other drugs, advertisements, and peer example. We cause more harm than good in trying. The idea of God can cause trouble, some of it very bad. It also causes some good, some of it very good. The capacity to believe in God is natural like the capacities to follow morality, enjoy alcohol, and enjoy sex. People will believe in God. We cannot get rid of the idea of God without making the same mistake that Americans made during Prohibition and without causing more harm than good.

(5) Rather than argue directly about God, it is better to go through morality. The capacities for religion and morality both evolved. Atheists wish to give morality a special status but they refuse to allow that status to religion. The special status for morality necessarily implies the super natural. Atheists open the door to the super natural with morality. When atheists open the door to the super natural for morality, they cannot entirely close the door for religion. Even if they do not allow any proof of the existence of God, they have to allow other people to wonder about God and to believe in God.

(5A) If morality were merely another evolved capacity like the desire to eat fatty meat, then atheists could not stress morality and stress how moral they are. There would be no difference between drinking water and following the Golden Rule. Yet atheists insist people act morally, and insist atheists can act morally despite no God. The existence of morality is not like the existence of apples, and following morality is not like picking apples. The existence of morality necessarily implies something about the world that apples do not. Morality is about something else. All people who sincerely follow morality, including atheists, give morality a special status. The special status that atheists give to morality cannot be found in nature. The special status that atheists give to morality is super natural.

(5B) If the fact that morality evolved does not discredit morality then the fact that religion evolved should not automatically discredit God. If we won’t say “morality is nothing but an evolved delusion” and thus give morality the status of merely picking apples then we have to be careful saying “God is nothing but an evolved delusion” and thus give to wondering about God the mere status of thinking about sweets. If you allow the existence of morality and the something else of morality, then you necessarily open the door to the something else of God and the possible existence of God. It is hard to keep morality but dump God. If we keep morality, we open the door to wondering about God. If we keep morality, then evidence from physics, cosmology, and evolution does not automatically discredit God, and it can support God. We do not prove God exists or prove God does not exist, but we allow the sanity of speculating about God and we allow the reasonableness of belief in God. If you want morality, you have to allow that people can have God even if you don’t accept God.

(5A again) Atheists do not realize (or they deny) that they open the door to the super natural when they insist on morality, when they insist on giving morality privilege over wringing your neighbor’s neck to get his-her cash and spouse. In an amoral all-merely-natural world, when you give any aspect of the world

special privilege, including morality, you open the door to the super natural. When you say respect for the individual is “GOOD”, you make a super natural claim. If you cannot see this idea in terms of morality, think about giving art privilege over everything else including morality. “Art is great and art is enduring while acting morally is merely like having a big piss.” That is not a natural judgment; it is a super natural judgment. When you say art is better, you allow other people to wonder how it got to be better, and then they may also wonder about morality and God. If you can’t get this idea with morality or art, then think about power, wealth, logic, mathematics, or natural law.

If the idea of God is reasonable, and we can’t get rid of it, then the best response is to make sure people believe in the right things, that belief in God goes along with the best morality. Luckily, I am sure correct ideas about God go along with the best morality, so we do the right thing by pursuing the truth about God and everything else. This stance is not new with me. The ideas in this stance have been around since Classical Greek thinking, and were well developed in the Middle Ages.

PART 4: Ideas of God and No God.

Morality opens the door to the super natural and to guessing about God; but so what? If all we have are silly ideas then the door opens on a cage. To think adeptly about God requires thinking about ideas and evolution. Thinking well about God is the task of theology. I don’t like theology. This part is not theology. As I have said often before, where an idea comes from doesn’t matter. What matters is truth and usefulness. We need criteria to assess ideas that have an obvious evolved basis such as morality and religion, criteria that help avoid bias. This part cannot fully supply the criteria. This part gives a feel for how to work with ideas that have an evolved base. Mostly we use the same criteria that sane rational helpful people have used for 2500 years. On that basis, belief in God is reasonable.

Irrelevant Personal and Cultural Considerations.

People believe or disbelieve in God for personal and cultural reasons such as how they were raised, good experiences with believers, bad experiences, fads, need to belong, and wanting to think of yourself as an outlaw. None of these reasons are relevant. Unfortunately because argument about God is not decisive, we do fall back on experience and culture. Still, we should try to get around experience and culture for a time to look at other reasons. The best reasons are: I see a mind behind the world, the mind is moral as well as logical, I love to wonder, and God works with my wonder.

God as a Dubious Evolved Idea.

Atheists use aspects of the idea of God to weaken the possibility that God exists; see the list below. This kind of argument can discredit some ideas but I think it is wrong in the case of God.

- The idea of God came only as a by-product of evolution.
- The idea of God has no natural object, particularly because it is only a by-product of evolution. There is nothing the idea of God stands for like the idea of “dog” stands for something.
- The idea of God is strongly urged by our evolved nature regardless of facts, like belief in ghosts.
- The idea of God is not needed to explain anything.
- The idea of God has no value.

- The idea of God is inaccurate.
- The idea of God is used to manipulate other people and ourselves.
- We evolved not only to have the idea of God but to believe in it and to defend it vigorously.
- The idea of God is an illusion at best but more often a delusion.
- We evolved to get comfort from the idea of God.
- People cling to the idea of God as a comforting delusion.
- The idea of God causes more harm than good.
- By getting rid of the idea of God, we can get rid of the harm. Getting rid of the idea of God will not cause more harm than good.

Ideas and Things.

We use the same language to talk about God as to talk about material objects, so we tend to think of God as a thing. It is misleading to think of God as we would an ordinary material object such as a broom. It is even misleading to think about ordinary objects as if they were simple unchanging uniform material stuff in the same way a chunk of limestone is made of crystals. A hurricane, jet plane, chunk of limestone, electron, and nation all exist but not in the same ways.

God, and material objects, while not simply ideas, can be like ideas. They are not ideas like $2 + 2 = 4$ but they are still like ideas. Sometimes it is easier to talk about the idea of God, idea of a dog, hurricane, or jet plane than about God, a particular dog, hurricane, or plane. Imagine Fido the dog over his entire life. He changes over his life so he does not look the same from puppy to gray-back, and not even from one day to the next. He replaces all the atoms in his body every few years. We still talk as if Fido were one material thing like a chair. It makes more sense in some ways to talk about the idea of Fido. Rather than assess whether God-the-pseudo-material-thing exists, often it makes more sense to assess the idea of God, how we come to believe in the idea of God, and how we use the idea of God.

Yet to think of God as an idea, as a subjective idea, even as the same idea shared by others, also leads to mistakes. We tend to devalue God when we think of God as an idea. We think of God as merely an idea, a delusion, like a superstition or like a secret scheme for getting rich quick on the stock market. It is easy to dismiss God as a delusory idea when we think of God as merely an idea. When atheists argue against God, they devalue our idea of God, often by devaluing how we get the idea. By looking more calmly at God as like an idea, we can overcome this mistake.

The Value of Ideas.

We naturally tend to assess an idea according to where it comes from. This attitude likely evolved, and it is usually reliable. We believe the weatherman about upcoming storms more than we believe the arthritic toes of our cranky old neighbor. We believe a brother more than strangers with candy. For here, though, we have to stop assessing ideas according to their source. Where an idea comes from has no bearing on value. We have to assess ideas on their intrinsic value alone. A classic example gets the point across. Many chemicals in living tissue are based on a "carbon ring", which is six carbon atoms linked in a circle, like ball bearings in a ring, loops on a crocheted doily, or lobes of a snowflake. In the late 1800s, nobody had yet thought of this idea. One night, a chemist took some hashish, and came up with the idea. That the chemist was stoned has no bearing on the value of the idea. It does not matter if your drunken sister

or the veterinarian figured out the dog got sick from chocolate. What matters is that you stop the kids from giving it chocolate.

Truth makes an idea valuable. If it were easy to prove all ideas true or false, we could easily decide value. But it is not. Instead, we compare ideas. One idea is more valuable than another if it is truer, more useful, more accurate, more beautiful, the thing to which it refers is more real, it explains more of the most important data, is less likely to be wrong, has not been proven false, and fits in with other ideas that we already think are true. Although we cannot often prove an idea is true, sometimes we can prove it is likely false. Usually we can dismiss an idea if we can prove it is false for at least some facts. After the astronauts landed on the moon, we knew it wasn't made of green cheese. After the rise of quantum mechanics in the early 1900s, we learned that the idea of the carbon ring was not fully accurate, that it was only a close approximation. Still, the original idea of the carbon ring is beautiful, easier to use than the complex ideas of quantum mechanics, more accurate than other simple ideas in explaining results, and has proven useful in making many compounds.

We need to assess the idea of God, ideally without worrying where it came from. It does not matter that we evolved to believe in gods and then God, to think our belief important, to think our belief points to the super natural, and to defend our belief; it matters only that the idea of God fits the situation. We need to settle on the proper criteria to assess ideas like the idea of God. Unfortunately, there are no criteria that everyone accepts for assessing ideas like God. So we have to fall back on circumstantial criteria, ideas from the first three chapters of this book, and the standards used in this chapter. Atheists try to undercut God by undermining the source of the idea. They disparage God by saying the idea of God is only an evolved comforting delusion. Atheists confuse everybody when they do that.

Evolved Urges.

For here, I include with ideas the acts that we can conceptualize. All ideas have a basis in our evolved nature, however near or remote from an evolved base, including morality, writing music, craving pizza, projective geometry, making the world lively, and believing in spirits. This view of ideas does NOT mean all ideas come directly from genes. Almost all ideas need some learning, including something as bodily as toilet training. I don't fret over this issue here. This section explains how we assess ideas about God; later sections follow up on some of the points made here including repeating some points.

Some ideas are closer to our evolved base, and require less learning, than others. Hunger is more tightly under evolved guidance than watching TV even if we watch TV more minutes per day than we eat. Apparently around the world, young men think of sex every few seconds while young women think of it only a few times a day. Religion and morality clearly have an evolved base and are not far from it.

We have a dual view about ideas that are closer to our evolved base. On the one hand, we see them as gifts given by God (Dharma, Tao, the Universe, Heaven, etc.) through nature, as we do of Love, Charity, morality, and even Patriotism. On the other hand, we see them as base, animal-like, merely physical, merely bodily, and merely emotional in the bad sense. Examples include lust, greed, desire to show off, desire for power, and even patriotism. In which camp we put an idea depends on our general point of view and on situations such as culture. Sex can be dirty ugly lust or can be the physical embodiment of

Love. (By “we” I mean all people. I base my view on Indo-European culture but I have not read of any culture that does not have a dual view.)

To condemn an idea, we put it in the group that is physical and bad, and give it no redeeming graces. Superstitions are “base”, unthinking, and emotional. Sex perverts are slaves of their bodies and their low lusts. We call a man a “bastard” and a woman a “bitch” thereby stressing their low animal material nature over their identity as a human being or a social being.

To extol an idea, we don’t mind that it comes through our bodies as long as we can link it to highness too, for example love. Political activism can be low physical greed or high service with self-denial. Women take as evidence for male base physical nature that men think of sex so much and commitment so little while men take as evidence of women’s contrary physically-based nature that they think of commitment so much and of sex so little even in a relationship to which sex is basic – see “Annie Hall”. In Christian mythology at least since the Middle Ages, purely mental activity (ideas), such as logic, is high, but not as high as mental activity that comes through the body and transforms the body, such as love, morality, and art. Angels have merely mind; humans have body and mind. We are above the angels. God likes us better than he likes the angels.

To link an idea, thing, person, or social group to the low physical set or high transcendent set is a way to assess the idea etc. by referring to its origin. Rather than think about an idea, we say it is merely based in material animal nature and so ugly, wrong, and bad. Referring to base origin is a way of using “nothing but” to condemn and dismiss, as for example when we say American football is nothing but the desire to kick the crap out of someone temporarily played out on a field. To repeat: This practice is what I argue against. It is a wrong use of “nothing but”. We should assess according to truth and usefulness but it is much easier to assess by linking to bad-low or good-high.

We do not have good criteria for when an idea belongs in one set or the other. We use criteria but not very well. This section looks at some of the criteria.

A modern way to say an idea is merely based in our bodies and so wrong is to say that it is closely tied to our evolved nature. We point out that it requires little learning and is widespread not only in a culture but across cultures such as belief in some kind of spirits. We condemn superstition and “us versus them” in this way. We mock belief in “the Force” this way. “Closely tied to our evolved nature” is now another way to say “mostly merely physical and animal, and so low, ugly, and bad”. People who dislike homosexuality condemn it this way. The fact that an idea-or-act is rooted in our evolved physical nature and so almost obligatory might be an explanation but it is not a justification or an excuse to condemn an idea.

Sometimes we extol an idea in the same way, by saying it is closely tied to our evolved nature and so is an indirect gift from God etc. This way of extolling an idea is not very widespread yet. I am interested to see if it becomes more widespread as ideas about evolution and genes become more widespread. As of now, some people extol Love, Loyalty, Art, and Morality this way. People who champion homosexual rights (gay rights) explain and justify homosexual behavior this way even if they don’t know much biology and even if they don’t explicitly link it back to God: homosexuality is a loving variation on nature.

Following the best scientific accuracy, and following political correctness as well regardless of scientific accuracy, it is wrong to use “close to our evolved nature” as a way to condemn or extol. We should not misuse science and evolutionary theory this way. It is another bad use of “nothing but”. Yet people usually don’t care about scientific accuracy when they borrow an idea from science to lend weight to how they like to think. They use what they can. Still, people have learned that referring to our evolved nature sometimes causes PC anger and backlash, and they so are careful for that reason alone.

In the bad old days before political correctness, at least in circles that did not extol emotion, superstition was base (animalistic) and bad. It was part of our low bodily nature. It was our bodies hurting our minds. The fact that superstition was so widespread was evidence of a basic flaw in human nature. People said our “animal urges” often misled us. In the bad old days, atheists attacked belief in God and religion the same way, as merely-and-always like lust or superstition.

When modern atheists attack belief in God, they still treat it as a bad superstition in that old sense, as a flaw in human character, as an idea tied to our lower base. In our enlightened times, atheists cannot say outright that widespread belief is evidence of a flaw in evolved human nature. Still, they do say religion has deep roots in evolved human nature, so imply that religion is merely a bodily idea, so imply religion is merely-and-always like lust and superstition, and so say religion is always bad. Religion is a widespread weakness and evolved character flaw. It is like opiate addiction if opiates were widespread. Fortunately, we can use our higher abilities to overcome it.

If religion did not have a base in our evolved nature, it could not be so widespread and so similar across situations and cultures. Unlike anthropologists, atheists tend to see the similarities across situations and cultures rather than the differences. If religion has strong roots in our evolved nature, and is so close to its evolved roots, then it must be bad.

I try not to use the fact that religion has strong roots in our evolved nature and is close to our evolved nature as a way to extol religion. I try not to make the opposite mistake to atheists.

So, I conclude: (1) Try not to think of an idea as good or bad because it has roots in our evolved nature and seems close to our evolved nature. (2) Likely we cannot eliminate ideas that have deep roots in our evolved nature no more than we can stop sex and drinking booze. To try hurts us. (3) Instead, guide people to good ideas about God and religion. Guide people away from bad ideas. (4) Can we make an idea better if it has strong roots in our evolved nature and is close to our evolved nature? We can. (5) For reasons given below, we also have to consider if an idea can still be useful if it has obvious roots in our evolved nature, does not refer to anything sold, is abstract, refers to spirits, is hard to argue about, and hard to decide. I think it can. (6) It is sane to believe in God.

Moral thinking is under evolved control. Morality has strong roots in our evolved nature and is close to our evolved nature. I do not take this fact about morality to be a problem and I don’t dwell on implications for morality in this section. I do in sections below. The idea of God is more of a problem so I dwell on that here.

Because morality is close to our evolved nature, it could be low and bad yet most people, and especially including moral atheists, consider it high and good. Most people would argue that morality is one of those

things (ideas) that works closely through the body but transcends the body. I am not sure what moral atheists would say in this particular regard.

It seems we could look at religion the same way, and I do that, while always keeping in mind that we are evolved beings. But moral atheists cannot look at religion the same way as morality. Despite that both morality and religion evolved, and both being close to an evolved base, morality makes it to the high-and-good while religion remains among the low-and-bad, a superstition or bad habit. Moral atheists need to explain why. I repeat this point a few times in various ways here and more in the sections below.

We need to look at some of the ways in which we decide if an idea that has strong roots in our evolved nature is good or bad. Some ways are useful and valid while some are not.

We have ideas of our particular mother, mothers, our father, fathers, siblings, other kin, friend, neighbor, a particular dog, a particular dog breed, dog breeds, dogs in general, nearby un-dangerous animals such as raccoons, far-from-human dangerous animals such as crocodiles, deer, coyotes, wolves, birds, squirrels, mountains, valleys, water, rain, snow, rivers, trees, forests, air, the sky, weather, tools such as a stick, tools such as a ball peen hammer, tools such as a telescope or an x-ray machine, Justice, Honor, good, bad, Freedom, and Loyalty.

The nearness or farness of any of the ideas from an evolved base can be debated. All the ideas can be important but are not necessarily important. Some ideas are concrete while others are abstract. We take as real nearly all the things to which the ideas refer but not all the things to which the ideas refer are real in the same way or to the same degree. It is easy to talk about some ideas and to assess them such as whether it is snowing or raining. It is hard to talk about and to assess some ideas such as parental love, and parental love versus patriotism. Some of the ideas are likely to occur wherever there are people but some depend on the situation. We use importance, concrete-abstract, ease of talking about, widespread, dependence on situation, and degree of realness, to assert that ideas are near to our evolved nature and so are good or bad. People mix these tools for assessing and labeling in bewildering ways, mostly not very accurate or useful.

The importance of "realness" in assessing things and ideas, and the use of more real or less real, is tied to Indo-European philosophy (Greek, "te on"). The practice involves many problems. Leaving that aside, still people do think in terms of realness and of more-and-less real. I avoid issues about realness except when I have to mention realness. I don't like "realness" debates.

We tend to think of material objects as definitely real, things that might have a material base but are not material as less real, and to think of abstract things (including ideas) that have no material base as unreal even if we can have clear ideas of them and we think they are important. We know a particular tree is real but we are not sure about forests, species of trees, a genus of trees, or fantasy movies in which trees have spirits.

On the other hand, we often think that non-material abstract things are more important, more real in their own ways, and better, than limited material things, for example love. Over his-her lifetime, a hunter can forget a lot of individual trees but he-she has to know the ways of the forest. The same is true of the city dweller and buildings. To a dog breeder, a breed is more important than individuals and effectively more

real. While a lawyer must dwell on each particular case, we hope that ultimately justice is as real and more important. A style of painting such as cubism can be more important and more real than any but the best paintings in the style. The momentum of a flying football is important and real but the momentum of a football game might be even more important and just as real.

Unluckily for any simple account of human nature, many important things come up often in our lives and so they might be fairly near an evolved base in the same ways a young man thinks of sex rather than as a father thinks of loving his children. We don't like to think of them as near our "animal instincts" but there is no real reason to think of them as far from our evolved nature. Nearly everybody understands the ideas of a person, Justice, Fidelity, and Love and I think they have a firm evolved base. Nearly everybody can reason some so likely basic reasoning has a firm evolved base. While the substance of art varies much, art itself recurs often. All cultures have music, graphic arts, and crafts. Recall from the chapter on human nature that we see our world as lively. We see it as livelier than a robot or computer might see it. As a result, we not only see a tree, we see a spirit of the tree; not only oak trees, also a spirit of oaks; not only a forest, also a spirit of the forest; not only a spirit of this forest or this kind of forest, also a spirit of all forests. We see not only a person but the spirit of a person. We see the spirit not only while the person lives but also after he-she dies. The spirits can be more important and more real than the physical, quasi-physical, or non-physical entity they represent.

Ideas about spirits are notoriously hard to argue about and to disprove so it is hard to definitely assess their merits. They are like the boy who builds a fort to keep out tigers. "But there aren't any tigers around here. See, the fort works." They are like the Arkansas fiddler with a leaky roof. He can't fix the roof when rain falls; and, when rain doesn't fall, the fiddler doesn't need to fix the roof.

We often call "superstitions" the Ideas that are not concrete, come up often in some form, seem to be near an evolved base, are hard to assess, and often lead to wasted energy or to bad results. We don't want those.

Yet we do not wish to cut off all ideas that are abstract, non-material, come up often, seem to be close to evolved human nature, and are hard to assess, because those ideas have led to some good and useful results. If we could not imagine a forest as well as particular trees, and could not imagine the spirit of the forest too, we would never have developed the science of ecology. What about Love again?

We cannot reject an idea simply because it refers to something quasi-material or abstract, people think of it as linked to a spirit, and it might have a firm base in our evolved nature. We cannot call all ideas like that mere superstition. This is a bad use of "nothing but". If we did, we would have to call art and the idea of integrity mere superstitions. The movie "Avatar" is an orgy or Romanticized superstition but that does not mean ideas of the forest, spirit of the forest, and links in the forest including to the spirit, are all stupid, silly, mere superstition, and of no value. We have to sort out value from silliness. In reviewing the movie I might say "nothing but" yet in real life dealing with real ideas I should be more careful.

People have a long history of sorting out good ideas from bad ideas. We have criteria. I do not go into the criteria. It is enough that we have them and you can learn them.

The idea of gods does not refer to a material thing, it is abstract, depends on the imputed liveliness of the world, and refers to spirits. The idea of gods arises often almost regardless of particular conditions. The idea seems pushed by our evolved nature. The idea is hard to contradict and to argue over. To verify or deny the idea is almost impossible. The fact that the content of the idea of gods varies by conditions but the idea persists anyhow underscores the role of both conditions and an evolved base. The idea of gods seems more like superstition than like the Theory of Evolution or the Theory of Relativity – accepted facts now. It seems more elusive even than the ideas of Justice and Honor.

Atheists are correct to doubt (but not deny) the idea of gods or God. Atheists who also know evolutionary theory officially say “there are no simple reflexes”. Yet in practice they treat the idea of God (or gods) as a simple evolved reflex that brings out the worst, like hating “other people” or hating powerful bad spirits and witches. Atheists treat the idea of God as something strongly dependant on an evolved base and so is bad for that reason alone, like lust for power. The fact that the idea of God does not refer to anything that can be measured and does refer to spirits makes the matter worse. Atheists treat the idea of God as “nothing but” silly superstition with a strong near evolved base, like fear of the dark. At best the idea of God is an evolved superstition that leads us astray.

Moral atheists do not sort out good ideas that have strong evolved roots, are abstract, and hard to test, from bad ideas with the same features. They do not sort Justice from ghosts or morality from religion. They condemn the idea of God as a merely evolved reflex superstition when that suits them yet they also cling to morality. They do not say what stance we should take, and why, toward art, justice, reason, love, fidelity, honor, ghosts, animal spirit companions, or cracks in the sidewalk. They do not say why we should take any attitude toward any idea.

The idea of God often is like a superstition but doesn't have to be, and often the idea of God is better than any superstition. It can be better. It can refer to something real and it can lead us to good acts. Although our evolved nature pushes us to the idea of God it does not fill in all details. Nor does society fill in all details. We can accept or reject what society offers. We can fill in the idea with good points with good results. It is fairly easy to reject the ideas of the mountain spirit or demon but harder to prove or reject the idea of God. To people already against the idea of God, that character makes the idea seem more like superstition. To me, it makes the idea seem less like superstition. It makes the idea of God much more than mere superstition grounded in our evolved nature. The fact that the idea of God is hard to reject and hard to argue over might say something about how cleverly the idea works in evolved brains but it also might say that the idea actually is plausible and useful.

We feel morality, morality is abstract, morality is not material, morality works through evolved bodies, morality refers to relations between evolved beings, it is hard to pin down exactly to what morality refers, morality is important, morality seems as real as scientific method, and morality implies the super natural. These facts do little to make me believe in superstitions like ghosts, witches, and mountain spirits. They do a lot to make me believe in morality and God.

Almost Accurate Ideas.

We do not perceive the world as it is exactly. We do pretty well. We “mis-see” the world partly because it is hard to see the world just as it is and partly because “mis-seeing” can be more useful than accurately

seeing. Evolution helped us mis-see the world adeptly. If we need to flee or fight now, we can't stop to notice the exact shade of brown of the bear's fur or the exact musical pitch of its roar. It is easier to fall in love with a somewhat idealized person than a fully real person, and most of us need to fall in love to start families.

Our idea of God certainly is not accurate. We likely got the idea of God partly because it is inaccurate, part of a package with lively world, spirits, and natural categories, as a way to get us to act, or not act, even when we were not sure. As many people have pointed out, ideas of God borrow a lot from parents, other authority figures such as kings and wizards, and nurturing figures. The idea of God has both an inherited and learned component.

Just because the idea came through evolution, and is not fully accurate, does not mean it is necessarily false, harmful, bad, or ugly. Like other ideas that came through evolution, and like other ideas that come from anywhere, it has to be assessed on the appropriate criteria, not only on its source.

Assessing Ideas with an Evolutionary Basis Wrongly.

Some inaccurate ideas with roots in evolution do not refer to anything material or "real", if they refer to anything at all. The ideas of friendship and justice certainly have roots in evolution but they don't refer to anything material. Some ideas refer to something we think is very real but is not material. The idea of love, including family love and romantic love, certainly has roots in evolution, and most people think love is real, but love is not material and it is hard to specify exactly what love is.

Some inaccurate ideas give us considerable comfort. We get comfort from the ideas of love, honor, friendship, justice, exchange, tradition, etc. That does not mean that what the ideas refer to is not real, is less real, or is a delusion. Not everything that gives us comfort is a delusion. Some things that give us comfort are delusions, such as our own grandeur. Some delusions do not give us comfort, such as a conspiracy theory. Honor gives me a lot of comfort, and I don't think it is a delusion. Whether an idea gives us comfort is irrelevant to the value and truth of an idea; we have to assess the idea apart from its role in giving us comfort. I refuse to let go of the ideas of friendship and love because they are partly delusions that give me comfort.

With some ideas, we evolved not only to have the idea but also to believe in its importance and to defend the idea. We not only feel love, we think it is important, and we defend it against detractors. We do the same with friendship and art. Just because we evolved to think an idea is important (believe in it) and to defend the idea, does not mean it is not important and cannot be defended on good grounds. Love, friendship, duty, and art are important, and can be defended on good grounds that have little to do with how the ideas originated.

With some ideas, it is hard to pin down what they refer to. What exactly does "love" refer to? The fact that it is hard to pin down exactly what the ideas refer to does not make the ideas less useful or wrong. It also does not make what they refer to less real.

Some inaccurate ideas with roots in evolution allow us to manipulate other people or allow other people to manipulate us. That does not mean the ideas are false, or are so dangerous that we cannot use them at

all and should repress them. The idea of fairness certainly has roots in evolution, children use it to abuse adults, and political groups such as ethnic and gender groups use it to abuse other political groups. That does not mean the idea is false or that we should totally repress the idea of fairness. The idea is certainly true, and often useful. We have to learn how to use it well. We have to defend against bad manipulation based on fairness. We did so in our evolutionary past, and can continue to do so.

What matters is how we assess and use an idea. It does not matter that the idea has roots in evolution, does not refer to anything material, has no simple referent, is inaccurate, gives comfort, allows us to manipulate, or that we evolved to believe hard in the idea and to defend it. What matters is that we can assess and use the idea. Unfortunately, we do not have well-developed criteria for assessing and using ideas like these, and so argue about them a lot.

Morality.

Morality is an evolved idea. Because morality evolved to go along with success nearly all the time, biologists are used to thinking of morality entirely in terms of success, or practicality. Biologists explain morality in terms of practicality. Morality is really practicality in disguise. Morality is really all about practicality. Biologists reduce morality to practicality. Goodness is not really anything on its own; goodness really is all about getting your own way indirectly and promoting the welfare of your family. This way of thinking about morality can be useful when figuring out strategies and evolutionary history but it is not entirely accurate.

More accurately, morality has its own logic, the logic of the Golden Rule and of “applies equally”. Morality is about goodness, right, duty, the greater good, etc. Morality goes along with practicality most of the time because we evolved to be aware of it and use it. Morality cannot be entirely reduced to practicality. We will see this argument again below.

We evolved to use morality, believe in it, and defend it. Morality does not refer to anything material. We can be hard-pressed to say exactly what morality does refer to. Morality gives us considerable comfort. We use it to manipulate other people, and they use it to manipulate us. We evolved to be susceptible to morality (believe in it). We evolved to defend morality, probably in part because we use it to manipulate other people. Morality sometimes can be a delusion, give us false hope, and serve as a tool that does more harm than good. Even so, morality is not necessarily false or useless. Morality is largely true, and morality does more good than harm most of the time. Morality can be explained by the fact that natural selection sustained it. But morality cannot be assessed only by the fact that it evolved or only by its secondary attributes such as that we use it to manipulate. Morality can be evaluated only on its truth, beauty, accord with other ideas, etc. If morality cannot be assessed by these criteria, then no evolved idea can be assessed this way. If morality can be assessed by these criteria, then every evolved idea can be assessed this way and should be assessed this way.

Religion, including belief in God, is an evolved idea. We have to assess it as calmly as we do morality. For historical reasons, that is hard to do, maybe especially in the 2010s. Before we can begin, we have to be clear about moral atheism.

Reminder: Kinds of Atheists.

All atheists actively disbelieve in God. If you only think there might not be a God, then you are more an agnostic than an atheist.

Surprisingly to Right Wingers, the majority of atheists are good moral people. They are “moral atheists”. They believe in morality although they disbelieve in God. Their morality tends to be more PC and “Lefty” than mainstream. Moral atheists likely make good neighbors. Their atheism often arises out of their morality because they think religion causes more harm than good, and they want to do more good than harm. This is the group with which I am concerned.

Super Natural.

Briefly:

-Anything that we make very important, above most of the world, we really make super natural, even if it is also in this world. Not only God is super natural. People who believe deeply in morality, love, wealth, power, souls, democracy, or free will really make those things super natural.

-Whenever we make something super natural, we imply metaphysics to go along with it even if we don't elaborate the metaphysics. If we think persons are really important, we have to explain the place of persons in the world, the relation of persons to each other, the relations of persons to choice, and their relation to aspects of the world such as power.

-To allow any super natural and metaphysics at all is to allow a lot. If you say you can hold something special, such as morality, then other people have the right to hold things special too. Then we have to decide between different sets of super-natural-with-metaphysics. If a person says souls, love, morality, and freedom are special than another person can say power and wealth are special, and we have to decide.

I use “super natural” instead of “supernatural” to make a point. “Supernatural” implies something like nature but outside of nature, and now also implies superstition and mumbo-jumbo. I don't need to imply that much. I only need to show that we go beyond nature sometimes without implying that we go to another magic world outside of nature.

A commitment to morality usually is also a commitment to the super natural. Without realizing it, moral atheists commit to the existence of the super natural when they commit to morality. Because they will not be happy that I say this, I have to use space to make the point. I make it chiefly by contrasting a moral atheist with the amoral neutrality of nature. Moral atheists tend both to believe in the neutrality of nature and to commit to morality.

Assume that the idea of a natural world makes sense. Assume the world is only natural. This idea goes along with the idea that natural laws explain everything. If so, nature is amoral. There is no intrinsically better or worse in nature; there is only what is and what happens. This is the point of the story “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane, who also wrote “The Red Badge of Courage”. “Stuff happens”. Nature is not immoral; nature does not promote bad things or value bad things. Nature is not moral; nature does not

promote good things or value good things. Nature makes many things. Some things happen to be moral, some amoral, and some immoral. Nature does not favor one over the other. Even if there is a general drift in nature toward good things or bad things, that drift is only accidental.

Not only is nature neutral on morality, nature is neutral on everything. Again, there is no intrinsic better or worse in nature. A mudslide is no better and no worse than a star although a star might be better than a mudslide if we allow that bigger is better. A flea is no less important, or more important, than a galaxy. A tapeworm is no better than an ape. No animal is better or worse than any other animal. Humans are not better than any other thing or species. Humans are no better than a broken pebble or a slug. No ethnic group, religion, way of government, or way of life, is better or worse than any other. Tyranny and slavery are the same as democracy. Except with a measurable property such as "bigger", all evaluations come only from the point of view of a particular organism, and depend entirely on the evolved mental abilities of the organism. To a whale, the open sea is better than the Internet.

Valuing and committing often go together. The fact that people commit to morality shows that they value it in a way that nature does not value it. Usually when we value something highly, we also commit to it, and, we commit to something because we value it. I value honor highly, and commit to it; I value Tai Chi Chuan highly and commit to it. People usually value marriage and try to commit to it. Moral atheists commit to morality and therefore they value morality highly in a way nature does not.

We value things in an all-natural amoral world that does not itself bestow value. In particular, we value morality in an all-natural amoral non-evaluating world. Some of the things that we value, we value in a way that puts us at odds with an amoral non-evaluating world. To value things in an all-natural amoral non-evaluating world put us in one of only four positions.

(1) The value is only a matter of idiosyncratic taste, regardless of how the taste developed. I don't go into this position any more here because moralistic atheists want more than this.

(2) The commitment-valuation is all natural and only natural. It does not point to anything beyond nature. We evolved to have an idea, believe in the idea, value the idea, think the object of the idea is real, defend the idea, defend our commitment, and use the idea to manipulate ourselves and other people. There is nothing more than that. There is nothing special about the logic of this idea or that idea or any idea. No idea is intrinsically any better than any other idea just because we evolved to evaluate some ideas higher than other ideas. Any belief that an idea is better than any other idea is merely an evolved delusion that helps our commitment. Any belief that an idea is better than any other idea is part of delusion that helps us to manipulate ourselves and other people. Morality can be reduced entirely to evolutionary success or to surrogates such as power and sex.

(3) The capacity to have the idea evolved but the idea, the value we place on the idea, our commitment, and the fact that we think the object of the idea is real, really link to the super natural anyway. Although the capacity for an idea is entirely evolved, it can still point to something super natural. The fact that the capacity for the idea evolved in human beings here on planet Earth is only how we got to be aware of the idea. The fact that we might have an inaccurate version of the idea does not undermine the idea. This is how moralistic atheists feel about morality whether they know it or not. This is how many people feel about morality, love, justice, democracy, etc.

(4) The capacity to have the idea evolved but the idea, the value we place on the idea, our commitment, and the fact that we think the object of the idea is real, link to the super natural anyway. In this case, in contrast to position three, the best evidence for the super natural link is not any feeling we have about the idea or how we use the idea but the logic of the idea. The logic of the idea is distinct. The logic of the idea has the features that we associate with moral logic. The facts that we never perfectly follow the logic, and we do not see the object of the logic perfectly, do not undermine the logic. We might not live up to the Golden Rule and we might not see every person in his-her full humanity but those facts do not change that we understand the logic. Position four is the standard modern defense by philosophy for morality as super natural.

The difference between the positions is subtle but important. Philosophers have argued for positions three and four since at least 2400 years ago with Plato. This is a case of “if you get it, you get it, and, if you don’t, you don’t.” If you can see the color red, you can see it. If you already disbelieve the third and fourth positions, I cannot talk you into them. See any anthology on ethics, or read “The Once and Future King”. If you already disbelieve, willingly suspend your disbelief long enough to follow the rest of this chapter.

Moral atheists are ambivalent and often hypocritical. They deny the third-fourth positions when it suits them such as when they argue with terrorists against the role of religion in life. They do not want to allow any excuse for terrorism, so they explain away religion as merely evolved. They accept the third-fourth positions when that suits them, as when they want to push their morality against a different morality such as simple Christianity.

Not only a commitment to morality points to the super natural and makes the positions. If you think love, justice, freedom, clear thinking, decency, good neighborly relations, Dharma, Tao, or yin and yang are intrinsically valuable and/or real then you are not a true naturalistic skeptic as in positions one-two. The idea that the natural world is amoral is not a scientific fact that can be tested but a belief to be evaluated. So, commitment to naturalistic materialism means a person privileges material stuff over subjective-but-entirely-naturalistic-experiences such as righteous justification, and so is not a naturalistic skeptic. If you think matter-and-energy is more real than anything else, including the smell of roses, then you are not a true naturalistic skeptic. On the other hand, if you think subjective mental states exist and are intrinsically valuable, such as love or the smell or roses, then you are not a true naturalistic skeptic either. If you think pleasure really is better than pain, you are not a true naturalistic skeptic.

It helps to use a belief other than morality to make the point. People who believe that all acts, judgments, and commitments are only natural (position two) also tend to believe in scientific method. These two ideas are contradictory. The people who use scientific method do not just use scientific method, they believe in it, value it highly, commit to it, and think it is really real (Position Three). They believe that scientific method has its own logic; the logic is apart from any way that we come to believe in it; and the logic is apart from any particular procedures that we use to carry it out (particular procedures of testing and discovery) (Position Four). They believe scientific method is some thing outside of any particular person. Scientific method is objective. It can be used to evaluate other ideas. Although evolution ultimately gave us the capacities to see scientific method and use it, evolution did not create scientific method. Evolution developed capacities to allow us to mimic scientific logic but evolution did not invent

the logic of scientific method. Scientific method would be the same if it were used on Earth or used by floating aliens on some gas giant near a red star. Scientific method is not in the natural world in the same sense that a rock, tree, dog, or belief that the sun will rise, are in the natural world. Then where is it? If you believe in scientific method, then you believe in the super natural. You cannot believe in scientific method as apart from any particular evolved being and not also believe in the super natural.

Thinkers often use the fact that we sometimes act-morally-despite-impractical-results (altruism) to argue that morality is super natural. Whenever anybody risks his-her life to save a potential drowning victim, people argue that morality is super natural. In contrast, evolutionary theory has advanced to the point where it can account for this kind of behavior fairly easily without invoking altruism. Thus this argument has become a “red herring”, this argument is now largely irrelevant, so I do not explain how evolutionary theory accounts for altruism, and I do not go through the dispute. You can find discussion of it in most of the readings on the evolution of morality in the list of readings.

Following Plato, the early Christian Church clearly understood the idea that, if you privilege anything, you imply something super natural. Everybody privileges something, so everybody also implies some super natural. That idea was fully acceptable to the Church because, the Church argued, once you accept that some super natural is needed, we can prove that our construction of the super natural, our metaphysics, is the one and only possible, and the best, metaphysics. That is why the Church, especially the Western Church, has been so “big” on philosophy and logic – in my opinion, a good thing because we are the heirs of that tradition. Once you accept that some super natural is inevitable, then you have to argue about the best super natural; you have to argue metaphysics. You can still see this idea stated in its pristine clarity in Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton and Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis. This chapter dabbles in the battle of metaphysics but does not go into it much. I disagree with the Church claim that they can prove their metaphysics is the one-and-only-best. Hindus and some Buddhists make the same claim, and I disagree with them too. I do not give my full criteria for deciding between versions of the super natural and of metaphysics. This book-as-a-whole does go through that project a bit but not in the explicit philosophical way favored in the Western Church.

Not Reducing Morality.

People like to explain morality in terms of other things. Especially they like to explain goodness in terms of other things. They reduce morality to other things. They say goodness is really only pleasure, power, practicality, lust, order, or success in disguise. Darwinists reduce morality when they say morality evolved to serve evolutionary success, and all moral abilities can be understood by how they served evolutionary success in our past (position one). In “Principia Ethica”, G. E. Moore argued that this way of talking about goodness is completely wrong. You cannot explain goodness in terms of anything else. Moral thinking is qualitatively unique by itself. Morality is a qualitatively distinct idea. We understand good things as good. We do not understand good things in terms of any thing else. When we say something is good, we mean it is good, we do not mean it is really anything else in disguise.

Because good is a qualitatively distinct unique idea, when we believe in goodness, we can really believe in goodness in itself. Even when goodness is mixed with other concerns, as when we tell the truth and enhance our reputation at the same time, we can believe that there is a pure goodness apart from other motives, and we do not have to believe that goodness is only other motives in disguise.

Moore did not say the following but it is an extension of his ideas: In the all-naturalistic amoral world, morality is either directly natural or it can be reduced to only things that are natural. Moore says we cannot reduce morality. That means we cannot reduce morality to anything natural. Because nature is amoral, it seems a bit odd to say that morality is natural even though the capacity for morality evolved. The fact that the capacity for morality evolved does not mean that morality itself is natural. Morality and nature are not necessarily the same. If morality is not simply natural, I think it must be super natural.

I have said often that morality has its own logic. This is my way to say morality is a qualitatively distinct idea that cannot be reduced to anything else. I used the Golden Rule and the idea of “applies equally to everybody” to explain the logic of morality. Saying morality has its own logic can be seen as reducing morality to some thing. I am not sure Moore would approve. I don't argue with his ghost here. I stick with what I have been doing.

Implications.

Once moral atheists accept that morality is super natural, then religion is an open door. Morality evolved, it is used to manipulate people, we gain comfort from it, and it is not a perfectly accurate way to assess behavior. We evolved to believe hard in it and to defend it. All the same is true of religion. Moral atheists who want to dismiss religion because the ability for religion evolved denigrate religion not on its content but on its source alone. If moral atheists want to dismiss religion on the grounds that religion evolved, merely is a comforting delusion, is not fully accurate, etc., then they have to explain why they can use this argument against religion but not against morality. They have to explain why morality is special without committing to any of the super natural implications that saying morality is special must lead to. They have to say why morality is special but religion is not. This is doable but is very hard, and I have never read an account by a moral atheist why it might be so.

Belief in the super natural does not necessarily commit us to religion in general, to any particular religion, or to any foolishness such as fairies, devils, and animal spirit companions. We have to think about what it does imply.

If making moral evaluations necessarily implies God exists, this book would not be needed. Everybody would accept it by now. But the fact that we refer to the super natural when we judge does not prove any of what I believe.

For a while, many Darwinists that I met were also atheists and vegetarians. It is an odd mix. There is no reason why vegetarianism and atheism entail each other. I understand why people might be vegetarians and how they would justify vegetarianism morally. Vegetarians make a moral commitment. They believe in vegetarianism and morality. Yet the moral commitment to vegetarianism is the kind of commitment that usually links to the super natural. Traditional vegetarians, such as some Jains, Hindus, and Buddhists, make this link explicit. There is no reason in nature, evolution, evolutionary history, or Darwinism, why people should be vegetarians on moral grounds. There is little in how morality evolved that would lead us to not eat meat or to think vegetarianism is superior. In fact, there are good reasons why not; why we might think eating meat was practically better and so morally better; but I don't go into them here. If the moral commitment to vegetarianism implies the super natural, then Darwinian atheists need to ask why

they want to be vegetarians. If Darwinian atheists want to deny everything that implies the super natural, they need to give up vegetarianism except for strict reasons of health. I think the moral commitment of vegetarians to the super natural is not logically compatible with atheism, especially with a combination of vigorous Darwinism and atheism.

The super natural link that is implied by any moral commitment might not entail any particular theism but it does entail that we have to wonder. If you want to be moral, you have to think. We have to wonder why we think goodness, freedom, love, duty, and honor are real and are so much better. Whenever sentient-moral beings evolved (like humans) the morality that evolved would be like the morality we have even if not exactly like. So we have to wonder what the pervasiveness of morality means. We have to wonder what it means that the logic of morality is the logic of the Golden Rule and “applies equally to everybody”. We have to wonder why that logic is unique. We have to be amazed that all sentient-moral beings would know that logic. We have to wonder about the laws of the universe being set just right for the evolution of sentient-moral beings on a lot of planets. We have to wonder about a mind behind it all. We don’t all have to agree, but we do have to wonder, and we have to agree what we wonder about. My wonder leads me to a mind behind it all, and to the messages that the mind has given us through his prophets, in particular Jesus.

We know now that we don’t have to discard the idea of God just because the basis for it evolved, the idea is not fully accurate, it gives us comfort, etc. Now we have to evaluate it. On what basis do we evaluate? Because there is no logical proof for the existence or non-existence of God, we have to give up on that, and evaluate on other grounds. After we have evaluated on other grounds, we can come back to decide the existence or non-existence of God. The first other ground is plausibility based on circumstantial evidence of cosmology and on the evolution of morality. On that basis, I decided God likely exists. The remaining other grounds are what this book is about. We look at the various ideas about life, God, and religion, and then we make up our minds. The most important ground is morality. Religious belief has to be in line with the best morality, the morality of the Golden Rule and “applies equally to everybody”. We have to take the real world into account.

This stance is not new. This is the stance advised by the Enlightenment. Sadly, smart people gave up on this stance for about two hundred years. Not everybody can take this stance. The people who can follow this way should follow it, and they should share their results as best they can.

Taking this stance does not guarantee that people will become decent or the state will run as it should. Only if decent intelligent reasonable people can control the apparatus of government without oppressing other people can this strategy help with government.

Any orientation to the super natural automatically implies that this life is not enough and that we have to turn to the super natural to find the full meaning of life. I don’t like this implication but I accept it, and then try to deal with it. How I deal with it has been discussed in previous chapters and will be discussed more in later chapters. This link to the super natural does not commit us to any particular theism and it does not commit us to devalue this human life on this planet. Humans are not depraved and the world is not fallen just because we link to the super natural when we believe in morality. A small amount of the super natural is compatible with the idea that this life is what there is, this situation is what counts, and we should focus on what we have to do now. Religions that teach us to pay attention to what is going on

now, such as Judaism, Buddhism, Zen, and Taoism, also feature some super natural presence although not always deism. The idea that moral commitment opens the door to the super natural does not have to go against those religions or against a commonsense life.

Natural and Super Natural Again.

On the one hand, I said natural laws can explain everything. On the other hand, I said morality points to the super natural. I cannot wriggle out of this contradiction. I don't know how to fully resolve it. Here is the best I can do. Morality has its own distinct logic, the logic of "applies equally to everybody" and the Golden Rule. Evolution helps us to find this logic. Evolution creates the chemistry that approximately models our acts on this logic. Evolution does not create this logic, any more than it creates the logic of scientific method. Evolution is God's way of guiding us to an objective logic of good and bad.

Except for books like this when we have to be clear about the super natural and have to make points about the super natural, pro or con, I prefer not to dwell on it much. I use the naturalistic research strategy and assume that natural laws explain as much as I need for most cases.

More important than deciding exactly what morality implies for the super natural, we need to decide on what principles we will use in morality and to decide particular cases of morality. What principles do we use to decide the morality of what kinds of abortion, and what laws the state should have concerning what kinds of abortion? I have given my principles in the first part of the book and I develop them more when I describe other religions in later chapters.

Religion, Badness, and Human Nature.

This section repeats an argument offered earlier. This material might make more sense now.

Many atheists want to thwart religion because they want to thwart badness. This is a noble desire. Many bad things are done in the name of religion, as they are done in the name of political ideologies. Atheists think, if we got rid of religion, we might be able to prevent a lot of badness. I think, if we got rid of religion, we might prevent a little badness, but we probably could not prevent much badness, and we would cause a lot of other badness that would be worse than what good we did.

Bad things that are done in the name of religion are usually really done for other reasons. People only use religion as an excuse. Stopping Christianity would not have stopped slavery in the United States. Stopping Islam would not stop terrorism by people who fear modernity, hate the West, and hang on to whatever little power they can. Stopping Islam would not prevent Iran from working to develop nuclear weapons. Ending Christianity would not have stopped the Crusades. Stopping Qi Gong will not prevent all Chinese from foolishness. The best way to minimize the damage done by religion is to tie religion to the best universal morality. Most of the world now understands the best universal morality. We need to help people see the tie between their religion and what they already know about morality.

If all religion were eliminated, people would still do bad things in the name of other ideologies. People would use other ideologies to excuse bad things that they want to do for other reasons. People would use atheism as an excuse for oppression.

If all underlying excuses to use religion to do bad things were removed, some few people still would do bad things because of "pure" religion alone and for no other reason. Even if a person had no other motive, he-she would still bomb a school bus because God-Allah-Dharma-Tao-Nature-Heaven-Oogah-Boogah said so. It is not possible to stop all human stupidity and badness. It is not worth trying to stop all religion so as to stop the very little badness that is done for religion alone.

People are born with the capacity for religion, like they are born being able to enjoy alcohol. Trying to stop religion would be like American Prohibition. It is like trying to stop stupid political opinions or the love of fashion and frippery. It is like trying to stop stupid TV game shows, reality shows, and soap operas. It is like trying to stop bad political commentary. It only surfaces again in another way. Trying to stop what people like breeds resentment, hatred of authority, and gangsters. Trying to stop religion would breed the equivalent of religious gangsters, and we have enough of that already. Again, the best thing is not to stop religion but to ally religion with the best morality.

Difference.

I want the best morality to guide religion. I do not fight with other believers over details of content. I learn from all religious teachers. I especially admire Jesus, and I like defending him. God sent prophets to us. I want us to be decent people and to work hard to build a better world. I want us all to do what we wish as long as we don't hurt other people, and, by doing what we wish, make the world interesting. Except for the few references to God and Jesus, my stance hardly differs from moral atheists. Then what difference does it make? Not much. Here is what I see.

Moral atheists are like the religious zealots they condemn. Even when moral atheists make a point of smoking pot, drinking booze, supposedly accepting other people, and accepting Lefty politics, that is not how they seem. They have the letter but not the spirit. They are like PC moralists and religious zealots even when they condemn PC moralists and religious zealots. They are like Prohibitionists but they are even worse because they deal not with substances but with ideas. They romanticize indecent people while putting down simple decent people. They perpetuate the false romantic world view with simple contrasts such as between religion versus morality. They want me to think like them. I don't want to think like them. They want me to shut down my imagination. I don't want to shut down my imagination. They want to take the color out of the world. I like seeing in color.

Religious moderates are like the people that the moral atheists want to be. Religious moderates are like people who take a drink now and again, smoke a little grass (marijuana), and listen to stories from other people. They are happy when other people listen to their stories. They like taking ideas into their minds and playing with them. They are not afraid of the idea of God. They see the importance of morality and religion but also their dangers.

Promote religious moderates. Condemn zealots of all kinds. Do not try to ban religion so as to get rid of zealots. Do not try to discredit religion so as to ban religion. Do not get angry at moral atheists; argue with them when you feel like it and when they make sense. Do not use Darwinism to discredit religion unless your arguments get much better.

PART 5: Atheists vs. Theists: Do We Need God to Be Moral?

This part largely repeats and summarizes. It focuses on the implications for the real world.

The simple answer to the header question is “No. Atheists are moral”. The rest of us can believe in God without feeling guilty or inferior. Belief in God usually is sane and belief can help us. Most of us will, and should, believe. Atheists can do as they wish. Deep problems are more dangerous than ideologies such as atheism, simplistic religion, or bad religion. We should work on solving deep problems.

Note before Main Text: Poor Old Science, Good Old Science, New Science, and Not Science.

The only way to write this note briefly is to allude to ideas from science without explaining. Anybody who has read the excellent recent popular books on science knows enough. At the end of this section, I give some examples from fields other than science.

Atheists who use physics and biology to disprove God look at the idea of God as doctrinaire physicists look at the old ideas of Ptolemaic epicycles, phlogiston, and ether or as doctrinaire “New Darwinism” biologists look at old ideas about “good of the species” and Vitalism. These old ideas once were valid theories about aspects of the world. They were displaced by better theories that took better account of the facts. Sometimes, crucial facts disproved the old theory but worked with the new theory. The classic example of this disproving is the Michelson-Morley experiment that came up with facts that could not be explained by ether but could be explained by Special Relativity.

When old theories are displaced this way, people born into the new generation look on the old theories as not simply displaced but as conclusively falsified and they look on the people who cling to old theories as fools. Old theories, and people who cling to them, are the butt of jokes. Examples include people who denied the atomic theory, denied the enzyme theory, believed in Vitalism despite the rise of biochemistry, couldn’t understand Relativity or QM, just couldn’t accept QM even if they could do the manipulations, and people who clung to “good of the species” and the kind of population biology that presumed good of the species. Even Einstein was seen as foolish over QM.

THIS is how atheists look at God, as an old displaced theory that is now conclusively disproved. When new science can explain so much without reference to God, then God is not only displaced but clearly disproved. The people who continue to believe in God are foolish oldster outsiders who just can’t let go and can’t get on with better ideas and better work. When faced with old ideas and clingy people, the best antidote is to pile on facts of the new world as we now see it. If we can’t save old believers, at least we can save the new generation from being seduced by wrong old ideas.

It helps to know that Einstein never thought the ether disproved. It just had little use. There was no point in trying to directly prove or disprove ether. It is better to focus on what is interesting, beautiful, elegant, and so likely true. Einstein likely did not know of Michelson-Morley when he forged Special Relativity, and, in any case, the experiment did not play a large role.

This attitude that old theories are definitely false and old believers foolish might be valid when aimed at some popular ideas of God and at some doctrines of traditional churches. I don’t go into detail. It is not

accurate when aimed at all scientists and other thoughtful people who believe in God. It is not accurate when aimed at the ideas in this chapter and this book.

I now presume to speak for scientists and other thoughtful people who believe in God. This group does not look at the idea of God like epicycles, phlogiston, ether, Vitalism, and simplistic “good of the species”. This group looks at the idea of God much as working physicists, working biologists, engineers, the space program, and science teachers look at Newtonian physics, classical electrodynamics, population biology, and even QM before quantum field theory (I still don’t understand QFT well). Those old theories make sense. They work. A normal person can get them. They do not require a bizarre leap of imagination or an-odd-for-a-scientist faith in numbers that magically add up. They are easier to use than the complex theories that displaced them. They are more than good enough except when theoretical rigor is needed. All the trips to the moon have been carried out pretty much using only Newtonian physics and classical ideas of light and matter. Yes, the old theories are not complete, but that is no reason to laugh at them or discard them entirely.

Just because another new theory can better explain the same things that this old theory can explain, does not mean we should scoff at this old theory. It does not mean this theory is entirely false and stupid. It does not mean the people who continue to use this old theory when useful are idiots and incompetent. If so, 90% of engineers and 75% of physicists are incompetent idiots.

Besides, the new theories are not entirely correct, they are likely to be displaced, they are not often the most convenient for real world use, and they are as much about beauty as about facts (although they must explain facts and they are subject to falsification). Aspects of the old theories find happy places in the new theories. Nobody thinks quarks are the last word about matter. When new ideas about matter and energy come, it will be fun to see what happens to QED and QCD despite the accuracy of QED numbers. Nobody knows why the calculations come out so well or what is really happening “down there”. There is as yet no quantum theory of gravity, and, when QG comes, it will be fun to see what happens to the theories of Einstein even though the amazingly accurate calculations of General Relativity remain. “Collapse of the wave function” is, in fact, gibberish to cover up that physicists haven’t any idea what is going on with many basic interactions. New Darwinism is more accurate than old ideas of the “good of the species” and more accurate than old population biology (including genetics and ecology), at least for individual organisms, kin, small groups, and mass closely related societies such as hives and colonies. If there was a big full theory of species, populations, and ecology based on the New Darwinism then that is what we should use – if we could. Attempts to model real populations and real ecologies using new ideas of competition, population structure, species, and species interaction are complicated, and so far, have not been very successful or useful. No field biologist would use New Darwinism for a population or ecosystem when old population biology works well enough to save a species and a national park. And, with the coming of recent ideas in biology, which show that variance at several levels is relevant to selection, the old population ideas are not so wrong after all and the New Darwinism is not all correct. New ideas from physics and biology are overall more correct but that is no reason to be smug, rude, and dismissive toward old ideas.

Of course, the idea of God is NOT a scientific theory. I don’t explain why. That difference is part of the point here. Scientific theories, even when they explain so much, still do not discredit ideas like God. If they did, then I could not write this chapter basing my arguments on morality.

Even though the idea of God is not a scientific theory, still, lessons of old and new theories from science can be applied to the idea of God.

We certainly do not understand God very well. We are not accurate. We should not expect to be entirely accurate. We should be happy when prophets increase our knowing a bit. Suppose we understand God about as well as physicists before 1900 knew the world. That is good enough for practical needs. When prophets and thinkers come up with better ideas of God, we can absorb those as well. We need not scoff at old ideas of God or even at atheists. People who scoff now get ridiculed later. It is not likely that any theory, or any simple heaping on of evidence, will get us to the full accurate truth of the world. It is not likely any theory or any simple heaping on of evidence will prove or disprove God.

Despite advances in science, you can hold on to the idea of God, without contravening science, as you can hold on to the Golden Rule or the beauty of Bach, Mozart, and the Beatles.

Thinking of the idea of God as like epicycles, phlogiston, ether, or simplistic “good of the species” gives you a bad attitude toward the idea of God, God, believers, and average evolved people. Thinking of the idea of God as like classical physics or like field biology gives you a better attitude toward God, believers, and average evolved people. Thinking of the idea of God as like epicycles etc. blocks you from seeing that the idea of God is not like scientific theories and it cannot be disproved or proved by an accumulation of facts. Thinking of the idea of God as like Newtonian physics helps you to see that the idea of God is not a scientific theory and helps you see the proper relation between facts, beauty, science, and the idea of God. This stance is a better place from which to see that people do not believe in, and use, the idea of God as they do the science that they learned in high school or grad school. This approach makes you humbler and better able to work with the realities of evolved human nature.

Taking a stance that “old theories are stupid and absolutely false” sets up a bad idea toward new theories and sets you up to be the stubborn idiot when new ideas come along. You become the person that you now laugh at. Seeing that new theories are as much about beauty as about gobs of facts leads you to feel the value of old theories and helps you not to get stuck in the “new” theories that will someday be old theories. Seeing that many old theories are still good working models makes it easier to appreciate new theories and to appreciate what lies outside science. It helps you not become the person you now avoid. You think better. This better overall attitude makes it easier to appreciate the idea of God in human life and the possibility that God might be real. It does not force you to believe God is real.

It would be better if atheists did not look at science as “proving God wrong” in the same way that science proved wrong ideas of phlogiston, epicycles, ether, Vitalism, and good of the species. It might be better if thoughtful believers in God would think out the relation of God and morality, and then think out the role of science in appreciating (not proving or disproving) God.

Atheists see the idea of God like outlandish art and dress styles from about five years ago: not only are they gone, they are dead, and best repressed and forgotten. Thoughtful believers see God like classic clothes that never go out of style. They might not be a hit with everyone, not turn heads, not be suitable for every occasion, but they can't go wrong, you won't look stupid now or in old pictures, you only need improve on them sometimes, and you will have enough fun wearing these. Atheists look at the idea of

God like any simple stupid recurring fad. Thoughtful believers look at God like as classic, enduring, and that gives value all the time, from rock music and jazz to cars. Atheists look at the idea of God as like the latest TV show about cops, doctors, spies, demons, demon hunters, pseudo-epics, or vengeance; it has roots in the human personality, and will always recur, but we can rise above it. Thoughtful believers see God as like the really good shows that come from time-to-time and speak to us. They might not guide us through all of life, and might even be aimed at one gender or one ethnic group, but they are true enough at a deep enough level so we can always enjoy them and learn from them. Atheists look at the idea of God as like all the damn annoying politicians that we always elect and that serve forever in Washington or the state capital. Why people vote for them can be explained by evolved human nature but that doesn't make it right and doesn't mean we shouldn't fight hard to rise above it. Thoughtful believers look at God as like the politicians who shape nations and who make us better such as Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Washington, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy. Atheists hear the dogma of churches as like the ridiculous spiels of politicians and hip-hop racist sexists – not only seductive and annoying but dangerous. Thoughtful believers try to glean the truth out of long-standing political ideas, church dogmas, and religions. Atheists see groups of believers as like banana republics, dictators, North Korea, Burma before 2016, ethnic groups that cannot self-govern, or America since both Ronald Reagan and the explosion of entitlement. Thoughtful believers see small groups of simple decent people in all major religions striving to do good and to make the world better, guided both by their own character and by the best teachings of their religion.

The chapter now returns to the major themes.

Bad Problems.

The world has real problems such as: kinks in capitalism, some people are not smart enough to make a living in modern capitalism, the agony of nature, the American national debt, abuse of welfare, abuse of state programs for business, bad ideologies such as religious backlash, White racism, and Black racism. Some problems we can work on. Some we can do little about such as chronic unemployment. For those, the best we can do is to manage the symptoms in the most humane way possible. Instead of worrying about theism versus atheism, we should worry about the problems.

We the public, and our leaders, will not face these problems and deal with them. We offer evasions and “band aids” that make problems worse in the long run. Our evasion is as evil as the original problems. Some few smart people have seen the problems and a few have offered thoughtful plausible solutions but the solutions aren't the topic here. No major politician, religious leader, ethnic leader, or gender leader has offered and backed good solutions.

Ideologies, Behavior, and Bad Problems.

(1) Atheists say the world will end horribly if people continue in religious delusion and don't quickly adopt atheism. (2) Theists say the world will end horribly if people do not reject atheism, determinism, materialism, scientism, socialism, etc. and we don't all quickly come to God. Both groups are wrong. All groups that think this way are wrong.

I use “ideologies” and “ideas” similarly. People are swayed by ideologies such as the tough guy code, academic atheism, or “justified by faith alone”. Yet people do not usually behave as well as their best ideology tells them and do not behave as badly as their worst ideology tells them. Ideology and behavior go along and don’t go along. There is a gap between ideology and behavior.

People have a natural stock of mischief, naughtiness, superstition, stupidity, silliness, and some badness, and this mischief can keep us from reaching goals. Usually this is not much of a problem unless other hard issues lead us down bad roads. Bad people use bad ideologies, or twist good ideologies, to push personal mild naughtiness into real collective badness such as terrorism and oppression. Bad ideas can override basic decency. But bad ideas win usually only when used by bad people and combined with hard problems. I don’t focus on these issues here. They require a separate essay.

People also have a natural stock of decency that helps protect us from bad ideologies or bad twisting of good ideologies. The gap between ideology and behavior, and basic decency, mean we don’t have to worry much about bad ideologies unless there are also other deep reasons why people believe bad ideas and act badly. We can overcome bad ideas if we tell the truth and we work on solving deep problems, and only if we do that. I focus on this issue.

We all should: find good ideas, keep good ideas, debunk bad ideas, and expose the bad use of ideas. Theism and atheism in themselves are not bad. Ideas within them, such as “Jesus was a prophet”, are not usually bad. Theism, atheism, and ideas in them, can be used badly. We should expose the bad use of theism, atheism, and ideas in them. It is not often useful to try to debunk atheism or theism as wholes. It is more useful to debunk particular bad ideas or bad uses of ideas, such as “God loves us and only us, so we can do what we wish to others”, or “anyone who believes in God is fundamentally irrational, and so a bad citizen and prone to oppressive violence”.

So we can be religious, or atheistic, as we wish without also being stupid, harmful, and inhuman.

If you understand the above paragraphs and their implications for bad acts, good acts, bad people, good people, bad ideas, good ideas, bad ideologies, good ideologies, and traps, you may skip this section.

The world has bad people both because bad people would be around regardless and because problems lead people to behave badly. People also use problems as an excuse to behave badly even when they don’t understand the problems or the solutions, and what they really want to do is behave badly.

Some problems lead people to feel cheated, trapped, and picked on. Sometimes the people are really cheated and trapped, and sometimes they only feel cheated and trapped because they don’t see the big picture, don’t see how to get out of their situation, and don’t see how much the problems are their fault. Problems in which people feel cheated and trapped cause the most damage whether people are really cheated and trapped or only feel that way. Unemployment and under employment that feed racism, sexism, ageism, and bias based on religion are my favorite case of problems that lead people to feel cheated and trapped.

After about 1500, with the rise of capitalism and Protestantism, the West saw a boom in all kinds of new ideas, some good, many silly, and some bad. This is the start of modern “isms” such as materialism,

spiritualism, capitalism (free-market "ism"), modernism, faith over works, the Bible alone, atheism, etc. This is the start of modern cult-like ideas such as that religion, the state, the market, mysticism, science, emotion, love, reason, art, etc. alone can solve all our problems.

I don't know if silly, stupid, and bad ideas are in the same proportion to good ideas at all places in all times but they seem to have boomed in the West after 1500. I don't know if silly, stupid, and bad ideas before 1500 had more sway over people than those after 1500. Religious leaders descry nearly all new ideas as all bad and as leading us astray from the tried-and-true path of traditional religion that had been well set-up by the Middle Ages. Every "ism" or clever idea leads us into confusion, by itself causes us to act badly, and leads us away from God. I don't guess on the link between capitalism, Protestantism, and silly, stupid, or bad ideas. Roman Catholics and pro-business people have their share of poor ideas.

Bad ideologies by themselves can lead people astray into feeling cheated and trapped and can lead us into bad acts but not nearly as often as we fear, as long as nothing reinforces the bad ideology. The drug culture leads some people astray but not nearly as much as chemistry does, and the majority of people indulge in some drugs without losing their lives. People try cigarettes seeking glamour but stay addicted because of nicotine. People can lose integrity trying to be cool, and many people waste a huge amount of money and time that way. But trying to be cool itself likely does not do too much damage. Bad ideas usually are like women's fashion.

Bad ideologies are a real problem when they work with deeper problems that lead people to feel cheated and trapped (whether really cheated and trapped or not). Then, bad ideologies enable and intensify bad behavior, usually quite a bit. Then, problems intensify racism, sexism, ageism, and bias by religion; those attitudes cause people to act worse; the acting worse intensifies the original problems; and so on. It is hard to get out of these situations once in them, and, sadly, America is in half-a-dozen. Bad versions of Christianity and Islam do not alone cause terrorism, and are not the major original causes of terrorism; but they can work with terrorism when it arises for other reasons, they serve as recruiting tools, bad versions persist even when the original causes have abated, and bad versions can cause terrorism even when the original causes have abated.

When bad people want people to do bad things, they make people feel cheated, trapped, and picked on. They make people feel like victims, and make people wish to lash out. This is how terrorists recruit. This attitude has soured American politics since the late 1960s. When everybody in a country feels this way about his-her situation and about relations to everybody else, the country is in trouble. When people wish to do bad things, they screw themselves up to feel cheated, trapped, and picked on; they convince themselves they are victims and there is no way out other than bad acts. Regardless of any original dilemma, once a person is in this mindset, it is hard to get out. But it is not impossible.

Culture can be a strong reason why bad problems persist, stronger than (other mere) ideologies such as the gangster mystique or the Right Wing Rebel. Culture itself usually does not cause problems as does, for example, unemployment – although it can, as in cultures that are sexist. Yet, once attitudes that bear on problems become part of a culture, the complex of culture-and-problems becomes so entrenched that it is impossible to deal with problems, such as unemployment, without also dealing with the paired culture. So, for here, I don't classify culture as a basic underlying cause or as a mere ideology. This topic quickly

raises issues of PC versus not PC. What aspects of American White and American Black cultures are bad? I cannot go into more details here without going into too much.

People want to behave fairly well unless they feel mistreated. If there were not underlying bad conditions on which bad ideas and bad people could build, there would be much less seriously bad behavior.

To reduce the badness that ideas enable, we cannot simply go after bad ideas alone. We have to go after the underlying bad problems and the links between ideas and bad problems. If we don't also go after bad problems, then going after the ideas alone only makes things worse. We seem like hypocrites. Then bad ideas increase their ability to enable bad behavior. To go after the bad ideas that enable bad behavior, such as racism by both Whites and Blacks, can help with underlying problems. To go after bad problems we need fairly clear heads, and, to get that, we have to clean away bad ideas such as racism as much as we can. But, still, we will make little progress unless we also go after bad problems at the same time. We cannot simply talk people out of problems such as unemployment or bad behavior such as racism and terrorism.

Still, we should not excuse bad behavior because of underlying problems or because of ideologies that lead people astray. People must be responsible for their actions regardless of some bad situations and bad ideologies. People, especially leaders, have to seek out the basic causes of their situations, apart from what ideologies tell them, and people have to act according to basic truth.

Even if we totally eliminated all problems and bad ideas, we would still have enough people who act badly and find excuses. We have deal with bad people. Good people have to control bad people, often with the police and military, and often by personally telling bad people they are bad.

The simultaneous presence of bad people in themselves, bad problems, and bad ideas, makes the whole situation much more difficult but that is what humans have to deal with.

For here, look at religion as if it was an ideology in the above framework. For here, think of atheism as an intellectual quasi-religious ideology. If you don't like thinking of atheism that way, then think of it as an intellectual ideology. Bad ideologies, including bad religion and bad atheism, work with deep problems to lead people astray. We need to seek the truth to get people out of bad religious ideas.

For here, think of morality not as an ideology but as behaviors that are common to nearly all people and that can be evoked during most human interaction. Morality is "instinctive" good behavior, following the Golden Rule and "applies equally", instinctive good behavior that we can call on to counter bad behavior. I know real morality varies by culture and society, real morality has its own ideologies, and people can behave badly using a moral excuse; but overlook those issues for now. Think of it this way: when people behave badly using an excuse, their bad behavior goes against moral logic such as the Golden Rule, and their bad behavior usually is helped by a religious excuse, an ideology. When people behave well, they follow the logic of the Golden Rule, and they would not do so unless training had built on a solid evolved foundation.

Luckily, we have been helped by evolution. If religion (ideology) always exactly dictated moral behavior, then we would be in big trouble when people fell into bad ideology. People would always act badly, and it

would be hard to get them to act well. But people don't do that. A gap lies between ideology and moral action. People can think one way yet act another. Usually people act fairly decently regardless of official ideology. Usually people act badly on the basis of a particular ideology only in particular situations and toward particular people. Religion and morality evolved together, supported each other while evolving, and often support each other now. But they are not identical. They evolved not to be identical. They evolved so people could have one set of religious ideas and another set of actions based on simple morality, and the two sets could co-exist even if they contradicted a bit. People evolved to tolerate gaps between ideologies and actions. People can be nice to members of another race even when their religion tells them to hate those people. People can be bad to members of another race even when their ideology tells them to like those people. We can be moral without being religious. We can be quite religious and yet still act badly. There are adaptive reasons why religion and morality evolved to be close together but not identical, but I cannot go into the reasons here. For here, accept that morality and religion are usually fairly close together but definitely not identical. They run together but with a gap between them. Usually we are nice except when we have reasons to be bad, as when we feel cheated and trapped, and we can use ideology as an excuse.

The sometimes-close tie between ideology (religion) and moral behavior is what intensifies the bad acts of people who feel cheated and trapped. They use religion to explain their predicament and to justify their acts when they want to lash out.

If ideology, including religion, always dominated moral action, then the West would have been in a lot of trouble with the rise of all the strange ideologies since about 1500. The gap between ideology (religion) and moral behavior allowed the West to succeed despite many silly and bad ideas for the last 500 years (I ignore many good ideas). Without this gap, we would have succumbed to fascism, atheism, religious extremism, communism, market worship, or nature worship long ago. Religious leaders forget this.

On the other hand, if religion had not guided moral action somewhat, we would never have had good capitalism, and we would never have had good social movements such as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, feminism, and care for nature. The tie between good ideology and good behavior is also part of what saved the West.

Because of the gap between religion and moral action, and the fact that people revert to basic decency, we should not expect attacking ideas to do much good if we do not also attack deep problems, ideas such as "they are all pigs". We should not expect attacking ideologies to do much good if we do not also attack deep problems, big ideologies such as religion or atheism. We should be able to attack problems directly without worrying much about bad ideas that feed off the problems. We can mop up specific bad ideas after it is clear that we are working on deep problems and we will make progress. As we work on deep problems, we can attack bad ideas while relying on our basic moral sense to keep us in line long enough to find a better ideology to fit better times – if we work fast. Our energy is better spent on attacking deep problems than on attacking ideologies.

It is a great blessing both that ideology (religion) and morality are not tightly bound together and that they are usually somewhat bound together.

Traditional believers need not fear that people will run amok and society will collapse because a few cranky philosophers had ideas contrary to traditional religion and a few silly people follow. Traditional believers DO need to fear and face deep problems. Traditional religions do need to fear that our leaders will not come to grips with these issues. As long as we do not deal with issues, religions can use bad ideas, such as, from their view, atheism, as whipping boys and scapegoats for social problems – but that is merely another evasion.

Likewise, atheists need not fear that people will run amok and society will collapse because of religious backlash, persistence of religious ideas such as the Resurrection and Eucharist, or rise of new religious ideas such as the gospel of prosperity. Atheists DO need to fear and face deep problems. Atheists do need to fear that our leaders will not come to grips with these issues. As long as we do not deal with issues, atheists can use bad ideas, such as, from their view, God, as whipping boys and scapegoats for social problems – but that too is merely another evasion.

Main Argument.

In the 1800s, especially after Darwin, thinkers pointed out that morality and religion had an evolved basis and so morality and religion were not simply god-given. If morality and religion were not god-given, then they were not special and did not point to the super natural. Morality, religion, and their ideologies, were merely bigger evolved reflexes like reaching for burnt fatty meat and begging for sex.

Traditional Christians in Europe and the United States were appalled, and still are. They marked this idea as among the worst of the bad ideas since 1500. They said: “If people do not believe in God, and they do not fear God, then people have no reason to act morally. Without God, when people die, they do not face heaven, hell, or purgatory, and so there is no reason to act well while alive. If people are not forced to act morally, necessarily they will act selfishly and immorally. If people are not forced to act partly well then necessarily they will act all badly. People are being misled by weird bad ideas such as materialism and atheism. Atheists cannot be moral, and so must be depraved. Society must fall into chaos. Society must fall if atheism spreads.” Note the view of human nature and social life inherent in this idea of what morality is about, why we need morality, and how we get morality. I find it hard to believe people said this but I read it. I do not recall where. Maybe Bishop Wilberforce in England said this. I am sure you can get the same view on TV now.

Atheists responded: “Nobody needs to believe in god to be moral, to act well. As a matter of empirical fact, most famous atheists were quite moral. Personal behavior and society can withstand the demise of God although we might have to change our outlook and values.”

As a matter of empirical fact, atheists are correct about morality and not believing in God. You can be moral and not believe in God. I do not know of a survey of all atheists over history, including non-famous atheists, to see if they were more moral or less moral than people in general; but I suspect atheists are slightly more moral. I think a survey of current atheists would show they are slightly more moral than average, and they take pride in that. People can act morally without fear of God or hell, and without hope of heaven or anything like heaven. Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus need not fear hell as do Christians and Muslims, yet Jews, etc. on average, are about as moral as Muslims and Christians.

Atheists added: "We don't need god to act well. Belief in god causes more harm than good. Believers cannot be fully rational. Society requires citizens who are fully rational. Because believers in religion are not rational, they must be depraved. Society must fall if we don't fully undermine all their stupid beliefs and if we don't eradicate religion. For evidence, look at society now. If belief in god causes more harm than good, then we should stop believing in god. If we all stop believing in god, we all will become more rational, less superstitious, and better citizens; and we will save the world."

I doubt that, if we all became faithful Christians, we would actually behave much better than we do now. History definitely is not on the side of people who think that. We would not become sweeter, kinder, more helpful, more likely to follow the Golden Rule, more likely to build correct political institutions, and better citizens. A change of ideology alone doesn't do the trick.

I am sorry Christians argued that we need fear of hell and hope of heaven to act morally. That is not a good foundation on which to build a good relation with God or from which to find the principles that we need to act well morally.

I doubt that, if we stopped believing in god, we would actually behave much better than we do now. We would not become more rational, less superstitious, better citizens, and better people. Believers can be as rational as atheists and can be as adept at citizenship as atheists.

Moreover, we need good ideology apart from religion, any religion. We also need Western political ideas of the person and the state. We also need the proper intellectual tools to see, attack, and deal with hard problems.

(That atheists are empirically correct that people can be moral without believing in gods does NOT mean that society, or material conditions, give us our sense of morality and our sense of religion (our capacities for morality and religion). Nor do society or material conditions alone give us all the contents of our morality or religion. I am sure our capacities for morality and religion evolved. The contents of morality and religion depend on many factors, including society and material conditions. Here I don't go into what builds the contents of our morality and religion.)

Also as a matter of empirical fact, the atheist argument that we need not believe in God to be moral works both ways. This is the blessing of having an evolved gap between ideology and moral acts. While most atheists might be slightly more moral than average, they do not act all that much better than average, and, of course, some atheists act badly. I cannot give examples of bad behavior for fear of being sued. Freeing ourselves from God does not make us act much better. So there is little point freeing ourselves from God if what we want is for people to act better. Not believing in God also does not seem to make people much less superstitious. I am not sure if atheists give up believing in ghosts but they do seem to believe in equally silly superstitions such as fads in academia, politics, health, arts, entertainment, and science. They can be stubborn in a way that amounts to superstition. They seem to enjoy conspicuous consumption including big houses and cars. They seem to like publicity and asserting their will. They do not seem overall more rational and do not seem overall more adept as citizens. They do not seem better at finding the root causes of modern problems and at offering plausible solutions.

Freeing ourselves from God does not seem to make us generally better. So there is little point freeing ourselves from God primarily as a way to be less superstitious, more moral, more rational, and better citizens, if we don't want to free ourselves from God for other reasons first. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson believed in God but not that Jesus is God, and they seem about as moral, rational, free from superstition, and adept as citizens, as we can find in normal flawed human beings.

As I said above, neither atheists nor traditional believers need to worry that people will become stupid, irrational, selfish, bad, and depraved on account of atheism or theism alone. Theists and believers need to worry about real problems, and need to worry because we won't face real problems. If we won't face real problems, then undermining theism or atheism won't make any difference. When problems persist, then atheists can use religion as a scapegoat whipping boy while theists can use new ideas such as atheism as scapegoats and whipping boys but both are merely practicing evasion that is as evil as the original problems. We need to take advantage of whatever basic decency remains in evolved human nature before it is too late.

I suspect most atheists wish us to be as little un-natural as possible and most atheists would promote mental health. For most people, atheism is neither natural nor healthy. We evolved to believe in some gods. Repressing a big part of evolved human nature makes us work against ourselves. It splits us in two, like making a "horcrux". It is like denying love, friendship, or loyalty to a good group. Not all naturally evolved traits are good but religion is not usually like stealing, rape, or killing. We have to be careful if we suppress naturally evolved aspects of our character that are not bad, often give us much satisfaction, and help us get along with others. Usually repressing ourselves that way is not good. Repressing ourselves in that way is likely to make us more irrational and harmful than accepting the supposedly irrational parts of our evolved nature and dealing with them well.

Sometimes following our naturally evolved urge to believe in gods (or God) can inoculate us against even stupider sillier more hurtful ideas. Sometimes believing in God can prevent us from fighting our naturally evolved nature and so splitting ourselves in two. Sometimes drinking beer or "pot" tea can prevent us from drinking rotgut whiskey, smoking crack, or snorting meth. Whether religion is good or bad depends more on exactly what we believe and less simply on the fact that it is religion.

The people who need to believe in God are not thereby less human, dignified, moral, or successful as human beings than atheists any more than people who don't drink liquor are better than people who do. Not all people who need a drink of liquor every once in a while are depraved maniacs. People who need to believe in God are not automatically worse than non-believers any more than people who enjoy sex are worse than people who abstain from sex. Of course, the other way around is true too. Again, this issue comes down to separating the source of an idea from its truth and usefulness. Whether people need to believe in God, or need not to believe in God, is irrelevant to seeing the implications of a commitment of morality for the super natural and for legitimate speculation about God.

I doubt atheists are slightly more moral than average mostly because they are atheists. Atheists are like other self-appointed groups that seek to make us better, through traditional faith, PC faith, or despite faith. Those groups too are slightly more moral than average. Atheists are like Campus Crusade for Christ, strong feminists, "back to the Koran" Muslims, "back to the Torah or Talmud" Jews, or Boy Scouts and

Girl Scouts. If atheism itself does not make us more moral but joining a dedicated marginal group does, then maybe the real lesson is to join a dedicated marginal group. We need to select our groups wisely.

Often we need to overlook conventional morality for a while to see more clearly and to find our own better version of morality. The better version need not reject all aspects of conventional morality, and likely will include many aspects. Now, many young people go through this process. If atheism helps some people do that, then so much the better. Using atheism is better than getting snared by a cult or falling into the gangster mystique. When atheists are done reconstructing a better morality, they should think if they still need atheism to keep them safe from convention. Maybe when people are done reconstructing morality, they need to reconstruct their religion and-or atheism too.

I have to confess that I find the whole issue of theism versus atheism beside the point and annoying.

The first real point is to accept real problems and deal with them as best we can. We can deal with bad ideas, such as race hatred, along the way.

The second real point is: Regardless of theist or atheist, morality requires commitment. We believe in morality. We believe morality is important. We believe morality is real. The commitment to important real morality strongly implies the super natural. Commitment to morality opens the door to the super natural. Once we open the door, we can legitimately speculate on God and legitimately believe in God. We don't have to, but we can if we want; and, as long as we are not crazy about it, nobody who also commits to morality can criticize us. Atheists cannot criticize us very much for simple belief. Specific points of belief are another matter. Atheists can criticize specific points with have good arguments. Theists and atheists need to sort out what the meaning of their commitment to morality, and any implied belief in the super natural. Theists and atheists have been inept at doing this.

When people argue in terms of "can atheists be moral, not be depraved, and be good citizens?" or "can theists be rational, not be depraved, and be good citizens?" I find the argument more evidence for how intellectually inept we are than relevant to anything important.

Can We Really "Get Beyond Our Raising"?

We evolved the capacities for morality and religion. We evolved to think morality is important and so real. We evolved to think that anything important and real points to the super natural. Especially we evolved to think that morality points to the super natural and to gods.

Knowing all this, can I still think morality is real, intrinsically important, and points to the super natural? These answers will not please atheists.

(1) Yes. We did not evolve to automatically know the Sun, birds, ecology, patriotism, calculus, hyperbolic geometry, atheism, or the virtues of atheism; but most of them are real and relevant; and we can learn to see them and work with them, using only tools that evolution gave us. We can "go beyond" our evolved roots at least enough to see moral logic. This is a case of either you get it or you don't.

(2) Yes. God gave us the tools that he knew we would need so as to see true morality. God planned evolution so it would bring us to what we need. I don't like this option as well but traditional strong theists likely will.

(3) It doesn't matter (A). Suppose we are entirely limited and cannot get past our evolutionary roots. Still, we do see morality. The morality that we do see is close enough to any (hypothetical or real) ideal pure super natural morality that I don't have to worry about the difference. We can form principles of morality that are close enough to ideal morality so that I don't have to worry about the difference. Engineers and physicists can get the job done even though pure mathematical objects never exist and scientists have to use approximations. Calculus is a giant approximation crutch that works.

(4) It doesn't matter (B). We do not behave well enough whether our moral action is based only on merely evolved capacities or also based on seeing real super natural morality. We don't live up to the ideals of morality even if morality is entirely limited by what merely evolved. When we work on truly acting well, truly acting better, and we have the right principles to guide us, then it doesn't matter if our ideas of morality are only merely evolved or also refer to real super natural morality. We are better off spending effort working on making things better than on worrying about whether we are closely limited by evolution or we can somewhat transcend evolution. If you want to spend a little time, and have some fun, guessing on this topic, then fine, but don't obsess. It isn't worth it.

In the first chapter of this book, I said: (1) We should not do the right things out of fear of hell or hope of heaven. (2) We should do the right things for the right reasons. (3) We should do good for its own sake. At the same time, I also said (A) we face God when we die. It seems the first part of my stance is like the atheist while the second is like the stereotyped theist. I confess to some wanting to "have my cake and eat it too" but I don't feel bad about this. I explained it in Chapter One, and I will not repeat here. I do not feel like an atheist or stereotypical theist in taking this stance. While I do not act well only because God wants me to act well, I do know God wants me to act well, and that is enough. I do not play music well only because I know my teacher wants me to play well but I do know he-she wants me to play well, and that is important. Again, either you get it or you don't.

An evolutionary scientist need not worry about transcendent morality, and shouldn't worry about it, when thinking how morality and religion work in human life and how they might have evolved. Likewise, the fact that morality and religion evolved does not bear on the reality and super natural status of morality or God. In working this way, the scientist does not turn him-herself into a sociopath. In private life, a scientist can believe, wonder, doubt, disbelieve, or an interesting mix. I like off-beat interesting mixes.

10 Undermining, Picking Apart, Bolstering, and Emptiness

From Donovan Leitch, from a phrase taken from Zen Buddhism:

'First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is...
Oh, Juanita, I call your name'

The song "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It"

Sung separately by Hank Williams and Rick Nelson

Attributed to Rufus Payne, and sometimes to Clarence Williams

Probably "Traditional" through Rufus Payne to Hank Williams and Nelson, and now Public Domain:

CHORUS:

'Yeah ('Cause) my bucket's got a hole in it
Yeah my bucket's got a hole in it
Yeah my bucket's got a hole in it
I can't buy no beer.

Well, I'm standin' on a corner with a bucket in my hand
I'm waitin' for a woman that aint got no man.

Chorus

Well, I went up on the mountain - I looked down in the sea
I seen the crabs and the fishes doin' the be-bop-bee.

Chorus

Well, there aint no use me workin' so (damn) hard
When I got a woman in the boss man's yard.

Chorus

Well, me and my baby, we just bought a Ford
And now we sit together on the running board.

Chorus'

This chapter and the next three, four in all, defend the common sense view, especially the common sense view of the self. They are needed as defense so we don't fall prey. This material includes puzzles from when you still wondered what makes the sun the sun or makes water wet. Although the chapters do not

use technical language, they are about philosophical issues. I think they are fun. If you have no taste for these issues, go directly to the chapter on badness, about chapter fourteen.

In all that follows, I consider ideas as “things” or as “objects” unless noted. I do not distinguish between things, persons, ideas, sensations, impressions, images, notions, etc. as objects. Sometimes I refer to our evolutionary heritage. I do not imply that whatever evolved is correct and best, or whatever did not evolve is superior to simple biology. We have to use our evolved minds to decide cases. I use the term “thinker” to include any proponent of ideas including philosophers, theologians, and biologists. I include as “thinkers” people in non-theistic religions such as Buddhism and some Taoism.

Deliberate Distortions: Picking Apart and Bolstering.

Thinkers undermine common sense things in two ways. In the first way, they pick apart a thing until there is left only what the thinker wants to remain, sometimes nothing. In the second way, they bolster a thing so that it is realer, stronger, more enduring, and more idealized than in real life.

The two ways are related. Usually thinkers cannot bolster every aspect of a thing, so they pick apart what they don't want and then bolster what remains that they do want. For example, if we wish to use an oak tree as a symbol of eternal life, we abstract away withered leaves, exposed roots, squirrel nests, etcetera until we get what we do want such as very long life, large size, strong wood, ability to withstand storms, and coming to life again in spring after winter. Although the methods go together, some thinkers favor one method more than the other. Some religions, such as Buddhism and Zen, seem to favor one method over the other but all religions use both.

Technically, “picking apart” is called “analysis”, “reduction”, “deconstruction”, “relativizing”, or “sublation” while “bolstering” is called “reifying”, “hypostasizing”, “essentialism”, “holism”, “repackaging”, “process thought”, “reconstruction”, “embedding”, or “contextualizing”. I do not use technical terms here.

Since the 1970s, bolstering, especially essentialism, has been out of favor publicly in academia even while thinkers have become adept at various kinds of picking apart. Even so, thinkers still bolster after they pick apart. The same thinker condemns essentialism while at the same time reifying embedding in a system of relations.

Different thinkers use these methods to argue with each other. The first thinker reduces some aspects and bolsters other aspects of a thing while his-her opponent reduces other aspects of the same thing and bolsters other aspects. Sometimes the first thinker reduces some aspects and bolsters others while his-her opponent reduces what the first thinker bolsters and bolsters what the first thinker reduces. This kind of bickering is common among philosophers, critics of art, literature, and pop culture, and critics of gender roles. In another way, it happens when anthropologists assess fossils in human evolution. Some anthropologists discount some features (this hole for blood vessels, that muscle attachment) and stress other features (these back teeth, this foot bone) while other anthropologists discount the same stressed features and stress the same discounted features.

When “deep” thinkers argue, this kind of battle can be quite confusing, as we will see in arguments about the self in a later chapter. A Buddhist might discount the importance of a comfortable little backwater by

showing how it comes and goes with the rains while a Taoist might see the same backwater as literally heaven on Earth for exactly the same reasons. When deep thinkers argue like this, ordinary objects and ordinary people tend to disappear in the crossfire.

Sometimes it does help to question the common sense ideas of things. We need to think about who we are, what we do, and why we do it. We need to be clear about what things there are, how they work, and how they relate. We need to be clear about natural and moral laws. This is part of science, law, and dealing with everyday life. In the long run, honest questioning strengthens common sense. But common sense things have to survive long enough for the questioning to benefit rather than hurt.

It should be easy to see how picking apart can undermine common sense ideas about the world. It might seem that bolstering could only help the common sense idea of a self but that is not true. A strong sense of things undermines the common sense idea because it creates expectations that cannot be met. When expectations are not met, people fear all things have been undermined. Usually a strong version of any thing is abstruse, like an idealized heaven or an idealized orange. The real world is not usually abstruse. A strong sense cannot be built out of all the normal parts of things. We have to pick some that we like, reinforce those, pick others we don't like, and let go of those. At the least, that seems odd. When people find they have to let go of something that makes a lot of sense to them so they can keep something abstruse, they get confused, and feel as if they must lose this whole thing and all things.

Much of this chapter is about showing:

-Most normal common everyday things survive picking apart.

-Bolstering a thing usually does not make it better, and bolstered things tend to fall apart.

-We have normal common sense evolved techniques for dealing with the fuzziness in things. We can deal with picking apart and bolstering.

Picking Apart One: General.

By picking adeptly at anything, you can undermine anything. I cannot explain all the ways to pick apart something. I only give examples for some of the ways that are most important for this book.

What is a car? For about 20 years, after 1990, the US imported small vehicles that looked like a car in the front but had a small open compartment in the back like a little tiny truck bed. They often had roll bars, and they were marketed as sports vehicles. Technically they were not cars but tiny trucks. Most of the buyers did not know this. The "cars" were legally labeled as trucks to take advantage of import laws. What if a car has three wheels, two in the front and one in the back? To me, that does not look like a car but like a toy, especially since most don't go fast or far. What if a car has three wheels, one in the front and two in the back? How does that differ from a motorcycle with a sidecar? In Thailand, where three-wheel vehicles are open like carriages, they are used as short range urban taxis. I disliked riding in them, and I never considered them a car. Is an "El Camino" really a car or really a truck? Is an all-electric car really a car? For many years, "car people" refused to accept it as a real car.

How smudged is a shirt before it is dirty? How wet does a t-shirt have to be to qualify for a wet t-shirt contest? How tall is a person before she is tall? How well does a person have to speak a language before he-she speaks the language? At what exact second does a storm begin or end? What is the exact difference between a jar and a bottle? Which version of a song is the real version? Which recipe for a cake is the real recipe? How much can you change a song or a recipe before it is a different song and a different recipe? What is the right process (way) to build a tree house? If we raise a child the wrong way but he-she still turns out OK, is he-she still a person? If a girl acts like a tomboy, is she still a girl? Is there up without down? I dislike those small yippy animals that have a long genetic continuity with dogs, and don't consider them dogs. Dolphins share a long genetic continuity with horses but that doesn't make them horses. People share a long genetic continuity with apes but that doesn't make us exactly the same. People are more like apes than people-and-apes-together are like monkeys but that still does not make people the same as apes.

When is a river a river, and when is a river the same river? What if a drought lowers the water level to a trickle, as with many rivers in 2012? What if the water has been diverted so that some occasional mud remains, as with the Los Angeles River and the Colorado River? What if the river floods; is the overflow flood water part of the river? The river changes from minute to minute. Is it still the same river? Is it still the same river even though every molecule of water in it is different now than it was last week? Is it still the same river if it erodes its bank and makes a major new channel? Is it still the same river if it erodes its bank, merges with another river, and becomes a smaller tributary to the other larger river?

We can pick apart anything but that is not the real point. The real point is that we still have a sense of real things, and we get by anyway, often despite picking apart. When we need to decide what a car is, or when a river is a river, we use known criteria, modify them, or make new criteria. We can deal with fuzziness for most cases for the practical needs of those cases. We do not always agree, but dispute shows as much about human self-interest as it does about innate fuzziness. Below, I hint at how we deal with the problems but I do not here focus on how we deal with them.

If identity depends somewhat on human agreement, does that mean no thing has identity in itself but that all identity is only a matter of arbitrary convention? The simple answer is "no". It would be hard to turn a car into an orange, or a river into a train. It would be hard to turn an ape into a human although we might grant apes some sort of lesser personhood. Scientific method is not superstition even if many scientists follow it like superstitious old folk. Just because all boundaries might be fuzzy does not mean there are no qualitatively distinct things, nothing has integrity, and all identity is a matter of convention. If that were true, then there would not be any convention either.

Picking Apart Two: Particular Weaknesses.

The point of this section is not to master these techniques for picking apart but to recognize them, and to get a sense that a thing can survive them. There is no particular order.

Most things, such as rivers, are composite, made of parts. Not all parts have to be material stuff. Ideas often are composite when they refer to things like rivers that are composites. Even when ideas do not refer to composite objects, they are often composites of several ideas. The idea of fairness requires that

we think of benefit, cost, comparison, distribution, etc. Anything that is composite, including ideas, can be picked apart.

We expect a certain amount of consistency in a thing before we can call it a thing. If we drop a rock on the sand and it survives the fall, we expect it to do the same next time. If we drop a rock on the sidewalk and it breaks, we expect the same next time. If a toy helicopter flies this time, we expect it to fly next time. If the Republican Party opposes national health care this time, we expect it to do so next time; or else we want to know why. If an animal likes to eat meat this time, we expect it to like meat next time. On the other hand, if the first time we gave the animal only meat, then this time we give it a choice of meat or fruit, and it picks fruit, that does not lead us to wonder about the consistency of the animal. We can often find conditions that vary enough so that a thing behaves differently but we can't figure out the connection between the conditions and the thing, and this leads us to pick apart.

A river is not just a certain quantity of water; the river is water in a process. The process is a part in the identity of the river as much as the material water. Processes are much easier to pick apart than simple material stuff like water. The relation between material stuff and a process is easy to pick apart as well.

The pool at the bottom of a waterfall not only is made up of water but it also swirls. The swirl is a process like the river but it is also a process with a definite form. The identity of the pool is not just a quantity of water but also a form. Forms can be hard or easy to pick apart depending on the form, but the relation between material stuff and its form is notoriously easy to pick apart.

Things change over time. Things change not only as part of the process that is part of what they are but in other ways too. The water in the river changes completely every week but we don't mind that. The river also dries out, changes course completely, or gets dammed, and we do mind those changes. When a cute bear cub grows into a nasty grizzly, we understand it is both the same thing and something else. We are not sure if it is completely the same thing. Big rocks split into littler rocks but the littler rocks are still rocks. Eventually the little rocks split into sand grains, and then we are not sure if they are still rocks. Almost all living things die, not all living things die. Some microbes, and some slime mold, might be potentially immortal. In that case, when a living thing dies a "natural" death, is it still the same thing or is it now a different thing?

Suppose we magically moved the pool of water at the bottom of a waterfall from the northern hemisphere to the southern, where the water would swirl the other way? Would it still be the same pool of swirling water? Changes in form make a difference. Parts fit together in different ways. Suppose I took a group of Lego blocks and made a little man of them, then took exactly the same blocks and made a little woman of them. Are the man and woman the same?

Two objects can be the same in some ways but different in others, and then we are not sure what they are, how similar they are and how different they are. I have already mentioned cars, trucks, and little three-wheeled vehicles above.

No two things are the same in all ways even if they are supposed to be the same kind of thing. We have to pick the ways that count and the ways that don't count. Sometimes we are not sure. Does the size of

a cat count as to what kind of cat it is? Does the number of wheels count as to whether something is a car or not?

Things change not only every once in a while, as when a chip falls off a rock, but change constantly, as when a river flows. How can something that changes constantly be one thing?

Things are usually bundles of features. Even a rock is a bundle of size, shape, composition, hardness, sharpness, brittleness, etc. In what sense is a bundle of features a thing? This is a stronger way of asking about composite things and about consistency.

Sometimes we can abstract away from a bundle of features until no thing is left. Sometimes we can subtract away until one feature is left in this case but only one other feature is left in another case. For example, we can abstract away the features of a rock until only hardness is left. Or we can abstract away until only brittleness is left – they are not the same. Then what is a rock all about? It seems the most important feature of birds is flying but some birds can't fly. Then what is being a bird all about? We can do the same with mammals and cars. When we do this, it seems that nothing is left at the heart of any bundle of features. It seems like the center of any thing, and all things, is emptiness.

We tend to think people, animals, cars, rivers, trees, and many things have a deep inner self, what they are all about, what lies at the heart of the bundle, what old philosophers used to call “essence”. Suppose they do but we can't get certain access to it, just as we can't know the deepest heart of a person. Does it make sense then to say they have a deepest heart, and the deepest heart is what they are all about? If we can't find the deepest heart, then does it make sense to say the thing still coheres and is one thing?

Animals have behavioral tendencies, which I call here “appetites”, as for example appetites for sex, getting food, and conflict. Even though the appetites are different, we like to explain the appetites by saying they all serve one goal. Americans tend to call that goal “survival of the fittest”, “benefit of the species”, or “the survival instinct”. Yet sometimes conflict the appetites conflict, and sometimes they conflict so much that it is hard to see them all in terms of the same goal. Male adult lions kill all the cubs when they “take over” a pride. Adults fight to the death. Cubs wrangle and spit at each other. Adults fight over sexual access. If it is not obvious how the various appetites can be made to fit together, then how can an animal be one coherent thing?

Since the 1930s, evolutionary biologists have put all the appetites-and-abilities of organisms under one goal, which I have called “evolutionary success” in this book but which they more often call “reproductive success” or “inclusive fitness”. Suppose the appetites can all be bundled together under one goal. Still, they are qualitatively distinct. They are not just expressions of one goal. They are things in themselves. The same ability can play a different role in different animals, as when “running” means “running away” for a gazelle and means “running after” for a lion. “Eating” means “grass” to a gazelle while it means “gazelle” to a lion. If an animal is composed of qualitatively different appetites-abilities that can serve different purposes in different circumstances, how is the animal one coherent thing even if the various appetites cohere in this particular case?

Sometimes things, especially complicated things, behave erratically. Sometimes a healthy heart skips a few beats for no apparent reason, even to the point of causing serious distress or death. If so, then how are things consistent enough to be integral things?

Even when a thing has some identity of its own, on its own, usually it gets its real full identity only in the proper context. A wolf is only a wolf in the context of a pack as a child is only a child in the context of a family. Even fundamental physical particles such as photons and electrons vary their apparent identity according to context: they travel as waves but arrive and depart as particles; they are one thing when bound with other particles, or when bound in a field, and quite another thing when travelling freely; and now they need other particles (the Higgs boson) even to have mass. We all know the word "red" but it changes meaning according to context: red leaf, pencil that is painted red, pencil with a red lead, an embarrassed person, a Communist, or a state that votes Republican. Politicians complain correctly about their remarks being taken out of context to mean something other than what they intended. If something has to be embedded in a system of relations to be a thing, or to be its true thing, in what sense is any thing really an integral thing?

A strong version of the idea of relational identity arises with people and empathy, when we feel that we are just like other people, other things in the world, and like the world itself. See next chapter.

A drill bit depends not only for its use but also for its identity on the drill and on the person who uses the drill. A tree depends for its sustenance on the whole forest, soil, water, the weather, and the sun. We don't think about food until we are a little bit hungry. What food we think about depends on our cultural background and on our personal experience. "You don't miss your water till the well runs dry". The life and death of a car depends on a lot of things. Every physical thing has a life and death, and the life and death depend on a lot of other things. What music is in style now depends on technology, politics, the economy, weather, and particular acts by a lot of particular people. When some thing depends on other things, the identity of the first thing is not distinct and enduring even if the first thing is a simple material thing like the drill bit – and most things are not simple material things. Even ideas such as styles of art, and sensations like hunger, depend on other things, and come and go with other things. Everything that depends on other things, is fuzzy, and can be picked apart easily. If everything depends on everything else, then everything can be picked apart, and nothing has an enduring identity. Hinduism and Buddhism stress this situation.

Scientists deal with problems of fuzzy through statistical coherence. For example, they define a storm by a set of statistical features that come in a bundle, such as windspeed and rainfall. This works in practice but it is not very satisfying. We don't want to know that most tropical storms have winds in excess of 50 miles per hour (I am guessing), we want to know what is a tropical storm for sure. We don't want to know that oak forests can be defined as having at least 50% oak trees; instead, we want to know what gives an oak forest the spirit of an oak forest.

Not only are things fuzzy, but the ways in which they are fuzzy are fuzzy too. Not only are things made fuzzy by situation embedding, but situational embedding is fuzzy in itself. Thinking about the fuzziness of fuzziness leads to some fun mental games. I hope to look at this problem someday in another piece of writing.

Sometimes things disqualify themselves and even negate themselves. The law is supposed to serve justice but sometimes the law creates injustice. Kindness is not supposed to smother. The vegetation that comes in after a fire in the forest creates the conditions that allow other vegetation to come in later to take over from the original pioneering vegetation.

We can pick apart almost any thing but that is not the real point. This is:

- We see things as integral long enough and well enough to get along.
- We allow for variation and still allow that one thing is one thing, at least for a while.
- We allow one thing to become another thing when appropriate.
- We can put things into categories according to situation. Thing "A" can be grouped with "B" sometimes and with "C" at other times.
- Some things naturally have similarity and go into categories, such as all robins or the hammers. We can shuffle the categories for these things when we have to but they tend to go back into their natural categories.
- We know enough to leave sticky cases alone unless we have to deal with them.
- We can deal with cases well enough to get along for now and not to worry about absolute solutions.

Bolstering.

Thinkers have looked a long time for things, including ideas, that are hard to pick apart. Because it is easy to pick apart composite things such as rivers, thinkers search for things that are of one "stuff", that are not composite, to prove there is identity in the world, and to have an example by which to judge the identity of other things such as persons. That is why thinkers want to think of the soul as one simple non-composite "stuff". Thinkers look for simple homogenous stuff to make up real worlds composite things. Real things can borrow absolute identity from the underlying simple homogenous building blocks. That is one reason why physicists search for the basic building blocks of matter-energy-time-space.

I can't give anything that is absolutely proof against being picked apart. Even simple elementary particles such as electrons and photons can be picked apart if we think of their identity in terms of a cloud of virtual particles; and time and space are not what they used to be since the ideas of Mach and Einstein.

By stressing things that are simple and eternal, bolstering undermines real world things because real world things are not homogenous and eternal. It is hard to go from simple eternal things to real world things, even when simple eternal things are the building blocks. Bolstering undermines real world things by stressing some aspects over others and leading to disappointment. To show the weaknesses of bolstering and how it undermines things takes a long time. So here I present the usual suspects for simple basic building blocks of thing-ness, and request that you use your imagination to see how it leads to undermining.

For millenia, thinkers took mathematics as the paradigm example of something that was absolutely clear and identical. “1” is “1”. “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” certainly means something clear in the right mathematical system, the one we are used to. There are systems in which “ $2 + 2$ ” does not equal “4”. If you know music, think of how to count intervals: “ $2 + 2 = 3$ ” or “ $3 + 3 = 5$ ”. Two thousand years ago, there was no number “0” but now there is. Two hundred years ago there was no square root of a negative number but now there is. Not even numbers are necessarily simple and have a foolproof identity. Mathematics is not as good an example of strong coherent identical stuff as it used to be only 200 years ago but it is still a good enough example. The problem is we can’t generalize from mathematics to cases that are important to people. We can’t use mathematics as a general pattern for identity and for selves. We can’t treat court cases, or cases of being a decent person, as if they were like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”.

Thinkers have used ideas such as decency, honor, justice, goodness, and love as something that can be nibbled at but can’t be undermined. We can quibble about cases of honor but we can’t say there is no honor at all. Even if some horrible dictatorship eliminates all honorable people from this world, honor will have existed at some time, might exist on other planets, and is part of the universe. I think this is all true but cannot alone be used as the basis to make integral people. People are not composed of one integral idea, not even an idea like goodness.

Thinkers offer some experiences as things that cannot be undermined. We can bicker about the exact shade of red of my jump drive but we cannot say I do not see red or that there is no color red that I could see. We might argue whether people have the same subjective experience as I do when they look at my jump drive (what they see I might call “blue”) but we cannot normally argue whether they do have some experience and that the experience involves some object and some color. Again, this is true, but we are not sure what to make of it. It is hard to build consistent unified persons of the kind we want out of these experiences.

Thinkers look for persistence through change as a way to show at least some coherence and identity, and to use that as the basis for arguments. The river certainly persists despite the total change in water every month, and that is one kind of identity. The planet Earth changes a bit every day but not much. Each orbit is nearly identical to the previous orbit. The tiger in her forest does not change so much from day to day that we are willing to go tease her, and that is enough persistence to make identity. Individual tigers come and go but the species “tiger” persists. The species “tiger” persists through several generations even though natural selection is always at work in the wild. None of this achieves absolute persistence but it is enough persistence to argue for using identity as an idea. Even persistence through one change is enough to make us think about identity.

The use of persistence as a criterion of identity has an interesting history in biology and social science. It is the basis for classical ideas of society being more powerful than individuals (false) – people come and go but particular societies and cultures live on - and for the systems theory that underlies most ecological analysis (mostly true).

A real physical mountain or river is not impervious to change and not absolutely identical all the time but an ideal mountain is. Even though real things might not have absolute identity, ideas can have absolute identity, even ideas about physical things. The idea of a mountain is one coherent whole that persists

through time even though no real mountain does. So is the idea of “straight” or “circular”. Sometimes a painting teacher tells students not to paint any real tree but to paint the idea of a tree. Asian artists paint ideas of dragons not “real” dragons. When using ideas as the examples of absolute identity, you can always think of the idea in a way which is not composite, even when it is an idea of a composite real thing such as a mountain. With ideas as the example of identity, philosophers can think of the soul-person as like an idea, and can think of any valuable aspects of the world that they wish to keep as like an idea. They also discard aspects that they wish to discard as not like ideas. If philosophers think sex is not worth holding on to, then sex is not like an idea. This method lends itself well to keeping personal qualities such as tendencies to justice and giving.

While any particular instance of a type, such as a particular tiger, might not be integral, enduring, and real, the type might be. “Tiger” might be enduring and real. In that case, a particular individual thing does have status by being part of an enduring type (being a “token” of a “type”). No particular real triangle is fully a triangle but idea triangles are one thing and do endure, so particular real triangles borrow some of that status.

While any particular thing might not be integrated and real, the interdependent net within which it “lives” might be enduring, integrated, and real. A particular tree might not be integrated and enduring but the forest, ecosystem, biosystem, and world in which it participates might be. The particular speaker of a language might not endure, and his-her sentences spoken over a lifetime pass away, but the language endures. Thinkers after World War Two especially stress this kind of bolstering.

This sequence goes back to Aristotle, and it is important for the next chapter: A rock is integral in that it is mostly one kind of stuff, all in one place, and does not change much over time. A card from a deck of cards is one thing. A deck of cards is together in that all its parts, the individual cards, are clear, and we can use the identity of parts to make clear arrangements as in a poker hand. A model of a suspension bridge is one thing, in which the parts depend on each other. A car is one thing in that its parts depend on each other and the parts have to stay together in one particular arrangement for the car to be able to move around. An airplane is the same as a car, and it controls itself while on autopilot. A plant is like an airplane but it also recreates itself. An animal is like a plant but it also can move itself. Some animals also have intentions such as tigers and orangutans.

We tend to think of animals with intentions as integral selves, although this classification is in dispute. We think of people as selves. To be a self, it seems as if you have to be one integral thing. It is not clear that we think of people as selves because they are integral in the ways listed above plus they have intentions. We would like to think that people are selves because not only are they integral in the ways listed above but they also have a kind of coherence-identity that none of those other ways have. It is not clear what part having intentions plays in this extra integration that selves have. It is not clear that the other kinds of integration are needed for the particular integration of a self.

Whatever this particular integration of self is, if we could think of selves entirely in terms of this integration, then we would have the one homogenous strong “self stuff” that philosophers seek. Most philosophers in the West have thought of this special self stuff as rationality-and-goodness although Romantics think of it as creativity-beauty-emotion.

It is good to see that selves use some of the ways of coherence noted above, and to see that selves are distinct in their coherence from any of the ways listed above. It is misleading to seek a special self stuff to explain their coherence. It is better to say we usually recognize a self when we have to interact with it, and that other ways of coherence contribute to selfness. We can use other ways of coherence to decide selfness in particular cases.

I go further than some philosophers. I think there are such things as trees, rivers, species, selves, good people, and bad people; they are real; they are real despite being composite and fuzzy; and their reality does not depend primarily on convention. I think not only ideas about them are real. The things are real. Ideas and qualities such as the color red are real. I understand we can pick apart most of these things but I do not require absolute proof against picking apart. If I allow that “dog” is one integral thing then I do not have nearly as much trouble allowing that human beings are persons.

Appropriate Technique; the Middle Way.

This section simply asserts that we handle issues of integrity and self, and illustrates. We can overcome picking apart and bolstering. This section does not offer a foolproof argument. It does not list all the ways that we use to overcome undermining. You can get a sense of the ways by looking above at how we undermine and then thinking how you would reverse that way.

You get up in the morning, and you find your favorite cereal for breakfast, granola, is out, empty, and nothing. Luckily, like Seinfeld, you have a dozen alternatives. You compare corn flakes to bran flakes and decide you like corn flakes better. You compare corn flakes to wheat flakes, and decide you like wheat flakes better. You compare wheat flakes to shredded wheat, decide you like shredded wheat better, and eat that. None of this means granola is empty, unreal, has no identity, and cannot be relied upon in spiritual matters. All this does not mean that shredded wheat is more integral, realer, and better than other kinds of cereal.

You get up on Saturday to go to the store only to discover that your car has a flat tire (empty, nothing). You do have a full sized spare kept in the garage, from an old car, but it is not quite exactly the same as the tire in your new car. It will do in a pinch, like this situation, but you don't like it. You do have one of those little spare “doughnuts” in the trunk but you don't like to that either. Eventually you decide to use the old full-sized tire until you can get to the tire store. None of this means that the original tire has no identity and is unreal. None of this means tires in general have no identity and are unreal. The doughnut replacement is not more real than the flat original.

You find yourself on the “Antiques Road Show” with a vintage Rolex that you picked up in a pawn shop in Asia. The appraiser has a real Rolex of the same model and year, and, point for point, shows you how yours is not a genuine Rolex but a fake. It is a great fake. The quality is as good as a Rolex (if that is possible). But it is still a fake. It is not “real”. That does not mean it is about to drift apart like the imagined dragon in a cloud. It means we have a particular idea of identity and reality for this case, and we use it. Here the opposite of “real” is not “unreal” but “fake”, “not from the authorised maker”, or “of bad quality”.

An old oak tree has stood in place for about 200 years. It has been surrounded by original oak forest, farms, secondary beech forest, mixed hardwood forest, a vineyard, a housing project, and a school. Its identity has depended on each of those neighbors. Does that mean the oak has never had an identity, it is not real, there is no such thing as oak trees, there is no such thing as trees, and there is no such thing as anything? Does it mean the oak tree is not real but the forests, farms, and suburbs within which it has been embedded have an identity and are real?

Ordinarily we do not seek an absolute bolstered standard of identity and reality. We have provisional standards. We compare the players in this situation with our provisional standards. We modify our standards if we have to. We decide the case according to what we want. We decide abstractly and ideally if we want to do that for fun. What follows in this section is restatement of this idea.

Over time this real mountain wears down. No real mountain lasts forever. We cannot bolster a real mountain, and would be misled if we tried. A million years from now, we can argue whether this mountain is a hill or still a mountain. Yet today the mountain is still there, and I still have to climb it to see the view from the top. There are other mountains besides this one, and they are much like this mountain. The river does not cohere in the same way as the mountain, but that is where I go if I want to go fishing rather than climbing, and, almost all the time, the river is still there. There are real fish in this real river. Except in quantum mechanics, real mountains do not turn into turnips and real fish do not turn into toads; for a fun version, see "Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy". When the real morning bus does not show up on schedule one day, I still know what to do. I can walk, hire a taxi, wait for the next bus, or call in late. We understand integrity. We know different kinds of integrity. Integrity varies with different things. . We can handle both persistence and variability most of the time. Sometimes we even have fun doing it.

Heraclitus (about 535 to 475 BCE) said we can't step in the same river twice because it changes all the time, so the river cannot be any one integral thing, and so there is no real river or any real thing. Cratylus (400s BCE) said we can't step in the same river even once because of constant change. Heraclitus meant to discredit this normal world so that he could advance an unchanging world of ideas, and Cratylus pushed his argument to the limit. They got it wrong.

Whatever a river is, it has to be river enough to step in once or we could have no idea of a river at all, we could have no rivers at all, and we could not have any ideas of anything either. We would have nothing in the real world that we could call real and that would make any world a real world. This river is this river, and remains this river, long enough to step in it once. That is what it means to be a real river. If we grant that an ever-changing river is the same river right now this time when we step in it once, then we have some working idea of identity despite change. Then we can understand what it means to be a river for more than an instant, and we can indeed step in the same river twice and many more times too. We can extend this idea of identity to the river at other times until common sense tells us it is no longer the same river. We can correctly use this idea in other cases such as mountains, cities, persons, and natural laws.

If we could not think like this with real objects like rivers, then likely we could not come up with the ideas that make up the ideal world that Heraclitus and Cratylus wished to live in. Without the ability to sustain real objects, we could not have ideal objects. If ideal objects depend on the same abilities that allow us to make real objects, we might as well live with the real objects.

David Hume in the late 1700s pioneered modern critiques of the self. Despite his usual logical rigor, he once contradicted himself, and his mistake is relevant. To pick apart the self, he wanted to show that the integral self was only a bundle of sensations; to do that, Hume said we cannot imagine anything of which we have had no prior experience. We can recombine elements from experience into new combinations but, strictly speaking, that is not something really new. We can imagine a unicorn only because we have seen a horse and have seen other animals with horns, and can put them together. Yet, then he pointed out that we can imagine shades of color that we have never seen, and we can locate them in our scheme of colors. Suppose we look at two cards that are colored sky blue and cobalt blue. We can imagine shades that lie between these two shades, and still think of the imagined shades as blue, even though we have never seen these shades and we do not have an ideal vision of blue. What shade of blue is the one single master shade of blue that we could use as a standard for all blue? We do not think of color in that way, and do not think of other things in that way either. The human self has imagination. With it, among other mental tools, we can extend ideas of belonging to cases that we have not experienced. We can extend coherent identity as appropriate to circumstances. We can do this without mistakenly thinking identity is only social convention. We have ways to recognize and use identity of things. So, we also have ways to recognize selves and interact with selves. We can imagine a person we have never met, and still think of that as a person. We can accept new people as selves until we have compelling reason to think they might not be selves such as that they cast no reflection in a mirror. We use similar criteria for a self that we use for color or for a river. This way avoids the pitfalls both of picking apart and making too strong, and it is enough. Keep this in mind for the next chapter.

Adapted to Deal.

Tactics to undermine the common sense world so as to influence other people are not just from priests, academics, and connivers over the last 5000 years. I would be stunned if these issues had not appeared in the human mind during the formative years of our evolution, at least 100,000 years ago, and as early as 5,000,000 years ago. We have had people trying to undermine our common sense idea of the world so as to manipulate us for as long as we have had a common sense view. We have had techniques to deal with them and to keep us on the right track just as long too. That is part of why we have these questions and why they are so much fun sometimes. We start out at birth with some naturally evolved abilities such as “grouping and ungrouping”, “pointing at (ostending)”, “isolating”, “comparing”, “finding similar and different”, and “finding features”. We start out with some naturally given categories such as “category”, “isolated thing”, “group of things”, “individual in a category”, “solid thing”, “plant”, “animal”, “sentient being”, “over time”, and “up and down”. I think about all this when I think about the evolution of people.

Personal Historical Note.

When I was young, in the 1950s through 1970s, smart progressive thinkers revolted against analytic type thought (picking apart) in favor of holism and process-based thought (bolstering). I loved picking apart. Without picking apart, there is no science and there are no fictional detectives such as Sherlock Holmes. There is no exploring the environment, no learning, no putting back together, and no stories. There is no holism. I got hammered a lot for enjoying science and analysis. When I went to graduate school in the 1970s and 1980s, picking apart (scientific style analysis) was worse than voting Republican. You could only do it if you called it “deconstruction”.

It was impossible to get across the idea that we have to do both, both are natural, and that neither alone fully gets at what is going on. Both together don't fully get at what is going on either but both together are better than one alone. You have to be able to do both at the same time without going crazy and without believing either one alone gets at the full truth. This is what Douglas Hofstadter called "reductoholism" in his popular book "Godel, Escher, Bach". You also have to be able to do both together without believing that both together get at the full truth although both together are better than either alone. You have to go beyond analysis, holism, and both analysis and holism, to the simple truth of reality, which includes some qualitative realities that are not always best described either analytically or holistically. That is a lesson of Taoism and Zen. To rest in picking apart, and in process thought, are both instances of what Hindus call "Maia". To rest in both together can also be an instance of Maia although I do not want to push the point here. I do not need to define the term "Maia" here other than as "illusion". Bolstering, holism, process-thought, post structuralism, and post modernism, are as much illusions as the hardest most mechanical of mechanistic analytic reductionism. We should learn to enjoy our illusions, and use them wisely, but not live in them.

Emptiness.

The idea of "emptiness" is important in Buddhism and Hinduism. The term does not mean "not a thing", a vacuum, nothing is there, nothing, or nothing done. Instead, the term intends to get across something positive. (A) The usual way of getting across what is positive is the image of the wheel with a hub, axle, spokes, and rim. To do something useful, the wheel has to turn. The wheel turns on the axle. The axle is mounted into a hole in the center of the wheel. If the hole was not there, the axle could not enter the wheel and the wheel could not turn around the axle. The hole in the center of the wheel is the emptiness at the center of the wheel that allows the wheel to be what it is, get things done, and be useful. (B) It is possible to make a wheel as a solid piece from hole-in-the-center to rim. Likely, wheels started that way. Children still build wheels that way; I did as a child. It is more efficient not to build a wheel that way but instead to cut out some of the material from the center to the rim. The wheel does not need all that material to be strong enough. The material adds dead weight that makes the wheel harder to turn and defeats the purpose of the wheel. Heavy wheels get stuck in ruts even if the wagon carries no cargo. The stuff that gets cut out leaves spaces. The spaces are the emptiness that lets the wheel work even better than before. The stuff that is left over eventually became spokes. (C) Along the same lines, the Eiffel Tower was not built just to be beautiful, although it is. The Tower was built to prove a point that was contentious in architecture at the time, in the late 1800s. Not all the material in a wall, pillar, or post carries weight. The weight runs along lines. A wall, pillar, or post is just as strong if you have strong material only along the lines of force. The other material adds useless weight to the wall, pillar, or post, and so actually makes them even weaker than if the other material is cut out. When you cut out enough, leaving only the load-bearing skeleton, you have the Eiffel Tower. What is taken out is the emptiness that lets the Tower do a better job and also makes it beautiful. (D) A spider's web would not be as effective if it was all filled in. Insects need to feel the air move through the web and need to feel they can fly through the web. The space in between the threads is the emptiness that makes the web stronger and more effective.

Emptiness is not nothing but instead emptiness is something positive that allows other things to develop and allows beauty to flourish. I like to understand the idea this way. (I am aware of research about how

we use mental images, paradigms, etc. but that is not important here.) Think of the term “tree”. The term does not stand for any particular tree or any type of tree such as oak, elm, spruce, pine, fir, etc. The term stands for a class of things none of which in particular is “tree-ness” in itself but all of which are somehow trees. If we find that something we once thought is a tree is not really a tree, such as, maybe, Manzanita, then we can take it out of the tree category and we can still use the tree category well. If we discover a new species of tree in a rain forest, we can include it in the group of trees without shaking up all the other trees. Sometimes we do have to revise our categories but that is another issue. The term “tree” is empty but it is also full. By being none-specific, the term is more useful than if we have a particular separate term for every species of tree. At the same time, we know a tree is not an elephant. The term is empty but not totally empty. Its mostly-but-not-entirely emptiness is what allows the term to be so useful and productive. Think of the terms “dog” or “dwelling” in the same way. That is the sense of emptiness. It fills our minds and it fills the universe.

We get to emptiness most easily by picking apart. Try picking apart the idea of a car or a motor vehicle to see. Getting at emptiness is a big part of the job of picking apart in Buddhism and Hinduism. Sadly, it is easy to abuse picking apart when picking apart is used to lead us to emptiness, and, paradoxically, easy to use picking apart to bolster a false idea of emptiness. Buddhism and Hinduism both do this much too strongly. I do not here explain how and I do not explain it in later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism. I merely offer the warning here so that, when the times come, you will be warned and perhaps inoculated.

11 Philosophical Interlude

This chapter picks up some questions suggested by the previous chapter. All the questions support stances. It answers all the questions in favor of common sense.

Finite Source of Badness

When rationalism prevailed among serious thinkers, between the Classical Age and the Enlightenment, God was infinite, totally rational, and totally good. Badness came from the free will of irrational and finite beings. Badness came from not having the full bounty of God. Badness need not be horrible, but some badness was inevitable in finite beings. For example, humans cannot have the full infinite compassion of God, and we cannot rationally figure out how best to use what modest compassion we do have, so we are a bit selfish, and inevitably we do some bad things, as a result.

After Romanticism, the spirit is creativity. Badness comes from lack of creativity and from opposing the spirit. Irrationality and finitude do not matter as long as they serve the spirit. A bit of badness arising from finitude and irrationality might even be better on the greater stage. True badness is opposing the spirit even when you know it is the spirit, or true badness is deep commitment to false creativity; the two often go together. Other things take the place of infinitude and rationality, as we will see.

Common sense is finite. It is not always classically rational although it is usually biologically rational. Just because humans are confined to finite-sometimes-irrational-common-sense does not necessarily make us good, bad, or prone to either. Badness does not come from finitude or irrationality as such. Badness does not come from lack of creativity or from opposing the spirit. Badness comes because some bad behavior succeeded in our evolutionary past, we are mixed beings, and some situations promote bad behavior now. Luckily, we seem more prone to good than bad, and common sense more often promotes good than bad.

Common Sense and Science

Common sense is not foolproof. We have to use science in addition to common sense. We have to get help from other people sometimes so as to think right. We can see a lot of science as the determined application of common sense, but, still, common sense and science are not entirely the same. Common sense calls a dolphin a "fish", for good reasons, but wrongly. Common sense says herbal medicines can give us the vitality of the forest and the source plants, when, in fact, sometimes herbal medicines can kill us. Common sense tells us to eat big plates of burned fat when that can kill us too. Outside a few such problems, science and common sense go together well.

Common Sense and Ordinary Language Philosophy

Especially after Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was active between the two World Wars, a philosophical school arose, called "ordinary language" philosophy, which stressed the ability of ordinary language to handle all philosophical issues; undermined and devalued issues that ordinary language could not handle; avoided

all “metaphysical” questions; and felt it could achieve full clarity by using ordinary language precisely. Whatever was important, they could solve using ordinary language alone; whatever they couldn’t solve, wasn’t important; if something was important and they couldn’t solve it, nobody could solve it, and, in fact, nobody could even talk sense about it. Ordinary language philosophers do not think language is all about accurately describing the world but is more about getting people to act appropriately, although accurately describing the world sometimes is a necessary part of getting people to act appropriately. Language is a game rather than a picture. We do not say “friend” to describe but to offer help, ask for help, or tweak a relationship. Each language is part of a distinct way of life, just as football, golf, tennis, and most games are mutually distinct. The French language goes along with French life just as computer-speak goes along with geekiness. The rules of any way-of-life-with-its-language make full sense only within that way of life, like the rules of a game make sense only within the game. The value of an ace depends on the card game; the meaning of “mother” depends on the way of life. We can appreciate a way of life only within a way of life; but, if we are willing to enter a way of life, likely we can learn to appreciate it. We do not explain ways of life in terms of scientific laws like we explain eclipses. We only explain ways of life inasmuch as we describe their rules and we use art to get across glimpses of what it is to live there. If we really want to know what is going on, we have to enter a particular way of life and participate in it. For ordinary language philosophers, “game” is the new rationality while “way of life” is the new morality and the new spirit. Ordinary language philosophers are not clear if what they do is only a limited relative way of life and therefore applicable only within their community.

My stress on common sense has some points in common with that school, such as avoiding jargon, but my stress on common sense is not the same as that school. I am not nearly as relativistic. Ordinary language philosophers seem to dislike modern biology when it is applied to people. Modern biology stands outside of any particular way of life, and so they disallow that it applies to people. They over-bolster the role of convention. They tend to think that most (nearly all) games are mutually cooperative, and all ways of life are mutually beneficial to the people in them. In making this evaluation, they stand outside all ways of life, but they do not make that point clear. They do not allow that a way of life can be bad because that would require standards outside any way of life. They over-bolster the ideas of a “game” and a “way of life”. They are not fully sensitive to all the ways that people have of dealing with picking apart, bolstering, and the fluctuations of life, especially ways that might have evolutionary roots. Some issues that they try to explain away are real issues after all, or are important issues to regular people who are not philosophers, such as facing God and what is the best moral life. Ordinary language does not solve everything and does not lead to full consistency and clarity. Normal people can’t achieve perfect consistency and clarity while living an ordinary complex and contradictory life. Some confusion can’t be explained away because it is in life. Going into more details would not be useful here.

Really Real.

Indo-Europeans link thing-ness and real-ness in a way that leads to confusion. Until we clear away some of the confusion, we can’t ask interesting questions such as about the reality of God. All through this section, where I use “real”, “good”, and “God”, you can substitute “dharma”, “karma”, “Heaven”, “Tao”, and “yin and yang”. The results are the same.

We want to think that goodness and reality are tightly linked: the more real you are the better you are; and the better you are the more real you. We use this connection to argue for what we like and against

what we dislike. To argue that something is better, we argue that it is realer; to argue that something is realer, we argue that it is better. Phony is bad, genuine is good. Rock-and-roll is more real than swing; the blues is more real than pop; gritty is more real than comedy; football is more real than baseball.

This technique works pretty well but it does have problems. (A) Not everything artificial is bad while not everything genuine is good. Cartoons are artificial but some of them are excellent. Poison mushrooms are real. (B) To say something is realer than another thing, we have to compare realness, which is hard to do, and sometimes is incorrect. We cannot always assess things in terms of more real and less real. (C) To compare realness, we need standards of realness. Standards of realness are not easily available. People disagree about standards. Ideas about standards change from time to time; the Enlightenment had different standards than the Romantic era. The West does have some deep persistent standards of what is real but those standards are not useful for all important things and all interesting questions. (D) To set up standards, often we choose one thing as a paradigm. This technique often is indispensable, and works well, but it does not work in all cases, even when we choose well. Too often we choose badly and carry out the technique badly. (E) To make comparisons, we extend ideas of goodness and realness from one case to similar cases. For example, we see that a bird is real and extend the realness of a bird to the realness of a cloud. This technique also is indispensable, and often works well, but can work badly even when we use it well, and too often we use it badly. We have to stop sometimes when we apply ideas of realness and goodness to ask how we got to apply them in this case, and if we might apply them better. (F) Thinkers use the issues of reality to further their own ideas. Thinkers combine picking apart, and bolstering, with issues from reality to further their own ideas. We also have to look for all that when we encounter disputes about the reality of God or about the priority of the mutually dependent relations over the things they determine.

Not only do we link goodness and realness, we also link integrity, beauty, enduring, love, empathy, deep self, logical priority, fullness, independence, freedom, importance, satisfaction, interesting-ness, creativity, simplicity, homogeneity, symmetry, consistency, cumulative-ness, and other features that I cannot think of now. Not all these features are compatible if we do not previously link them to reality and goodness and find ways to make them compatible. Having so many features, some of which are inconsistent, opens the door to abuses and manipulation. In the same way, we link the opposite of these features to badness and not-real-ness, and that opens more doors.

It is hard to use the whole list at once. Instead, we pick a key feature, establish the presence (realness) of that one key feature, and then argue from that one key feature to the realness and close links to the other key features that we like. For example, we argue that the idea of a gene is simple, so genes must be real, and so biological evolution is what we can make of it. We argue that "game" is the key to human interaction, so games are real, so interactions based on games are real and good, and then we make of the other features what we can. In a famous case, in the early history of quantum mechanics, physicists argued for the theory because it was beautiful and symmetric without worrying about its reality or about evidence. Later evidence proved the beautiful symmetric theory correct. From those quantum effects, we got validation for effects at other levels such as in chemistry. This does not happen often. We will see examples that are not so successful.

The following examples illustrate only possibilities that are relevant. They do not amount to a rigorous philosophical argument. You will recognize some of the techniques of picking apart and bolstering; I do not point them out.

In a sense, everything in the world is real: toasters, fleas, ideas, illusions, shadows, etc. In a sense, that is true, but it is not useful. It is not how we use the idea “real” and it is not how we think of the world. We really do distinguish between real and not-so-real. We accept that a cat is real but we think the smile of the cat might not be real; it might be only something we project on to the cat. We call a magician’s trick “only a trick, not real”. The question then becomes whether we think of God etc. more like the cat or like the smile on the cat.

We accept that clouds are real. We are not sure about illusions that we see in clouds. Even if we accept that the illusion is real, we do not accept that the thing we see in the illusion is real. We accept that the illusion of a dragon is real but we do not fear that a dragon will come sweeping down on us. We do not want God to be the dragon in an illusion, but, more than that, we don’t want God to be an illusion even if we accept the reality of illusions.

Suppose we take as a-paradigm-example-of-what-is-real a rock made entirely of one mineral, like a big chunk of quartz. As the rock wears down, it turns into tiny little rocks. We call a pile of little tiny quartz pieces “sand”. Each tiny little piece of the rock is as real as the big rock but is the pile of sand as real as the rock? Is a group as real as a material thing? Suppose we slowly separate the sand crystals so that eventually they are scattered all over the floor with space in between all of them. Is this group of crystals still a pile of sand? Is it still sand? We tend to think that groups with an identifiable persistent form are real, perhaps as real as material objects.

Go back to the quartz rock. We throw it against the ground to shatter it, so we can get smaller crystals to make things, including fire. The simple material object is real. Is the event of shattering real? An event is not a material thing. It might require material things but might not require the same material things. We can shatter glass, rocks, and ice. Most people think events are real but not in the same way as rocks. If events are real but not in the same way as material objects, are they as real as rocks? This situation makes people uneasy. Most people think shattering a rock or a glass is real but are not sure if falling in love or watching a TV show is as real.

Now suppose we have a sand storm in the desert moving along at 50 miles per hour. As the sand storm moves along, it kicks up first the sand here, then the sand there, then the sand even further along, and so on. It does not kick up the same sand all the time. It kicks up different sand grains as it moves along. So the material composition of the storm changes all the time but it keeps roughly the same form. Most people say the sand storm is still real. Most people say that some processes, like a sand storm or a river, are real, and are as real as material things. Anybody who has ever been caught in a big storm thinks this way.

We have extended identity-and-realness from rock to event to process. This is legitimate extending. This extending is not only a question of convention although convention can play a role.

Is God real more like a rock, an event among material objects, an event among ideas, or a process? This question makes people uneasy. They are not uneasy because they think God is not real and because we cannot ask about God's reality but because we are not asking in a way that makes sense. Even if we cannot find a way to ask about God's reality that is rooted in questions that we ask about things in this world, people still feel it makes sense to ask.

It is fun to find conundrums about reality, figure out how they work, how they go right and wrong, and how they relate to questions about God and morality. There are many examples. I don't give many more. The end results are the same. It makes sense to ask the question about the reality of God and morality even if how we ask is not quite the same way as we ask about things in this world. It is a lot of fun, and it is only human to ask. After a while, though, when we see we cannot get definite answers, it is better to ask questions about things that make a difference in this world.

The rock is a lump without much discernable form. But the quartz crystals in the rock do have definite form. Maybe God is like the crystals, in that God is a form of material stuff and events in the world but not necessarily any of the particular stuff and events. Sugar and salt also have forms but different forms. A gas does not have much form. God might be the form not of any particular stuff in the world but for the whole world. Thus it makes sense to ask about forms, and so it makes sense to ask about God even if we do not ask in exactly the same way as we ask about any of the stuff in the world. This answer is along the lines of the traditional answer descended from Greek philosophy, and living in the West in different ways such as in Thomas Aquinas and Baruch Spinoza.

Say we have twenty versions of a traditional English-American song, which happens often enough. Which version is the original real version? It is not necessarily the oldest of which we have any evidence. If the song changed during its history, and a particular version became the root of all later versions, that version might be the original real version afterwards. Not all the songs can be the original real version. Some of the songs are artistically better even though they came later. Should we consider those the real version of the song? People accept that a performance of a version might be real all the time that what is being sung might be a bad imitation and so not quite as real. Bad versions of "When I'm 64" abound, and they seem not as real as the original. People tend to pick one kind of version and think of that as the original real version even though it might have come later and even though other versions might be good in their own right but different. People think that "Franky and Johnny" sung as a straight blues is more real and better because it is a straight blues while versions sung as production numbers are phony and bad even if well done. In all these cases, we know something real is going on but we are hard pressed to say exactly what. This is like when we ask questions about God. God might be the original real version of the "song of the world" to which we no longer have direct access. Tolkien offered an explanation much like this in "The Silmarillion", which takes place as a "pre-quel" to "The Lord of the Rings".

Species persists even if individuals come and go. We can form an idealized version of a species, such as robins, even though individuals vary a lot. We tend to think a species is realer, better, deeper, and more interesting than any individual. The species "tiger" is realer than any particular tiger. Sometimes this way of thinking can be useful. But jumping to the conclusion that a type is more real than the individuals that make it up is often misleading and false. A powerful version of this fallacy is in the social sciences where a society-culture is taken as more real etc. than any individuals that make it up, and controls individuals within it.

Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to all cases in the real non-supernatural world. Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to many cases but does not extend at all to supernatural issues such as God and morality. Try to find an idea of “real” that applies to many cases, and applies without any “stretching” to supernatural issues. Most ideas of “real” do not apply to all cases even in the natural world. Most ideas about “real” stretch to supernatural cases even though the “fit” to supernatural cases is not exactly the same fit as any natural case.

The Good Part.

The importance of these issues might be more apparent with morality than with God. A couple of examples are all we can do here.

This situation too comes from Aristotle: Fannie is foolhardy, Bonnie is appropriately brave, and Kathy is cowardly. Is Bonnie more integrated and real than Fannie or Kathy? Because Bonnie is appropriately brave, sometimes she is as foolhardy as Fannie and sometimes as cautious as Kathy. So her identity is more mixed than either Fannie or Kathy. It is easy to undermine mixed personalities. That does not mean we say Bonnie is less integrated and so less real. What Bonnie does depends more on her world than what Fannie or Kathy do. Does that mean Bonnie is more dependent, and therefore less real? Most people would say “no”. Maybe Bonnie is more in tune with her world because she better adjusts herself to situations, unlike Fannie or Kathy, who tend to act in stereotyped ways. Bonnie is more integrated into the interdependent net of the world that determines her actions, and thus more real. Again, most people would say “no”. Being caught up in an interdependent mutually determining net does not necessarily make something more real. We can apply ideas of integration and reality to Fannie, Bonnie, and Kathy only in some strained and unusual ways. It just does not make sense to say that any one is more real than the other two. It can make sense to say one is more integrated than the others but we have to clear what we mean. It can make sense to say one is better than the others but again we have to be clear about the situations and the overall long term. We like to think there is a connection between integration, morality, independence, and realness but that is not necessarily so.

Is suffering more real than happiness? If we do not pursue either happiness or suffering, then likely we will meet more suffering than happiness, and it seems suffering is constant and enduring while happiness is irregular and fleet. So suffering should be more integrated and real than happiness. Buddhists came to that conclusion. But that seems odd. Unless we want to personify and integrate suffering, it is not an integrated thing. We are asking the wrong questions because we are asking them about things to which they do not apply. The same problems come up with good and bad.

We are beset with problems about thingness and reality. Reality always has a hole in it, and that keeps us from getting to the heart of some important questions. Even so, we carry on with life, and can find some satisfaction.

“My bucket’s got a hole in it, I can’t get no beer

What’s the use of working so damn hard when I got a woman in the boss man’s yard?

My baby and me bought a brand new Ford, and now we’re standin’ on the runnin’ board”

Bolstered Interdependence

In the classical era, rationality and infinite-ness were good while finitude and irrationality were the sources of bad. Since World War Two, overcoming subject-object dualism has become the new rationality while living in an interdependent net, within which subject-object dualism has been vanquished, has become the new infinite. Disconnection and subject-object dualism are the new sources of all evil. Don't worry if you don't know what that means yet.

Classical thinkers were wrong to find badness in emotions and finitude, and modern thinkers are wrong to find badness primarily in isolation and subjectivity.

According to stereotypes of interdependence, nothing is self-sufficient, nothing has an essence, nothing has an identity by itself, everything comes to be only in relation to other things, everything maintains only in relation to everything else, and the net of interdependence is realer than any particular thing in it. The net of interdependence is the only truly real thing. Individuality is only an illusion. These ideas show up in many schools. The modern versions that I have in mind appear in "Structuralism", "Postmodernism", "Deconstructionism", and "Phenomenology". Interdependence is allied to schools that focus on process. I do not treat process schools.

The ideas of interdependence came out of some good motives and good insights. No living thing by itself makes full sense. We can't understand a living thing except in the context of its normal way of life in its normal ecosystem, full of other living things, and dealing with the weather. Even the weather is subject to variations in the sun. We can't understand a wolf primarily by killing it and cutting it up on a table. We have to go out, live with wolves, and see how they live. We can't understand an amoeba without seeing it engulf food and then run from other small animals that want to eat it. "Kill, tag, bag, and cut up later" is not how to know most of the world. We don't understand a person unless we know something of his-her family life and work life. We don't understand the military in the United States unless we know something of its history and about how the United States works. Even an apparently obvious word like "food" doesn't make full sense by itself. We have to know that some people consider hamburgers the only food group while other people think they are poison. We tend to see whole scenes rather than an isolated part of a scene; we tend to see the cat-in-the-tree rather than the isolated cat or the isolated tree. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts". To repeat for physics buffs: even basic particles such as electrons, photons, and quarks can be understood only in the context of their fields and in the context of the virtual particles that exist all around them all the time.

Interdependence is a good correction against bad habits of isolating and reducing. The problem is that interdependence goes too far. It picks apart the parts and bolsters the interconnected net. It overlooks any autonomy of the parts and the fact that the whole is often made up out of the interaction of the parts. Often the whole is not greater than the sum of the parts but is only the sum of the parts if you also take into account interaction. Identical twins raised in different environments do act much more alike than the average two people, even if their different family lives made a difference. Your stubborn little sister might be stubborn even if you treated her differently; she does have her own personality, as so many TV ads make sure she knows. An electron is an electron; you can't turn it into a photon without doing something drastic to it and without having some leftover parts. When an electron flies through a magnetic field, it changes the field. If you took a tiger out of India and put it in the wilds of North America, it would not

suddenly become a vegetarian or turn into a wolf. A car can be turned into a petunia planter but mostly it is still a dead car. A red light can mean anything we want it to mean but a big open outstretched hand with palm against us usually means “don’t”. A shaking fist is pretty clear even if a particular tradition might alter the meaning in limited contexts. The orbit of the Earth is influenced slightly by the orbits of all the other planets but mostly it is an affair between the Earth and the Sun. All individual academic proponents of interdependence (except maybe the Bourbaki School of mathematics) insist that they are really smart individual people, and deserve their high salaries; they have earned their respect and their ability to influence student minds.

The modern version of interdependence developed partly as a critique of capitalist ideologies: everyone can get rich; all rich people are self-made; all rich people have more talent than other people; social and political connections play no part in success; the system arises entirely out of individual effort; the system is best run by individuals selfishly pursuing only their own desires; the system automatically leads to the greatest welfare for everybody through selfish pursuit; workers are not capitalists because workers are too lazy or are too cowardly to invest, not because they never had a base from which to launch further investments; there are no socio-economic classes, only different levels of ability and effort; etc. I do not have to spell out the errors in this ideology. As a corrective to this kind of self-serving ideology, the idea of interdependence is necessary.

As with the other good motives listed above, interdependence goes too far in its critique of capitalism. It refuses to recognize the good that does come out of the system (along with the bad), see the freedom that individuals do have in capitalism compared to alternatives, and see the importance of individuals in making the system work. In going too far, I fear that proponents of interdependence support the fascism that they think they criticize.

The idea of interdependence sounds like the Hindu of “you are that”, for which see the next chapter on the Self. I have not seen much sympathy of academics who promote interdependence for traditional religious ideas. Mostly they are skeptical and critical (scornful) of traditional religion except when they use it to denigrate modern capitalist life. The idea of interdependence appears in many traditions, including elsewhere in Indo-European traditions other than in modern Western academia. I do not know enough to make further discussion along these lines worthwhile.

To any common sense person, the balance lies somewhere in the middle between analysis and holism, between total self-determination by individuals and total domination by the system. Individuals have their own innate dispositions. Those innate dispositions are shaped by the system. The individual in turn shapes the system; and so on. There is nothing surprising about this, although the outcomes can be mysterious for a while. Many of the same techniques that common sense people can use as defense against picking apart and bolstering, they can use to figure out the proper relations between parts and wholes. Just as we evolved to fight back against undermining, we evolved to find the most effective way of looking at parts and wholes.

Few modern scientists advocate “kill, tag, bag, and cut” anymore. Even skilled anatomists are acutely sensitive to the limitations on what they can learn that way, and usually are modest in their claims. We do still need skilled anatomists. Nearly all modern scientists recognize the interplay between part and whole. The modern study of animal life is an amazing beautiful exercise in appreciating animals in their natural

lives, working back-and-forth between seeing animals as individuals striving for evolutionary success, seeing the interplay between individuals, and seeing how it all takes place in an ecological context. The best corrective to ignorant ideas about interdependence is to read some of the material that has come out on animals since the 1960s. Since the 1970s, several scientific fields have grown up that are almost devoted to questions of individuals-and-interactions, with catchy names such as “complexity theory”, “chaos theory”, and “fractal geometry”. One of my favorites among these new fields studies how separate things acting individually can come into “synch” such as the glow of fireflies, the roar of frogs, or the tick of clocks.

Dependent Origination.

“Dependent origination” is an idea in Buddhism, and so predates by over two thousand years modern ideas of interdependence. It is similar to interdependence but stated in another way. I do not know the historical relations between the two ideas.

Nothing in the real natural world comes into being by itself and persists in being by itself without any help from other things and despite other things. Nothing is self-subsistent and fully independent. Everything is subject to natural laws. Everything is entirely determined by natural laws. Everything is the sum total of the natural laws that have acted on it through its life history. The Buddha included karma, dharma, right, and wrong as natural laws. As we will see again in the next chapter, the Buddha argued for dependent origination to correct wrong ideas about the soul and the self, that the self is eternal, self-originating, and ultimately autonomous from the illusory external world. The next chapter on the self describes these ideas in more detail. For now, think of it like this: If there is an immutable eternal soul, then it cannot change, and it cannot decide to be better and to strive for spiritual enlightenment-release. Only if the self can change does Buddhism make sense – in fact, only if the self can change do most religions make sense. If the self can change, then it has to be subject to natural laws. Accepting that the self is subject to natural laws makes us less egotistic and makes us more amenable to correct thinking about morality and seeking spiritual release.

If everything is subject to natural laws, and natural laws pervade the world, then everything is connected to everything else through natural laws, and we arrive at something like interdependence. Dependent origination need not necessarily imply full interdependence because it does not specify in advance the relations between quasi-autonomous things. It only says they are connected and that nothing is fully autonomous. It does not rule out quasi-autonomy. The sun is the sun but the sun is not the neighboring star or any other star; the sun is subject to gravity from the neighboring star and all the other stars.

In modern terms, we might express the same idea through a focus on individual decisions: individual persons have to decide, only individuals can decide, we are the source of all our decisions, we have to consider external things but external things don't make up our minds for us, we have to bear all the rewards and punishments of our decisions, and we have to live with what happens for all eternity. It is the idea that we have an eternal soul with free will.

For non-persons, for all-natural objects, there can be no doubt that dependent origination is largely true for the same reasons listed above for interdependence. Even the sun is not eternal and self-subsistent. The universe came into being with the Big Bang about 14 billion years ago but the sun is only about 5

billion years old, and will live for only about 5 billion more years. Every living thing on Earth evolved as a result of natural laws. Every living thing on Earth was made through a process in which many things contributed to its being made. The sea is an ever-changing thing that is the result of rain, evaporation, running water, sediments, below-surface volcanoes, sunlight, etc.

Unfortunately, thinking that the self can change and that the self is subject to natural laws leads to another set of problems, similar to the problems with free will and determinism in Western philosophy; I do not solve those problems here. Buddhists want people to be able to make good decisions such as to act morally and to strive for spiritual release-enlightenment while at the same time they say all decisions are conditioned (determined) by previous events operating under natural laws. You can't have it both ways. I don't think the Buddha was irrational in teaching dependent origination but I have to say a bit more before explaining why I don't think so.

Even in the modern form as "the decider", we can see problems, especially with persons. I always found it strange that people who stress the individual as the source of decisions also stress the consequences of those decisions on family members and society. It is as if we have to make decisions but other people cannot make decisions, so we do it for them when we make decisions for us. I have heard parents talk to their children about the importance of making decisions and about the impact those decisions will have on their siblings (meaning, of course, "don't have sex or take drugs") while at the same time the faces of the children show that they see the contradiction. "If I have to decide despite all the influence from the rest of the world, then why can't my siblings do the same thing, and why don't they have to do the same thing, no matter how I decide; why do I have to be responsible for them as well as me?" This is a problem in dependent origination too.

With the Big Bang, we can see a point of origin. Someone who insists on determinism in the Western sense can, at least in theory, trace it all back to the Big Bang. Buddhists taught dependent origination before anybody knew about the Big Bang, and so they don't have that option. Either there is a starting point about which we don't know or else everything goes back forever to a mysterious nothing. In either case, there is no role for people making good decisions.

Buddhists want people not to obsess about things. They want people to focus on acting correctly and on seeing how the world works. Part of the purpose of the idea of dependent origination is to get people off ideas like heaven, hell, forever, essential immutable me, and how immutable me changes. In that sense, dependent origination is correct. On the other hand, Buddhists do not want people to obsess over questions of free will and determinism, the ultimate beginning of the chain of dependent originations, and over possibly infinite chains of determinate origins. That second obsession is the danger in getting rid of the eternal changeless me. It is a question of lesser evils at the time, and of which chance you want to take so as to get people to act better and to focus on the right things. For his time, the Buddha's decision to focus on beneficial change, and away from the eternal me, was correct.

I doubt the Buddha thought we could not make independent decisions and that we are locked in infinite chains of determination, like a drop of water constantly moving between evaporation, rain, river, and ocean. Although "dependent origination" is an English phrase, the name gives a clue to the intent of the Buddha. "Origination" can mean that things do originate, even if they also depend on their surroundings when they do originate, as an orange tree creates oranges even when transplanted but the soil affects

the taste in particular locations. We can decide on a new course. I think the Buddha meant the idea of dependent origination to argue against both the eternal changeless soul and rigid determinism.

In this version, dependent origination does not differ too much from common sense. Common sense accepts that we make decisions that are not entirely determined by our surroundings. We can decide between apples and oranges in the grocery store without worrying whether some amazing long chain of determining causes led us to the “choise”. At the same time, we also accept that our situations influence our decisions, that we are not entirely free, and that the past still influences us now. I once had a good experience with German Jewish immigrants and that experience still colors my views. Living in the American South now, I have to try hard not to let my experiences of several races and social classes get under my skin and make me prejudiced – sometimes I fear I am losing. The great comic Lenny Bruce had a monologue about tough guys who thought they could withstand any torture, and challenged them to take “the hot lead enema”. Astute military commanders know that anybody can be broken in time. At the same time, even in prison camps, or in the middle of racial hate, people act with empathy, and they reach out to do good to the other side. We have a fairly accurate sense of how much pressure people can take, are happy when people exceed our expectations, but we don’t expect it, and we don’t hold it too much against them when they don’t. Long experience improves our sense of how it all works and what kinds of people there are. Scientists can proceed as if the will were determined without worrying for now if it really is or not. Some scientists can specialize in trying to figure out this problem – sometimes I enjoy their books. Legal people can proceed as if we were almost free. We can appreciate events of the past that made us better people and can struggle against events that made us worse. We can decide to be better people and to focus on important topics. Exactly how all this works, I do not know. Nor do I offer any theories. I cannot offer foolproof arguments against either determinism or eternal changeless me. I just go along with how it seems after reasonable consideration.

Subject-Object Dualism

The topic of subject-object dualism also is like the Hindu idea of “you are that”. It has always played a part in Western thinking but did not become prominent until the rise of Romanticism. It is closely related to interdependence. I don’t know the relations between all three ideas.

A “subject” is a being who knows about the world, and usually acts on the world. An “object” is a thing in the world. Subjects know about objects; subjects act on objects; objects act on other objects. An object is not a subject when it acts on another object. Whether subjects act on other subjects can be a matter of debate. These ideas partially line up with familiar distinctions in grammar: A subject is like the subject in a sentence; actions are like verbs; and objects are what gets acted on. When an object acts on another object, it can be the subject in a sentence, but we should not confuse gramamtical usage with the status of the object in the world. When “the rock hit the window”, the rock is the subject of the sentence but it is not a subject as in “Jack threw the rock” or “Jack understands about rocks”. An animal can be an object, and an idea can be an object.

Keeping a strong distinction between subject and object can lead to problems in both understanding and behavior. A strong idea of the subject can bolster the idea of the eternal autonomous me, against which the Buddha warned. We get confused, think we are more than we are, and act like it too. We think we are properly in the world if we merely intellectually understand the world. We forget we are in the world

too, and we have to interact with other things that are in the world. We forget that other things affect us, often more than we affect them. We forget there are experiences, and that some experiences are very hard to put in terms of subjects knowing objects. We think that a subject can take in the whole world, and forget that any one subject is finite and so cannot take in the whole world. We think we own the world, and can do with it what we want.

If we think everything that is not us is an object, we treat other things improperly and badly. We take as our example of an object something that reduces the features and complexity of most objects, such as a rock or a crystal. We see everything as if it were a simple inert rock, waiting to be broken apart to be understood and used. We see only isolated parts within which are more isolated parts. We “objectify” and sometimes “demonize” too. We forget about interdependence and relations. This attitude reinforces the idea that we own the world, and spreads the attitude to include every particular thing in the world. We cut up animals. We reduce ecosystems to sources of energy. We cut up the economy, thinking we can cure all problems with tax breaks for the rich or massive spending financed by debt.

Whatever is not us, we treat as “an other” or an “other”. Whatever is not like us is altogether foreign and cannot be treated as we treat ourselves and as we wish ourselves to be treated. We cannot apply the Golden Rule to what is not us. What is not us can be known from the outside, and can only be known from the outside, because it does not have a real inside like us. We treat people of other groups as if they were objects and “others”. We treat people of other groups as things, and as hostile things too. As the sole subject in the world, we feel isolated. We cannot make up for the isolation by interacting with others because they are no real others. So we acquire objects to make up for the isolation we feel; we indulge in mindless consumerist spending. We go into crazy debt. Nearly all the problems of capitalism can be seen as manifestations of a strong subject-object duality. Nearly all the social, economic, and ecological problems of the world can be seen as variations on a strong subject-object duality.

Subject-object dualism is the new irrationalism at the heart of darkness.

At least some of this analysis is true, although it is strongly overstated. The overstating makes normal people overlook the true part, and leads them to retreat back into the comfort of the false part.

What can we do about subject-object dualism? The only consistent answer I have ever read is that we should use “the dialectic” from European philosophy instead of analytic reasoning. This is not possible, for many decisive reasons that I do not go into here. It is not clear what thinkers who invoke the fear of subject-object dualism want us to do. It is not clear if they want us to merge into our world, our objects, and our others, so as to make everything one grand unity. It is not clear if they merely want us to stress the dualism less, and how they want us to do that. It is not clear if they want us to stress interaction more, and how they want us to do that. They are good critics, but being a good critic who does not offer a solution is really another manifestation of subject-object dualism. In stressing subject-object dualism without offering a cure, they actually bolster subject-object dualism. Critics do not tell us what the right balance is, and they do not tell us how to get there from here in any realistic way that normal people can follow. They do not improve on the good common sense that we get from friends and doctors. Quit eating junk food, get up off the couch, get into nature, learn, get out on a golf course, or get out into the garden, and do things instead of just watching them on TV.

Sometimes it works really well to see the world not in terms of one merged subject-object but as distinct things that we can know intellectually, as distinct things that interact, and as distinct things that gain more from the interaction that they would if they merged. We can't become the rock. We have learned a lot from post-mortem dissection. Sports are a lot more fun when we have an opponent who is not us, even if the opponent is a material thing like a golf course or a mountain. If we try to see an ecosystem as one big unified subject-object, we miss the interaction between predators and prey, and between plants and animals. A sports person becomes one with his-her opponent for a while; but not really. A good driver becomes one with his-her car or bike for a while; but not really. A swords-person becomes one with his-her sword, but not really, and only for the short time needed to use it; otherwise, the sword is best left in the scabbard.

In "Star Wars", the interaction that good humans have with machines might represent the good merging of the subject-and-object. The interaction that bad humans have with machines represents this idea taken too far, especially when machines take over from the organic. When Anakin Skywalker interacted with his machines, he was better off. When Darth Vader became more a machine than a person, when the machine and the human tightly merged, he was worse off. General Grievous was really an organic being that had been taken over by a machine, to the point where machine and organism were entirely merged, and he became evil as a result.

Bolstered Subject-Object Dualism

This section is dedicated to "Pale Fire" by Vladimir Nabokov.

The opening line from Donovan's song is:

"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is..."

The line is adapted from Zen Buddhism. It is usually attributed to Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin:

"Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once again mountains and waters are waters".

(From David McMahan, *Empty Vision*, New York: Routledge, 2002, page 43. Quoted from D.T. Suzuki, "A Sense of Zen", in *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, William Barrett, editor, Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1956, page 14.)

The version of Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin reminds me of Heraclitus and Cratylus. A simple interpretation is: "At first, we naively think there are mountains just like what we see without knowing how much we add even to simple perceptions. Then, through study of the dharma, we see that nothing is as it seems, so there can be no such mountains. Finally, through more study, we see that undermining is not better than naïve reality, so we accept the world as it is, and with a better attitude."

This interpretation is pretty good if it stays simple like this, although it can be a mistake to add the ideas about perceptions and naïve reality right away, and to refer to dharma study right away.

The problem is that the interpretation doesn't stay simple. It gets sophisticated, half-right, and therefore totally wrong. Annoying theoreticians complicate things and make unsolvable problems by interjecting their theories. One sophisticated interpretation says the enemy of right thinking is subject-object dualism. We are wrong in the first phase because we are the victims of subject-object dualism. We improve in the second phase because we overcome subject-object dualism. In the third phase, we return to chastised subject-object dualism as a way to get along but we are a lot wiser about it.

The sophisticated interpretation introduces a point-of-view-and-problem where there is none. It is another way of interjecting a bolstered self. Humans seem desperately to need idealized explanations, especially ones that go back ultimately to their own bolstered self; and sometimes we have to allow it; but, if we can avoid it, we might as well do so. There is no need to invoke subject-object dualism only to overcome it. To do so only bolsters subject-object dualism, and thus adds another problem on top of the problem of how to deal with the world properly. Rather than allow our minds to range over all the issues that might get in the way, and to overcome them naturally as they arise, invoking subject-object dualism forces our minds to focus on the non-central problem of subject-object dualism, and so prevents us from finding natural action. If subject-object dualism is one of the intrinsic problems that get in the way, we will meet it and deal with it when it arises, as long as we are not primed to obsess on it.

If you think in strong subject-object dualities, even if your intent is to overcome them, then you have mired yourself in subject-object dualism (undermined and bolstered yourself), even if you think you will escape at the end. You bring the problem of subject-object dualism to the question of mountain-no-mountain and water-no-water, and then are amazed when you still find issues with subject-object dualism. If you bring subject-object dualism to simple moral questions such as "should I help my neighbor with the groceries?" then you and the neighbor never help each other.

The correct attitude is not to get trapped in any ideology at all. Just accept that first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is. Accept what we do to make mountains, unmake mountains, and remake mountains every day. Accept what we do to make ourselves, unmake ourselves, and remake ourselves, every day. Accept what we do to make other selves, unmake other selves, and remake other selves, every day. If later you wish to put this ability into ideological terms as a way to have fun, and maybe to help the intellect, go ahead. If later you wish to use dharmas and sutras, the Western study of perception and evolution, or the ideology of subject-object dualism, to help you understand the ability and to put it in various contexts, go ahead. But don't expect everybody to follow you.

12 Self

This chapter defends the common sense idea of the self. This chapter assumes a common sense idea of the world to go along with the common sense self but does not defend it. I use “person” and “self” to mean the same. I continue to use “thinker” to mean theologian, priest, monk, philosopher, critic, biologist, psychologist, anthropologist, etc. Please see the chapter on codes, in particular the section on “Pascal’s Wager”.

If we face God after we die, there has to be a self that faces God. That self has to be like the self of common sense. If there is no self, or the self is unlike what we think it is, then facing God doesn’t make the same sense. If there are decent people, then there have to be people, and people have to be like the selves of common experience. If our self should be true to a code, then we have to have a coherent self. If we work to make the world better, then we need to know what makes human selves better off. If we want to reward good people, and we need to punish bad people, then people have to be the kind of self that it makes sense to reward and punish. If we hold life in general, and sentient-moral-aesthetic life in particular, to be valuable, then we need to know why human selves are valuable. We need to know why we should not enable bad behavior in human selves. On the other hand, if our self is not like these ideas of a self, we need to know how and why, and what that implies.

Ideas of Self and World.

The idea that our common sense self faces God is also an idea about the world. For a common sense self to get along in this world well enough to face God, this world has to be much as it seems. This world has to be close to a common sense world. We can’t expect people to act decently where decency makes no sense. We can’t hold indecent people to account when indecency doesn’t matter. We can’t expect people to work hard to make the world better if their actions don’t help at least some people. It takes a lot of space to show how an idea of the self and idea of a world go together, so I omit that topic, and stick to simply describing selves and worlds separately.

Various ideas of self-and-world are not all compatible. Different religions hold different views. People, and religions, usually hold multiple ideas of self and world, often contradictory, without reconciling them. This topic also takes much space so I don’t go into it. Two later chapters describe ideas about worlds.

My American Common Sense Version of the Self and the World.

My version of the self-and-world is pretty much the standard American common sense version, including my ideas about facing God and working to make a better world. The standard American common sense idea of the self-and-world is good enough, and true enough, for nearly all important needs. The standard American version is mostly shared by other cultures but not fully shared by all. Cultural differences are important but are too much to account for here.

My version of the self differs from simple empirical common sense a little. There is nothing in ordinary experience that makes us believe we face God after we die, and believe it is important to work to make the world better. My extension of the simple empirical common sense vision of self-and-world is not much of a departure, it is compatible with that view, and it is what many Americans, and many people of the world, believe too.

What the Self is and is Not; Opponents in this Chapter.

Most argument now against the common sense idea of the self comes from a mechanistic idea that the self is nothing but a bundle of electrochemical reactions. This view borrows from modern Darwinism, and it has much truth to it. It shares ideas with religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Modern scientific psychological mechanists are our version of ancient religious adepts who let their cleverness mistakenly dissolve the world.

Too often, to undermine the commonsense idea of the self, ideologies set up an unrealistic “straw” self which is easy to undermine. When they have undermined it, they assume they have vanquished all other views, and so their non-commonsense view must be correct. To counter this tactic, it helps to explain what I do not think about the self.

It is not hard to get people to consent to an idealized self that they don't really believe in, as apparent in their actions. Their actions show that they believe in a self different than the ideal self. Ideally, a self is completely consistent, has no contradictions, is fully integrated, never indulges in self-deception, is fully conscious of all it does or could be fully conscious of all it does, completely controls the body, acts only rationally to achieve goals, can exert “will power” to counter all temptation, and can exert “will power” to withstand hardship and torture. Even if the surface everyday self seems inconsistent and contradictory sometimes, the deep soul-self is fully consistent and meet all the points of an ideal self. The deep soul-self is not entirely physical but is some kind of spirit. As a spirit, the self can escape some constraints of the material world, such as disease and torture.

No normal person actually lives this view of the self. What normal live, and therefore what normal people believe even if they don't say it, is that there are degrees of selfhood depending on the situation. We are integrated enough in particular situations so we can assume then that selves have desires and intentions, and will act with intent to achieve their desires, as long as they are not thwarted by duress. We allow for weakness, lapses, duress, contradictions, and self-deception. We do not assume those flaws completely undo the idea of a situational-self-as-needed-and-as-possible. People accept that a self can be totally destroyed through torture or disease, as in the novel “1984” or with Alzheimer's dementia, but that fact does not undermine the situation-variable situation-adequate self of normal life. The totally autonomous spiritual soul-self is an unrealistic ideal, and it is a useful shorthand way to think about the self, but it is not what people really expect. People are not sure how free we are from materiality and constraint, and what any freedom from materiality and constraint implies for a soul-self. This situational-self-as-needed-and-as-possible is the view of the self on which our laws are actually based, not the idealized soul-self.

The situation-variable situation-adequate self is what I defend. I do not defend the idealized self. It does not matter if the situation-adequate self is a mere machine or is a super organism that sometimes can

escape the laws of physics. What matters is that this self is interesting to God, this self can take personal responsibility in enough situations, and God will talk to this self some time.

Mechanists point out correctly that the ideal self cannot be true, and, from that, conclude that the self is nothing but an evolved delusion; a human organism is nothing but a bundle of chemical reactions with a delusion of selfhood. Critics ignore the situation-specific self or see it as a variation of the idealized soul-self. As we will see below, there are good evolutionary reasons why people might say they believe in an idealized idea of a self but act on another basis. These reasons do not make the idea of the situation-adequate self into a delusion. The real situation-adequate self might be a bundle of chemical reactions but that does not mean it is nothing but a bundle of chemical reactions.

It is easy to produce a theory of the idealized totally free soul-self, or to produce a theory of the totally mechanistic un-free deluded robot self. It is hard to make a theory of a self that appears to be partially free and to have some intensions according to situation, but that is what is empirically true. It is harder to produce a good theory of the real self if we begin from either extreme. If we are to have a correct theory of the self, we need to respect what we actually see, and we need to develop a theory accordingly. We cannot twist what we see to fit a preset theory about the world as spirit or as machine. At this time, I don't have a good theory of the situation-variable and situation-adequate self.

Exploring Character versus Undermining the Self.

The self is one of the easiest things to undermine by picking apart and bolstering. I do not assess here the many ways in which the self is undermined. You can get a sample from the suggested readings, and I might put some examples on the Internet.

People have different reasons for undermining the self. Probably the biggest reason is to control other people. People have different reasons for wishing to control other people, usually bad, sometimes good. People both undermine different aspects of the self to go along with their particular reasons, and they have particular methods that go along with the particular aspects of the self that they wish to undermine.

For example, suppose a thinker wishes people to feel guilt. A thinker can pick apart our ability to judge moral situations, or a thinker can point out how we fail to act appropriately even when we can see moral truth. A thinker stresses our tendency to blindly follow the teachings of authority figures, especially the authority figures of a religion. The self is morally inadequate.

Rather than undermine the self, I use picking apart and bolstering to explore human nature and to explore the character of people in particular societies. I want to know about character so I can assess if people are up to the job of citizen in a modern democracy on a planet that is fast being laid waste. I think there is a big difference between picking apart so as to promote ideology versus exploring character.

As an example of exploring character, we expect a certain level of skills and amount of consistency in a person before we can call him-her a common sense person, and can relate to him-her as a person for the needs at hand. In a democracy, we expect some good sense. Suppose a man spends a lot of money on a golf club because he thinks it will magically improve his golf game, when he knows the real problem is his swing, knows the club alone cannot do much, and he already has bought six others just like it before.

Suppose a woman buys a cream to magically make wrinkles go away, and make boys fall at her feet. She does not check the ingredients to find they are exactly the same ingredients as in all other creams, and the same as in the generic cream she could have bought for one-tenth the price, because she wants not to know that. Both the man and the woman want to believe in magic. Can we reasonably expect either person to cast his or her vote wisely in the next election? What skills are needed of a person in a democracy, and how much integrity is required?

The Self.

Most of these ideas were given previously in Chapter Two on evolution. Sorry for the technical jargon but it is needed in case any scientist reads this.

-A self (see below) recognizes that the world has distinct units even though the units interact.

-A self (see below) recognizes that it is one of the distinct units.

-Units come in natural kinds. The exact nature of the kinds that are recognized by selves likely varies a bit with the particular evolutionary history of a self, but that does not matter here.

-The natural kinds have their own distinct attributes. Selves tend to think in terms of essences. You do not need to understand the idea of essences now.

-The units within a natural kind are not all the same. Sometimes the differences matter, and sometimes they don't. I do not take up these issues any more here.

-Some kinds are passive (rocks); some kinds are active but seem to have no intentions (the wind); some kinds seem to interact but have no intentions (soil, and juices from trees); some kinds are alive; some kinds are alive and adaptable but fairly passive (plants); some kinds are active but not too smart (animals like snails); some kinds are active and obviously learn (animals like cats); some kinds have memories, and the degree of memory varies with kinds (cats again); some kinds are active and have intentions (animals like robins); kinds that have intentions usually also have good memories (elephants); some kinds recognize that they individually have intentions and memories (horses); some kinds recognize that other kinds have intentions, memories, etc. (dogs); and some kinds can read the intentions and memory of other kinds quite well (humans, and some other animals such as baboons and orangutans).

-No evolved kind, or unit of a kind, perfectly models the world in its perceptions, mental operations, and actions. The gap between the exact world versus perceptions and act can be more advantageous than an exact fit, as, for example, flight and fight.

-Evolved kinds that are adept with intentions and memory have the following features:

=They can manipulate other units based on their understanding of the abilities of other units.

=They can send signals aimed not at giving information but at manipulation. That is, they can lie.

- =They have lively imaginations. They tend to see the world as lively.
- =They come born with an ability to generate natural categories (units, types of units, left, right, lively, “has intentions”, etc.) and to build other categories on the basis of the original natural categories. See above.
- =They use essentialist thinking, especially when building on natural categories. See above.
- =They can use their imagination to think of living units that are not confined to a bodily state.
- =They deceive themselves in some ways. Usually they are not so self-deceived as to be immobilized or psychotic.
- =They live in groups of similar units.
- =They can tell apart individuals of the same kind (not all dogs are one dog) and even tell apart individuals within social groups (not all wolves in this pack are the same).
- =They recognize that situations get complicated along with an increase in the number of inter-actors. Two is more complicated than one; three is much more complicated than two; four is horrendously complicated, and so on. The evolved natural ability to deal with complicated situations tends to stop at about four but might go as high as six.
- =They recognize that other actors have histories, and that what actors do depends partly on the type of the actor and partly on their history.
- =They put actors into types. They types are based on natural categories and learned categories.
- =They have “short cuts” and “rules of thumb” that they use to deal well enough with complexity.
- =They internalize and use their imagination to “play with” the intentions, memories, abilities, and histories of other units.
- =They have sympathy and empathy for other units.
- =They handle complicated situations by lumping together the other members of their group into a kind of big unit with its own intentions and memories. Following a tradition, I call this the “generalized other”.
- =They internalize the “generalized other”.
- =They have at least two distinct identities in their self-awareness, which they use as tools in dealing with situations. Following a tradition, I call these two parts of us the “I” and the “me”.
- =They have internal contradictions such as the desire to both love and hurt a spouse. They are also pretty adept at handling these contradictions.

=They can make up counterfactuals (“might have been”, “if”, “suppose”, “imagine”, etc.). Counterfactuals are useful in understanding histories, types, situations, etc. Counterfactuals can cause confusion and manipulation. They are fairly adept at resolving problems with counterfactuals.

=They have logical contradictions, some of which come from lying and counterfactuals and some of which just arise out of logic. Examples include the “liar’s paradox”, or self-contradiction such as “I am a liar”, the ability to think both in terms of reduction (picking apart) and holism (bolstering), to think also in terms of qualities apart from reduction or holism, and to think of a time traveler disturbing the time line. They are adept at dealing with logical contradictions.

=That is, all in all, they are “sentient”.

=They appreciate beauty.

=They have a moral sense.

=They feel emotions. Emotions are not necessarily irrational. Emotions are often evolutionarily rational. There is not a simple dichotomy between rational and emotional. I do not explain further here.

=They have commitments to other units (love) and even to large parts of the world (ecosystems), ideals (justice), or the world as a whole.

=They use language.

=They have consistent ideas (theories) about selves and about the world.

=They tell stories. Stories are important in how they see selves and worlds, and manage selves and worlds.

=They feel as if they have free will in many situations but not all situations. They understand constraint and allow for it.

-Units of kinds with all these features recognize themselves as selves. It is not clear if an evolved self might be able to recognize itself as a self with fewer features than those listed above. We do not yet understand the interdependence between features.

-Evolved units that have a sense of self do not have a fully accurate sense of self. They have an overly strong sense of their own self, a distorted view of their own self, and a distorted view of other selves.

Any unit that displays all of these features is a self. This is what it means to be a self.

It does not matter if a self evolved or is made, but, as far as I know, I have met only evolved selves. I doubt we can make selves unless we make them feel contradictory, face conflicts, feel commitment, use counterfactuals, face paradoxes, have a generalized other, have an I and me, feel beauty, tell stories, etc. We are a long way from doing that, but I think we will get there.

It is extremely unlikely any artificial self could have all the other necessary attributes to be a self but did not also feel as if it were a self.

Brief Early Rejoinder to the “Mechanistic Bundle” View of the Self.

As far as I am concerned, any unit that has all the above attributes is a self, even a machine that follows deterministic natural laws. No evolved self has perfect free will. All evolved selves have imperfect ideas, and delusions, that serve evolutionary success, including some distorted ideas about their own selves. None of these conditions make a self any less a self. Just because a self feels as if it is a self does not mean it is deluded. Just because a self evolved the feeling of being a self to serve evolutionary success, and the feeling is partly distorted, still the feeling could be largely true. Selves that feel as if they are selves could really be selves. When we have clear criteria a self, other than the criteria for the ideal unrealistic “straw” soul-self, then we can decide if we are selves despite our inaccurate ideas of our own selfhood.

Mechanists need to construct the strongest idea of the self from the points listed above, and see how to deal with that. Mechanists need to do more than attack simplistic myths about the self, even ones that have a strong evolutionary basis. Selves cannot be explained away just because evolved selves have a tendency to over-stress their selfhood. The mechanist misses the point by stressing mechanism. It is not about whether selves are machines. It is about some qualitatively distinct kinds of machines with unusual interesting attributes and with personal histories. Selves can think both deterministically (mechanistically) and qualitatively, without going crazy. The fact that selves can do this seems to me to strongly validate that selves are qualitatively distinct and interesting.

Self and Soul.

I want to distinguish self from soul because I don't like ideas about the soul in most major religions. I want to make sure I am not committed to any of their ideas. Religions tend to take the ideal “straw” self as the basis for their ideas of the soul, and I want to make clear I don't do that.

As far as I can tell, you need a self first to have a soul, but you don't have to have a soul if you have a self. The common sense idea of the self does not require a soul, which might be why we are not clear about the soul. Americans often think animals have selves but are much less clear about whether they have souls. Even if the self implies a soul, the common sense idea of the self does not imply any kind of soul, as for example the abstruse soul of Christianity or Hinduism.

I do not know what attributes of the self would entail having a soul or having a particular kind of soul. I know we don't have our body when we go to meet God; so I say that our bodiless self goes to meet God. If a bodiless self is a soul, then my view might imply a soul. The attributes that I have when I meet God are the same ones I have as a self now or it wouldn't make sense to meet God in the way that I expect. How this self is able to not have a body, I do not know. I don't know what good it does to call a bodiless self a “soul”. It can do harm if the term “soul” commits us to ideas that are harmful.

Free Will.

This chapter does not address problems of free will. Like most people, I want to have my cake of free will and eat my cake of deterministic science too. What I say in this chapter does not depend on settling the question of free will. See the next chapter; it doesn't settle the problem of free will either.

The following starred sections explain some major views of the self.

***Autonomous, Immutable, Eternal I-Me.**

I don't think the idea of an autonomous, immutable, eternal me is innate. There is no point in trying to review in what kinds of societies, and in which cultures, the idea shows up, so we can decide how innate it is and how derived it is. It is common in most of the major world religions, but not all; see below. I think there are innate ideas of selves, of myself, and of the fact that my self persists despite changes. All three aspects of the idea need not come together. The self-soul could be eternal without being immutable, and so on, but it seems the three aspects do often occur together.

The question for here is how true it all is. Because of the Big Real Risk, and because of what I have seen of people, I doubt the self is autonomous, immutable, and eternal in the way that many people believe it, especially if they get the combined idea from traditional religions. The self was made by God, so God can end the self, and he likely does end many selves. The self is not necessarily eternal.

If the self were immutable, there would be no Big Real Risk. If we could not change, we could not turn bad or good, there would be no risk, and there would be no gain. If the self were totally autonomous, then we could withstand any temptation, any stress, and any bad thing that happened. We would not change. We can withstand a lot, more than we usually think, but not everything. We cannot withstand indefinite torture. We are not all-powerful.

Try thinking of the various kinds of worlds that would go along with an eternal, autonomous, immutable self-soul. Not all of them are appealing. Some are boring.

***Christian-Muslim Idea of the Soul.**

I think the Jewish idea of the soul from the Tanakh is fairly close to my common sense idea of the self, so I don't treat it here. I don't know enough about Talmudic and post-Talmudic ideas, and the topic seems complicated, so I don't treat it here.

The Christian and Muslim views of the soul are similar enough so that I treat them together here. Muslim and Christian ideas received a lot of input from Classical philosophy, so, indirectly, I treat that here as well.

Classical philosophy emphasized a distinction between the external superficial changing perishing self versus the deep unchanging eternal soul. This distinction was part of other dualities such as between matter-spirit, nonbeing-being, becoming-being, illusion-reality, mundane-sacred, etc. I do not guess which duality might have priority and how they all hang together. Other worldviews, even non-Western worldviews, suffer from most of the same dualities. The Christian-Muslim view inherited the Classical view.

The true inner soul seeks God. It does not necessarily seek ecstatic union with God but it does seek to be close to God and to please God. It seeks God's grace. It seeks nothing else. If it did seek other things, it would be mutable, not autonomous, and not rational. It is willing to submit its will to God's will. In fact, whenever it knows itself, it has already submitted to God and subordinated its will to God. That is its nature. When we die, we shed the external self and come before God, to be judged, entirely as our true inner soul.

On the other hand, if we come to God to be judged, only as our true inner self, then the true inner self must have made some mistakes about right and wrong, and so it must be mutable, not autonomous, and not fully rational. Otherwise there would be no point in being judged; we would force God's grace just by existing; and God's grace cannot be forced.

I don't think there is any way to reconcile the choices that we make in life, the fact that we change, and the people we become, with a simple traditional Christian-Muslim idea of the soul. There is no way to reconcile the external half-good self with the true deep inner soul. Even deep true selves vary within themselves and over time, and not all deep true selves center on goodness, rationality, submission, and grace. We are mixed beings. Because I am not defending the traditional Christian-Muslim view, I do not try to figure it all out.

***Upanishad Hinduism: "You are That"**

The "Upanishads" is a group of short sacred documents that were compiled in India from about 500 years before Jesus to the time of Jesus. The ideas are often beautiful and profound. They are one important source for the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita. Some ideas in the Upanishads are similar to Buddhism and Jainism, and some are ideas against which the Buddha protested. I do not give the source of particular ideas below from a particular Upanishad.

By the time of the Upanishads, at about the same time as Socrates, Indians (not yet Hindus) had an idea of the self similar to the Greek philosophical idea of the self, and similar to later Christian-Muslim ideas of the self. This material world is potentially corrupting, but the self-soul can see through the delusions of this world to spiritual enlightenment. There were various ideas of enlightenment, which I do not go into here. The enduring self is called "atman".

The Upanishads altered the basic idea of essential enduring selves to say that we are all very deeply connected, so deeply connected that it makes little sense to think of ourselves as isolated individuals. We are still individuals but we are not separate individuals. The idea is given through the phrase "that thou art" or "you are that". If the idea were limited to feeling togetherness with other humans, modern Americans might say it is a very strong version of the feeling of "there but for the grace of God go I". The idea is not limited to other people but includes togetherness with all sentient beings, often animals, and sometimes plants, microbes, stars, things such as mountains and dust motes, and events such as sun sets and laughter. The idea "you are that" can have several meanings. The meanings can support each other. They can also contradict, depending on the stress and "spin" given to any particular meanings.

(A) We are all manifestations of the same creative force and so we are not distinct at the deepest level. Not only are we the same as other people-animals-plants-things-events in our deepest being, also we are all the one-and-only real God in our deepest true selves. Our deepest selves are all the same self.

(B) We all depend on each other to get along and to progress. I cannot be anything at all without you, and you cannot be without me, so we should respect each other and get along.

(C) The hope of all beings is spiritual realization (enlightenment). We should achieve realization together. If we are connected, then I cannot achieve realization unless you achieve it as well. If I am temporarily more advanced than you are, I will teach you, and wait for you, until we all achieve realization together. I trust you will do the same for me when you are more advanced.

(D) Although we are all from the same deep spiritual force, we are somewhat distinct, because that is how creativity works. The distinctiveness in this present world might not be ultimate but it is what this world is all about. To go along with distinctiveness here is another way of going along with ultimate union at the deepest level. This way of thinking preserves the enduring autonomous atman.

(E) As a distinct entity, I sometimes have to displace other entities. When I do displace others, I hope I do so respectfully, and in line with my deep nature as part of the same creative force (an idea in the Bhagavad Gita). When I do displace others, sometimes I have to do it forcefully. Change sometimes requires pain.

(F) When one being displaces another temporarily, really there is no deep trauma because we are all part of the same deep underlying spiritual force (an idea in the Bhagavad Gita).

(G) We all should, and can, feel joy at our deep unity and at the creativity that produced us.

(H) There is no reason why knowing “you are that”, or why spiritual realization, should stop creativity and joy as long as beings continue to know that they are of each other at a deep level.

(I) It is not clear if “you are that” removes all distinctions between separate selves, or reinforces it, does each depending on the situation, or if the question makes sense.

Christians should recognize ideas of mutual love and dependence.

“You are that” is a way of picking apart the self by eliminating aspects of the self that are not compatible with “you are that”, and of strongly bolstering the self by giving it a clear identity and rationale. I do not here explain how proponents of “you are that” pick apart aspects of the self that they do not like such as striving for fame, success, material goods, and power.

To a Darwinist, “you are that” seems like normal evolved empathy gone crazy. Normal people can’t live in full accord with the empathic spirit of “you are that”. Under normal circumstances, nature would select against people who felt this way, and would find a balance between selfishness versus identification with others. “You are that” can only be a delusion based on pressing an evolved ability.

Yet the fact that “you are that” is an extension of an evolved ability in a way that could not be sustained in normal human life does not mean “you are that” is wrong, is worse than the normal common sense way, really is a delusion, or that people who think like this are not selves. It might mean that evolution led us to the point where we could see what is most true even if most people could not consistently live in what is most true. You have to decide this question on its merits.

Assume there is a difference between the external surface self versus the deep true self. The surface self goes through many changes, and suffers from both hardship and gladness. Assume the deep true self of everybody is the same deep true self. It does not go through real changes. It is eternal, immutable, and autonomous. It does not suffer any real pain and hardship although it knows of the surface pain. It does feel joy from the ever-changing surface selves. It feels joy whenever a surface self is true to the code of the life that the surface self happens to be in at any particular time. This is the resolution found in the Bhagavad Gita.

***Buddha’s Bundle.**

The Buddha’s name was “Siddhartha Gautama”, spelled in various ways. Siddhartha sought release from suffering and sought spiritual enlightenment. Enlightenment brings release from deep suffering even if it does not end all common suffering such as a hungry belly. The major source of suffering, and the major impediment to enlightenment, is ensnaring commitment to this world, including in this world the circle of religious seekers. The Buddha had to release himself from false ensnaring ideas, both from the mundane world (love, wealth, power) and the world of spiritual adepts (magic power through suffering). He had to wake up. The term “Buddha” is a title; it means “awakened”. A “Buddha” has “awoken” and so is free from delusion, is enlightened, released from ensnaring commitment, and released from the hard snare of suffering.

To Siddhartha, among the false ensnaring ideas were all then-current ideas of the self, including the self as soul-self, the picked apart self as a simple mechanism, and the bolstered metaphysical self of “you are that” from the Upanishads. The Bhagavad Gita came well after the Buddha. The Buddha would have considered the self of the Gita as a bolstered false idea of the self. The Buddha had to construct an idea of the self that was neither too much picked apart nor bolstered, and was not the naïve soul-self of common sense. The Buddha had to make an idea of the self that took account of rebirth but did not mire the self in rebirth.

The Buddha argued that the self is best understood as a bundle of abilities-and-desires or of abilities-and-effects (“skandas”). For example, we have abilities for seeking sex, food, and fame. We have an ability to make up “objects” that help us along, such as houses and myths. There is no self apart from the abilities. There is nothing metaphysical behind the bundle. There is no underlying metaphysical self that acts, there are only the acts.

False ideas of a strong self are the result of a particular ability (or a few). The false idea of a self comes from one particular “this-bundle-is-a-self” ability that helps other abilities to succeed and is, in turn, supported by other abilities when they succeed. The mental ability that makes the self does so by raising illusions about the self and the world, like constantly seeing the same image in clouds. The idea of the self is the result of deluded bolstered mental abilities like the false strong image we have of ourselves as

a “winner”. When any other ability temporarily succeeds, as when we succeed in sports, business, or sex, that particular other ability conspires with the self-ability to validate false ideas of the self. When we succeed in business, we think we are “hot shit” and a winner who will never lose again; we think we are realer than we really are. When we succeed spiritually, even in good endeavors such as charity or yoga, we make the same mistake.

When we no longer depend on our collection of abilities, and no longer depend on any illusory idea of the self, we might be open to better ways of seeing our self and the world. The term for the bundle after all delusory ideas of the self have been removed is “no self”. The term for “no-self” is “anatta” or “anatman” or “an-atman”, which means “no-atman” or “no-self”.

Some Buddhists take the Buddha to mean that there is nothing like a self at all. This has become the standard Buddhist view. This view is probably a mistake. It accuses the Buddha of completely picking apart the self, a mistake which he did not wish to make. Saying there is no self at all is like saying there is no reality at all, like saying there are no apples because we can undermine the idea of an apple. There might be no metaphysical absolute enduring delusory apples but that does not mean there are no apples at all. To deny what is in front of your eyes is a form of clinging just as strong as to bolster what is in your imagination. I think the Buddha might have allowed a weak form of the common sense everyday self like he might have allowed a weak form of everyday common sense apples. To insist on “no-self” actually is to bolster the self, to focus the ability that creates the idea of the self on the no-self instead of on the soul-self, and to falsely cling to the no-self as the object of an ability just as we used to cling to the self. That is as bad as clinging to a strong idea of the self.

As with the strong empathic form of “you are that”, a real-world biologically evolved self cannot live by the Buddha’s teachings in the normal world, and the Buddha did not expect followers to do so. As with “you are that”, this fact does not mean that either the Buddha’s idea of a self or the common sense idea of a self is better. If you want to live in the normal evolved world, it is strategically better to adopt a common sense normal view of the self. If you can accept living outside the normal world, and perhaps even dying, then you might seek an idea of the self and the no-self through the Buddha’s teachings.

I have a stronger view of the self than in standard Buddhism but weaker than that of people who strive for the satisfactions of this world. The common sense idea of the self can mislead us. It is also a good base from which to learn better, just as common sense is a good base from which to begin science. I do not believe the standard Buddhist view of the self can be reconciled to the common sense view. I am not sure if a Buddhist view that allows a weak form of reality can be reconciled to the common sense view; but I hope so. I do not believe an advanced Buddhist should expect to live other than as a monk. If you really hold the Buddhist view of the self and the world, you cannot live as a normal person in the normal world.

***Hume’s Bundle.**

David Hume, in the late 1700s, duplicated many ideas of the Buddha without, I think, knowing of them from Buddhism. Hume doubted traditional Christian religion and doubted the idea of the soul in traditional Christian religion. I do not know if Hume developed his ideas of the self so as to undermine the idea of

the soul in traditional Christianity, as the Buddha developed his ideas of the self in part to undermine the Hindu idea of the enduring atman self.

Hume (thought that he) showed all activities of the human self could be understood in terms of particular mechanisms: perceptions, ideas, rationality, emotions, and the responses that go along with particular clusters of these. Most human activity, including mental activity, can be seen in terms of perception and ideas. Nearly all ideas can be understood in terms of perceptions. Hume showed the role of perceptions in thought and action. He showed how some ideas can be rendered in terms of clusters of perceptions. Sometimes he wrote as if all ideas could be rendered as clusters of sense perceptions but I am not sure he meant that.

Once we understand the various mechanisms that go to make up the self, we understand the self. There is no reason to add anything to the various mechanisms to make up the idea of the self. To add anything other than the various mechanisms only adds something that has no explanation, is mysterious, and tempts us into metaphysical confusing thinking. So, the self is nothing but a cluster of sense perceptions, ideas-based-on-sense-perceptions, rational manipulation of ideas, emotions, morality, and subsequent acts. It is not the coherent rational soul-self of Enlightenment ideals. It cannot be the soul of traditional Christianity. It is not clear if Hume wished to do away with the common sense self but he certainly did undermine standard religious and philosophical ideas of the self.

Hume had many of the same insights as the Buddha but I think he went too far and he fell to a mistake the Buddha wished to avoid. Hume explains away the self as “nothing but”. Hume picks apart the self until there is nothing left, and there is no rationale for why various mechanisms of the self hold together.

Hume anticipated modern scientific reductionist ideas of psychology, philosophy, and the self. I think it is easy to go directly from Hume to modern evolutionary ideas of the self. I am not sure modern Darwinists appreciate their debt to Hume.

Unlike as in Hinduism and Buddhism, Hume did not expect normal people to fully accept an undermined self and live in accord with an undermined self. Hume expected people to live in a common sense world aided by good thinking. In this way, like the Buddha, he did not rest on the picked apart self, but, unlike the Buddha, he was not explicit about what he was doing, and he had no rationale for the self that was left over after being picked apart. Hume expected people to live in accord with morality and to use reason to improve the world when they could. He was still a child of the Enlightenment in those ways. He simply accepted a gap between what he wished people to do – act morally – versus the loose self-as-bundle that he had analyzed. He lived his own life with morality and zest.

***Emptiness.**

When we undermine any thing completely, all that is left is a bundle of maybe-features surrounding a hollow core, as with Hume’s idea of any thing or of the self. All that is left is emptiness. This is not necessarily so bad. If the same emptiness is at the center of all things, including selves, we can say that the same emptiness generates all things, including selves. Hindus, Buddhists, and some Taoists say this. It is not clear how the same emptiness can generate many different things but that can be kept as a separate issue. When Buddhists say this, they have to be careful that the emptiness at the heart of all

things is not the same as the great universal Being, or else they reconstitute the enduring eternal self that they wish to get rid of. Thus the exact nature of emptiness can be a point of contention between various thinkers who rely on emptiness.

Thinkers who use emptiness point out the role that real observable emptiness plays in the identity and operation of many real world things: A wheel is useless unless there is a hollow at the center around which it can turn. A water glass can only hold water because it is empty inside; the hard stuff on the sides and bottom exists only to help the emptiness. The vast majority of an atom is empty space. Players can only play basketball, football, and other sports because there is emptiness on the field to go to. If the field were full of all-star great players, nothing could get done. It would be like sardines in a can. The wind has to blow through something. We can tell the difference between an eagle and a wren by what each one is not compared to the other as well as by what each one is in itself.

The same approach works on the self. As with the Buddha and Hume, we can undermine the self until nothing is left but emptiness. That does not make the resulting bundle useless. That kind of bundle might be more useful because it is easier to accept change in a bundle with nothing at the core than to see how a permanent eternal simple changless essential soul-self can change.

This way of looking can be inspiring, sublime, and great; but I think it is wrong. It is not the common sense view of the self. That it is not the common sense view of the self does not make it wrong, useless, or less useful. It is wrong because it feels wrong and because it doesn't really explain anything. It tends to elevate nothingness to the magical metaphysical principle that the Buddha and Hume avoided.

***The Modern Darwinist's Bundle.**

People like to think the self is rational, in particular that their own self is rational. There are three ideas of rationality. (1) Evolutionary rationality, in which an ability is rational if it efficiently served evolutionary success in our past (in comparison to alternatives). It was rational to have a spouse because that is how we best passed on our genes. Most acts and abilities are still rational in this sense although not all continue to be rational now. It is now irrational to kill the neighbor because he-she flirts with your spouse. (2) Classical rationality, which has no single definition. It means roughly: able to critic and offer argument according to logic, amenable to reasons and evidence, trying to serve welfare and justice, and avoiding harm and injustice. (3) Economic rationality, in which actors efficiently strive for their own goals, whatever those goals might be. The usual goals are profit and satisfaction (utility or welfare). Satisfaction includes all the goals of normal humans, such as wealth, power, fun, spouse, and children. This section describes evolutionary rationality and its view of the self. This section does not describe relations between the kinds of rationality.

Think of most particular activities such as eating, having sex, or playing a game. They might share some aspects in common, but, really, at bottom, they are distinct activities that go along a track of their own. We can switch from one to the other. Usually we can't do both at the same time. Derailing one need not much affect the others. We can be adept at one but inept at the others. This is how modern evolutionary scientists think of the mind and the self, as like a bundle of activities-abilities, much like Hume and the Buddha thought of the mind and the self.

Each tendency in the self-bundle is largely mechanical, governed by laws of chemistry and biology. If we provide the appropriate input to a bundle, we get predictable output. Modern science provides a horde of examples, all of which are plausible. See the suggested readings.

(1) My favorite example is regularity in marriage because I studied how people seek spouses under different conditions and how one asset can substitute for another when conditions change. People marry other people of their own category of age, wealth, prestige, education, family size, and family background. People stress one factor over another depending on which factor might help reproductive success at the time. People would not act like this if they had entirely free choice based on accidental love alone.

(2) My next favorites examples show how children do not learn about space, time, intentions, and morality all-at-once but learn in stages. (A) Take a shiny toy and put it in a big glass jar in front of a child less than a year old. The poor child will wear out its tiny hands trying to reach directly through the jar. Wait until the child is two years old, and it knows to get into the jar somehow before trying to get something out. (B) Leave a child alone in a room with a cupcake and tell the child not to eat the cupcake. Then leave the room. Usually they eat the cupcake. Before about the age of three, a child will lie if it thinks you were not around to see him-her eat the cupcake. Usually they say another child ate the cupcake even though the child knows that no other child has entered the room. By the age of four, usually they know that you can figure out what is going on even if you were not in the room, and that lies do no good. (C) Even at an early age, some children are able to resist temptation while others give in. The ability to resist shows up in different performances throughout the entire school career of the child. (D) Before about age seven, children can automatically learn languages and speak like natives. After about age ten, children have a much harder time and sometimes retain accents.

(3) Ideas of brain operation have now entered the mainstream media, not perhaps as scientists might like, but in ways that would make sense to them. On Friday 12 October 2012, the popular TV show "America Now" aired a segment on the "emerging science of the chemistry of love". They offered tips on how to use the chemistry of love to speed the process along. The tips seemed to be aimed at women who were narrowing down the field. Presumably the new gurus also have tips on how to use the chemistry of love to thwart the process in case you don't like the suitor.

The parallel between Buddhist bundling and the modern mechanistic view goes further.

(A) It is not necessary for an ability to exactly mirror the real world to be most effective and therefore most evolutionarily rational. Our fear does not always accurately mirror our danger but it does get us decisively out of harm's way. A bolstered inaccurate idea of the self might lead to success.

(B) Although the ultimate unit of evolutionary action is the gene, for practical purposes, the individual is more useful. Biologists understand evolutionary rationality through individual reproductive success and individual fitness.

(C) So a feeling for being a distinct autonomous self-activating self would help human genes to succeed and would help human evolutionary success. Our feeling of being a self is another ability-activity in the bundle that is our looser evolutionary self, like the desire for sex or for a good meal.

(D) It is useful to think of other animals and people as selves with intentions etc. If it is useful to think of them that way, then we almost have to think of ourselves that way too. We think of ourselves as selves because we think of others as selves, and vice versa.

(E) The evolved feeling of being a self is partly true because we are a bundle, but it is not likely to be an accurate representation of our self-hood. It is likely to be too strong a representation of our self-hood, in accord with the need to act as a unit, much like a military group has to have a strong esprit de corps (literally "spirit of the body") to act as a coordinated self-unit, much like we fall in love despite the small flaws of our spouse, and much like we crave fatty foods. Not only do we have an evolved sense of self, but we have an evolved sense of self that is not an accurate representation of how tightly we really are integrated. We are deluded because it works.

(F) The idealized soul-self is only an evolved delusion.

The apparent conclusion is that there is no self at all. Modern evolutionary biology picks apart the self until it is gone, much as did Hume and somewhat as did the Buddha. I have already said that this idea misses the point. It will be easier to see below how this idea misses if we see here how it hits.

Think of the flight and fight responses. Once one of these responses engages, it takes over, and it has little to do with the other response. We can't do both at the same time. It seems these are two distinct abilities-activities. Precisely because they happen in the same situation but cannot happen at the same time, some other thing has to decide which to activate at any given time. Something else has to control the switch from red to green in a traffic light. We are tempted to think of this over-ability as the classically rational self, or some kind of idealized soul-self, but that need not be so.

Flight-or-flight cannot be willy-nilly. If we flee from a kitten but fight a bear, we die. Something has to make sure we play with kittens, fight robbers, flee bears, or ignore robins. Whatever thing regulates the switch from flight to fight has to gauge situations. We have to fight some dogs but not all dogs, flee some bears (momma grizzly) but not all bears (teddy bear), or do nothing. So it seems there is a rational self at the core of the evolved self, behind all the disparate activities-abilities, that regulates everything.

Now think deeper. Something has to flip the switch but whatever flips the switch need not be classically rational. It need not be the idealized soul-self. The mechanism need only be a way to make a decision, and it has to decide in accord with what serves evolutionary success. So, we do not necessarily have a rational self or a soul-self at the core, behind all the activities-abilities, that regulates everything. We just have more mechanism. The mechanism can, and does, vary a lot between people, so that not everybody does the same thing in every situation. It is still an evolved mechanism rather than a simple deciding rational self or a soul-self.

Most people fear snakes. The fear is not classically rational because most snakes are helpful (they eat rodents) rather than harmful, and most snakes avoid people. The fear is evolutionarily rational because one hundred encounters with a timid good snake don't help us much but one encounter with an angry bad snake ends our reproduction. Whatever controls the switch for fear cannot be classical rationality; but it can be evolutionarily rationality. The same is true of strangers, loud noises, loud objects, and erratically moving objects.

We can learn to overcome fear of snakes etc. We can learn to adjust our flight and fight response so that it takes better account of situations; that is what martial arts training is for. So we are tempted to think that, above all the mechanisms of evolutionary rationality, there is a mechanism of classical rationality, and this mechanism of classical rationality is closely tied to the self. There are higher-order mechanisms, probably several overlapping layers. But it is not likely that all are under the control of one classically rational self. It only matters that it all works when it has to work.

So we have: a bundle of abilities-mechanisms around a core body; the body is a key unit in evolution and so coheres; the core has a mechanism to think of the body-and-all-that-goes-with-it as an integrated self; the evolutionary self is not quite as integrated as the self-mechanism thinks it is; but the evolutionary body-self behaves like a semi-cohesive self according to the situation. This is not far from my common sense view of the self. I can live with this.

***The Composite, Largely Functionally Integrated, Self.**

I have already said the self is not one simple thing, we can change, and I don't know how it all holds together, so this section does not repeat those arguments. I merely point out that some cultures have ideas of the self based on important component parts; the fate of the parts can differ, especially after death; and the assemblage of parts and their fates can be important in religion. It takes much too long to explain a theory of a composite self from a different culture, so instead I give one of my favorite examples of a theory of selves from American culture; it is not quite the same thing, but it is close enough.

Contrary to popular opinion, the unit of American society is not the individual or the family but the team. A team is a functional unit composed of complementary parts, and, as a whole it is much greater than the sum of its parts. An ideal individual would be an individual whose personality tendencies were made up of the best kinds of individuals in American society, and who blended them perfectly. The individuals that make up a team represent various potential parts of individuals. Comic books give us our best examples of teams and idealized parts of individuals. Military units are teams in this sense. Maybe the most famous team-with-idealized-parts-of-people-represented-through-particular-characters is the command team of the Starship Enterprise, in all its various versions. In the original version, there is a rational part (Spock), an emotional part (Bones), instrumental part (Sulu), communicator (Uhura), nurturer (nurse Chapel), technical part (Scotty), and command executive part (Captain Kirk). There might also be a slightly unruly, slightly comic, activator-of-adventure part (Chekov). There might be a routine part that has to be given up to make progress, the always ready-to-die anonymous crew member. All together, these parts-represented-by-characters make one full and effective person. It is not clear what happens to the person and-or parts after death. The most important parts are the rational, emotional, and executive. Some Americans think the command executive goes to heaven while other people think the emotional part goes to heaven. Only theologians and philosophers think the rational part goes to heaven.

It is unlikely that the parts of a self in any given culture correspond closely to the "modules" in current evolutionary theory of the self, modules such as "find a mate", "find a sex partner", "support your kin", "support your allies", and "detect social cheating". Evolutionary theory does indirectly support the idea that cultures can make selves out of composite parts and might provide some of the raw ingredients for parts of the self in different cultures. I do not comment further here.

***Other Interesting Selves.**

The above ideas about selves are important for the purposes of this book but they are not necessarily the most interesting ideas about selves. Almost every enduring human type can be a type of self. For the rational self, think of Mr. Spock and Sherlock Holmes; for the emotional self, “Bones” McCoy and John Boehner; for the intuitive self, Deanna Troy or Robert Redford in “The Horse Whisperer”; for the conniving self, Lucy Ricardo and any soap opera; for the integrated commander, Captain Kirk or the “Master and Commander” series; for the artist, Kirk Douglas as Vincent Van Gogh or Ed Harris as Jackson Pollock; etc. Other cultures have these same selves but see them differently, and they have other selves not in American culture.

Distinctive Identity of Bundles; Reconstituting the Self.

This section explains why I think “bundle” ideas of the self miss as well as hit, and what is better.

In David Hume, Buddhism, some kinds of Hinduism, and modern biology, an apple is a bundle of features with nothing at the core (sorry for the pun). So are a rock, whale, hurricane, theory of physics, theology like Hinduism or Christianity, sutra, person, scientific method, Beethoven sonata, Picasso painting, and your child. Yet contrary to undermining, there are qualitatively distinct coherent things in this world. All those things listed above are examples. Even if the various things are “merely” bundles of features, the bundles are qualitatively distinct packages; the apple-bundle is distinct from the whale-bundle. Bundle types are consistent between different instances; particular delicious apples stay what that way, The bundles consistently differ from each other; I cannot imagine an apple-whale hybrid even if they once had a common ancestor. What gives the bundles their identity and distinction? This has been a long-time serious question in Western and Indian philosophy. I do not answer this question. I only say that the obvious identity of some qualitatively distinct bundles is enough on which to base the common sense view of the self and the world.

Someday we will have fairly complete descriptions of toadstools as bundles. Even so, I don’t think being able to give that kind of explanation explains away toadstools. Suppose, though, that it does. Is the human self enough like a toadstool so we could explain away as with a toadstool? The question is not one of complexity but of similarity. I don’t think the human self is similar enough to be explained away in the same way as a toadstool. The toadstool does not have abilities to deal with intent, levels of intent, group life, art, contradictions, etc. Even when we can explain those abilities in the human self, we will have a different problem in explaining away the human self.

Before modern evolutionary theory, this problem was less vexing. It became more confusing because Darwinists have another way to explain away: historical contingency. When a Darwinist has to consider how it is that some bundles such as human beings have a self, the Darwinist can say, “Well, that is just how it is. These particular bundles came together due to the historical accidents of evolution on this one planet. It could have been otherwise. Different features could have come together. We might have had three-eyed fish. We might have had morality that tells us to kill our best friends. We might have had selves without a sense of ‘I’, ‘me’, and the generalized other. There is nothing more than that.”

Yes, there is considerable latitude in how features come together, the exact course of evolution does depend on historical accidents, and many other life forms might have arisen even on the same planet. Still, it is not possible for all things to come together willy-nilly. For example, there has to be at least one basic life form at the bottom of the food chain that converts energy to biological forms. There has to be predators and prey. In particular, it is not possible for human-like selves to come together willy-nilly. At least on planet Earth, a human-like self has to come together in the context of all the features listed above under the description of selves. A human-like self could not lack a sense of morality; it could not have a morality radically different than it does have; it could not lack a sense of "I", "me", and the generalized other; and it could not lack contradictions that it can mostly deal with. Human-like selves cannot include some features that other animals have such as extreme hostility and eating their own young. Human-like selves are unusual. Humans are a selection among possible abilities. They are qualitatively distinct. The line between these selves, other selves (orangutans and wolves), and living not-selves (slugs and amoebas) might be blurred but qualitatively distinct human-like selves line still exist. Anybody who wants to say human-like selves are merely a bag of unrelated abilities has to explain why these abilities have to come together, what their coming together means for the idea of a self, and what their coming together means for the idea of any qualitative thing including such qualitative things as chimpanzees, cultures, science, etc.

A star is not only a big bunch of hydrogen atoms; it is a big bunch of hydrogen atoms arranged in some particular ways so that particular reactions do go on, and other reactions do not go on. So selves are a bunch of abilities but they are a particular selection of abilities out of all the possible abilities and they are arranged in a particular way. Mechanists need to be clearer on the idea of the self before they start to explain or explain away. They need to do more than construct a "straw" self that they can explain away. Mechanists need to explain why the features of a full self come together, and what it means for the such bundles to come together into full selves.

I have no doubt humans have a distorted exaggerated sense of self. I have no doubt all human-like selves would have a distorted sense of their self and likely would have a stronger sense of self than an objective observer would assess. We think a lot of our selves, our power, and our integrity. I have no doubt this is because we evolved. Still, that does not mean we are wrong about being selves. It just means we misunderstand ourselves, which is not at all surprising. A male lion quite likely has a distorted self image but that does not mean he is not a lion and not a kind-of self.

In the future, probably we will make artificial selves, and we might be able to make artificial selves without the same mixture of sentience, morality, aesthetic sensitivity, humor, sense of generalized other, etc. that go together in evolved human-like selves. I am not sure what abilities can be made to stand on their own, and what has to occur only in sets along with other abilities. I am not sure if all selves, including artificial selves, have to entail some contradictions so as to achieve real sentience. The fact that the future will see some artificial selves does not invalidate what I have said here about evolved selves and the reality of selves.

A determined mechanist rightly says: "A machine is a machine is a machine. It is determinate no matter how complex it is and how possibly contradictory it might be. Some machines might be more interesting to creatures with a finite mind (cars are more interesting than little red wagons) but to God with an infinite mind, all machines are equally simple and equally uninteresting because they are all equally determinate.

To God, we are all like “Rube Goldberg” machines with chutes, ladders, springs, and loops; once you drop the little ball, you know the toaster will pop up no matter how many steps are in the middle. It does not matter if a machine is rigid like wooden blocks or probabilistic like dice and small particles (quantum mechanics) as long as it is determinate. Machines are selves only because they evolved to feel they are selves. To God, you are about as interesting as a rock. You are nothing special. God did not make the universe to cure his boredom. In fact, there is no need for God, so probably there is no God.”

I don't know what to say. I wish I knew the mind of God as well. If there is a God, not everything can be equally the same to God or equally boring to God. If it were, I guess God would not have bothered to make the universe as it is. I think God does care about machines that have all the attributes of a self. Here is my rejoinder to the mechanists:

I can think in both ways without going crazy. The ability to think in both ways is an important part of what makes persons qualitatively distinct and interesting. Any machine that can think in both ways without going crazy is certainly qualitatively distinct and interesting, and is a good candidate for being a self. The fact that people can recognize the issues (think both ways at the same time without going crazy) thus tends automatically to decide the issues in favor of the existence of a qualitatively distinct interesting thing called “persons”.

My argument does not refute Darwinism. I am a Darwinist; I don't want to refute Darwinism. I think my answer supports Darwinism. My argument shows how evolution can create qualitatively distinct things including selves. Even if human-like selves are entirely subject to natural laws, they are still human-like selves, and they are as they are because they evolved. I think this is more than enough to support the common sense idea of the self.

Donovan, Mountains, and Juanita.

Recall from Donovan Leitch:

“First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is...
Oh, Juanita, I call your name...”

When we pick apart and-or bolster any thing, we undermine that thing and lose that thing. We dissolve the world in the pride of our intellects. Smart-aleck advanced religious adepts riding the crest of their first insights, and modern scientific adepts with similar abilities and character, tend to make this mistake – one of the textbook definitions of Maia. Yet if we undermine a thing in the right spirit of common sense, often enough we can recover that thing again in a better way. This applies to selves. When we have the right sense of the self and of our own self, then we recognize other selves in the right way, we can reach out to them (call their name), and they can reach out to us. That is part of what good selves do.

13 Free Will

The question of free will is not settled, it is confusing on its own, and nearly all discussions of free will add to the confusion by promoting agendas. I cannot straighten out ideas of selves and free will here but I might say enough so you don't fall prey to any added confusion, including what I add. Horses, apple trees, cardboard boxes, computers, running, TV shows, a song, scientific method, and many things are qualitatively distinct things for practical purposes. Likewise, the self is enough of a thing, in the sense of those things, so we can treat it as a qualitatively distinct thing. Free will is not as clear-cut as the other things. Free will is more like pretending, telling a story, and evaluating a movie. That does not mean free will is not real but it does mean free will is more open to confusion and argument.

Selves.

Please see Chapter Three on evolution and the previous chapter on selves. Qualitatively distinct things do not have to be absolutely distinct from the rest of the world. It is hard to draw a line between justice and mercy but that does not mean there is no justice and no mercy. It is hard to draw a line between love for friends, love for spouse, and romantic love, but that does not mean there are not distinct flavors of love. It is hard to draw a line between non-living things versus living things but that does not mean there are no living things. It is hard to draw a line between non-selves versus selves but that does not mean there are no selves.

A rock does not have a self. A worm likely does not have a self. A bird might have a self, especially a smart bird like a crow. A deer might have a self. Wolves, monkeys, some cats, and some dogs likely have selves. Chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans likely have selves although not as developed as a human self. Normal common people do not expect a sharp line between non-selves versus selves, and normal people expect selfhood to come in degrees.

We expect evolved selves to have the following evolved abilities. We grant selfhood to a thing to the extent the thing has more of these qualities and-or shows them to a greater degree.

-Recognizes that other beings come both as discrete beings, as individuals, and as types. There are both individual beings, and there are also plants, roses, badgers, chimpanzees, mothers, chess players, and thinkers.

-Recognizes that other individual beings have needs, goals, attitudes, emotions, etc.

-Recognizes that some other individual beings have intentions, and that intentions go along with needs, etc.

-Recognizes that the needs, intentions, etc. of other individuated beings often go along with the type of that being, but sometimes the expression of the needs, etc. is particular to that being. Almost all robins

like to eat worms; some robins prefer worms to bugs while other robins prefer bugs to worms; some particular robin might prefer chocolate chip cookies.

-Recognizes that some individual beings might have completely individual tastes.

-Recognizes that other individual beings differentiate themselves from their environment. They have a sense of "me" and "not me".

-Recognizes that other individual beings with intentions differentiate themselves from other individual beings with intentions. They have a sense of "me" and "those guys".

-Recognizes that it's self is an individuated being with intentions, similar to other such individuated beings with intentions. "I have a sense of myself apart from other things".

-Recognizes that it is like other sentient beings and they are like it. "I am like one of those guys who act with intent and self-knowledge. Those guys who act like that are like me".

-Recognizes that some other individuated beings with intentions recognize it as such too. "Some of those guys who act with sentience see me that way too".

-Expects to enter into relations, or deny relations, with other individuated beings on the basis of the intentions, needs, etc. of other individuated beings with intentions. "I can be friends with some of those guys who act sentient".

-Sentient beings often come in groups. I feel a part of a group with some other sentient beings, and might feel distinct from other groups. Evolved selves have a sense of "us" and "them".

-Evolved selves have a sense of the generalized other, that is, has a sense of the feelings, ideals, rules, actions, expectations, and attitudes typical of us.

-Evolved selves have a sense of morality, and appreciate art.

-Evolved selves have a sense of empathy.

-Many of these items imply free will, such as intentions, but do not absolutely require it.

Situational Free Will.

I do not know of any good analysis of the will in Darwinism, other science, philosophy, or theology. I did not look hard in philosophy or theology. Some Hindu and Buddhist treatises are specifically on the self and the will but I am not familiar enough with such work to comment.

Just as normal people do not expect a sharp line between selves versus non-selves, and allow degrees of selfhood, so also normal people do not expect a self to have totally free will in all arenas, and do allow a self to have varying degrees of free will in various arenas. Selves could only evolve with some limits on

their free will. A self need not have totally free will. Not having totally free will does not disqualify a being from being a self. A being with totally free will likely would not be a self as we know it, and certainly could not have evolved. The fact that freed will comes in degrees according to arenas does not undermine free will. We have enough free will to do most jobs that need doing. If the human self did not have some free will, we would have to pretend it did, as we do now sometimes. I think we have enough free will to sustain the justice system. I doubt enough people have enough free will, and are astute enough, to make modern democracy work.

While I believe people do have a lot of free will, I also believe in the reductionist scientific research program that seems to undermine all free will and might undermine the common sense idea of a self. I cannot reconcile these points of view at this time. I hope future thinkers make progress on these issues.

Ideas of the Will.

“The will” is not one idea. The list below shows various ideas that go into the idea of the will. It is easy to add items, or to reduce by seeing some items in terms of others, but I urge you not to do either quickly. I cannot describe the will without using metaphors, and I don’t want too. I cannot explain here why the fact that I need to use metaphors is important but I do wish to point it out. American English allows overlap between “will”, “want”, “wish”, and “need”. I do not try to impose a system on the language.

1. Strength and Power. “Will power”. The ability to resist torture. The ability to carry through something once begun. The ability to endure. The desire to endure. The ability to control bodily functions and other mental functions. “I will stop coughing”. “I won’t think about her anymore”.
2. Desire. “What is your will, sire?” “Your will is my desire”.
3. Choice. “I will have the eggs over easy”. “Do you want top or bottom?”
4. Creativity. “I will come up with a solution”. “I can see the idea taking shape”. “He willed the project into being.”
5. Denial and Refusal. “I will not”. It is easy to think of this category as a choice between this situation versus not-this-situation but it is not the same. This category represents rejection of this situation whether my rejection puts me into another situation or not.
6. Determination. “I want that job, and I will do anything it takes to get it”. “As a people, we must be free, and we will fight to the last man-or-woman to get freedom, if that is what it takes”. “I don’t care what happens to me, I have to see my work into the world”.
7. Existential Superiority. This point might be a variation of point one. When two beings have a contest of wills, the one that wins is the better, more powerful being, or superior being. The better of two beings is supposed to win a contest of wills. Parents should win a contest of wills with their children, although of course they don’t always. In the “Narnia” series, C.S. Lewis says the battle between the Ice Queen and Aslan the Lion was always a contest of wills at bottom. Aslan, the force of Goodness, wins. The revolt of the Devil against God was a revolt of Pride, that is, a revolt of the will. Good is supposed to win the

contest of wills, that is, to have the stronger will, even when evil is physically stronger. In most mythology, when evil wins the contest of wills, something is seriously wrong.

Despite the fact that the other categories cannot be reduced to the idea of choice, because of how the ideas of strategy and free will have been developed in biology and in current American pop culture, for present needs, it is useful to focus on the idea of will as a choice.

More on Situational Free Will.

Maybe some teenagers and Existentialists dream of being great warriors and being able to withstand any torture for any length of time, but that is not true of any normal person, and it is not what armies expect of soldiers. No normal person can resist torture for longer than a few days. Some people can withstand torture until they die, if they die in a few days. But, if torturers can avoid killing, eventually everybody breaks. In “The Maltese Falcon” by Dashiell Hammett, the hero, Sam Spade, is trapped in a room over night with enemies, and he has important information that they want. Spade makes it clear that, if they torture him, he will force them to kill him soon. So they leave him alone. Ascetics endure great hardship – amounting to torture – in pursuit of truth. The Buddha denied such methods are effective, and instead advocated a middle path of restraint and cultivation. The law recognizes coercion, knows that coercion sometimes cannot be withstood, and defines cases that qualify as coercion. If a thinker demands that the will be able to withstand anything in order to be free, then we do not have true free will. But I do not think course that is reasonable.

We are walking across a street when we can see that a car is not going to stop for the red light, and will hit us. So we jump out of the way rather than stand on our rights as a pedestrian. This does not mean we do not have free will.

Every personal relation involves negotiations and involves giving up some things. The movies and TV make fun of people who refuse to give up anything to sustain a relationship. The fact that we have to make compromises in relations does mean we do not have perfect freedom of will but does not mean we have no freedom of will at all. If your “significant other” loves vegetarian lasagna, then you learn to eat vegetarian lasagna. If your autocratic boss likes a cigar after lunch, you might have to learn to put up with cigar smoke on the restaurant terrace.

You are driving along through town when suddenly you are struck with the desire for a soda. You stop at the local convenience store, only to find it does not have your favorite flavor of organic Swedish raspberry sweetened with Cuban natural brown sugar. To get that, you would have to drive another half-hour to a specialty store. You don’t feel like making the drive today, so you buy a cherry coke here instead. This compromise does not mean you do not have free will.

The cat will not eat dry food every night. We have to give the cat wet food at least two nights a week, or we feel guilty when the cat goes hungry. The cat has more sense than we do. This does not mean the cat has free will and we do not. It does not mean the cat has a greater will than we do or that the cat is morally and existentially superior. Parents go through the same battle with children over vegetables. Parents do not win every case. Little Suzy gets ice cream despite some leftover broccoli. Parents have to pick which issues to turn into a contest of wills.

Picking Apart Sam's Free Will.

(1) When we give in to torture, we do not assent or consent. Choice is consenting. We can “hang” the idea of freedom of the will on this difference, and, to some extent, American law does this. A woman's consent is the difference between having sex versus rape. We use consent as a marker of free will. We use it even in situations where do not expect perfect freedom of the will.

(2) Modern biological argument about free will hinges on seeing that behavior conforms to a system that is governed by a rationale. The rationale is evolutionary success. The system can be any of our abilities such as looking for food or looking for a mate. We act to serve evolutionary success. Thus there is no free will at all; free will is only an illusion.

The modern biological argument is the latest (and best) version of a general argument about conforming to a system with a rationale. Any explanation of human behavior that shows how we conform to a system with a rationale can be used to undermine free will; the system does not have to be natural selection with evolutionary success as the goal. If we can explain behavior in strategic terms, or if we can find a system in which the behavior makes sense, then we can say have completely accounted for the behavior without invoking free will or consent. You will see what that means in the examples below.

In modern biology, the argument about conforming to a system with a rationale has considerable power because of natural selection. Organisms (people) who do not conform to the system (natural selection) and seek its goal (evolutionary success) are eliminated. Only people who do conform to the system with its goal live and propagate. The people who do live and propagate must have something “inside them” that gets them to conform to the system and to aim at its goal. Because of the mechanisms inside us, we have no free will.

The following examples work through these ideas. The examples use varying degrees of freedom in different arenas to show that absolute ideas of free will or no-free-will do not work very well, and do not accord with common sense. The examples show how the common sense idea of varying free will in varying arenas is enough for most purposes, and goes along with the common sense idea of the self.

Sam goes to a garage sale, where he sees two bicycles priced the same. One bike originally came from the local huge chain department store and is of modest quality while the other bike is from a small maker in the Pacific Northwest with high-quality parts and a great design. Leaving aside moral considerations as to whether the seller will be cheated, Sam naturally decides to get the high-quality bike. Buying the other bike would be stupid. Has Sam acted freely? Sam would not buy without his consent. Sam acted to get the best buy; Sam acted according to financial wisdom, which is a system of thought outside of him; Sam acted strategically; Sam acted according to the rules of economic so as to maximize the value for his money, and to maximize his utility. Did financial wisdom compel Sam? In a way, it did. Sam's behavior is predictable according to the rules of economic logic. If financial wisdom did, in a way, compel Sam, can we say he is not free? Contrary to any ideology about free will, there is no easy answer, and freedom of the will comes in degrees. I think Sam did act freely. Most people would agree but would not want to waste time arguing about it. A biologist might reasonably disagree with me. An economist would

not care as long as Sam is predictable. In arguing for Sam's free will, I would use the idea of his consent, but I am not sure his freedom of will has to hinge on that alone.

Sam has \$200 to spend at the grocery store. He allocates the money to get the most satisfaction for his money (technically, he allocates the money to get the greatest utility from each marginal penny). Sam buys 5 pounds of hamburger, two loaves of whole grain bread, a bag of cherries, a variety of melons, carrots, milk, yogurt, and lots of breakfast cereal. Did Sam act freely? Did Sam's desire for the greatest satisfaction for the money somehow constrain him to act according to a system, a rationale, and so take away his freedom? Most non-biologists would say he acted freely. Now suppose Sam is diabetic, and he chose his food so as to control his blood sugar and so as to alleviate the symptoms of diabetes. Did Sam act freely? Sam acted with less freedom of the will but he still had considerable freedom within the limits of his budget and his disease to act freely. He could have chosen more whole grain pasta and less whole grain bread with the same result on his disease.

Sam has only \$20 and has to feed his whole family of five. Sam has to choose carefully what food yields the best nutrition and fullest bellies. Same has less freedom, maybe, in reality, little freedom at all. He is constrained by a system and a rationale. But we still think he acted freely. Largely we think he acts freely because he consents.

Sam now has \$200 again, but this time Sam refuses to choose any food colored white, such as white flour, white bread, pastries made with white flour, white rice, etc. He is free in his other food choices. Sam refuses to buy food colored white because he thinks refined food is bad for us, and white is a good criterion for refined food. I still think Sam mostly has free will, although some people will think Sam has given up a portion of his free will to a food fad. If you agree with Sam, likely you think he still has as much free will as ever, given the issues raised above about operating efficiently. Set aside whether you agree with Sam. Now Sam operates under not only the constraint of efficiency but also under the constraint of a system with a rationale. If you think that one erodes free will while the other does not, what is the basis for the difference? If you believe both erode free will, does operating under the constraint of any system with a rationale erode free will? If we always operate under the constraint of some system with a rationale, then we cannot have free will.

Now Sam refuses to buy food that is colored reddish, such as apples, carrots, some peppers, and even some lettuce. Sam is acting under a compulsion, yet still a system, for which there is a clear consistent rationale. Sam consents to his choices in this system. In this case, some people would say Sam is not free, even the people who previously said Sam was free when he chose not to buy white food. Consent alone is not quite enough to make for free will. The kind of system-with-constraint seems to matter in whether we say that we have free will. The effect of the system on consent seems to matter. There are no clear criteria for resolving these issues. A biologist would say Sam is not free in any of these cases because Sam acts under a system with a rationale.

This situation annoys philosophers and theologians. Sam can spend \$20 out of his \$200 in donations to the local food bank. Sam knows this is absolutely the right thing to do. There is no question. So Sam gets the food, and gives it to the food bank. Morality compels. Morality is among the most compelling of systems, with its own obvious rationales (good, greater good, rules, etc.) even if people do not completely agree on the rationales. Does Sam act freely when he acts morally? Yes, Sam could have chosen not to

act morally, and many people do choose not to act morally; but, when Sam feels the call of morality, and follows it, does Sam act freely? Maybe people who have a less keen sense of morality have a freer will - that opinion is in line with Romanticism and modern moral ambiguity. Keep in mind that we evolved a sense of morality, and usually following morality helps us to evolutionary success. There is no definitive answer. Again, a biologist would say "no". The answer has implications for what we consider a self, for the justice system, and for religion.

This situation annoys romantics. Sam falls in love. According to the prevailing romantic myth, Sam has no choice in the matter. Love chooses us, we do not choose love. When Sam falls in love, does Sam have free will? Is love like torture? If Sam has no choice in this matter, then why does Sam have free will in other situations in which he acts toward a rationale?

In fact, biologists can show that Sam is very likely to fall in love with particular kinds of people. If Sam is a boy, then Sam will fall in love with a girl who is likely to bear healthy children, and to rear the healthy children to their own evolutionary success. Sam and the girl are similar in socio-economic status, race, religion, intelligence, school record, and job history. Similarity in these factors, and others, contributes to evolutionary success. Large differences in these factors hurt evolutionary success. In that case, it is not that love chooses Sam; it is evolutionary success that chooses Sam. This is the general argument from biology. Sam operates under a system that guides his actions toward a rationale. Sam has little, or no, freedom of choice. Within the category of acceptable mates, Sam might choose Sally or Sue, but, in the words of a blues song, "there aint much difference between the two". If the difference is enough to Sam and Sally feel as if they have free will and are free selves, then fine; but that is only a convenient illusion that helps the drive to evolutionary success.

Recall the flight-and-fight response once again. When faced with a coyote, Rocky Raccoon fights about 60% of the time. When faced with the same coyote Timmy Raccoon fights about 40% of the time. They have to do one or the other, but they don't have to do one particular one, and they don't have to do it in any particular ratio. It seems as if there might be a system (that is questionable) but no obvious rationale. Does the variation mean that Rocky and Timmy have free will? Not necessarily. Natural selection will choose which one lives most of the time, and goes on to have children that act more like him. With many Rockies and Timmys to choose from, natural selection can choose the most effective ratio of flight to fight. We need not specify an exact brain mechanism, and we need not conduct extensive investigations to prove this is so, although biologists have in other cases. There is a system and a rationale, and Rocky and Timmy operate closely under its direction.

So, what looks like free will in the case of Sam falling in love or Sam choosing groceries might not be so free. Natural selection (system) gets rid of all the Sams who do not choose groceries most efficiently so as to maximize evolutionary success (rationale) whether or not, right now, we can specify a mechanism in their brains that leads to the right choices. There is no need to evoke free will; evoking free will does not help explain; evoking free leads to confusion; so there is no free will. Consent is irrelevant as long as Sam follows a system with a rationale. Consent might help Sam to maintain the illusion of his self-hood, to fool himself, better fool others, and so act more effectively. This conclusion too is the position of the modern deterministic biologist, and this is where deterministic biology, deterministic chemistry, and deterministic physics meet.

I do not have a rejoinder yet I continue to believe in enough free will in the common sense way. I only point to the instances above where we allowed Sam some degree of free will, and used consent and choices as criteria.

Interlude: Biology is Not the Real Problem; Physics Is.

Modern biologists have shown clearly that people act along the lines of evolutionary success, as, for example, by picking suitable sex partners, marriage partners, friends, allies, jobs, living situations, etc. We act and think according to what would have worked in our evolutionary past, and what still largely works today. That constraint makes it seem as if we have no free will. In fact, though, biology allows a lot of leeway in the implementation of strategies, and it allows a large scope for learning, especially among people. Think of it like this: biology directs us to choose from among a category, so in that sense we are not free; but within the category we have a lot of scope for choice, so in that sense we are free. We don't make friends with violent thugs but we still do have a lot of choice in who we actually pick as friends, and we learn a lot about what kind of people make good friends for us as individuals. That leeway is enough room to squeeze in enough free will to satisfy most of my needs. The fact that we are biologically constrained not to befriend a violent thug but instead we are biologically constrained to make friends among a thousand other people from our culture, socio-economic class, and interests, is enough to satisfy my needs for free will. The fact that we are biologically constrained to marry within our set but can still choose from among hundreds of potential spouses in our set is enough to satisfy my needs for free will. The fact that the cat is designed to eat meat instead of vegetables but prefers salmon over stew beef is enough to satisfy my idea of free will in cats. In the future, there will be argument over how large this window really is, but, for now, it is enough for me.

The real problem is the underlying determinism of physics and chemistry. Suppose not choosing Sam the violent killer as a friend is explicable directly in terms of biology but choosing five particular people among a hundred other much nicer possibilities for a friend is not explicable directly in terms of biology. Still, when I make up my mind, I also make up my brain. My brain chemistry is at work, and so is the physics of my brain chemistry. Change happens in my brain physics when I decide to hang out with Bill instead of Bob. That change in brain physics is determined by natural laws. Even within the category, we do not choose as we think we do. That seems incompatible with free will. Our brains are determined by physics, and so are our wills; so we have no free will, and we are not selves in the sense that I want. I cannot resolve this issue in a way that definitely leaves room for common sense free will and the common sense self.

It might seem as if there are two levels (physics and biology) each with its own kind of determinism, and that there is more possibility for free will at the "higher" level (biology); but really there is only one level with one kind of determinism and no free will. Biology is part of physics, and the determination of physics applies to biology as well. Apparent differences are only due to convenience in thinking, and apparent free will is only an illusion arising from convenience in thinking. If choosing Bill instead of Bob is a matter of brain physics, then so is not choosing Sam (biological level). If choosing Mary as a spouse is a matter of brain physics, then so is choosing among women who are in our age, cultural, religious, and economic categories (biological level). Biology could be rendered in terms of physics if biologists were thorough enough. So determination at the level of biology is only another aspect of determination at the level of physics. It is all determinate and it is all determination of the same kind.

This idea is likely true but not very useful. It is just too hard to turn all of biology into physics. It is easier to think in terms of the “higher” level of genes, individuals, strategies, reproduction, natural selection, types, and outcomes, just as it is easier to think in terms of a higher-level computer languages such as Pascal, Java, or Perl than to think in terms of “1” and “0”. That is what biologist do. The convenience of thinking at a “higher” level than physics, such as biology, opens the door to confusion. When we argue at a “higher” level, we seem to leave open a window for free will. It appears as if we have some freedom. But this conclusion is not necessarily so. It only seems so because scientists have not reduced biology to physics in a way that makes it easy to do biology. This idea has become a dogma in modern science. In this situation, all I can do is to re-assert I think we are free enough, and self enough, despite the apparent determinism.

Some thinkers, in particular anthropologists, have argued the opposite way, for a separation of levels, and so that higher levels dominate lower levels. The determination of physics-and-chemistry does not apply at the level of biology, the determination of biology does not apply to mind, and the determination of mind does not apply to culture-and-society. Each level has its own laws, which the laws of lower levels cannot explain. The laws of any upper level dominate the laws of any lower level. This argument is a mistake. There is no good reason why the laws of a lower level should not apply to a higher level, and many good strong reasons why they should. There is no good reason each level has its own laws that automatically supersede the laws of lower levels. Culture has to obey mind, mind has to obey biology, and biology has to obey physics. Often it is convenient to think in terms appropriate to each level without worrying about relations to other levels, as biology does with physics, but that is not the same as believing each higher level is independent of all lower levels. Despite some good intentions, on the whole, the argument for the power of higher levels is an attempt to escape science, and should be fought. Moreover, the autonomy of higher levels usually leads to no free will at all. When culture-and-society dominates biology, it leaves no room for free will.

Biologists and other thinkers sometimes mix up the determinism that is clear in biology (avoiding the violent thug, or marrying a nice person of the same kind) with the determinism of physics (every act is a matter of brain physics). In their own minds, thinkers likely make the distinction, but they do not convey it well in their writing, and so sometimes they confuse people. When you read about free will or culture, figure out what level the thinkers are writing about, the kind of determinism that might apply at that level, and the relation of determinism at that level to the basic level of physics. Because, so far, not everything has been reduced to the laws of physics, if you think you see some freedom at higher levels, you are free to choose to go on believing it.

Absolutely Godfrey.

We have now cut off Sam’s free will. It might help to put the situation in perspective if first we look at the opposite person, a being with absolute free will. Then we can reverse the process by starting with a Sam who has little free will and gradually giving Sam more free will.

The name “Godfrey” comes from the movie “My Man Godfrey”. Godfrey has absolutely total free will. When most people think of absolute free will, they think it means a self can do whatever the self wishes without restraint and without regrets. If Godfrey wants to eat ice cream until he pukes, he can. If he

wishes to get up early everyday to do schoolwork, hold down a job, and go to church twice a week, he can. In fact, having absolutely total free will means more than this. The results are not always what we expect. The results are more like the absolute skeptic than like a really good guy with a lot of stamina.

Godfrey can withstand any torture, if he wants. Godfrey can also tell the torturers whatever he wants, if that is what he wants. Godfrey can be moral if that is what he wants, or immoral. Godfrey is not subject to any system or any rationale. If Godfrey were subject to any system or any rationale, Godfrey would not have absolutely free will. Because Godfrey need not follow any system, we cannot tell what Godfrey is doing or why, unless he feels like telling us. Godfrey need not have any reason. He need only will to do it. In fact, if Godfrey does have a reason, and he feels as if the reason compels him, then he is does not have absolutely free will. If Godfrey walks around the street shooting puppies, he does not have to tell us why, and he does not have to have a reason. If he does have a reason, he need not follow the reason for any longer than he wills to follow the reason. Suppose we have heard there is an outbreak of rabies, and we think that is the reason why Godfrey is shooting puppies. But it might not be the reason, and we need never find out.

Godfrey is not a self as we think of a self. Godfrey is more like a demon or a strange God than any self we could possibly be comfortable with. Godfrey could never have evolved. If Godfrey can create worlds through his will, I am not sure I would like to be part of those worlds. I am not sure I would like to live in a world with Godfrey.

When we think of a being with a lot of free will, we do not think of Godfrey. We think of a being that can engage in common activities to the extent that he-she wishes, and of a being that has the characters listed above. We understand that working within an activity restrains the free will of the being but we do not hold that very much against the free will of the being. Arthur is such a free being. Arthur works hard to promote morality. Arthur wants friendship and love to work, and works hard to make them work. Arthur understands the modern economy, and works hard to make that succeed. Arthur has learned to have patience with people who do not understand as much as he does. When Arthur gets ill, he endures the pain and discomfort. He does not complain, and he does not cause discomfort to his friends and loved ones. Arthur certainly works under systems with rationales but we do not think of him as less free.

For an attempt to merge Godfrey and Arthur, and for many interesting comments on the will, see the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, especially "The World as Will and as Representation" and some of his essays. Schopenhauer mistakenly thinks a being with absolute free will would will a world much like what we see, but he makes a lot of interesting points along the way.

Rocky Raccoon: Variability, Consent, and Freedom.

It helps to work upward from simple cases of free will to more complicated cases, this time to see if we can sustain (bolster) freedom of the will rather than pick it apart. I do not argue for absolute freedom of the will but for a limited kind of freedom that some people will not consider freedom of the will at all. This limited free will is based on the fact that much variation is normal in nature, and that natural selection does not always restrict our behavior. Natural selection leaves a window within which variation shows, and within which we can be limited-but-practically free even if not metaphysically free. The first ten items

in the list below try to find some “wobble room” for free will within the limits of a system with a rationale. The eleventh point asserts that “system with a rationale” is irrelevant. The twelfth is a bonus.

Rocky Raccoon fights 60% of the time against a coyote while Timmy fights 40% of the time, George fights 80%, and Frank fights 20% of the time. There is no intrinsic right and wrong here. There is only what works over time in natural selection, and how natural selection finds a way to get descendants of Rocky, Timmy, George, and Frank to react most effectively. We might expect that natural selection would eliminate all this variability so that, eventually, all raccoons would fight about 50% of the time, but this is not true. (Technical Note: The following is based on multi-person games with probabilistic strategies, and on results from decision rule theory.)

1. For reasons that are too hard to go into here, natural selection can sustain situations in which people vary in their abilities as with the raccoons. The population in general does not gravitate toward 50% but remains in a mixture with some individuals at 80, 60, 40, and 20 percent.
2. Rocky and the other raccoons really are not determined in particular cases, and so are not really determined at all even if, overall, there is a stable ratio in their alternatives. The fact that Rocky fights in 60% of cases means that we cannot predict for sure that Rocky will fight in any particular case. Rocky, and every other individual raccoon, has a lot of internal variability.
3. Internal individual variability comes, at least in part, because of population variability, and vice versa. Rocky is like a mix of George (80%) and Frank (20%). Timmy is like a mix of Rocky (60%) and Frank (20%). Because Rocky and the other raccoons fight in mixed proportions, the population stays mixed too; because the population stays mixed, Rocky and the other raccoons fight in mixed proportions.
4. Many abilities (traits) are like this, such as the search for a mate. They are the end result of some variability and mixture. Even simple things like eye color can be the result of mixed tendencies.
5. All organisms that might be selves have an incredible number of traits with an incredible mixing. By “incredible” I mean “incredible”. The number of possibilities in any normal human being is more than the number of atoms in star.
6. Rocky has to assess each particular coyote before fighting or fleeing. If Rocky and all raccoons could perfectly assess all coyotes, then Rocky, and all other raccoons, would not have a flight or fight response at all. They would not need one, and so would not have one. Rocky, and all other raccoons, would fight or flee according to the coyote. The fact that they act in some mixture means the situation with the coyote is fuzzy. There is probability in the flight or fight response, and in many traits, because there is some fuzziness in nearly all situations. When there is fuzziness, what we do is not a determined response to the particular situation but is a guess. A guess is like a choice, it is like an exercise of free will. The choice in each particular situation is like an exercise of free will in that particular situation even though there is an overall pattern to the choices over time. The fuzziness and guessing inherent in all situations interacts with the above factors to reinforce them.
7. Usually almost any choice is better than no choice. Rocky just has to get on with things, especially when faced with a coyote. The worst thing Rocky can do is just stand there. Even if flight might not be

better than fight in this case, both are worse than nothing, and so flight is better than nothing. Rocky has to choose even on the basis of poor information and uncertainty. Natural selection does reward making some choice over not making any choice, and so Rocky is part of a system with a rationale. But, in this case, natural selection does not reward either choice so much as any choice, and need not reward either choice strongly. Some choice is important, and it need not be any particular choice, as long as it is not a really stupid choice. So, Rocky has some leeway in how he acts within the system with a rationale.

8. This point is a variation on the idea that any choice is better than no choice. People face situations more complicated than “fight or flight”, such as whether to marry Sue, Mary, Jane, Sally, Tiffany, or any of a hundred other possibilities. Not choosing, or choosing very late, is worse than not choosing the one absolute best. So we choose the best that we find within a range within a time. We exert our will to make a choice of practical best when the absolute best is not obvious. Biologists have developed a system with a rationale that can explain many of the choices that organisms, including people, make under these conditions. So biologists argue that free choice plays no part. The system-with-rationale does not explain all choices, but I do not wish to base my idea of free will on discrepancies between the system with actual choices but rather on the fact that we choose under uncertainty. Even if we have a system to make choices under some uncertainty, we still make choices under uncertainty, and we still deal with uncertainty, and that is a kind of free will.

9. A biological reductionist also can explain away the following source of free will but I like it anyway. Often we have to judge people (and machines such as cars) not on the basis of obvious appearance or recent performance but on the basis of the quality that we think underlies mere chance. The ability to make this judgment is what makes a good sports scout. This distinction fuels battles between teenage girls and their parents over boyfriends. Financial market consultants make their reputations by pointing out the cases like this where they succeeded, and by overlooking the cases like this where they failed. The really good guy in a cowboy movie looks scruffy. If there were no signs at all of underlying quality, then there would be no basis to take a chance. If the signs alone were enough, then there would be no judgment, and people would not vary much in their ability to assess signs. Of course, natural selection picks people who consistently make the right judgments on the smallest of signs, so a biological reductionist can argue that free will and judgment play no part. I think enough uncertainty prevails, and the cases are important enough, so that we do make judgments “out of the blue”, that is, with free will.

10. All important systems-with-rationales are incomplete and inconsistent: morality, marriage, the law, medicine, sports, business, friendship, etc. The fact that natural selection controlled the evolution of a system-with-rationale does not mean that the system is complete and consistent. Biologists argue just the contrary; they argue that we are a pastiche of distinct ad hoc mechanisms. Anger is inconsistent within itself. Anger is inconsistent with affection. Emotions are inconsistent with social rules. Morality is not consistent; good often varies with the public good. These problems within and between systems cannot be straightened out, yet we have to act anyway. We have to choose. Often we must choose. Not all the choices that we make out of the misty borderlines are cases of free will but some probably are, and this misty land of indeterminacy is fertile ground for free will.

(Technical note: some thinkers refer to the fact that all systems, of the most important kind [Russell-Whitehead], must be incomplete, an idea that developed in the work of Kurt Godel. They argue that no systems are determinate, thus there is no single overarching system-with-rationale that governs human

action, and so there must be free will. That is not the point I am making here. That point does not need to be made here. That point deserves to be argued, but to do so here would only confuse issues. I am arguing that all evolved real systems that we do have, such as morality and emotions, are in fact incomplete and inconsistent, whether or not they have to be in theory.)

11. The standard explanation in Christian theology of the relation between goodness and free will is that we freely choose to act well. Goodness does not compel us to act well just because it is a system with a rationale. This explanation is not necessarily contrived mumbo-jumbo. Just because we go along with a system that has a rationale does not mean we do not freely choose to go along. We obey traffic laws even when we don't have to, partly out of habit, but partly out of free will. We decide to have sex or not. We decide to go along with a "wave" at a sporting event. We decide to go with our friends to a bar. We decide to join a flash mob. We decide to testify against a violent criminal even when we fear retaliation. Especially when a system-with-a-rationale is beneficial, as with traffic laws, it is hard to tell if a person goes along because of an inner compulsion to follow the system-with-a-beneficial-rationale or because of free will. Here biology invokes its argument that natural selection eliminates people who do not go along, rewards people who do go along, and there has to be some mechanism "inside us" that makes us go along, so there is no free will. We "choose" to act morally, because in our evolutionary past, acting well succeeded, and the mechanism that caused our ancestors to act well lives on inside us. The biologist disagrees with the theologian. There is no way to settle this argument.

12. People change, hopefully for the better, sometimes for the worse. One day Phoebe is a stockbroker. The next day she is a professional masseuse who sings "Smelly Cat" badly in the local bar. One day Barney wears all natural organic fiber clothes and tries to save the planet. The next day he wears tailored suits, works for Goliath Bank destroying the planet, and exploits women as much as he can. I hope we all "see the light" at least once in our lives, even if it is only a small light, and even if the light fades quickly. It is easy to rationalize changes in terms of a system with a rationale, and so to explain away free choice. Part of the fun in watching Phoebe and Barney is to see how they switched from one artificial system to another while search for satisfaction. To use the same explanation for both the before and after seems contrived and circular. Sometimes the easiest explanation is just the obvious common sense explanation that people do choose to change.

Probability, mixtures, guesses, huge numbers, systemic contradictions, making a choice even if it is not the one best choice, and changes, do not by themselves do not get around reductionism and they do not guarantee freedom of the will. But they all help. They leave space for free will.

When Rocky decides to fight in any particular case, he is not always sure beforehand (determined by a system with a rationale) and we are not sure. Rocky decides when the case comes up. The fact that, over many cases, Rocky fights 60% of the time does not determine that he will fight in this case. When Rocky fights, he feels as if he decided to fight, and that he consents to his decision. Not only does Rocky feel this way, but the other raccoons that see Rocky fight feel this way, and Rocky feels the assessment of the other raccoons about him. Whether he acted freely in any absolute sense is not as important as the fact that Rocky feels fairly free in his decisions about fighting, Rocky feels as if he can give consent or withhold it, and that the other raccoons feel the same way about Rocky and about themselves. That is the easiest way for an evolved self to handle this kind of issue.

Rocky does not exercise his freedom of the will generally and absolutely, like Godfrey. Rocky does so in kinds of situations, within limitations inherent in the situations, such as fighting, foraging, courting, and walking along having a good time. The situations are typical of raccoon evolved nature. The amount of free will that Rocky has in a particular situation depends on the situation. Rocky exercises various degrees of free will in various situations according to raccoon evolved free will. This is like Arthur, and this is how we think of Sam and other humans.

Back to Sam.

Sam likes the color blue more than the color orange. There are few consequences to his evolutionary success due to liking blue more than orange, and so we can say that Sam exercises free will in his choice. There might be some deep underlying genetic-brain-or-learning reason why Sam prefers blue to orange, but we need not care, and likely we will never find out. We can accept that Sam freely chooses blue, and that he consents to blue.

Sam likes bananas better than apples. Sam likes golf better than football. Sam likes films noir more than romantic comedies. Sam picks some of his friends on the basis of shared tastes. The same comments apply.

Sam will not fall in love with just anybody but he is not thereby limited to only a few best mates. Even in the category of “right” mates, Sam has thousands of candidates. Biology cannot determine the one single best mate for Sam. Sam has to choose. Sam has to choose somebody even if it is not the ideal perfect imaginable somebody because eventually time will run out, and some choice is better than no choice. Sam can even stray outside the box a little, as, for example, marrying a plumber or marrying a princess instead of marrying a young professional woman with a degree. When Sam chooses “the one” among the large range of possibilities, he feels as if he has chosen freely, and he feels as if he consents to his choice. Because there were many possibilities, he did choose. This might not be perfect freedom of the will but it is free enough.

Sam has to choose in the market to get the most for his money, but, even within that constraint, there are a lot of choices. I know it can seem as if the market is one dreary aisle after another but compared to most alternatives, there are a lot of choices. Sam has to choose within a time frame, even if he does not choose the absolute best item that he might possibly have found if he had time to check every item in this store and in all competing stores. Sam has to buy cereal, and he chooses to buy generic cornflakes at \$2 a box even though there is a slim possibility he might have gotten a better deal on generic raisin bran at another store. Within the need to use his money most effectively, Sam really does make choices, and really does consent to the choices that he makes. Sam makes choices with consent even if he makes pretty much the same choices over time, even if he acts within a system according to the rationale of the system, and even if he is somewhat constrained.

Back in 2002, when Apple introduced its line of small electronic consumer goods such as the iPod, Sam bought Apple stock even though, overall, the company had recently suffered losses. Sam held on to his stock through the series of iPhones and Tablets, and did very well. Sam congratulates himself on his judgment and his free will.

Sam has a small garden in his back yard. Sam and his wife dearly love their raspberries. Sam saw the small child of a poor family stealing raspberries from the garden, and stealing other food that was more for nutrition than for taste, such as tomatoes and corn. There is no absolute system-with-rationale to guide Sam here. Sam has to choose.

Sam likes to play folk tunes on the guitar. He plays them too fast, but he likes them that way.

As selves, we understand the situations and actions of other selves, at least somewhat. We assess the degree of free will according to situations. We are happy to see Sam as acting freely at the supermarket or in the mate market. We also know that, if somebody kidnapped Sam's daughter, that Sam would not have the same freedom of the will. We would not hold that against Sam, Sam's free will, or free will in general.

Enough Free Will, One.

Situational partial free will is consistent with evolved selves, or at least with the evolved delusion of free will. We expect people to assert free will when they can (or to assert the evolved delusion of free will), to assess how free they can be in particular situations, to evolve the ability to assess situations according to how much free will they can assert, and to assert it in those situations. We expect people to evolve not to assert free will when they likely cannot, and when they might be punished for trying. The biologically-based reductionist idea that people have no free will at all goes against the idea that people have of their selves. It goes against the evolved idea of a common sense self. That does not mean it is false – people delude themselves even on major issues – but it does set up an awkward issue in which people without free will usually defend their legal rights. It makes us think in terms of absolute free will versus no free will at all, and I think that dichotomy confuses the issue so that it is insoluble. It impedes correct Darwinian understanding both of free will and of the illusion of free will.

I don't want absolute free will for humans. I don't want us to be like Godfrey. I want varying degrees of free will in the activities that people normally engage in. I can't assess if we are totally determined at the subatomic level. Even if we are, I don't see how to get from that level of determinism to the kind of action and assessments that we have to do as evolved selves in the normal world. Free will remains a practical mystery. We have to assume free will until we can absolutely explain it away. Until we can show how a shift in a quantum state determines my preference for pomegranates, we have to assume some free will. We still have to act well for the sake of our loved ones, people in general, and for the sake of goodness. For our life, we can safely assume the degree of free will that we do assume.

I don't know if situational free will is enough to satisfy theologians or enough to refute reductionists, and I don't care. I care that it is enough so I can continue to feel like a self, and it is enough so we can carry on with the usual needs of life.

I think situational free will is enough free will so we can face God when we die. We have enough free will in cases of morality, empathy, and working hard to build a better world; and those are what count most with God.

I don't know if people in general have enough free will to make modern democracy succeed. Some of us do. Many of us do not. Many of us are too easily manipulated by selfishness, jealousy, political parties, media, peer pressure, fear, and advertising. I can think of ways to separate the likely competent citizens from the likely incompetent citizens but here is not the place to argue the issue. To argue this issue requires accepting that a lot of people just are not competent, and so it means eroding one of the ideals of modern democracy in order to make the rest of modern democracy succeed. It does not mean giving up the idea of situational free will or giving up the idea of personhood.

Situational free will is like the freedom to compose music or play music within a musical system-with-a-rationale such as the Western twelve-tone system with a tonic key ("key of B flat") or even without a tonic key. The composer-or-player cannot choose any note to follow any other note or to go along with any other note. The choices are quite restrictive, and the rules can be elaborate. Yet even within the system-with-a-rationale, there is tremendous freedom of will and creativity. If there were not, we could not have the almost infinite amount of music that we have. Within a restrictive system-with-a-rationale, Johann Bach and Thelonius Monk both can create. Other arts are similar. What adds much to the interest of any art, and gives any art much of its character, is not the absolute freedom of the artist, but the play between the limits of the medium and the striving of the artist's will within the medium. Telling a story is not just relating events. In the long run, mathematical intuitions have to be proven. That does not mean novelists and mathematicians are not free.

Enough Free Will, Two.

Suppose we are only a bundle of traits without any free will in the sense that ideally most of us hope for. Suppose we are ultimately deterministic, that is, we are ultimately machines. Not only that, we are self-deluded machines, and often self-contradictory machines, too. Even in this situation, I see a role for what I think of as free will.

Imagine we are a machine like this: Most choices, in most arenas can be made directly with rules, such as, for example, in the eating arena, to eat an apple but not eat a stone. Other choices in other arenas are made by first generating a set of possibilities, then evaluating the possibilities by the best rules that natural selection can provide. For example, when meeting a new person for the first time, first we have to think up possibilities for what to do, then evaluate them, and then do something. Inside us, we have a random possibility generator. We might have a distinct random possibility generator for various distinct arenas such as social events, foraging for food, mate hunting, etc. That is not relevant here, so imagine we have one general-purpose random possibility generator for any arena. The random possibility generator is not the same in all people. The random possibility generator likely is not really random but is governed by a set of rules, like the pseudo-random number generator in a computer. That also does not matter for here. The evaluation rules also vary between people. All this is like a composer plinking away at a piano until he-she finds a set of notes with promise, and then develops them. As far as I care, this situation is enough free will.

The fact that we are self-contradictory machines opens up a giant set of possibilities for spaces in which free will might operate. This issue is similar to the fact that all important interesting systems must be incomplete. The topic is too big to go into here.

Even as machines, we are complicated, variable, interesting, nearly-unique bundles. Despite that we might be machines, or maybe because of that, God is still interested in us and in how we turn out. Especially we might be interesting if we have various unique random possibility generators, various unique sets of possibility evaluators, and big holes opened up by self-contradiction. It is like the interest that a “motor head” shows in his-her cars and in how the owners drive them, or like the interest that a programmer has in his-her games and in how people play them. When we die, the ideas expressed through the physical shell still remain, just as the program still remains even though the computer is turned off, and just as the program still remains even though it is erased from this computer. As long as the idea of the program remains in the programmer’s head, the program remains. God will still evaluate us after we die. God will evaluate how his handiwork turned out. The illusion of free will is one of the abilities that he gave us. God will evaluate what we have done, and how we have used our illusion of free will. If, in the end, that is all it turns out to be, that is still enough selfhood and free will for me.

Robot Free Will.

This section restates a situation that computer scientists call the “Turing Test”, after the great computer scientist, Alan Turing, who first devised it. A human interacts with another being by means of computer terminal. The other being might be a human or a computer. If the human can’t tell the difference, then there is no difference. The computer is as much a person as the human.

Imagine a robot. The robot does not have to look like a human; it does not have to be an android; it can be like R2D2. The robot can solve all problems about as well as a human, can tell individual humans apart, can tell individual machines apart, has personal tastes, and can seemingly choose within limits. Within those limits, humans cannot tell what constrains the robot’s choices. For example, the robot might prefer to interact with cars rather than heavy equipment but, within the category of cars, the robot has idiosyncratic preferences such as for electric cars rather than fuel cell cars; and we can’t tell why. The robot has some contradictions. For friends, it prefers cars to heavy equipment, and prefers heavy equipment to standard computers, but prefers standard computers to cars. It likes early Impressionistic painting, such as Turner, to German Expressionism, and likes German Expressionism more than Gothic, but prefers Gothic to Impressionism. People can carry on a conversation with the robot for as long as either party wishes to carry on the conversation.

As far as I am concerned, even if the robot is entirely determined at the level of physics, the robot is a person, has some free will, and would be somewhat interesting to God. This is the quandary posed by the great movie “Blade Runner” and by more science fiction works than I can count.

14 Badness

This chapter describes the problem of badness, and the responses that people have to it. This chapter does not solve the problem of badness. I cannot explain why there is so much badness, why there is such strong badness (strong evil), and why there is so much strong badness (strong evil). I deal with the problem as best I can. I am pretty sure nobody else, nor any religion, can explain either.

The problem of badness is a theme in all important world views. Sometimes the problem of evil is called the problem of "theodicy" ("god justice") but I avoid the term here. As of August 2012, you could find good summaries on the Internet, especially in Wikipedia, by looking for both "the problem of evil" and "theodicy".

Evil is worse than bad, and the two are qualitatively different. Usually we can deal with bad. Often we can reverse "bad effects", as in setting a broken arm. In contrast, usually evil cannot be reversed or fully remedied. Evil cannot be undone. Most clear instances of evil are carried out by sentient moral beings (people) but some things in non-human nature are so bad that I can only think of them as evil, such as parasites. As I was writing this, Ivan the gorilla died. If you would like an example of evil, search him for what was done to him. In this chapter, I lump all this together as "badness". I do not define bad, evil, or badness. Here I focus on people.

What we consider badness varies by our society, culture, history, economy, political situation, etc. This does not mean badness is only a convention and does not really exist. It is real. What we consider a song, bird, river, mountain, scientific method, philosophical method, or person varies according to our society etc. but that does not mean there are not birds, rivers, mountains, scientists, thinkers, or people. We can pick apart and bolster anything. I do not consider this question further here.

The problem of badness consists of several closely related problems, such as badness that comes from the bad will of sentient beings, from neglect, accident in nature, the inevitable mix-up of the evolutionary process; whether badness can be corrected; what difference it makes if badness is done to innocents or to people who should know better; etc. I don't sort them out here. I consider the items below to be the worst kinds of badness. Unfairness as such is not necessarily too bad. It depends on the degree. The world is unfair, and we have to deal with it. That is part of being a moral being in the real world. What matters is how we respond to unfairness.

- The exploitation of innocents, such as innocent children for sex slavery or the destruction of nature.
- Some people live in such bad conditions, or are afflicted with such bad physical or mental conditions, that they almost doomed to fail spiritually.
- Betrayal of a moral public trust, such as of a priest, academic, or politician.
- Strong oppressing weak.

- Not giving people a chance to succeed or fail, such as when children get cancer.
- Extended intense suffering, as with some kinds of cancer, burns, mental disease, or emotional coercion.
- Deliberate use of ideas that we know to be false and detrimental, such as bad religion, such as religion that leads to terrorism.
- Unfair play when fair play is possible.
- Indecency.

This chapter is easier to understand if you have already read the previous chapter on decent people. This chapter repeats a little from that chapter but not much.

Explanations.

The following ways of thinking about badness overlap. People combine ways as part of how they think about the world and respond to the world, that is, in their religion. People are not always consistent but they are more consistent than we might expect. I reject the Devil, so I omit explanations of badness that rely on the Devil. I do mention him for completeness. Some of these ideas try to explain badness, some offer comfort with which to endure badness, and some suggest what to do in the face of badness or after badness without necessarily explaining badness. Often the ideas are all mixed up. I don't try to sort it out here with each idea.

Unexplainable. Badness is unexplainable. Learn to deal with it if you can.

Random. The world is very largely random. Bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people, because the world has many random events. The world is not a large person with whom we are in a moral relation so we should not expect the world to make sense in terms of badness and goodness. We try to correct the badness according to our own moral character.

Mixed Moral Beings. Evolved sentient-moral beings are inevitably mixed moral beings, and so do some bad things.

Inevitable in the Evolutionary Process. To evolve sentient-moral beings with the capacity for good, it is necessary to use a process that allows for the evolution of badness, the persistence of badness, and the recurrence of badness. If this explanation is combined with Deism, it implies limits on God's ability. We can get around the limits by arguing also that some badness is necessary for the full development of sentient-moral beings, and God set the level of badness at about that level. See below. This addition is not fully satisfying in cases of terrible badness to innocent beings who cannot recover and learn.

Badness is an Illusion. Badness is merely a judgment from the point of view of an evolved being. It is not an absolute attribute of any acts or events. Beings that had evolved differently than the people on this planet would have different judgments about badness. Within a particular evolved moral system, beings

do make judgments of good and bad. But we should not mistake those judgments for anything more than a feeling within a particular context. Anteaters would say ants are delicious. Lions think killing a beautiful gazelle is a beautiful thing in itself. This point of view does not take fully into account the logic of good, bad, and evil.

God's Will. That there is badness is simply God's will. The degree of badness, and on whom it falls, is also God's will. There is nothing we can do about it. We deal with it if we can. To people who do not believe in God, this response seems like a variation of "unexplainable", but it does differ to people who believe in God. To explain why badness is part of God's will, believers have to go to some of the other explanations for badness.

Bad is Part of God Too. Nearly all deists agree that God is mostly good. God might be part bad as well. The badness that we see is as much an expression of God's character as the good. Good depends on bad, and bad depends on good, because they are part of God's character. This idea does not insure that goodness prevails over badness, or that there is more goodness than badness. Most people who argue for a link between goodness and God, or even between badness and God, also take for granted that goodness prevails. People who argue that both aspects are in God's character nearly always assume that the good side prevails.

Free Will. Badness results from freedom of the will. Beings with free will can choose to do bad things, and sometimes do. This response is a problem for scientists who do not believe in free will. It is a problem for people who believe in God because then they have to be clear about why having truly free will means being able to choose badness. It is not clear if badness is a by-product of free will or it is an intrinsic part of free will. For a cutesy statement of this explanation, along with the inevitable evasion, see the charming movie "Time Bandits".

Necessary for Morality. We could learn some morality without badness but a real sense of morality can only grow if we encounter true badness. Of course, we have to survive the badness, both physically and spiritually; but most people do survive and do grow. This point of view implies a being who planned the degree of badness so that it would be at the right level. People who think badness is simply an illusion cannot use this argument. This issue is so important that it gets another section of its own below.

God Provides Badness to Teach Lessons. This explanation does not differ from "Necessary for Morality" except in two ways: It explicitly mentions God as the source of the lessons. It implies that God might tailor the lessons to the abilities and needs of particular people: "God does not send us anything more than we can stand". Of course, sometimes the world does send us more than we can stand, and does break us. Deists have to explain that additional problem.

Good Exceeds Bad. This idea is not so much an explanation as a comfort. It can be in an explanation when combined with other ideas, such as below. If we could quantify good and bad, we would find that good exceeds bad, probably by quite a bit. Except for a few people in miserable situations, life is worth living even if it is not fair.

God Converts Bad. God might have had to tolerate some badness in the world because of free will and to use the process of evolution, but God also provided means for people to overcome all the badness and

to convert it to good. Moreover, the total sum of good gained through allowing sum bad far exceeds the total sum of badness needed to achieve the good. Once we see that the total sum of good exceeds the total sum of bad, then we see that God did not tolerate badness but anticipated and used badness to make even greater good. This elaboration on the idea that God converts bad is a bit dangerous because it implies that good depends on badness to become fully good, and that God depends on badness to achieve full goodness. It lends strength to the idea that badness is a part of God.

Collective Punishment. God punishes and rewards collectively. Collective punishment by definition can't fall selectively only on the people who deserve it. Some of us suffer because of the bad deeds of others. In the end, if we all correct our behavior, we are also rewarded, and the reward more than makes up for the punishment that we suffered. Even if we personally do not live long enough to reap the reward, our families do. If we go along with God, the total good is greater than the total bad, although it might not seem that way when we are going through a bad patch.

Mutual Healing. I include this category largely as a matter of person inclination and because of the case of Ivan the gorilla. See the movie "Bennie and Joon" and an episode of "Star Trek TNG" called "Tin Man". Among a long string of babysitting movies that feature mutual healing, the 2011 movie "The Sitter" has a man in his twenties and three children healing each other and a few friends along the way too. Badness wounds people. Sometimes people are just born wounded or develop wounded. Wounded people can heal each other. Sometimes only another wounded person can heal this wounded person. Sometimes wounded people are better after mutual healing than they would have been if not wounded in the first place. Badness does hurt but it also provides the opportunities for healing and for being a better person than otherwise.

Non-Autonomy. People are not autonomous but we often mistakenly think we are. "No man (person) is an island". Because we are tied to people, and better off tied to people, we suffer badness. We suffer when they suffer, and we suffer because we are connected to other people who do bad things. Without some badness, we would never learn the important lesson of being connected, and never fully develop into personhood. Hopefully, the gain from learning our personhood exceeds the loss from badness.

Tests. God allows badness so as to test us. It is not clear if God is testing us so God can find out about us, we can find out about ourselves, other people can find out about us, as part of teaching us lessons, or all the options.

Materialism. Badness results because this world is made up of material stuff rather than spiritual stuff. This explanation is not always clear about why material stuff is more likely to lead to badness, and why some spiritual beings are bad. See later chapters.

Finitude. Badness results because all beings in this world are finite, finite beings must choose among limited alternatives, and finite beings cannot express the great (or infinite) heart needed to be truly good. This argument can be combined with materialism because material beings are necessarily finite.

Absence of Good. We think of badness as a positive thing-in-itself such as killing an innocent animal or imprisoning Ivan the gorilla. This is a mistake, and leads to further mistakes. Badness is a lack of good. It is emptiness, and leads to emptiness, such as the isolation we feel from other people when we have

done something wrong, especially when we have hurt them. This explanation was important in Medieval philosophy, and was combined with finitude and materialism, when God was considered infinite and full. This explanation is not very important now.

Become Like Me. Badness comes of wanting to make the world into your own image, or wanting to make the world something you are comfortable with. This idea is related to the idea that Satan (the Devil) fell through the sin of pride, and that humans do the same. This idea still lives in modern fiction but in a different form. Badness comes of people working too hard, people wanting to surround themselves with stuff that reflects their narrow tastes and makes them comfortable, and people hanging out only with other people like themselves. In the movie series "The Matrix", the Devil, Agent Smith, wanted to remake the world into something he was comfortable with. In the end, he wanted to remake the world entirely into his own image.

Justice Comes after Death. Badness exists in this world but it will all be corrected after we die, when good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell, and some people go to purgatory. This account by itself is not an explanation for badness, it only makes badness more tolerable. Sometimes that is all we need from an explanation.

Due Reward Does Come in this Lifetime. We dwell too much on cases of badness and do not pay enough attention to cases of just reward. People with talent and who work hard are rewarded. Even people who have suffered badness can be rewarded if they work hard enough and if they develop their talents. Think of the inspiring stories of handicapped people and wounded soldiers. People get what they deserve. If a person has not gotten much, that is because he-she has not tried hard enough and so doesn't deserve it. Before dismissing this account as self-service for rich people, consider how true it often is. It is important in the development of the work ethic and of some forms of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Devil's Rebellion. Badness came because an extremely powerful supernatural agent decided to put himself ahead of God's plan, thereby disrupted God's plan, and corrupted the intended state of affairs on this planet, and maybe on other planets. Each element in this explanation is doubtful, but I do not go into a critique. Even in religions that are not simply theistic such as Christianity and Islam, variations of this argument can be used when a supernatural being "goes against" the major religious goodness, as in the stories of the enemies of the Buddha(s) and bodhisattvas.

Human Rebellion and Poor Choice. This explanation is more than that free will sometimes leads to bad choices. At some time, people made a bad choice that somehow tainted the entire situation on this world and for all the people on this world for a long time. The bad choice of people sometimes can be linked to the bad agency of the Devil, as in Christianity and Islam. Again, each link in the logic is doubtful but I do not critique it here.

Karma, Exact Version with Reincarnation. If we are confined to this lifetime, it is hard to make sense of badness. If we are reborn, it is much easier. Karma has become such a common idea in the West that I don't define it here. I say more about it in a later chapter on Hinduism. The idea of karma elaborates on the basic idea of "what comes round, goes round". There really is moral justice and social justice. If we act badly now, it will come back to (haunt us) later. Likewise if we act well now, we will eventually get a

reward. Sometimes the reward or punishment returns sooner, sometimes later, sometimes in this life, and sometimes in the next life.

The most powerful use of karma for explaining badness comes when it is combined with reincarnation. What good we do affects our next lives, so we might be poor now, but, if we suffer badness well and do good, we can be reborn rich and able to help other people in the next life. If we do bad now, we can be reborn as a poor person or a mangy dog in the next life. This account is partly an explanation for badness, and partly, like the idea of heaven, it is a way to give comfort so we can endure badness. It is an explanation because the badness we encounter in this life is the result of badness that we did in past lives. In the rigid account, karma keeps a ledger in which each deeds moral quality, and its degree, is recorded, and rewarded exactly.

Karma, Poetic Version. Poetic justice is often better than exact justice. We would not necessarily learn about life, and become better people, if the acts of our previous lives put us in a horrible situation in this life. We could not get over badness if somehow karma did not lead us to see how to overcome badness. Karma would just perpetuate whatever good or bad was already in the world. Karma can lead us to situations that not only expiate our previous bad acts, or benefit from our previous good acts, but also to learn. A rich abusive person might be born into a family of church people devoted to community service or might be born into a poor family exploited by rich people. A good person might be born where he-she can see how good acts do help people, such as in a family of successful civil servants. In this version of karma, the world as a whole might be getting better continually.

The two versions of karma have a distinct flavor and imply distinct mechanisms. The exact version is like a natural deterministic mechanical law from physics, and does not require any high spiritual being as a judge. What you do has results, and that is that. But the exact version is hard for people to accept, even in religions like Buddhism. The poetic version does seem to require a high spiritual being to carry out but this being need not be God.

Almost all versions of karma take for granted that the universe (Dharma) is moral and makes sense. What happens to us according to what we do is based on good and bad. If karma did not have this base in morality, it would not make sense as a response to badness. It would not be much of an aid for making sense of the universe. The universe need not have a thinking moral personal god for karma to be based in morality. Morality runs according to rules, strict or poetic. As long as what happens to us according to our deeds follows morality, then karma can work. Religions that take morally-based karma for granted do not usually explain why the universe is intrinsically moral. Keep in mind that karma and reincarnation require that the universe be intrinsically moral; the idea is needed for the later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

Even though logically karma does not need an intelligent agent behind it, people still think morally-based karma works better with some intelligent agent. I think a desire to link karma with a moral agent persists because our sense of morality evolved along with our sense of persons.

Karma could be based on rules other than morality, and people could have multiple lives not based on karma but on other principles or on no principles at all. In these cases, karma offers little as a response to the problem of badness. No major religion accepts these alternatives. So I leave them alone here.

Playful Illusion. This account is related to the kind of cosmic mythology found in the Bhagavad Gita. This account can be related to the scientific idea that badness is an illusion, and to the Medieval Christian idea that badness is a deficit of goodness, but I do not do those exercises here. This account requires the idea of multiple lives. Badness does feel bad when it happens, it can change this life, and badness feels absolutely bad when we are suffering it. But that need not be the case. It might be that we encounter serious badness now in this life but encounter serious goodness in the next. It might be that the badness and goodness balance out, or that goodness is actually much more than the badness. We need the badness to appreciate all the goodness. Badness is a relative illusion in the overall scheme of things even if it is real enough now in this life. The true overall situation is joy to the world. This account can easily combine with the explanation through karma.

Not Important 1. Goodness and badness do exist, they are not illusions, but they just are not important. They are not nearly as important as most people think they are. They are not nearly as important as most religions make them out to be. A lot is going on in the world. Goodness and badness don't apply, or apply only weakly, to the vast majority of what is going on. If we look for goodness and badness first, then likely we will miss what is really important. For example, I probably make too much of natural evil, and thereby might miss the way that behavioral interaction evolves. All the "Not Important" ideas are relevant to Taoism and some forms of Buddhism.

Not Important 2: Stop Dwelling. Goodness and badness are real but we need to stop dwelling on them, even when we have been a victim personally, and even when we have a good case. You do not need to invite other people to use you as a doormat. Simply stop thinking about it and get on to better and more useful activities. In evolutionary terms, morality is not the only thing going on in evolutionary success. If you dwell on morality, or on any one aspect of evolutionary success, then you will likely get out of balance and fail, even if you are technically correct on this point. Seek the overall balance. Seek grace. Don't be primed to look for morality.

Not Important 3: No Government Policies. In particular, don't base government policies on moral issues. Don't make many rules. Rules focus attention on specific aspects of relations and do not allow the flexibility that people need to find the best balance, grace, and evolutionary success. A state based on morality is bound to fail. A state that does not seek to promote morality is likely to lead to the best living and thus to the best morality. However, we should not seek to minimize the role of morality in the state so we can indirectly achieve greatest morality. That is only to shoot ourselves in a big circle. We should just simply minimize formal morality, and trust in the outcome. We should minimize formal morality even if, at first, the outcome does not lead to greater moral action. Not to stress morality is not the same as saying "anything goes" or "there are no rules for people 'in the know'". To use non-stress as an excuse for indulgence is another kind of stress and another morality in disguise.

Badness is Temporary and So Slightly Less Real.

The material in this section belongs in the list of explanations for badness but it takes so long to explain that it is best by itself. The material here is important for a better understanding of karma and rebirth.

Suppose God wants us all to be good decent people but he wants us to choose that way through our free will. Few of us choose this path right away. Most of us have to learn decency and goodness. While we are learning, we cause badness. We can only learn by encountering badness. We learn best when we encounter badness that is strong but not so strong as to break us right away. Some of us don't learn in one lifetime. Some of us get broken in this lifetime, and so can't learn.

If God is fair and consistent, he has to keep giving us chances until we choose to be good decent people of our own free will. The situation is like the movie "Groundhog Day" in which Bill Murray keeps waking up to the same day over and over. At first, he acts selfishly and badly; as long as he acts that way, the bad and selfish world keeps repeating itself. Eventually he gets bored with being a jerk, and begins to act well. He helps people and improves their lives. When he finally chooses selfless helping of his own free will, then he stops repeating the same day, and he can go on to his normal life. Some people get the idea in this lifetime, and so do not need to be reborn. If necessary, some people keep getting reborn until they do get the idea. They people who do get it might not cease being reborn. They might get reborn so as to help the people who do not get it yet, and because being reborn can be fun.

Badness is real but it is not permanent. It lasts only so long as we do not choose to be good decent people, and only so long as we are reborn into a struggle against good and against bad. When we finally realize that we will act well, then badness is no longer important, it is no longer as real as it once was. It is still real, but not as real. It has its own less reality, like bad but not like evil.

The beings who stay to help us, or who come back to help us, are like the saints in Christianity or like the bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism.

Goodness and Badness (Good and Evil) Need Each Other.

This section belongs in the list of explanations but is best raised to stand by itself. This section expands on a topic mentioned above. The main point is to see how people use the coming together of goodness and badness to excuse evil, and that the argument is weak.

We can say that goodness and badness need each other in four ways:

(1) As a matter of plain fact, both goodness and badness exist together in this world. We never find one without the other. Even if we do explain their presence together through evolution (item 2), we do not explain away their presence together; and so we are still stuck with the fact. Just because goodness and badness evolved together does not mean it is an accident without meaning. We just don't know what to make of the meaning. Before modern evolutionary theory, their presence together could not be explained except "metaphysically" (item 4), and could not be explained away. I do not consider this point much in this section. I take it up below in my response to badness.

(2) The ability for morality (goodness) could not evolve without the ability for immorality (badness), and vice versa. The process of evolution leads to badness as well as to sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. I explained how this is so in Chapter Three on evolution, and so do not explain again here.

(3) Nearly all of us have to learn to be good. We learn to be good by facing badness. By this logic, the harsher the badness that we face, the better that we learn to be – at least as long as we are not broken. Goodness that is good without going through the fire of badness is not the highest good. Goodness only becomes the highest truest good by rising above the flames of badness. A lot of badness that would seem to sour the world is turned into even greater good through the efforts of good people or through the efforts of people learning to be good. True goodness always manages to turn badness into even greater goodness. God always manages to turn badness into even greater goodness. The presence of badness leads to even more goodness than if there were no badness at all. This is an idea that people often use to excuse evil.

(4) The idea of goodness implies the idea of badness, and vice versa. If we can think of one, we can think of the other, and we have to think of the other. The reality of one implies the reality of the other, the being of one implies the being of the other. Goodness and badness are “metaphysically” bound. In myth, this idea can be expressed by having the symbolic good deity and the symbolic bad deity as siblings, as Jesus and the Devil are sometimes portrayed as siblings, both sons of God. This is another idea that people often use to excuse evil. This is the idea that people often have in the back of their heads when they think of evil as a presence.

Just as I use circumstantial evidence to conclude that God exists and made this world, so a reasonable person might use similar circumstantial evidence to conclude that goodness and badness need each other. Even more, God foresaw that goodness needs badness to be truly good, and put the right amount of badness into the world to get the most goodness out.

While appealing, I am scared of this idea. I dislike the idea that God creates badness for any reason. I dislike the idea that good and evil imply each other and are bound together. This attitude raises badness to a metaphysical force. It turns badness into goodness. It allows people to take the side of badness, and to do bad things, while excusing it as really good or “really like God”.

As a matter of another fact, good does not always need evil to be good. (A) An old couple befriends a child who is not related to them and who might not advance as far without some help. Their help allows the child to grow intellectually, socially, and athletically. The child would not have suffered without their help, except in a theoretical way from comparative deprivation of what he-she might have been, so there was no active bad. Still, their help is a positive good. (B) When a strong storm comes, volunteers help the victims, and people donate to charity to help the victims. The hurt is badness but it is not usually evil. The goodness arises in response to the badness but the badness does not cause the good. The same can be said when people get cancer or get bitten by a poisonous snake.

Badness and evil can occur without a response from good. Examples are not needed. In a social group, many kinds of badness have to be met with goodness or the group could not cohere, but that fact does not mean good and bad are mutually dependent. (C) Good people have to protect innocent people from harm, or the group would fall apart, but that need does not mean good guys and bad guys are somehow mutually dependent. If the bad guys would stop hurting innocent people, good guys would still be there. (D) If bad guys stopped stealing, honest people would still be there, and would find other ways to express their honesty, such as by generous sharing.

People do overcome some kinds of badness, and thus make even more good out of situations than might have been without the badness, but not always. The point of evil is that it cannot be undone. When a bad parent kills a good parent, what can be done to overcome the evil to make the situation even better than if no evil had asserted in the first place? Good people can step in to help the children but that is not the same as making goodness even greater than if the parents had lived. We can learn to be at least somewhat good without confronting evil by responding properly to scenarios such as A, B, C, and D above. We do learn to be even more good when dealing with evil, such as when trying to make up for child abuse and war. The fact that we learn to be better does not necessarily make up for the child abuse and the war. We should not start evil so we can learn to be even better. We should not murder the parents of the family next door, but spare the children, so the neighbors can respond with kindness that the neighbors would not otherwise know was in them. Even when good responds to bad and helps as much as it can, it does not make the total sum of goodness exceed the total sum of badness. Even when good people learn very much from badness, and do some great things, that does not necessarily make the total sum of goodness exceed the total sum of badness, and it does not excuse the badness. Because of his horrible experiences in the concentration camps of World War 2, Eli Wiesel stepped up to begin great acts; that does not excuse the Holocaust, and it does not mean the total sum of goodness exceeded the total sum of evil when Wiesel and other good people learned and stepped up as a result. I am not sure which cases count as God making good out of evil, leading people to learn to be even better as a result of evil, and making the total sum of good exceed the total sum of evil. Maybe sending Jesus or another prophet counts as such a case, as the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis argued. Even if it does, I am very unhappy arguing that we are better off as a result of evil such as child abuse and war, and I am even unhappier arguing that God sent child abuse and war so that we would be better off by overcoming them.

If we wish to make a person better by being bad to him-her, how would we do it so as to get the best results? Who can gauge what to do? Even in the Book of Job in the Tanakh (Old Testament), Job was not beset with evils to make him better but to test a man who was already very good. For the average Joe, should we put him out of work, put him in a car accident, break his arm, give him herpes, give him cancer that takes years to cure, or give him incurable cancer? Can we give his children cancer as a way to make him better? What if we put so much on him that he breaks, and we end up with worse evil than before? Using evil to make good does not make sense even if sometimes people do make good out of evil.

It is realistic, and a sign of maturity, to accept that goodness and badness, including evil, appear in this world, and often appear together. It is a blessing when you can see how a good response can make a silk purse of goodness out of a sow's ear of badness. When you think goodness and badness are spiritual siblings, we can do even greater good by doing some badness, or God sends badness so we can learn to be even better, then you have veered into weirdness, and likely veered into illness. It is good to think about these issues, but keep to common sense, dignity, and humanity.

When combined with other ideas, the idea that we can get more goodness through badness can be quite bad. The other ideas include reincarnation, life is a game, the badness that is in each of our hearts, and symbiosis between good guys (decent people) and bad guys (indecent people). I discuss this situation later in the book.

There is an exception to avoiding the idea that we can get more good through evil. Art, including movies, TV, and literature, should explore this theme. It does us good to look at and get over it. This theme is fairly common now in drama about serial killers and criminal masterminds. Sometimes it is combined with the idea that the bad guy and the hero secretly want the same thing, at least for now, and what they want is more than a bit bad; this is a version of symbiosis. For example, to better chase the bad guy, the hero might want to get a dedicated good police officer out of the way, and the bad guy kills the police officer so that the two might be locked in more pure combat. The Joker sometimes helps out Batman with a little bit of “hanky-panky” so the Batman is free to devote his attention to the Joker.

All Good is from God; All Badness is from Us.

I have heard people in all the major theistic religions repeat this “slogan”. I understand it, but I am also boggled by it. It doesn’t make sense. Clearly people originate some goodness and badness. Because God made the world, and the world is overall good, it makes a kind-of sense to say that all good comes from God; but it can make no sense that every good act comes only from God. To say this implies that people are bad, or evil, in a way that goes against the clear evidence of our senses and against the idea that God created us with the capacity for good. It implies a depravity that goes against common sense and against the idea of God’s creation.

To believe this slogan goes against the idea of free will. It denies a gift of God. If we can do only bad, and we must rely on God for every good act that we do, then we have no free will. We cannot be judged. We cannot be sent to heaven or condemned to hell. Even if our only act of free will is to consent to let God work through us, still we need at least that much free will. That much free will implies more free will. Either you accept that we have free will and that we can do good on our own, or you deny that we can do good, deny that we have free will, deny the grace of God, and deny the creation of God.

Too often, people who repeat this slogan use it to avoid personal responsibility and to make other people feel confused, guilty, and weak so they can control other people. Even when they say they personally cannot do good, only God can do good, still they personally can see what is good-and-from-God while other people can’t see what is good and can’t sense the will of God. As a result of their superior insight, the people who repeat this slogan have a right to tell other people how to behave, and, in fact, they are better than other people. By restricting good to God, and having the only access to God, they also have a monopoly on what is good and what is of God. The more they deny in theory that good cannot come from people but only from God, the more they manipulate other people in practice, and the more they expose their hypocrisy. Thankfully, other people rarely believe them.

I understand the piety that goes into such a slogan, at least for some people. In this case, piety is not an affirmation of God but is an effective denial of God and his gift of free will and responsibility. This kind of piety is really blasphemy by the standards of most theology, although inadvertent and well-intentioned blasphemy. Sometimes we have to rise above one kind of piety to accept the gifts of God, in this case the gifts of free will and responsibility, so as to achieve another higher kind of piety.

Beyond Good and Evil.

This section is optional, and is a bit of self-indulgence. This section explains an attitude toward goodness and badness, an attitude associated with the thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote in the late 1800s. The attitude lingers in the background of disputes even when we don't recognize the attitude. It is at the heart of what people fear about modern science, especially Darwinism, and modern philosophy. People fear this attitude erodes all morality. The attitude is coded in the slogan "might makes right".

When people face the facts that badness is an intrinsic part of this world, and that goodness and badness often go together, they get uneasy. When people see that other people use goodness as a tool of their own self-interest, they get annoyed with the whole idea of goodness, and the whole idea of good versus evil. The vast majority of life is run without reference to strong ideas of good and evil. When we invoke good and evil, usually something even worse is about to happen. It makes sense to think of a situation beyond both good and evil where people can just get on with their lives.

The title of this section is also the title of a book by Nietzsche. When most people hear the phrase, they think of something sinister, and usually should. In the first Harry Potter book, "The Philosopher's Stone", Voldemort, Tom Riddle, tries to win over Harry by saying there is no real good and bad, there is only power. Good and bad are illusions. In Western literature, this idea is a common delusion of bad guys. In the case of Tom Riddle, power clearly was on the side of badness. So, the message is not really "beyond good and evil" but "lay down your sense of morality so as to act badly without feeling bad". Whenever anybody talks about "beyond morality" or "beyond naïve simpleminded good and bad" usually it ends up serving bad. Good people do not try to soar above morality.

(1) Nietzsche meant the phrase in other ways. Nietzsche protested against simple minded morality that wants black and white "goody goody" ideas of good and bad. Nietzsche was not a simple relativist, and he would not excuse people who used relativism to their own advantage. He would not enable users. He demanded some intelligence and awareness in human life. Unfortunately, Nietzsche has been used by "bad guys" to excuse their bad behavior; Tom Riddle was echoing the misuse of Nietzsche.

(2) Nietzsche argued against using morality to serve other ends in disguise. The middle class and upper middle class use morality when they are smug in their success and their moral superiority. The poor use morality when they invoke morality not because they really think it is correct to help them but because they want stuff, they want people to enable their reproduction, and they want other people to enable their irresponsibility.

(3) Nietzsche argued against morality-in-disguise that hurt society by enabling bad behavior, protecting people who should be weeded out, and diverting resources away from people who deserved more. Helping the poor often enabled bad and weak people to carry on at the expense of good smart people. Ideas about morality did not often come from strong successful people but from weak failed people who wanted a tool to use.

(4) As a special case of three, Nietzsche called the morality that came from the lower classes "slave morality", and said Christianity propagates slave morality. Nietzsche thought of all simple-minded morality, and all morality used as a tool, as slave morality. Even the middle and upper classes acted as slaves when they used the idea of good-and-evil in self interest.

(5) As a consequence of all the points so far, Nietzsche rejected the distinction between good and evil but did not reject the distinction between good and bad. There is bad but there is not necessarily evil. Evil is not a useful category and might be an illusion foisted on us by people that wish to promote slave morality for their own sake. The distinction between good and bad is much like the distinction between practical versus impractical or useful versus wasteful. Substituting “evil” for “bad” changes the perspective. It makes contrasts deeper and creepier. It makes it harder for ordinary practical people to argue against a position. It forces a moral perspective out of something that should not necessarily be argued in moral terms. It raises simple minded morality into a cosmic force.

(6) Nietzsche saw another kind of behavior which he far preferred to simple minded morality, slave morality, or the morality of good versus evil. It is the behavior of noble heroic people. Although Nietzsche did not call it morality, he clearly had in mind that kind of behavior as “true morality” as opposed to slave morality. Heroic people think in terms of good and bad rather than in terms of good versus evil. People should seek heroic morality. People cannot seek heroic morality as long as they are duped by appeals to simple minded slave morality. People cannot seek true heroic morality as long as they are caught in the trap of good versus “evil”.

(7) Although Nietzsche came before the modern theory of evolution, he understood that the sense of morality must have arisen somehow out of other needs. In particular, morality must have arisen out of manipulating other people. Power plays a role in his ideas similar to that of natural selection. If morality came out of power, then power is older and deeper than morality. Power is what it is all about. Power is what we should pay attention to.

(8) Because it so often does happen in real life, we think power automatically leads to bad behavior. But, for Nietzsche, unlike for Tom Riddle, this need not be so. Power is power. It can promote other ends, including goodness. “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people”. Power is a tool. The struggle for power led to the birth of heroic behavior. Heroic morality could not arise in any other way. Nietzsche wanted to make sure that the search for power led to the cultivation of heroic morality rather than slave morality.

I admire Nietzsche but I dislike the misuses to which he has been put. I dislike anybody using morality as a tool and I dislike slave morality. I dislike whining and I dislike enabling. I admire heroic morality, and I think heroic morality approaches the ideal morality of “do unto others” and “applies equally” that Jesus taught, tempered with empathy for the down-and-out and the excluded that Jesus also taught.

My response to the idea that “might makes right” repeats my argument from the evolution of morality. If it were simply true that “might makes right”, then there would be no need for “right”, there would be no need for morality, and there would be no morality. Morality would be redundant. It would be an irritating middle step between having power and getting what you want. Even if morality were an additional tool of power sometimes, it would be a greater burden to power at other times. Powerful people would not need it, and it would not arise. There would be only power. The capacity for morality would not have evolved.

Whining people on the lower end of society (slaves) can get away with using morality as a tool often, too often, but they should not be able to get away with it forever. In full morality, responsibility comes along with rights, and the people who use morality as a tool to get enabled eventually have to come to grips with responsibility. The people who get cajoled into enabling eventually wake up to full morality including

responsibility, and stop enabling, not only because it is hurtful to them but also because it is hurtful to the enabled people and it is the wrong thing to do.

Powerful people and rich people are not necessarily good people. Being successful is not a sign of moral status. Nietzsche did not make this mistake but many people promote the ideology of “success is a sign of God’s grace and our moral superiority” as their way of using morality as a tool. They combine this idea with a hatred of slaves and slave morality, and define all opponents as slaves with slave morality. The idea that success indicates moral superiority is as wrong as slave morality. It is a kind of slave morality in reflection. Living in the Romantic era, we should not be susceptible to this mistake but the evolved allure of success is so strong that we do make it anyway. We like to think that successful people are also better people, and that we are one of them.

Once we allow that morality is real, we have to see that it has its own logic, the logic of “do unto others” and “applies equally”. Power, and slave mentality, can make use of the feeling for morality and can twist it, but they cannot change the root logic and they cannot get rid of it entirely either. Once we have morality and develop a feel for the root logic of morality, then morality does not simply serve might or serve slaves. Might does not make right. Whining does not make right. Right makes right even if right can be twisted and misused.

I am not sure how Nietzsche would respond to my response. Because I think true morality and heroic morality go together often, I hope he would be sympathetic.

My Response to Badness.

I do not offer a comprehensive explanation of badness. I only repeat what I said before.

Regardless of the questions above, the overall response is the same. Right here, right now, you strive to act well and to avoid acting badly. Whatever the metaphysical background, this is the only consistent response. Even if you believe that goodness and badness need each other, or if you strive to get beyond good and evil, still you do good right here and right now, and don’t obsess about it. This answer is so simple that there is no point elaborating on it. As for the details, I can offer some opinions:

God does not test us. God did not put extra badness into the world as a test.

Some badness is inherent in the evolutionary process, and some badness necessarily arises because we have free will. We have enough free will to choose good too.

I don’t know if there is more good than bad in the world, or if the world is better overall because there is some badness. I don’t know if God put just the right amount of badness into the world to make sure the sum total of goodness is greatest. I doubt it very much.

God created the world knowing there would be some badness. I am not sure if this implies a limit on God’s powers. I do not know if God could have created the world so there would be more badness than there is now or less badness. If God could have chosen a different level of badness, I don’t know why he chose this level of badness.

The badness in the world allows us to learn to be better. There is enough badness in the world already for us to learn to be better without adding any more badness. We can help others deal when they face badness, and should.

God foresaw that we could learn from the badness that is an intrinsic part of the world. God allowed the world to have some badness so that we would learn from the badness and so be even better people. I do not know if God put just the right kind and amount of badness in the world, or put too little or too much. I do not know if God feels responsible for the badness that breaks people.

Sometimes we feel that we encounter incidents of badness, or bad people, to teach us in particular, as an individual, lessons, and so make us better. We feel as if God steers badness towards us so that we will learn and so be better, rather like a teacher tailors lessons for particular students. This scheme is not the same as God testing us. This feeling is likely false, although it might be true in some very small number of cases. God set up the world so that it would automatically teach all the lessons that we need. There is enough variety in the world, including enough bad people and bad incidents, so we can learn to be good without God having to micromanage our lives.

I doubt we keep getting reborn until we are all good decent useful people. Maybe some people who got a really raw deal in this lifetime do get another chance. Most people learn a little goodness but not a lot of goodness, and they just disappear when they die.

When we think about goodness and badness, we have to keep in mind free will and the real riskiness of the world. If God tailor-made a plan for everybody so that everybody would eventually learn to be a fully decent good person, that situation would not quite defeat free will and the real risk of the world, but it almost would. If everybody were kept around long enough so that eventually everybody learned to be a good decent person, even through their own choice, that situation would not quite defeat free will and the real risk of the world, but it almost would. If we know it will last long enough until all of us are as good as good can be, then there is no real free will and no real risk. This outcome is comforting, and it might be what a Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva would like, but it is not consistent with what I think about how people are and how the real risky world is. If badness is just an illusion, then there is no free will and there is no real risk to the world.

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 us 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 secrets, 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.

16 Common Mistakes

This chapter describes some common mistakes in themes, stances, and religions. This chapter does not assess whole religions such as Christianity or Taoism; see later chapters. This chapter does not include every mistake. Many mistakes are natural and hard to avoid. If we never make mistakes, we drift into austerity. We can still make some mistakes and not betray our ideals. Many points are written in terms of God and Jesus. Feel free to use “Dharma” or “Tao”. I do not give an evolutionary basis for the tendency to make particular mistakes but there usually is one. Feel free to skip around at first but please do read all the mistakes eventually.

Balance and Judgment.

We can avoid many mistakes by seeking a balance between tendencies, sometimes between two opposing tendencies, and sometimes between more than two. We can be too strict with our children or too lax. In the law, we seek the common ground between justice, mercy, and strictness. So seek the balanced middle first to see if that makes best sense.

The middle way is not always correct and it is not always best. When a child has misbehaved, it seems the middle way is talking to the child, and it seems talking lies between doing nothing versus hitting the child. Yet sometimes talking to the child is not enough, and a parent has to take harsher steps such as hitting, withholding a treat, or a “time out”. Sometimes a child is overwhelmed by a temptation too great for its age, or just makes an honest mistake, in which leniency is best. You have to use judgment.

PART 1: Going Overboard

Sects.

Some stances are only mistakes when viewed from the perspective of a big religion. From the point of view of the stance, it is correct. Christianity began as a “commune” on the edge of Judaism. Mormonism (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) began as radicals on the edge of Christianity. Buddhism began as the (largely correct) rationalizations of a failed ascetic in a forest. Some stances fit types of people, so, even if a stance is not orthodox, and not for everybody, it is right for the people who join - as long as the people join voluntarily, are adults, can leave when they wish, and the stance does no evil. Many early converts to Mormonism were women who found husbands, even as co-wives; and I see little wrong with finding a husband. In Roman Catholic nations, the people who join intense Protestant sects often are go-getter business people who need a rationale for their personality and actions, or are poor people who need to find work. People outside the Protestants think of them as cults or gangs, and thus necessarily bad, but, for the people inside, they are not. People in small Christian churches that stress spiritual gifts (magical powers) and stress direct contact with Jesus often feel just fine. Most such groups that stress magic are found on the edges of major religions. Many are quite similar if we disregard fussy points of doctrine to look at the main themes in group life; Christian Science, Scientology, and “being all you can be” are fairly similar. The ideological and mutual-support groups among professional academics,

such as enthusiasts of evolution and atheists, seem like cults. I cannot assess all these types of groups in this book. All I did here is to mention a few to get the idea across.

Any group is wrong if it forces people to join, or forces them to stay once they are in, especially if it takes children and then does not allow them to choose when the children are old enough. Of course, once inside a small strong group, it is hard to leave even if group members are kind and non-coercive, but that is not what I mean. Some groups coerce members even without explicit violence. As I was writing this, several media stars were leaving the Church of Scientology because they said it was badly coercive.

I don't like groups that recruit members by appealing to human foibles, and then retain members by social pressure - even without violence. I don't like groups that hold beliefs contrary to science and that appeal to our need for relation with powerful spirits. I don't like groups that pervert our imaginations. I don't like groups that preach exaggerated abilities such as flying or reading minds, or that offer amazing success such as wealth and power. This list includes most major religions at one time in their history, or includes groups within all major religions, so I have to be careful with blanket condemning. The fact that all major religions have made these mistakes is one reason why atheists don't like religion.

As an example of a generally good group that does not appeal to everybody, think of the Amish. I do not describe Amish beliefs or their way of life. According to them, they are true Christians, but, according to other Christian groups, they are different enough to be suspect. They are strict, simple, mix democracy with the autocracy by men, sexist, have "traditional" gender roles, oppose technology that is artificially powered, dress strangely, focus on farming, and grow food that is wholesome because it is "organic". Aside from having too many children for the modern world, they do little harm, and do much good. My wife and I used to live near Amish, and we loved to buy food from them and talk to them. Mennonites are similar but they accept mechanized technology. Mennonites are business people with strong prosperous communities, and focus on farming. I had the pleasure of doing fieldwork among them. Some Buddhists in Thailand have independently adopted similar lifestyles, including the "organic" farming, as have some Jews in America, but not as farmers.

All major religions have subgroups that hark back to an older purer mostly imaginary time, dress as if they lived in the idealized past, and adopt ways they think reflect the ideals of the religious founders. All major religions have groups that live very strictly according to a strong set of rules. "The Early Christians" are a favorite made-up idealized group that Christian churches and sects like to follow.

In their own way, motorcycle gangs (clubs) are similar to religious groups that are strict and that yearn for an idealized false simple heroic past. Motorcycle gangs simply replaced horses in cowboy movies with their preferred brand of bike, and put on chaps. Instead of following an imaginary Jesus, they follow an imaginary Jesse James from the American 1870s. If motorcycle gangs did not make a living through bad kinds of crime (such as pimping, selling bad drugs, and extortion), then they would be even more like strict alternative religious groups.

Not "Nothing But"; Speculating on Hidden Motives.

Resist the temptation to dismiss an idea or behavior as "nothing but", as in "American football is nothing but repressed homosexuality emerging through sport" or "enjoy show tunes is so gay". Especially resist

the temptation to dismiss another stance or religion as nothing but, as in “Islam is nothing but the desire to dominate people dressed up as an ideology of ‘we-are-right’ monotheism”, or “Christianity is nothing but the morality of slaves insinuated on other people through guilt as a way to gain control”.

Assess ideas and behaviors in themselves before reducing them to “nothing but”.

Once you have assessed ideas and behaviors in themselves, then it is correct, and often fun, to guess how these ideas and behaviors express other ideas and behaviors. It makes sense to ask about the sexual component in sports, for men and women. It makes sense to wonder if a religion expresses the morality of a particular socio-economic-cultural class of people, and whether that particular stance is good for everybody. It makes sense to ask if a religion is a disguise for other motives.

Along with asking about motives, ask about consequences. Suppose Christianity is a “slave religion”? Does it still do a lot of good? Can it be mixed with other stances to do a lot of good? Is “bleeding heart” a stance only for safe suburbanites? Does it still do some good? Is ghetto tough guy only a scared little boy even if he has a cocked loaded gun?

When you ask about what-all mixes in with a stance, ask yourself about your own stances as well. It is unlikely you hold your own stances purely. It is likely your hidden motives affect how you assess other stances and that your hidden motives lead you to see other ideas and behaviors in terms of nothing but. You can assess other people much better after you have done a little house cleaning. This activity is painful but worth it. It takes practice. This is what Jesus meant when he said first to clear out the two-by-four from your own eye before you criticize the sawdust speck in your neighbor’s eye.

Evolved Basis and “Nothing But”.

Since about 1990, a popular “nothing but” increasingly has been based in biology, whether the biology is well founded or badly founded. Sometimes the biology is based on misreading our evolutionary history and sometimes it is just forcing our ideas onto nature: “male sports are nothing but an indirect way of deciding dominance and access to women”, “cheerleading is nothing but a display to show males what they get when they win sporting combats”, “everybody is basically bisexual, so all sex behavior is only learned artificial stereotyped roles”, “women and men don’t differ at all in any way”, and “all children are equally interested in dolls and trucks”. People of all politics make this mistake because we like to ground our explanations in human nature and like to ground our idea of human nature in nature. Just because you can find a plausible biological story to rationalize a behavior does not mean your explanation is the only, overall, or best explanation. It does not mean your explanation is even partly true. Enjoy biological explanations, and use them if you are skillful at it, but be careful to consider other explanations and be careful not to lapse into “nothing but”.

Society Made Me Do It.

In the movie “West Side Story”, one of the delinquent Jets tells Police Officer Krupke, “I’m depraved on account of I’m deprived”. The curse of my time in anthropology graduate school was social reductionism in which all individuals had to follow social rules, and social rules explained all important behavior. Rules based on power and class counted as social rules. Rules did not have to be conscious, and rules could

be encoded in symbols, myths, stories, social structures, art, and religion. The idea that people act only because of social rules makes as little sense as saying all people who watch the latest Star Trek movie leave the theater to adopt the identity of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, or the villain in real life. Homophobes only “beat up queers” because society said so. Girls who get pregnant unmarried only do it because their group values motherhood so much. Financiers rigged the housing market because that is part of their culture. Greedy house buyers took unrealistic bad loans on huge houses because that is the American dream. Nobody can resist society, nobody can help it, nobody bears any responsibility, and there are no criminals.

We do follow social rules, but that is not all we do, and, even then, we do it often out of self-interest. How self-interest and social rules coincide is not the focus here. It makes as much sense, and nonsense, to use social stories to explain behavior as it does to use biological stories. Take the same precautions with both stories. I prefer the biological stories and I prefer to take self-interest into account first.

Widespread Focus or Narrow Focus.

None of these conditions make an idea wrong or right, although people mistakenly argue from them that an idea is wrong or right:

- An idea is widespread
- An idea appeals to human needs and so is widespread
- An idea is hard to understand, appeals to smart people, and is “sort of” a secret
- Anybody can understand an idea, it is simple and clear

H.L. Mencken famously said something like, “For every complex difficult problem there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong”. Ideas should be judged on the basis of their likely truth. Criteria for judging on the basis of likely truth do not include any of the above conditions. The above conditions can be used as signals to make us curious or suspicious but, by themselves, they are not criteria for judging ideas.

The idea of ghosts is widespread and likely appeals to basic evolved human needs but that does not make it wrong or right. I think it is wrong for a lot of reasons that I don’t go into here. The idea that God sends a savior (messiah, Christ, avatar, Maud-dib, or bodhisattva) is widespread in state societies but that does not make the idea wrong or right. I think it is wrong. The idea that God sends teachers and prophets is widespread, and I think it is right, but I have little hard evidence for saying so.

Relativity in physics is well known but only a few people understand it. The few who do understand it agree it is correct. That does not make it correct. The reasoning and the evidence make it correct; on that basis, it has done well. The idea that we are all part of a never-ending joyous system of many lives is hard to understand, and only a few people really do understand it. The few people that do understand it seem to enthusiastically endorse it. That does not make it correct. I think it is wrong. I call on the people who think it is true to supply good evidence. Some alternative and-or independent rock music appeals to only a few people, most of them are smart, but few even of them really get it very well. The fact that only a few smart people get an art form does not make the ideas in it right or wrong, better or worse.

Religious ideas are more likely to be correct if they are simple, almost everybody can get them, they give a basis for good action, provide clear goals, and nearly everybody can see the goals and carry out the actions consistent with their lives. This is a big reason why I favor the teachings of Jesus. But I have no hard evidence these criteria are absolutely reliable for true ideas. I use the criteria without justifying them. At least I am clear about what criteria I use and any justification or non-justification.

My Stance is All Right and Your Stance is All Wrong.

This mistake does not need much explanation. We are rarely all right, and the other fellow is rarely all wrong. We can usually benefit from seeing our faults and from seeing the other fellow's strengths.

The real issue with this stance comes when the other fellow is wrong enough to do damage, and when we are right enough that we should prevail. This is the question of a "just war". Sometimes you have to stand your ground even when there is a dead skunk lying on it. That commitment is part of what makes us human, it is something God understands, and it is something God wants out of us sometimes. The problem is that there are no sure guidelines, and that it is easy to make a mistake in over-stressing the value of our stance and over-stressing the danger from the other fellow. Without going into a treatise, I cannot offer any good advice, and so I stop here.

Jesus' life and death seems to say it is better to die rather than to harm another person, even when we know we are right, we know they are wrong, and even when the other person will hurt our family, friends, nation, and faith. It seems better to die and to let your entire faith die too rather than to hurt the other fellow. Maybe in so doing, our own faith mysteriously comes back to life again, but there is no guarantee of this miracle. Most people cannot take the chance of resurrection, and most people cannot follow the teaching of Jesus in this regard. You have to choose for yourself how far you are willing to follow Jesus down this road, and, if you cannot follow Jesus very far, you have to make sense of that for yourself in light of your particular faith. Some Buddhists and Hindus face this same problem although it is not posed in terms of the life history of their religious leader but in terms of a strong principle of their faith. Hindus and Buddhists tell stories of great religious adepts dying rather than harming someone else, or harming even an animal. Again, I have to let the issue go here.

In accepting our own human weakness, we do not have to accept that the other fellow is always more right than we are and we do not have to accept that all paths are equal. Those are serious mistakes. Sometimes the other fellow is wrong, and not all paths are equal. We have as much responsibility to point out problems in other stances as we do to accept problems in our stance. Wishy-washy pseudo-egalitarianism is as harmful as selfishness.

God is on Our Side.

In the opening scenes of the classic movie "The Longest Day", soldiers on both sides declare, no matter what happens to them individually, or what happens in any particular battle, in the end, their side will win the war because God is on their side. This is a self-validating idea. Whichever side wins, its historians would give credit to God as a way to justify the war and validate the state. Victory does not insure that God was on your side and loss is not a sign that God was against you.

Maybe in ancient Israel, God was on somebody's side. Since then, God has not been on anybody's side. I doubt God is on the side even of modern Israel. Some good nations and good causes have won key victories, as in World War Two and the Cold War, but not because God was on their side. They won because of planning, execution, intelligence, bravery, and luck. Too many good causes have lost, and too many bad causes have won, to think God supports one side or another. God depends now on good-hearted, clear-thinking, brave people to defend the right side.

Ideology is not Enough; Decency is Enough.

Personal religious success cannot depend on correct dogma. I have never read any thinker who had all the right answers. This book does not have all the right answers. If going to heaven (or other religious success) depended on the correct dogma, then all the theologians would be in hell, including Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus that I won't name.

Sectarians say acting well is not enough; doing good is not enough. You must have the right ideas about God, grace, justification, salvation, enlightenment, sudden enlightenment, Dharma, karma, Tao, Heaven, the status of Mohammad, or the force of natural selection. If no dogma is right enough, then their dogma is not right enough either.

If dogma is not right enough, then decency and goodness are enough. Decency and goodness do not get you into heaven because heaven is irrelevant. They do not justify you or save you. Acting decently and acting well promote goodness in the world and they prepare you to meet God. That is enough. God is much happier over a person who struggles to do the right thing, tries hard to make the world better, and succeeds once in a while, than over a brilliant theologian, atheist, or Darwinist who accidentally gets right a point of dogma.

If decency, goodness, and working hard to make the world better are enough without dogmas, then much formal religion, theology, and secular theology, is not important. In some ways, I am sorry, because much of the formal apparatus is beautiful and interesting. Formality does good sometimes through education, charity, promoting social order, and support against tyranny. It does not always get at the correct positive dogma but it can cut some errors. Formal dogma can be fun for people with the right character; it is their way of using imagination. I don't aim to abolish all formal religion by saying that decency and goodness are enough. I merely make sure good decent normally fallible people are not frightened by dogmas and dogmatists.

Collectivism and Individualism.

During the 1990s and 2000s, there were two certain ways to get a rise out of hipsters and right wingers. First, say "we are all one and mystically connected". Second, say "we are all out for ourselves alone, and capitalism is the one institution that suits human nature best". You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. A great failing of American intellectuals since about 1975 is not to find the right balance between individuals and collectives, and not to find institutions that teach and support the right balance. Semi-educated semi-intellectuals with opinions, of the Right and Left, have not made much progress either.

The best way to see the evolution of human nature is through individuals. Individuals act to get greatest reproductive success. Yet, in acting as individuals, people have to consider kin, relations to group mates, and relations to other groups. Successful moral good guys have to consider the acts of bad guys; and even bad guys have to consider the ability of good guys to rally against them. We are never fully isolated atomic individuals as in market-worship fantasy “rugged individual” capitalism, and we are never all linked in a swarm of warm puppies as in false nature-and-cosmic-spirit worship. We act mostly as individuals but not as selfish isolated idiots. We can, and do, feel for each other. We form groups for mutual benefit and protection. We seek institutions that allow us to live together but still to seek our personal success. We have not found them lately.

Here is not the place to settle the questions. The point here is not simply to make fun of the extremes as hipsters, right wingers, and pseudo-intellectuals do, and not to fall for any stance, ideology, politics, or religion that offers simple solutions. Think it out for yourself. When you can settle on the right balance of realistic self-interest and empathy, think about the institutions that can teach this balance and support this balance.

Cosmic Significance.

“I got dem Ol’ Cosmic Blues again”.

“I am of the Universe, and you know what It’s worth”.

The first line is from Janis Joplin, a rock singer from the 1960s and early 1970s. The second line is from John Lennon, an ex-member of a boy band from the same period.

People want to find cosmic significance in the things of daily life or in the events of daily life that are even a bit unusual. People want to make their lives meaningful by making them metaphysical. We likely have a deep evolved basis not only to do this for ourselves but to try to get other people to go along with us. We are more important when we are cosmic, and other people are likely to do what serves us when they think we are cosmic.

In the 1800s, this tendency was obvious in all the capitalized words: Life, Destiny, Progress, Emotion, Passion, Nature, Process, Commerce, Working People, etc. In the 2000s, we do it just as much but we know better than to capitalize our fantasies. You can’t just have the blues; you have the old cosmic blues. You can’t just see berries ripen in the garden; you see Nature Unfolding. You can’t just send your kids off to college; you participate in the never-ending cycle of birth, death, and renewal. You can’t just fight with your girlfriend or boyfriend; you participate in the battle of the sexes. The battle of the sexes is not just the legacy of different paths in natural selection; it is the never-ending wrestle of opposites. Jesus did not just come to teach outstanding principles at a time in history when they would catch on; he was God on Earth. The rise of gay rights is not just the victory of a well-educated affluent useful group of some citizens in a democracy; it is the victory of oppressed peoples everywhere over reactionaries and miscreants who use religion as a tool of control. The Buddha did not just teach reasonableness and good sense; he was the repeating manifestation of the great joyous Dharma system coming to know itself and save itself. Mohammad was not just a teacher of the one moral God, who converted superstitious Arabs; he was the last and greatest of prophets whose every word is God itself. Confucius was not just a great

teacher of moral social relations; he was the agent of Heaven to the Middle Kingdom of China. Singers are not must singers; they are artists. Musicians are not just artists; they are creators. Adolph Hitler was not just trying to conquer Europe and then the world; he was carrying out the last act of the Aryan Race Asserting its Natural Supremacy and thus asserting Nature. The world is not now beset merely by clumsy modernism versus fundamentalist reactionary clinging; America is at War with Islam as the soldiers of Good versus Evil; which side is which depends on where you were born. The latest academic fad is not just a curious potentially useful idea but a tremendous insight that will unlock the secrets of nature and society and let us all get along in justice and prosperity.

We are a lot better off if we practice seeing the events of our lives and of world history in normal terms as much as possible. Normal life has enough need for heroism and strenuous effort, and we are better off if we see our actions in those limited terms. We don't need to see ourselves in cosmic metaphysical terms. We can resist our biologically-based tendency to see ourselves in cosmic terms, and we should be ready to see when we have gone too far.

Thinking in cosmic terms is a lot of fun, and it is natural. Likely we can't entirely avoid thinking in cosmic terms unless we are a Taoist or Zen adept. Thinking cosmically gets things done, as with the American Revolution as the spearhead of Freedom and with Gay Rights as the spearhead of Social Justice and Common Sense about Society. As always, the trick is finding the balance.

The problem with seeing in cosmic terms is not just that we go off on tangents, overlook what we should do, and cause more harm than if we just sat still. The problem is that we are confused and blind. We get into bad mental habits. Once we fall for once cosmic cause we are susceptible to others and we are not susceptible to plain simple truth. It is like falling into Romanticism.

Likely the best antidote to losing yourself in cosmic terms is to inoculate yourself by doing it a couple of times on a small scale early so you will be immune to big versions later on. Usually that is what youth is for, but, recently in America, cosmic confusion has infected too many adults.

Religious Leaders as Cosmic Principles.

Several times in this book I say that people want a mediator between them and God (Dharma, Divine, Heaven, Tao, Buddha Mind, etc.); and I understand this as a human tendency such as when people use their mother to mediate access to their father; but I don't fully understand why the idea finds its way into the center of high religions and why religious thinkers not only keep the idea there but make much of it. This section is a variation on the theme of my disapproval.

The major figures in major religions often become cosmic principles. Usually the figures embody more than one cosmic principle, such as mercy, beauty, love, and order. Sometimes they embody all good cosmic principles as Christians try to do with Jesus, Muslims with Mohammad, and Mahayana Buddhists do with some bodhisattvas. Often one major figure is chosen to embody evil as with Satan in Christianity and Islam, or as with personifications of Maya in Buddhism and Hinduism. In their roles as good cosmic principles, good religious leaders also act as mediators.

All this is a mistake. It diverts us away from a more realistic view of the world, away from better thinking about how ideas and principles work in the world, better thinking about how God made the world, and about how God relates to the world. We are better off thinking of religious leaders, even mythical leaders, as merely people and thinking about their message instead.

I do not make much of my objection in this book. Once I began cataloging how major religions turn their leaders into cosmic principles, and how the particular idea of a cosmic principle as embodied in a major leader affects the character of the religion, or reveals its character. I was going to use this approach as a way to explain and assess major religions but the material got out of hand. I mention it sometimes when it is useful.

Just to be clear, I repeat that ALL major religions err. Judaism turned Moses, David, and Solomon into cosmic principles of Leadership, Obedience, Creativity, Newness, Righteous Rebellion, and Wisdom. Early Christians turned Jesus into THE cosmic principle, and the mistake stuck. Islam turned Mohammad into the cosmic principles of God's Will, Obedience, and Access to Divine Knowledge embodied. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu are the Tao embodied. Lao Tzu is Yielding embodied while Chuang Tzu is Playful Spontaneity. Confucius is Heaven condensed into a man. Confucius is Proper Order embodied. Mahayana turned the Buddha into the cosmic principle of a good system in which life is worthwhile. All bodhisattvas are variations on the theme, and on Compassion and Sacrifice as well. Even Theravada turned the real Buddha into the cosmic principles of Aloofness and Superiority. Hinduism is the greatest machine for cosmic principles ever devised. Brahma embodies amoral creativity; Vishnu embodies sustaining a marvelous system; and Shiva embodies the transition from an outmoded bad old particular instance of the system to a better new instance. Some mystics dwell in waves of cosmic principles manifested. Some mystics claim to transcend the idea of cosmic principles manifested but then claim that a person can embody the transcendence of cosmic principles.

Thinking of a religious leader as the manifestation (embodiment) of cosmic principles actually betrays the idea of a person and radically changes how we respond to all people. I think it betrays how Jesus wished us to think of people, including him, and it diverts us away from his teachings. This topic too is too large for this book, and I might take it up later.

Mystic Conspiracy of Events; Those Patterns in the World.

There is no fate, destiny, secret calling, mission from God (except for maybe a few people about whom I am unqualified to write), mystic forces, and no mystic conspiracy of events. Believing in any of this is the personal version of giving normal events a cosmic significance they might not deserve.

Many things happen in the world at a variety of levels. The world falls into many patterns. We read meaning into events to give meaning to our lives, make us more effective, and usually to help us in our quest for success. We evolved lively imaginations. There is nothing wrong with that if we don't do it too much and don't read too much into it. We should not find a cosmic significance behind the fall of every leaf, every ripple of every stream, everything fades away, or every tear that blends into the rain – poets notwithstanding. You have to find your own balance. Two movies that give both a funny critique and some encouragement are the classic "Blues Brothers" and "The Men Who Stared at Goats", with an all-star cast on a romp.

The world gives many opportunities, most small, but some big. We can make more for ourselves, again most small, but some big. Out of the opportunities, we choose. We feel the world is inviting us personally along some path when really all that happens is an open-minded life in the real world. Our choice feels as if we are pursuing our destiny along the offered path when all we are doing is working hard to make sure it all comes out in the end. If we do good along the way, and don't lose our other common sense, then it is not bad to feel as if the world offered us a destiny and we followed a path.

A mountain, a canyon, a cathedral, and a landslide are all made up of a bunch of rocks but they are not all the same. The different organizations found in each thing mean something. But what? One firefly alone in a valley can be hauntingly beautiful. A handful is fun. A valley full is beautiful in a different way. What do we make of the two facts that a stupid insect can flash and that so many stupid insects can all flash together?

Of course, physicists, chemists, and biologists have explanations for most of this stuff. We don't have to go against science to feel their explanations are not enough. Recently on the news, I saw a story about a boy who had epilepsy, got hit on the head, was largely cured of epilepsy, and then developed aptitude in music. I have no doubt that neuroscience can tell us a lot about this case, but that is not what we want to know. Why this boy now? Why this aptitude? What should the boy do with his new talent? We want to know the significance of the patterns produced by blind nature, if they have any. It is not stupid to think they do have meaning and to want to know. It is only stupid to seek a cosmic explanation for everything, in particular necessarily for yourself.

Our lives do have meaning. We make meaning. We make meaning by seeing our lives in terms of the working of the universe. I have done that throughout this book. Sometimes great causes require great commitment, and we can only get great commitment in cosmic terms. The American Revolution was not just the refusal by well-to-do colonists to pay taxes but was a real change in how people saw their selves, human government, and human life on planet Earth. The tendency to see in cosmic terms is one of the features that make Indo-European culture great. It helped spread American culture around the world through its art. Without it, there would be no epic movies such as "Godfather", "2001", and "Star Wars". But we can overdo it. We don't have to see it everywhere and we don't have to make it a habit. We have to be able to back off when we overdo it.

We do a lot better when we think we are fated to do what we are doing. We do a lot better when we think we are called to a particular vocation. For nearly all people, this is likely not so. Few people are fated to become soldiers, doctors, politicians, anthropologist, or dental hygienists but they do better they think that is their fate. Once you settle into a track, it is hard to get out, and then it is better to accept what is going on and work hard at it. Thinking it is our fate helps.

Some people feel they are destined for greatness, and don't have to be specific about the field. They work hard, and sometimes deviously, to achieve greatness. In movies and TV, the world villain usually feels this way, and feels thwarted too. Luckily, I have met few people who had this attitude although I have met too many people who felt they were better than everybody else, entitled, and so they work hard and connive hard to dominate. Usually, though, people who feel they are destined for greatness do more good than harm and they are not hard to get along with. I think Abraham Lincoln and George Washington

at some time knew they were destined for a great reputation, and decided to do good things to earn the reputation.

The world offers not only opportunities but problems. Some problems are big, such as the Axis powers in World War Two, poverty, the assault on nature, the flaws of capitalism, and how to maintain freedom in the modern world. Among the people alive at any time, some of them must face the problems, such as the soldiers in a war; and some people choose to fight the problems, such as the people working to help animals and maintain natural diversity. They can feel as if facing the problem is their destined task. Yet even in this case, likely no particular person had that destiny, and the world would have gone on, albeit different, if the people had not chosen to face the problem or if nobody had chosen to face the problem. I am glad some people are fighting to keep chimpanzees, tigers, and fish from going extinct, but, if those animals do vanish, a different world will continue on. Other people will face other problems, and that will be their destined task in their arenas. If it helps to fight a problem if fight it feels like your destined task, it is a real problem, and you do more good than harm, then go ahead and feel that way.

If you don't feel you have a vocation, calling, destiny, or task, then you can still do a lot of good in many ways, and still be a useful human being. By keeping an open mind, and moving your effort to where you can see it might do the best good, you might do more good than somebody who has been called to save the world. Giving money to United Way, the Red Cross, or World Wildlife Fun can do more good than you can imagine.

Family and Friends.

Here is the middle class version of a common fantasy: A group of family-and-friends is having a long Saturday party at somebody's nice home, from afternoon through dinner. The food is good. Much of the food has been made by the hosts, some of it has been brought by guests who make their specialties, and some was bought from good local restaurants or delis. In between meals and after dinner, people talk, gossip, drink, watch sports, sitcoms, or goofy adventures on TV, watch movies, play with the kids, talk a little business, family-and-friends, or politics. Everybody is well-educated, smart, and successful in his-her field including home care. People discuss who to vote for in the next election, who is right and who is wrong, the progress of women or gays, the progress of faith-based initiatives, or other favorite issues. They might even talk about what to do on a personal level. People might go home a bit buzzed but nobody ever gets in a car accident, and, in a few weeks, they all do it again at somebody else's home.

The movie comedy "Dewey Cox" is about a made-up country music star. Dewey made every mistake ever written in the tabloids including drugs, sex, and fad religions. The movie borrows from the lives of Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Glen Campbell, the Beatles, and others. When his career falters in his late middle age, Dewey discovers all his family and friends that he had abused and left behind. At a concert near the end of his life, he declares he finally learned that life is all about family and friends. Especially since the rise of wedding movies, baby movies, and other family movies in the 1980s, this opinion has become dogma in America.

There is nothing terribly wrong with "family and friends". There is a lot right with this. It is successful by the standards of nearly all people all around the world, it is what most religions really secretly teach, and it is successful by the standards that evolution gave us. I wish I had enjoyed these kinds of family-and-

friends scenarios far more often than I have had. In the movie “Man on Fire”, Denzel Washington takes on the job of bodyguard to a young Dakota Fanning. At first, he is nearly alcoholic and nearly suicidal. Then he grows to love Dakota Fanning almost as his own daughter. His love for her saves both of them. That is a good version of this attitude.

Yet, unless you are a wounded person who can only be healed through love of family and friends for you, or from you to them, this attitude is not enough. It is not simple decency. It is not learned decency. It is not working hard to make a better world. You have to do more. You have to decide how much more. You have to decide if you have to give up a little bit of this dream to do more, and what you have to give up. That was the lesson of “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis.

Better Than Family Values.

You have to be more than just a good family person. You can be good in religion without being a family person at all. Religion is bigger than families. To make family the center of religion is to commit idolatry. Just as Jesus requires us to be more than good citizens, so also Jesus requires more than family values. There is nothing wrong with family values nearly all of the time, and there is much right with them nearly all the time. But family values are not the same as the teachings of Jesus, and they cannot substitute for his teachings. To substitute family values for the teachings of Jesus is the same as to substitute romantic self-indulgence for the teachings of Jesus. You come short of the mark. You sin.

People need a god as the patron of family life in general, of their kind of family life in particular, and even of their own particular families. In Rome and China, ancestors became minor gods who defended their descendants. In traditional Mormon Utah, God wanted polygamy (one man with several wives). In the Old Testament, God helped the Israelites proliferate in part by approving polygamy, and God tolerated prostitution. Yet now in America, apparently God wants us all to be strictly monogamous, celibate at marriage, have only one sexual partner our entire lives, and never use prostitutes. Now in America, God helps the right families and punishes people that do not have the right families. Now in America, for many people, as in many other religions of the world, that is the principal role of God.

God’s principal role is not protector of family values, any kind of family values. God is not primarily the god of the hearth. God dislikes immorality, including some kinds of sexual immorality and some kinds of family immorality. We should not have sex with our children. Still, God did not have only one kind of family in mind, and God does not take a highly active role in protecting that kind of family.

Collecting Experiences.

“In the end, you regret more what you didn’t do than what you did do”. That saying might be more true than false but it can feed some self-indulgent mistakes. Life is not all about collecting experiences. We do not have a more successful life if we have more experiences and more varied experiences. God might look through our eyes sometimes, but God does not need to look through our eyes to know what a sunset looks like and does not need to taste through our tongues to know the joy of ice cream. A person who has skydived from 20,000 feet and has snorkeled the Great Barrier Reef has not necessarily lived more and lived better than a person who has “only” coached Little League Baseball. Very likely, a person who has made a hard moral decision, such as served on a jury, has lived better. The moral decisions that you

have to make as a Little League coach likely are deeper and more important than skydiving or seeing the Great Barrier Reef. Life does not become about more experiences, or more amazing experiences, but about accepting the current situation and dealing with the current situation correctly. Life is fun, and it is right to enjoy life, but life is not only fun, and you miss out on the best experiences if you don't face up to that too.

Life is an Adventure.

This mistake is a version of turning our lives into a cosmic principle. This mistake comes in many flavors, and I can't cover them all. The first flavor comes directly out of the idea that life is all about collecting experiences or that God collects experiences through us. That is not true, and no more need be said.

The second flavor is that life is only worthwhile if it is a grand adventure such as strolling on Broadway or being the first person on Mars. Many lives are quite worthwhile that have no grand adventures as long as they deal with the current situation and face the moral conflicts that people have to face. A useful life is a worthwhile life. I suspect that many lives of grand adventure are not necessarily worthwhile. God knows already what it is to star on Broadway and what Mars is like. God does not need you to walk to the South Pole barefoot. He does not need us to feel anything for him, and we cannot let ourselves think we lead a worthwhile life because we generate new and unusual feelings for God. Feeling amazing feelings for ourselves is certainly fun and is a step in the right direction but it is not necessarily all there is or the best there is.

The same thing over and over is boring. We should enjoy life. Life is more enjoyable if it is an adventure. For life to be an adventure, it helps to do new things from time to time, hopefully often. It helps to get out of ourselves, take chances, escape boundaries, and even sometimes act naughty. That is all true but it is not the end of the matter. If that is all we do, even if we keep doing it, then we have fallen into another rut even if the new rut goes off in a different direction. Variety and thrills can be a rut too. You enjoy life more if you deal with the current situation as it is, and with all the human problems that come up, while you vary your life and seek new experiences. If you are ready to do that, then you can seek and enjoy adventure at the same time. For a silly version, see the movie "Hall Pass".

If individual people want to run around the world having fun and seeking new things, I don't seem much wrong with that. Usually these people are a lot of fun, and make the world more interesting, even if they can be a little crazy too. If some individuals use the idea of "life is an adventure" to avoid dealing with real life and real problems, that is their arena. I don't have much to say about them as long as they don't lead too many other people into silliness. It is up to parents to give their children the right balance of lust for adventure with stodginess, and so protect them from silly adventurers.

As with raising the ordinary into the cosmic, the real problem with "life as an adventure" is that it makes us think badly. We do silly things, we do what we did not originally intend, and we do the opposite of what we intended. Adventurers think of themselves as romantic rugged individuals but big-scale adventure takes a cause and a group. In the adventure of rebellion against the evil capitalist empire or in service to God and country, people get sucked into wacky groups. People get sucked into big systems that eat the world, sometimes into cults, and they never make it out. I don't know if Americans are particularly prone to this problem but it seems they are. Americans treat religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism as

adventures before Americans realize that religions require a commitment to a point of view and a society, and that the point of view and society are not usually what Americans think of as adventure. Americans tend to see a cause such as “save the planet” and “save the unborn” as adventures without thinking through what is really going on, what is won and lost, and that the cause requires a commitment that is not compatible with the romantic idea of adventure.

PART 2: Standard Errors of Official Religion.

The Bible is not Infallible. Other Religious Texts are not Infallible.

“The Bible” includes the Tanakh (Old Testament) and the Christian New Testament. The Bible is not science. The Bible is not an objective explanation of history, biology, physics, political science, or even theology. It is a collection of stories, some of which are based on real historic events, and some of which teach about morality, life, military strategy, politics, and God. Some messages are good and some bad. The Bible contains few predictions about specific events in the future. The Bible is not consistent, and it can be contradictory. It is not self-evident. It requires some interpretation to understand. People select what they will take seriously and what they will ignore. People interpret what they take seriously to suit their own needs. Interpretations differ and cannot be reconciled. It makes sense to say that God spoke through the Bible, but that does not mean we have to accept every line as literally true or as binding. The Bible has a lot of bad stuff in it, such as genocide, which we cannot take as binding. The Bible does not speak to many modern issues such as cloning. Many issues we have to decide apart from the Bible such as whether to have national health care. Even when the Bible is clear on some issues such as helping the poor, many Christians apparently decide not to follow it. For issues that we cannot decide ourselves and on which the Bible does speak, we can fall back on the Bible as a reference. Even in those cases, do not forget the potential for dispute. For example, if we cannot decide for ourselves about divorce, we can fall back on the fact that the Old Testament allowed men to have more than one wife and allowed men to divorce women but not women to divorce men, or fall back on the fact that Jesus seems to allow only monogamy and seems to forbid divorce, or that Paul and Matthew seem to allow both divorce and remarriage in some cases.

What is true of the Bible is as true of all religious texts. They are not science texts or history texts even if they have some science or history in them. They are not always true. They contradict each other. They contradict themselves. They have to be selected from and interpreted. People disagree in selections and interpretations. You may take them above science and common sense only at extreme risk.

Divine Gifting.

See “Giving Back and Forth” in the previous chapter.

People that believe in spirits think we can get into a relation with a spirit by giving the spirit a gift. Both ideas are wrong. There are no small spirits, so we cannot get into a relation with them by giving. Even though there is a God, we cannot cajole God with gifts. I could never understand why God might want a burned dead animal or even a wreath of flowers. We cannot even give God something like a gift (not drinking beer for Lent), a task (working for the homeless for a month), or a pilgrimage (going to Notre

Dame Cathedral or the birthplace of Luther). If we want something, we can just ask for it, but we should not be too hopeful. Most of what we want is silly.

The only real gifts we can give to God are a good heart and good actions. The only benefits to us in our relation to God are that the gift we give to God shows to us our intent; it might help us to know our selves. The gift is more about us than about God or our relation with God. We can think of it as a gift to God as long as we do not get confused about who really benefits and why.

No Negotiating.

Giving a gift to God in hope of getting something good back is negotiating with God. We cannot negotiate with God. As Jim Morrison whined in the 1960s, "You cannot petition the Lord with prayer". We cannot ask things like, "If you save me from this sinking ship, I will say a special prayer everyday for all the rest of my life". Barney Stimpson on the TV show "How I Met Your Mother" cannot promise God to go to church regularly if a woman he had sex with does not get pregnant. We cannot even make really good-hearted laudable bargains such as, "If you save my daughter from cancer, you can kill me right now, or you can give me her cancer instead". In some cases, such as with sick kin, it is impossible not to try negotiating like this, and I doubt that it hurts much to try. But we should not expect to have our prayers answered, and we should not get angry when they are not answered. I do not know what not being able to negotiate implies about relations with God or about the place of prayer.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is in Genesis. Abraham negotiates with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God says he will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if only twenty righteous men live there; but there are not. Abraham quibbles about the number, saying, "Well, if twenty is enough, how about fifteen?" God says, "OK then, fifteen". By clever wheedling steps, Abraham gets God down to five. The Bible does not say anything about righteous women. Unfortunately for the twin cities, there were not even five righteous men living in them, so God smoked the places anyway.

Abraham did negotiate with God in the Bible, but that does not mean it really happened, that we could do it, or that it applies in all cases. Abraham did not negotiate to get something for himself or for a loved one. Abraham did not give God a gift to butter God up. Abraham negotiated on behalf of humanity, decency, and mercy. We could do the same. I am not sure if negotiating on behalf of the greater good would help but I see little harm in trying if we feel up to it. Abraham's example shows that we can have a relation with God and what a relation might be like. Humor and irony play big parts.

No Bookkeeping.

God does not assign points to good deeds and bad deeds. There are no points. There are no karma points, spiritual points, good deed points, bad deed points, or wish points. We cannot add good points or add bad points. We cannot subtract bad points from good points. We cannot use good points to make up for bad points. We cannot use good deeds to make up for bad deeds. Bad deeds do not erase good deeds. We do not go to heaven if the total of good points minus bad points reaches a certain number. We do not go to hell if the total of bad points minus good points reaches a certain number. We do not go to heaven if the sum of good points exceeds the sum of bad points. We do not go to hell if the sum of bad points exceeds the sum of good points. How long we spend in heaven or hell does not depend on

our point total. We should stop thinking of points at all. God might have a long memory but he does not keep nasty little books like Scrooge. The Buddhist idea of points is usually translated as “merit”. There is no “merit keeping” either.

No Transfer.

Since we do not have points, we cannot transfer points and we cannot get points transferred to us. We cannot use our good points to ease our sick brother, or to get God to make our sister see the stupidity of alcoholism. They cannot do the same for us. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead mother to get her out of purgatory faster. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead father to get him a better rebirth. Everybody has to make do on his-her own.

No Karma.

Karma is the idea that “what goes round comes round” or “as you sow, so shall you reap”. For the most part, it is true, but not because of any cosmic principles. People are nice to people who are nice to them for practical reasons that I don’t go into here. People are bad to people who are bad to them for practical reasons that I don’t go into here. People are good to people who are good generally and not only good to them right now, as long as being good to them doesn’t cost too much, because people who are good generally are useful to have around and often do help us eventually. People are not nice to people who are bad generally to other people because those bad people are likely to hurt us. People are bad to bad people when it is not too costly or too dangerous. People are more likely to act like this in close groups where everybody knows everybody well and where people interact often. We develop the idea that we get what we deserve, which some people call “karma”. We also develop the idea that we deserve what we get, but that is another topic. Once the idea of karma arises, in some form, as it certainly will, then it perpetuates itself.

If people got what they deserve strictly, then good people would prosper and bad people would suffer. Because that outcome is clearly not so, the idea of “getting what you deserve” has to be modified. The modification most familiar to Jews, Christians, Muslims, many animists, and some Hindus, is that God (some god or the gods) takes care of the differences, usually after we die. To some extent, I go along with this modification.

Another most common modification of the idea that people get what they deserve goes along with the idea that we live many lives, and this modification is the idea that is properly called “karma”. What we did in past lives determines who we are now and what happens to us now. A rich person now was a hard-working peasant in the past. A poor person now was stingy in the past. An obnoxious rich person now was a saintly community worker in a past life; he-she misuses wealth in this life but the merit of the past keeps the wealth now from going away as a result of the demerit of now. A saintly but sickly community worker now was a vicious warrior in a past life; in the past, he-she was strong and hurt people so he-she has to be weak and has to help people now to pay and to make up.

The idea of karma comes in two forms. In the first, karma keeps a strict ledger, so that, for example, all people who eat meat are born as rabbits destined to die by the fox. In the second poetic form, payback is not exact but approximate and poetically fitting. One slum owner might be reborn as a cockroach while

another might be reborn as a tenant in a cockroach-infested slum building. One community worker might be reborn as a kindly senator while another might be reborn as a rich farmer growing organic apples.

Regardless of which form, the idea of karma almost always goes along with a cosmic justice system that operates on its own apart from any decision by any deity. Karma is automatic, inexorable, just, and, over the long run, exact. Karma might be personified by a god but it really does not depend on a deity. Karma depends only on the idea that the universe (Heaven, Dharma) is intrinsically moral in a similar way that a human village is intrinsically moral.

I do not believe in a strict ledger or any points, so there can be no karma in the strict sense. Because we are not often reborn, and are not necessarily reborn, there is not even karma in the poetic sense.

Instead of karma, God assesses us. Certainly God takes into account our intentions and deeds when he talks to us, and he likely treats better people better than worse people. But that result does not amount to karma, not even in the poetic sense. Getting evaluated by your boss is not karma.

It is important to see that “no karma” also means the universe (Heaven, Dharma) is not intrinsically moral, amoral, or immoral. It could be any of those. I think the universe is amoral because that view goes along with my scientific outlook as science is now. Future science might find otherwise but I doubt it. The facts that God is moral, created the universe, and will assess us largely according to our moral behavior, do not mean the universe is moral. The fact that God created the universe so that it would evolve life and evolve life that is sentient, moral, and feels beauty also does not make the universe moral. We are moral, God is moral, and those facts make a difference. The universe is amoral. The amorality of the universe often is sometimes a hindrance to us acting morally but it does not make a big difference; we act morally anyway.

You Deserve What You Get.

The idea of “what goes round comes round” or “karma” has two aspects: (1) you get what you deserve eventually, and (2) you deserve what you get, you deserve what you have now and the situation that you are in now. We all wish the first aspect were always true but it is not, and we have to learn to live with that disappointment. The section above disposed of the first aspect well enough but the second aspect generates some bad mistakes particular to it, so it is worth dwelling on.

People use the idea of “you deserve what you get” to rationalize both the good and bad that happens to individual people and to social groups. If an obvious nasty person is rich and apparently happy, people say he-she must be really smart, must benefit society through businesses, gives secretly to charity, or has a kind heart. Worse, we say that person is beloved of God. God sees in him-her a quality that normal people cannot see; or (slightly differently but close enough) God wishes to use that person for a purpose and so gives that person wealth, power, family, and happiness. If a person suffers for no clear reason, we say the person is a secret sinner and God detests him-her. If an ethnic group is on top of society, we say those are the “good people”. They are clean, athletic, smart, thrifty, inventive, helpful to each other, create business for society, and generally profit society. If an ethnic group suffers for no clear reason, we say God dislikes them, and they are noisy, dirty, stupid, uneducated, create problems, live as leeches off the rest of us, and are immoral.

It is true that we deserve what we get to some extent. Overall, smart people do better than other people and moral people do better than out-and-out immoral people. Hard-working people do better than lazy people. I do not dispute that the slogan has this much truth, and I am glad of it.

But the idea is not true in all cases, and especially it is not true in the sense that God secretly loves some people and so rewards them or God secretly despises some people and so punishes them. Things just happen. People hit bad luck. People hit good luck. Connivers sometimes win. Smart people lay good plans that go astray. Meteors fall on people's heads. The weather turns bad early and a careful investor loses his-her shirt and all the money for the orphans. Ethnic groups get trapped on the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and don't know how to climb up. The children of rich people stay rich for many generations without working to deserve it. We have to fight the tendency to see in the random events of the world a moral pattern or divine pattern. We have to cultivate the ability to see beyond some outcomes to the events and characters below. Not all outcomes are the result of karma. Some outcomes just happen both to deserving and undeserving people.

Health, wealth, love, and success are not rewards for being righteous, and we should not take them that way. Sickness, poverty, loneliness, and failure are not punishments for sin, and we should not take them that way. Health, wealth, love, sickness, loneliness etc. can be rewards for goodness and sin in this life not because God rewards us but because people respond to us in kind. If you want to take that as God's way of rewarding us, go ahead.

If something bad happens to us, it is not because God is angry with us and has punished us. That is called "blaming the victim". If something bad happens to a person, he-she should not feel guilty on top of the bad event, and should not search for some sin to make up for. If a girl is raped, that is bad enough; we cannot say she provoked it. If a hurricane hits Alabama, it is not because Alabama adopted a lottery. If I get a flat tire on the freeway, it is not because I yelled at my wife. In the same way, but in the other direction, if I win the lottery, it is not because I am especially good. If being good could win the lottery, I would be very good. The movies sometimes have nuns winning a big bet on a long shot in a horse race to save the convent-and-orphanage, but that does not happen in real life no matter how much we wish it would.

One version of this mistake is funny. After a town in Pennsylvania decided to keep Creationism out of its school textbooks, Pat Robertson warned them that God would send disasters such as storms, plagues, and earthquakes. Nothing happened, so maybe God approved of their decision and disagreed with Pat Robertson. During the Bush administration, America faced an unprecedented lineup of natural disasters including Hurricane Katrina, drought, and fires and mud slides in the West. In my head, I know this is only coincidence but sometimes, in my heart, I wish this were divine punishment for the arrogance and un-democratic conniving of bad Republicans. The fact that the problems continued under the Obama administration shows that it is not punishment from God. Instead, it can be taken as the just return on stupidly screwing up the ecology.

One version of this mistake is quite sad. People sometimes think that, if only they are good enough, then things have to turn out all right. If things did not turn out alright, then they weren't good enough. At the risk of sexism, I see this attitude mostly among girls and young women aged about 10 to 30. Women think things will turn out well if only they are sweet enough. If things did not turn out well, that is because

they are a secret bitch deep down. I do not know why women feel this way. It is like the opposite of the book-and-movies "Carrie", and the book-and-movies are probably successful because they act as a purge for women to get this bad feeling out of their system by reversing it. People with this attitude try so hard to be good that they twist their lives. If things do not turn out, they blame themselves and they sift their lives looking for the tiny fault that provoked God.

No "Instant Karma".

"Instant karma" is the slang phrase for "what goes round comes round" happening fast. Sometimes in human society, return is fast: neighbor B runs over the cat of neighbor A, so neighbor slashes the tires of neighbor B. Neighbor D helps out when Neighbor E's mother dies, so neighbor helps out when neighbor D's beloved old dog dies.

Mostly, though, return is delayed, and, often enough it does not happen at all. Especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma, and more especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma because we secretly deserved it, because we are secretly good or bad. God rarely punishes and rewards us now for our deeds in this life. God might punish and reward us in this life sometimes, but, if so, it is rare and it is beyond my knowledge. I know of no case that I can attribute to divine justice. We do have to reckon with God after we die, but not while still alive except in prayer. If we murder our bad neighbor with the yappy dogs, God does not punish us right now. If God did, there would be much less murder. If we save a drowning child, God does not reward us pretty quick. If he did, there would be many more heroic acts.

More than a Good Citizen.

In a modern democracy, on top of earning a living and raising a family, it is hard to be a good citizen. Most people are not good enough citizens. It is monstrously hard to earn a living, raise a family, be a good citizen, and carry out firm ethical precepts such as from Jesus, the Jewish prophets, Mohammad, the Buddha, or Confucius. Yet that is what is required. It is not enough to be a good citizen. It is not enough to do good by paying your taxes for programs to help the sick and poor. You do not have to go to the local soup kitchen every weekend, but you have to keep your eyes and heart open.

The Greater Good Undoes the Lesser Good.

Being a citizen of the Kingdom of God can require us to be a bad citizen of the civil state sometimes when it is bad, as when we refuse to follow a bad law or refuse bad military service. Being a member of the family of God can require us to be a bad family member sometimes, as when we allow a person to have freedom of choice even when we can see that the person might make a bad choice, and even when that person is our child. A greater good can sometimes undo a lesser good. Advocates of family values often can see the first case but not the second.

This is really dangerous ground. I do not know of any hard-and-fast rules here. This is where we need both rules and judgment. I cannot say more here.

God Does Not Make You Rich.

God does not want to make you rich. The “prosperity gospel” of the televangelists not only is false, it is also immoral. Because wealth often gets in the way of spiritual advancement, if God meddles in your business affairs, it is more likely to keep you modest than to make you rich. If you think God rewards you with wealth for being an especially good person or being especially attentive, then you misunderstand God, goodness, and attentiveness. If you think some spiritual being other than highest God interferes to make you wealthy then you are an idolater and you are misled. Because there is no karma, karma does not make you rich.

According to the Old Testament, God did make some of the patriarchs rich as a way to promote their offspring and the Hebrew nation. But he did not make all the patriarchs, judges, or prophets rich. Some of the prophets were destitute and powerless, and that is what made them interesting and useful to God. Most of us are not prophets and will not found a nation.

Absolute Same.

In the movie series “The Matrix”, Agent Smith is the devil. Machines made him, but then he changed, and now not even his makers can stop him. His chief goal, and main technique, is to make everyone exactly like himself. When he has made everyone exactly like himself, then he no longer has to put up with the diverse smells and tastes of the pseudo-liquid-pseudo-organic matrix world.

Movements of all kinds, religious, political, and intellectual, are like Agent Smith. They make everybody within the movement the same, and they see everybody outside of the movement alike too but in a bad opposite way. People that cannot be the same as “us” are bad. Despite declarations of diversity, die-hard homogenizers include some politically correct (PC) people, gay people, atheists, feminists, rock-n-roll bad girls, liberal Christians, and college freethinkers. Even evolutionary biologists accept as truly astute only other evolutionary biologists and they look askance at people who adopt other explanations such as culture. Conservative Christians and Muslims do it.

It seems as if the answer is some kind of real diversity with real acceptance, and not merely the slogan diversity of PC. But this cannot be quite true either. We really don’t want all kinds to make up our world. We don’t want true bad guys or else we wouldn’t have the police. We don’t want rapists, murderers, and child molesters. We don’t want indecent loud trashy people. We don’t want bad people who seduce our children onto the wrong path. We need people who can help teach life’s hard lessons but we don’t want so many of them that we all turn bad and never get the benefit of the lessons. We want people who can control the bad people for us. We want zealots and town marshals. We want soldiers who sacrifice their lives so our children can lead normal lives. But we don’t want the controllers to turn bad themselves or to make us all into the same sweet candy rabbits.

Groups have an identity. Even when members diverge a little bit, it is important that they understand the group identity, conform to the group identity, and actively support it. If they do not understand the group identity, they are likely accidentally to go against it. If you sign up for Boy Scouts, you have to get the idea of a Boy Scout or you are likely to betray it. The group can tolerate some people who do not get the idea of the group but not too many. Most of the people in the group have to be people who get

the idea of the group and actively support the group and its idea. People that do not get the sense of a group cannot make up much of the membership or the group will fall.

Within our group we want people that both understand basic decency and that get the group identity as well. Whether we like it or not, our group has to be made up mostly of almost-Agent-Smiths or it will fall. Now we return to a basic problem of democracy. A democracy cannot have too many louts or it will fall. People that do not get the ideas of decency and democracy cannot make up most of the citizens or the democracy will fall. But a democracy is not a voluntary organization. If you are born in it, or immigrate into it, you are a part of it whether or not you are a lout and whether or not you get the idea. If too many louts or stubborn people live in a democracy, it will fall.

Christianity shares some of the same problems as a democracy. It cannot have too many louts and the members have to really get it. Not everybody is naturally accepting and forgiving. People do not always transform to be accepting and forgiving just because they happen to see the importance of Jesus. Christian churches cannot have too many stubborn hard-hearted people or they fall. On the other hand, if churches are too soft, they fall too. People take advantage of diversity and forgiveness. Non-Christians accept things from Christians but never give back, to the point where Christians can go broke supporting non-Christians. Poor people become Christian in name so they can get support from Christians. People do not always change after they have been accepted and forgiven. Prostitutes do not necessarily stop “the life” just because somebody forgave them. People that have been accepted do not always extend the same kind of acceptance to other people. Gamblers do not always accept and forgive alcoholics. If too many people like this are part of the church, then the church will fall. To keep the church from falling, some members of the church have to turn all members into almost-Agent-Smith. This was a real problem in the early Christian church.

I do not know any sure way out of this problem that preserves both diversity and group identity. I do not know how to draw the line between “Stepford Wife” versus “Queen of the Damned”.

Faith Is Not Enough.

As a young child, I participated in what was likely the greatest social psychology experiment ever. The Sunday Disney TV program showed the adventures of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell. One day, Tinkerbell was mortally wounded, I think poisoned, but not yet dead. The physical poison represented the spiritual poison that some children did not believe in fairies, not even in Tinkerbell. She would die unless all the children watching believed in her and believed she would recover. Only overwhelming faith could bring her back. I think we had to show our faith by clapping our hands at the right moment. Tinkerbell would hear, know the children believed in her, and know that they loved her. The faith and love of the children would save her. It must be true because she recovered.

In a famous scene in “The Empire Strikes Back”, Luke is trying to levitate his star ship from a swamp as Yoda looks on. Luke almost succeeds but not quite. Luke obviously has the ability but lacks something to complete the ability. Yoda tells Luke that Luke failed because he did not believe. There is no trying; there is only absolute black-and-white-faith-with-doing. Either you believe and you succeed, or you do not believe and you fail. Absolute qualitative black-and-white-faith-with-doing can overcome any moral or physical barrier.

In the New Testament, Jesus is able to heal people because they believe. If they do not believe, he cannot heal them. Peter started out walking on water but sank when his faith in Jesus wavered. Jesus says that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

If only the power of faith were true. Mohammad had a good idea: "If the mountain will not come to Mohammad, then Mohammad will go to the mountain".

Faith can be a powerful component in success. It can push us over the threshold we need to succeed, as when we give a talk in front of people, we fight a disease, or try to make it as a rock band. Self-confidence is good. That is why people want to be able to will to will, to will to believe.

But we cannot will to believe just because we wish to believe, and faith alone is not enough, and faith might not even be the most important thing. Several times I have had serious infections. Faith alone could not have healed me. I needed some powerful exotic antibiotics.

Saying that faith alone is not enough does not kill Tinkerbell, deny the Force, condemn Luke never to finish his Jedi training, leave lepers and sick children to die, sink Peter in the water, or defy God. Not having your prayers answered does not mean you did not believe strongly enough and that you should believe more.

Trying to believe more is making the same mistake as in Pascal's Wager. We cannot will to will. We cannot believe more because we try to believe more. We believe as much as we believe because we think it is true.

Even worse, insisting that God do something for us because we believe is not a good show of faith but is a way of coercing God and defying God.

Someday the Israelis might burn animals in the Temple again as an offering to God. Many Jews hope the act restores the kingdom of Israel while many fundamentalist Christians hope the act brings the end of the world and the Second Coming of Jesus. Neither will happen. Even if their faith were genuine, it cannot coerce God. When animals get burned, the God decides what to do.

Faith and Works.

(1) Suppose a person gets Jesus' teachings but is poor, sick, and can do little about building a better world. That person has faith but no works. (2) Suppose a person is not sure about the divine source of Jesus' ideas but does good things all the time, and is selfless by any normal standards. That person does good works but does not have standard faith. (3) Suppose someone knows of Jesus and his ideas but thinks believing that Jesus-is-God-and-died-for-our-sins is enough to go to heaven, and does not do very much else to build a better world. That person has faith but no works also. (4) Suppose someone gets Jesus' teachings but does good not to help people or to build a better world but to get to heaven. That person has good works but does not rely on faith.

Which of these people is right or wrong? The best answer is: "That issue is not my business. That is between God and the individual people." I personally think the first two people are in better shape than the last two.

I doubt you can earn your way into heaven, or can earn your way into a good relation with God without also having good intent. I doubt you can have a good relation with God if you believe but do nothing about it. It makes no sense to say that good works are enough or that faith is enough.

If we cannot absolutely look into the hearts of people then we cannot pronounce on the correct mix of faith and good works. To echo passages whose citation I cannot recall: Faith without works is sterile and works without faith can be cancerous. Encourage a mix of the two.

God Does Not Test Us.

I do not argue whether God knows us well enough so that he has to test us. Even if God did not know us well enough, to test us by shoving us into hardship would be cruel and unworthy. We are not hunting dogs so that God needs to see if we can stand the early morning damp and cold. Life is hard enough. It provides enough obstacles. God provided the world with hardships that would test our characters long before we were born; and without us particularly necessarily in mind. We find our way to the particular situations that give us in particular the hardest problems, something like the opposite of "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you". God can find out enough about us from watching us slog through life.

Thinking God tests us is a way to explain evil without accepting that it is really evil and without blaming God. If badness is a test, and we get through it by faith, then God is better than we thought. But there is evil, and God allowed it, and God allowed it to happen to you or to a loved one even though you did not deserve it, and it is not a test. I do not know why.

We think God, or "the world", tests us although we know better. I am not sure why. For a fun example of a great spiritual being testing us, see either version of "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory", with Gene Wilder or Johnny Depp. Maybe the classic example of testing in Western literature not in a Christian setting is "The Odyssey" ("Story of Ulysses"). See the TV mini-series starring Armand Ashante. Maybe the classic example of testing in Western literature, in a Christian setting, is "Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan, which reminds me of the first movie of the "Never Ending Story" series.

God Gives Us No More than We can Stand.

Everybody has to endure hardship. Often we become better because of the hardship we endure, as long as the hardship does not break us beyond repair. Although God does not test us, God has some control over what we face. People like to think God does not give us more than we can stand. If we can stand it, we can grow from it. In that way, God does not send us tests or lessons in particular but God makes sure what we do face is something we can deal with, learn from, and grow through. This idea does not mean God never allows innocents to suffer; God can still allow children to get cancer as long as having the cancer does not break their souls.

I wish this were true. I wish God never gave us more than we can stand. In a strong version, this idea means God never let people suffer so much that they broke irretrievably. But, in fact, people do suffer so much that they break irretrievably. People who don't deserve to suffer and break still do suffer and do break. There is no point in giving examples. This issue is a nasty version of the greater problem of evil.

The very large majority of the time people can stand what they face and they can turn tragedy into a good thing. Often what appears to be a tragedy at first, such as losing a job, turns into a chance to find things in life that are even more important. But that does not change the fact that some people, through no fault of their own, and with good characters, suffer more than they can stand and do break.

God, through evolution, prepared us to deal with almost everything in the world, and to turn into good a lot of the bad of the world. I am often amazed at how well evolution has prepared us. But evolution did not prepare us for everything, and probably could not prepare us for everything that comes from the physical world and from the evolved world, such as floods and diseases.

I can see why God would allow some badness such as hunger, poisonous snakes, and the flu. I don't see why God allows problems so bad that they break good people. I don't see why God would evolve us to be able to face most problems but not all problems. Probably this situation has to do with the fact that life is real, risky, and interesting. It would not be hard to work up a philosophical justification for it. The idea of karma is, in part, a response to this issue. But I prefer not to "worm around" that way. I think it is better just to face up to the situation. It is something we can ask God about someday.

Whether God sees and feels all that everybody sees and feels, or does not, it still makes sense that God saw and felt what Jesus did. When Jesus died on the cross, he was broken in body and spirit. God can generalize from Jesus to all of us. So God knows what it is like to be broken. He knows what we feel like when we don't make it. I am not sure how much comfort that is generally but it has comforted me often enough.

Not Merely in the Presence of the Lord.

In his book, "Till We Have Faces", C.S. Lewis tells about a group of people that have serious questions for God about justice, duty, why we should strive in life against so much hardship, and why we have hurt other people. The questions come out of their hard life experiences and their roles as public servants. They think they will see God someday because the sister of one of them has gone to live with God, and she promised to come back. When she and God do come back, the people do not bother to ask God the questions that once seemed so urgent. The mere presence of God is answer enough.

Many real people outside of books have this experience, both in and out of Christianity. Many real people feel the presence of the Lord, and it can be satisfying. Many people who have had a near-death experience say they stop worrying about the little things and go on to focus on enjoying life and on doing what is important. The doctrinal expression of the idea that the mere presence of the Lord is enough might be "saved by faith alone". Orthodox Christians hope to induce a similar experience at Easter when they greet the risen Lord and act as if he walks among them. Some people feel this way at a Lord's Supper. Some people feel this way at a great natural sight such as the Grand Canyon. Some people feel this way when the trees sway, and I do not want to doubt the truth of their feeling.

The trouble is: what next? Now that the people have seen God and had all their questions set aside by awe, what do they do? I would not have to ask this question if all people that had this experience were transformed in the same way, and all immediately understood Jesus' teaching and acted to build the same better world, or all acted in accord with the Mosaic Law, the sayings of Mohammad, or the Dharma. But they do not. They act according to different religions, not all of which are compatible. They act in different ways even when they share the same background, such as when they are all Methodists. Then sometimes, later on, they forget too. Even when they remember, they still seem able to act immorally such as by defrauding the poor. A lot of good Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who have felt the presence of the Lord (Dharma) do bad things.

The presence of the Lord alone is not enough. Devotion alone is not enough. We need more. We need ideas that can guide our actions in accord with experience and morals. We need to do what some people with near-death experiences do: forget about little things, appreciate life, and get to work on what is important.

In the high days of Hippies, people thought using drugs would be enough, usually strong drugs such as LSD, but even soft drugs such as marijuana. They were wrong. You have to have something to follow the experience.

Some people do not even need the experience. They can understand the ideas and act on them without the extra urging. They do not need the presence of the Lord. They carry the presence of the Lord with them in a simple urge to be decent and help out. I think they are as lucky as the people that do have the experience.

I am not saying I would not be swayed by such an experience. Listen to the Blind Faith song "Presence of the Lord". I have come close enough to this experience to know that it could change my life and that I would act in accord with almost whatever I believed gave the experience. If the God of Presbyterians thrilled me, I would be highly inclined to convert and to act like a good Presbyterian. But what if I was not sure of the source? Or what if I was a good Roman Catholic and yet I thought the experience came from the Hindu god Shiva? Or if I was a good Hindu and yet I thought the experience came from the Muslim Allah (Yahweh)? A lot of people who have this experience but did not previously believe in any particular god, and do not associate the experience with any particular god; they say the experience changed their lives by making them appreciate life more, appreciate nature, and be kinder and more peaceful. The experience might be powerful, but we still have to evaluate it according to our best understanding of life, morality, and religion. Awe alone is not enough. Awe and devotion together are not enough.

God Does Not Harden Hearts or Abuse Innocents.

When the Hebrews were trying to get out of Egypt, God, through Moses, threatened Egypt with plagues if Pharaoh did not let God's people go. Pharaoh did not, so Egypt had to endure locusts, rivers of blood, and even the death of its firstborn male children. It is natural to ask why Pharaoh did not let the Hebrews go given the penalties the Egyptian people had to endure. The Bible says God "hardened the hearts" of the Egyptians (or at least Pharaoh) so they would resist God so God could show how powerful he was, how much he controlled any nation, and how much he favored the Hebrews.

This story is obnoxious but not because God favored the Hebrews – that is their good luck and not our bad luck.

This story is obnoxious on two other counts. First, God should not use innocent people, the common Egyptians, to make a point about how powerful he is. If he did, he would be the devil, not God. Second, God should not harden the heart of an individual person because to do so would take away that person's free will and take away the rationale for a lot of other teaching in the Bible such as the importance of intent. I do not even know what it means to harden the hearts of a whole people apart from hardening the hearts of their leaders or hardening the hearts of each person individually. This is another instance of self-contradiction in the Bible if we take the story literally. To “harden hearts” is nonsense from which we can derive whatever we want. As with the story of Isaac, it is possible to rationalize this story to make it less obnoxious but I think it is better to face the implications, overcome what is wrong, and seek something better.

God Does Not Soften Hearts: Grace.

The flip side of hardening hearts is more subtle and not directly obnoxious. It is appealing: God bestows grace on some people by leading them to believe and by saving them. God softens their hearts. God likes some people and so helps them out. It is never clear why God helps some people but not others.

Yet God does not soften hearts any more than he hardens hearts. If God softened the heart of anybody so as to make that person believe in him, then God would take away the free will of that person. God would take away the soul of that person. God would take away the very thing that God wanted to save. He would “destroy the village in order to save it”. By softening one heart but not another, God would act to favor one person but not favor other people. God would put the other people at a disadvantage. God would condemn some people by not giving them the help that he gave to a few special people.

The slogan for saving a person by softening the person's heart is “salvation through grace”.

Minimal Magic.

The definition of magic used to be a big topic in anthropology. I don't define it here. Belief in magic gets in the way of true religion, such as following the ideals of Jesus. A little belief in magic is a lot of fun, and can spur us on to good deeds; but too much magic is really harmful.

In the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” by C.S. Lewis, the White Witch (Ice Queen) thinks she has beaten Aslan the Lion (Jesus) because she invoked a magical formula to the effect that a good character (Aslan) may be required to substitute for a bad character that committed treason (Edmund, who liked Turkish Delight too much). Aslan must allow himself to be killed on an altar. Later when Aslan is resurrected, he reminds the Ice Queen that there is an even deeper magical formula: whenever a good person willingly offers him-herself as a sacrifice, then he-she will return greater than before. This idea is charming and we hope it is true but too often it is not true. If a hero knows he will return from the dead, then that seems to diminish the sacrifice. Jesus might have returned from the dead in that book but other heroes sacrifice themselves for the greater good without the comfort of thinking they will return from the

dead. Harry Potter went to sure death not knowing he would return. Socrates drank the hemlock. I think the real Jesus knew he faced the wrath of the Romans and Jews without thinking he would return if he died. If the idea that true heroes return from the dead stronger than ever is true, then, in a way, it hurts Jesus and the message of Jesus. It is too much clever magic. I want Jesus to make sense. I do not want to rely on magic. I do not want to trick the Ice Queen by pulling Jesus out of a magic hat. We might not be able to reach perfection but we have to actively participate in our spiritual advancement instead of just waiting for God to pull Jesus out of the magic hat.

The Vehicle and the Message.

True or not, bad or good, people need magic. Magic can be a lot of fun if we are careful. Good religious teachers sometimes use magic as a vehicle to convey deeper ideas. The stories about the voyages of Sinbad have magic but they have important messages too about friendship and honesty. Parables are messages in a magic wrapper. Sometimes people can only understand or accept a message if it is in a magic wrapper, as with the plagues that God sent against Egypt. The problem is that people too often focus on the magic wrapper while forgetting the more important pearl of wisdom inside.

I believe this happened with Jesus' death and resurrection. They are the magic wrappers. They should get people to think about Jesus' teachings but instead people get stuck in the glitter of the wrappers. What does it mean to be forgiven and saved if we do not contribute to Jesus' mission? What good would it do to be resurrected to a world where Jesus' teachings do not matter? This stance is a kind of pyramid scheme. To focus on the wrapper while forgetting the pearl inside is actually a type of idolatry.

Christianity is not the only religion where people get distracted by the wrapper while forgetting the pearl inside. Christianity is not the only religion in which magic hijacks religion. Other religions might do a better job of warning their followers of this danger and of providing good means of escape.

Salvation.

Being saved is getting the ideas of Jesus and doing what he wanted to the extent that we are able. I am not sure what it could be otherwise in Christianity. Whether salvation leads to heaven is irrelevant. Jesus asked us to follow him because it was the right thing to do and not so that we could go to heaven. There is no other useful idea of salvation.

Saved and Damned.

We cannot know for sure in this world if we are saved or damned. We can know whether or not we get the ideas of Jesus and whether or not we intend to follow them as best we can. Worrying about whether we are saved or damned only gets in the way of carrying out the ideas of Jesus. Looking for signs of whether we are saved or damned especially gets in the way of following Jesus. Judging other people on the basis of signs about salvation and damnation directly thwarts following the ideas of Jesus, in particular because we can only use signs that we make up. Taking worldly success as a sign of being saved, and then treating people better if they are rich or powerful or famous or beautiful or athletic, directly gets in the way of following the teachings of Jesus. Ironically, looking for signs of salvation is likely to damn us. Get over it and be useful instead.

Not About Justification.

People need to feel successful. Salvation is a strong kind of success. Especially in Indo-European (Western and Indian) cultures, and Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures, people also need to feel justified. They need to feel justified to feel saved and successful. Instead of pursuing salvation directly, they pursue justification directly as a substitute for salvation. People need to feel they are basically correct, not guilty, their lives matter, and they are “right with God”. People go to great lengths to feel justified. They join causes such as “save the whales” or “pro life”. They stress single-issue politics such as energy independence or national “defense”. They bomb abortion clinics. They blow themselves up along with a lot of innocent people.

Sometimes the need to feel justified can lead to social good, as it did when Northerners agitated for the abolition of slavery in the United States. But the need to feel justified can lead to unusually great and widespread damage. People who go on crusades to feel justified to feel saved do great damage. People tempt their fellow sectarians with justification-for-salvation so that they can gang up to hurt other people and feel good about it. People go on moral crusades against welfare, gambling, abortion, or soft drugs so as to make themselves feel good without thinking about the freedom of other people and without thinking that the results might hit the poor hardest. People use justification-for-salvation as a way to hurt the poor. The poor use crusading for justification as a way to get benefits from the state and to get other people to feel guilty so they can control other people. Oppressed minorities in America use crusades of justification to make other groups feel guilty and to control other groups.

Seeking justification directly is an abuse. Jesus did not want us to be active so we could feel justified about ourselves. He wanted us to be active to build the Kingdom of God, to build a better world. The teachings of Jesus are not about justification. When seeking justification gets in the way of the teachings of Jesus or of building a better world, then seeking justification is wrong even if the cause it serves might be right otherwise. People need to get over the idea that they can feel justified because they work hard in a cause that might be right.

We need to think hard whether we are acting primarily to do good or to make ourselves feel better by making ourselves feel justified. We need to think about how we can be useful overall, and to pick where we can best help, rather than pick where we might better chase justification. We need to think about what all needs to be done, and how we can best use our energy and abilities. Good is good because it is good, not because it justifies you and gets you into heaven.

Judaism and Islam use the idea of justification much as does Christianity, and so have similar problems. If believers in religions other than Judaism-Christianity-and-Islam use the highest goals of their religion as Judaism-Christianity-Islam use justification, they will see that they have similar problems. If you crusade for the right Dharma, your crusade makes you blind, and you hurt other people, then you are wrong, and you have not achieved the right Dharma or the fruits of right Dharma.

Miracles Prove Nothing Important.

Believers think citing miracles by their leader proves that their religion is real, of the one true God, correct, and most correct. Almost no miracles have actually happened. Even if miracles have happened, they prove nothing. If we allow that adepts in one religion (Buddha, Jesus, Moses, or Mohammad) performed miracles, then, by the same standards, we have to allow that adepts in all religions performed miracles. No one religion can claim a monopoly on miracles. The miracles in any one religion cannot be proof that it is true, truest, or best.

More importantly, miracles don't bear on the content of a religion. If adepts in a religion perform miracles but then tell us we have to murder our children and our neighbors, we cannot follow that religion. If the believers in a religion offer no miracles but instead offer the moral teachings of Jesus, "applies equally", and good citizenship, we have to consider the ideas of that religion even if we do not accept its gods.

If we reject miracles as validations of any religion, then we have to judge the principles of that religion by standards that are relevant to basic principles. We do not judge the teachings of any religion according to any miracles. Miracles are irrelevant even if they are clearly true or false.

Buddhists use stories of the young Buddha to convey ideas. In one story, to show that we ought to venerate and follow him, the Buddha walks and talks at birth. If true, would that validate his teaching? If not true, would that invalidate his teaching? If Jesus really was resurrected, does that mean we all have to give up alcohol and sex? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that mean we all have to be gay and marry another homosexual? If Jesus said we have to hate our parents to follow him, does that mean we really have to? The miracles of any religion are irrelevant to the truth of its ideas.

Religions differ in some ideas that are hard to decide on the basis of the ideas alone, on the basis of logic and limited human experiences. In theory, Judaism allows polygamy for men only; Islam says a man may have up to four wives while a woman may have at most one husband; and Christianity officially is silent on the topic although in practice it promotes monogamy. Deistic religions make one God quite important while Hinduism and Buddhism accept many gods and do not make any god too important. If we believe that the adepts in one religion performed miracles while the adepts in the other religions did not, then we are likely to take that as evidence that the one religion is true, and we are likely to accept its opinion on ideas such as marriage and gods. If we wish to promote our religion while denigrating alternatives, then we are likely to argue that the miracles in our religion are true and good while the miracles reported in all other religions are false and-or come from the Devil. This is where deciding the truth of miracles might be a bit important, but not much.

We can't use miracles to decide whether to accept the deepest principles such as "do unto others" and "applies equally". We have to decide those principles according to them alone, and we are able to make this decision. So the other questions are not very important; at least they are not very important to me. Once we have the basic principles, we can use them as the basis for arguing about other ideas such as gender equality, polygamy, monogamy, and one god or many. We might not be able to decide once-and-for all but at least we can talk to each other, make sense, and make progress. If we don't have the basic principles, then we will get confused about all other questions, including questions about miracles in any religion and about what the truth or falsity of miracles proves.

People argue about miracles as a way to promote their religion, denigrate other religions, and denigrate all religion. I think the question of miracles is irrelevant and diverting. If the true underlying wish is to assess particular religions, assess religion in general, or assess atheism, then it is better to focus on that task and to forget about miracles. Identify the ideas of the religion and of atheism. Assess if those ideas are reasonable, are reasonable on the basis of circumstantial evidence, are moral, useful, in accord with the right aspects of human nature, do not go against important aspects of human nature such as the desire to be moral and to believe in some spirit, and do not contradict science. That focus is much more relevant than miracles.

Religion and Morality as Weapons.

See the chapter on human nature. See above and below. Using morality and religion as weapons is wrong, even when the morality and religion are right, except for special cases.

PART 3: Logical Errors.

Not Everything from Nothing.

We can derive any silliness at all from nonsense, yet many religious dogmas seem like nonsense, and thus religious dogmas allow believers to claim anything as a result. We have to be careful. If the next two paragraphs annoy you, skip them, but stay in the section to read what follows them.

Logicians have developed a formula to make sure their systems come out right. An “if-then statement” is like this: “If I let go of the ball, then it will fall”. We can tell if the whole if-then statement is true or false by looking at the component parts to see if they are true or false. If “I let go of the ball” is true and “it falls” is true, then the whole if-then statement is true. If “I let go of the ball” is true but “it falls” is false, then the whole if-then statement is false. Maybe the ball is really a helium balloon. Usually assessing by parts makes sense even to people that are not logicians except when the “if” part of the if-then statement is stubbornly false. Suppose the “if” statement is “If the sky is green” so that we have “If the sky is green, then the ball will fall”. The sky is not green and we are not sure about the falling ball. So then what do we know about the whole statement “If the sky is green, then the ball will fall”? Logicians decided that, in cases where the “if “ is false, then the whole if-then statement is true regardless of the “then” statement. “If the sky is green, then the ball will fall” is true as a whole even though “the sky is green” is false. So the following if-then statement is true as a whole too just because the “if” statement is false: “If the sky is green, then the moon is made of cheese”. This result goes against common sense, and logicians know it does, but this technique shows us how whole systems work and directs our attention to problems and holes. I do not show how.

It is easy to see this peculiarity where the “if” statement is clearly false. We can do this by putting together two contradictory statements to make up the one statement in the “if” part: “If ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fall”. What do we make of this? Logicians say this whole if-then statement is true. This is just strange, and seems like justifying nonsense with emptiness.

Now resume the section. When most people hear an “if” that cannot reasonably be evaluated or is likely to be false, they just shrug off the “then” part: “If the sun turns green, then I will win the lottery”. People can see the two statements are not really related.

In religion, though, the connection can get obscure, we think the two parts are related even when they are not, we get anxious, and we get susceptible to manipulation. “If Jesus is God, then everybody who believes will go to heaven just because they believe, and then everybody who does not believe will go to hell just because they do not believe”. We cannot evaluate for sure whether or not Jesus is God, but we have to do something about the whole if-then idea anyway. It seems the whole if-then statement is true even if Jesus is not God, so it seems we have to accept the “then” parts. It seems that we are going to hell if we are not careful. We can't be sure we won't go to hell if Jesus is not God. So we better accept that Jesus is God so we don't go to Hell. We get confused and make mistakes.

With this logic, we can derive all we want from ideas that cannot be evaluated but have to be taken or rejected on faith. Starting from nonsense, we can say whatever we want, nobody can contradict us, and it seems like all our conclusions must be true. In that case, we had better be careful what we say and what we accept.

This is why scientists insist that statements can be evaluated as true or false (if a statement can be evaluated as definitely false, that is enough; but we don't need to get into the topic here). Scientists need to know what conclusions we can draw from the statements and if we are liable to get confused. Since we cannot evaluate “If Jesus is God” then we have to be really careful about what conclusions we draw from it.

This is why we have to be careful reading the Bible. It is self-contradictory and it says things that cannot be evaluated through experience such as that the earth stood still to help Joshua win a battle. From its self-contradictions and its statements that cannot be evaluated we can derive almost anything we want. We have to be careful about faith and about thinking faith alone is enough. Faith cannot be evaluated and so we can derive from it anything we want. We can make some pretty big mistakes by starting out “if you only believed enough”. We find it hard to correct those mistakes.

Some religious have as their basic ideas statements that we cannot evaluate or that really are just nonsense, such as “Jesus is God”, “the Dharma is everything”, “you and God are one”, or even, alas, “cultivate a relation with God”, and “Spot the dog is both only a machine and more than a machine”. The statements might or might not be true, and they might or might not mean something, but we have to be careful even if we do think they are true and meaningful.

It becomes hard to sort out ideas that really merit consideration for faith from nonsense that ideologues can use to get us to believe other nonsense. There are many ways to deal with these situations but I cannot go through them here. To its credit, Buddhism tries to restrict itself to ideas that can be tested against common sense, and it tries not to derive other principles from nonsense or from ideas that cannot be tested against common sense. Buddhism goes astray when it does use ideas that cannot be tested, or that are high-blown and awe-inspiring, such as salvation for everyone.

No Magic Formula.

Now I give you some hopefully meaningful nonsense from which you can derive more nonsense if you wish, or from which you might get some insight.

There is no magic formula for exactly what to do as a result of religion, for what to believe, what God is, or how to have a right relation with God. There are always some guidelines. Guidelines are necessary. They are sufficient for most cases but not for all. We need something more sometimes and we need to be able to change the guidelines sometimes. The something more is trust. We have to let go of absolute security, let go of fear, and then trust. If I try to specify exactly what this is, then I try to provide a magic formula, and I negate myself.

Trust does not mean that the world will turn out all right, that we only have to play our part, and God will do the rest. For all I know, we can go along with God, do what we should, and the world will still go to hell. For all I know, we can be right with God and our spouse can still die of cancer. Trust is not trusting in the world alone or trusting in God to magically save the physical world. Trust is trust. Trust is “fear not”. Trust is believing that we can be all right with God regardless of what happens in the world. Trust also extends to human beings but that is trickier, and I prefer to let that go until towards the end of the book.

This idea of trust is similar to ideas of trust found in various religions, and I do not know how to draw a clear line between this version and other versions, or even if there are no real differences. This idea is like the idea of trust in the Star Wars movies, as in “Luke, trust your feelings”. When we have no magic formula, then we cannot trust in any obvious logic, and so it seems as if we have to trust our feelings. Yet I do not want to say, “trust your emotions” because emotions betray us too. Both the Jedi and the Sith trust their feelings but one turns out good while the other turns out evil. Trust is not logic but it is not only emotions either. Star Wars understood the problem, and the basic idea of trust, but offered only a pop culture solution.

For a better solution, first we have to accept that we need the guidelines even if we cannot absolutely rely on them. Great religious adepts continue to act morally even if they put morality into a greater - context. Jedi remain good. After we see that we need guidelines yet we need more too, then we can move into trust. This idea of trust is like what is found in some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism but the similarities and differences are too much to go into here.

I do not know if trust is the same as love, and I do not speculate more here.

It is possible to say that trust is the same as faith or grace, but I do not want to use that formula because I think Protestants have misused the ideas of faith and grace and Roman Catholics have misused the idea of grace. Protestants think: we have faith; faith leads to God giving grace; grace makes us righteous, and righteousness leads to salvation. Instead, I think we should not even think about righteousness and salvation. Faith and grace become means to the ends of righteousness and salvation rather than something in themselves. We need to think about a direct relation with God rather than about what God is good for and about the means to get it. The differences will become more apparent later in the book after we learn more about the Protestant ideas of faith, grace, and righteousness, and learn more about what I have in mind with the term “trust”.

Maybe it helps to say what this idea of trust is not. We cannot think that we trust God and are all right with God if we are merely righteous, if we achieve righteousness through faith, if we achieve righteousness through grace, if we are perfect in following the Law of the Bible, if we understand the correct dogma of the Church, if we follow the sacraments of the Church, if we follow the correct festivals, if we seek holiness for ourselves, if we seek holiness through separation from sinners, if we seek holiness in the middle of living in the corrupt world (the “floating world”), if we seek holiness for our nation or our ethnic group, or if we follow specific commandments.

Maybe it helps to look at what trust is liable to do to people that have trust, and what they are liable to do as a result of having trust. People that trust follow Jesus’ teachings. They do unto others as they would have others do unto them. They are useful. They actively try to build a better world. They are merciful and forgiving.

I can see how someone could think, “The idea of trust has no content. I can make it mean whatever I want. From it, I can derive almost any conclusion, and can derive almost any justification for what I want to do for other reasons. The idea of trust is a potential goldmine of rationalization.” The idea of trust can be abused like this. Ideas that are potentially empty at the core can be both powerfully good and open to powerful abuse. The ideas of Dharma and Tao are like this. I cannot offer sure safeguards against abuse for the same reason that I cannot offer a magic defining formula. We have to trust that trust will not lead to abuse most of the time. We have to trust that our judgment can get us out of abuse when it happens, most of the time. Unlike “willing to will”, we can trust in trust.

The State as Our Agent.

People find it natural to use the state to support their religion and morality. This is wrong. It is right to use the state to uphold some generally accepted moral positions, such as “do not kill”. It is wrong to use the state to impose moral positions that we want such as “no abortion” even when we are sure those moral positions are correct and even when we are sure that violating these moral positions hurts people.

Not so long ago, people used the state to make sure everybody went to the right church and everybody had sex the right way. Now we understand we should not use the state to do that, if for no other reason than that it can backfire on us. If we use the state now to make everybody go to a Protestant church, in the future someone can use the state to make everyone go to a Muslim mosque or Buddhist temple. If we use the state now to make sure everybody has sex in missionary position with the man on top, then some other group later can use the state to make sure everybody has homosexual sex. The ambiguities in morality and religion, and the tendency of people to use morality and religion as weapons, make it all the easier and all the more tempting to use the state.

The early Christians disapproved of abortion. They did not try to make their idea the law of the Roman Empire. They did not try to change the behavior of non-Christians. Instead, they went along with the basic rules of the Empire, did among themselves what they thought was right, and tried to change the minds of people who would listen. They kept their own stricter rules within their group and did not try to impose their own stricter rules on people in general. When Christianity became the official religion of the

empire, and Christians tried to impose their morality, a lot of things began to go wrong, some of which still haunt us to this day, such as laws against divorce.

We have to find which general moral rules we need the state to enforce. We need to find which rules we want to prevail in our group but which we do not necessarily want the state to enforce for us, such as rules against divorce. We have to let people who are not like us do as they wish even if what they do seems immoral and self-destructive to us, such as allow homosexual marriage or not allow anyone in their group to get a divorce. We have to not be obnoxious. It is not always easy to draw the lines.

Sometimes another group uses the state to impose its morality. Sometimes that morality hurts us and might even hurt the general welfare. If we really are threatened, we might have to defend ourselves, and we might have to use the state to defend ourselves. We might have to use the state to impose our ideas of morality so as to defend ourselves against a group that wants its ideas to prevail.

Fortunately, this situation arises not nearly as often as people fear. Unfortunately, people invoke this situation to generate fear to get what they want. People use fear to create artificial battlegrounds to get their own way. This is using religion and morality as weapons. Most argument over abortion is more about getting your own way than about protecting innocent babies or preserving freedom of choice. So we have to be cautious before deciding somebody else is using the state to hurt us, and we have to think hard about how to respond. It is better not to impose our own morality if we can help it, and especially better not to use the state.

“Say ‘Yes’ to Life”.

Half-true mistakes are especially vexing. Here is one. It goes along with Romanticism. It still shows up when we “say ‘yes’ to life” by “saying yes” to trendy rebellion. It shows up when we say, “we’re gonna have a new attitude”.

In an essay written about 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson described a secular Transcendentalist ritual in New England in which an upper-middle class woman pledges to “Say ‘Yes’ to Life”. She promises to give up her rigid background and her inhibitions, and to take whatever Life throws at her. In this case, her change in attitude likely meant she should read more literature, especially novels of the Romantic period such as “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley and works of the Bronte sisters, read new theology such as by Hegel, go to concerts of Romantic music such as by Wagner and Liszt, and hang out with radicals such as Unitarians and Transcendentalists. Of course, along the way, she hoped to find a like-minded mate of the appropriate class and religion. Emerson’s essay was an unintended self-parody. (Despite searching, I have not been able to find the essay again. If you know of it, please tell me.)

Middle class Americans have been making much the same pledge for about two hundred years, although not in such formal ways. Now that rebellion is part of the culture, they simply go along with their culture and use rebellion to make the pledge. The new Romantic music is rock-n-roll, and the new novels are the movies. After World War Two, people who say “Yes” to Life added sex and drugs. Saying “Yes” to Life through sex and drugs now is what high school and college are about. Whether in the Transcendental Emerson form or the modern rock-and-roll form, most people who take the pledge stay middle class and marry other middle class people.

Saying “Yes” to Life in this way is like going directly after Salvation. “Life” is the new Romantic Salvation that replaced the old Christian Justification-for-Salvation. If you have a real “Real Life Encounter”, then you are Justified and Saved. Just as the old ideology of Justification-for-Salvation did not often succeed, so, if you go after Life this new way, you are not likely to find it, and you are likely to do a lot of damage. It is better just to do what you think is important, and true to your character, and to let Life take its course. Life will find you if you do that. You will not have to find it. Don’t dogmatize, just do.

Sometimes it is important to examine our presuppositions, including our inhibitions, and to get rid of bad ones. That is one way we get rid of prejudice. But we don’t have to get rid of all inhibitions, and we don’t have to say “Yes” to Life to do it. We just do it. We need to keep a few good inhibitions. You do not say “Yes” to Life by having sex with everybody and by helping in a murder. You don’t even do it by getting drunk.

Often strong new experiences and strong new people help us to examine ourselves and our world, and to get rid of bad habits. People do hide behind formal ways of life, jobs, homes, churches, etc. Sometimes strong new experiences and new people can help us break out. Sometimes it helps to be receptive to strong new experiences and new people. Travel is fun. You can do all this without making a dogma of it. You can do it much better without making a dogma of it.

This attitude is not all bad. It has produced some good movies, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as “Harold and Maude”, “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie”, “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore”, and, later, “How Stella Got Her Groove Back”. A good recent movie on both sides of the question is “Yes Man” starring James Carrey. The movie first satirizes and then re-frames saying “yes” to life in a better way. If you go at “Say Yes” the right way, and realize you are likely to “get back to where you once belonged”, then the attitude of “Say Yes” can be useful.

Worshipping Life and Nature.

These attitudes toward nature differ: use, appreciate, revere, conserve, preserve, and worship. I don’t sort out how they differ. Revering nature highly is the same as worshipping nature. All people must use nature directly or indirectly such as for food and energy; I revere nature; I want to conserve nature without necessarily preserving it in pristine form everywhere; I want to preserve nature in pristine form in some places; and I do not worship nature.

Only some Europeans, and the Americans descended from those Europeans, clearly worship nature. Some Taoists in China, and some Japanese followers of Shinto, might have worshipped nature too but I don’t know enough to say for sure. Most peoples of the world use nature heavily and appreciate nature mildly but do not revere it and are not much concerned with conservation or preservation. They tend to think that European-American nature reverence-and-worship is bizarre.

As far as I can tell, only people who have (or had) unrealistic idealized images of nature worship nature or revere nature to the point of worship. These people might be intimately involved with nature but still they have idealized unrealistic ideas of nature. Usually these people are removed from nature and see it only through the lens of some ideology. The most obvious example today is urban middle class people who

want to preserve all cuddly little animals and every tree ever sprouted. Even people who study nature scientifically often have unrealistic ideas about it and worship it. Some classic European and American naturalists, especially before about 1980, fall into this camp. Virginia Woolf makes fun of worshipping nature, and of the British romantic attitude toward nature, in her funny novel “Orlando”.

The point here is that nature worship is a form of idolatry, no matter how well intended. It is not horribly wrong, and I don’t think God will send you to Hell for it, but it is misguided and wrong enough to cause problems. It gives rise to the idea of LIFE as the spirit of the universe and the companion idea that we should “say ‘yes’ to life”. It mixes with Romanticism so that Life is the Spirit, and we say yes to the Spirit when we say yes to Life.

On a lesser scale, the idea that Life is sacred, generates us, flows through us, and that we are all kin by mother Life, fuels the modern environmental movement. This is a lesson in the other direction. Modern environmental advocates are wrong about Life and Nature but, coming from the wrong reasons, they are right about the need to take care of the planet, to conserve nature, and to find ways for nature and people to get along. This is approximately the philosophy of well-informed realistic members of the World Wildlife Fund. It is possible to have good outcomes from bad premises. Given the choice between misguided but useful preservation of worshipped nature versus “use nature till we all live in a crap pool” I go along with misguided but useful.

Nature worship also gives rise to silly ideas about natural medicine, natural cures, living naturally, natural food, organic food, etc. I can’t debunk all that here, and it is done well by other people. As I pointed out in the chapter on the evolution of human nature, not everything in nature is good, not everything good comes solely from nature, some things in nature are bad, and sometimes we have to choose. Too much of some kinds of herbal tea don’t cure cancer and they can kill you.

It is not hard to get a better idea of nature, and of relations between people and nature, if you will read a little and to watch some good TV. I do not offer a list of readings. PBS, Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel, and the National Geographic channel all offer good nature shows that are much more realistic and accurate than when I was young.

The Unbearable Joy of Infinite Happiness and Infinite Life.

Believers in theistic religions are blessed with potential heaven but cursed with fear of hell and the need to justify themselves. Believers in religions that feature a joyous system of many lives do not have those worries but they do have other burdens to go along with the benefits. If you believe you are part of a great joyous system of many lives, you can tap into that system, and you should tap into that system, then you should already have tapped into it, and you should be really happy. In fact, the people I have met who believe this seem miserable. Happiness is a duty. They try hard to be happy. They pretend they are happy. They try to make other people happy. You used to see the face of strained happiness in the “Hare Krishna” and “Transcendental Meditation” people. Some Christians who say they are sure of heaven have the same strained tired face too. When happiness is a necessity, it becomes a duty, and then it becomes its opposite, a kind of misery.

Just as we are morally mixed beings, so also we are rarely perfectly happy. Normal life is not happy. It might be filled with wonder and might feature opportunities, but it also has many sorrows. The sorrows are not usually another hidden source of joy. They are just sorrows. I have found that people are happier when they don't have to pretend to be happy. A religion that tells you that you have to be blissful makes a mistake. I think this is a mistake of Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and some Christianity.

Mahayana and Hinduism also promise Infinite Life through a system of many lives, to go along with the Infinite Joy. Infinite Life would not be tolerable without Infinite Joy. Any religion that offers Infinite Life also has to offer Infinite Joy, and both offers are mistakes. Infinite Life compounds the mistake of Infinite Joy, and together they are much worse than each alone.

Some very few people do seem to tap into a lot of joy. In my experience, these people are not confined to any one religion, and only a small proportion of them are also mystics. Some say they find joy because of their religion, and I am happy to accept their explanation, but I suspect they use religion to explain joy that comes despite religion. If you feel joy like this, then go with it. If you are lucky enough to know somebody like this, then borrow some of his-her joy. But don't feel guilty because you are not like this if you are not like this.

Devil Worship.

Idolatry is bad worship. We have no problem saying that a person worships money and holds it as an idol when money is all he-she thinks about and when he-she blames all problems on the lack of money or on money in the wrong places. We say some people worship their work or make an idol of their job. Right wingers say nature lovers make an idol of nature; nature lovers are obsessed and so worship an idol. In the 1950s, Americans feared Communists, saw them everywhere, blamed all the problems of the world on them, fought them, encouraged others to fight them, believed you had to be against them or for them, and hounded people who did not fight them. It is no exaggeration to say they worshipped communists as bad idols. To hate something that is like a god is to worship that thing just as much as to love something like a god is to worship.

What if a person feared a spirit, saw the spirit everywhere, blamed the spirit for the problems of the world, fought the spirit, and encouraged everybody else to fight the spirit? What if the person was more worried about fighting that spirit than about doing good and following God? That person worships the spirit in a bad way; that person holds the spirit as in idol. If we can say this of people who worship money, nature, or Communism, we can say if of people who worship a spirit through fear of the spirit. That person holds the bad spirit above God and worships the bad spirit above God. Unfortunately, that is what I have seen among too many Christians and Muslims. They are far more concerned with fighting the bad work of the devil than doing the good work of God. Their concern does not make them better servants of God. Their dedication makes them worshippers of the Devil, even if the Devil does not exist. The religion of fighting the Devil is not necessarily the religion of worshipping God. If you are more concerned about the Devil than about God then you worship the Devil even as you fight the Devil.

I do not believe in the Devil and I do not believe evil comes from the Devil. If you believe in the Devil and you want to fight evil, there are better ways than to focus entirely on the Devil. Find the root causes of

evil in the material and social worlds. Find solutions that succeed without causing more harm than good. Fight to end the causes of evil. Fight to carry out the useful solutions.

Unity of Opposites.

Just as some ideologies are dangerous because half-true, so also some logic is dangerous because it is half-true. Most of the logical alternatives that came out of the “dialectic” are like this. Here I describe only one, a variation that is important in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The line between love and hate is thin, and one turns into the other. Fear easily turns into rage and hate. Respect is tinged with fear, anger, and resentment. The line between creativity and madness blurs. Madness undoes creativity while creativity can undo madness. Straight-line strength is easily vulnerable to being diverted and undermined. Soft water, rushing over the great rock of a continent, ultimately wears down a continent. Dissolved rock settles out of the bottom of water to become rock again. Tranquility often comes only after great exertion. The search for salvation often leads to great spiritual distress, and sometimes to damnation. When we let go of direct search for salvation, we find it. Yin becomes yang, and vice versa.

All these examples are true enough. In the hands of a good storyteller, they could serve as the basis for engaging tales. But the unity of opposites is not always true, and it is not something we should depend on. Love does not always turn into hate. Hate usually does not turn into love. A rock can divert water for a long time before it is dissolved. Most fast straight punches are not diverted, and an un-diverted punch breaks the snout. Salvation is not always deception. What is new now does turn into boredom later but what is boring now does not always give rise to what is new and interesting later. Not all spiritual revivals work. Capitalism does not necessarily contain its own destruction, nor does Communism. The religion of love, Christianity, does not necessarily turn into the religion of class-based oppression and pedophile abusive priests; sometimes it remains the religion that gets neighbor to help neighbor; and usually priests are really good folk.

Take ideas as they come. Use them as far as they are useful. Don't get lost in them as dogmas. If it is useful to think in terms of yin and yang for a problem, then do it. Don't expect to be able to resolve all issues in terms on one thought method. You can't resolve all issues in terms of the unity of opposites, the dialectic, or yin and yang, and more than you can with rigid binary algorithms.

No Magical Energy.

This line from Dylan Thomas is worth repeating. Here, a “fuse” is a flower bulb.

“The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives me”

The ideas in this section are related to the ideas of spiritual force and “mana” described in the chapter on common religious ideas but I do not point out the similarities.

Most religions have an idea of a spiritual energy that drives things. In Judaism, it is the Shekinah. In Christianity, it is the Holy Spirit, one-third of the Christian Trinity. Islam has a similar idea but I am not sure what it is called formally; usually it is part of the idea of the Will of God, a force that causes things to be automatically. I am not sure of relations between all these ideas in the Judaic tradition. Buddhists and Hindus endow the idea of Dharma with a similar force. In addition, Hindus recognize other forces, such as “shakti” energy; the energy that comes from meditation (“tapas” or “heat”); “prana” or “breath energy”; energy from sounds (the notorious “OM” or “AUM”); maybe energy from visual patterns (“mandala”); and the energy of creation that comes from Brahma. Buddhism has ideas similar to Hinduism. Taoism has the Tao, chi, yin and yang, and virtue. Confucianism has Heaven, chi, yin and yang, and virtue.

In most religions, a person can live in accord with the spiritual energy and-or can “tap into” the spiritual energy. Doing so usually leads to a better life. If a lot of people do it, it leads to a better society. The spiritual energy can select a person, guide a person, help a person, heal a person, and make a person stronger, smarter, and more effective. The spiritual energy can also cause damage if mishandled.

I once took a yoga course in college. The teacher was a good guy. He said yoga was based on a great spiritual energy. The energy to which yoga led was much stronger even than atomic energy. If it could be harnessed for good, it would save the world.

None of this is true, at least not in the way that religions think of it. There is no magical energy. There is only the normal energy and matter of physics, in various arrangements. We feel magical energy because of the lively minds that we evolved and because the physical world can form beautiful intricate compelling patterns. To think in terms of magical energy is a handy, and often correct-enough, way to think of the world, especially the living world and the human social world. That is all, but it is a lot.

Imagine a set of Tinker Toys. You can put together the same pieces a lot of ways. How you put them together is not inherent in the pieces. How you put them together is the energy behind the world that you make out of the toys when you put them together in a particular way. Any particular toy piece does a lot better if it does not try to be a “square peg in a round hole” but instead goes along with the image that the builder (you) has in mind. That is the energy of the living world and the social world. The world is made up of energy and matter but the energy and matter are not random. They come in patterns. We can see the patterns. We do a lot better if we go along with the patterns. If we go against the patterns, we can get all the benefits that religious believers say that we can get from magical energy. If we go against the patterns, we get hurt. We can get a lot of energy from the sun. We can also get sunburned. We can get a lot of energy and many interesting chemicals from fossil fuels. We can also waste them and poison the planet.

Physicists, chemists, and biologists have found beautiful patterns in some of the following. Without knowing the science, it is tempting to think of these as examples of “life force” or a similar great energy. Knowing the science does not diminish the allure of these patterns and how useful it is to fall in with them rather than oppose them. The list: the coordination of fireflies, the coordination of croaking frogs, the rotation of black holes, how a centipede moves its legs, how the heart beats and how beats can get out of synchrony, how animals move in groups, there are only a limited number (17) of ways to draw two-dimensional patterns, there are only a limited number of ways a three-dimensional crystal can form, the

patterns that form in whirling water, the fact that patterns in what otherwise appears to be chaos double (or triple, or quadruple, etc.) at a very regular interval (Feigenbaum's number), etc.

Early Greek thinkers felt that a mind lay behind the world. This is the same feeling as the idea that a spiritual energy lays behind the world. This is how I think of spiritual energy, and not only because I am Greek. It is a handy way to think, and the mind of God certainly does lay behind the world. But until I know the mind of God, it is only a handy way to think.

To deny there is an autonomous all-purpose spiritual energy is not to deny that there is a kind of energy in many things that we can feel and can tap into. Sporting games, such as football, have momentum ("the big 'MO'") which many people can feel and smart players can tap into. So do political campaigns, networks of people, rock concerts, and even social parties. I have already mentioned the Sun. Even Black Holes have a kind of energy, especially the monster Black Holes at the center of galaxies, and we might someday be able to use that.

I am not sure where this limited sense of spiritual energy leaves ideas such as Dharma, Tao, Heaven, Goodness, Virtue, Tapas, Chi, Yin and Yang, etc. Except in some limited ways with yin and yang in the martial arts, I have not found it useful to think in those terms. I do not even find it useful to think in those terms when I feel what other people might call "chi" in martial arts or "tapas" in meditation. If you do feel any of these, and you do no harm, then I doubt there is anything wrong with going along with the feeling as long as you do not think your felt energy is the ultimate force behind the universe and you do not think everybody has to think exactly as you think.

Christianity in theory allows forgiveness for any sin except a deliberate malicious sin against the Holy Spirit. I am not sure if what I say here denies the Holy Spirit and so commits a heinous sin against the Holy Spirit. I leave this issue up to theologians and, once again, I rest confident in God sorting it out for me someday and in God's mercy.

Dharma.

Holding to the idea of Dharma is not usually a mistake but it is useful here to say a few words to clear up possible issues. Most Westerners are unclear about Dharma. I am not much clearer. Even Hindus and Buddhists that I have met are not always clear and they are not consistent within themselves individually, between individuals, and between schools and religions.

Originally Dharma likely meant something like "ritual efficacy". If you did things according to the ritual relevant to a situation, then the result should come out fine. The result would come out fine because the ritual went along with the order of the world and manipulated the order. It was like spiritual engineering or spiritual gardening. (The idea of Dharma is more refined than "white magic" but I cannot here go into how the two ideas differ.)

From that, Dharma came to mean the order of the world itself, in particular the moral, social, and spiritual order of the world, even apart from humans and gods. Dharma came to mean duty. It came to describe the place of people in the world and society, and the duty of people to carry out their place for the sake of the whole. It came to have a sense similar to "the mind behind it all", or "nous", in Greek philosophy. All

along, the idea of Dharma carried a sense of the rules of the world and how the world works according to its rules, something like natural law in Western science, but including moral rules such as just reward for good and bad deeds (karma). Dharma further came to mean the ideas, doctrines, dogmas, ideologies, and mystic visions of schools, sects, and religions. The ideas of Buddhism are its Dharma(s); and the working of the world according to Buddhism is Dharma; because Buddhism is the one true religion, the ideas of Buddhism are the same as the working of the world. The same is true of Hinduism.

To the extent Dharma coincides with intellectual and scientific understanding of the world, then use of the idea of Dharma is fine. The two are the same. The Dharma of weather is the same as the scientific analysis of weather. The Dharma of jazz is the same as the artistic feel for jazz. The Dharma of realistic socially conscious fiction is the same as the sense for realistic socially conscious fiction. Intellectual and scientific understanding of the world includes ideas such as “what goes round come round”, the evolution of cooperation, the evolution of morality, the likely pervasiveness of morality in evolved beings around the universe, natural cycles, and everything else that makes modern science so much fun. To the extent Dharma recognizes that morality exists, morality is a big part of the lives of evolved sentient beings, and morality governs many of the results to actions by sentient beings, that is fine too. To the extent Dharma recognizes patterns in the world and accepts that patterns run according to the laws of the world, such as stellar (solar) systems, galaxies, DNA, political campaigns, etc, than is fine. Thinking in terms of Dharma can be useful. Using the analyses of Dharma recorded in Buddhist and Hindu texts can be useful as long as the analyses fit situations better than alternatives and do not shut off our minds to better alternatives later. Hindu and Buddhist texts can be wonderful sources of suggestions.

If Dharma insists on more, then I disagree. There is no Dharma more than physical laws; energy and matter; the patterns formed through energy, matter, and physical laws; and the morality that emerges in the evolution of sentient beings. The only thing behind all this is God or the Mind of God. If Dharma is the same as God and-or the mind of God, then I want to see God and-or the mind of God in my terms. I admit this is selfish and narrow-minded of me, but I can do no better.

Besides the idea that Dharma explains the physical world and people’s place in it, Dharma was extended to social life, particular societies, the place of people in societies, and relations between people. Dharma was used to rationalize things as they are (the “status quo”) including inequality, exploitation, oppression, great wealth along with great poverty, gender relations, the superiority of men, the inferiority of women, and socio-economic class. If your father was a carpenter, you should be a carpenter. If your father was a great Rajah with untold wealth, likely you deserved the same as long as you had not done something in a past life to merit losing it. Indian society was as it was because that was the Dharma of India and Indians. Chinese society was as it was because that was the Dharma of China and Chinese.

The idea of social Dharma also taught mutual obligation and, sometimes, mutual support. If you were a Rajah, then you were obliged to govern your people well for the mutual and greater benefit of all. You could not simply milk your people for your own indulgence. If you were a soldier, you should carry out your duties and your job, just as Krishna advised Arjuna. If you were a doctor, you should heal almost everybody. If you were a priest, you should carry out the proper rituals for various people according to their social station and needs. If you were a husband, you should be a good man, father, and husband. If you were a wife, you should be a good woman, mother, and wife. In this regard, the idea of Dharma

was similar to the idea of social relations under Feudalism in Europe. It is similar to the idea of how social life works, or should work, held by many anthropologists.

This view of society and Dharma is charming and appealing. When everything goes well, people have a lot of freedom, people can change roles sometimes, and people can do what they want sometimes, it is not far off what people imagination of a good society. But that is not how it works out in practice. In real life, it more often seems to rationalize disparity, oppression, and exploitation than mutual support. It blocks freedom, change in role, and doing what you want. It gives people duties that they are unable to carry out well, such as people born to govern who cannot govern, and thus hurts society. It blocks people of ability rising to positions of responsibility and power. It traps men and women in stereotyped gender and parental roles.

When Dharma is extended to society, it is as if complete continuity holds between nature and society. Human society is simply part of nature. When a human society is stratified, filled with rich and poor, high and low, oppressed and oppressor, standard men and standard women, that is because that society is naturally that way as part of Dharma. While the abilities that people use to build societies evolved and so are natural, we should not view all societies as natural and inevitable. With the same abilities, people can make vastly different kinds of societies, just as with the same steel people can make vastly different kinds of buildings, boats, and cars. However much people came out of nature, and are governed by physical laws, what we do with our heritage should not be viewed as natural and so as inevitable and good. We should judge what we do in our societies by the best moral principles, and we should not simply take what is in our societies for granted as natural, inevitable, and good. The idea of Dharma blocks us from seeing how human action builds society and can rebuild society. The idea of Dharma blocks us from assessing societies according to the best moral principles. In this regard, the Dharma view of society is false and wrong, and I disagree with it. I get along better with the ideas of nature, physics, biology, evolution, social evolution, and history.

Likely the same comments apply to the Tao, Virtue, and Heaven; for which see the chapters on Taoism and Confucianism.

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 make 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.

18 Worlds 2

This chapter is the second to describe themes in world views. The first part of this chapter continues from the previous chapter while the second part dwells on an important world view. As with the worlds in the previous chapter, assess the worlds in these ways: Can we think of this world as a teaching game? Can we think of this world otherwise? What does this world teach us? What kind of behavior does this world call for? Does this world call for us to act along the lines of Jesus' message mixed with practicality? Can we graduate (succeed spiritually) in this world? When we graduate, what do we graduate to? If we have to leave this world to graduate, what do we leave this world for? Can we use the lessons of this world to live in this world?

PART 1: Continuation.

Ever-Interesting World.

I find the world continually interesting even if often exasperating. When I was young, there were no small computers. Every decade a scientific change opens new doors and asks new questions. Every hundred years, we get a new scientific revolution. Within the next few decades, we will have a good idea how the world started in the Big Bang and what will happen as the universe gets older. Every fifty years sees a major new artistic movement. Even though the new art says the same old things, the new art says them in different ways that are worth noticing. I cannot see all the movies that I want within my lifetime, let alone read all the novels or watch all the TV. People never tire asking which sports team will be number one this year, and I even like watching golf on TV. One lifetime is not enough to learn about one major form of life such as flowering plants or monkeys. One lifetime is not enough to learn one way of human life, such as being a farmer, programmer, Buddhist, Christian, Thai, or Oregonian. It is fun to know other people and other ways of life. There is no end to getting to know the world and various ways of life. I can imagine an end to it in the future when the world is populated by super smart beings, but I am not worried that I will get bored. Some lucky people seem to find the world an intrinsically fascinating place.

Boring World.

On the other hand, it doesn't matter which college teams wins the national championship in what sport. Maybe this batch of neighbors is temporarily quiet and clean but soon they will move out, only to be replaced by a batch that is loud and dirty. Loud and dirty is more common than clean and quiet. Movie stars look good for a few years but it doesn't last. Plots of new movies are the same as plots of old movies. Even if we understand what happened at the Big Bag, that knowledge won't change the basic character of life on Earth. Most people don't understand science, and most people can't assimilate new art after they are about twenty years old. Politics is the same old game, even if now we have bad democracy where once we had bad royalty. The real rulers in democracies, rich people, govern about as badly as old aristocrats used to do. Once you learn about a few animals or plants, you know about most of them. You can learn the basics of any way of human life, such as being a farmer or Christian, in a few weeks, and then new ways of life are only repetition-with-slight-variation rather than anything really new.

We do not need to “feel all ways of life from the inside” so as to understand all of them well enough. A Christian can learn about Islam, and vice versa, in a few weeks. After you get to know a few other ways of life, then a few more do not make much difference. After a while, deep down, all people and all ways of life are pretty much the same. Yes, you can make a TV show about “nothing” but even that gets boring after a while. It does not take a even a small portion of a single short lifetime to figure out that life is not mostly about anything intrinsically interesting but about fussing so as to produce a batch of new people, children and grandchildren, who go on to do more fussing to do the same thing.

Many ordinary people can be diverted by the never-ending superficial change of the world such as game shows on TV but that does not make the world intrinsically interesting or intrinsically good. That kind of entertainment is for idiots. Any person who might be interesting him-herself will see enough to know that the world is not interesting, and so being interesting defeats itself, and being interesting is more a burden than a reward.

This view is more than cranky pessimism. It is based on a survey of how things seem to be. This view is not necessarily the same as a fallen world, although a fallen world and a boring world could coincide.

The role of boredom behind ideas of the world is so important that I take it up again in another part of this chapter below.

Progress; Continually Better World.

Alternatively, the world is getting better. Three hundred years ago, people lived under aristocracies but now about half the world lives under democracies that work more-or-less. Three hundred years ago, most of the food was grown with animal power, and a farmer could only feed two or three people other than him-herself. Now one farmer feeds as many as a hundred other people, and the other people have time to work in science and art. In some places, for some times, the world does stink. But on the whole that is not true. If you are not in one of the bad places, try to see outside yourself.

Progress is an Illusion.

John Lennon “It’s getting so much better all the time”.

Every time we learn how to grow more food, people have more babies, and, in the end, everybody ends up about the same as they always were. The average level of life in the United States has not gotten better in the decades since 1970s, it has gotten worse. Even if, in some way, people are materially better off, they are not better off intellectually, artistically, or spiritually. People are just as ignorant, dull, stupid, and selfish as they ever were. To gain our little temporary bits of material well being, we have poisoned the world, drastically changed the climate, destroyed biodiversity, and turned vast areas of the world into a desert. People are not freer in general; they just think they are because the media says so. The mass of people do not decide elections and govern their own country now any more than they did four hundred years ago but we have to go through the pretense that they do.

A hundred years from now, when people are gestated in bottles and machines regulate most of the world, then we will see more clearly that we are not better off.

The World Could Have Been Better but We “Blew It”.

This is my basic position, and I will not go through it again. This world, and, I think, most evolved worlds, are not intrinsically good or bad, or progressive or stagnant. It depends on what the dominant evolved intellectual-aesthetic-moral life form makes of them. We did not make the best of our world. We did not make it good enough in general. It still might be good enough, and interesting enough, for some groups of people, some individuals, and whatever results from the future interaction of humans and machines.

Good or Bad for Me.

“I cannot decide if, on the whole, the world is interesting or boring, getting better or worse, and is a good place or a bad place. I cannot decide if the world worthwhile or not. All I can do is evaluate it for me and my immediate circle.”

In this case, the relevant question might be whether or not the world is an adventure, and whether it is adventure enough.

The Same Might be Good.

In some ways the world gets better, and in some ways it gets worse. In some ways it is interesting but even what is interesting now gets boring later. When the world is boring now, interesting things do seem to turn up, but then they get boring in their turn. I can't tell if, on the whole, to an objective observer, the world really is interesting or boring, good or bad. It seems as if, on the whole, the world might be about the same but that the world is different in different times and places. If so, that is good enough for me as long as I can get to the places that are interesting and getting better. A world that is not overall better off worse but that has a lot of variety in it is about the same as a world that is overall interesting and overall a good place.

In this case, the relevant question might be the same as above: Is the world an adventure? Is the world adventure enough?

Supra-Rational: Too Much to Understand Intellectually.

The world can be too hard to understand in two ways. First, it can be too hard to understand because it is too hard for humans to understand, that is, too hard for one particular evolved intellect to understand. If humans were smarter, the world might be easier to understand and evaluate.

If the world is too hard for humans to understand now, we cannot assess it as ultimately interesting or boring, good or bad, getting better or getting worse. All we can do is assess it according to our limited perspective. Maybe as humans evolve, our descendants will be able to better assess the world.

Second, the world might be too hard for any intellect to understand, as we know intellect. It might not be comprehensible to any finite intellect or to any infinite intellect. Another evolved intellect might see the world better than humans do but it still could not completely understand the world. The world might not

be that way. This outcome does not mean the world was not created by a mind. This outcome means the mind is not merely intellectual. It is not clear what it means to be a mind that is more than intellectual, but it is not necessary that all minds be basically intellectual.

If the world does not make sense intellectually, then we can't assess it unless we use non-intellectual criteria. People do not agree on non-intellectual criteria, so we cannot assess the world. Not even Romanticism can correctly assess the world by non-intellectual criteria, although it fools people into thinking it can. This problem of a greater-than-intellectual world cannot be cured by evolution unless we evolve in a way that transcends intellect, and, in addition, that particular way allows us to assess the world correctly.

In either case, all we can do is deal with what we can make sense of.

Most major civilizations and their religions, especially Western civilization and Christianity, have assumed that we can understand the world well enough intellectually to assess it properly. That idea is basic to Classical Greek philosophy. That is how Christianity helped science to arise. Even when mysticism and "supra-rationalism" play a part in civilizations, as they do in Hinduism and Taoism, there is a very strong rationalist strain, and there is an assumption that mere humans can "get" the world well enough to assess it properly and to orient toward it properly.

Many Worlds without End.

Some people think this world is infinitely fascinating but even they don't begin to understand how deep the fascination goes. Some people think this world is boring but they are wrong because they have no idea of the playfulness of the many worlds. Whether the world is ultimately rational or supra-rational is irrelevant. There are many worlds without end. This universe has hundreds of billions of galaxies, with hundreds of millions of stars in each galaxy, and trillions of elementary particles in each star. Besides this universe, there are more worlds (universes) than there are elementary particles in all of this universe. Each world is a significant interesting variation. The brightness of sunlight if you were standing an arm-length from the sun would be a tiny candle compared to the brightness of the many worlds. What makes sense here in this world does not make sense there in that world, and what makes sense there does not make sense here. It makes no sense at all to ask about the sense of it all. It makes no sense to ask if it is good or bad, or feels good or bad. It makes sense only to participate and to someday to get a glimpse of the many worlds as they cascade out beyond your limited glimpse.

Even if this is true, it misses the point. Good and bad do matter, in this world and in all worlds. What matters is what we do right here right now in this world or right there right then in any other world.

God is One, Whole, Undivided, Perfect, Complete, and Self-Sufficient.

As far as I know, all major religions and philosophies eventually come to the conclusion that God (Tao, Heaven, Dharma, the Spirit) is one, whole, undivided, perfect, complete, and self-sufficient even if they see the nature, personality, operation, or essence of God differently. I do not explain how they come to this conclusion because that is not important. The implications are important.

Why is there something instead of nothing? Why is the something imperfect or incomplete? As most children quickly figure out when they hear this idea of a complete God, if God is self-sufficient, they why did he make the world and people? If he needed us for some reason, then he is not self-sufficient etc. If he did not need us, and we are a lot of trouble, then why did he make us? If he is complete and perfect by himself, then how did he make us? If he is complete and perfect, and we are not one with him, we must be incomplete and imperfect, and therefore we must be the source of trouble.

The various answers to these questions define world views but I do not go through a list of possibilities. Some answers are given in the sections below.

A modern form of this dilemma replaces God with various things that are bigger than people but are still in the world: society, culture, the state, nature, the ecosystem, etc. The founder of modern sociology and anthropology, Emile Durkheim, in France, in the late 1800s, famously said that society is God. He meant that people get their ideas of God from the power of society over individuals and nature. Society seems to have power over nature because society dictates how people interact with nature. The modern political form of this idea is some kind of totalitarianism: socialism, fascism, Communism, theocracy, American Republican Mercantilism, all-inclusive PC communalism, and all-good nature. The collective counts; and people are understood only in terms of the collective. We come from the collective, and will return to the collective. Our problems begin where we diverge from the collective. We can solve our problems by merging back into the collective.

In the modern case, the origin of humans is not the same kind of issue. Nobody needs to ask why society makes people at all. We need to ask why society makes the kind of people that it does. Then the same questions follow in the same form.

Religion and social science only make progress when they get away from these questions. We can get away from them by dwelling on them until we make peace with them or we can get away from them by ignoring them until we feel comfortable getting back to them.

Emanation and Descent.

The idea of emanation does not strictly require the idea of a perfect, complete, self-sufficient God, and does not strictly require the idea of descent, but the three ideas usually go together, and it is easier to work with them together, so that is how I use them here.

God made the world by extruding (“emanating”) something from himself even if he just emanated himself from himself. The world is an emanation from God. The world emanated from God as a tree emanates from a seed, fruit emanates from a tree, a work of art emanates from an artist, a baby emanates from a woman, a car race emanates from a group of guys fooling around with engines, the wind emanates from air moving, etc. Usually there is no complete and strictly logical explanation of emanation, so the idea of emanation remains on the level of an image. But most people get the image well enough, and it makes enough sense to be satisfying.

Because God is perfect, whole, and complete, then nothing else can be perfect etc. If anything else were perfect etc., it would be God, and there is only one God, so anything else that is not God cannot also be

perfect. It might be very good but it cannot be perfect. At least in relation to God, anything else has to be less than perfect. I do not explain all the ways in which things can be imperfect but three of the most important are that things other-than-God are not as good as God, not as real, and not as self-sufficient (in Buddhist terms, they suffer from dependent origination). Because the universe and all the created worlds are not God, they too are imperfect. Everything descends in perfection-goodness-realness-sufficiency as it emanates from God. It is like a pyramid. God is at the apex. Everything else emanates from God and descends as it emanates. Everything else is less than God. Something might seem perfect, good, real, whole, seamless, self-sufficient, etc. to us but it would not seem so in comparison to God. Society, culture, the state, nature, our particular religion, capitalism, etc. might seem that way to us but would not seem so in comparison to God.

The universe could be binary: God and everything not-God. That seems too simplistic. It seems more in accord with what we see that the universe exists in several levels of perfection, realness, goodness, unity, self-sufficiency, etc. There are at least three levels: (1) God, (2) below God but still mostly, and (3) this material world. In most versions of this idea, there are at least seven: God, great sub-God (like Jesus) who really does most of the creating, sub-sub-God (like archangels), spiritual (like other angels), humans, this natural world, and below this world. Most versions also divide this natural world into beautiful natural stuff and "ugly icky" natural stuff, and include demons, to make at least nine levels. The highest levels are spiritual, ideal, light, good, full, and enduring while the lower levels are material, confusing, dark, bad, empty, and transient. Sometimes the world is made of two halves (see "Dualism" below), reflected around humans in the middle.

God likely did not emanate all the universe with all the levels all at once. More likely, God emanated the first subordinate level (creator sub-God), and then the first level emanated a second level and most of the other levels. Sometimes one level can emanate another level, as when good beautiful nature evolved human beings. The creator sub-God level might be amazing but it is not God, so it could not emanate anything that is absolutely perfect. It could not even emanate anything as perfect as itself. With each emanation, things got less perfect, less spiritual, more material, and more screwed up. Not only did the world and other worlds emanate, they also descended.

By the time we get far away from God to this human world, we are pretty well mired in becoming rather than being, illusion, confusion, materiality, and loss of self. This world is not the worst world imaginable. This world still echoes the beautiful worlds above. It is still possible to ascend from this world. But this world is bad enough to be a danger to humans.

This view of the world explains many things, in particular the nature of composite beings such as humans, the existence of spiritual beings of much power, the existence of conflict, and the existence of evil.

In modern versions, society-culture, or nature, emanates the world, and each emanation is less perfect the farther away it is from society-culture or nature. For example, capitalism is a perfect system. The corporation is one of the creations of capitalism. The corporation is not in itself perfect but the system of interacting corporations is led to be more perfect. Society-culture makes rules. The rules make people into farmers, warriors, priests, scholars, rulers, craftspeople, artists, etc. None of those are perfect but they play a role in a system that is more perfect than any of them alone could be. We can say similar

things about the justice system, the university, the football program, the corporation and the people that work for the corporation, etc.

Demi-Urge. This section describes an important variant in the myth of emanations. Because God is perfect and complete, he does not directly create the world. God creates a slightly lesser god who does make the world. This creator god is less than God but still tremendously important, creative, and powerful. In Classical world views and philosophy, this creator god was called the “demi-urge”. Aristotle gives the first clear account of the situation. Because this creator god is not quite God, the world that he creates is not quite perfect, but quite close.

To account for the subsequent falling of the rest of the world, sometimes the creator god “goes bad”, like the Devil in Christian mythology. The creator god can “go bad” through pride, jealousy, vanity, or just because it chooses badness rather than evil.

Sometimes to account for the mixture of good and evil in this world, and for the strife in the world, God does not create only one creator god but two, the gods of light and darkness. They are supposed to create a unified lesser world, the world of angels and of human experience, (also “the unity of the two sides of the Force”) but instead they quarrel, botch the creation of lesser worlds, and create both light parts and dark parts that don’t mix well. Sometimes the whole thing gets resolved in the end, while sometimes not.

God creating the world has always been a problem in Christianity. You can see John the Evangelist trying hard to wrestle with the problem in his gospel. The New Testament makes clear that God created the world through Jesus (as “the Word”). That idea seems to suggest that Jesus is the lesser demi-urge, and that is how Gnosticism (see elsewhere) understood the situation. The gospel of John suggests that Jesus is less than God but official Christian doctrine insists that Jesus is fully God. In the Christian view, God is both God and the creator demi-urge semi-God. If Jesus is fully God, then it is not clear why Jesus created the world or how, or how evil comes into the picture. If God created the world through Jesus, then Jesus made Satan too, and that idea makes Christians nervous. Christians want to have their cake of Jesus as full God and eat their cake of Jesus as the demi-urge at the same time. This conflict is one root of the idea of the Trinity, and why the idea of the Trinity is so confusing and hard to understand.

To account for badness, the New Testament invokes an extremely powerful Satan. In that case, it appears as if Satan is the demi-urge, also took part in creating the world, and might be about equal to Jesus. Satan and Jesus might be the two co-equal demi-urges. Jesus and Satan might be twins. But official Christian doctrine insists Satan is not equal to Jesus, did not create, and is not the brother of Jesus. So Satan becomes an archangel at one level below Jesus. Satan becomes the false unnatural creator while Jesus is the genuine natural creator. Roughly equivalent to Satan in level but not in evil are the other archangels, in particular perhaps Michael. The other archangels are not at all creators but only instruments of the creativity of God and Jesus. Unlike Satan, they are willing to accept their lower status as mere instruments and do not try to be more than they are.

The idea that Jesus (or someone like him) is the higher truer real natural creator while Satan (or someone like him) is the lower false unreal (empty) unnatural creator arises repeatedly in Western civilization and probably is much older than Jesus. You can see a version in Romanticism and you can see a version of

genuine versus poser in Existentialism. In modern nature worship, nature is the true good creator demi-urge while people and civilization are the bad lesser creator demi-urge.

Ascending.

God foresaw that the world would not be as he is. He foresaw that each level would get worse, and that a lot of pain would result. He foresaw that sentient-moral-aesthetic beings would arise who would come to think of him and yearn for him, and who would suffer from being trapped on lower levels. He would make sure we had a way back to him. The way back is ascendance. Ascendance is salvation.

Once a being achieves sentience, it can use sentience to work its way back through the levels to unite with God again. People can overcome their contradictions, connections with vices, bad ideas, and bad causes, their material needs, etc. to become better citizens and better people. Then they can become more religious. Then they can become more saintly. Then they can become more ascetic and given to intellectual pursuits such as philosophy, mathematics, and meditation. From there, they can ascend to levels that I am not competent to describe.

All religions, including Christianity, have versions of ascending although they might not call it that and they might insist that it be put in the context of other religious ideals such as grace and being judged by God on Judgment Day. The idea of ascending easily combines with the idea of devotion. In the Classical Mediterranean world, the leading philosophy of ascending was neo-Platonism, and its leading teacher was Plotinus. I do not describe it here. It greatly influenced Christianity. It also influenced the idea of progress on the scale of society.

People still have an idea of getting better, and still have an idea of getting better in stages. Not all of this can be considered a version of Ascending. When a Scout works through his-her levels and merit badges, we can't see it as exactly the same as neo-Platonic ascending. When a business person climbs the rungs to reach CEO, it is not the same, although the business person might feel as if it is even better. It is not always clear how much ideas of getting better conform to the religious ideal of Ascending.

Of course, people can descend as well. That idea is known well enough already.

Dualism Again.

Levels, powers, qualities, abilities, personalities, judgments, etc. quickly become confusing. Is the abstract world of mathematics really higher, better, and realer than the world of human love? Instead, it is easier, and certainly it is true in part, to order the world along lines of obvious contrast and conflict. Take the various possibilities, and arrange them in two lists with each item in one list opposed to an item in the other list. It is easier to divide the world in to good and evil, light and dark, high and low, man and woman, woman and man, spirit and material, material and spirit, natural and artificial, smart and stupid, genuine and false, naïve and cunning, real and illusion, being and becoming, right and powerful, striving and comfortable, weak and powerful, poor and wealthy, common and aristocratic, city and country, us and them, etc. Now that you have arranged your two lists, pick a side. Different societies-cultures-religions places have arranged the lists differently – in some societies the aristocrats are good while the

country pagan people are bad. Most societies-cultures-religions eventually simplify things down to a pair of such lists even when their leaders and wise people know better and say so.

Which features are on what list tells a lot about a society-culture-religion, and sometimes it is useful to look at the lists to assess a religion.

One particular arrangement of lists has been common and influential for the last four thousand years, and still shapes how we see the world today: Good versus Evil, Light versus Dark, Spirit versus Material, Soul versus Body, True Order versus Artificial Order, State Order versus Chaos, Angels versus Devils, Saints versus Sinners, and Us versus Them. This is the world view of many groups today that are based on ethnic, gender, politics, economics, nation, and religion.

We probably couldn't get through the day without some dualistic simplifications: breakfast cereal that I like versus breakfast cereal that I don't like; my car versus my wife's car. There is a real difference between right and wrong.

Even so, assessing any situation entirely in terms of dualisms usually causes a lot of harm. The world really is not divided up neatly into "us versus them". American politics since the late 1960s has been a bloodbath of "us versus them". This simplistic war has eroded the country, eroded freedom, and eroded the standard of living for all Americans.

Most great religious leaders have used dualisms but warned against dwelling in them. When Jesus said "Go and sin no more" he recognized the distinction between sin and not-sin. But he also let sinners go if they would reform.

Despite the wisdom and caution of most religious leaders, the most important and powerful form of dualism, listed above, was clearly stated by one important religious leader, Mani, about 400 years before Jesus. Mani might have been born in Iraq but he lived most of his life in Persia (Iran) and he probably picked up his version of dualism there. In his lifetime, he was a religious star, and had many followers. He explained how the world originated from one God, but was hijacked by a Devil. A follower could find God again through Mani's teachings. Eventually the followers of good and light would have a final battle with the followers of bad and darkness. The followers of Mani are called "Manicheans", and the term has also come to mean anybody who believes in simple pervasive dualism with good and evil at the core. "Manichean Dualism" means an ideology with pervasive dualism and with good and evil at the core. The terms usually are meant disparagingly. Manichaeism influenced nearly all the religions of the Middle East for hundreds of years, and formal Manichaeism even got as far as China. Manichaeism was a powerful force shaping Christianity, and also a powerful force against which wise Christian leaders fought. Saint Augustine was a Manichean before he was a Christian; his Manichean beliefs shaped his Christian theology; and his Manichaeian Christian theology strongly shaped Christianity from his day on to the present. His reading of Paul is almost purely Manichean. I find this sad.

Gnosticism.

Except perhaps for a few mystics, most people are not born knowing about God, Emanation, Descent, Ascent, Dualism, various spiritual beings, various spiritual powers, etc. Even in Star Wars, the Jedi and

Sith are not born knowing about the Force but have to be trained. They have to be trained properly to get most use of the Force and not to be dangerous. We need knowledge. Knowledge is potentially powerful and sometimes can set us free.

The word "Gnosticism" comes from Greek, and comes from the same root as the English "know" and "knowledge". Literally, it means "know-icism" or "know-ism". The literal meaning has changed to become the title of a system of belief, so now the term is capitalized and it means "doctrine of (secret powerful) knowledge about how the world really is rather than what it appears to average people" or "religion based on (secret powerful) knowledge about how the world really is rather than what it appears to average people".

In theory, Gnosticism could refer to any knowledge about how the world really is, especially to knowledge that is not common, such as that the world is really a happy place or the world really is a boring place. In practice, Gnosticism always refers to knowledge about how God made the world, Emanation, Descent, Levels of the world, spiritual and material beings, Ascent, and Dualism. Compared to that knowledge, other kinds of knowledge are not very important or useful.

This kind of deep knowledge is not the same as simply knowing about things such as how to bake a cake or how to figure the area of a rectangle. This kind of knowledge has the intrinsic ability to give power and to set you free. If you know how God made the world etc, then life changes. Even if you do not ascend to high levels immediately, automatically you ascend a bit, and are more in control of your life because of your ascent. Even just knowing there is this kind of knowledge sets you on the path to further ascent. The knowledge is as much a life-changing skill as mere information. Learning to program a computer, learning law, or learning about medicine is not just assimilating facts but learning a skill that changes your life. Gnosis is the highest example of such knowledge as skill.

With skills that change your life, there is a body of facts but there is also transformation and initiation. Gnosticism had formal schools in the Classical world. Gnosticism as a formal school had ceremonies and life-changing rituals. Gnosticism has a feeling of being "in the know" as opposed to being a member of the ignorant herd, and, as with all groups that feel they are "in the know", has the secret rituals to go along.

The same ideas live on in the modern world, mostly as the suspicion that the world is not as it seems, we are at a disadvantage for not knowing how the world really is, some other people know how the world really is, they are at an advantage, and we would like to share their advantage by becoming one of the privileged people who know how the world really is. This attitude is the basis for cults but it is also the basis for many world religions. Christianity, Buddhism, some kinds of Hinduism, and some kinds of Taoism, started out with this attitude.

The same ideas are often expressed in cinema and TV, and often make for great stories. The movie trilogy "The Matrix" is essentially a Gnostic tale in which the hero ascends levels until he finally knows how both the human and machine worlds work, and is able to merge them so as to defeat the Devil. The scene in which Neo chooses the red pill or the blue pill is a key Gnostic ritual. Not all Gnostic stories are this good in quality or this good for us.

An implication of Gnosticism is that we need saving, Gnostic knowledge can save us, and knowledge alone can save. Nothing else can save us. Other spiritual qualities such as decency, following the Golden Rule, mercy, perseverance, etc. certainly are not bad but they are not key and they are not enough. Another implication is that those people who are not saved are damned, those people who are not “in the know” are damned, and the damned are the automatic enemies of the saved. It is easy to see how bad people might be the enemies of people who are “in the know” but it is also true that merely good people and merely decent people are enemies as well because they tempt us away from the path of true and saving knowledge.

God Intervenes in World History.

The material in this chapter is in addition to the question of divine intervention from earlier chapters. I skip any discussion of complexity, and growing complexity, in evolution.

In the simple form of this idea about world history, world history has a direction, and individual people would be well advised to go along with the direction of the world. About two hundred years ago, most commerce in the world began switching over to capitalism. Now, a business person had better think like a capitalist. About a hundred years ago, government began to switch over to representative democracy. Now most people need to think how to get along in large representative democracies. As long as we can identify the trend, we don't need to bring God into the business.

Yet people do want to bring God into the business. People like to think God foresaw the major trends and approves of them. People like to think God foresaw Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, benevolent royalty in its time, traditional farming in its time, democracy, and capitalism. People like to think God nudges along the trends if they are not going fast enough or in the right way, sometimes by sending along a champion like Arthur to teach good government and Constantine to establish Christianity, and sometimes a prophet like the Buddha to preach the Dharma. If people can recognize the major trends in world history that God promotes, they want to go along with those trends. This view feeds Romanticism.

I believe God foresaw most of world history, and approves of some of it such as democracy. I don't think God intervenes much to help out.

Each major civilization-and-religion has its own version of God-and-world-history but the most relevant for the Western world is the idea that came from Judaism. I explain that version in a later chapter. We need to know it not only because it is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but because it has been so often abused, even to the detriment of the Jews.

Culmination of World History.

World history might have trends without necessarily having a culmination or a focal end point. Farming succeeded hunting-and-gathering. Aristocratic monarchy succeeded tribes and chiefdoms. Industrialism and capitalism succeeded farming. Democracy succeeded monarchy. Something else will succeed both capitalism and representative democracy. Something else will probably succeed biological humans as we know them now. I don't know where it will all end. It might not even end in five billion years when the Sun swells up and eats the Earth.

The idea that world history might not culminate, or that it might not culminate as wished, makes uneasy the people who see God as promoting a trend and who actively promote the trend themselves. If you are a capitalist, and you think God promotes capitalism, then you want capitalism to be the culmination of world history and the ultimate formal expression of God's will here on Earth. The same is true of every major religion. If your particular way of life is not the culmination of world history and of God's will, then you are not the receiver of the greatest possible grace of God.

Jews wished to see world history as culminating in them even though Israel fell and even though other ethnic groups seemed to find favor with God. Christians first, and Muslims later, inherited the idea from Jews. Christians still wish to see world history and the will of God as culminating in Jesus and the Church even though they know that superficial historical events have gone on long afterward. The idea of a Day of Judgment allows major religions, including Christianity and Islam, to remain the culmination of God's will and world history despite historical changes and new trends.

Even Romanticism was based on culmination even though Romanticism seemingly championed the ever-unfolding of the Spirit in new ways. The only reason that we could know about the previous unfolding of the Spirit was because finally the Spirit had revealed itself to a few great thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel. If the Spirit reveals itself to particular great thinkers, that fact means the culmination of the self-revelation of the Spirit is close at hand, and the great thinkers are the highest expression of the will of God. Marx and Communism inherited this view of themselves and world history.

Even though I think God prefers some movements in history more than others, such as democracy in its time over aristocratic tyranny, I don't think there is an inevitable direction in world history, world history culminates in any particular movement or people, or that any particular institutions are the embodiment of God's will on Earth during the time of culmination.

It is easy, and mutually reinforcing, to combine Emanation, Descent, Levels, Beings, Peoples, Ascent, Dualism, and Culmination. The large modern nations do it in their visions of themselves. I leave it to the reader's imagination.

Order, Chaos, Emptiness, Naturalness, and Genuine Creativity.

The section is mostly about order and chaos. Emptiness gets a few words below. This section is needed because, in the last 200 years, first the West, and now the world, developed a guiding myth chaos and creativity. Romanticism easily hijacks the myth into error.

In the Middle East and Egypt at least 4000 years ago, people told myths of chaos versus order. People wanted order. They needed order imposed by somebody, including the state. People were trying to live by gardening on the shores of rivers and swamps, and feared the chaos that came of both floods and droughts. They wanted somebody who could tame the waters so that the waters came regularly in the right amounts. In the Middle East, they personified chaos as a dragon-like beast. The Israelites adopted the myth to their situation. In the Tanakh, they called the beast of chaos "Tiamat". God defeated the beast of chaos and imposed order on the world. As representatives of God, the priests and aristocrats of the state defeated the chaos of desert, floods, wars, and social injustice to give regularity and life. Chaos

was not always bad or evil, and it was not always opposed to order, but it was not order, it could undo order, and it was not subject to the control of ordinary people. It has to be tamed.

About the same time that capitalism became strong, about 250 years ago in the middle 1700s, the West, especially England, developed a different myth of chaos and order. Order is the enemy; especially the order imposed by the state is the enemy. State order is supposed to be for the benefit of all people but really it is for the benefit of the aristocrats. Inevitably state order leads to oppression and death. It is artificial order and artificial creation. In contrast, true natural creative order arises spontaneously out of seeming chaos, out of the action, interaction, exchange, creativity, mixing, bubbling, and creativity of the mass of common people. The apparent chaos of common people is not really chaos but is a kind of natural creative force that leads to natural organization. The rigid mindset of artificially ordered oppressors cannot understand, accept, or live with this natural creative chaotic force that leads to a better higher order. Natural chaos is really good. The imposed artificial order of the state does not really bring order but actually brings chaos to the minds and hearts of people and of nature. The imposed artificial order of the state is really the bad chaos that the people should fear.

This is the myth behind:

- The modern version of Robin Hood
- Popular movements and populism
- The evil Emperor versus the good Rebels of Star Wars
- Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely
- The Devil as Lord of the material world and of state power
- The fact that oppressive regimes make the trains run on time
- Rock and roll defeats oppression and bad music
- The free market is better than anything the state can devise
- Good new ideas come only from a group of guy-or-gals in their garages
- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
- Black people in the United States are more creative than White people
- The workers are always right and the bosses are always wrong
- The capitalists are always right and the bureaucrats in Washington are always wrong
- The people are always right and the scientists are wrong when they disagree with the people

This myth is partly true. In a formal scientific version, it does help explain how capitalism and the free market can lead to order and to benefit out of apparent chaos. It helps drive a modern mathematical movement called “complexity theory”. This myth puts some force into modern democratic movements. It helps overthrow tyrants such as in Libya and Syria.

This myth also serves as the medium by which rich people and officials of the state can lie so as to have their cake and eat it too. Rich people and state officials say they are “turning loose the free market, reducing taxes, reducing regulations, etc.” while really they are imposing their own state order through their control of state institutions. All politicians, including Left Wing politicians, falsely claim to be “on the side of the people” so as to serve their own ends.

In fact, both chaos and state order can be both good and bad. Sometimes good new ideas come out of chaos and mixing. Sometimes the ideas cannot be implemented unless the state provides a framework within which people can act safely. Sometimes chaos is just hurtful. Sometimes we need state order to protect us from the lies of rich people, powerful people, demagogues, and even from the intrigues of state officials themselves. We should not romanticize the opposition of chaos and order. We should not let the myth fool us into thinking that the masses are always right while the intellectuals are always wrong. We should not let the myth fool us into thinking the natural dark-skinned races are always right in the long run while the rule-bound light-skinned races are always a wrong dead end – or vice versa. We should not identify our religion with the spontaneous order of nature and God while we think of other religions as an artificial order imposed on natural creativity.

I think great nations have had a powerful impetus to order as well as a powerful among their people to advance. Great nations always have an unsolved conflict between order and chaos. Too much of one is as bad as too much of the other. Just as art needs the resistance of a material, so order needs the resistance of chaos and chaos needs the resistance of order. Order and chaos are the materials out of which the other creates its own works. Just as peoples who seek security at the expense of freedom usually end up with neither, so peoples who seek creativity in chaos at the expense of order usually end up with another kind of dead order and with no creativity at all. To rely on the myth of chaos without also providing some order results, in the long run, in deadness and boredom.

Emptiness Again, and Contrast.

Because the order that arises out of chaos does not seem to arise out of any other order, it seems as if it arises out of emptiness. It seems as if Emptiness is not empty but is full of good potential. This way of thinking is a trap of thinking, a trap of the mind. It would not be much of a problem except it gets mixed up with other ideas of emptiness and creativity. In a bad form, it rationalizes the Devil (Lord of Darkness and Nothingness) but I find that use of the idea so silly that I simply dismiss it.

A positive thing only gets done because of something else that does not get done or gets left out. In two classic examples of this idea, a bucket is only useful because of the emptiness in the middle, and a wheel only is useful because of the hole in the through which the axle goes and around which the wheel turns. Every note in a melody is also an instance of a lot of other notes not played. Even a chord is only three or four notes out of a dozen possible notes. An airplane is useful for what it leaves behind as it is going to somewhere else. Emptiness and positive-ness go together to get things done.

That is fine as far as it goes but we have to be careful not to make too much of it, to romanticize it. The bucket would not be useful without the emptiness in the center but it would also not be useful without the walls to surround the water. The wheel is not useful without the rim that contacts the ground. The note that sounds is the note that sounds, it is not the absence of all the notes that do not sound. Sometimes we leave a place just by leaving it but even that is a positive escape. Usually we leave a place to get to another positive place.

Emptiness might allow space for some creativity but it is not creativity itself. What a potter takes away from a lump of clay allows the figure to emerge but the figure is not simply the absence of clay. Just because we don't always see where creativity comes from does not mean it comes from emptiness.

Emptiness is just emptiness, it is not another positive force in disguise. We like to think in terms of positive forces just as we like to personify the wind and the rain. When we see something come up, and we can't explain exactly where it comes from, it is consistent with our language and our imagination to say it came from emptiness; but that is only a way of thinking that we ought not to get trapped by.

Another way of thinking with emptiness is by thinking with contrasts instead of with positive assertions. Any note in a musical scale is only a note because of how it contrasts with other notes. Any color is not just a color but is a color also because of how it contrasts with other colors. As a matter of fact, our eyes see shapes not merely as positive things but in contrast to other shapes and to their backgrounds. When we see black, white, or shades of gray, we seem them not as stand-alone images but only in contrast to other specks of black, white, or shades of gray. When we see a person, we see it in contrast to trees and to other similar shapes such as dogs and street signs.

We need contrast but, as with emptiness, we should not let that need fool us into thinking that contrast is somehow a positive thing in itself that is more important than other positive things. We understand an elephant by knowing it is not a pig, deer, or tiger, but that does not mean we have completely understood the elephant when we know it is not a pig, deer, or tiger. If we know each of them only by contrasting it with the others then we don't know much at all. This is a mistake that philosophers and social scientists made in the decades after 1960. This mistake feeds moral relativity and other kinds of relativity.

Good and Evil as Substances.

In the movie "Barbarella", the town to which her spaceship falls was built over a lake filled with a dark seething liquid, which turned out to be the evil of the world. This evil sets the character for the residents of the town and sets the tone for life there. To gain freedom, Barbarella had to come to grips with the evil flowing underneath. In an episode of Star Trek TNG, an advanced race decided to leave all their evil behind and to cast out into the heavens as a new reborn race purified of evil. They collected all their evil into a sentient powerful black sludge, capable of self-action, which they left behind as a large pond on their old planet. The evil black sludge being is lonely and has a bad temper. Unfortunately, the crew of the Enterprise run into the evil black sludge being, and it does bad things to them. On a better note, we think of goodness as "water of the heart" or as "honey of the heart". We think of kind words as "sugar", and think of affection as "sugar".

Just as we personify the wind and the fire so also, in reverse, we think of abstractions as substances. We think of justice as like a person or like a steel hammer. In scary movies, evil can be transmitted like the "cooties" of childhood games. This way of thinking is not necessarily bad, and can be useful in thinking through a situation. If we need to think about implementing justice, it might help to think of it as a hammer that must be wielded properly. This way of thinking can cause problems when we can't get out of our image. Sometimes we need to let go of the old image to adopt a better image. Sometimes we need to get away from images for a while and to think in other ways. Unfortunately, people tend to get stuck in their images, and become vulnerable to bad ideas.

Dream World.

The idea that this world is a dream is common enough so no specific example is needed. The idea itself is not very important, less important than a hidden message (“subtext”) conveyed along with the idea. The hidden message really is what the idea of “world as dream” is usually all about; the idea of world as dream is usually only the carrier for the hidden message. The hidden message is that this world is more real and consistent than a fantasy but less real and important than we usually take it. How real and how important the world is depends on specific versions of the myth of the world as dream. When we think of this world as not really real and not most important, then we are free to take a different attitude toward this world. For some people, this means freedom from silly social convention so that they can be a better person. For other people, this means freedom for self-indulgence.

I think this world is not as real and important as the mind of God but it is still real and important. It is the only world we have, it has rules, we have to live in it, and we have to try to be good decent people while we do live in it. We have to try to make it better. We are stuck in it, and might as well make the best of it. We do not make the best of it by obsessing on wealth, power, idealized families, religious ideology, fame, success, or any particular aspect. If thinking of the world as dream helps us get over bad obsessions, then the idea serves a good purpose. We have to avoid allowing the myth to lead us to self-indulgence. It is fun to make the world more dreamy and less dreamy in our imaginations, and to see how that feels. Sooner or later we have to settle on a range of dreaminess that is compatible with our best principles, and to live there.

PART 2: Losing and Finding Forever.

The ideas here show up again in later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

The Ugly Reality of Boredom.

People have children who have children who have children who have children and so on with no obvious point. People crave stories. People want to see their lives as stories. Not to see your own life as a story is to get caught in horrible boredom. Boredom is as much of a driving force as hunger, fear, lust, power, and keeping ahead of the Joneses, and boredom probably has been a big driving force through much of our evolution since we developed enough imagination to succeed. Boredom drives the other forces except for hunger and sometimes fear. The ideas of the world as a game, the world as a dream, and that we live many lives are responses to boredom.

The idea that the world is boring is not the same as that the world is pointless although the two ideas do affect each other. You can be bored with a meaningful world and you can be amused by a meaningless pointless absurd world. This section is about boredom rather than meaning although it is helpful to use lack of meaning to get across the feeling of boredom.

First, you live an ordinary human life for a very long time. Think of three kinds of normal human lives. As an original forager 50,000 years ago, your whole life was gathering, hunting, having children, and dealing with the neighbors. You do this for 1000 years. People about 10,000 years ago also tended gardens. Imagine you tend a garden, find a mate, have children, and fuss with neighbors for 1000 years. Modern people go to work, find a mate, raise children, fuss with neighbors, watch movies, and watch TV. Imagine doing that for the next 1000 years. At first, the love affairs, children, baseball games, family dinners,

overdue bills, squabbles, brushes with the law, pregnancies, intoxications, etc. would be fun. We were adapted to enjoy this kind of life. Yet if you live a long time, this life must become boring. The modern version would be excruciating. Sometimes comedy skits make a joke of this by torturing spies by making them watch bad movies or bad TV rather than “water boarding” them. Ordinary life is not worthwhile. It is not evil, and it can be good sometimes, but it is not worthwhile. Eventually, you cannot find a new song to listen to, and “the next big thing” looks like every other previous “next big thing”. Eventually you would beg for release; likely well before 1000 years was over. If you lived long enough, it would be easy to see that life is boring.

Second, you live for a very long time in a world of swords, sorcery, and kingdoms rising and falling, like the TV show “Game of Thrones”. Likely you would enjoy this version of life longer than middle class TV land but even this life would not escape boredom forever. Even if you were king, queen, or the most adept wizard in the world, eventually it would be not fun, and it would be boring.

Third, scientific and philosophical problems go on for a long time. It seems, for every scientific problem we solve, several new ones arise. If a person could get deeply interested in science, he-she might work on scientific problems almost forever without getting bored. Life might seem worthwhile. Yet it is not true that scientific problems last forever. Science is only 400 years old. In that time, scientists have solved many problems such as that the Earth goes around the Sun and life evolved. Even problems that remain theoretically open, such as gravity, have practical solutions, Newton’s equations and Einstein’s equations, that let us do what we need. Someday in the not-so-distant future, we will solve even difficult problems such as merging quantum mechanics and Relativity. Philosophical problems might not have definitive theoretical solutions but we will come up with practical solutions that help society carry. We will be able to make smart computers. Ten thousand years from now, even intellectual life might not be fascinating. Life might not seem deeply interesting even to a nerd.

Fourth, maybe the human life we see is not the realest human life. Imagine that real immortal people of the future, bored and desperate, have set up a simulation in which the short-lived ugly people that we see around us are only game characters for the real people. You are only an avatar for some other long-lived beautiful person living somewhere else. By living a short while as a character, pretend-dying, and then pretend-being-reborn, the real immortal people operating the simulation can fight boredom for a long time. But not forever, not even for them. Someday they will become bored with every simulation. Even if they do not become bored with every simulation, eventually they must realize that even simulations are not worthwhile. Simulations are not anything qualitatively different, they are just variations on the same old themes. Even when particular simulations break the rules of physics, eventually all simulations become just variations on the same old themes. Life is not fascinating even in fantasy land.

Fifth, maybe we can make the simulation interesting if we make it the right kind. Scientific, intellectual, philosophical, and social problems might all be solved but moral problems keep arising. Even if a moral problem is not new, it has to be addressed every time it appears in slightly different clothes. Almost by definition, we care about moral problems, so we have to engage. When we engage, we are not bored, and life seems worthwhile. Create the kind of simulation that appeals to moralists and to do-gooders like me. Create a world where moral issues keep coming up. Maybe that is what this world is. As long as there have been people, we have had moral issues, and they seem to be the same moral issues. Maybe we already live in a game where moral problems have kept us engaged for at least a million years. We

hardly ever get tired of them. We always get excited about which politician is right and wrong. We always get excited when a dirty old pervert subverts an innocent young life. Yet even this can get old. After a while, we stop caring even about morality. After a while, we say, "To hell with it. Let the politicians and power mongers figure it out. Let that ethnic group take care of its own troubles. Let that gender group take care of its own troubles. Let the Liberals whore themselves out. Let Conservatives stop lying and balance the budget, or they can do down with the rest of us." Even moral life wears out. Even if good and evil depend on each other and are locked in a never-ending game, moral life wears out.

Sixth, suppose one or more of these scenarios, separately or together, succeed. Every time a superior person gets bored, he-she pretend-dies and pretend-gets-reborn over and over. The previous boredom is forgotten, and a new life begins. In this way, a person can stave off boredom indefinitely. Then life seems worthwhile. This solution is offered by Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Please keep in mind all these scenarios, in particular this last scenario, for the chapters on them. Even this solution does not avoid boredom. The perpetual life of satisfying illusion is not a solution.

Dealing with Boredom.

Faced with deep boredom, the idea of death makes more sense. Maybe death is not a bane but a boon. Maybe death makes sure life is short enough to be interesting. A short interesting life seems much better than a never-ending dull boring life. Even a short interesting life that ends in old age and moderate pain seems much better. When we face the end, we wish it would go on for a while longer, but do we really want it to go on for 10,000 more years, especially if we are old and in pain?

We can improve on the idea of death to make it make even more sense. We can be reborn with most of our memory wiped out. Instead of truly dying, and instead of being faced with deep boredom, we face deep forgetfulness. If we are reborn to a sequence of short lives, we need never be bored. Each life faces fairly new situations with fairly new problems. As long as we can forget between each life, we could go on like this forever. A sequence of short lives is better than an infinite one life. We never really die, we just go away for a while to get ready to come back.

There is another way to deal with boredom. Risk is fun as long as it does not kill us prematurely or make us unhappy with life such as by crippling us or trapping us in a bad marriage. People don't want real risk. We want pretend risk, risk that feels real as long as we are caught up in it but in which we can't really die, or get crippled. Suppose the immortal people of the future create an electronic simulation. Life in their game is much like life now, with all its fun risks. A character in the simulation is like a real living person now, and faces death in the game. An immortal person of the future can take on the persona (avatar or character) in the game. All risk is real within the game but is not real to the person outside the game who voluntarily entered the game. To make the game right, the immortal person of the future gets lost is his-her game character. While playing the game, the immortal person of the future forgets that he-she is anyone but the character in the game. The game is like the movies "Total Recall" or "The Matrix" but fun and benevolent. For a while, risk is real, life is worthwhile, and life is not boring. When he-she dies, he-she remembers. But nobody really dies. Death is not really real. After a fake death, of course, boredom sets in again, and the immortal person of the future goes back to the game. Besides getting out of the game for a while by dying, he-she also can get out of the game if, while in the game, he-she remembers that he-she is only playing a game, and that the game life is not the realest life. In that case, a person

does not disappear from the game right way, but only waits to die the natural death of the game life. In effect, this is the same as living many short real lives on this Earth. The characters in the game could not tell the difference between living short “real” lives in the game versus living short real lives on this Earth in which we die and are reborn. It could be one of the major goals of the game to remember while still in the game, and the real immortal people who manage to recall while still in character would earn extra prestige. Maybe this game already happened, so that we, and all the people around us, are real in this game but are not real for the immortal people of the future.

God Loses Himself to have more Fun.

Maybe God gets bored too. In that case, this world, all worlds that have ever been, and all possible worlds, is how God deals with boredom. God deals with his boredom by losing himself to put himself into the world. God falls asleep (loses himself) to dream the world (create the world).

In a classic episode of the revived version of the TV show “The Outer Limits”, Ron Glass plays the Devil. The Devil is trying to gather the soul of a man, I think a schoolteacher. The Devil will give up if the man can give the Devil a task that the Devil cannot do. The Devil can do anything. The Devil can make or destroy anything, even whole galaxies. The Devil knows where everything in the universe is, can zoom to retrieve it, and can get back in no time at all. The Devil can go to any time past or present. To the Devil, there is no lost item or lost moment of time. The Devil can espouse and refute any philosophy. At first the man is worried. Then, in a stroke of inspiration, he tells the Devil to “get lost”, that is, to lose himself. This the Devil cannot do. The Devil cannot negate himself, especially the Devil cannot negate himself in fantasy. The Devil is an all-competent unlimited intellect; but only an intellect. The Devil has the limited creativity of a formula, of a machine. The Devil does not have the true creativity of God. God could lose himself. This story is a modern version of true creativity versus false creativity. This is a modern version of the Devil as the Lord of this world of matter, energy, and power. This is an embodied version of the Liar’s Paradox, of Godel’s Paradox.

In this view of the world, God can only overcome boredom by losing himself. A lost God has more fun than a self-aware found God, at least temporarily for a very long time. For God to lose himself is the same as for us to die and be reborn over and over. What is around us is one instance of what happens when God loses himself, when God dreams or plays. As long as we believe this world is the realest world, and the only real world, and we stay committed to this world, then God continues to sleep and to dream and to have fun. We are also the way in which God sometimes wakes up and finds himself again. We are the way in which God recalls that he is God. Each time a particular person understands that this world is God asleep dreaming, God partially wakes up. Luckily for God, at any given time, few people feel this, so mostly God keeps sleeping and dreaming through people being deeply involved in this world of his dreams. When everybody has awakened, then God will be fully awake. When that happens, God likely will lose himself again, and it will start all over again, perhaps in a world with different physical laws and a different feel to reality.

The idea that the world results from God falling asleep and dreaming, or from losing himself, shows up in Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and in other European-and-American stories. In Mahayana Buddhism, God is Buddha Mind or Emptiness while the Devil is the ordinary mind or the material floating world. In

Hinduism, God is Brahman the true Creator (although he creates a dream world) while the Devil is Maya (who is not evil but merely seduces us into accepting as fully real this dream world of illusion).

The idea was a theme in the work of the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, whose work was the basis for the great movie "Blade Runner" and the good movie "Total Recall". In "Total Recall" the hero, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, at first an agent of the Martian ruling corporation, has his memory wiped so he can better infiltrate rebels against the corporation. However, in losing his memory, he also changes his character. I don't give away any more of the plot. If you look, you can see hints that the movie is not reality at all but a fantasy, intended or otherwise, even though, in one scene, the movie specifically repudiates that interpretation. In the science fiction movie "The Pusher", starring Dakota Fanning, the small band of heroes, who have mental powers, faces an evil government agency who wishes to control such people, and faces a family of evil people with mental powers. The bad guys can read the minds of the good guys, and so always can foil their plans. The heroes can only defeat their enemies by blocking their own plans from themselves, that is, by falling partially asleep.

Combo Pack.

It is easy and fun to combine the individual version and the God version. Rather than have the immortal person of the future take a role in a simulation, think of all possible created worlds as simulations that God sets up, and let God take all the roles in any simulation. God is each and every person in every simulation. For God to forget himself is for God to take a role in the simulation. Each of us is God, and God is each of us. For any person to remember that he-she is in a simulation is for God to remember that he lost a bit of himself in the simulation, but not necessarily for God to recall that the whole thing is a simulation, and so to wake up completely. God simply chuckles that this one person awoke, waits for this one bit of himself to die, and, in the meantime, carries on forgetting as all the other characters in all the rest of the world. The whole business keeps going on as a lot of fun for God. Any given life might not be a lot of fun but many lives are fun, and the whole thing is a joy even if no one life is fun. If ever everybody wakes up all at the same time, God might wake up entirely too. That possibility is quite remote. If it does happen, God just loses himself in another simulation.

Super Combo Pack.

It is easy and fun to combine many of the visions in this chapter, and the combinations don't even have to be consistent.

For example, God loses himself, and, in so doing, emanates the first world. That first world is made up of Jesus and the Devil, who, together, make up the demiurge. Jesus and the Devil have an argument. Their argument pervades their world and all the worlds that they make as a result. We are on one of the made worlds. Our world is thus not the realest world but is more like a simulation. We can wake up to realer worlds, or we can wake up to the ultimate reality of God before God lost himself. It is easier to wake up to realer worlds, and to ascend those one-by-one until we reach the world of Jesus and the Devil, where good and evil need each other, and where their interaction creates a never-ending sequence of worlds. We can live in that world and have a lot of fun.

I invite you to watch movies, read comic books, listen to politicians, listen to various kinds of pop music, watch TV dramas, watch TV pseudo-news shows such as on CNN, and use your imagination to pick out the Dualism. It is harder to pick out the Emanation and the Descent but usually not too hard; just think of the Devil as in the second or third level from God, and the present world as a couple of levels below that. The great hero of your religion usually is in the level just below God. I invite you to make up your own combinations.

Some form of combined Emanation, Descent, Levels, Ascent, Gnosticism, and Dualism is part of most major religions, including Christianity. It is also part of most major political stances even when they deny the validity of religion, including Marxism and some kinds of Political Correctness. Some combined form is part of modern militant atheism and even part of Darwinism when it is put in the service of ideologies such as militant atheism. As far as I can tell, the Church of Scientology is an almost-textbook example of such a combination.

I think this mindset can be a serious impediment to getting along properly when it is used to get people to do what we want.

Widespread Similar Morality.

The world as a dream, God lost, simulation, or game, are all versions of the same kind of verging away from this world. All versions come from people with good imaginations. To the extent the versions are fun and make this world more interesting, I find nothing wrong with them. If they get us to act badly, then they are wrong.

The implied questions in all these alternative worlds are: What lies behind them? What does it mean when we figure out that this world is not quite as real as it seems? Who is dreaming, running the game, and losing himself? Does it make a difference who is dreaming, running the simulation, or losing himself? How do we find out who that is, and what difference it makes? Just knowing that the world is a dream, a simulation, or God-lost- in-himself does not necessarily tell us who it is or much about who it is and what he wants. Does figuring out that the world is a dream etc. automatically set us free? If it does set us free, free to do what? If it does set us free, free from what? In the realer world behind this world, what are the rules? What are people there supposed to do? Is the morality there like the morality here? Are we supposed to do what they are supposed to do? I can't answer any of this for sure. I can only deal with this world as it comes along. I assume that is what the maker of this world wanted, for us to deal with this world as well as we can, however the maker made the world.

At least in our world, the key question seems to be morality. What matters is how you act, and how you act toward the world. Suppose this is a simulation, or suppose this is God forgetting himself, and you figure that out. Then what? Does that release you from morality? Does that release you from acting according to Jesus' message, from working hard to make a better world? I think it does not. In fact, if you can be sure God made the simulation, it seems to make acting well even more urgent.

Assume the laws of physics can change within different simulations. Even if people made the simulation, and it was not a creation of God, the makers could adopt different laws of physics for use within the game as long as the laws were consistent. Modern games in our world hardly follow the laws of physics or the

laws of evolution, and they have to be fairly consistent. Even if were not as it is on this world, but physics would support sentient-moral-aesthetic game players, would the laws of morality change much, and could the laws of morality change much? I think not. I think it is harder to change the laws of morality than to change the laws of physics and the laws of evolution. The modern philosophical way to say this is that the morality that we know here on our world "would hold in all possible worlds". I can imagine variations on moral-like feelings that might hold up for a while under some particular evolutionary conditions but I cannot imagine well-developed morality for fully sentient-moral-aesthetic beings other than as described in this book, even under somewhat different physical laws and different evolutionary histories. I hope I am correct, and that the Golden Rule, "applies equally to everybody", and the other points of Jesus' message would be valid in all evolutionary histories and all simulations. In that case, the key question in all worlds would be how sentient-moral-aesthetic beings act. I am not sure if that issue is enough to make all simulation worlds interesting but it is an interesting idea itself.

19 Common Mass Religion

This chapter begins a series of chapters that describe religions. This material is not what you find in a text or popular book. These chapters assess the main points in the stances from my viewpoint. What does any stance offer? What do I have to look out for? How do believers act? These chapters do not point out hypocrisy. If you have read this far, you can see hypocrisy for yourself.

All the stances were formed in nation-states although they all have older roots. All the stances are lived now in states in a world that is mostly capitalist. I do not take account of cultural, national, or class differences. I do not separate states that try to be pluralistic and democratic, such as England, from states that do not, such as China and Indonesia. I do not assess according to a school called “the marketplace of religions” although I have sympathy with that school.

People all over the world have different official religions such as Christianity or Hinduism, but, if we look only a bit below the surface, we find that the huge majority of people in states hold the same religion-and-morality regardless of official religions. This chapter is about that common mass religion. Just because common mass religion is widespread does not mean that thinking, intelligent, educated people don't share it, that or it is the religion only of superstitious dolts. The very large majority of intelligent educated people share it, and often are its most vocal proponents.

Mass common religion has two main components. The first component is popular religion regardless of the official religion. Some of popular religion is due to human nature as it plays out in states while some of it is due to particular cultures, societies, economies, histories, etc. I cannot separate the factors that shape popular religion. Do not take my portrait to popular religion as a picture of religion in all societies in all places at all times; take it only as my view of popular religion in states.

The second component of mass common religion is called “state religion”: beliefs and practices that are like religion and have to do with the state, such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and New Year's Eve in the United States. State religion often takes motifs from official religion, as, for example, Christmas is part of the state religion of the United States (and elsewhere) and Christmas takes motifs from Christianity.

Official religion does influence mass popular religion and state religion but not nearly as much as priests, politicians, and parents think. Mass popular religion is different in Italy from Indonesia but not nearly as much as Christians and Muslims think. State religion is different in the United States and China but not nearly as much as Christians and old-line Marxists-Maoists think. This chapter does not gauge relations and relative strengths of official religion, mass popular religion, and state religion.

If most people share the same de facto real religion, then why do people argue over religion? They argue for the same reasons that ethnic groups argue even when they live in the same place and are citizens of the same state, the same reasons that people from the American South and West argue although they speak the same language and supposedly share values, and why America has been fighting a “culture

war" since the 1920s, bitterly since the 1960s. People come already-in-groups, and feel forced to argue because of their groups. Some disputes are about pure religion but few. Few people fight over child baptism or which saint is most powerful. Most disputes are really about wealth, power, dominance, sex, success, and security; disputes use religion as a vehicle. People look back to their official religions for a source of points to use in arguments.

Disclaimer.

The values that I promote are not the property of Judaism or Christianity even though, for me, Jesus was the origin, and even though the values arose first in Europe from the fusion of Jewish and Western ideas. They are not the property of England, America, or European democracies even though they grew best in Western Europe. They are not the property of democracies even though they seem to go along with democracy. Any culture, society, ethnic group, religion, socio-economic class, gender, age, occupation, or nation can learn these values. Try to see the points, consider how adopting them requires a shift in your beliefs, and avoid most of the mistakes described in earlier chapters.

If you do not already share these values and want to adopt them, then you have to change regardless of your official religion. If you are a Christian but don't share these values, then you have to change. I don't know how compatible these values are with mass popular religion and state religion. I think most people can live these values and still carry on with the saints and some gods, but I am not sure. When saints become so important that they crowd out working hard to make the world better then you do not follow these values. These values are not compatible with staunch militarism, mercantilism (greed), or placing our state above all other groups. They are not compatible with doctrinaire Marxist atheism. They are not compatible with oppression and tyranny. They are compatible with national defense, modest nationalism, and fighting for a free world.

I don't think these values require drastic change if you already are basically a good decent person. You could learn most of these values and remain a Jew or a Muslim because you don't need to accept Jesus as God to accept these values. You might have to change some Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist ideas but not much. These values already appear in all religions although religions other than Western-European-and-American Christianity emphasize ideas other than these values.

It is hard to change values and views. We stick with what we learned as children. God does not require us to be perfect right away. The rest of this book can help you decide what to keep and what to let go. If you find worth in the values in this book, then see how they fit with your stances, and how the spirit of your religion could survive along with them. Consider that you really might have to change a bit what you believe.

If your culture does not stress these values, then your culture has to change, or you might have to leave the mainstream version of your culture for another version. Most cultures recognize these values but not all stress them. I do not give lists here. The idea that a culture might have to change to become better is completely against current dogma in social sciences and PC dogma. There is no way around this. Most people believe it but won't say it. This too was a hard lesson that I had to learn while growing up but one that is better accepted. Don't confuse ethnic pride with a good set of values. Don't think that adopting a variant of your culture that allies you with a powerful group is the same as changing your culture and

adopting a better set of values. You have not adopted a good set of values just because you discover your “Blackness” or you join the White Supremacists.

Brief Warning.

I have a good sense of the spirit of systems. I have no head at all for the details of systems, including rituals, holidays, clothing, bodily decoration, titles, ranks, hierarchy, etc. Once I use the details to see the sense of a system, I forget the details. I recover the details from the spirit of the system only when I am again in particular situations. I find wearing particular kinds of clothes, symbols, decorations, etc. to be confusing and often silly. I cannot remember the official differences between Protestant sects no matter how many times I have learned them and how hard I try. In Thailand, I understood both Buddhism and vigorous animism right away, but I had to keep relearning the holidays each year and the details of the holidays. As part of Western American culture in my youth, I learned disdain for formality, rank, and pretence. I cannot lose my disdain no matter how important formality and rank are to other people. My disdain helps me forget the details of systems, including rank and pretence. I hope my ability to see the spirit of a system makes up for my inability to deal with details and my annoyance at rank and pretence. Please keep my limitations in mind.

I need to be clear. I find much of common mass popular religion silly and annoying. I wish people would stop all that damn stupid silliness. Mass common religion pushes out better ideas and so makes people inept by default. Still, the large majority of people can be good most of the time despite mass popular religion. Most people become bad about religion only when they mix mass popular religion with doctrinal rigidity from official religion or official ideology. I hope my limited empathy and sympathy still leave room for me to be fair enough.

PART 1: COMMON MORALITY AND MORAL RELATIONS

Most groups recognize universal moral principles such as “do unto others as you want them to do unto you” and “applies equally to everyone” but those principles are not applied consistently and are not vital in daily life.

Instead, people have a set of morals that they apply within their “in-group” of reference at the moment, a set for relations between known groups, a set for people-in-general who are in the same state but are not necessarily in any group we can identify, another set for strangers and strange groups who probably are not in our overall state system right now, and another set for enemies. All these sets are related but that is not an issue in this book.

People might belong to several in-groups: family, job, profession, church, sport, “service” group such as Scouts, ethnic group, etc. The moral rules that people use within each group differ slightly so that you behave differently toward your family than on your job, but the rules do not differ drastically. Simply, the ideals almost apply within the in-group, with allowances for different roles such as “parent and child”, “worker and co-worker”, or “worker and boss”. We try to treat people as we want to be treated, and we expect them to do the same. We consider the general welfare, and we are willing to contain our own needs a bit for the general welfare. People do not generalize this kind of moral behavior outside the immediate in-group, and, in fact, keep the best version for their families.

Relations between groups do not have to be bad. In fact, contrary to modern misconception, relations between groups often are good as long as groups know their mutual relations, stick to it most of the time, do not change without proper notice, and do not change quickly in ways that would be seen as immoral betrayal by the other group. I am not saying relations are always fair, only that relations work best when steady. Relations between groups get nasty when groups think other groups are changing relations without proper consultation, think other groups are cheating, or think the relations are so unfair that they undermine the ability to raise any family.

Relations between groups tend to be tit-for-tat, equal exchange, or what anthropologists call “balanced reciprocity”. If groups have about equal power, when members of a group interact, they both get about the same benefit even if they don’t get the same things. When an Italian baker exchanges with a Greek wine maker, both get about the same value. When groups do not have similar power, some imbalances are built into relations, such as Black people in the American South often did work for important White people without pay or for less pay than White workers would have gotten. Black people hoped to get some protection in return.

Once we get past groups with which we have regular relations, relations tend to deteriorate the further away the other groups are. There is no point going into many details.

The Tanakh (Old Testament) knew of these situations and made provisions for them. It forbade Israelites from treating strangers badly as long as strangers behaved well and did not knowingly break the laws of Israel. That does not mean Israelites actually treated strangers better than Romans treated strangers but it least they had the ideal. It was this kind of ideal that Jesus generalized. The Tanakh also allowed that Israelites could treat non-Israelites worse, in some ways, than they treated Israelites. Israelites could not charge interest on loans to other Israelites but could charge interest to non-Israelites. Israelite law gave priests privileges that non-priests did not have such as a share of taxes, a share of sacrifices, and sexual access to girl and women war captives. Israelite law, supposedly from God, allowed Israelites to treat war enemies terribly, murdering the men and raping the women – which was a common practice in most war by most ethnic and religious groups.

Later Muslim law followed Israelite law on many points, especially taxation. Non-Muslims were taxed more heavily than Muslims. This provision probably accounted for more conversions to Islam than any forced conversions or “conversions at the point of a sword”.

The order within groups and between groups was not just a practical relation, it was a moral relation and a result of God’s will. The attitudes of Israelites and Muslims show that people believed the rules were moral and came from God even when they were unfair by our standards and by the idea of “applies equally”. God rewards people who keep to the rules and punishes groups when people in the groups that break the rules even when the rules are unfair. Judaism and Muslim are more theistic than most religions but that only makes the ideas clearer, it does not change the basic ideas. If you do not believe in God, you can substitute “Dharma”, “Heaven”, or “Tao” for “God” and nothing changes.

The identity of groups, and relations between groups, usually are based on a division of economic and political resources-and-roles. A breach of these normal relations is a breach of the moral rules, and of

God's will. For example, ruling families rule while subjects obey. Warriors carry out the orders of the rulers while merchants move goods. In India, this social order was clearly religious but China, Europe, and the Middle East thought the order was moral-religious even if it was not spelled out in a religious text. Merchants with their own armies make rulers and soldiers uneasy. Rulers and soldiers complain not about the power imbalance but about the moral breach. In Thai society, when Chinese first began to immigrate to Thailand in the middle 1700s, Thais farmed or governed while Chinese ran commerce. All over the world, in one city or large urban neighborhood, only one ethnic group can be the dominant gangsters. After World War 1, Jews in America moved into professions such as law and medicine. Since about 1980, immigrants to America from India and Pakistan have done the same. After World War 2, Blacks in America moved into semi-skilled and skilled jobs in building and manufacturing although often at a level just below Whites at the same factory or job site.

Relations between occupations-and-ethnic-groups reinforce the mix of economics, power, and morality. Since about 1980, Blacks have looked at Asians and Hispanics as competitors who break the rules of ethnic group relations, and Blacks have grown more hostile toward them. They see Asians and Hispanics as taking traditional (since World War 2) Black jobs, and see this as a breach of moral relations. Because shifts in economics and power are common in the modern international world economy, conflicts between religious-ethnic-gender-and-power groups are constant, varying only in their intensity.

PART 2: COMMON RELIGION

The common religion is a variation on animism (a lively world) under state societies.

-There is a single high God (Dharma, Heaven, or Tao) who originated everything and who could control everything if he-she wished. The single high God created beings of various types, including many who are more spiritual and powerful than we are.

-The single high God has relinquished some control to the lesser spiritual beings and to us here as well. They have power and free will. We have some free will. Some of the lesser beings have effective control over some spheres of this world, and are like the high gods of small arenas.

-Lesser gods include not only gods with personalities but also gods that embody spiritual principles and ideals, such as the god democracy, the god justice, the god freedom, etc. Although we might think of these ideas as abstract principles, in fact they are more like personalities, and we can relate to them as personalities.

-Sometimes this world is quite fair (just) and pleasant, but sometimes it is not. We seek the situations in which it is fair and pleasant.

-The single high God is too distant and odd for us to appeal directly to him-her. Instead, we appeal to the lesser spiritual powers for help. We try to forge a relation with them.

-The single high God had a wife (husband) and a family. The wife and children have good friends among the spirits. We appeal to the family of the high God if we can. We appeal to Jesus and Mary rather than to Yahweh.

-If we can't appeal to the family, we appeal to friends of the divine family or appeal to the most important of the lesser gods.

-We appeal especially for help for our family. Our family is a good upstanding family. It is like the family of the high god and the high gods. We have family values, and we know that the good gods have family values as well.

-After help for our family, we appeal for help for our church, business, friends, ethnic group, city, and nation.

-Wealth, health, good marriages, success, and power help our family, so an appeal for them is justified.

-Worldly success, especially family success, is a sign of good relations with the gods and saints. Failure is a sign that something is wrong.

-We give what we can to the gods and to appropriate places for giving (in-groups, church, and state) in the hope that we get what we need and what we ask for.

-The religion has specialists, like priests, monks, magicians, and witches. They can explain how the gods work, what they want, what they can give, and what we can do. We pay the specialists for their services, either directly or through contributions to their organization.

-If the gods or the church abandoned us, we would be in terrible shape.

-We know of abstract moral principles, and we know that they should prevail among our groups and among various groups. We try to follow them when we can but we cannot always follow them and we don't worry too much when we don't.

-We attend the festivals and rituals. We expect other people to do so too.

-We all make mistakes. Fortunately, the high god has made provisions for atoning for our mistakes. That is part of what rituals are for. That is what the other gods help us with.

-Sometimes adept people become close to the family of the high god, or to the lesser gods. They are "saints". Some of them become like the lesser gods, or like a member of the family of god.

-Now saints include states-people such as Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan, scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, business leaders such as Henry Ford and Bill Gates, sports figures such as Knut Rockne and Joe Namath, and workers in a cause such as Ralph Nader and Karl Rove. Their ideas, the events of their lives, their achievements, the places they have been, and relics from their lives, all have spiritual power. People can appeal to them and to those things.

-Even great institutions such as Notre Dame University or the Church can take on a personality and become enough like a saint so we can appeal to it.

-Dead people become close to the gods and especially to the family of the high god. Good dead people become closest but any dead people can become close. Maybe bad dead people cannot become close to the gods but that is not for us to decide. Dead people are like the saints, and so we can include them with the saints. Dead people have spiritual power.

-We can appeal to the saints, perhaps more than to the lesser gods, even after the saints die, especially because they were once like us. Our dead family members are likely to help us in particular.

-We forge a relation with saints, especially dead family members, as a way to get their help.

-Various members of the holy family, lesser gods, and saints all have particular interests, abilities, likes, and dislike. They have particular skills or lack of skills. They have personalities. We have to take that into account when we forge a relation with them.

-Different people appeal to different members of the holy family, different lesser gods, or saints, according to the personalities of the applier, the group to which the applier belongs, and the personalities of the gods and saints. People have different "patron" gods and-or saints. Particular groups, such as families, towns, and occupational groups, have different gods and-or saints.

-Sometimes the different patrons of various people and groups do not overlap much. One family appeals to the son of the high god while another family appeals to a woman saint. That does not matter too much because we know there is some common ground. The priests explain this to us.

-Power can reside in places, things, objects, situations, events, and processes. Often a particular god or saint is associated with one of these, as, for example, the god of a waterfall or the saint of a church.

-We can appeal to the power that resides in one of these.

-Priests (or other religious adepts) can recognize the power of an object, can bring out the power of an object, or can instill power in an object. Objects that were associated with gods, saints, or other power can take on their own power. They become amulets. We can borrow this power when we need for such needs as healing and the attainment of success. Even the strictest Protestant Christians treat some things like this.

-Some people can abuse spiritual power. We fear those people and avoid them.

-Sometimes, in a dire emergency, we can appeal to the abusers of spiritual power. There is always a price, familial, material, or spiritual.

-One god keeps track of our deeds and misdeeds. It is like a tax ledger for spiritual merit and demerit. We are rewarded or punished according to our deeds and misdeeds. Sometimes we are rewarded or punished in this life. More often we are judged after we die.

- The highest reward is heaven, the lowest is hell. It is not clear if everybody will go to one place or the other, but we all strive for heaven.
- Spiritual merit is like spiritual power. It can help.
- We can transfer from our account of spiritual merit to another account of spiritual merit. If we think we have any merit surplus, we can transfer our surplus merit to help another person heal or to help a cause succeed. We can give our merit to our aged mother, sick child, or important social-political cause.
- We might be able to go into spiritual merit debt for a while so we can get something now for which we do not have enough merit now. If a god or saint heals our sick child now, we can promise to do something for that god or saint in the future such as tend his-her shrine or work for democracy.
- We can bargain with the gods and saints.
- The gods and saints warn us personally when we are on the wrong track through signs or moderate punishment. If we think about investing in a particular stock but a similar stock begins to “tank”, that loss might be a sign from our god or saint that we should invest elsewhere.
- The gods and saints warn our group collectively when we are on the wrong track. The gods and saints collectively reward our group when we are on the right track. The gods and saints collectively punish our group when we persist on the wrong track.
- The gods and saints have different plans for individuals and groups, including different nations. We try to discover the plan our god or saint has for us, and to follow it.
- Sometimes the gods want to raise up a particular nation to leadership. The help that nation to get on the right track for leadership, and they punish that nation when it gets on the wrong track. Fortunately for us and our nation, our nation has been selected for great leadership.
- The single high god would not have made the world a mess. The world has problems, so something happened. Probably some god, below the high god but still quite powerful, screwed it up. There are many ways in which this might have happened, including emanation, descent, pride, etc.
- Only people who are deeply concerned with power, who might consider getting power from the bad high god, or who have to protect us, worry about this issue much. For ordinary people, it is best to accept the situation, and then get past it.
- Normal people only have to worry about not getting hurt too much and about not inadvertently falling under the control of this aberrant god.
- There are many ways to live. Some are good, some not so good, and some bad. The gods and saints know which are good and which are bad. The gods and saints have told us which ways are good and which are bad. The good ways are “the right track” while the bad ways are the “wrong track”. The gods and saints let us know when we are living as they intended and when not.

-One way the gods let us know is to send particularly gifted people. These are the prophets, the great religious teachers, the great moral teachers, and the great adepts whose example we can follow even if they did not directly teach. The prophets become like gods, among the saints, even if they deny that they are like gods and like the saints. The Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad became gods.

-In the long run, what matters is family and friends. If your family succeeds, you are alright with the gods and saints. If your family fails, then all fails.

-There are particular kinds of family that the gods and saints approve of and particular kinds of family that the gods and saints dislike. Of course, we all live in the right kinds of families. The approved family is the most moral family, in fact, probably the only family that is really moral.

-The right kind of family changes with the times. Most people live only in their own times so they are not likely to know that their kind of best family is not the same as the best family of previous times. At one time, the best family might have been a large extended family with several generations and collateral kin all under one roof. Now it might be isolated nuclear families.

-The right kind of family changes with socio-economic-power class. The ruling elites might have one kind of family while urban workers might have another. The fact that they differ does not matter. The gods and saints approve of various kinds of families for different kinds of people.

-Each kind of family has particular best kinds of sex-age roles. These roles are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these roles is punished by the gods and saints.

-Relations between socio-economic-power classes, and between ethnic groups, are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these relations is punished by the gods and saints.

-The church, temple, synagogue, etc. can be important for some people but it is not vital. You can be sufficiently religious without going to a meeting place regularly and even without belonging to a formal religious institution.

-If you do belong to a formal religious institution, and especially if you go to a meeting place regularly, it can make a big difference in your life and in the lives of the people around you. The differences between formal religious organizations, and even between particular meeting places within formal organizations, can make a difference too. I don't go into either topic.

-The nation is an important group.

-Some people seek other paths. Some people want a direct relation with the high god or with a member of the high god's family. Some people want the quiet monkish life. Some people are mystics. That is all fine as long as they do not disrupt the family-centered beliefs of the majority.

-The gods and various spiritual powers can know the future. Religious adepts might know the future, either through their own abilities or by tapping into the knowledge of religious powers. We can learn about the future by hiring religious adepts to tell us.

-Good might, or might not, win in the long run. That is not my concern. I help goodness whenever I can, but I do not take responsibility for goodness.

-I am a good citizen to the best of my ability, and as long as it does not conflict seriously with my own interests. I think the gods and saints would want that.

-The gods, the saints, and the highest god, understand that humans are not perfect. They allow us ways to make up for our faults. An important way we make up for our faults is by participating in the standard religions, such as, for example, by going to church and by giving to the right charities.

-As people get older, naturally they become less concerned with worldly success and more concerned with what will happen after they die. That is when people participate more in formal religions and causes. The gods and the saints understand this and accept it.

The Dying and Rising Savior Mediator God.

One theme in common religion recurs so often, and is so important, that it bears repeating. People want a god that knows the human situation well, is sympathetic to people, wants to help people, and has a lot of power to help people. People want a god they can talk to and relate to, and who can relate to them. People want a god who can assure them that they will be saved to heaven when they are dead even if they have a hard time on Earth and perhaps even if they have a good time on Earth now. People want to feel that the good life will go on forever, and that this god can assure them in particular of participation in the good life forever. The best life they can think of is a good successful family life as it is on Earth, so people want that kind of life forever, and they want a god who can assure them of this.

The best kind of god to do all this is one who has been a human but who is also very closely tied to the highest god. People want a god who has been human but who is also the highest god, the spouse of the highest god, or the child of the highest god.

The worst things in this life are suffering and death. People want a god who has experienced suffering and death first hand but who also has transcended suffering and death, a god who has more power than death and suffering. People want a god who has suffered and died, and then been born again or who has risen from the dead.

It was not hard to imagine this kind of god in traditional agricultural (agrarian) societies because these facts were part of the annual cycle. Every year, the weather-Earth seemed to die and be reborn. The plants seemed to be reborn, die, and be reborn. To live again, a seed first has to die by being put into the ground. The rains bring nutrition and life, but there is a cyclic season to the rains. The mediator human-god was like the Earth, rains, seasons, and plants by dying and being reborn in a context in which he-she was familiar with the details of everyday human life.

The common people both love and fear the aristocracy and the bureaucrats. People both despise the aristocracy and want to be like them. We see the same attitude today toward media stars. People want a god who is both of the common people like themselves and of the aristocracy at the same time. People want a god who is really of the royal lineage but was born and reared among commoners.

It is not hard to see that many gods in many traditional religions satisfy these requirements, such as Isis and Osiris in Egypt, Moses for Israel, Orpheus in ancient Greece, Dionysius-Bacchus in Greece and Rome, Jesus for Christianity, to some extent Heracles, bodhisattvas in Buddhism, and many good and heroes in Hinduism. I cannot here go into details.

I find it easy to understand the popular appeal of this kind of figure and why most people believe in this kind of god, especially if they were born into a strong state religion that focuses on this figure. It has a strong emotional appeal for me. I find it harder to understand why smart people continue to believe in this kind of figure and continue to produce amazing works of theology and philosophy to defend this kind of figure. Whether I fully understand or not, it is so, and I have to accept it.

Unlike some of the other figures, Jesus was a real person. Christians argued that, unlike other figures, Jesus really was both fully God and fully human, really did die and rise again, and other aspects of the story are really true of him as well such as being of the highest lineage but being reared among common people. Christians said versions of this figure in other religions were reflections, imitations, shadows, or fore-shadows of Jesus. Jesus was the only real dying-and-rising-god-man. Some Christians argued that other figures were demons that imitated Jesus in an attempt to undo his good work. C.S. Lewis dwells on this argument in several places in his works. Here I make a point of it only to be clear about it. I disagree with the Christian view. People believe this about Jesus largely because they assimilated the life of a real man to the myths that prevailed in state societies for reasons that had little to do with the mission of the real human Jesus.

My view remains that it does not matter. If Jesus was God, fine. If not, then I think he will forgive me and others for not believing in him as God as long as we do as he taught. The same is true of the other divine figures. Whether they are divine does not matter as long as we do as they taught.

Personal Mediator Gods as Cosmic Principles.

People in all major religions turn major figures of their religion into a cosmic principle. More precisely, they turn major figures of their religion into a person who can become whatever cosmic principle is most useful at the time, and so turn their mediator semi-gods into many cosmic principles. A bodhisattva can become the principle of love, justice, hearing complaints, karma, salvation, unity with everything, etc. as people require. Jesus can become pretty much the same cosmic principles, and has. The human-divine figure mediates through assuming the appropriate personification of the handy principle. Even Jews see their God (Yahweh or El) primarily as a particular cosmic principle of the time such as Justice, Mercy, Vengeance, or Guidance. Even Muslims see Allah this way, and in addition, they see the Koran, and sometimes Mohammad, in the same way, as embodiment of a cosmic principle.

In Christianity, Jesus is both God and handy cosmic principle. I would object less to the idea of Jesus as God if Jesus did not also have to take on the role of various cosmic principles. For the one true God to

take on the role of any cosmic principle is to diminish the one true God, not to extol him. God teaches us principles. God is not a principle himself. Jesus taught us principles. Jesus is not a principle himself. Where Jesus is concerned, confusion over this point started even before the Gospel of John where John declared Jesus to be the Word made Flesh. Even if Jesus was flesh, he was not a cosmic principle, the Word. Even if Jesus taught principles, he was not one himself. Christians who see Jesus as the cosmic principle of Justification, Salvation, Love, or Gratitude make a basic, and common, mistake.

This idea that God is not reducible to a cosmic principle does not mean God is necessarily un-friendly, un-loving, un-just, not-saving, un-good, etc. God can act on the basis of any of those principles and can promulgate those principles. He does so often. This idea simply means that God is not reducible to any of those principles. The exact relation between God and any cosmic principle is like the relation between God and Good. I don't know what it is and I don't speculate here. We don't need to know the exact relation to value God and principles, and to use principles to guide our behavior. (This way of looking at the situation is like getting at God by being clear about what he is not, an approach common in all major religions, and into which I don't go here either.)

This use of a religious figure as a person who can become a cosmic-principle-as-needed is an example of how idea systems eat the world. The major religious figure is the "hole at the center", the "emptiness", around which the color splotches (cosmic principles) flow, and onto which we can project what we need at the time (attach cosmic principles as needed). The fact that this use of a major religious figure fits the pattern of an idea system that eats the world does not make it wrong or right but it does mean we have to be a bit suspicious. I happen to think it is wrong and badly misleading.

PART 3: STATE (CIVIC) RELIGION

The state is a large group composed of other groups. As with all groups, the state uses mass religion, ideology, and ritual. Power and wealth are not shared equally in the state. Groups that have power and wealth use religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain their power and wealth. They also use explicit tools of power and wealth such as the police and the financial system but that is not at issue here. State religion is largely about how the state uses religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain power and maintain relations among groups. State religion is a little bit about how some groups in the state use religion, ideology, and ritual to change power and wealth. For here, subsume "ideology" into "religion" so we need only consider religion and ritual.

It is tempting to reduce religion and ritual to nothing but tools of the state, and this attitude is convenient to use here, but ultimately this attitude is false. Religion and ritual exist apart from the state. The abilities for religion and ritual evolved before the rise of the state. Groups do not create religion and ritual, and groups must work within the logics of religion and ritual. Here, I cannot go into the evolution of religion and ritual and how their natural logic shapes what the state can do, so mostly I go along with the idea that the state has great ability in manipulating them.

The state is not one a harmonious set of groups. Instead of saying "the state uses religion and ritual", it is more accurate to say "groups vie for control of religion and ritual, and each group uses the motifs of religion and ritual to its own advantage". I don't have space here to be that exact. In the beginning of states, states were tied to agriculture, and so controlled the calendar. Since industrialism, states are

somewhat divorced from the calendar. They still retain some of their earlier ties, especially the holidays, such as Easter and Christmas in Christian states. States need cities. Most religions took definitive form in cities as urban movements. Thus “state religion” is sometimes also called “civic religion”. The terms are not important here but you need to remember them in case you read about these issues elsewhere.

-As much as possible, we want the state to be in accord with our personal groups and want our personal groups to be in accord with the state. We want our morality to be the morality of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the morality of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our morality. We want our religion to be the religion of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the religion of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our religion.

-Formal religion is not as important as the mass religion described above. We don't want the state to contradict the beliefs above. Fortunately, the beliefs given above allow the state huge latitude.

-If our personal groups conflict with other personal groups, we want the state to back us up. We will bend our beliefs a bit to be in accord with the state if it will back us up. A large reason we want accord between the state and our personal groups is so that the state will back us up in our conflicts.

-If we are not in the dominant group, we recognize that we must accept the beliefs of the dominant group a little bit, but, hopefully the contrast is not stark, and we can get along.

-State religions have their saints, usually the great states-people and military heroes, but sometimes also the great religious thinkers and great political thinkers: Socrates, Jesus, Mohammad, the Dukes of China, Marx, Lenin, etc.

-States have regular events to show their cohesion, power, organization, and values. The events are the holidays of the state. State holidays are large rituals.

-Participation in state events shows that your group accepts your relations with the state and that you support the state. Refusal to participate shows that you do not accept your relations with the state and that you do not support the state. If you do not support the state, you are an internal enemy, and so are dangerous. It is hard to be neutral.

-Some groups get a little latitude in participation, especially if they are small and weak. The larger and more powerful a group grows, the more important that its relations with the state be amicable.

-The values demonstrated in the state rituals (holidays) are both the official state values by which people might live but need not necessarily live, and the real underlying values by which people are expected to live. Sometimes the official values are made explicit but rarely are the real underlying values explicit. Still, people get it.

-The state recognizes higher spiritual powers. Even secular states do this, although they are likely to call them principles such as democracy, justice, and nature. What happens in the state has to be in accord with the higher powers. If the state falters, the higher powers try to correct the state. If the state falters

badly enough, the higher powers collectively punish the state. If the state does well, the higher powers reward the state.

-If any group has particularly close links to the higher powers, that group is especially important to the state. If any group offends the higher powers, that group is an enemy of the state and of all the proper groups within the state.

-Our nation is a favorite of the gods, is destined to be an important nation, and someday might be the ruler of the world.

-Our leaders must be in touch with the gods and their values. For this, they probably need to consult with priests and other religious adepts.

-Christmas illustrates most of the points about values and rituals. Christmas originally was not a Christian holiday about the birth of Jesus but a non-Christian holiday that celebrated the victory of light over dark and the return of the light through the lengthening of the day. Christmas now is not primarily about the birth of Jesus but about: First, the "Christmas Spirit" (value) of universal siblinghood; the links between people of all classes, races, etc; and the willingness of people to give. Second, it is about the role of commerce in keeping the nation strong and in allowing people to relate to each other properly without conflict. A prosperous nation is also strong, generous, and peaceful.

-Halloween carries many of the same messages. We vanquish devils with the candy of prosperity.

-The Fourth of July is an explicitly secular holiday in a nation that officially values individual choice, yet, if any group does not participate, that group is highly suspect. Libertarians and Unitarians might be "given a pass" as long as they remain minority "kooky" groups. The values shown during the Fourth of July are not just practical values about how to run a nation, they are moral-religious values about what humans are, what our world is like, and how we ought to live in our world. We have symbols of how a good moral life wins favor for our families from the gods, such as "Mom" and "apple pie". The act of eating the right foods together shows we are all one and share the same values. We have symbols of the transcendent strength of our nation and how we can deal with our enemies, such as fireworks in the sky.

PART 4: CHRISTIANITY AND CIVIL RELIGION

Christianity and civil religion merged in traditional Christian countries. The merger was tight until recently, when the rise of large-scale migration between nations and the rise of the pluralistic secular state made a tight merger harder. It is not yet clear whether modern pluralistic secular states can work. It is not yet clear how closely a state has to be tied to a particular dominant religion to work. Until recently, in China, the link between the state, Confucianism, and commerce was given. With the rise of Communism, the link was strained for a while but now seems to be coming to life again.

When Christianity first arose, it was not part of the civil religion of Rome, refused to participate in some ways, and so suffered moderate persecution. Christians would not sacrifice to the deified rulers of Rome or of particular city states, they would not sacrifice to the gods of the city states, they would not sacrifice to the city state if it were conceived as a god, and they would not eat foods (especially meat) that had

been used in sacrifices. They would not participate in the Roman versions of Christmas, Halloween, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, and Presidents' Day.

The term "pagan" originally referred to a rural person in the Roman Empire, particularly one who held to the traditional Roman religion(s) and way of life, including the military. Pagans were modest landholders. They thought of themselves as nationalists and true Romans, and as true members of their particular city-state. They thought urban cults were degenerate, especially Christianity. Pagans were traditional religious, social, and nation-state conservatives. Christians were urban religious innovators. Christians deliberately contrasted themselves with rural pagans.

In a reversal, American Christians now are the religious conservatives, think of themselves as upholding the traditional religion of the countryside and nation-state, uphold the nation-state with its religion, support the military, and oppose innovations that come from the "degenerate" urban centers of New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Christians are the modern pagans. In fact, the rural population in the United States is so small that modern American pagans are not enough to form the same block as did Roman pagans. The real pagans now are wannabe suburbanites who have middle-level jobs, both blue collar and white collar, who support civic holidays, and who are religious at least a little sometimes. The modern real America pagans continue to identify with idealized traditional conservative nationalist country life, as, for example, in doggedly listening to supposed "country and western" music.

The original Christians would have been more like Unitarian-Universalists than like American Christian-pseudo-Pagans. It is not clear how Christians in Rome, would view modern American Christian pseudo-pagans. It is not clear how modern American Christian pseudo-pagans would view Roman anti-pagan urban original Christians if they could meet some real ones.

PART 5: BRIEF ASSESSMENT

We cannot get rid of state religion, common religion, or the mass religion that is their combination, so we might as well get the best versions we can. The best version of mass common religion is guided by the best morality. That is what a good secular pluralistic state aims for. That is what traditional religions can help us achieve.

Mass common religion makes nearly all the mistakes from the chapter on mistakes. I do not point them out. That does not necessarily make mass common religion bad.

Most of the time, there is nothing wrong with mass common religion. Most of the time it lets people get along, lets people know where they stand, lets people negotiate changes, and gives people quite a bit of comfort. I see no reason to complain about that. Mass common religion can be a good thing because it slows down changes and slows down bad movements – political, economic, and religious – that would spread quickly otherwise. Sometimes irrational conservatism is a good thing.

Mass common religion can support bad things such as prejudice and terrorism. That is what good people must guard against. That is what good politicians must stop. That topic is enough for many books in its own right, so I let it go here.

Mass common religion usually only goes bad when there are other conditions to fight about, as, for example, when ethnic groups think that wealth is shared unfairly. In those cases, it is important to correct the underlying problems. That is usually much harder than trying to correct the problems at the symbolic level of mass common religion.

Mass common religion lends itself too easily to abuse by religious movements, in particular demagogues. America now is full of examples but I don't list any for fear of being sued. Examples from the past usually don't carry the "punch" of current examples so I omit them here. It is easy to see Muslim Fundamentalism as this kind of take-over but American Christian Fundamentalism is just as bad. Intelligent thinkers need to devise ways to insulate mass common religion from easy take-over by bad people.

Mass common religion can serve as the vehicle to carry other doctrines. Sometimes it is the only way to carry other doctrines because the other doctrines need to be invested with the religious power that comes from mass common religion. Mass common religion supported Christianity after it merged with religions of the Classical world. Without the pagan spirit, ironically, Christianity might have died. Mass common religion, fused with Christianity, kept the message of Jesus when otherwise his message almost certainly would have been lost. Without mass common religion in England and its North American colonies, modern democracy would not have arisen and would not have been sustained in America even though democracy officially was a secular movement. The point here is to keep mass common religion from supporting bad ideas and not to fret if it supports good ideas. People should recognize the distinction between mass common religion and other doctrines but that does not mean they should work to drive a wedge between them. Explain the distinction to the children who can understand, and work to keep the other children on the right track.

20 The Future and the Supposed End of the World

Most readers of this book don't believe in a dramatic end of the world in which God reveals himself to fight evil, so it would seem a waste to write about it. Still, the idea is worth a look because it comes up, and it influences state policy. It is a big feature in some Christianity and Islam. The recent rise of the new state of Israel fuels end-of-the-world fever.

Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism usually don't have doctrines about the final end of the world, although some sects have visions of big changes from one world to another, and some sects have ideas about the end of all worlds. The idea is usually limited to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, some Dualism, Gnosticism, Norse religions, and Satan worship. It might show up in some forms of old Celtic religion although I am not sure, and I think modern pseudo-Celtic practices, such as Wicca, were influenced by other religions. This chapter focuses on Judeo-Christian-Islamic ideas, especially from the Christian Book of Revelations.

Succinctly, ideas about the end of the world are nonsense. There will be no end of the world. There will be no end of the world according to any prophecy that I know about. No nation now represents the new Israel or Satan. Nations will not line up in two huge blocks, starting the final battle of Armageddon. The world will not end in a cataclysm where good fights evil. There will be no anti-Christ. There will be no herald of the anti-Christ. No current politician is the anti-Christ or his herald. No future politician will be the anti-Christ or his herald. Satan will not be released upon the Earth to wreak havoc until Jesus and Michael come to defeat him. There will be no "rapture" in which good Christians are taken up to heaven, leaving only the damned on Earth to endure Satan's misrule until Satan's final defeat. The Jews who do not believe in Jesus-as-God will not all go to Hell. The world will continue indefinitely with all its annoying traits and annoying changes. We have to face up to the real future, a much harder task.

The Christian New Testament was not final until about 400 CE (AD). Originally the Book of Revelations was not in the New Testament, and often was not in versions of the New Testament used by Greek Churches and other Eastern Churches even after 400 CE. I am sorry it was ever included. Although a great work of imagination, and a sly political commentary, otherwise it is a "pile of crap". It has caused more anguish and mistakes than any work in the New Testament except for misreading Paul's ideas of justification and salvation. It led perhaps the greatest mind ever, Isaac Newton, to waste decades. If Christians wish to find evidence for the Devil perverting even the holiest of God's work, they need to look at the Book of Revelations, what it did to Newton, and what it did to countless otherwise good Christians. I do not consider the Book of Revelations inspired, and I reject it. Still, it influences some Christians, and so I consider some of its ideas here. Likewise, I reject Muslim ideas of the end of the world and the texts in which they are written.

The Likely Real Future.

Before going on to refute some specific points, we need a better idea of what the real future likely will be. This vision automatically refutes many apocalyptic ideas without need for further argument. This vision is based on technologies that already are visible if not fully developed. Technologies that I do not see likely

will make this future stronger and make it come quicker. This vision is not my fantasy; other people share it. This vision will change social issues such as abortion. The changes will be driven by technology, greed, comparative competition, bad institutions, personal choice, the insurance industry, the medical industry, and government; but I don't say how here.

Climate will continue to change. The world will not go into global sudden collapse but will gradually get worse, and governments will do little about it in time. Nature will be degraded. Much biodiversity will be lost. Wars will be fought over resources, in particular water. People will live in huge urban jungles. People will have more electronic and mechanical toys, and more entertainment, but a poorer life. Human life will persist but will lose much of its grace.

Self-government by good citizens might persist in name but not in fact. Who actually governs will depend on the particular nation. Mostly it will be a combination of the volatile populace and the rich elite.

The key technical changes come from biotechnology. Biotechnology will not solve problems with climate change, development, resources, and government, at least not for a while. If properly developed and implemented, biotechnology will be able to help eventually, as with the use of algae to produce fuel and other chemicals, but the help will not be enough to reverse the effects of climate change and degradation in time.

Instead, the main effect of biotechnology for the subject of this chapter will come in human reproduction. By 2050, it will be easy to gestate humans in artificial wombs, that is, "bottle babies" will be easy. Within a few decades after it is possible to conceive and gestate humans in bottles, that method will be the only way it is done; natural conception and natural birth will become obsolete.

When bottle babies are the norm, human genes will be changed. Genetic engineering will become standard. At first, genes will be changed to get rid of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, "Lew Gehrig's disease", some forms of heart disease, some cancers, and some mental disorders such as depression, epilepsy, and autism. At the same time, genes will be changed to make people smarter and to give them desired appearances such as symmetry, sleek hair, and no baldness. After genetic engineering is fairly well understood, people will live a very long time, perhaps indefinitely. People will age much more slowly, and might not age at all as we now know aging.

Men (males) and women (females) will not be needed for conception, gestation, or infant rearing. Genes will be kept in banks and will be sold on a market. To make a baby, genes can be supplied entirely by one person (cloning) with changes to suit the "parent"; spliced together from two people (an imitation of current mother-and-father parenthood) with changes to suit the "parents"; spliced together from two people who are male-male, female-female, or male-female, with changes to suit the "parents"; spliced together from multiple sources; bought piecemeal on the market for consolidation into a package; assembled entirely from bits and pieces; or some combination of the above.

For safety and efficiency, when a "baby" is made from a set of genes, several backup copies will be made too. If one baby is ordered, perhaps four copies will be made to begin with. If three babies are ordered, perhaps eight copies will be made. As the copies progress, if defects are found in a copy, that copy will be discarded. At some time, one or a few copies will be chosen as the copies to be brought to term and

delivered to the customers; then excess copies will be discarded even if not defective; so all that remains in the end will be the correct number of babies (copies) originally ordered. The people who ordered the babies likely will not even know how many copies were originally made and will not know that some copies were discarded in the process of making the baby, or babies, that they ordered. If they do know, they won't care. Discarding the defective or excess copies will not be considered "abortion".

Whether the result of making a human being will be considered the "child" of the people who arrange for its creation will depend on how much "baby buyers" contribute to the result and on conventions. A fully cloned child, such as from the bounty hunter in Star Wars, probably will be considered a child in the way we now think of a child. A child that comes mostly from two contributors probably will be called a child. A human made up entirely from genetic parts will be considered a legal offspring but I am not sure it will be considered a child in the sense we now think of a child. We can call it an "offspring".

Because men and women will not be biologically necessary, genes will change to construct the new men and women. Women will no longer need ovaries, uteruses, fallopian tubes, and other "plumbing" as the plumbing is now. Men will not have testicles, prostates, and other "plumbing" as the plumbing is now. Some cells-organs will be kept internally to generate useful hormones automatically, as for example cells from the former testes, ovaries, and prostate. I guess some customers will have their offspring made with some external genitalia, such as penises and vaginas, for various reasons. Some offspring might have both sets of external genitalia but I guess that mostly an offspring will be made only externally male or only externally female. A person who is only genetically-or-externally male will be able to make offspring of either gender, and a person who is only genetically-or-externally female will be able to do the same. We will not be limited by our current gender in the gender of our offspring. Men and women will no longer have the same personalities that they have now. A lot of stereotypical gender-based aggravations will be cut out of our genes. Men won't be domineering hackneyed know-it-alls and women won't be bitchy conniving know-it-alls. Whether this leads men and women to be less charming or more, I cannot say.

People will be able in theory to make many "offspring". Because people will live a long time, "space" for offspring will be limited. Because it is possible for any person to make many offspring, some people will make many offspring while others will make none. People will compete. Rich people will be able to out-reproduce poor people. Conflicts between rich and poor over resources and reproduction might escalate.

To manage artificial reproduction, social changes, and ecological changes, people will turn increasingly to computers and other machines. We will depend on machines. Machines will get smarter. Eventually some machines will reach sentience. Whether machines then have other features of persons besides sentience, such as morality and appreciation for beauty, I do not speculate. When machines are sentient, essentially they will take over running the planet.

The machines will not exterminate humans as in the "Terminator" movies, or enslave humans as in the "Matrix" movies. Organic life is much too interesting and fun. Mechanical and organic life probably will come to an accord where organic life gets a share of the planet, machines take care of organic life, but machines have ultimate say. Machines will alter the genes of living organisms so as to make them more suitable for keeping, much as people now alter tomatoes to make them easier to pack, ship, and keep. I cannot guess all the ways in which machines will alter organic life to suit their needs and whims. I do not

know if the accord between machines and organic life can be kept up for thousands of years, and what might replace it, but that is not at issue here.

Implications of Biotechnological Change.

Current controversies about gender, abortion, health insurance, obesity, smoking, race, etc. will not make sense in the future. Use abortion as a representative case to see why. It will not be necessary to have a sperm and an egg to make an embryo. It will be possible to make another human out of any current DNA base. One cell, any cell, not even a gamete, such as a skin cell, will be enough. Any complete set of DNA from any source will be enough. So, any large strand of DNA then will be the same then as an embryo now even when that strand is not part of an embryo. Genes and chromosomes can be stored for long periods, to be used when desired. Because they can be used when desired, they will be “alive” then in the way that current “right to life” people think of stem cells or embryos being alive now. The question of when “conception” occurs, or when life begins, will not make the same sense then as now. It will make no sense then to single out embryos or stem cells as “little human beings” and to say we should not abort them. If we do not allow the death of an embryo or stem cell now, by that current standard, in the future, we should not allow the death of any human gene, large strand of DNA, set of 23 unpaired chromosomes, set of 23 paired chromosomes, or any cell. To truly venerate life by current Christian standards, every bit of genetic material would have to be put into a glass uterus and turned into another person. Every skin cell has the potential to become a fully developed human, and to allow any skin cell to die would be like allowing a fully developed human to die. Anything less than full use of any skin cell to create a human being would be abortion. Anything less than full use of every liver cell, eyeball cell, hair follicle, etc. would be abortion. Every skin cell of every human being would have to be turned into another human being, so every person would have to generate another billion other people; and then every skin cell of every one of those billion human beings would have to generate another billion human beings; and so on. Clearly that is not possible. If it makes sense to allow a strand of DNA, skin cell, or liver cell, to “die” then it makes sense to allow a newly-conceived fetus to die, allow a fetus of age one month to die, a fetus of age eight months to die, or a child of age two years to die. When any “baby” is made, other backup copies will be made along with it, and will be discarded when no longer needed. People will need standards for when human “life” is far enough along not to end other than the standards that we use now. It is unlikely other standards will take “conception” as the time after which life cannot be ended, although that is one option. Abortion cannot mean the same thing then as now.

The Near Future of the Middle East.

To see that events in the Middle East are not likely to bring about the stereotypical end of the world, think about the worst possible outcome there: Several Muslim Middle Eastern countries get nuclear capability. The United States, Russia, and other European states will not allow them to have weapons that can reach Europe and the US but the Middle Eastern Muslim states might have weapons that can reach Israel and reach each other. If the Muslim nations of the Middle East use their weapons against each other – not unlikely - the US and Israel probably will do little, and that situation of itself will not spark the end of the world.

To deter Muslim nuclear powers from hurting Israel, the United States augments Israel’s nuclear arsenal, and the US stations ships around the Middle East ready to bomb major Muslim capitals in case of a strike

against Israel. A nuclear strike occurs, most likely by terrorists smuggling bomb components into Israel and assembling them there. Israel retaliates. The US “nukes” Muslim cities. Ground war ensues, which the US eventually suppresses through air power. Large areas of the Muslim Middle East, and Lebanon, are contaminated by nuclear fallout and are uninhabitable. Muslims hate the United States for decades. Muslims wage guerrilla war and terrorist war against the US, against what remains of Israel, and against Jews around the world. Due to nuclear contamination, Israel can be rebuilt only to a lesser extent than now. Israel makes up for its loss of territory by seizing more territory from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Will this situation escalate into a world war and general nuclear war? Not likely. No major nuclear power, in particular not Russia or China, will think it worthwhile to enter a war like that. They will have little to gain from taking any side, and much to lose. It is not worth risking nuclear war with the US to enter that war openly on the side of the Muslims. It is not worth risking increased Muslim terrorism to enter that war openly on the side of the US and Israel. China cannot guarantee its flow of Iranian and-or Saudi oil by coming in on either side of the war. Russia, China, and other nations might secretly help Muslim terrorists as a way to hurt the US indirectly but that will not be the same as general war. Europe will avoid the war. No general end-of-the-world will ensue, although the war will mark a major change in way of life for Jews, Israelis, many Americans, many Muslims, and many oil-dependent nations.

This scenario is a good reason to develop alternative energy technologies.

Competition for Resources.

Without doubt, people, business firms, and nations will compete for resources, and nations will aid firms in their competition for resources. Water will become far more important than people now appreciate. In the war over resources, it is just as likely, in the long run, that Muslims will oppose Hindus or Chinese, or Hindus oppose Chinese, as Christians will oppose Muslims. World competition over resources will not be a picnic but it does not fit the scenarios for the end of the world.

Is This the Prophesied End of the World?

The likely future of the world, given the rise of new biotechnology, does not conform to any predictions about the end of the world from any major religion. The likely future of the world contradicts Christian ideas about the end of the world as a big battle between good and evil. The likely future biotechnical world will mean the end of the world as we know it, and it might mean the end of humanity as we know it, but it is not the end of the world as a whole, it is not the end of the world in a giant battle, it is not a fight between good and evil, and it does not signal the presence of God on Earth. Without further evidence supporting the Christian ideas, I have to go with what experience and science tell me.

The Christian scenario for the end of the world requires two super-nations escalating a fight that brings in the whole world. The two nations are usually called “Gog” and “Ma Gog”. The term “Armageddon” refers to an ancient battleground near the Israel-Jordan border, on which horrible battles were fought. The New Testament likens the final conflict to the battles fought on Armageddon, which is where the name for end-of-the-world conflict comes from. It is not clear if Gog or Ma Gog represents Good-God and the other Evil-Satan, or if they only usher in the conflict that leads to the final battle between God versus Satan. In

the Christian scenario, Israel is not one of the main nations. Israel is a bone of contention between Gog and Ma Gog. When the battle is over (or earlier) the present Jewish Israel is destroyed, and all Jews go to their just fate, usually Hell.

In the current real world, Israel is a bone of contention, the Middle East generates conflict, and fights over resources will increase, but it is hard to see any of current conflict as likely to bring in the prophesied end of the world. If the world turns out as above, there will be nothing at all like the Christian scenario.

At any time, the world usually only has a few dominant nations. At any time, it is common for about two large nations to be at odds. At any time, it is rare for more than two dominant nations to conflict in ways that bring in other large nations. For most of the Cold War, Christians saw the two nations as the Soviet Union and the United States. Now the USSR has become Russia, and Russia and the US are not likely to go to nuclear war. It is not likely China will replace Russia as a likely nuclear combatant of the US; and it is not likely China and Russia will engage in a war that will drag in the world. The scenario of two large nations is so general that it could apply at any time. From about 1730 to 1945, it usually meant England, France, and Germany in some bipolar combination. The scenario of two large nations applies to the world now and applies in the near future if we think of China and the US, or Christians and Muslims, or Hindus and Muslims, or Indians and Chinese, as the two nations. But that does not mean it fulfills New Testament prophecy. It does not necessarily involve Israel. I can't see which two nations, or even which two blocks of nations, are Gog and Ma Gog.

Even if there are conflicts in the Middle East, or around the world, it is hard to see this as Good versus Evil, or as the forces of Satan versus the forces of God. It is hard even to be sure who are the good guys and bad guys. The Muslims will not rise up to take over the world. The Christians will not take over the world. Israel will not be the center of a world war. Nations will not start a general war over resources although they will start many small wars. Even if the United States and Muslims engage in a guerrilla-terrorist war, that is not what the New Testament predicted. Before enough nations get enough long-range nuclear weapons, issues over resources and biotechnology will change the playing field so that controversies will not be settled by general warfare.

The Rise of Israel.

I am not sure how Muslims in general interpret the return of Israel again after 2000 years. Some Muslims, but not all, wish to eradicate Israel. Some few Christians interpret the rise of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and interpret the rise of Israel as a sign of the end of the world, including the showdown between God and the Devil. I am not sure how most Jews see the return of Israel. Some Jews certainly see it as the fulfillment of prophecy, but Jewish prophecy does not necessarily entail the end of the world. It entails the Kingdom of God, centered on Israel, in which Israel leads the world in spiritual and moral affairs, the world accepts Israel's leadership, and the world accepts the Jewish (Israelite) God. It does not mean all other nations have to come under the military power of Israel or that all other people have to live like Jews.

If modern Israel is the Israel of Biblical prophecy, then no other nation, ethnic group, or religious group can be the real new Israel, the real new special nation of God. If the modern Israel is the new Israel of New Testament or Muslim prophecy, then the end-of-the-world should start around it, and that does not

seem likely. Although very unlikely, assume some nation other than the modern Israel has taken the place of Jews in the heart of God, and that other nation is the real new Israel. If so, then modern Israel is not the subject of New Testament prophecy and likely will not be the focus of the final end-of-the-world conflict. So the rise of modern Israel is irrelevant to New Testament prophecy. If another nation, ethnic group, or religious group is the real new Israel, then it is hard to see how that other nation will be the start of a conflict that will end the world. I certainly hope the United States does not do that, even if it is bated by enemies.

Assume that the modern Israel is the Israel of Biblical prophecy. We need to think what that means; we need to accept somebody's interpretation of what the rise of Israel means. I don't think the Christian interpretation is likely, for the reasons given above. It is not likely that the new political state of Israel is arising just to be a pawn in the final battle between the US-as-the-New-Real-Israel-and-the-force-of-God-on-Earth versus the forces of Satan-Evil as represented by Russia, China, or the Muslims. It is not likely the new political state of Israel is arising just to trigger a conflict between Muslims-as-the-New-Real-Israel-and-the-force-of-God-on-Earth versus the United States, the West, Russia, India, or China as the force of Satan-Evil. So, instead, if we want a religious interpretation of the rise of Israel, likely we should accept the Jewish interpretation. The Messiah will come to institute the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is about the security of Israel, the security of the whole world, Israel as moral and religious leader of the world, and the global acceptance of God. That is what Jesus preached. I don't think the Kingdom requires the end of the world. It seems the Kingdom is about continuing an improved world.

Due to the conquest of ancient Israel by Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, the destruction of Israel by Rome, and the attitude of Jews at the time of Jesus, some Jews then did predict the eventual return of the nation of Israel. That is like Southerners in the United States predicting "the South will rise again", Greeks predicting the return of their intellectual-artistic glory and their empire, Iranians seeing the return of the Persian Empire, or Chinese predicting China will rule the world. Christians took up the Jewish prediction about Israel and turned it to their ends. Neither the Jews nor the Christians expected to wait 2000 years. They expected to wait a few decades. It is "spooky" that Israel did return as a nation, especially after so long. It does make a person wonder. Exactly what that means is open. Here it is enough to repeat that likely it does not mean the end of the world.

We need not have a religious interpretation of the return of Israel, even after 2000 years. Two hundred years ago, people thought China would be carved up by European nations, America, and Japan. Only some Chinese predicted China would rise again. Yet China was not carved up and China did rise again. Perhaps the prophecies about China's return should be considered as much as the Christian prophecies that involve Israel, Gog, and Ma Gog. If the rise of China does not mean anything religious, then neither does the rise of modern Israel necessarily mean anything religious. Sometimes nations just come back. Weird things do happen. Until we are sure it does mean something religious, it is better to deal with the return of Israel at the human levels of culture, society, politics, and the military, and it is better to begin with the "take" of Jews on their own nation. More than that confuses reality and makes a good outcome less likely.

Ethereal Future Bodies.

This section is a fun addendum by a science geek. The idea of the rapidly-coming-end-of-this-world-as-we-know-it caused the early Christians problems. Early Christians wanted to know if future family life would be like then-current family life. Would they have bodies in the future, would have the same kinds of bodies in the future as then, should anybody get a divorce, would they have sex in the future, should they continue to marry and have children in the present, would they have children in the future, would they be reunited with a resurrected dead spouse in the future, and would they be reunited with a resurrected dead spouse in the future if they had a new spouse at the time. The writers of the New Testament had Jesus give an answer. I am not sure if the answer satisfied all the questions. I am not sure Jesus said all of what is put in his mouth, although likely he said some of it. According to the New Testament, Jesus did think the world would be changed under the Kingdom of God. Jesus said people would have bodies in the future but all bodies would be different. Bodies would be more ethereal. They would last longer and would not be subject to the same disease and aging as now. People would not reproduce then as now. It is not clear if people would have sex but I think not. It is not clear that there would be any reproduction at all. Churches of all denominations have formulated their interpretations, and I advise consulting the dogma of your favorite Church for specifics.

In the real upcoming human future, many of these changes will in fact happen. We will live a lot longer. We will not get sick. We will not age as fast, if at all. Because reproduction will not depend on sex, sex acts will not be needed, sex assignment will not be necessary, and many people will be sex-and-gender neutral. The dream of traditional prudes and some modern PC people will be realized. Some people might get a sex assignment and have sex for fun. Not everybody will be able to reproduce. Machines will arrange for replacement people as people are needed. Replacements will be genetic composites. We will share much of our memory and personalities with machines. Our bodies and selves will change from what they are now and will become more ethereal.

I don't know if the future counts as a fulfillment of Jesus' prediction, and, if so, what that means. I am not sure what it means that the change was delayed for so long. I am not sure what it means that the change is coming now under current world conditions. I am not sure what it means that the change is coming after the rise of modern Israel. If eventually we lose organic bodies and life becomes entirely based in silicon and electronics, I don't know what that means for Jesus' prediction. If eventually humans are "only" ideas in large computers, and have no consistent physical reality at all, I don't know what that means for Jesus' idea of the future. Feel free to use your imagination to speculate.

21 Legalism, Exclusivity, and Fundamentalism

If religion only reinforced common life, then religion would not be needed, and nobody would commit to it. You would be better off making friends or buying insurance. Religion has to be a bit at odds with normal life; and religion has to be a bit crazy. By acting a bit crazy, sometimes people succeed better than if they act only rationally. Yet if religion is too crazy, it hurts normal life, erodes comparative success, and then people stop believing. Religion has to justify our search for success and it has to reinforce common life. Religion has to find a balance between slightly unworldly but still relevant. It has to be crazy enough so people can use it to form solid groups, commit, avoid domination, manipulate others, and dominate others, but it has to be not so crazy that its own believers fear it, are open to abuse from within, open to abuse from without, and suffer in competition. Legalism, exclusivity, and fundamentalism are three ways to find that balance. The ideas in this chapter likely have clear roots in our evolved nature but I do not go into the subject. I use “god” instead of “God” because I use ideas that are common to many stances, not only to those stances who believe in God as I do.

PART 1: God, the Good Life, and the Bad Life.

The Ideas of Believers about god, the Good Life, and the Bad Life.

A common idea in most religions is that following the religion leads to the Good Life for individuals and for the community. In theistic religions, the idea is that following the will of god leads to the Good Life. Going against the will of god hurts both individuals and the community.

The will of god can be expressed in a written text, formal edicts such as the Ten Commandments or the Jewish Law, rules, the sayings of prophets and teachers, and the stories of prophets and teachers. For this chapter, I use “commands” and “will of god” to mean any of those ways.

“The Good Life” did not necessarily mean the most materially prosperous life although usually it did mean that. Usually people who followed the commands of god thought doing so would lead both to individual prosperity and community welfare. They would have successful families. They could control bad people. Their nation would have freedom from domination and would dominate enemy nations. The rain would fall gently, steadily, on time, and just enough. The wind would blow only gently. On the other hand, disobeying god would lead to personal failure, community hardship, strife, national defeat, poverty, flood, drought, storm, and natural disaster.

If necessary, god would actively intervene to insure these results. God would reward the group as a whole or collectively punish the group as a whole. God rewarded by giving material prosperity, security, national power, and by averting disasters. God punished through natural and manmade disasters such as plague, famine, and defeat in war. God punished by making sure the economy floundered.

Usually, though, god did not have to actively intervene. In modern terms, god’s commands go along with nature, human nature, human social life as a result of human nature, and the dominant economic system

such as capitalism. God tells us to do what we should do according to nature etc. anyway. When we act according to god's commands, we act according to nature. When we act according to nature, then things turn out best. God's commands are a plan for living, a plan that accords with nature, human nature etc., so following god's plan is bound to work out best.

People who said that following god leads to the Good Life did not expect the Good Life for everybody equally. Some bad people would not share in the Good Life while some especially good people might be rewarded more than average. Of course, the apparent unfairness of the world would go on as before, so some good people would not get their seemingly just share of goodness while some bad people would still prosper. This seeming imperfection does not invalidate the basic idea that following god leads to the Good Life. In the same way, even when people did not follow god, and god punished them for doing so, the punishment would not fall equally or fairly. The fact that the punishment did not fall equally or fairly did not invalidate the basic idea.

People who said that following god leads to the Good Life did not expect that the Good Life would be as good as could be imagined. Other nations might still be better off. It is only necessary that our Good Life be better than otherwise. In the same way, punishment need not be as bad as could be imagined. Life need only be worse than otherwise. Other nations might be worse off but that does not mean god is not punishing us for acting badly. Burma might be worse off than America but that does not mean god is not punishing America.

Even when the group (country) as a whole does not follow god, people within the group still can follow god and still can expect to be rewarded with a Good Life. Even when the group as a whole follows god, some people in the group do not follow god. Sometimes they obviously suffer as when violent criminals and their families suffer violence. Sometimes they do not suffer obviously yet they suffer in that the quality of their lives is poor, as when rich people are miserable. If those punishments are not enough, eventually god will punish them in other ways such as by taking away their power and wealth or by sending them to hell.

Even when following god does not lead to the Good Life in any obvious material or political ways, it is still the Good Life. There is intrinsic satisfaction in doing what god wants, following gods' morality, and in going along with human nature and general nature as god thinks of them. This satisfaction is much more rewarding than mere prosperity or power. Usually satisfaction in going along with god also comes with a feeling of security in family life that cannot be achieved through mere prosperity or power. A godly family is a happy family even if they eat stewed cabbage every night. In the same way, going against god destroys the Good Life even when, by external standards, people are prosperous and powerful. We feel bad when we go against god, morality, human nature, and general nature. Our families argue even if our children grow rich. We are dysfunctional in a bad way. It is good to follow god and get the Good Life.

What about commands that seem to have little to do with nature such as the command not to eat pork? In the context in which the command was given originally, to Hebrew nomads, the command would not have caused much hardship, and would have helped in their way of life. I can't explain more here. Most commands that seem at odds with nature are like that. Usually they are not much of a hardship, might make practical sense in ways we don't appreciate now, and, importantly, they help reinforce a feeling of group solidarity and they lead to more cooperation. That in turn leads to more success.

What about commands that seemingly go against nature such as Jesus' command to leave father and mother to follow him, or even to hate father and mother so as to follow him? Most believers feel they can ignore or modify such commands without much danger. Usually there are alternative ways to fulfill the goals of the command. In this case, a person can follow Jesus without hating his father and mother by giving time, energy, and money.

Nature did come from god and so mostly nature goes along with god. But nature is not the same all over and nature is not the same all the time even in one place. People have to adjust. God commands us as a way to fine-tune our adjustment. Even though nature came mostly from god, nature is not always good. Our human nature is not always good. Moral good is more important to god than nature. God commands us so we do what is good even if we are naturally tempted to steal, seduce our neighbors, or kill them. God commands us so as to fine-tune our nature to morality. God guides us in how to run our families and our relations with other people.

In modern times, the most obvious candidates in America for this attitude about god and the Good Life are Right-Wing Religious-Right Family-Values Republicans. They have an idea of what is natural, human nature, business natural, and commanded by God for people in accord with God's ideas of nature, human nature, and society.

Yet Religious Right Republicans are not the only people who think in these terms. In our times, people substitute the policies of their political group for the commands of god. People think they can achieve the Good Life if they, and the country, would only follow the policies of Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Communists, Political Correctness, or Tea Party. They believe this even when they do not understand nature, human nature, or the policies, have no idea where the policies really come from, if the policies really address the issues they appear to, and if side effects are worse than the problems the policies are supposed to address. There is a Good Life. Our party knows the Good Life. The policies of our party will lead us to the Good Life. Our party is the proxy for god. Our party is god on Earth.

My Assessment.

I doubt much of this is true, at least not in the way most believers believe it. God does not intervene to make it true. God does not collectively reward and punish so as to guide groups to follow his commands. Even if God did do that with Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews a long time ago, and even if God did do that with Muslims long ago, he does not do that now with any group, not modern Israel, Islam, and even America. God did not reward America with power and prosperity because America was godlier and was the new Israel. God did not punish America with recession, war, Democrats, and Republicans because America was lax about oppressing homosexuals or because America elected Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush the son. After tornadoes in Tuscaloosa, AL in 2012, preachers in Alabama really did say God was punishing Tuscaloosa for something; I don't remember what. They were wrong. God will not lift up Muslims to power again if they pray five times a day, stick their hands up when they do pray, keep women veiled, keep girls out of school, and spit during Ramadan.

The truest version of this idea that god rewards good behavior is the one in which we derive satisfaction from doing what is right and from mostly following nature.

Leave aside problems with group versus group, subgroups, and cheaters. As a matter of fact and human evolutionary history, these things usually coincide well enough: nature, morality, human nature, making a living, family life, and self-interest. Any commands of god that went along with those forces would mostly work, and would mostly lead to a good life. This good life would be close enough to the imagined Good Life. Our group would automatically reap the rewards of good religious action. On the other hand, if we act against those forces then we suffer. If many people in our group act contrarily, then our group suffers. We automatically get punished both individually and collectively. When we follow the commands of god, we all lead a Good Life because that is how the world was set up. When we break the commands of god, we all suffer because that is how the world was set up. If we were all more astute, and had never evolved a capacity for religion, we would not need to refer to the commands of God. We would just see the links between situation, behavior, and results. But we are not astute enough, and we did evolve religion. So we do refer to the commands of god for those behaviors that lead us to do well anyway and to explain when we do badly.

This result does not mean God did not plan it this way or did plan it this way. I think he did. This result only means that the world and God do not work quite the way that believers believe.

Nature is not the same everywhere and all the time. Nature changes. We are largely in tune with nature but not exactly in tune. Nature is largely in tune with morality but not exactly in tune. That is one reason why god commanded us, so that we could be in tune with nature as we find it here and now. This logic seems a big part of the argument of “family values” believers and religious conservatives everywhere.

So, not all of god’s commands could be absolutely true for all people, cultures, and societies in all times and at all places. Situations change, god wants the Good Life for us in all situations, and so some commands have to be relative to situations. God’s commands can change. He can add new commands, change old commands, and rescind old commands. Commands have to be re-interpreted. All this is what god did with his prophets. This is how Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish history developed. This is what Christians say god did with Judaism and what Muslims say god did with Judaism and Christianity.

The idea that not all of god’s commands are forever everywhere absolutely true, but some might be relative to situations, makes strong believers quite unhappy. It is easy to subvert relative commands. Relative commands do not provide the framework that people need to get along with each other, get along in the world, and manage their relations with other groups of people. Even if, in their hearts, strong believers know that not all commands apply all the time, they still don’t like to admit it.

The usual response to the relativity of some commands is to prioritize and select. This process can be done openly and honestly for general morality and general benefit or it can be done in the dark for self benefit. Openly prioritize commands so that some commands are absolute while also accepting that some commands are relative to situations. Hope you can derive the application of relative commands in particular situations from the basic commands, as when we derive the command to help disaster victims from the commands for “Do unto others” and social justice. Or, on the other hand, pretend all commands are absolute. Sneakily prioritize in fact some commands as important while neglecting the status of other commands in fact. Select as important the commands that are most useful for us. In practice, neglect commands that are difficult even when, in theory, we say they are equally important.

The intellectual, rational, logical, good version of this process is to select the commands that are most general and most moral to serve as the absolute commands, and then to make other commands relative to those basic principles. That is what I have tried to do in this book. By taking “applies equally” and the Golden Rule as basic, we can make sense of various other commands in particular situations.

In my experience, most believers follow the guideline of reasonableness a little bit but not consistently. It is too tempting to select commands that work for the group right now as absolute while ignoring difficult commands. It is too easy to select as absolute the commands that serve as tools in inter-group conflict while neglecting other commands that require us to bridge differences. Part of the task of this chapter is to illustrate this kind of selection.

More on Relative and Absolute.

It is worth returning briefly to the relativity of commands.

Strong believers cannot have it all ways. They cannot both believe that all god's commands are always everywhere absolutely true and still believe in history and still think nature and god go along well.

If some commands were not relative, there would be no Israelite, Christian, or Muslim history, at the least. If all God's commands were given once-and-for-all-forever, they would have been given at the dawn of people, and would not have needed to be unfolded during the course of Hebrew, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history. There would be no history. There would be no difference between the Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, New Testament and Koran. People would not need to interpret any scripture. For American Christians who believe god's spirit was behind the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and that those documents represent something new in history, then new commands have to arise, and have to put old commands in a new light.

If nature was completely good, nature was always everywhere the same, nature went along entirely with god's commands, and god's commands went along entirely with nature, there would be no need for god's commands. People could just see clearly that the American nuclear family was the right godly natural way to live for everybody everywhere all the time, and people would not need god to command them. It would be like drinking water or breathing air. If god needs to advise us what to do, then nature cannot be obvious and all good all the time everywhere. Nature is not constant, nature is not all good, human nature is not all good, and we do not simply see the best godly way to live. The Golden Calf is more natural than ethical monotheism. The best way to live varies by time and place. In some places, it works better to live in large multi-generation households. In some places, it is better to stay put while in others it is better to wander. In some places, it works better to have many children while in others to have few. In some places, it is better if one child takes in parents when they are old while in other places it is better if old people live in apartments. I leave aside issues such as gay adoption. We don't need to look at those issues to see we need advice, and the fact that we need advice means natural is not always what we should do.

If god needs to advise us about the best way to live, then god's advice changes with situations. God's commands change. If god's commands do not change, then nature cannot change. If nature cannot

change then god's commands are unnecessary. If nature changes, then god's commands change. If god has to give us advice, then god's advice has to change sometimes. If god's advice changes, then nature cannot always be obvious and cannot always be the same. I believe god anticipated this result when he planned the world. I believe it is a lesson about using our heads.

The first Hebrew religion was not ethical monotheism as Jews have now. Hebrews-Israelites-Jews went through at least six phases of religion before they got to what is now modern Rabbinic Jewish religion, and I do not even include phases of Talmudic Judaism as separate steps. The first two phases coexisted among the early Hebrews; the two phases included, first, Yahweh as a storm-warrior god and. Second, El (Elohim) as a local agricultural and state god with a family, children, and siblings or counselors, much like the other Baal of the Semitic neighbors of the Hebrews. After the Hebrews arrived in the (Promised) land that would be Israel, the two gods began merging, excluding other gods, and becoming ethical. I don't go through the steps. Christianity and Islam can be seen as more steps along the same trajectory, or steps down side paths spawned by the original trajectory. God's commands changed according to the stage of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish religion. God's commands changed along with the various stages of Christian or Muslim history whether Christians and Muslims believe it or not.

The relativity of some commands does not destroy the idea that there are some deep widespread (likely) absolute ideas about how to live. The idea of relativity is threatening only if people refuse to deal with it openly. For people who wish to manipulate commands so as to control other people, the idea of relativity is threatening, and dealing with it openly is threatening. Again, the best response is to figure out openly what is basic, and to see openly what is relative in the light of what is basic.

Selecting, Prioritizing, and Interpreting.

It is not possible to accept literally every rule of any sacred text, not the Tanakh, New Testament, Koran, Hadith, Talmud, Buddhist sutras, sutras and shastras of India, Code of Mani, Tao Te Ching, sayings of Confucius, or writings of Mencius. People who cite the commands of god from any sacred texts select, prioritize, and interpret for their own ends, often good ends, but sometimes bad.

God's Will Again.

Allow me to divide up god's commands like this:

- (1) Key, central, unchanging commands such as the Golden Rule and "applies equally".
- (2) Further related commands about how to live and what to do such as "work hard to make the world better", "be decent", "be useful", "love your neighbor", "forgive a lot", and "enjoy the world".
- (3) Important commands that we can deduce from the above such as, in a democracy, all mentally competent adults with genuine knowledge and experience get to vote, including women, men, gay people, old people, people of all races, and people of all creeds.
- (4) Commands that regulated life in particular circumstances in the past and that still are important today such as "keep the Sabbath", "take care of nature", and "be kind to animals".

(5) Commands that helped groups cohere in the past and that can still be useful today for particular groups such as, for Jews and Muslims, the dietary laws and the laws about prayer. For Muslims, this includes going to Mecca if at all possible, a charming and beneficial idea.

(6) Commands that might have been important in the past but don't make much sense now, and which I don't intend to follow, such as regular ritual sacrifice of animals.

In addition to these commands,

(A) Groups often give their customs the status of god's commands even if the customs were not commanded by god, such as going, for Christians, going to church, and, for Jews and Muslims, wearing certain kinds of clothes and praying certain ways.

(B) Some of the customs with the status of commands are innocuous or useful, such as Christmas.

(C) Some of the customs with the status of commands might have started out with good intentions, and might have had good effects, but can be harmful. When women were denied the right to vote, people took their lack of voting as the status of a command of god based on the duty of men to take care of innocent less-intelligent creatures.

Real life groups mix up all these categories thoroughly. Mixing them up helps make the religion relevant to daily life but transcend daily life at the same time – it gives the religion power. The power helps groups cohere, especially against other groups. The mixing up of categories helps religions present themselves as “systems that eat the world”. Only theologians, philosophers, social scientists, atheists, and people like me are likely to sort the commands and customs out into categories.

The only commands that I take to be really commands of God, and the only ones that are basic, are kinds (1) and (2). These commands are in line with the logic of morality and the best moral principles. The true basic commands of God coincide with the best moral principles.

Atheists can argue that, if the basic commands of God are only those that coincide with the best moral principles, then we don't need to think of commands of God at all. This idea might be strictly true for some commands but it is hardly enough for normal human life, and I have dealt with it in other parts of the book. Besides, this idea is not enough for interpretation and extension of the commands as in cases (3), (4), and (5). There is nothing in logic that compels us to work hard to make the world better but I think it is a command of god and I intend to do what I can. The same is true of “enjoy life”, “be decent”, “forgive”, and so forth.

I do not pay much attention to categories (5), (6), and (B). Americans treat wearing baseball caps and having a smart phone as commands of the culture gods, but I don't care. If the customs help a group to cohere and to be useful, without causing harm, that is fine with me. If group customs are a burden, are hurtful to members, lead members into strife with other groups, lead members of this group to treat that group badly, or contradict moral principles, then I categorically deny that the customs are commands of

God. If your customs are bad, they are not from God, and you should get rid of them. You should stop following them.

It is not always easy to decide on what is a good command or a bad command, especially if a command has a history, and is a close part of group identity. I dislike when adults mutilate the genitals of children. Yet circumcision of boys is an important part of Jewish and Muslim identity, at one time it clearly had the status of a key command of god (although it is not in the Ten Commandments), and I am not comfortable saying Jews and Muslims should stop doing it because I don't like it. I have never been able to make up my mind on this case, and I would not like to pass laws against the practice. On the other hand, some groups in Africa, some African emigrants, groups in the Americas with an African heritage, and some Muslims, mutilate the genitals of girls in order to control their sexuality and their marriages (the mutilation of girls is much worse than male circumcision). This practice is wrong, it is not based on a command of god, it never was a command of god, it should stop, and people who do it should be prosecuted. I do not say this because I like Jews and dislike Muslims.

Most of the rest of this chapter is about how commands of god help groups to maintain cohesion and to carry on satisfying useful ways of life. While describing the good aspects of following the commands of god, I warn against the bad aspects.

PART 2: Legalism

“Legalism” is relying strictly on the rules in a text, without necessarily regarding the spirit (intent or use) behind the rules, and without necessarily regarding how the rules impact personal success in the normal world. (Legalism could be based on a memorized “text” that was not written down but we don't need to consider that case here.) Legalism implies that the text has many rules, and that the rules are specific such as what time of day you may eat lunch, cover many aspects of life, leave few options, and leave little room for individual thought and action. Legalism also implies a caste of people, priests and teachers, who know the law, interpret the law, and judge cases. Whether legalism is good or bad depends.

Rarely is a group always oriented only to the spirit of ideals without regard for coded rules and procedure or only to the letter without regard for the spirit. I can't think of any pure case, not even the American legal profession's obsession with procedure. Groups range from usually focused on ideas to usually focused on rules. It is not possible to have only a feeling for the Good Life without any rules and it is not possible to follow rules with perfect rigidity without any selection or interpretation according to some feeling for what the rules are all about. I do not know if there are “natural nodes” on the continuum. This chapter looks at groups that are on the “strict rule end” of the continuum to see how that stance makes sense.

Just because a group has a text, even a text that supposedly conveys the literal word of God, does not mean the group will adopt legalism. However, having a text, especially a text that claims to convey the literal word of God, does predispose a group toward legalism. Some groups have a legalistic attitude although they do not also have a widely accepted text. Europeans, Americans, and Indians (from India) seem to have a legalistic attitude even when they do not have a text. Having the attitude might dispose a group to adopt a text so that it can have a basis for legalism. Buddhists have many detailed texts but do not seem very legalistic.

Among religions of the world, those which rely on texts to give the absolute unvarying word of God as commandments of law seem among the craziest, yet, paradoxically, seem to be the most successful. The most obvious are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This chapter refers mostly to them. In the past, for those religions, legalism on the whole likely was good but now usually it is not good. Legalism is a surprisingly useful way to find the balance between crazy versus serving self-interest.

Legalism serves people who can control the interpretation of a text because it gives them power. In a social system that is already legalistic, people who want power seek control of interpretation, that is, they seek control of the texts and of the priests-teachers.

Legalism persists for many reasons. People are born into a legalistic tradition, and never get out of it. For most people who live in legalism, living in legalism is actually satisfying. Even in legalism, people can select and interpret from the laws what best serve their needs. The other laws usually are not hard to follow, so the “package deal” is overall quite worthwhile. This seems to be how some Jews approach their holidays, as a satisfying plum to be picked from the overall legal tree. Legalism is one of the many ways in which people bind together into one strong community, especially when faced with opponents. This was a factor in Jewish legalism in the past, and is a factor in Muslim legalism of the present. It is easy to manipulate people with laws. When many laws are available, more tools of manipulation are available. Skillful manipulators pick and interpret laws so that they can control other people. The skillful manipulators stress the entire system of laws so they can use the laws they wish and can keep control.

It is hard to separate the good effects of legalism from the bad effects. In the modern world where we value the pop culture version of personal freedom, we see all legalism as bad. Too often it is bad in the modern world because it resists beneficial changes. Conservatives foster legalism to resist beneficial changes and to keep their own power. For groups that do benefit overall from legalism, I don't have any good advice that hasn't been offered before. For groups that used to benefit from legalism but now likely need to change, I can offer only what has been said in other chapters of the book.

Brief History of Legalism in the Judaic Tradition, with Comments.

Outside of the Middle East, it is not common to have an organized text of specific rules for the conduct of people, society, and the government, handed down by God. Other societies have codes, but usually not as detailed as found in the Middle East, and usually not handed down directly by God. The most famous code inside the Middle East but outside of Israel probably is the Code of Hammurabi from Babylon from 1700 to 1800 BCE. I am not sure what all to make of this fact about texts and the Middle East, but, as a result, ancient Israel did tend toward legalism. I don't know if the presence of codes led ancient Israel to legalism or if a cultural predisposition to legalism led Israel to think of its life in terms of commands directly from God.

Having a set of commands from God by itself probably did not force ancient Israeli to legalism. Legalism needed an amazing series of events to move Israel to legalism. Ancient Israel-as-a-whole was divided into two opposing factions, each with its own priests, military, and claims to rule the entire country: the north (Israel “proper”) and the south (Judea). Eventually the south outlasted the North. To bolster their cases, each faction said its way of life came directly from God through commands. When a disaster

happened, each faction claimed the disaster was punishment from God for disobeying its ideas about what he commanded. Each faction claimed that a good life would return if, and only if, the people and rulers went along with its version of the commands of God.

David and Solomon ruled in Israel around 1000 BCE. Beginning in the 700s BCE, Israel suffered a series of military setbacks that tore the country in two, led to the destruction of the north, and ended with the “Babylonian Captivity” in which tens of thousands of the most skilled Israelites were taken to Babylon for decades. This is when the south finally defeated what was left of the north. The south, Judah, blamed the series of disasters on not following the commands of God well enough. Its priests claimed that power and prosperity would return if the people and the rulers repented and followed the commands of God more closely. The captives returned from Babylon about xxx BCE.

Likely, the Pentateuch (first five books of the Tanakh), and the histories in the Tanakh, were edited and assembled around the time of Solomon, partly as a way to legitimize the rule of the Davidic Kings and their priests. When the captives returned from Babylon, they reconstructed the Tanakh. It received much of the form we know now, largely as a way to explain what had happened and to legitimize the new rulers and their priests. The Tanakh was edited to emphasize the theme of transgressing and following God's word and following the priests, as for example in the story of Moses, the Ten Commandments, and the Golden Calf.

In the 300s BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Iran (Persia), Babylon, and their combined empire. His heirs annexed Judea, the remains of Israel, into their empire. Again, the Jews explained their defeat and loss of freedom by saying they had disobeyed the commands of God. They could achieve freedom again if only they more strictly obeyed the laws of God.

After about 150 BCE, the Romans conquered the Greeks and took most of their empire, including Judea. Jews explained this further setback by saying they did not try hard enough to obey God; so they tried harder. By this time, legalism and strict monotheism permeated Jewish society and culture. This was when purist groups such as the Pharisees began to gain influence.

After the time of Jesus, in a series of campaigns against Judea, the Romans destroyed the state of Israel, destroyed Jerusalem, and ran most of the Jews out of the area to make them refugees all around the empire. Again the Jews explained the disaster by saying they had not followed the commands of God well enough, and they needed to try harder.

When Christianity gained power after about 400 AD, the Christians restricted the political and economic power of the Jews, and often forced them to live in restricted areas. I am not sure if the Jews blamed this latest disaster too on not obeying the commands of God well enough. The Jews did rally around the commands of God as the basis for their new way of life. Using the commands as a common center, the Jews were able to maintain economic, social, and ethnic viability for 2000 years. This is the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism and the Talmud(s) as we know them today.

Legalism has a very strong basis in Jewish history. Legalism makes sense given what the Jews started with and what happened to them. That does not mean it is correct or incorrect.

When Christianity arose, Christianity inherited the attitude of the Jews about the role of God's commands in life, bad happens when the commands are disobeyed, and good happens if the commands are obeyed well enough. Christianity kept that attitude even after it rose to political power after about 400 CE. In part, following Judaism, Christianity credited its rise to power with following God's commands, including his new commands through Jesus.

Islam spread after about 800 CE. When Mohammad and early Muslims suffered setbacks, they explained them the same way. They accepted that, if they followed the commands of God well enough, as God gave them to Mohammad, they would prosper. They did prosper, and they gave credit to the lifestyle of following God's commands. Keep this in mind for the later chapter on Islam.

The European non-Semitic West, including North America, has a legalistic tendency regardless of any ideas it might have inherited from Israel. The Roman codes are as long, detailed, and convoluted as any Judaic code. English common law is a nightmare to any rationalist. Americans make Southeast Asians and East Asians dizzy with their written contracts and legalist points. This legalistic tendency fused with the attitude forged in Israel to help create the legal system in America and to help create the legalism in American style Christianity.

On the positive side for legalism, without Jewish and European legalistic tendencies, we would not have developed and inherited the ideas of the rule of law, of freedom under the law, and that the law should serve social justice.

Thus legalism has had a long strong career in the theistic religions that come from Judaism and legalism has had a long career in the West.

As particular groups of Christians decided they were close to God, they also adopted that idea that they in particular were like the Old Israel; each particular group was the New Israel, and, somehow, Christendom as a whole as also the New Israel even if some groups within it were not. As the New Israel, Christians in general, and self-selected groups of Christians, had to accept God's commands as literally as possible and stick to them as literally as possible. In a similar way, as Muslim groups decided they were close to God, they adopted the idea that they were like original Islam directly under Mohammad, had to accept the commands of God as given by Mohammad as closely as possible and had to stick to them as closely as possible. Whether or not early Islam consciously adopted Israel-Judea as its model, it did adopt the pattern that was set originally by Israel-Judea, and later Muslims followed. Christians and Muslims do not differ much in this regard; both owe their framework to prior Israel-Judea.

When American Christians say America is in decline because Americans have lapsed from God, and America could revive if it returned to God, they are only following a long tradition with strong roots in the origin state of their religion, Israel-Judea. When American Christians fix on a cause, such as opposing abortion or controlling gay people, in order to follow God's commands and return America to God's favor, they only follow a long tradition. It is logical that many Christians believe the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to have been inspired by God and to be a modern version of his Inspired Word. We must follow them as close to the text as possible or disaster will ensue. If we do follow the texts of the Declaration and Constitution closely, along with the Bible, then America will last long in prosperity and power. All this does not make American Christians correct, but it does make them more understandable.

This kind of legalistic behavior might have a strong basis in tradition, and might have helped the Jews to survive for 2000 years, but that does not mean it is good behavior now or Godly behavior now. Blind legalism now too often works against social groups, and it undermines the state rather than supports it. If God does support a state on the basis of its adherence to his desires for a good life, then, in the modern world, that good Godly life is less likely to be found in ancient legalism than in seeking the spirit of God's commands, Jesus' message, decency, personal freedom, and social justice.

Other Religions, Legalism, and the Legalistic Personality.

The cultural and historical background of Jews goes a long way toward accounting for legalism in Israel, Christianity, and Islam but it cannot account for all legalism there or in other places. India and Hindus have a strong definite strain of legalism and legalistic-like argumentation, and they did not derive it from the Middle Eastern or Judaic tradition. Latin America seems less legalistic than North America yet both were conquered by Christians who had a legalistic tradition. Legalism seems to be as much a matter of personality and culture as of particular religion. I do not know what to make of this situation, and I make nothing more of it here. It is worth mentioning.

Commandments versus Common Sense and Moral Principles.

Most American children, say Suzy and Sam, have gone through a variation of this conversation: They have done something bad and been caught, such as drinking alcohol. They offer as an explanation, "Everybody else was doing it, especially the cool kids, and especially not the un-cool kids". Mom-and-Dad retort, "If all your friends jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, would you do that too? Why don't you listen to Billy goody-two-shoes instead of that hoodlum Jack?" We shouldn't act on the basis of external influence alone. We evaluate suggestions according to common sense and general moral principles. If suggestions violate either, then we shouldn't act, even if we gain in other ways such as a reputation for bravery and fitting in with the really cool kids. When listening to suggestions, it matters who we listen to. We should listen to people who have a proven track record of success at things that matter in the long run, and who suggest acts that go along with common sense and general moral principles. If only all children were so sensible, and all situations so clear-cut; then Mom-and-Dad would not be necessary.

Suzy and Sam have a valid partial defense rooted in our evolutionary history, but Mom-and-Dad don't accept Sam-and-Suzy's defense because it reminds them of their own youth, and because it doesn't work when taken too far. Common sense is not the same for all situations because not all situations need the same strategies for success. In our evolutionary past, sometimes it was important to be brave, set up a persona, make a reputation, fit in, and especially fit in with the "cool kids". Sometimes it was useful to follow the rules of the cool kids rather than of the nerds. Sometimes it was useful to pass through rituals so as to commit to a group. Sometimes it was useful to share danger and intoxication. The goal is to get past all this now so as to reap the benefits later without any more of the danger later. We hope that we do get past it, and that we don't get trapped or wrecked along the way. We don't want Sam or Suzy to turn into juicers or burnouts, we don't want them in car crashes, and we don't want Suzy pregnant. That is what Mom-and-Dad really want to achieve with admonitions.

The commandments of God put us in a similar situation as Suzy and Sam listening to Jack. What if the commandments of God do not follow common sense and general moral principles? Which God do we listen to? Whose God? Which prophet do we listen to? The commandments of God rarely come directly from God to us personally; always some real imperfect human, like Jack, tells us what he-she thinks the commandments of God are. Prophets differ in what they declare the important commandments of God. If all commandments of God exactly followed common sense and general moral principles, we wouldn't need the commandments of God, the prophets, or Mom-and-Dad. If we use common sense and general moral principles to decide which prophet to listen to, then we don't need the prophet to begin with.

Common sense and general moral principles can't cover all cases, and, worse, they are not always much fun or very "sexy". They don't give us that thrill of succeeding at comparative competition or of belonging to the cool kids. That is when the commandments of God can prove useful. That still leaves open which prophet we listen to. We listen to the prophet that we were born with, and we listen to the prophet that offers us the commandments of God that best serve self-interest, even if we are deluded about our self-interest.

All too often, we listen to people that use our need for order, commitment, belonging, and coolness to manipulate us to serve their self-interests.

So we are back to Suzy and Sam getting drunk because, at the time, they thought it was cool and would make them popular, and all the other cool kids were doing it, especially the prophet Jack. We are back to getting stuck in laws, seeking power and wealth in the name of God, and zealotry in the name of God. We are back to people killing abortion doctors, blowing up buses full of school children, beating women, shooting girls who want to get an education, beating up gay people, enabling people who want to live off the state, and enabling people who use the law selfishly. There is no easy way out, especially because the large majority of people will not examine the sayings of a prophet in the light of common sense and general moral principles.

Don't take the commandments of God, or the sayings of any one prophet, at face value. There are now enough simple accounts of all religions and prophets so you can consider them. You can weigh Islam against Christianity. You can weigh sensible original Islam against stupid radical Islam. You can weigh the ideas in this book against the ideas of your childhood. You personally have to make the bridge between common sense and general moral principles to the commandments of God as spoken by some particular prophet. If your legalistic system is an integral part of your group identity, and does not hurt anyone in your group or out of your group, then follow your tradition without disparaging others - unless the others cause harm.

Rules for Life.

In particular circumstances, some ways of life work better than others. Humans always have had to deal with at least two ways of life at the same time. They led one way of life among close in-groups members, especially family. They led another way of life with out-group people. Usually, they led one way of life with out-group people who were likely allies and might be mates; another way with out-group people they did not know very well but who were not confirmed prey or enemies; and yet another way of life with prey or enemies. It was not always easy to switch from one mode to another mode. It could take a long time

to learn through experience that a behavior that seemed a good tactic in the short run might be disaster in the long run, especially because they outcome depended on who you used it with. It is a bad idea to lie to family members but a good idea to lie to enemies.

When faced with uncertainty, people use rules. Rules help people behave properly until people can see for themselves why they should behave properly. If some people never see why, rules still help them behave, so help everybody else, and probably even indirectly help the people who don't see. This was the same reasoning I used to explain codes.

Rules can be encoded as laws but don't have to be. They can also be encoded in rituals, dances, visual art, myths, music, song, stories, journeys, etc. It is not clear why some rules are encoded in some ways rather than others. It is also not clear what difference it makes in how rules are encoded. This chapter wonders if being encoded in formal written laws makes a difference.

Once rules are encoded, other problems arise. Rules suffer from the same paradox as religion. They need to be firm and a little crazy but not too firm or too crazy. Rules and religion get their paradox problems from each other.

Before people will follow rules that they don't understand, they have to believe the rules come from a powerful higher authority. The rules have to be coupled with religion and morality. Religion, morality, and rules tend all to go together. This coupling is why rules cannot only be about what is obvious practically but have to have a tinge of craziness and commitment. To be fully practical, we have to be susceptible to not being fully practical.

If rules are too specific, they are not useful and they are annoying. If rules are too general, they are hard to understand and apply. Rules have to be the correct "specificity". The degree of specificity varies with the arena for the rule. We need sharper rules for some sexuality than we need for gift giving. There is an art to making rules. This "haziness" in rules is an important reason why they need not be encoded in formal written language but sometimes are better encoded other ways such as art.

Rules have to be interpreted to be useful. We need an agency for interpreting rules to fit particular situations. The agency itself is the product of rules.

Life changes. Rules should change too. Some of the change in rule use can be handled through the fuzziness and interpretation of rules but sometimes the rule itself has to change. Yet rules are partly about not doing what seems obvious, and partly about not changing. It is a big deal to change a big rule. There have to be rules for changing rules, like the rules for amending the US Constitution.

Plan for Life.

Rules have to help us get along in life but we commit to them precisely because they are not a simple obvious plan for life. We commit to them because they are God's law. In terms borrowed from modern family values: We can follow God's law because it is a good plan for life or because it is God's law. Modern family values adherents trust that God's law will always be the best way to live but that does not have to be so. Sometimes it is not the most obvious way to be successful. When God's law does not

always provide the best plan for success, we have to follow it anyway because it is God's law. Modern strong Christians in America back up this idea with the belief that God will collectively punish any country that does not follow his law regardless of temptations to do otherwise and to succeed. What happens when people follow God's law anyway even if it does not lead to obvious success and to getting along with other people? Is the end result always bad?

Kinds of Zaniness.

For this chapter, and only for this chapter, we can distinguish three kinds of religious zaniness. The kinds are not exclusive, and, in practice, overlap much.

The first kind of zaniness leads us act in ways that handicap ourselves in comparative competition, such as giving heartily to charities. This kind might have helped in the past, especially if they had been aimed primarily at our in-group. Whatever the past, these ways don't clearly serve out needs in modern plural capitalist society.

The second kind is by fostering really harmful behavior both to society at large and to ourselves. The most notorious examples are drinking the juice at Jamestown, suicide bombing, and poisoning the Tokyo subways; but other lesser behaviors are detrimental too, such as chanting in airports or proselytizing door-to-door.

The third kind of oddness is amusing if you are not caught up in it. Religion leads to strange groups, often with strange costumes and behavior. We might include functional groups within religions, such as priests, but mostly I have in mind splinter groups that act and look distinctive. In the 1970s, the paradigm case was the Hare Krishna people. In major cities now, we can find Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu groups like this; I don't know the names of most of them. Some groups now have considerable chic, such as the Amish in the United States. Buddhist and Taoists are not immune from this zaniness, but they tend to keep their zaniness out of the public eye, and they are usually confined to the Far East, so Americans are not as familiar with them. I do not consider practitioners of Tai Chi to be such a group although practitioners of Qi Gong might be.

People do not mind zaniness that does little harm. I don't care either. I am concerned with zaniness that can do harm. That I call "crazy".

I am not sure if having a single powerful formal text makes a religion more prone to any such zaniness, or to stronger forms of zaniness. Even in religions with no clear single texts for all groups, such as Taoism, some text usually is at the bottom of a zany group or zany behavior; every type of Qi Gong inevitably has its secret diagrams and formulas. White Power and Black Power groups have manifestos. Whether the text preceded and caused the group, or the group formed first and uses the text as an excuse, or some combination, is a historical question for each particular group. I think it usually is a combination. Even if having a single powerful text makes zaniness more likely, the difference is probably not large. I doubt we can blame all urban Jewish and Muslim groups primarily on the existence of the Tanakh, Talmud, Koran, or Hadith, any more than we can blame the Bhagavad Gita for the Hare Krishna people. I doubt we can blame all the Protestant Christian splinter groups on the New Testament.

Good Effects of Strong Adherence to the Word-Laws of God.

Strong adherence to the words-laws of God is not all bad. Jewish legalism allowed them to maintain their identity as an ethnic group in the face of terrible pressure for over 2000 years, and to maintain their faith in God. Without Jewish legalism, ethical monotheism as we know it would not have prevailed. There would not have been a Jewish personal God to merge with a Greek philosophical god. People would not believe in a single moral God. We would not have ideas of scientific laws without some mild legalism to make us appreciate the power of objective laws. We would not have our idea of the rule of law above the subjective will of rulers. Without Jewish legalism, the setting for Jesus would not have been prepared, Jesus could not have come, and the message of Jesus would have fallen as flat in the Middle East and Europe as in other regions of the world. Without Muslim legalism, Muslims would not have protected other ethnic groups and other faiths. Without Muslim legalism, the best ideas of Islam would not be carried on today.

Remarks on Legalism and “Crazy” Groups.

Sooner or later, most of the time, hard-line legalism obstructs successful living, and people give it up in favor of a more reasonable approach, so usually it is not much of an issue. It is an issue in the modern world because some groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims use hard-line legalism as an excuse for hurting other people. Only a selfish bad person believes God will send you to heaven for the suicide bombing of innocent civilians but Christians and Muslims have cited scripture to prove God will reward them thus.

Are Jews, Christians, and Muslims more prone to forming groups of crazies because of their legalistic tradition? I am not sure. I think the answer runs more along these lines:

Some groups feel disadvantaged by mainstream trends in successful living. In particular, now, groups feel threatened by trends in modernization such as the emancipation of women and minorities. They want to protect their position against change, enhance their comparative position, and hurt rivals. They want the state to support their ideas and to oppose the ideas of rivals. They want the state to stop the future, or slow down the future, until they can secure top position. Fundamentalists of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim basis all fit this bill and carry out these strategies, so use your personal experience as a source of examples.

To remain viable, these groups need a strong commitment both to themselves and against enemies. They borrow the strong feelings of the greater religion to use for their ends. Where texts-laws-words-of-God are available, those make particularly good tools because they have already been accepted by the mainstream religion. If these groups can, they use the mainstream religion against itself. They capture the mainstream religion. They redefine proper worship as carefully following the texts that they select as the basis for God's word and the law. They redefine the texts as being not primarily about a successful way of life but as being about following God's Word to the letter. Of course, they also say that the texts support their way of life as the proper way of life, and, if the texts are followed, then their way of life will also be a successful way of life. They call on God to reshape society. They assume God uses collective punishment and reward to reshape society. As mentioned, in the West, they use the example of Israel as a model. So, where texts with laws are available, some groups will use them as the basis for legalism.

Groups in religions where there are not texts with laws face the same problems and want to carry out the same strategies, but they might not be able to use these ideas, mainstream religion, and the state, in quite the same way. So legalism probably does support annoying groups to some extent. It is likely not a large extent.

Whether legalistically-based annoying groups occur more often, or more strongly, in particular kinds of religions is an empirical question, a question of fact. It can be settled by investigation. I do not know of any investigation that definitively answers the question. Problems with political correctness might make the investigation hard to carry out.

Not only “crazy” groups with a problem quote scripture to enhance cohesion and fight the mainstream. Good-willed people who want to guide us into the future also seek precedents in their scriptural tradition, and might quote those to help. Unfortunately, “crazy” groups with a problem seem to quote scripture more often than good-will farsighted people. We have come to link quoting scripture with having a hidden agenda. We distrust bible bangers. Because we make the link between quoting scripture and out-of-bounds-craziness, good-will farsighted people are even less likely to quote scripture (politically incorrect), so only crazy people do quote scripture, and so the link of scripture to crazies becomes even stronger. The stronger the link becomes the less likely good-willed people are to quote scripture and the more likely bad-willed people are to quote scripture. The situation is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. A bifurcation in identity occurs, with crazy-bible-thumpers on the one hand and sane bible-illiterates on the other. This does not mean all crazy groups come only from religions with the give world of God, or that all religions with a respect for scripture have to generate crazy groups.

The link between craziness and scriptural legalism also means that people in those traditions reject the work of prophets and of other good people outside their traditions. This might be the single biggest casualty of bad legalism. Smart people with religious sensibilities have written some good things. It does not make you a legalistic crazy to read them.

PART 3: Exclusivity

“Exclusivity” is fancy way to say a religion accepts only its own gods and it rejects the gods of all other religions. A given religion can reject other gods in several ways: (1) Other gods simply don’t exist and are figments of imagination. (2) Other gods are so unimportant and weak compared to our god that we don’t need to consider them. We look down on them and reject them. It is not clear where the other gods came from but it doesn’t matter. (3) Our god created other gods as helper minor gods. Likely they were supposed to be good, but became bad. In Christian and Muslim terms, the other gods became demons; other religions worship demons. (4) Our god deliberately created other lesser gods with bad characters to serve as foils.

While, in theory, a religion with many gods could accept only its own gods and could actively reject all the other gods of all other religions, in practice that rarely happens. Usually religions with many gods tolerate the gods of other religions even if they don’t accept them warmly. Usually only a religion with one god actively rejects the gods of all other religions. That is the only case I consider.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam accept only one God, and reject the gods of all other religions. In various cases, they have used all the major modes of rejection. There is no point going into details.

In theory, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worship the same God – Yahweh-EI, “God”, and Allah - and so could accept each other’s God as the same God and as worthy of similar worship. In practice, that is not often so. Essentially, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reject each other first as social-cultural-political-ethnic-religious groups and so do not accept each other’s god as the same god. To not accept the god of another group to be the same as your god is a way to keep that other group at a distance even if you do not actively reject their god. To accept the god of another group to be the same as the god of your group, even if only in theory, veers too closely to merging groups.

High Hinduism, high Buddhism, and high Taoism insist the gods are not very important even though they do accept the existence of many gods. In common practice, the gods are quite important, but that is not the focus here. In theory, Jews, Christians, and Muslims could allow a place for ideas of high Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In practice, that does not happen either. In part, that does not happen because the monotheistic religions simply distrust every other religion and especially distrust religions that allow many gods even when the other religions claim those gods are not important.

High Taoism and high Confucianism from China really allow only one God, Heaven, with its one “force”, the Tao. For more details, see the chapter on China. I easily see links between the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with the Heaven of China. Since the middle of the 1800s, thinkers have pursued this line but not much has come of it in terms of actual reconciliation between religions. I don’t go into that issue here.

Just as legalism in the monotheistic religions has strong deep historical roots, so does exclusivity and distrust for other religions. God’s ideas about himself and about his relation to other gods are obscured because the ideas underwent historical development and the one God of Israel likely resulted from the fusion of two gods, Yahweh and EI. What I say here is only a gloss.

The famous Ten Commandments were given by God to the Israelites. The first says, in part and in my words, “You shall not have any other gods before me”. God rejects all other gods and all other religions. While God does not scorn ethnic and national groups other than the Israelites, he does not accept an important part of their way of life, their religion. As long as they cling to that religion, God cannot accept foreigners. They must convert to the religion of the one highest God, as the Assyrians supposedly did in the Book of Jonah.

In the Ten Commandments and in other passages that are probably early in the Tanakh, God does NOT say he is the one and only god. In fact, in early passages, God, as EI, is part of an assemblage of gods, including a wife, and likely including children. It is not clear in the Ten Commandments if God means “you shall not have any other gods before me and my group”. In any case, God does not deny other gods, and seems to accept the existence of other gods. God only says they are not as important and not as powerful, and that the Israelites should have nothing to do with them.

To have anything to do with other gods effectively is to deny and reject God. So it is better to reject and push away all other gods. Even to acknowledge that they have some power of their own is dangerous because it implies an autonomous alternative to the greater power of God.

Eventually, the Israelites came to believe there is only one God, not Yahweh and El distinctly, and not a family group. Other gods are not merely weaker and unimportant, they do not exist. Angels do exist but they are only messengers of God and are they entirely derivative on him and his power (the “Shekinah” or the “Holy Spirit”).

The Israelites blamed national and personal setbacks on not stringently following the commands of God. Perhaps the most serious breach is accepting other gods even tacitly. One of the chief problems in this regard came about because of mixing with other people and their gods, in particular through marriage. As most people who know who marry outside their ethnic group and religion, a spouse has trouble giving up his-her religion and gods. Usually such households become, in effect, households of two religions and at least two gods. When the Israelites conquered their neighbors, they often killed the men and took the women as wives and slave concubines. The women kept their native gods and native rituals. When Israelite men married neighboring women, the women usually kept their gods and rituals. Often the children followed their mothers and-or worshipped both God and the gods of their mothers. The Israelite prophets and priests blamed this practice for the troubles of Israel. God didn’t like it. To make God happy and restore Israel, in-marrying spouses had to abandon their gods and had to actively worship only the one God of Israel. It is easy to say “abandon all other gods”, and it is easy to suppress other gods and their worship for a while, but it is not easy to keep up suppression. Many times, the worship of other gods would be suppressed for a while, at least in the minds of priests and rulers, only to reappear again when Israelite men married neighbor women. Then the priests would get angry again, and the cycle would repeat.

Especially after the historical events related above, the Israelites became stern about the idea that there is only one God and that all worship must be directed to him alone. Other gods did not exist. Worship of other gods, even if they did not exist, could not be tolerated on Israelite holy ground. Israelites could not worship any other god in any other way. All worship other than of God was horrible idolatry.

In the Greek and Roman Classical world, it was common to raise heroes to divine status, and some gods began as mortals. Heracles (Hercules) was given the status of a god. Polydeukes (“Pollux” in Latin, now “Polioudakis” in English) was the divine brother of twins. The mortal brother was “Kastor” (“Castor”). Eventually they shared their divinity. Roman emperors were often deified. All this was unacceptable to Jews. It was the same as worshipping other gods, the same as idolatry. No mere mortal could partake even to the smallest extent of divinity. To do so was to undermine the divinity and integrity of the one God. Worship of divinities, including heroes, featured dinners in which the food was first sanctified by being offered to the divinity. Jews could not touch that food.

God gave the geographical land of Israel to the Israelites. There, worship of God had to prevail. Territory was identified with theology and ethnic identity. God also made clear that foreigners were to be treated well, and not persecuted, as long as they did not hurt the worship of God. Israelites were to treat foreign people better than the Egyptians had reputedly treated the Hebrews in Egypt. Foreigners could not build temples and could not worship their gods in any way that seduced Israelites away from worship of God.

Foreigners could not raise children of mixed marriages to worship other gods. Foreigners could worship their own gods politely in the confines of their own homes. Foreigners did have to pay interest on loans even when Israelites did not.

After Israel was conquered by Assyria, Persia, and Babylon, the angel "Set" was raised to the status of the powerful demigod "Satan" or, in Christian terms, the Devil. It is not clear if Jews then understood that, in raising Set to this status, they were, in effect, creating another god, and, indirectly, worshipping the power of another god. I don't think they generally understood the situation this way yet it had this effect. Not all Jews stressed the role of Satan, and I think most modern Jews do not stress the role of Satan. Most modern Jews appear to have abandoned Set as a god or as anything.

No nation likes to be conquered, to have foreign people in power on its land, and to have foreign gods worshipped on its soil. For Israel, being occupied by a series of foreign powers was doubly offensive because God expressly set aside the territory of Israel for his worship and expressly forbid the worship of any other deities on that land. Even if Jews did not worship foreign gods, the presence of any public worship of foreign gods was offensive. When a more powerful country occupies a less powerful country, the children of the less powerful people naturally emulate the powerful people and tend to worship the same gods as the powerful people. This is part of what worries Muslims about modernism, when their children begin to worship Walt Disney characters, rock stars, and fast food. Such worship is exactly what earlier Israelites blamed for the demise of Israel and what they condemned. Contrary to misconception, the conquerors, even Romans, usually respected Jewish wishes for worship. But even small mistakes and events led to large reactions, which then snowballed into worse situations.

When Israel became Judea and the Israelites became the Jews, the Jews kept all of this attitude. After the Jews were dispersed out of the land of Judea and Israel, they intensified this attitude. Even today, Jews are among the groups that most strongly stress that an in-marrying spouse convert to Judaism and that children be raised as Jews worshipping only the one God.

When Christians and Muslims branched off from Judaism, they inherited the strict attitude about one God. They also inherited ideas about Satan without quite realizing that they inherited another god.

For Christians, the idea of one God helped in making converts, and so became stronger. People in the Roman Empire at around the time of Jesus were familiar with the idea of one god from religions like Judaism and from philosophical ideas about one god. Judaism had great respect as the earliest religion of one god. Christianity inherited that respect and offered an easier way to worship the one god.

Mohammad had to build Islam by actively and sternly repressing the many gods of the Arabs at the time. In doing so, he greatly stressed the idea of one all-powerful all-good God, which continues to this day in Islam.

To Israelites and Jews, God appears both as God and as God's power, the Shekinah, or, later, the Holy Spirit. It is the Shekinah who punished the Egyptians and who forced Moses to circumcise his son on penalty of death. God and his Power are always in accord. Israelites did not see this dual identity as two gods nor do Jews now. I am not sure how Jews deal with this issue in theology. Christians and Muslims inherited this dual way of looking at God. In Muslim thought, I am not sure how separate God and his

Power are. I do not know what Muslims make of this distinction theologically. For Christians, the two aspects of God became part of the Trinity that also included Jesus. Very much has been written on the theology of the Trinity, and I do not go into it here. To Christians, the divinity of Jesus as an aspect of God seemed a natural outgrowth of the same ideas that allowed the Holy Spirit (Power of God) to be a separate aspect of the same underlying Father God.

Jews and Muslims could not accept that Jesus partook of the same divinity of God as did the Power of God, perhaps in part because Jesus was only a man, and Jews and Muslims did not wish to treat him as a semi-divine classical hero. To do so was too much like idol worship, too much like accepting the gods of foreign wives. Because Jesus is an integral part of the Trinity of God for Christians, and so an integral part of God's identity, Jews and Muslims thus have trouble seeing the God of Christians as being the same as the Yahweh-El of the Jews or the Allah of Muslims. It is unlikely this situation will change in the near future.

I do not know exactly what theoretical issues divide Jews and Muslims on the identity of God. Muslims altered the mythological history that appears in the Jewish Tanakh, but do not seem to have changed the identity of God when they changed some events and people in the Tanakh. Mohammad insisted that he worshipped the same God as the Jews and Christians. Even if there is no theoretical difference between the two gods, it is unlikely that Jews and Muslims will feel good about seeing their two gods as the same God in the near future, so it is not worthwhile going into the question here.

American Christians have inherited the same ideas about God, idols, other gods, foreign worship, and the relation of God to the welfare of the nation, altered, of course, by including Jesus in the aspects of God. Transplanting Jewish ideas to America does not necessarily make the ideas right or wrong. We have to decide that for ourselves based on principles that we hold important and correct. I think the transplanted ideas about God and the nation are wrong based on the principles that I hold.

To an American Christian before the days of political correctness, non-Christians were like foreigners in Israel. In fact, to a Protestant American, non-Protestants, including Roman Catholics such as the Irish and Italians, were like foreigners in Israel. Although the Constitution prohibits any official state church, still, the semi-official religion was Protestant Christianity and other religions were foreign. People of other religions could quietly practice as long as they did not seduce good Christian Americans into their religion and they did not affect politics. To say this of American Christians before political correctness is not an insult. Their attitude would have been perfectly natural given human nature and their particular heritage, and their attitude would have been as tolerant as most places on Earth.

Even now, for many American Christians, to abandon a strong clear commitment to the one God is to invite disaster. Even without establishing an official church, America can still show that it is committed to the one true God through its non-official ceremonies and through education, entertainment, politics, and the media. To allow the spread of different religions in America is to insult God and to invite his wrath. It is the same as condoning idolatry regardless of how moral and reasonable the other religions might be. Only if other religions and other believers can be controlled like guests could we expect God to be happy with religious diversity in America.

Even when Americans are not explicitly Christians, they still take this mindset as a way to see situations and respond. When I was in school in the 1970s, a wave of anti-science overran America. Science is not just another ideology, but opponents of science declared it to be that. As just another ideology, science could be judged as an ideology, that is, as a foreign religion. In effect, politically correct people declared their ideas to be the one true religion of the one true god, and declared science to be a false idolatry. To believe in science was to invite social and ecological disaster. Only by repenting of science and returning to the one true god of political correctness and natural harmony could disaster be averted and the country returned to a correct course. Many Christians take this same attitude toward science, treating it as a false god. Ironically, anti-science politically correct people use this stance against science as an argument for simple-minded “nature is always good” environmentalism while anti-science Christians use this attitude of science-as-false-religion to deny climate change and to hurt nature. This result shows how ideas about one true god and one true religion can be adjusted to fit needs. I don't know if politically correct people learned this attitude from Christians or vice versa.

Assessment.

What God did with ancient Israel does not matter in the present assessment.

I think it is easier for people to accept the message of Jesus, and to accept the message of Jesus mixed with modern values about freedom and government, if they believe in only one god, and if the god has the traits of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God, and-or has traits similar to Chinese “Heaven”. This does not mean people whose god differs from God, or whose religion allows many gods, cannot understand and follow the message. But it is harder. In effect, people with many gods have to ignore their gods to focus on the message and on one source for the message. They have to think how the message could have come out of their matrix of gods. People who believe in “nature” or “the universe” have to think through how nature or the universe supports the message of Jesus and modern enlightened democracy. Many intelligent, educated, inspired, or decent members of polytheistic religions already do this. Some people who believe in nature or the universe do this but usually without intellectual rigor. Most atheists do this. I comment more on particular religions in later chapters.

Christianity and Islam effectively worship the Devil (Satan) through the fear, attention, excitement, and respect they give him. Through worship of Jesus, saints, Mary, the Devil, powerful historical holy people, clerics, and charismatic religious leaders, Christianity and Islam are polytheistic in practice even if they adamantly deny it in theory. They are much like other devotional polytheistic religions such as Hinduism. I think they need to reduce their devotion to the Satan, saints, etc. in order to focus more on the message of Jesus mixed with modern values.

Except for perhaps the modern state of Israel, God does not collectively reward or punish nations for keeping or breaking his commands. Life is now so interconnected that nations effectively reward and punish themselves for good policies and bad policies. The policies might have some basis in some of God's commands but the policies certainly do not have to take account of all his commands and they do not have to explicitly recognize God. Good beneficial self-rewarding policy is rooted in Jesus' message combined with modern values. God does not collectively punish America or any nation for not explicitly believing in him or for allowing the worship of other gods. God does not reward America or any nation for putting up the Ten Commandments in courthouses, as with Justice Roy Moore of Alabama. God does

not reward America or any nation for officially recognizing God or for recognizing God in media, politics, or national ceremonies. God is happy if we accept the historical roots of our values in Judeo-Christian-Muslim history but his happiness does not translate into collective reward or punishment.

I don't know what God's relation is to the modern state of Israel. I doubt God collectively rewards and punishes it. God cannot expect all the Israelis to keep all the commandments all the time. I doubt God is waiting for the rebuilding of the Temple and the restarting of animal sacrifices there. I think God is waiting for Israelis to pioneer in explaining and seeking social justice as in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Likely God is happy that most Jews love and respect him, and likely he is happy when Israelis treat foreigners with the kindness and respect described in the Tanakh, including letting them practice their own religions within reasonable limits. I leave it to Jews, Christians, Muslims, and any other interested parties, to work this out for themselves.

PART 4: Fundamentalism

Here I only summarize what I said in other ways in other parts of the book. This part of the chapter is not a general treatise on fundamentalism. I focus on recent American Christian fundamentalism but most of the comments would apply to other versions of fundamentalism. I mix up fundamentalists and religious conservatives but I don't know how to separate them. In fairness, I should assess liberalism as well but here is not a convenient place to do that.

Modern American Christian fundamentalism began in the late 1800s, especially around the 1920s, when groups of Christians got "fed up" with social, political, and economic changes, and sought a return to a better life. They sought the basis for a better life in the basic ideas of their religion and the commands of God. In theory, they went back to the Nicene Creed, or something very similar, in which the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus save people who believe in him as God. They took on the mantle of the next New Israel, and took on the duty of following God's commands. In theory, they accept every command of God as binding and as equally binding. They believe God gives us commands to guide us to the Good Life. God punishes people who do not follow his commands and who do not believe in him as the one and only god. God punishes nations that do not follow his commands and do not support the worship of him as the one and only true religion. Most fundamentalist groups assumed God's commands mostly went along with nature. Nature is an expression of his will. His commands reminded people of their basic God-given nature so people could live the Good Godly Life largely in accord with natural human nature, for example "Honor thy father and mother".

In practice, fundamentalists pick, interpret, and stress various particular commands of God according to their needs and agendas. All groups of all kinds, fundamentalists and otherwise, do this.

Like any good sports team that knows it has talent but is in a bad spell, they "got back to basics" and "regrouped". Scientists do the same when scientists are deeply puzzled, return to basic experimental results, and return to basic concepts. This is how Einstein came up with Relativity, to keep Galilean insights about the reliability of frames of reference as applied to light, gravity, and changes in motion. Even Marxists do that when they return to Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, or Chou.

I point out parallels to stress that fundamentalism is not inherently bad, stupid, reactionary, anti-natural, naturalistic, or even conservative. What matters are the specific points, the criteria for fundamentals, the criteria for criteria, what fundamentals you recognize, what you do with the fundamentals, and what you do with ideas that are not fundamental.

Fundamentalists could have dealt with the problem of God's commands and the Good life openly. They could accept as fundamental ideas from their religion that go along with recent science, ethics, social science, and pluralistic democracy. They can accept that it is impossible to adhere to all the commands, and openly acknowledge that they select, rank, and interpret. They need not put recent thinking ahead of commands from the Bible but they can consider how God's commands relate to objective facts such as evolution and the Big Bang. They can think about how to reconcile the Golden Rule with evolution and with recent thinkers such as Bertrand Russell or John Rawls. They can think about which social and economic changes actually go along with the fundamentals, and support those. They can think about which social changes do not endanger the fundamentals, and leave those alone. They can think about how to use various approaches to correct the social changes that endanger their idea of the Good Life, approaches such as the pulpit, media, and politics. They can use only approaches that support their own fundamentals and do not undermine the general welfare. After a long time of not taking this approach, it appears the Roman Catholic Church now is taking this approach, at least with hard science including evolution.

As far as I can tell, American fundamentalists did not do that. Instead, they declared all commands are equally valid but they surreptitiously picked some commands as key while ignoring others. They insisted they have the right to choose which Christian values are fundamental, and only they have that right. They used God to promote their hidden agenda. Even if the "hidden" agenda is easy to spot, and even if you agree with the agenda, it is wrong to use God to do this. In fact, it is blasphemous to use God to do this no matter how good the agenda.

They stressed ideas that would make them distinct and would give them great power if the ideas were generally accepted. They stressed issues that would make them distinct and would give them great power if they won. This tactic is typical in group fighting.

They assumed America is the modern nation of God, the modern equivalent of Israel. They assumed God's commands and nature completely coincide. God's way is the natural way, and vice versa. Their ideas of what is natural are God's ideas of what is natural; anything else is perverted and ungodly; God will punish anybody who does not live according to their ideas of what is natural; and God will punish any nation that allows people to live unnaturally and in ungodly ways. Especially America must accept God and all his commands or else God will punish America. If America accepts God and all his commands, then God will reward America. Fully pluralistic democracy is not possible. People who believe in other religions can live in America much as non-Jew foreigners used to live in Israel as guests; but people of other religions cannot be full citizens with full rights of worship any more than foreigners could in Israel. Even Jews in America are like foreigners were in Israel. The issues that fundamentalists picked to boost their solidarity and power include: increased militarism, welfare, abortion, immigration, climate change, cheap energy, birth control, drugs, stiff criminal penalties, state support for business, and minimal rights for ethnic groups and gender groups. They insisted that America now reflect Christian values that were important in the founding of America even when, in some cases, such as separation of church and state,

their position contradicted the founders of the state. They decided that an unrealistic idealized version of the market was natural, godly, and automatically could solve all problems. They allied with political conservatives, with White reactionaries, and against most social change. If they were Black or Hispanic, they allied with Black or Hispanic reactionaries.

It is not hard to see what really drives their agenda: a return to an idealized unreal unrealistic America from the 1920s or 1950s in which they dominate. Even if you enjoy this idealized version of America, and agree with most of its values, you can still be uneasy about using religious fundamentals to try to return to something that cannot be achieved. You should be uneasy about using an appeal to the Good Life to support a state in which the Good Life cannot be achieved. Even if you think the Good Life can be achieved, you should still be uneasy using religious fundamentalism to run the state. Even if you think the Good Life can be achieved, you should be quite uneasy about using an appeal to God to do it. The founders of America never intended any of this even if they were devout Christians.

Some fundamentalist attitudes amount to idolatry or blasphemy. America is not the modern Israel. The fundamentalist idea that the family, love, and sex all come in only one natural version, and that God fully supports only their one natural version to the exclusion of all alternatives, is idolatry, even if well-intended. Their idea that the free market is entirely consistent with the New Testament is wrong. Their idea that the market automatically solves all problems is wrong even if, like me, you like capitalism. Fundamentalists worship an idealized dangerous view of the market instead of worshipping God. Their attitude toward the market is blasphemous idolatry. Fear of the Devil is worship of the Devil when we see his power behind everything that annoys us. It is seriously wrong to use God to promote even good ideas if you do so for your own reasons and if God does not explicitly and clearly endorse those ideas.

Some of their ideas are just misguided and factually wrong. Their rejection of science in general and evolution in particular is hard to understand. It is not necessary to reject science and evolution so as to develop correct ideas about human nature, family, and state. It is not necessary to reject evolution to connect ideas about human nature to God. The fundamentalist idealized version of the family actually has fairly strong roots in human evolutionary history even if it was never the only type of family in our history. It is possible to build an idea of families and family variation similar to the ideal family using ideas from evolution. This approach to the family would allow for the family to be flexible in various conditions and still keep a solid place for parents, children, and good relations. Yet fundamentalists reject this alternative, and, instead, deny evolution so they can categorically assert that only their version of the family, and of human nature, is natural and god-given, and so they can assert that their way of life is immutable. It is not necessary to insist that a modern democracy be based on their idea of Christianity just because many of the principles that were used to found America came out of several Christian traditions. The Jewish idea of law was used as the basis for the Christian idea of law but we need not return to the Jewish idea of law to have a modern state. Modern industrialism and consumerism is hurting the planet on which we depend for life. To deny that fact is willful ideological blindness in the service of selfishness. We should not deny science just so we can keep our indulgent lifestyles as long as the planet will let us get away with it. Fundamentalists are wrong about what God wants for the modern state. They are wrong in not supporting pluralistic democracy.

Given the long Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition about the importance of God's commands in the state and for the Good Life, and the danger of breaking his commands, the fundamentalist position does make

sense. It makes sense to avoid offending God. Their vision of the family is one good vision of the family as long as they also accept alternatives and they do not insist that only one vision is god-given and immutable. Fundamentalists are factually correct to point out that social and economic changes have contributed to general malaise and lack of direction. They are correct that a strong religious vision among private citizens would contribute to a sense of direction.

Fundamentalists are wrong that modern problems are a punishment from God for falling away from his commands. Rebellious children are not a punishment for falling away from idealized versions of the family. The economic collapse of 2007 was not a punishment for not persecuting gay people. I doubt God cares about gay sex nearly as much as fundamentalists; and I doubt God has punished America for not persecuting gay people as harshly as in the past. God cares far more about whether gay people are good citizens of his Kingdom and pluralistic democracy. The divorce rate is not a punishment from God for some transgression and it is not a sin for which God will punish America. The modern divorce rate is simply an unintended sad result of the freedom that comes of the same free market that fundamentalists otherwise extol. Cancer is not a punishment for not having a strong military. When not caused by genes, if anything, cancer is the automatic result of self-inflicted pollution and self-chosen bad lifestyles.

We offend God much more in other ways than by allowing diversity in family life and sexuality. God is angry at America for not making pluralistic democracy work better. God is angry at America for not respecting science. He is angry at America and fundamentalists for worshipping the capitalist market and angry at fundamentalists for tacitly worshipping the Devil. God is angry at America for not dealing with poverty and the problems of nature. God is angry with us for not finding ways to deal with social and economic problems without corrupting people and business firms by enabling them as clients of the state. God is angry at America for allowing wealth to take over the government. God is angry at America for a bad distribution of wealth that is not based on productivity, and for allowing the rich to get richer while the poor get miserable. God is angry at America for destroying the middle class and the proud working class. Even though God is angry at America for all these faults, he does not punish us collectively. God leaves that to the automatic working of nature and society.

Some fundamentalist critiques of modern life are correct. Modern people certainly feel malaise even when they are prosperous. Children are better off in safe loving families where they have both men and women role models (gay and straight), and from where they can experience a variety of life styles. Some ethnic groups and other special interest groups have learned to manipulate the state to get what they want, as witness the school cheating scandal in Atlanta in 2013. Some family styles are poisonous, as when men and women have children by many different "spouses". Some cultural styles are poisonous, as when men use women to manufacture babies that they will not support, when a social group devalues education, or when a social group values indecency. Dependence on the state is poisonous, whether by individuals, families, business firms, or ethnic groups. Refusing to see our religious heritage and the role it played in the foundation of modern democracies is ideological blindness. Ideological blindness in one realm bleeds over to other realms. Denying the role of religion in people's lives as a way to block groups that use belief to stir up trouble is like hiding your head in the sand.

The problem is that the fundamentalist way to deal with problems is bound to fail and bound to make the problems worse. Fundamentalist support for Republican economic policies contributed strongly to the weakening of the American economy, growth of the debt, decline of the middle class, skewing in wealth,

and the economic collapse under President George W. Bush. Even if fundamentalists succeed in some issues, such as by limiting personal welfare or by expanding the military budget, to use God as a way to succeed is worse than the original problem. Fundamentalisms' greatest tragedy might be that it missed a chance to do something about problems that really need to be solved.

As a way to gain some perspective, I suggest that fundamentalists learn about real capitalism and how it works rather than parrot slogans about an idealized unrealistic idolatrous version. Find the strengths and weaknesses of real capitalism in the real world. Figure out how to safeguard its strengths. Find out how its weaknesses drive social problems, hurt people, and hurt nature. Consider how the weaknesses can be helped without subverting capitalism itself, human nature, or the state. Understand how the modern American suburban nuclear family, pre-marital sex, divorce, single parents, and mixed families are as much a product of capitalism as cars, toothpaste, and stocks. Come up with ways to solve endemic unemployment, bad employment, and poverty without disrupting families and without making people into junkies of the state. Find out how to give unskilled stupid people jobs without the state supporting a lot of stupid unskilled children. Think what can be done about global climate change under real global capitalism. Think about which of God's command pertain to capitalism and to nature, how to follow God's commands, what it is to break his commands, and what happens when we break them. After fundamentalists have thought through these issues, then they can use their new skills to analyze other issues in the same way.

22 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Here I comment on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I do not pay attention to subgroups within them. I do not assess weirdoes and terrorists. I assess along my standard lines: the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. All three religions have to respect the message of Jesus as much as their core tenets. I see no hard problems for any, in theory. Modern believers in all three religions already have adopted much of Jesus' message and Western values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have more problems getting along with each other than with assimilating the message of Jesus. Because of current problems between the West and Islam, most of the chapter is about Islam. I write for moderate reasonable people who do not force ideas on anybody. Much of what I say about one religion applies to the other two. I don't usually point that out.

Not Jews, Christians, Muslims, or any subgroup in them, literally follows all the words in the basic text of their religion (Torah, rest of Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran). Every group selects passages to support its current ideas and skips passages that make problems. No group has a direct line to God and knows exactly the one-and-only Word-and-Will of God about everything important. No group knows the Word of God to the exclusion of others. Even when groups cite passages that seem clear, we should not take their view at face value. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran are self-contradictory and contradict each other. God does not insure that any passage in any book is correct for all times in all places just because (1) the passage supports your ideas, (2) God would not lie to your group, and (3) God watches over your group. We must read the texts to make up our own minds, find the best truth, avoid bad people in each religion, and be clear about principles. These points are so important that I repeat them.

PART 1: Similar Problems.

Following Jesus' Message; Jesus as God.

Keep in mind my disagreement with Orthodox Christianity. In Orthodox Christianity, Jesus is important because he is God and he saves people directly through his Birth, Death, and Resurrection. His life and teachings help his mission. To me, his message is more important than mere facts of his Birth, Death, and Resurrection even if he is God and was resurrected. Christians should accept Jesus' message along with his identity as God but they don't always do that. They substitute difficult doctrines and odd acts of worship for following Jesus' message. Read Wayne Meeks for a view that is accessible, orthodox, and scholarly. Read from the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, or from the Heidelberg Confession for Protestants.

The content of Jesus' message is not a problem for Judaism and Islam to accept. How enthusiastic they have to be is not a topic I go into much. They have to take it as seriously as anything anybody ever said in their religion, including Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, Paul, and Mohammad.

The major doctrinal problem in Judaism and Islam with adopting the message of Jesus is Jesus as God. Judaism and Islam cannot accept Jesus as God. Because the message of Jesus does not depend on

him as God, I see no reason why Judaism and Islam can't accept the message. People should stop getting stuck on Jesus as God and instead should consider his message. Jesus is not only a Christian prophet; Jesus is a prophet of God for all people.

Jesus' message was basically Jewish, modified to include others. Although not apparent now, Jews and Muslims share much background. The shared background of Judaism and Islam accords with Jesus' message. Political relations with Christians led Jews and Muslims to reject the message not due to its content but because it is part of Christianity. I hope Jews and Muslims can ignore the issue of Jesus as God, and then assess the message correctly apart from any ties to Christianity's claim that Jesus is God. If so, they might give a more objective useful assessment of how to apply the message in modern times than Christians have done so far.

Jews and Muslims don't have to solve their disputes before they consider the message of Jesus. Jews might have to accept Jesus as a Jewish prophet, which they can do easily enough if they do not have to worry about Jesus as God. Muslims already accept Jesus as a prophet, so I do not see any conflict with Muslim traditions as long as Muslims do not dismiss Jesus as "only a Christian thing".

Following the message of Jesus does not require that you give up all the practices, beliefs, and markers of your own native religion. I would be sad if people did that. I would be sad if Jews gave up yarmulkes, Muslims gave up praying several times a day, and Christians gave up pseudo-Christian holidays such as Christmas. I love Christmas and many non-Christians love Christmas.

Whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, rather than worry about your identity, get your principles and priorities straight. Think about what you see clearly and what blinds you. Think about how to live in the modern world so you keep religious integrity but also so you are a helpful citizen. Think about how you might best use your time and energy. Get rid of what is misleading and bad. Decide what is important. Then do it. Think seriously about the message of Jesus and the core tenets of your religion. If they are compatible, as I think they are, then think how to merge them and how to live accordingly. After you give a can of food to the community food bank, if you want to light a candle to Mary, say a prayer of thanks to Allah, or thank Yahweh you were allowed to do a good act, then go ahead. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims already do this.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (A).

This section and the next raise problems in exegesis that I have avoided throughout the book. The basic point here is simple: The world is not all about you. Stop thinking the world is all about you. In particular, stop thinking the world is all about how you get to heaven. Instead, think about how to be a good, decent, useful person. If you need to think the world is about something, it is about the Kingdom of God.

The relevant passages are Matthew 22:37-40 from the New Testament. Jesus references Deuteronomy 6:15 and Leviticus 19:18. The first reference that begins "You shall love the Lord your God" is a famous powerful key statement in Judaism, and Jews often repeat it. The ideas are clearly stated in the Koran. I doubt Jesus said everything in the New Testament that is attributed to him but I am sure he said all this below.

“You shall love the Lord your God
With all our heart,
And with all your soul,
And with all your mind.’ (from Deuteronomy)
This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it:
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (from Leviticus)

On these two commandments hang
All the law and the prophets.”

I left out Jesus’ statement about loving your neighbor as yourself from my list of points from Jesus in the first chapter of this book because it leads to the confusions listed below. I don’t explain it much here, and I don’t explain why it is hard to follow. Use common sense. It is an ideal toward which we work. It guides and inspires us. Evolution made sure we cannot follow it fully. God does not expect us to follow it fully. God is happy when we try hard.

To love your neighbor as yourself is to see people as persons; follow the Golden Rule; follow the idea that rules apply equally to you, kin, friends, enemies, “them”, and everybody; and follow the rule of law.

“Neighbor” means everyone, including non-Jews. Jesus likely did mean it inclusively to encompass even non-Jews but not as inclusively as later Christians taught. Jesus aimed at Jews and tolerated non-Jews happily. Later Christians aimed equally at Jews and non-Jews. Christians eventually aimed at non-Jews and excluded Jews. Hopefully modern Christians include everybody equally.

The advice that “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” raises problems.

First, it is hard to understand and impossible to follow. Evolution made sure that we don’t entertain ideas like this very often or very much and that we don’t act on them except rarely. We can’t get a good feel for loving our fellow as much as ourselves. I don’t explain much more.

Second, if we take “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” seriously as a realistic goal that we have to reach or else we are bad people, then we get flummoxed and paralyzed. We don’t do much good. If we want to get anything done, it is better to see this as an unreachable ideal than as a necessary goal.

Third, you are not part of a giant collective totalitarian state, theocracy, or bad version of the Kingdom of God. The fact that the world is not all about you does not mean it is all about the state, an ethnic group, a religion, a church, your socio-economic class, your family, the Caliphate, or the Communist collectivity. Do not lose yourself in a group or dogma. You individually are important. I have stated the importance of individual persons often. You have to find a correct balance between you as individual and the secular-religious-political-and-kin institutions that you are in.

Fourth, God still cares about you as an individual. God cares about all the individual sparrows and so he cares about you. You matter. To God, you, and all individuals, are what it is about. You can believe that God cares about you and still understand that the world is not all about you personally.

Fifth, the fact that the world is not all about you, and you should act in accord with what the world is all about, does not mean all you must force yourself to act like a sickly sweet do-gooder. You help the world when you are yourself, when you do what you are good at, even when you are a little irascible, and when you make the world more interesting. You love your neighbor when you give him what you are and what you are best capable of, and so give what you can give most of. You love your neighbor when you do the most good not necessarily when you do stereotyped good. If you devote yourself to others, and only help the world, that is great; but not everybody can do that or should. To love your neighbor as yourself is not to lose yourself in an ecstasy of warm feelings unless the feelings lead you to do good things following the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

Sixth, the statement implies that, if you don't love yourself very much, you don't love your neighbor very much either. Lack of self-respect is lack of respect for others too. You are one of the people in the world; you are a neighbor to all other people; you are a neighbor. They should love you as much as they love themselves. You are as worthy of their love, just as they are as worthy of your love, because God loves us all. They won't succeed at loving you as they love themselves, no more than you do. You do still have to try to love them even if they don't fully love you or even if they hardly love you. To say this is not again to make you “first among equals” and selfish. To say this is not to deny good people who spend their life in service. It is the other way around. When you see that everyone is in the same boat, including you, you are more likely to be good to other people. If you have done bad things, or feel bad, I know how you can have little self-respect but still respect others. If you are depressed, then take care of yourself first until you are better, and don't worry. If you can, accept that God loves you and forgives you. Take seriously that you too are one of the neighbors too, and act accordingly.

If you see that you are one of the neighbors too, you still matter, you cannot fully succeed in loving your neighbor as yourself, but you can try, then you are more likely to do some good than if you try to reduce yourself to a bitter servant in a vain attempt to love your neighbor fully. The little bit of good that you really do is more important than the great good that you dream you could have done.

Seventh, to love God does not excuse doing any bad things to anybody. You do not love God and do not love your neighbor as yourself if you do any bad things to anybody. Zealotry is bad.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (B).

This section shows how we can stretch scripture to get what we want. I hope that I don't stretch it so far that the scripture breaks.

Eighth, to me, Jesus' statement makes clear that the world is not all about you and therefore not all about you going to heaven. Jesus did not worry much about heaven. Loving your neighbor, seeing that the world is not all about you, is a higher goal than going to heaven. Because the lower goal gets in the way of the higher goal, it is best to forget the lower goal. Focus on the higher goal, loving your neighbor. What I say here of heaven is as true of the goal of “getting saved”. If you worry about getting saved more

than about your neighbor and of following Jesus' message then you will fail at all. Think first about being a good person and about your neighbor; heaven and salvation will take care of themselves. What I say is also true of getting "enlightened" from Buddhism although I don't push the point.

Some Jews, most Christians, and most Muslims, think religion is all about believing something, and-or doing some things, so you go to heaven. Even without Jesus' statement above, taking "go to heaven" as your primary goal is a big mistake. Religions that teach "go to heaven" as the primary goal are wrong. To take "go to heaven" as the primary goal leads us to think of ourselves first, leads us not to follow Jesus' message, and so leads us not to love our neighbor as ourselves. To do good things to gain a benefit for ourselves is a mistake even though we do good things and even though what we want for ourselves is a good thing such as heaven. Even if we take heaven to mean "closer to God" it is still a mistake to take that as the first goal. Rather, just love God, love your neighbor, do good, be decent, and let heaven take care of itself.

Jesus clearly puts "love God" and "love your neighbor" before going to heaven. To put heaven above them is wrong. If you think you can declare some doctrine or perform some act and so get to heaven, then you think the world is all about you, you do not love God fully, you think first of yourself, and you do not love your neighbor as yourself. If you love your neighbor so you can go to heaven, you do not really love your neighbor as yourself. It is a contradiction to try to love your neighbor so you can go to heaven. You can't do it. This is the mistake of "Pascal's Wager" from the chapter in this book on codes. Worry about loving your neighbor first and then worry about heaven later. To say this is not to offer you another doctrine to declare; I offer you some observation and some advice.

I have said we meet God after we die, not that we go to heaven for sure if we follow a particular doctrine, do particular deeds, or go to a particular church. I have said we should act well for its own sake without worrying about our talk with God and without worrying about heaven. This is like the athlete or dancer doing the best he-she can right now without worrying about anything else.

It is natural to want to succeed, do well, avoid badness (hell), and get a reward (heaven). It is natural to want all that for family. When Jesus says to love your neighbor as yourself, then it is natural to try to love your neighbor as yourself so you can go to heaven - regardless of the contradiction. God does not burn with fierce anger toward people who mistakenly use "going to heaven" as the highest goal. Because it is so natural to seek heaven, hard to love our neighbor as ourselves, and natural to pursue the contradiction of loving our neighbor so you can go to heaven, then trying to go to heaven is not necessarily a horrible mistake. God understands. Unless the mistake of "going to heaven" leads you to act badly, act selfishly, or condemn others, it is not necessarily a horrible mistake. It can lead us to act well, and, in that way, it can be a good mistake. Sadly, many of us would not follow Jesus without the temptation of heaven. As with other natural mistakes, especially those mistakes that cause little damage, God is not too harsh with us about this one.

Don't worry about you personally going to heaven. Worry about doing what God and Jesus want.

If you really want to do well, without thinking you will go to heaven as a result, then practice thinking about doing well without thinking about heaven. Practice helps. Practice enacts good faith. Practice thinking the world is not all about you even though you still matter. Practice thinking other people matter as much

as you. Practice thinking “what should I do?” on the basis that other people matter as much as you do, on the basis of ideally loving everybody as you love yourself, and on the basis of knowing you are one of the neighbors too. You can’t fully succeed but such practice can clear your head and make you do better.

When people stop thinking the world is all about them, and stop thinking religion is all about how they can go to heaven, then they are much more likely to follow the message of Jesus.

If your religion does not teach you that the world is not all about you, if your religion does not teach you to love other people as yourself, if your religion does teach you the main goal is heaven, then your religion is wrong and misleading. If your religion does teach you those things, then it does not teach you to follow the message of Jesus, and you are not likely to follow it. My assessment applies to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and all religions.

Luckily, all major religions leave ample room to stop thinking it is all about you, stop thinking it is all about going to heaven, start loving your neighbor as yourself, and start following the message of Jesus. Try to see the teachings of your religion in that light. If you cannot see your religion in that light, then you need to change it or leave it.

Fallible Founders.

Hopefully I made clear I think Jesus was a man and Jesus made mistakes even about some important spiritual points such as the existence of the devil and the rapid coming of the Kingdom of God. Religions have no trouble seeing the key people of other religions as merely human and fallible, even when the other leaders were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Religions have no trouble even seeing the key people in other religions as false prophets or demons. Religions cannot see their own prophets as merely human and fallible. Religions insist not only that their founders were infallible in some situations when they were inspired by the Holy Spirit but infallible generally. Certainly Christians see Jesus that way, and, despite Mohammad being clear he was only a man and so fallible sometimes, Muslims see him as an infallible constant representative of God. Even Jews see their major prophets that way. It is inconceivable that anything attributed to Moses in the Torah or to a major prophet in the Tanakh might be merely human and not fully true all the time.

Of course, I think this attitude is entirely wrong. We have to accept that even the most important people in a religion are merely human and might have made mistakes. Even the most important people let their personal desires shape what they said in God’s name. We have to assess what prophets said against our best ideas of what God is, what the world is, and the best morality. We do not have to be slaves to some clever theology, or even to common sense, but we cannot be slaves to dogma either. Yes, I know this attitude opens the door to subjectivity and to conflicts but that is the price we have to pay for inching closer to the truth and for applying God’s ideas of “best life” to our times.

The idea of each religion that its own founders are utterly infallible and god-like is a major hurdle to each religion accepting the teachers of other religions and seeing the truths of other religions. Rather than look at the mainline teachings of another religion, religions attack the prophets of other religions and defend their own prophets. Only if religions first accept that their own prophets are fallible can they get beyond

this petty attack on persons and get on to messages. Only if religions accept the huge chunk of wood in their own eyes can they get over the tiny speck of dust in the eyes of other religions.

To attack the prophets of other religions while insisting on the absolute god-like infallibility of your own prophets is a version of "us versus them". It is idolatry in the service of group conflict. Get over it by accepting the fallibility of your own prophets and looking for the best message everywhere.

Religions defend the infallibility of their founders as a way to defend the whole religion. Take our religion as a whole or leave it. This attitude makes sense in the light of human evolution and the importance of religion in group life but we can no longer afford this luxury. If you want to take what is good from another religion while leaving what is bad, you have to see that good and bad are mixed in that religion. If you see that, you have to see that the prophets of a religion are fallible, are not infallible. If you can see a mix of good and bad, truth and mistakes, in other religions, you can see it in your own. Only if you can see it in your own can you see it in other religions. If you want other religions to take what is good from your religion, you have to allow that not all of your religion is perfect. If you allow that not all of your religion is perfect, then you have to allow that your prophets were not totally infallible and god-like. You have to allow that they were human speakers. Only in that way can the good truths of your religion go to other people and the good truths of other people come to your religion.

Jesus, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, and Chuang Tzu were all fallible and made mistakes. Get used to it. Get on to better things.

If you really just can't let go of the idea that "your guy(s)" was infallible and god-like, if letting go makes your stomach hurt, then you have a hard job. You have to see through a thick hedge to get glimpses of truth on the other side. You have to try harder. God (Dharma, Tao, or Heaven) wants you to see the truth no matter what religion it is in. You have to try hard about this issue because God wants you to try hard.

Special Relation to God.

Most religions start within particular ethnic groups, and ethnic groups often think of themselves as having a special relation with the deity, for example Yahweh, or with the supreme principle, such as Dharma. The special relation is only between their group and God (Dharma), so that no other group can have this relation or can have a similar relation that is just as good. Europeans and White Americans think only they can be true Christians, American Blacks think only they can be true Baptist Christians, Indians think only they can be true Hindus who know the full Dharma, Arabs think only they can be true Muslims, Chinese think only they can be true Taoists, and the Thai think only they, the Ceylonese, and maybe the Japanese can be true Buddhists. In theory, the close relation can grow outside the original ethnic group by conversion. In fact, people in a religion still tend to be of one ethnicity or nationality and they still have trouble believing anybody of another ethnicity or nationality can be a true follower.

Judaism is more stringent than other religions in its exclusivity because, from the start, Judaism always openly stressed a close relation between God (Yahweh) and a particular ethnic group. People could convert to Judaism, and would be accepted as a true believer in Yahweh. Eventually they would become Jews too. But only as Jews that people could have a close relation with Yahweh and be a true believer.

Nowadays, Jews do see that Christians and Muslims try to have a close relation with Yahweh, but their own history has told them that this is a tricky situation. Historically speaking, at best, non-Jews can only have a derivative second-rate relation with Yahweh, and they only follow a lesser version of the Law that reflects their secondary status. This is one thing that Jews, and all religions, have to change. Jews can change this idea of strong exclusivity without giving up on the idea that once-upon-a-time they did have one kind of unique relation with God and while accepting that now they have another unique relation with God. The present unique relation of Jews with God does not prevent other people from having their own fully satisfying relation with the one-and-only same God.

First Christianity, then Islam, took up the Jewish attitude of ethnic exclusivity, and turned it against their rivals. For Christians, only Christians can have a true full relation with Yahweh, and it has to be through Jesus. Jews lost their close relation with Yahweh when they rejected Jesus as God. For Muslims, only Muslims can have a close relation with Allah (God), and it has to be through Mohammad. Jews and Christians lost their relation when they rejected Mohammad as the last and greatest prophet. Muslims resent the Jewish and Christian attitude that Muslims cannot have a close relation with Allah. Muslims see the Jewish and Christian attitude as selfish idolatry that tries to usurp God for the idolaters, and that places a wall between God and most of his creation. You don't have to be a Jew or Christian to have a relation with God (Allah). I disagree with the Christian and Muslim interpretations. They are not unique and special, other groups are not bad, and other groups are not barred from a close relation with God. When Christians and Muslims put themselves in a special place, they practice the same kind of idolatry of which Muslims accuse Christians. I agree with the Muslim interpretation when it seeks links between God and all his creation.

The badness of unique exclusivity gets worse when combined with the idea of ethnic group as nation. As with most peoples of the world, Jews (Hebrews) were not only an ethnic group, they were also a political military nation. Jews (Hebrews) had a relation with Yahweh not just as an ethnic group but also as a political nation that had policies and fought wars. Yahweh made not only Jews (Hebrews) prevail but also made the state of Israel (including Judah) prevail. When Christianity and Islam took up a unique relation with God, they took up nationalism too. At various times after Israel, various nations in their turn claimed status as the "New Israel". One nation claimed to be the favorite of God, the instrument of God, and to represent God on Earth. Sometimes this nation was France, Britain, Germany, Spain, the United States, Iraq (Babylon), Egypt, Iran, or as I wrote, ISIS. Other ethnic groups and nations make this claim too in their own way as when India thinks of itself as the one nation that has a true relation with the Dharma and represents the Dharma on Earth.

This is all wrong now. No ethnic group, nation, or religion has a special relation with God. God cannot be reserved for one ethnic group, religion, or nation. What matters are your ideas, your relation with God, and your acts. You have to build a good relation with God. If you have good ideas about God, then you likely have a good relation. If your group has good ideas about God, then people in it likely have good relations. If you have bad ideas as part of your religion, ethnic group, or nation, then you will have trouble with God. You cannot think you have a close relation with God just because you are a Jew (religious), Christian, Muslim, Jew (ethnic), Israeli (nation), European, Arab, Turk, Persian, Malay-Indonesian, or American. Believing you have a special relation with God because of your ethnicity, religion, or nation is a bad idea that blocks a good relation with God.

The Jewish attitude about a special relation with God played a big part in history and in the development of good ideas about God. It played a key role in Jewish survival. Unfortunately, I cannot tell that good story here. Christian and Muslim take-over of the attitude also played big parts in history. Sometimes in this chapter I return to the attitude of having a close relation with God.

If a special relation of Jews with God remains, and I hope it does, it consists of Jews serving as moral and political examples to the world. I go into this topic more below.

Religion in the Modern World.

The biggest impediment for Jews and Muslims to following the message of Jesus in the modern world is not theology, it is the modern world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all were built in a pre-modern pre-industrial world of kings, soldiers, peasants, merchants, crafts people, priests, thieves, bandits, distinct class society, magic, superstition, spiritual heroes, divine mediators, demons, no science, no modern scientific engineering, and no capitalism. The ideas of the major religions fitted life then. To adopt Jesus' message for the modern world means to give up ideas that sustained Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for many hundreds of years. That is hard. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus' message as a way to reject the modern world and the West without necessarily rejecting Jesus as a prophet. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus as prophet so as to cling to old ways, not because of anything intrinsically in Jesus' message.

Conservative Christians have the same problem but inverted. They want to accept some of the modern world such as their place among the wealthy and secure, but they refuse to accept other parts such as the problems of capitalism, decay of nature, and "handwriting on the wall" of biology and machines. They cling to a past in which they were the center of society, and use Christian dogma to do so.

Some confused believers have a similar but more sympathetic problem. They do not in principle reject the modern world, but the modern world is confusing, indecent, and often painful. They yearn for better and simpler times, and for order. They yearn for the decency that is so hard to find now. They turn to what seemed to work in the past even if they know now is not the past. They turn to what seems like solid basic principles even if those don't work now. It is hard to fault them. We all do something similar when we watch reruns of "Andy Griffith", "Seinfeld", or "Friends" on TV.

To the overly Conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I don't know what to say other than "get over it". I say the same thing to the confused Christians but with less nastiness. In the end, you must accept the modern world or else your DNA and your culture will be kept in tiny bottles in museums. When you do get around to dealing with the modern world, you must deal with its institutions including the ideas of Jesus and the West. That task is much easier if you accept the large background that you already share with Jesus as a Jew and with the West as a close neighbor. It is much easier to accept the modern world if you see you can add to it. Christians have not come up with all the good ideas already and have not solved all the problems already. The modern world needs your help. The modern world needs your help to make pluralistic democracy work, regulate capitalism, save nature, figure out gender, and to control biotechnology and artificial intelligence as they expand.

A Few Words on Terrorists.

Some Christians and Muslims act much harsher. I am not sure about Jews because I don't know Jewish subgroups well enough. If what I say applies to some Jews, then think about it. The old order supported some groups more than others, such as men over women, wealthy stay-at-home women over women who had to go to the fields or shops, rich over poor, old over young, owners over workers, owners over people with an education, and clans over small working families. People who stand to lose, and people who fear they might lose, sometimes violently resist change and they use religious ideology to support their violence.

These are the terrorists. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear the new world, are victims, and are deeply confused. The losers don't even have to be outright poor; they only have to be comparative losers to other people around them or in media fantasy life. Terrorists recruit from among the people who have some education but can't find a job, or from among able bodied fairly smart people who don't see why they can't make a living. It doesn't matter if some Christians are the ones who make life hard for other Christians, or some Muslims are the ones who make life hard for other Muslims. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear and who have a hard time; terrorists recruit by blaming it not on their fellows of the victims who hurt the victims but by blaming the "others". White Christians blame Muslims, Jews, Blacks, and Hispanics; Blacks blame Whites, Hispanics, and Asians; and Muslims blame Christians and the West. It doesn't matter that some terrorists use modern media, they still live in an idealized past. They still think that stories of a good godly affluent world where everybody had land or a job, everybody respected God, and everybody was modest, are true. The best antidote to the mistakes is honesty about both the good and the bad, and facing up to real problems.

Some terrorists might not personally stand to lose from the new order and might even stand to gain, such as well-educated and professional people who become terrorists. Apart from Osama Bin Laden, the Bin Laden family owns a large construction firm and they are successful good peaceful Muslims. Osama was not a victim of the modern world; he simply wanted to remake it in his idealized image. I do not here go into the motives of the terrorists who might have been able to make it in the modern world but chose terror instead. They enjoy using other people and they are adept at the media and ideology. They gain by manipulating ideologies of a great past and of an ungodly present. Again, the best antidote is the full truth and facing up to problems.

Western Institutions.

For nearly 2000 years, the West carried the message of Jesus and the seeds of key institutions but did not fully develop the institutions, such as full rule of law, public education, democracy, citizenship, and science. The West did have important institutions such as partial rule of law, charities, and education through churches. So it is possible to carry the message of Jesus without fully developing the good institutions that are its flowering. Even so, the important institutions could not have developed without the message of Jesus, and I see them as a natural extension of his message. I use them as standards for the good realization of a good religious message. I do so although I have serious misgivings about the success of populist democracy. If you hear the best message from God, then you will work to develop and sustain these institutions in the modern world, with allowances for your culture, society, and history; if you do that, then you have heard the best message from God for our times even if you do not know that it

came from God; if you do not do that, then you have missed the best message from God, or you do not take it seriously. It is selfish to use the institutions of my civilization to assess others but that is what I do, and I can only be honest about it.

Doing Good; No Religious Pyramid Schemes.

In other drafts of this chapter, the material in this section quickly ballooned, so I mention only the key points. I will take up the topic elsewhere.

I devalue religions if they are little but pyramid schemes. Religion should have a message other than “we are good guys; they are bad guys; join us good guys”, “God loves us more than anybody else”, or “we will win because God loves us more than anybody else, so you should join us”. It is not even enough to say “If you join us, you will feel great joy in the love of God, especially if you go out and get other people to join and feel great joy, and so on”. Every religion says that, and they can’t all be right. Also, that is what people say when they want others to take drugs or join a cult. An example of a pyramid scheme you can see on TV is: “Giving to us is the same as giving to God, and, if you do that, you will get rich, so give to us first”. You should never do bad things to show that you are more than just ecstatic and that you have a positive agenda from God.

Only in hard times, when religion is a tool to keep a group alive, can you rest with “this is what we believe because we are who we are”. Jews had to do this to survive, and it was good then. Sometimes groups of all faiths have had to do it. Even then, you should not use religion to do bad things.

If you join the good guys, if you are part of the one true religion of the one true God, you should do good things and avoid bad things. Being a good guy has to have a point. You have to act, not just to sustain your own group but to do good things. If you cannot act, or are not sure what to do, at the least, you can change your character. The message of Jesus, combined with realistic practicality and Western values, is a clear statement of good things to do. Your religion does not have to adopt Jesus as its leader but your religion should offer a program along the lines of his ideas.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in most of the world now do not need religion merely to survive. They are secure enough. So all three religions need to offer a positive message of what their religion is all about; they have to offer a positive agenda for how believers can make the world better. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have to assess to the message of their religions about what good to do in the world other than to convert others to their religion. If their religion does not offer a positive constructive message of what good to do, then they have to change their religion, or, if their religion will not change, they have to leave. Luckily, mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all (tacitly) accept a message along the lines of Jesus’ ideas, and they can promote a positive program along the lines of Jesus’ message. That is how I evaluate them.

I do not deal with Bad Subgroups here.

Some bad subgroups within the major religions do not offer any real message, or offer a bad message. “If you really know God like we do, you should hurt the other people who don’t hold us to be the only true representatives of God.” “The act that confirms your belief is forcing your belief on others, and so on”. It

is up to good members of a religion to suppress bad groups. If they don't fight bad groups, they are at fault equally. See the movie "Judgment at Nuremberg". That is all I need to say.

God's Will versus Principles.

I said what follows in the chapter on Legalism but I don't mind repeating it here.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim to know God's Will. They cite passages from the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran to support their claim. Passages within the books, and between the books, do not all agree, and so major religions disagree on God's Will. This alone is enough to show that they do not automatically know God's Will. We have to evaluate what they claim as God's Will not only on the basis of passages from their holy books but on other standards. Even when all the religions agree on their idea of God's Will, cite passages in support, and cite similar passages, we should not simply accept their claim to know God's Will. We still should apply other standards.

The other standards are the best moral ideas, especially the ideas of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. Those standards prevail over any claims about God's Will. If any group claims to know God's Will but its idea of God's Will does not go along with the best moral standards, then we can reject its idea as the basis for personal action, for policies of the state, and as God's Will. If Jews, Christians, or Muslims say it is God's Will that modern democracy extend voting rights to everybody who is mentally competent regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, then we can believe them, tempered by practicality. If Christians say it is God's Will that women, gays, and people of European descent may not vote now because they did not have rights to participate in the old Temple at Jerusalem, then we should not believe them. If Christians or Muslims say Jews do not have the right to vote because Jews have lost their special relation to God and only Christians and Muslims now have that relation, we should not believe them. If Jews say only they know the Will of God, and only they have the rights of full citizenship, because only they had a special relation with God, and only with them has that relation go on to the present day just as it was in the time of King Solomon, we should not believe them.

Just because the religions all agree on God's Will, and their idea of God's Will goes along with the best moral principles, does not mean we have to accept a particular policy in a modern state on the basis that it is God's Will. If all three religions agree it is God's Will that we can take slaves, then we should not believe them. We offer particular policies because they go along with the best moral principles. God's Will did not necessarily originate the policy and does not necessarily have anything to do with it. If we also want to think that God is behind good policies that are based on the best moral principles, that is a naturally human way to think and I have no problem with it.

Relying on good moral principles can take "God's Will" out of the picture. If action is based on moral principles regardless of God's Will, then we don't need God's Will. Logically, strictly speaking, that might be true. But, in practice, we need a source of good ideas about how to live, and the great religious texts are the best source. It is important for people to think they act not only in accord with logic and morality but also with God's Will. Logic alone cannot provide us with all the morality that we need, and logic alone cannot settle problems in morality. For the full base of our morality, we go back to the major traditions that gave us our morality to begin with. To settle issues, we also go back to them, and we try to get the different traditions to agree. When morality and God's Will agree, and receive support from the Tanakh,

New Testament, and Koran, then I am happy to think I go along with God's Will when I go along with moral principles. Maybe that is how God expresses his Will these days. I have no trouble with invoking God's Will sometimes as long as it is invoked properly.

We need nudges in particular directions sometimes. We do not want to stone all adulterers and thieves. We need to know what to forgive how much. If the holy books of different religions all agree, then great. If they disagree, then we have to think hard and refer back to basic best moral principles often. Hopefully, when we reach agreement, believers can think they follow God's Will through the process by which God revealed it to them in such cases.

You are not doing God's Will if you follow every commandment about prayer, food, fasting, the Sabbath, clothing, marriage, sex, and cleanliness, or if you get angry at enemies, and you do not follow the ideals behind Jesus' teachings. You are not doing God's Will if you are a silly legalist, or use God's Will to vent your hatred, and so do not follow Jesus' teachings.

God's Will can serve as the basis for a system that eats the world, and it does so in Christianity, Islam, and some types of Judaism. I originally wrote this chapter with a part on that topic but then I took it out because of the length. I put those comments on the Web separately.

External Worship; Old Warnings are Still True.

To do what God taught is far more important than to worship externally. Even self-validating experience such as ecstasy in the glory of God or participating in the sacraments is merely external worship, and, if that is all you do, that is not useful and that displeases God. External worship of God can get in the way of the message by letting us focus on acts that have little to do with the message so we can feel good about ourselves without doing much real good. We feel good about formal external worship but overlook true worship (sin of omission due to misguided worship).

Going to church, synagogue, or mosque every week, or every day, is not enough. Keeping the holidays is not enough. Praying daily, or five times daily, is not enough. Venerating great prophets, Jesus, or Mohammad is not enough. Venerating priests, rabbis, or imams, is not enough. Keeping the day of a special saint is not enough. Keeping all the commandments is not enough if that is all you do, you do it from duty alone, or you do it from fear of hell. Having a personal relation with God is not enough if you don't also make yourself useful. Making the pilgrimage to Mecca is not enough if it doesn't change you and lead you to be useful. If you light a million candles to Jesus, Mary, or a Saint, but never give a can of food to the food bank, then you have wasted your time and resources. If you put on a funny hat or sing a throbbing song, that devotion does not necessarily make you right with God. God does allow for limitations and mixed motives.

Worship of God can get in the way of the message by getting us to act not in accord with the message, or even act against it, but still feel good about ourselves (sin of commission due to misguided worship). If you defeat religious foes at the muzzle of a gun, or with legislative conniving, and then install tyranny, you have defeated God and goodness. If you act on zealotry instead of helping people, God will judge you harshly. If you waste time harassing people who do little harm so you can feel self-righteous, such as by harassing gay people, God will harass you and do you little good. If you crusade for social programs but

don't understand the real impact of the programs, you have wasted your time and hurt people. If you blow up a school bus in the name of God then God will condemn you when you die. You would be better off starting a school for children of any faith.

Our minds, and science, are a gift from God just as much as any scripture is a gift. If you refuse science because you worship dead scripture instead of the living God and his works, if you deny evolution and climate change, then you have refused God, the prophets, Jesus, and Mohammad.

When you worship externally, you worship an idol, and you worship badly, even if the idol is beautiful. Bad worship stands in the way of good worship. Idol worship blocks the way to God. Good worship is following the message of God and accepting his gifts of heart, mind, and spirit.

I cannot say what is enough. You have to work that out with God. We learn what God wants us to do from his prophets. Prophets disagree. We have to pick the ones that we consider most important. Our pick should be guided by widespread standards, such as by social justice, the need for social order, and by the objective morality of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "applies equally to everybody". We can reject parts of a prophet's message that we do not like while still keeping other parts that we do like if we do so in accord with deep principles and if we act sincerely. This is what I have done explicitly in this book. I ask believers in other religions to do the same, and to be sure they are explicit about what they do.

Focus on What is Important.

I know external signals, such as hats, beads, and prayer poses, can be key for believers, and external signals can teach ideas such as the relation of people to God. I know believers judge on the basis of external signals, and keep aloof or come together according to external signals. I don't care about that. I care about ideas of self, world, God, prophets, relation to God, justice, the message of Jesus, general attitude toward life, general attitude toward modern life, and the typical character of believers. In belief about God, the three religions are nearly identical except for the question of Jesus as God. I think the three religions can overlook that difference. The three religions differ in some features of personality and attitude. External signs of worship are much more about personality and attitudes, and about ethnic-religious affiliation, than they are about real points of belief.

Overall Right.

Jesus was not right about everything. No prophet in any religion was always right about everything. The Buddha was wrong sometimes. Mohammad was petty and spiteful sometimes. To see what God wants, you have to get over the idea that a particular prophet was always right. You have to read as much from all the prophets as you can, then make up your own mind about the core message. After you have read them all, you have to go back again and sort through them again so you can assess each prophet in the context of all and in the context of what you think is the core message. You have to be willing to let other people know what you are doing, and take the consequences if they disagree with your search or your conclusions. You cannot let people stand in the way finding out what God had on his mind. If you hold narrowly to any one prophet, you put a human being before God. God doesn't like that. You don't have to be a rebellious "bad boy" or "bad girl" to do this. You don't have to deliberately break rules to get free.

You just have to use your mind. When other people use their minds, don't stand in their way. Don't try to force them to believe that your prophet was the one and only prophet who was always right and who was always right because he-she spoke for God.

PART 2: Judaism.

Jews in the West already have accepted Western values and the ideas of Jesus without accepting that Jesus is God. They have accepted the ideas with little problem, and have been leaders in spreading the ideas around the world. Jews have lived the ideas. Jews are outstanding community leaders, citizens, and professionals. When Jon Stewart of the Daily Show came back from spending the summer of 2013 making a movie in the Middle East, despite stressing how much he loved the experience, he also made a point of how much he is a Westerner and shares Western values.

Jews are prominent in the entertainment industry. I do not argue here about the extent of their presence and whether it is good or bad; for this book, I don't care (I don't care that Italians dominate wine making or Germans beer making). As artists, directors, producers, and critics, Jews have promoted the best values of Western culture and have promoted the values of Jesus. A glance at credits for the best movies and TV shows indicates how Jews have contributed to spreading good Western values including the message of Jesus. Movies such as "White Christmas" owe a debt to Jews; Irving Berlin wrote the title song, really believed in Christmas as a vehicle of good values, and was a good Jew. Adam Sandler's "Hanukah Song" is both a lot of fun and a true glimpse at what Jews have contributed. His movies promote the values of Jesus because they promote the best values of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; see "You Don't Mess with the Zohan". In 2013, in disgust over squabbles about saying "Merry Christmas", Jon Stewart said Christmas is the best holiday ever for everybody – everybody. If all this is how Jews accept the message of Jesus and act on it, then I am fine with it.

(Just to salvage some PC: many ethnic groups now play a large part in Western media and in bringing good ideas to the world. My wife and I love Thai or Greek names in credits. Chinese kung fu movies promote good ideas such as individual freedom combined with patriotism, as in "Hero" with Jet Li. Hindu ideas imbue Star Trek and Star Wars, and Hindus contribute to the production of good movies. Hindu actors are fairly common. I don't have to dwell on the "Harold and Kumar" movies.)

I do not know much about divisions in Judaism and about groups in Judaism. If particular groups have ideas and acts that allow members to overlook the message of Jesus or get them to act badly, then other Jews have to re-evaluate those groups. Decent Jews within Judaism should chastise groups that act badly. If groups in Judaism do not act in accord with the message, do not act in accord with the spirit of the Law rather than its letter, and do not in accord with Western values, then I hope they change. I leave this to Jews in general as long as their minority groups do not harm greater society. I apply the same standards to all religions.

The prophet Isaiah said Israel (Jews) one day will lead the world morally, and will set the example for how to live with God, even if Israel does not dominate militarily or politically. If Jews lead the world by teaching God and the prophets, including Jesus, through the media, that is a wonderful fulfillment of the prophecy. I can think of few better ways to fulfill the prophecy.

Jewish history and theology as presented in the Tanakh is not literally the truth, and most educated Jews know this. In this respect, average Jews are ahead of average Christians. Jewish scholars lead the way in finding the facts of Jewish history and finding relations between the facts and the Tanakh. Christian scholars pioneered this effort, and many still are in the forefront, but it seems the average Christian has not caught up with scholarship as much as the average Jew has. Any scholarly version of the Tanakh from the Jewish Publication Society has essays and references that will lead an interested reader to know more. Jews have to interpret the historical facts, and what is written in the Tanakh, in light of the relation of Jews to God. As far as I can tell, Jews seem to embrace this task. I look forward to ideas from Jewish scholars on these issues.

Historical facts, and discrepancies between historical facts versus what is written in the Tanakh, concern not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims. Jewish history and Jewish ideas are the basis for those religions too. As facts come up and ideas change, Christians and Muslims have to listen to what Jews think, and they might have to change their own ideas. Christians and Muslims in general have not fully felt this issue about real history and have not fully felt their obligation to Jews, although some scholars do know. I hope all three religions can communicate on these issues and come to accords. Many Christian scholars have helped in this research. Some modern Muslim scholars are working toward finding facts but I am not familiar enough with their work to assess them or cite them.

Jews do not proselytize much. Other people come to Jews asking to convert. Jews do not look down much on people who do not seek them out and who do not convert. Judaism is not a religious pyramid scheme.

Most modern Jews accept that a person can follow the same God as Jews without becoming a Jew. I am not sure if some modern Jews reject this position. I don't think Jews who allow this position think a non-Jew follower of God is less in the eyes of God. If they do, they are wrong. I do not know how a non-Jew follower of God stands in the formal theology of particular Jewish groups. I don't think they worry about it too much. Jews usually do not condemn non-Jews, especially not to hell. Jews do sometimes look down on non-Jews but every religion looks down on others, and Jews are not worse in this regard than people in other religions; in my experience they are somewhat better. At least some Jews do think they are closer to God than people of other religions. I am not sure if this attitude is general in Judaism. Again, other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, feel this way, and Jews are no worse than them. Jews have an explicit basis in their history and theology for this feeling while Christians and Muslims do not have an explicit basis for their feeling of superiority. As far as I can tell, this feeling does not cause Jews to act much differently than believers in other religions, and so is not much of an issue. Jews do not expect to rule the world militarily. They do not expect to rule the world as a theocracy.

It would seem that being a Jew carries no special benefit and often carries a big burden. Then why go on as a Jew? The biggest reason is the same reason that people of all ethnic groups continue in their ethnic group. They are born into that group, have ties to the group, find their greatest success through their ties to their group, and enjoy life in the group. Maybe the closest comparison is with the British or Irish. The second reason is that Jewish identity and Judaism are a great benefit in themselves. However you see the idea of a "chosen people of God", Jews have a great history and have added greatly to humanity, truth, and morality. Jews continue to do so. For most Jews, it is satisfying to be a Jew regardless of the risks.

A fair assessment of any religion would require describing the contributions made by believers. I can't do that here. I do have to mention a few contributions by Jews even if I don't do so for other religions. From the Jews, we got ethical monotheism, the idea of a single God for whom moral conduct is important. Part of ethical monotheism is social justice. In addition to Greeks and Romans as a source for the idea of the rule of law, from Jews we got another important source. For Jews, the Law of God took precedence over any particular human ruler. Because of the firm grounding of this idea in one ethical God, among Jews, the idea held steady over centuries even when similar ideas broke down in other cultures such as among Greeks and Romans. Because of Jewish constancy, this idea became a big part of Western institutions, and then spread around the world. The constancy of the Jewish idea of rule of law, and the idea that law comes out of the deep nature of reality (God), contributed to Western science. Jews did not have science as we know it, and science can be credited primarily to the West, but I think science in the West could not have developed without Jewish ideas of God and law.

Although modern Jews seem to accept that a person can follow the Jewish God without becoming a Jew, I am not sure they can accept the idea that there were (are) prophets other than the standard prophets as given in the Tanakh. I am not sure how they assess John the Baptist. They cannot accept that Jesus was God. To deny that Jesus was God is not the same as denying he was a prophet. I think most Jews could accept that Jesus was a prophet, and Jews could contribute to assessing his message for our world, if Jews could do so without also implying Jesus was God. Even after 2000 years, Jews shy away from Jesus entirely because of the idea that he was God and because of his central role in Christianity. Jesus is Christian "property". Jews can act on the basic message of Jesus without saying much about Jesus the prophet, and so they just leave the issue alone and they do what is right. I wish Jews could explicitly assess the message, and comment on Jesus as a prophet, without worrying about the whole issue of Jesus as God. Some few Jews have done this.

I do not know how Jews assess Christian figures such as Paul, Francis of Assisi, or Martin Luther. Some Christians who were otherwise great thinkers were still anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic), such as Martin Luther, and I do not expect Jews to embrace them. Officially, Christians do not accord saints the same status as the Tanakh prophets, so it is unreasonable to ask Jews to accept Christian figures as full-blown prophets. Christians do accord prophet status to the writers of the New Testament, especially to Paul, but I see little point in arguing over whether we should see Paul as we see Isaiah or Elijah. Read the Christian greats, get what they have to say, and then assess their ideas rather than their status.

I do not know how modern Jews see the great figures of other religions. I doubt that officially Jews can accord them the same status as prophets in the Tanakh. I think most modern educated Jews still could assess their message, accept the good points, and reject the bad points. I have known Jews who have read the Buddha, have gotten a lot from him, and have not subverted their Jewish identity.

I accept Mohammad as a prophet. As far as I can tell, Jews either ignore his status as a prophet or deny that he was one. Despite the fact that Mohammad explicitly said he was only a human, Mohammad is a more difficult issue even than Jesus because, unlike Jesus, Mohammad was not Jewish, Mohammad did not come from Jews, and Jews like cannot accept the Muslims ideas that Mohammad was the greatest and last of all the prophets. Mohammad did accept Jewish ideas but that fact does not necessarily make him a prophet in Jewish eyes. I doubt Jews could accept Mohammad as a prophet soon because of the

current animosity between Jews and Muslims. Mohammad came after the classic Tanakh prophets. Thus Mohammad is disallowed the status of prophet in the same way that even great rabbis who came after the Tanakh are not called prophets. I am sorry a mere “side” issue, the animosity between Jews and Muslims, however otherwise important, can block Jews from assessing Mohammad on the basis of his relation to God alone.

I see Mohammad as a prophet of God (Yahweh and Allah), and I see the great figures of other religions also as prophets of God. I can do this because I do not expect prophets to be completely right about all important issues. I expect prophets to have partial accuracy and partial truth. I have to assess the value of particular prophets, and I have to pick among prophets for particular issues. I can accept that task. I do not accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets – I am not entirely sure what that title for him could mean. I tend not to think of great Christian thinkers and “saints” as prophets, with the possible exception of Saint Francis of Assisi. I am not sure why. I do not think of every adept thinker in other religions as a prophet. I do not think of Nagarjuna from Buddhism as a prophet. I don’t know about Mencius of China. I am not sure how to draw the lines between prophet, theologian, saintly person, good guy, philosopher, original thinker, and somebody who has good ideas about God without being special otherwise. It seems easier to focus on ideas and actions rather than on persons.

I do not follow Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. A person doesn’t have to follow all the Jewish Law to be a good follower of the Jewish God. Apart from the official declaration by Christianity at about 50 CE about freedom from the food laws, I am not sure when in history it became possible for a person to follow the Jewish God but not to uphold all points of the Law. Jesus would have insisted that I do follow all the Law or at least that I follow a modified version of the Law for non-Jews (“Noah” Law). The early Church changed Jesus’ position, exempting non-Jews from nearly all Jewish Law, to allow people like me to join; so by default I go along with the position of Christianity.

I insist on two differences. First, the Christian Church derives the change directly from Jesus, and this idea of the Church is false. The Church itself made the change so it could seek converts. The Church recognizes the roles of Peter and Paul in the change, and that is true enough. I am not sure I approve of the Church’s motives but I am glad it exempted followers of Jesus from some points of the Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. The Church did not exempt followers of Jesus from main points of the Law that exemplify the Spirit of the Law such as worshipping one God, telling the truth, helping, and being kind. In both ways, the Church did the right thing regardless of any side motives.

Second, in denying the Jewish Law, the Christian Church took on for itself the role of the New Israel, and said that Jews had lost their traditional relation with God. As far as I can tell, Muslims did the same later to Jews and Christians. I reject the idea of a New Israel and reject that Jews have lost their traditional relation to God. There always has been only one Israel, there is only one Israel, the one Israel has been represented by Jews, the one Israel always has been represented only by Jews, the one Israel is now represented only by Jews, and the one Israel will be represented only by Jews into the foreseeable future. Other groups based on nation, ethnicity, religion, gender, society, and politics, including Christians and Muslims, should stop pretending to be “the now New Israel”, the current chosen people of God.

Exactly what it means for the modern world that there is one Israel, and the one Israel is only Jews, I don’t know, and I don’t guess much. My best guess is that it is a burden of moral leadership on Jews.

Jews have to show us what it means to be a good person and good citizen in the modern world. The special relation of Jews and God does not mean I have to become Jewish to follow God. It does not mean I have to go along with all actions by the modern political state of Israel. It does not prevent other nations and other groups from guiding the world in moral, political, and ecological action for a time and over some issues. It does not prevent other groups from having a close relation with God, seeking God's guidance, and doing God's work. Jews are like Bach or The Beatles. They are the one talent that you have to listen to and come to grips with even if your own music is quite different. That is what Jesus is like too. Unlike Bach and the Beatles, the Jews are still making music, and we still do well to listen.

PART 3: Christianity

Adopting the Message of Jesus.

It might seem odd to weigh how much Christianity follows the message of Jesus but that is the issue with formal Christianity and zealous Christianity. Followers lapse into mere external worship or into using the idea of God's Will to assert their own will. People do not have to be horrible hypocrites to overlook the message in favor of external worship or self-service. Simple garden-variety hypocrisy does lead people to overlook the message, and people in formal Christianity and zealous Christianity too often are too hypocritical. Usually politics, wealth, and power get in the way, and people interpret the religion so they can pursue self-interest without worrying about the message. This result has been so often described and criticized that I don't go through it here. This problem is not limited to Christianity. Few religions follow the message of their leaders. The problem is sharpest with Christianity for me because I promote the message of Jesus.

People argue whether formal Christian dogma helps Christians overlook the message of Jesus and helps hypocrisy. Was Christian dogma built so as to help people avoid Jesus? The fact that Christians insist on worshipping Jesus as God makes it easier to overlook his message in favor of empty external worship. You can focus on the idea that his dying somehow mysterious saved you while not dealing with poverty or loneliness. I doubt theologians deliberately built dogma so as to allow people to overlook the message of Jesus. I think the early Church did not intend to allow loopholes for inaction except as it wanted to avoid open conflict with Rome. Rather, the doctrine accidentally allows a big evasion for Christians, and Christians have been eager to use the evasion. Many Christians do not use dogma to avoid the message of Jesus, and many Christians give time, money, bodies, and heartache to help other people and to make the world a better place. The hard work, and big hearts, by Christians in the South of America, often astonishes me.

Whether official Christians really follow Jesus largely will be a numbers game. Can enough Christians follow the message of Jesus to make Christianity a religion about the message of Jesus? Is it enough if one-quarter of Christians put the message first? What if one-quarter of Christians put Jesus' message first but another one-quarter dig in their heels about doctrinal issues and spend the energy of faith forcing other people to think as they do and to fight about issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and helping nature? As of 2014, I cannot say. I hope it turns out well.

Christianity as Devotion.

People in state societies need a personal god who is both human and divine, and who can serve as a bridge between the two worlds. They need a Nice Mother, Big Brother, Big Sister, Young Uncle, or Young Aunt, who can help them with God the Parent. Their attitude toward the god savior is devotion. They worship the god savior, and he-she intercedes on their behalf. People usually have only one chief god savior, or have one chief figure of each sex, but that does not stop them from having a lot of lesser intermediaries too. The obvious figures in formal Christianity are Jesus, Mary, the Saints, and the great thinkers in particular sects such as Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. I have already discussed this trend for Christianity in “Jesus for Most People”, and so I don’t go into it much here. The parallels in other religions are devotion to the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and devotion to Krishna or to other avatars and gods in Hinduism.

Just because a religion features this pattern does not mean the pattern is not true. The real question is whether the god savior in any particular religion is real and true. I think the god-savior pattern is false for all religions, not just because it is a common human pattern but because it is false. The answer is “no” for all religions, and so it is “no” in Christianity too. I don’t sift through the evidence here.

The next question is whether devotion to a god-savior gets in the way of being a better person or helps. Surprisingly, devotion often helps. It is one big way that people get in touch with the ideals of prophets such as Jesus, the ideals of institutions such as the Christian Church, or from literature such as in the Mahabharata. Devotion also helps keep people out of mischief. On the other hand, devotion can cause great damage, as when it limits the spiritual growth of individuals or leads them to do bad things such as bomb a church. I cannot guess at the overall balance of good and bad due to devotion.

Some people can never get beyond devotion. People who can get past mere devotion have to consider their response to people who can’t get past it. Harangue and “atheism for everybody” are not often good responses. Telling them that they are stupid and mired in superstition is usually just cruel, and often is not exactly true. Maybe the best responses are to make sure good ideas are easily available, and to help people who show promise of getting beyond mere devotion. In other words, the best response is calm freedom of thought.

Christian Pyramid Scheme.

Christians proselytize, and have since Jesus was alive. In part, proselytizing is how the Christian Church always has grown, and proselytizing is an explicit policy of the Church. Jesus wanted to make a new society in old Israel, he began a movement to do so, and he recruited Jews into his movement; so he supported some proselytizing. Proselytizing is not necessarily bad. It depends on if there is a point other than merely recruiting more members to have more self-validating experiences to recruit more members, and so on. If the Church has a good point other than self-validation and self-growth, then recruiting new Christians can be good. As long as the Church aims ultimately at the message of Jesus, and beyond mere self-validation, then it is good to seek new followers of Jesus. People benefit from the message of Jesus, and they benefit other people when they act on the message of Jesus.

Sadly, the Christian Church too often lapses into a self-validating pyramid scheme. The Church offers such self-validating experiences as love from God, justification, salvation, “getting right with God”, “having a personal relation with Jesus”, and “saving souls for God”, as rewards. Members seek more members

by offering them self-validating experiences. Some recruits have such experiences, and then recruit other people. Whether the experiences are real, valid, and make a person feel good, is beside the point. There is nothing wrong with seeking love from God; people feel good when they feel God loves them; and they should feel good. The point is that these experiences do not inherently lead people to follow the message of Jesus. When you feel that God loves you personally, you should do something good about it to the extent that you can. If people do not follow the message of Jesus as a result of strong experience, but only revel in a self-validating experience, and they seek to recruit other people to the good experience regardless of what people do afterwards, then something is wrong. This is what the Christian Church too often did. This is empty worship. This is a Christian pyramid scheme.

Before the reader gets upset, I repeat that you need only do something on the basis of Jesus' message if you are able to do something, and you need only act to the extent of your abilities and situation. If all you can do is revel in God's love because you are too sick, too depressed, or in prison, then revel in God's love. If you can't do more because it is just not in you, then don't agonize. If you can't do anything more because your society has no serious problems and other people don't want you meddling in their lives, then just take care of your own business. If you can do nothing for another person other than say God really does love that person, then do that for him-her. If all you can do for society is explain to individuals that God really does love them, then do that. If you can do more, then do more.

You cannot do anything bad in the name of God just to prove you have faith, and so to avoid the feeling that you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. You cannot become a zealot. You cannot start hating other people. You cannot even do something good if the only reason that you do it is to validate your faith, especially to avoid feeling you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. If you "find God" and then suddenly decide you personally are going to end all abortion, you need to slow down. If you "find God" and then decide you are going to burn all idols or expose the Roman Catholic Church as evil, then you need to slow down. Consider what you think is best and then do that.

These remarks apply equally to Islam, so please keep them in mind for that part of the chapter.

Avoiding Counter-Productive Over-Sensitivity.

Christians are funny about the balance between official dogma versus acting on the message of Jesus. As befits, Christians often are the most Jesus-like people in the world, and often act on his message. I cannot imagine the charities of the United States, and the good work Americans have done around the world, without Christianity. I am stunned by how much the average Christian will dip into his-her wallet to help disaster victims that he-she has never seen except on TV. As long as nobody raises the issue of Jesus as God, or raises points of dogma such as infant baptism or the Chair of Peter, Christians act on the message of Jesus without worrying about who they help or why they help. If somebody does raise issues of dogma, then suddenly Christians get upset and drop the ball. They act like PC zealots. They suddenly think points of dogma are far more important than following the commands of the man who is God. Where before they helped everybody, now they find reasons to help this person but not help that person. This attitude is contradictory and counter-productive, but it is what it is.

This is why I prefer to avoid points of dogma as long as good work is going on. If you have to discuss dogma, wait until the good work is done, and preferably wait until Christians raise the points themselves in the evening after work. If they ask in midstream, then tell the truth, but try not to be obnoxious.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus are notorious for disputing about small points that seem silly to others. (In my personal experience, Buddhists and Taoists don't do this as much.) So, eventually, if we hang around them, we might get in a dispute over dogma, and the dispute might interfere with good action. What then? Do what you do whenever you meet feisty people with whom you have to work: Avoid fighting as much as possible and instead divert attention to the more important tasks at hand. Try to push argument off until later. If you promise to debate later, then really debate later so they don't try to bring up the arguments while you have to work. Make sure they understand there are more important tasks and that you won't be diverted.

PART 4: Islam.

Personal Plea.

I repeat parts of this plea below. I assume any reader knows enough about Islam so I don't have to go through all the basics right away; I cover some basics below. "Allah" is the same as the Jewish God and Christian God. Muslims accept the Jewish and Christian God although they often overlook that the Jews introduced him. Muslims accept the Jewish prophets. They accept that Jesus was a great prophet. They do not accept that Jesus was God. In the beginning, Muslims did not impose Islam on anybody except local Arabs. Once, Muslims led the world in science and good government. Because of all this, Muslims could be in a special position to do two tasks to help the world, if they put their minds to it.

Before explaining the two tasks, I give some background. Muslims have to assess what Islam is all about in the modern world. In the world of Mohammad, Islam was all about carrying the idea of one moral God to people who did not have that idea. Islam was all about converting Arab people from bad polytheism to moral monotheism. Islam was not about forcibly converting all non-Muslims. In the modern world, Islam cannot be about converting polytheists and ignorant people to one moral God because all people already know about the one moral God and everybody can make up his-her own mind. Islam has to be about more than saying set prayers five times a day, covering hair, making the modern world safe for traditional families, or shoving the world back into the past. As a good Muslim, you have to figure out what more Allah (God) wants of you, you have to be able to explain it to other people, and you have to do it.

If Islam is about making the world better, about leading modern people to live in the modern democratic capitalist world in a Godly way, then Islam has to come to grips with the message of Jesus and Western values. If Muslims wish to help people to live better in the modern world, they will lead people along paths similar to those pointed out by Jesus. This does not mean Islam will turn into formal Western Christianity. That would be sad. In following the correct path, Muslims should not worry about being absolutely distinct from all other religions and about being strongly Muslim. They should worry about the correct path even if it resembles the teachings of Jesus and even if Westerners also walk it. Whatever Muslims figure out as the positive message of Islam, they need to explain it to other people clearly, with as much rationality, and with as little magic, as possible.

After moderate Muslims have figured out what Islam is all about now, then I ask they turn their minds to two important tasks.

First, Muslims could assess the message of Jesus in light of human nature, practicality, the modern world, and modern values. They can look at God, Jesus, and the modern world, and can tell us what they see. They can do this because they are not automatically committed to the idea that Jesus is God but they are committed to many points of his message because Mohammad was committed to many points of Jesus' message. They can be more objective than can Christians. We need not accept every point Islam has to say on this topic, but it would be useful to hear an objective assessment by believers.

For reasons described below, Mohammad had to worry more about the relation of ideals to practicality than early Christians had to. Mohammad knew the message of Jesus, and Mohammad's version of blending ideals and practicality is an outstanding version of blending the ideals of Jesus with practicality - even if that was not Mohammad's primary intent. Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality, and the blending of the Muslim leaders who followed him, was the basis for great Muslim states later. Then Islam fell away from Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality. The blend that extreme Islam offers now is bad. Mainstream Islam can find another blend of ideals and practicality that is more suitable for the modern world than what we see in Islam now. As mainstream Islam does so, it will meet the ideals of Jesus and meet modern practicality. Islam again can comment on the ideals of Jesus and practicality. Doing so would be a great service to the world.

Second, from the order found in the world, Muslims can assess evidence for the existence of God. They can be scientists, do good science, and then they also can tell us what science might say about God or cannot say. They can make clear what God and belief tell us that science cannot. They can contribute to both science and theology. This is what Islam did in its great days.

To be clear about what Islam is all about now, to assess Jesus, and to assess relations between God (Allah) and science, Muslims have to accept science, evolved human nature, history, the modern world, and religious scholarship. They have to return to their original values as those values make sense in the modern world. They have to return to the ideals and spirit of Mohammad. They have to give up fake bad fundamentalism that is not really founded on Mohammad, and they have to give up any fundamentalism that goes against the realities of science as given to us by God. They have to give up fake bad ideas even if some zealot can find some basis in the Koran or Hadith (Sayings of Mohammad). They have to give up theocracy. They do not have to give up the idea that some nations can be Muslim nations as long as those nations also respect general ideas of freedom and allow full freedom of religion. I think decent Muslims really can do this.

Islam did not begin as legalistic ideology, fear, superstition, oppression, reaction, and guerrilla war. That is what Mohammad fought against. Islam did not develop as legalism. It did not use the letter of the law to replace the spirit of the law. Mohammad fought that too. Islam began as the religion which converted Arabs away from superstition, fear, bickering, jealousy, and oppression to greater understanding of God and to goodness. Mohammad made laws to promote the goodness of Allah, not to oppress believers, or to force believers to act as instruments of oppression. Mohammad always followed the spirit of the law. The law should serve people, not people serve the law. Mohammad would hate oppression of women, denial of science, denial of fellowship with all people, hyper-legalism, and hyper-Muslim fundamentalism.

Those trends return to old bad dark anti-Muslim superstition over the light of Mohammad. Mohammad would condemn people who pervert the enlightened Islam that he taught. Modern enlightened Muslims need to reclaim their own religion. In doing so, they do not need to wage open conflict against bad fundamentalists. They can reclaim Islam by teaching good Islam, with science and fellowship, to children and neighbors. They can reclaim Islam simply by explaining it to good non-Muslims who will listen. Most good Muslims already follow this path but are too afraid both of other nasty bad Muslims and of non-Muslims to say so.

Mohammad's Task.

It helps to understand more about Mohammad's task. Mohammad was an Arab born among Arabs in the area that is now Saudi Arabia. Christians and Jews also lived among the Arabs. The Arabs of his time and place did not worship a single God (Allah) but curried favor with many gods and spirits, some of which were similar to good nature spirits, some simply spirits, and some rather bad. The Western name for them now is "genies" or "Jinn" or "Djin". Different Arab groups, including large families, each had their particular spirits much as Christian villages and guilds had their patron saints. Groups were divided and at war. Banditry was common. Arabs were illiterate, did not know the Jewish Tanakh, Christian Bible, or Greek thinking, and did not value education. Groups used their allegiance to particular spirits to bolster allegiance to the group and to bolster group competition. Arabs were easy prey to outside powers that were united; see "Lawrence of Arabia". Arabs were superstitious backwater clannish warlike country folk who denied the value of then-modern life and resisted then-modern ideas.

Mohammad's task was to get Arabs to worship the one true moral God and to follow his ways, and to stop worshipping other spirits and following their ways. The one true moral God was the same one true moral God of the Jews and Christians although Arabs call him Allah. Mohammad denied that some spirits were real, he did accept the reality of demons, and he said Arabs should not worship spirits even if the spirits were real and somewhat powerful. When Arabs were united in worshipping the one true good God, they would also unite among themselves, stop killing each other, cooperate, foster economic development, and modernize. It is not clear that Mohammad wanted a single large Arab state but it is likely he would have approved it, and that did happen after he died. Mohammad did not "keep women in their place" but fought for rights for women, as much as he could get in the society of his time, including property rights, personal rights, and education. Women supported him and he them. Mohammad was a modernizer who brought modern ideas and values to the backwater Arabs.

Mohammad fought against ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, prejudice, squabbling, and division. He fought against the superstitious religion of the countryside and against the urban clan-gangs that kept Arabs apart. Mohammad promoted learning, knowledge, education, and discussion. He promoted a rational religion based on one true good God. He was a great man.

I believe many practices and beliefs that we see now among poorly educated Muslims and confused Muslims are the same mistakes that Mohammad fought. Some Muslims have gone backward and so betrayed Mohammad. Muslims who promote strife are like the polytheistic idolatrous anti-modernist Muslims that Mohammad conquered. Mohammad would condemn them now as he did in his time. He would fight against them now, and would fight for rational modern worship of the one true God as he did then. Mohammad would promote education for women and promote the modest presentation of women

in public life. He would promote the role of women in commerce and politics. He would call for public schools and hospitals. He would condemn people who denied education to any child including girls. He would condemn bad people who kill innocents.

It might help Buddhists to think of Mohammad's task as much like the task of the Buddha, to bring good ideals, reason, modest practicality, reason, peace, and the light of the Dharma to people in superstition, war, and darkness.

Partial Synopsis through Some Useful History.

I elaborate on the ideas above, and I repeat parts of this synopsis below as needed. Mohammad lived from about 570 to 632 CE (AD). He began his career in middle age. His name means "praiseworthy". Mohammad succeeded amazingly well at his task of teaching Arabs about the one true God, bringing them away from superstition, polytheism, and strife, and bringing them into the then-modern world. Mohammad could not read or write but he listened well and spoke well. Mohammad knew of the Jewish Tanakh and Christian New Testament, likely fairly well. He had Jewish and Christian kin and teachers. Mohammad got his idea of the one true moral God from Judaism and Christianity directly, and, likely, indirectly from Greek thinkers. That does not mean he was nothing in himself. He added ideas and he added the vigor that comes of a clear direct relation with God. He did not think his one true moral God differed from the one true moral God of Jews and Christians, or, maybe, differed from the one true moral God of philosophers. In Mohammad's view, the religion of God that he offered was another branch of the same underlying basic religion as Judaism and Christianity. I think he would see Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as less far apart than Roman Catholicism and Calvinism, perhaps only about as far apart as Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans.

Mohammad did not strongly dislike all yearnings of the human heart and did not dislike all other religions. Mohammad understood love, emotion, the need for family, desire for wealth, and desire for power. His belief was for normal people who felt as he did, and wished to seek normal human satisfactions within the approval of God.

Mohammad strongly disliked only polytheism, magic, superstition, squabbling, and banditry. He actively fought those and their supporters. Mohammad tolerated other religions as long as they did not fall into polytheism, magic, and superstition. Mohammad appreciated other religions that focused on one God, even if the one God was not exactly as Mohammad saw him. After him, Islam supported a great growth in philosophy and science, which confirms that Mohammad tolerated philosophy based in the idea of one God. Mohammad did not accept the Christian Trinity, and feared that this idea lapsed into polytheism; but that did not lead him to denounce Christianity or to see it as other than a sister religion of the same one true moral God. It is not clear how Mohammad might have seen the apparent polytheism of Hindus and Buddhists because Buddhist and Hindu adepts are not really polytheistic; they allow the mistaken idea of many gods out of kindness to the simpleminded masses; at heart they believe in one Mind behind the world. I think Mohammad would have encouraged Muslims to teach Hindus and Buddhists through argument, but not by the sword.

Early in his career, Mohammad and his followers had some trouble with some Jews but not with all Jews; I relate a few details below. That trouble did not make him think the Jewish God differed from Allah. It

did not blind him to the fact that ideas about the one true moral God originated with Jews. The trouble that Mohammad had with one group of Jews did not mean Islam and Judaism as wholes were at odds. It did not mean Muslims-as-a-whole and Jews-as-a-whole were angry at each other. The problem that one group of Jews had with Mohammad did not convince Jews-as-a-whole that Mohammad worshipped a different God or that Mohammad's students were bad people. Until about the middle 1800s, Christians were usually more of a threat to Jews than Muslims, and Christians hurt Jews more than Muslims did. When Spain was under Muslim rule until about 1490, Muslims usually treated Jews well; when Christians conquered Spain after 1490, sometimes they persecuted Jews. Most of the atrocities of World War Two were carried out by Christians or by people who recently had been Christians. Except for incidents, until the time of all the fighting over Israel, I cannot think of situations in which Jews-in-general and Muslims-in-general had to be enemies.

Early in his career, Mohammad was persecuted by other Arabs. Other Arabs tried to kill him several times, and they killed some of his followers. The trouble with some Jews came because some Jews helped the Arabs who tried to hurt him. To support himself and his followers, Mohammad briefly raided some caravans (as far as I can tell, mostly caravans that did business with the people that tried to kill him). Mohammad was not a warlord or general bandit. In his raiding, Mohammad was less warlike than Joshua, the namesake of Jesus, or David, who overthrew Saul.

As a result of Mohammad's troubles, he learned to blend ideals and practicality. Mohammad's blend of ideals and practicality was not to put all ideals under practicality, and so kill off ideals; and it certainly was not to put everything in the light of "us versus them, and we must kill all of them". It was a blend of ideals and practicality that tried to preserve ideals and fellowship as much as possible in the real world. The leaders who followed Mohammad understood the need both for ideals and practicality, and continued to find a good blend of ideals and practicality.

Within a hundred years of Mohammad's death, Islam had taken over most of the Arab world including the Semitic non-Jewish (Arab) people outside present day Saudi Arabia, especially Babylon (Iraq) and Egypt. After about 900 CE (AD), Islam had spread into Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and came into conflict with Christianity. In a famous war, the Franks stopped Islam at the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. Islam took some areas of southeast Europe such as Bosnia. When Christianity grew strong after 1100, it fought Islam, as in the Crusades. If Mohammad were alive then, I think he would not have seen this fighting in terms of Christianity and Islam as distinct religions fighting but in terms of regional politics subverting religion. Christianity and Islam still would be two branches of the same religion.

Both Christianity and Islam waxed and waned in power. Since about 1800, Christianity has dominated. Islam feels Christianity looks down on Islam both as a religion and civilization, much as people in the South of the United States feel that other people look down on them. Christianity does not treat Islam as a sister religion of the same one true moral God but as a deluded heterodox deviant from true culture and true religion. Muslims feel much like oppressed minorities do everywhere. This leads to a constant chip on the shoulder of some Muslims, and sometimes to fighting.

Beginning in the late 1800s, Christians and Jews began to ally sometimes, even if there still were horrible episodes of anti-Semitism such as the Holocaust. The alliance of Jews and Christians, combined with the

decline of Islam, made the Muslim position seem worse to Muslims. The rise of Israel in 1948 seemed to confirm their fears.

Muslims resisted what they saw as Jewish and Christian attempts to overwhelm them. They fought back both directly and by reshaping their societies. Muslims adopted an attitude that Jews and Christians often adopt too, an attitude rooted in the Tanakh. They tried to be “ultra-strict” so God would look favorably on them and would give them back power, wealth, autonomy, and leadership. They overdid it. For them, “fighting back” came to include strong intolerance of other religions; intolerance of ideas associated with non-Muslim cultures even if those ideas are correct, such as science; rigid worship; bizarrely strict rules based loosely on old customs; forced observance of worship and rules; oppression of their own people; and especially oppression of women; and violence toward other religions, other people, and Muslims who disobeyed. Mohammad would not approve. When Muslims found wealth in oil, some Muslims used the wealth to fight Jews, Christians, and the modern world with violence. Some Muslims took the wealth in oil as a sign from God that they were on the right track and should go on even more strictly.

The rational response for any beleaguered minority is to build its economic, legal, and education bases, as Jews did in the United States, and as China has done since adopting limited capitalism. In the modern world, over the long run, education and business are more powerful than bombs. Most Muslims know this, and have worked toward this end. In the West, we do not see these Muslims but see primarily the Muslims that cause trouble. Muslims that are working toward economic, legal, and education advances are hampered by other Muslims who are reactionaries.

The vast majority of Muslims are like the vast majority of people in all religions. They use their religion to give meaning and guidance in life. They get along with neighbors. They want nothing more than family success. To find family success in the modern world, they need education, jobs, fair business practices, good government, and useful ideas about gender. They are happy to let other people do the same as long as other people do not oppress them.

Islam is not a “sweet” religion as are idealized (but not real) Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Islam is “not sweet” in the same way that Christians in the American South are not sweet even though they are Christians. Islam blends ideals with practicality, and acts vigorously. As with Jewish prophets for many centuries, Mohammad was vigorous, energetic, and staunch when fighting polytheism, superstition, and magic. I don’t know if, after about 1800, the vigor that Islam had shown when fighting superstition and polytheism was turned against Christianity, Judaism, and the modern world. If so, that was not correct. If some Muslims turned the old fight against superstition into the modern fight against Christians, Jews, the West, and the modern world, that attitude does not infect Muslims in general. To turn the old fight against superstition into a fight against the modern world is to go back into the bad superstition against which Mohammad originally fought. If some Muslims have an “attitude problem” then most Muslims are working to change their bad attitude into something better.

Muslims have to decide what the message of modern Islam is. They have to compare the message of modern Islam to the message of Jesus and to modern values with roots in the West. The message of modern Islam cannot simply be “One God” or “God is Great” because nearly everybody in the world now knows that idea; and everybody has decided either for it or against it. Islam cannot be about controlling women and children, or about preserving honor. That message is not unique to Islam, and, in its strict old

sense, the reactionary message is now wrong. Islam cannot believably assert that “God loves Muslims best” or “Islam will rise again because God loves us best”. Islam needs to stress a positive message of good acts. Islam does not have to invent something new or radical. Islam can look to its past for ideas about science and good government. Islam can promote good modern values and promote its version of the ideas of Jesus without demeaning Islamic history or Mohammad. They need to do this not mostly for non-Muslims but more for their own young people and for the future of Islam.

For the hundred-plus years since the discovery of oil in the Middle East, Muslims nations have not used their wealth to govern well, institute working democracy, educate their people, develop economically, develop commerce, and promote science. If Muslims wish to show the superiority of Islam, rather than use their wealth for the police and the military, to keep their own people in line, and to glare at Israel, they need to build good nations. Especially they need to promote science, research, and development. They need to promote working democracy. That is what impresses the world. That is what will show the world that Islam clears people’s heads and gives them a good relation with God. If Muslims want to frost the cake, they can use their scientific knowledge to make high-quality goods that people want to buy instead of all the crap that floods world markets – they can become the 1980s Japan or 2000s Apple of modern capitalism. I think Mohammad would want Muslim nations to show the superiority of a good relation with God through the example of good government, good science, and good production. If Muslims cannot show they can live well by instituting workable democracy and promoting real science, then other people will take that as a sign that Islam is not the religion of God.

Despite the real differences that have developed over time, I still believe Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sister religions of the same one moral God. I believe they were originally basically tolerant, especially of monotheism. I regret what happened to drive them apart and to divert them from the original tolerant vision of Mohammad. They could easily foster the tolerance needed for pluralistic democracy. They do not need to believe exactly the same dogmas to get along with each other well enough.

More Background.

Always when writing about Islam to Americans, you have to review some basic facts. This need arises not because all Americans are willfully ignorant (too many are) but because some Muslims are fighting the West, and some Americans resent all Islam; so it is best to be clear.

The word “Islam” means “submission”, specifically “submission to Allah-God”. A “Muslim” is a person who submits to God. “Allah” is the same God as for Jews and Christians. A “Muslim” is not just a follower of Mohammad but, more importantly, a person who submits to God. In terms familiar to modern Christians, a Muslim accepts God and has a personal relation with God. A Muslim not only accepts God but accepts all the prophets of God as well. Islam reveres prophets highly. A Muslim accepts the messages of all the prophets. To submit means not just to worship externally, blindly, and stupidly but to worship with your intelligence and courage too. Good Muslims follow not only the formal words of the prophets but also the direct gifts of God: intellect, imagination, and heart.

Islam accepts the Hebrew Torah (first five books of the Tanakh) and most of the Tanakh as the word of God. I do not know how much of the Tanakh that Islam accepts. Islam altered the Tankah a bit from the original Hebrew version. So did Christianity. I don’t go into details here. Islam accepts the basic story of

Jesus, and so accepts some of the New Testament. I don't know how much of the New Testament it accepts. Most Muslims know the story of Jesus and they accept him as a prophet, but I doubt they have read the New Testament, and they would not accept passages that refer to Jesus as God.

Islam has two major scriptures of its own, both stemming from Mohammad: the Koran and the Hadith. Muslims consider the Koran to be the literal word of God, closely inspired (directly spoken) by the Archangel Gabriel to Mohammad. The Koran is about as long as the New Testament. The Hadith are sayings of Mohammad that are not in the Koran. Mohammad did not write anything. After hearing from Gabriel, Mohammad then recited the Koran to other people, who wrote it down.

Mohammad did not speak the Hadith the same way that he spoke the Koran, with the intent of having it written down. Other people wrote down from memory various bits of what they heard Mohammad say, and then those sayings were collected after his death. The Hadith is quite large, depending on what is included; Muslims in Thailand had a set of 10 volumes. Several selections have been made; please look on the Internet for the latest selections. The Koran is like the Torah while the Hadith is like the Mishnah or Talmud(s). The Koran is like the New Testament while the Hadith is like the collected works of the early Christians Fathers. Most of the Hadith probably was not spoken by Mohammad but was added by later people. It is hard to decide what was spoken by Mohammad and what was not. Muslims know this problem, and take it into account. For issues of practical life, Muslims more often refer to the Hadith than to the Koran. When a point is clear in the Koran, the Koran always has precedence over the Hadith. The Hadith serves as the basis for Muslim law. Muslims debate over the Hadith just as Jews do over the Mishnah, Talmud(s), and their commentaries. The Koran and Hadith serve as the basis for a life of study and for an occupation just as Christian and Jewish scriptures do. I have read the Koran and selections from the Hadith in English translations.

Besides the Koran and Hadith, Islam developed a long tradition of law, more like English common law than Jewish Holy Law or Roman Catholic Canon Law. Muslims try hard to base points of law in the Koran or the Hadith. Some of this legal tradition is called "Sharia". This legal tradition is more often the basis for practical action than the Koran. The Koran always dominates the Hadith, and the Koran and Hadith always dominate merely human legal tradition.

Muslims call Mohammad "The Prophet" to stress that he is the most important and the last in the line of prophets that began with Abraham. To Muslims, he is the most important prophet, and most important person, in world history. In practice, most Muslims consider him the only prophet and-or the only prophet they need to listen to. They are wrong. Mohammad was not the only prophet, the last prophet, or the only prophet that Muslims need listen to. Even if Mohammad was the greatest prophet, Muslims and all people still have to pay attention to the other prophets. Mohammad would not have looked at himself as "the one and only and greatest", any more than Jesus or Moses did. Mohammad respected other prophets. Educated Muslims know this. I don't know what Mohammad thought of great Christian saints; I think he respected the teachings of Paul from the New Testament. I don't know what Mohammad would think of prophets from outside the Jewish-Christian tradition, such as the Buddha and Chuang Tzu. People of nearly all religions make the same mistake with their founders as Muslims do with Mohammad: Christians look only to Paul, Buddhists look only to Siddhartha Gautama, and Confucians look only to Confucius or Mencius.

Christians are often surprised to hear that Muslims revere Jesus as in the same rank as Abraham and Moses, second only to Mohammad. Muslims do not accept that Jesus was God. Muslims accept that Jesus will judge all souls including theirs. Muslims understand the message of Jesus when they have heard it but not all Muslims have heard all of it or have heard it taught sympathetically. Muslims know of the accord between the ideas of Jesus and of Mohammad when they have heard both. They follow Jews, and Mohammad, in rejecting that any human could be God. Muslims also respect John the Baptist as a prophet. Muslims also revere Mary, much more than Protestants but maybe not as much as some Roman Catholics.

Muslims are sometimes surprised, and some will be offended, when I say the teachings of Mohammad are not really new, any more than were the teachings of Moses. As with Jesus, the difference was more in urgency and in how the teachings founded a way of life than in any new ideas. Mohammad would not be surprised to hear this; indeed, I think he would be happy that he “merely” continues the tradition of the one true moral God. Mohammad brought the ideas of the Jews and Christians to the Arabs. Mohammad was outstanding as a teacher, organizer, leader, and soldier. He was like Moses, David, or Martin Luther. Mohammad followed the Jewish prophets with the addition that he accepted an eternal afterlife, heaven, hell, and that Jesus would be the judge on the final day. Mohammad taught the ethical monotheism of the Jews: There is only one God; God is good; and God gave us rules to help us live well in accord with his ideas of living well. Muslims get their “kosher” (“halal”) food and the idea of the Sabbath from Jewish tradition. Muslim men are circumcised because Jews are (Jews got it from Egyptians). Muslims have internalized the idea that, if we follow the rules of God, we will live well, and our people will do well, even in competition with other people.

Christianity, Islam, and the Jewish Prophets.

The stories in the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible, and the Muslim traditions about the prophets and about history after the prophets, are not literally true even if the stories have a basis in fact. Jewish interpretations have to take precedent. Christians and Muslims can differ from Jews but only if they explain clearly why and how, and give solid evidence for their differences.

Muslims and Christians differ from Jews in how they see some Jewish prophets and how they see Jewish history. Muslims and Christians both have distorted Jewish prophets and Jewish history to serve their ends. They sought a version of the prophets and of history that would bolster their ethnic-religion identity, in particular to show they had become favorites of God. Christians sought proof in the Jewish prophets that Jesus was God and that he was the foretold messiah. Muslims sought proof that their history was as long as the history of the Jews, and that they were as much a special people of God as were Jews or Christians. I do not give further details.

Muslims and Christians need to reverse this distortion even if to do so erodes their old claims. Muslims and Christians need to admit that the founding prophets were Jewish, and need to accept that Jewish ideas of Jewish prophets are the baseline for further understanding. This does not mean Muslims and Christians may not differ from Jews, but they need to be more honest about differences. Muslims and Christians need to admit ways in which they differ from Jewish interpretations of the prophets and Jewish history, and should return to the original Jewish prophets and history when possible. If they cannot return to the original Jewish prophets and history, they need to state clearly their own message, how it differs

from the message of the original prophets and history, and why they hold their version. They have to say why the original prophets were wrong. You cannot use a version of the prophets and of Jewish history to justify your need for a distinct identity and for ethnic-religious superiority. It is wrong to use the prophets and history to lie even in a good cause. You must take the prophets at face value regardless of what that implies for your particular religion, and then go from there. I do not follow the original prophets closely, yet I say so when I deviate from official doctrine, and I say why. For example, unlike standard Christian dogma, I do not believe the original prophets foretold Jesus and foretold that he was the Messiah that would save Israel and the world.

After Christians and Muslims are clear about their message in relation to the original Jewish prophets, then they need to assess their own message in the light of modern science and modern ideas about history. Reassessing in the light of modern science and ideas about history might cause Christians and Muslims to rethink their relation to the Jewish prophets and Jewish history. I know it is hard for Muslims and Christians to accept that Jews have precedence. Even so, accepting that Jews are the foundation is necessary as part of the truth of Islam and Jesus, and as part of truly submitting to God.

At the same time, Jews and Christians have to accept that Mohammad was a prophet of the same God that they worship, as important in his own way as Moses and Jesus. When Mohammad spoke of serving together as brothers and sisters under God, he spoke with the same authority as any prophet. This does not mean Jews and Christians have to accept the mistaken Muslim attitude that everything Mohammad ever said came directly from God and has the same authority as God. Mohammad erred as much as any prophet erred.

Ideas and Attitude.

In reading about Islam and in reading Muslim history, it is easy get a feeling for a distinct Muslim identity, attitude, and personality. All religions have both ideas and attitudes. I focused on ideas in this book. Here I have to switch over to attitudes, a topic at which I am inept. We need answers to the questions below. We can't get simple straight answers. I do some speculating and I call on enlightened Muslims for help. Critics of Islam, such as Christopher Hitchens, argue there is a general Muslim character, it is bad, it determined Muslim religion, it is not compatible with modern life, and Muslim character cannot be changed to make either the character or the religion compatible with modern life. The Muslim character is so nasty that any truths in Islam have been so distorted by the Muslim character as to be hopelessly lost. I think Hitchens is wrong, but the answers cannot come from me. If Muslims want a better image of Islam to prevail, they have to make one and explain it.

It helps to think of the same problem in Christian terms. Christianity in the different regions of the United States is not the same. Christianity in the "Bible Belt" is not the same as in the West, Mountains, or High Plains. Even in the "Bible Belt", Christianity differs between Midwesterners and Southerners. What is important in regional Christianity has more to do with regional history and culture than with dogma in the Bible or official pronouncements from churches such as Southern Baptists or Lutherans of the various synods. It is hard to separate the essence of Christianity from its particular regional versions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are each regional versions of faith in the one true moral God.

We do not expect all versions of Christianity to foster one and only one kind of character, and we enjoy a little variation as long as the variation is not harmful and the variation is basically true to what most people see as the essence of Christianity. Irish Roman Catholics, French Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Amish, and Scottish Methodists are acceptable even though they foster different people and appeal to different passages of the Bible. If one version of Christianity developed that was fierce, and neglected the ideals of compassion in favor of anger, dominance, reaction, and oppression, we would likely call that version not true Christianity even if it cited reams of Bible passages. To people outside fundamentalism, that is what fundamentalism looks like. To people outside Islam, that is what Islam looks like, and has looked like for a long time. It seems as if a bad character overtook Islam early in its history and has shaped it ever since regardless of what Mohammad wished.

I think that assessment is wrong. Islam began much like Judaism in the times of Moses, David, and Solomon, when Israel was a local national “contender”, and Muslims nations originally were like Judah when it was resisting Roman power. Islam always will have that attitude as part of its character and its relation with God. But, like Judaism, Islam also had other sides such as we see in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and the Minor Prophets. Those prophets stress good acts, justice with a good spirit, and compassion. The other sides usually are stronger. Which prevails depends on circumstances. Sometimes the fierce side of Islam prevails for a long time, as it has since about World War 2. If the fierce side prevails too long, and is too irrational, then it is not true Islam, any more than some fierce Christian sects are not true Christianity, such as White Power Christianity. It is up to Muslims to show non-Muslims all the sides of Islam, and it is up to Muslims to criticize the fierce side of Islam if it betrays the greater true Islam. It is up to us to listen to reasonable Muslims. If fierce irrational Muslims prevail, then it is reasonable for non-Muslims to fight them, just as the United States fights White Power racists and terrorists.

Ask these questions:

Is there a distinct Muslim character that was established at the start of Islam and that has remained fairly constant through Muslim history?

If not, how has Muslim character been shaped over history, and what is it now?

How have Muslim ideas affected Muslim character?

How has Muslim character affected Muslim ideas and the interpretation of Muslim ideas?

Are Muslim ideas and Muslim character sometimes at odds? Because Muslim ideas are largely true, if they are not sometimes compatible, that means Muslim character should change.

Is Muslim character compatible with modern institutions such as democracy and a secular state?

If not, can Muslim character change to be compatible?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with modern institutions?

Do Muslim ideas actually encourage modern institutions when rightly understood?

Can Muslim ideas help to find a Muslim character for modern times? If so, then this Muslim character would be in line both with the truth of Islam and with modern times.

Is Muslim character compatible with the message of Jesus?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with the message of Jesus?

Can Muslim ideas help mold Muslim character to make it compatible with the message of Jesus?

Mohammad as Not Inerrant.

Mohammad was clear that he was only a man. All men are fallible. Muslims should not take Mohammad as infallible, which means they should not take all the Koran as the transparently clear infallible Word of God. Of course, not only Muslims, but also Jews and Christians, do take their holy texts as transparent to themselves and as totally infallible. In theory, all the Koran was dictated to Mohammad by the archangel Gabriel. In one of the parts (“sura”) of the Koran, Mohammad comments at length about inheritance of cattle. At the time, Mohammad was having trouble with some kin about the ownership and inheritance of cattle. Mohammad abused his authority as a prophet of God to settle the trouble in his favor. He might have actually heard a voice telling him what was later written in the Koran, but that does not mean I need to meekly accept that the whole Koran was the word of God and is infallible. Mohammad did what many inspired religious people do. This little episode does not invalidate the Koran as a whole. Most of the Koran is beautiful, and we still can take that as seriously as anything in any other religious texts. This little episode does mean that we need to use our God-given sense of judgment about the Koran and all religious texts. I do this with the Tanakh and New Testament as well.

In case Muslims think I am picking on Mohammad and the Koran only, the Tanakh Book of Joshua is a manual on how to commit genocide and torture. The historical books of the Tanakh often are no better. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament was not written by Paul, and it contains bad anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic) ideas that served as the basis for Christians hurting Jews. So do many of the stories in the New Testament although often the anti-Jewish sentiment is hidden. We can't take this material at face value as the inerrant Word of God. All the holy texts have passages that serve more as warnings of what not to do than as true words of God.

Jesus was a man. Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and Mohammad both insisted they were not gods but only people. Yet Christians worship Jesus as God, and Buddhists and Muslims revere Siddhartha and Mohammad so much that they effectively worship Siddhartha and Mohammad as God. That is bad idolatry. Muslims do not avoid idolatry just because they do not make images of Mohammad. The best cure for this bad attitude is to take a long close hard look at everything the founders said, and then think what might not be true, or what might even be petty and vindictive. If we are to use our religions best, as God intended, to find full truth and face up to problems, then we have to begin with the fact that founders really were only people.

More Lessons from Mohammad's Trouble with the Enemies from Mecca.

Shortly after Mohammad fled Mecca for Medina, his enemies at Mecca tried to kill him, and they put a bounty on his head. They used contacts at Medina to try to kill him. As Mohammad had done with the cows, Mohammad heard from God that it was alright to fight his enemies and the enemies of Islam. (I have forgotten the exact passages in the Koran and so do not cite it here.)

Muslims since have interpreted this situation in two distinct ways. One, the situation validates the right of Muslims to protect themselves as persons against unjust aggression and validates the right of Muslims to protect Islam, other Muslims, and Muslim nations, against persecution. This interpretation is like the Christian and Buddhist idea of “just war”. Two, the situation teaches Muslims to strike non-Muslims, start aggression against non-Muslims, and forcibly convert non-Muslims. In effect, the situation urges Muslims to conquer as much of the world as they can, always in the name of Allah. This idea goes far beyond the Christian and Buddhist idea of a just war.

Just because Mohammad heard from God as a result of his trouble with enemies from Mecca does not invalidate the relevant passages in the Koran or necessarily invalidate either interpretation. We have to assess the situation, the resulting passages, and the interpretations, for their truth and their application regardless of where the passage came from.

I approve of interpretation One and condemn interpretation Two.

The problem is that the two interpretations can blend into each other in practice. It is easy to say that you are acting on the basis of One while in effect acting like Two. Claim self-defense to hide aggression. Not only Muslims do this, but people of all religions and nationalities claim they act only in self-defense even while they kill and persecute others. In these cases, we have to look behind the public interpretation to judge according to actions.

I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming One while acting Two. I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming Two outright. Critics of Islam say that Muslims claim Two, or claim One but act like Two, far more than other groups.

I don't know if the attitude of Two became a part of Muslim “culture” early on, has always been a big part of Muslim culture, and surfaces easily when Muslims get the chance. Critics of Islam claim this as well.

I think Mohammad meant interpretation One and would dislike interpretation Two. Even when he pushed the idea of one moral God onto Arabs, he meant interpretation One. He did not mean interpretation Two. Mohammad did not convert people by sword. Mohammad did not look for trouble. He responded with force when he had to, and only then. Within a few decades after Mohammad, Muslims did conquer other Arabs, and so did slide into interpretation Two. Interpretation Two lingers in the background of Muslim culture, but it does not usually dominate. Interpretation Two comes out when Muslims feel pressed and insulted. Unfortunately, Muslims have felt pressed and insulted for over two hundred years. Even then, most Muslims know that interpretation One is better, and that interpretation Two is wrong and dangerous. Self-righteous belligerence is not more natural to Muslim culture than it is to Christian culture – and some self-righteous belligerence is natural to both. Once we know the story of Mohammad, his troubles, and his statements, then we can better understand Muslims and better talk to them.

If any religious group, including Muslims, persists in interpretation Two, that is, persists in self-righteous belligerence, then, like Mohammad, we have the right to oppose them. Some Muslims now think the West persists in self-righteous belligerence against all Muslims. It is up to Westerners and enlightened Muslims to get the truth across that this is not so.

(1) Muslim Character and Mohammad's Message.

The question of Muslim character and its relation to the message of Islam is important enough so that I comment more on it in this section and in the next few numbered sections. I repeat from above. If you get the idea already, you can skip these numbered sections.

Like Abraham and Moses, Mohammad's people were animists, and were divided into quarreling groups. Like Moses uniting the Jews, Mohammad united the Arabs and strongly guided them into accepting one good God. He did this in the face of fierce opposition, including episodes of treachery and attempts to murder him and his followers. If he were a Jew fighting Rome, Mohammad would have been revered as were the Macabbees. If Mohammad were a Christian leading a Church in the early Roman Empire, or an early missionary to heathens, he would have been revered by Christians as a great saint like Paul or Patrick. Because of Mohammad, the Arabs united in spirit and in body, and spread ethical monotheism around the world. Muslims spread ethical monotheism around the world first, faster, and farther than did Jews or Christians. Muslims spread the worship of Yahweh-God-Allah around the world first, faster, and farther.

The situation of a prophet always colors his-her message, and the way that followers understand his-her message. Sometimes this works out well, and sometimes not. Mohammad faced a different situation than Jesus and the early Christians. Mohammad faced a situation more like Joshua and the leaders of Israel (the Hebrews) as they conquered the "Promised Land". His story is more like Deuteronomy, Kings, and Chronicles than like Exodus or Matthew. He reminds me of David. He had severe practical problems of survival that he had to solve. He had to defend against enemies and had to fund his movement. When his people were in dire financial straits, he fell back on the time-honored trade of raiding caravans just as David turned to banditry when he was in need. Mohammad was an outstanding leader-administrator-politician and a good military leader as well. He learned to combine the ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity with the practical needs of his time and place.

Mohammad died while Islam was still limited to the area of northern and western Arabia. Wherever his followers took his ideas, they faced violent attack from animists. They met force with force, and they were amazingly successful in battle and in winning over people. Just as a Jews or Christians did, they said their success came from God's help and from the hunger of people to know the one true God.

Contrary to widespread misunderstanding now, early relations of Muslims with Jews and with Christians were not bad. They recognized each other as "kindred spirits" of the same tradition ("people of the Book"), and often they lived and let live. Most of Mohammad's problems were with non-Jews and non-Christians, particularly animistic Arabs. Mohammad did have trouble with one group of Jews early on. Unfortunately, that set a bad precedent, and the precedent has been grossly over-magnified since the conflict over the modern state of Israel. Muslims and Christians did not have big conflicts until Muslims began to make inroads on Christian kingdoms, in particular in Spain, Southern France, and southeastern

Europe. Those problems were more properly about political power than religion. Conflicts between Christians and Muslims did not get bitter until the Christian Crusades after about 1150 CE. I do not tell about the early conflict with Jews, or later conflicts with Jews and Christians, and of how conflicts soured relations over time.

Mohammad certainly heard the message of Jesus and took it to heart. One of his key early teachers was an uncle-in-law who was a Christian monk (I am not sure of the details despite having tried to find out). It seems Mohammad tried to implement the message of Jesus in his early attempts to be friendly with rival families, merchants, ethnic groups, and religions, but was stymied by their bad behavior toward him. As a result, Mohammad had to modify the message of Jesus with what he learned of practical real life. In this, according to Muslim tradition, apparently the archangel Gabriel guided him.

Maybe due to its start, Islam is not a “sweet” religion like idealized unrealistic Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Islam knows of sweetness but insists on reality and vigor as well. It is more like the religion of the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who knew of sweetness but who also knew the need for commitment and vigor. When Islam had to struggle, it adopted a warrior stance easily without losing sight of social justice or of sweetness. The warrior stance persists in Islam, Muslims turn to it readily, and they use it intensely.

It is not clear if the warrior stance adopted by Islam is in line with the original vision of Mohammad or is a distortion of his vision. I believe it is an addition, a moderate distortion that seemed reasonable at the time. Later, it could become more a liability than an asset. More important than this question, Muslims need to consider if they can find a vision that is both in line with God’s intent and allows them to live in peace with other people in the modern world. If the original vision of Mohammad is not in line with God’s intent now, then Muslims have to change.

Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not been crazed desert warriors bent on conquest and domination. Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not carried a grudge against the West, anybody else, and everybody else. Even though militancy and commitment were big themes in the early days, they were never the only themes, and usually were not the dominant themes. Muslims always also stressed peace, compromise, reconciliation, reason, science, and seeing the heart of other people. In many places, in many times, the other themes dominated militarism. The other themes can dominate in Islam now as in the past. David was a usurper, murdered his king, might have arranged for the murder of his best friend Jonathan, murdered many other people, killed a man to get his wife, and had a horrible family life himself; but that beginning of Israel in David did not determine the tone of all Jewish life and religion. Mohammad was as upright as David; so a few militant events in the early life of Islam have not absolutely determined the character of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims have always been what the vast majority of all people in state societies have been: farmers, herders, fishers, house holders, merchants, officials, husbands, and wives. Muslims now are the same. The vast majority of Muslims that I have met in the West are business people seeking to make a better life for their families just like the vast majority of everybody else.

When the Jews conquered ethnic groups in the Promised Land, the conquered people either assimilated, or submitted totally, or the Jews killed them. When Muslims conquered, usually they did not force people to become Muslims, although they did sometimes. I don’t know if they did so more than Christians. Islam

never had anything like the Christian Inquisition. Muslims allowed conquered people to keep their own religion, with some provisions, the most obvious of which is that non-Muslims paid higher taxes. Most people in conquered nations converted to Islam so as to pay lower taxes, and then their children adopted the new religion of their parents and the dominant religion of the conquerors. Islam grew more through clever fiscal policy than through forced conversion.

When Americans think of Mohammad, they think of a crazed desert warrior. He was not. Mohammad began as a successful urban businessman, something like George Romney or Mitt Romney. He was not a bandit. He had an intense religious vision. At first, he did not want to publicize his vision. He was like many non-religious American business people who do well and then "find God". He was a businessman who also had an aptitude for religion, politics, and local warfare. He was more like Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower than like Genghis Khan. He was not a dictator like Hitler or like the Emperor on Star Wars. He was more like a good prince with religious convictions, such as the Buddhist Warrior King Asoka or Henry of France.

Within two hundred years of Islam conquering the Middle East, Islam had become one center of learning in the world with China and India. Islam was far ahead of Christianity. Without Islam, the West would have lost most of the work of Classical Greece and Rome, including most of Aristotle and much of Plato. We would have lost science, mathematics, and political science. "Algebra" is an Islamic term.

Most Muslims I have met seem like Americans who are good upstanding members of the Republican Party. Muslims are especially like Southern Republicans. Muslims go to Mosque regularly; work hard; are conservative in politics, dress, and family; work in skilled labor, business, or professions; want their children to marry well; want their children not to experiment too much in school; are not pacifists; accept the need for military solutions; support a strong military; and dislike programs that enable the poor. If American Republicans could accept that Jesus was not God, they would make good Muslims. If Muslims could accept that American Republicans mistakenly think Jesus was God but otherwise do no harm, they could accept American Republicans as Muslims in good standing. If Muslims became slightly more liberal on social issues, they would also make good members of the Democratic Party. Ironically, much the same can be said of conservative American Jews; the only major difference is the question of Israel.

(2) Muslim Belligerent Character.

Nothing is in Islam to prevent it from getting along with the modern world and with other religions and ideas. Nothing is in the start of Islam that forces it to take a stance against the whole rest of the world now. Islam could become a source of learning and science again. There have been events in recent history that have driven a wedge between Islam and the West. It helps to explain. I am not sure if the breach can be healed quickly enough. I hope so.

I stress again that the vast majority of Muslims do not have a grudge against the West, Western values, Jesus, his message, or even Jews. The vast majority are not belligerent. The vast majority of Muslims already have begun to adjust to the modern world, including the values of democracy and the message of Jesus. Most Muslims make excellent citizens and contribute to the economy. Problems lie with some groups of Muslims, in the gap between them and the modern world, just as it does with some Christians and with racial supremacists. Of course, it only takes a few rotten apples to spoil the whole barrel. So if

enough Muslims cause trouble, it could spoil the situation for all Muslims. This is possible. I hope it is not true. From what I have seen, it is not true. There are so many more good Muslims than bad Muslims that all of us should operate on the assumption that good Muslims vastly outnumber bad Muslims, just as good Christians outnumber bad Christians. Jesus, Mohammad, and most kind Jewish leaders of the past would want us to think that way.

The Islamic world has a serious case of “past glory blues”, much as do Greeks, Italians, French, Irish, the British, Chinese until recently, Indians, and Southern Americans. See the early movies of Bruce Lee to see how this blues plays out in a non-Western case or see the movie “Ip Man”. People who live in past glory learn about great kingdoms of the past, and think somehow it should be like that now. They are like America looking back to the 1950s and 1960s. They do not know that most past glory is imagined and unrealistic. They do not see past problems. People who live in past glory tend to be bitter about present life. They find someone else to blame for not having yesterday’s imagined glory. They blame whoever is in power regardless of facts, just as American Southerners blame Yankees and Liberals, and American Southerners never see their own disadvantage as arising out of their own culture. Muslims feel they do not get enough respect. The West, including Russia and the old Communist empire, is in power. So Muslims blame the West for the missing glory of Islam. They blame Western values for undermining the values that God gave to Muslims, and that would recover glory for Islam if only Muslims would live up to the values. They take whatever action they can to build up their own values and to knock down the power and values of the usurper enemies.

There is some basis for Islamic anger at the West but it is not enough to justify hatred. There is some basis for the feelings of American Southerners toward Yankees and Liberals but not enough to justify their hatred. For at least 200 years, Westerners have dominated Muslim nations and have taken the resources of Muslim nations without just compensation. Muslims control the greatest oil reserves in the world but the Muslim people have hardly benefitted from this wealth.

A big reason for lack of Muslim development is that, about 250 years ago, Muslims turned their backs on Western science (which once was Muslim science) and on capitalism despite good evidence that science and capitalism were the “wave of the future” and despite the fact that Muslim nations had the knowledge, people, and resources to have made the shift. By clinging to old ways of life then, Muslims doomed themselves to clinging to old ways of life now. China did the same thing for a while. After China got over its ideological indulgences, it recovered dramatically.

Another source of Muslim disadvantage is that, for 200 years, Muslims have been ruled by despots. Their despots have done what all despots do regardless of religion or culture. Rather than use their resources and power for the progress of their people, they invest in a strong military and they give their people something to hate as a way to channel outward the frustrations of the people. Despots hurt the people. Even before the rise of Israel in 1948, Muslims leaders indulged in Western comforts at the same time that they blamed the West for looting their countries. The degenerate leaders of Egypt before the rise of Israel are a clear example. After the rise of Israel, Muslim despots had a tailor-made scapegoat for the frustrations of the people and the stagnation of the country. Even given that Muslim nations have not gotten a fair price for their resources, there was more than enough wealth to build the country and to bring it to modernity if the wealth had been used for education, science, and commerce rather than for the military. Even when wealth was used for some education, as when students went to Western schools to

get degrees, there were no jobs on return because there was no capitalist and commercial infrastructure. The “Arab Spring” of 2011 and 2012 began when a man in Tunisia with a college degree had to sell oranges on a street corner to make a living, and a crooked police officer shook him down hard. Some Muslims with moderate power suppressed other Muslims with less power, and used them as tools in the ploy of using Israel as scapegoat; see the movie “Syriana”. As usual, the West supported despots when it served the short-term interests of the West, adding another valid reason to be angry at the West. Even now, there is great danger that Arab leaders will not use the new energy of freedom to lead their countries to progress but will return to militarism and using Israel as a safety valve.

As always during social changes, some groups benefit while other groups lose. Within Muslim nations, these groups stand to lose: men who have held power a long time; younger men who want to hold power someday; political despots; families who control resources; families who control power; young men with no jobs or resources and so no way to get a start in a new economy; and young men with little education and little hope of getting a job in a new economy. People think they can keep power if they can stop, slow, and limit changes. People think they can control power if they can control symbolic changes such as in movies, TV, and popular music. Too often, control of power becomes control of women, girls, young people, and schools. If power groups can make the nation look as it did a hundred years ago, they think they can keep out the modern world and can maintain power. They hurt people who change, in particular they hurt girls and women. This behavior has little to do with real Islam. This behavior is all about fear of change and fear of losing power. Conservatives of all religions, twist their religion to serve as the charter for the old ways and against the new ways. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for killing people who allow change. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for dominating women and schools. Not all Muslims are like this. The very large majority of Muslims want change if change is done at a pace they can deal with. People want hospitals and schools if they can also control drugs and promiscuity. But even the large majority of Muslims fear the violent aggressive minority, and so the violent aggressive minority makes all Muslims look that way.

Contrary to another Western misconception, not all ideas and values that come out of the West are all good. Even ideas that are good in the proper context in the West can be bad outside the proper context. Moral relativity and Romantic inversion can be useful in the West but bad if taken literally. The idea that a woman has a right to walk around naked without getting assaulted might be theoretically true, and might make sense as a discussion point in a Western college classroom, but it is nonsense in the real world and dangerous. Democracy makes sense when people have the right economic base to support it and the right relations with neighbors but democracy does not make sense where people are hungry, ignorant, and beset by enemies. If people adopt the wrong Western values, those values can hurt the country far more than help, as happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, in Burma (Myanmar), and in North Korea. People outside the West have to choose which values to accept and how to accept them. If given enough time and help, they usually make good choices, as in South Korea. In the short run, and without help, they get confused, as happened in Russia after the fall of Communism. When confused, they make bad choices such as falling prey to simplistic materialism and consumerism. When confused, and when bad choices backfire, people reject all Western values, all modernization, and all change. This rejection happened in only a small minority of Muslim nations but it happened enough to cause a problem, as in Egypt and Afghanistan.

In a world of expanding capitalism and consumerism, ideas about a modern life often come far ahead of actual economic development; what used to be called “modernization without development”. People want cars, computers, electronic pads, smart phones, cameras, cable TV, air conditioning, lots of other toys, and a cushy job with security and benefits, before the economy has the infrastructure to give everybody a job in which they can earn those rewards. People want to live like the people in American movies and TV ads, and they get angry when they can’t. They think the West is withholding it from them and cheating them. In fact, they are partly correct, but only in small part. Mostly their bad leaders are cheating them out of it. Regardless of the cause, they get angry at Western culture, and they react by reinforcing their traditional values. They do this even when their traditional values could not possibly provide the base for an economy that can give them what they want.

Violence and hatred beget violence and hatred. Once begun on a path of violence and hatred, it is hard to stop. In the short run, violence and hatred provide a lot of satisfaction and make up for a lot of other needs. In the 1970s, several groups of Americans started down a path of violence and hatred, and many people in those groups still wander that path. I have heard hate in the sermons of Black preachers, the rants of Whites looking for better jobs, and the well-reasoned but false attacks of educated women on men. You can still hear ill-disguised racial hatred in sermons on TV. Black culture in America since the 1970s has been ruined by hatred and violence; the legions of dead and jailed Black youth can serve as my evidence. Many Irish can testify to the persistence of hatred and violence. Muslims started down a path of hatred and violence, and many Muslims remain on the path. The conflict with Israel has done a lot to keep them on the path but it did not alone create the path and it alone does not keep them on the path. Despite Islam’s militant beginning, hatred and violence are not endemic to Islam. I think they are against the spirit of Mohammad and the spirit of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims do not walk the path of hatred and violence. Yet hatred and violence persist.

Whether Muslims more than other people tend to oppose change with violence, and tend to form groups that oppose change with strong violence, I am not sure. The above points tend to lead a large proportion of Muslims to oppose change and to oppose change with violence. The real question is what enlightened Muslims and enlightened citizens of a greater world should do, and that question is beyond the scope of this book.

(3) More on Attitudes.

After the terrorist attacks of 9-11, Americans called on Muslim clerics to condemn hatred and terrorism. Americans condemned Muslims for tolerating hatred and for not condemning it. In fact, many Muslims, including many Muslim clerics, did condemn hatred and violence. They do not tolerate it. They stress being good citizens of their countries, including the United States, and they oppose Muslim extremists. I would guess that Muslim clerics in America have done a better job of opposing hatred and violence than the clerics of most other religions. I have heard racism in the sermons of White and Black American preachers, and Christian Americans do not condemn them enough. Americans don’t hear the sermons of Muslims who have adapted to the modern world and who condemn violence. I wish there was a way to broadcast the sermons of Muslims in the same way as of Christians and sometimes Jews. I hope the non-Muslim Americans who have Muslim friends and who know of the vast majority of good Muslims go out of their way to tell other Americans about good Muslims.

Muslims and non-Muslims have to compromise on mutual tolerance of some rude behavior. Westerners do not notice, but, when Muslims protest a slander on Mohammad, the Koran, or Islam, they rarely burn the New Testament, the Tanakh, or any religious text. They never burn Jesus in effigy. Muslims respect religion, religious people, and religious texts. Muslims do unto others as they would have others do unto them, and as they think all people should do unto each other. Muslims do burn symbols of political and economic power, and symbols of values with which they disagree, such as flags, secular effigies, banks, fast food restaurants, bars, and hotels in which guests shamelessly under-dress.

I condemn the terrorist attack of 9-11 but I need to point out: The attack was not meant to kill as many people as possible. If the terrorists had wanted merely mass death of Americans, they would have flown a jet into Michigan Stadium ("the Big House") on football game day with Ohio State. The attack was aimed at the key financial center of the world (World Trade Center), the key military center of the world (Pentagon), and the key political center of the world (White House). Muslims who fear modern life see those centers as the weapons of oppression not just against themselves but against non-Western non-capitalist non-Communist peoples.

Non-Muslims, especially Westerners, should see the Muslim point of view, about bad institutions that hurt people. Muslims believe it is wrong to make images of people, especially important people. It is a form of idolatry that can lead to wrong belief. It can divert attention away from God. Non-Muslims should respect this. Don't make an image of Mohammad. Don't desecrate Mohammad or the Koran. Give Muslims the same respect that they give us. Give them the same respect that you want, and you would like to prevail for everybody. That is what Jesus taught. When Westerners make fun of Mohammad or the Koran, they should expect vigorous legal peaceful protests.

At the same time, Muslims must understand that Muslim values do not prevail around the world. Part of Western democratic values is that people have a right to be stupid, and they often use that right. People have a right to make images of anything, to make fun of anything, and even to denigrate anything. Even when people in general disagree with somebody who makes fun of Islam, that foolish person still has the right to say and act. Muslims can enforce strong laws of religious respect in their own countries but they cannot enforce such laws outside their own countries, and they cannot take vengeance against anybody outside a Muslim country. They simply must endure. If Muslim residents in a non-Muslim country cannot endure, they must leave that country rather than break its laws. Sometimes real progress comes through letting fools do what they must so that better people always have the right to speak too. This fact is painful, but it is true, and must be endured. I hope Muslims take comfort in the fact that the large majority of non-Muslims in the West disagree with offending Mohammad and the Koran.

Part of modernization is the freedom of girls and women. It is not possible to run a modern economy without women participating in the workforce. When women work, they have their own incomes, and they have a big say, often the dominant say, in their sexual lives, reproductive lives, and family lives. It is not possible to allow women to work without also allowing them power, and it is not possible to deny women work. So, women will have some power. Women will have economic, political, and personal power. When women have power, women, like men, do foolish things. Women will have times of excessive sexuality and of promiscuity. Most adolescent women go through that as a short phase, and it is not too severe. Women then stop on their own because they find the right path for themselves. Women do not stop mostly because men force them to stop. Men cannot stop it by severely punishing girls who go to

school. Men cannot stop it by punishing women who flirt, wear skirts above their ankles or knees, wear make-up, go out socially, have boyfriends, or drink. It is not against the basic ideas of Islam to give women the same freedom as men. It does not destroy a woman's soul if she makes a mistake, and it does not destroy her family.

The best thing Muslim parents can do is the best thing parents all over the world already do: Set a good example. Teach by example. Enjoy life without hurting yourself and without hurting other people. Teach your children to enjoy their lives in the same way. Show your children see what happens when other children go to excess or when they act stupidly for too long. Don't worry that your children will pick up bad examples from what you show them. Try to make sure your children see a variety of successful children, including children who are successful in traditional ways and children who are successful through imagination and creativity without hurting themselves. Do not admire bad role models, such as profligate men or terrorists. Do admire good role models such as stay-at-home fathers. Make sure all your children get the best education for their ability. Do not smoke at all and, if you drink, drink only moderately. Just as some men are lost, some women will be lost. Accept the loss of some women as the price to pay for the great gains of women as a whole, including all of your daughters.

Islam should not be the religion of bitter men, clinging to an imaginary past in which they had glory and power, and oppressing women so as to make themselves feel better. Mohammad limited the power of men while expanding the power of women. Mohammad protected women against men. Mohammad respected the judgment, intellect, and business ability of women. For a man to protect a woman does not mean to own her. Now it means to encourage her in her responsible freedom. Mohammad did not make men the owners of women; he made men the friends of women. Women supported Mohammad. Mohammad listened to women. Mohammad recognized women in business. He gave women a sure share of inheritance, a large portion for the times. He limited the number of wives that powerful men could have; contrary to false Western ideas, he did not encourage men to take many wives and to use women. Mohammad understood the value of an education because he did not have one. Mohammad would want women in this world to be educated, take up professions, and contribute to modern life.

This paragraph will offend Muslims. I think Greeks and Roman Catholics worship Mary and some of the saints, and their worship amounts to idolatry. I suspect that some Jews worship the Torah, the Talmud, and other texts to the point of idolatry. I don't make a point of this because mostly I don't care and there is not much I can do about it. I spend my time on better things. In the same way, I think many Muslims respect Mohammad, the Koran, and even the Hadith, to the point of idolatry. They worship Mohammad, the Koran, and the Hadith. Some Muslims seem to respect great figures of Islam to the point of idolatry. They let worship get in the way of the message. I know all Muslims learn that Mohammad is not God and that it is a sin to worship him. Even so, too often, they do. They do the same to the Koran. Mohammad was only a man, and he was wrong about some things. The Koran is only a book, and it is wrong about some things. Mohammad put passages in the Koran about his wives and cattle that could not possibly be relevant to the glory of God; he put them in so that he could use the glory of God to support him in his family quarrels. Jews should accept the flaws in their prophets, and often do, but not always. Christians should accept the mistakes of Jesus, and almost never do. Muslims should really and deeply accept the humanity of Mohammad, including his faults. When Muslims accept this about Mohammad, they will become better Muslims in the way that Mohammad originally intended. When religions accept the

humanity of their founders, they are far less apt to quarrel, especially about trivial things such as bad cartoons and bad movies.

Bad Self-Validating Experiences.

Now we return to material that is not repeated and that you should not skip.

“Jihad” does not mean primarily “Holy War” or “War against unholy enemies”. “Jihad” means “strenuous focused effort toward an important goal or cause, hopefully with God’s help”. A person can conduct a jihad to cure cancer or poverty. A person can treat winning the World Cup for his-her country as a jihad. “Jihad” can be given as a name, given in hope that your child excels, just as “David” means “beloved of God” or “Richard” means “person of correct rule”. A jihad can be a self-validating experience.

The problem with Muslim attitudes against modern life is they support self-validating bad experiences and self-perpetuating bad religious pyramid schemes. This is a problem not only with Islam but with many modern religions which offer a strong self-validating experience with which believers can oppose the uncertainty of modern life. From the 1960s through the 1980s, American Christian groups that offered a big self-validating experience of justification, salvation, finding God, feeling God’s love, and having a personal relation with God, provided a safe haven for confused young people who could not deal with the freedom and insecurity of modern life. This is a big reason why ordinary people see Muslim fanatics and Christian Conservatives as much the same. Both use self-validating experiences as the basis for bad religious pyramid schemes.

When self-validating experiences lead to terrorism or bad government, as in both Islam and America, then they are bad and should be condemned.

Malcolm X.

“The Autobiography of Malcolm X” is the story of a Black Man in America in the 1940s through 1960s, mostly around Detroit. This book influenced me greatly. I strongly recommend it as giving excellent insight on all the issues of this chapter.

Malcolm starts as a petty crook and drug user. He grows embittered. He goes to prison. He discovers an American Islamic movement aimed at Black People, called “Black Muslims”. The Black Muslims are not orthodox Muslims, but they are close enough to the spirit of Mohammad and Islam so Malcolm learns a lot. He learns to get over bitterness, to fend for himself, to stop relying on White people as though he were still a slave, to look critically at how the economy and society works, and to work in the community to make a better community and better world. For a long time, he got energy by hating White people and by blaming them for Black problems. He blamed Blacks who were lax or collaborated with Whites. Malcolm mistakenly thought that problems of economy, society, and history were primarily race problems. All these ideas became self-validating experiences that fed the dark side of the Black Muslim movement.

Eventually Malcolm saw that Black problems depended on race conflict but were not at root race issues but problems of economics, society, politics, and history. Malcolm became unhappy with the image of both Black people and White people that was given by Black Muslims. Malcolm went on the pilgrimage to

Mecca ("Haj"). While there, he saw Muslims of all races and nationalities. He saw all kinds of people getting along under their submission to God. The experience transformed him. He saw the unity of all people under God. The experience clarified for him race relations and root problems in the economy and the greater society. Malcolm never gave up being a vigorous focused person. He exemplifies jihad. He remained a strong good Muslim. His pilgrimage became a different self-validating experience that undid the badness of earlier self-validating experiences, and turned them toward good. I think Mohammad foresaw that the pilgrimage would have this effect on people, and that is one reason why Mohammad instituted the pilgrimage.

When Malcolm returned to America, he did not stop scolding Whites and Blacks when he thought they deserved it. He did stop preaching racial conflict, and instead attacked problems at their root. He always insisted on the virtues that he had learned as a Black Muslim. He cooperated with White people when they worked to help Black Community self-reliance and really helped improve it.

His new stance alienated him from traditionalists within the Black Muslims. Shortly after he changed his approach, reactionaries in the movement murdered him.

As far as I am concerned, Malcolm exemplifies what Muslims can be. He was working his way toward a critical but successful life in a modern society. Instead of rejecting society, Malcolm worked to make it better. Malcolm discovered, on his own, the message of Jesus, and the accord between the message of Jesus and the teachings of Mohammad. He found the inevitable implications of the teachings of all the prophets. I don't care if Malcolm would have put it in those terms, and I don't care if he would have left out Jesus and the Jewish prophets. The substance of what Malcolm did and what he learned are in line with a practical application of the message of Jesus.

Repeat My Pleas.

Because Islam accepts Jesus as an important prophet but does not hold him as God, Islam is in a unique position to assess the message of Jesus for the modern world. Islam can assess how much practicality, and what practicality, we have to take into account. How do we blend ideals and practically? Islam can tell us how decent people can cope with indecent people. Islam can tell us what to do about the flaws of capitalism without making either poor people or corporations clients of the state. Islam can tell us how to run capitalism without allowing business to rule the state. It can tell us how to help the planet as much as it now can be helped.

Islam began as a champion of science and reasoning. I do not guess here how some groups in Islam fell into hating science and reason, and why they believe in dogma that is obviously false, such as against evolution. As an early champion of science and reasoning, Islam sought for signs of God's activity and his presence in the wonders of his creation, in the stars, the Earth, biology, mathematics, and reasoning. Islam can do that again. Smart Muslims have a chance to be world leaders in science, and they have a chance to be world leaders in seeing God through science. I don't mean they should irrationally see God in every star, galaxy, and sea urchin. That would be silly, and a disservice to God. They should find out what can be explained by natural law, and they should speculate on implications. They should consider if the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings implies God even if it does not prove God. How are natural laws set, and why they are they set as they are? As machines become smarter, how should we

relate to them? What happens when most people are conceived and gestated in bottles? What happens when we play with DNA? Islamic literature, religious and secular, is full of natural signs of God. Few of these signs would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern skeptic but some would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern seeker who accepts circumstantial evidence. Many would still inspire a modern believer and bring joy to modern believers. Muslims have a lot to contribute to modern science and philosophy if they allow themselves to step fully into the modern world.

PART 5: My Non-Conversion.

When I explain the role of the Jews in my belief, Christians and Muslims ask me why I don't convert to Judaism. When I explain my respect for Mohammad and Islam, Jews and Christians ask me why I don't convert to Islam. I have reasons. (I have had atheists yell at me for not converting to formal Christianity). First, Jesus remains the main giver of the message for me. Second, Jews, standard Christians, and Muslims do not find my beliefs acceptable. Third, I don't accept some of their ideas and attitudes, such as overlooking Jesus' message. Fourth, I don't want to follow some of their practices. It is fine if Jews and Muslims circumcise boys and eat "kosher" ("hallal") but I don't want that, any more than I want to follow all the standard Christian holidays and customs. Fifth, and this might be a fault on mine, I don't like formal institutions. I would chafe at their authority. Sixth, I love some aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and I want to feel free to continue. My beliefs are fine for me, I share them with many enlightened modern people, and I think I am a true follower of Jesus. As long as nobody fights to convert me, I am happy to let things stand.

23 Theravada Buddhism

All material in all the chapters on religions is my opinion. The material is not an official description of any religion. I love Buddhism but disagree with it. If you wish, you need read only Parts 1 and 2 at first, about 50 pages. You will miss the in-depth commentary on Buddhism and its relevance to modern life but you will not miss much that you need for later chapters. The last part of the chapter, Part 7, about 50 pages, is optional as well. So this chapter is not nearly as long as it seems.

One person, Siddhartha Gautama, titled “the Buddha”, began Buddhism about 600-543 BCE in the area around Nepal. The Buddha died in 543 BCE. Buddhist calendars begin with that year.

Indian religion at that time centered on ritual. Brahmins were strong ritual priests, like some Christian bishops, heads of mega-churches, and Muslim clerics. Brahmins and rulers together formed a system that dominated society. Buddhism partly was a revolt against the Brahmin order and against irrationality, ideologies of superstition, glamour, ritual, magic, and the supernatural.

Other stances also arose distinct from Brahmins. Here are two: (1) The “Upanishads” are essays about spiritual life (“oo” as “woo”, “oo pahn i shahds”). The name means something like “writing from the forest” and refers to people who lived apart from society. The Upanishads teach: (A) all beings are similar or identical (“you are that”), so we are not different from other people or animals; (B) each sentient being is an eternal soul-self (“atman”); and (C) we should feel compassion for all. The Upanishads show the mix of inspiration and logic that is typical of India. Hindus developed many systems based on the insights of the Upanishads. Their importance is huge.

(2) Jainism (“jine” like “pine-ism”) is austere and reverences ALL LIFE. Jains are vegetarian and pacifist, like some Vegans. They strain water before they drink so as not to kill any bugs. They merge individual humans into Life. To me, unofficially, they imply that humans are Life’s way of knowing itself. We are special only because of that; in modern terms, they minimize “species-ism”. The Jain sense of Life is like the idea of Life that Jedi masters use to explain the Force but the Force is all good. Jainism remains a small distinct religion mostly inside India.

Always some people have a “Jain character” or “Upanishad character”, or both, even if neither society nor formal religion make a place for them: God is Life, The Living God, love people and nature, God is Love, hurt nothing, animals are like us, all people are our kind and our neighbors, we should be glad to sacrifice for them, God has a plan, all things have a place in God’s plan, and we all do God’s work. Both tempers can add to good versions of Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and all religions.

Already in the time of the Buddha, ideas similar to those from the Upanishads and Jainism were used to begin a system in which eternal soul-like selves were a part, the system supported them, they supported it, it lived through them and worked through them, they did its work, and the system was holy and joyous. Only a few people can see the system as a whole. Still, you can participate fully, be fully realized and

fully justified, by doing your role-duty in this life or by being devoted to a major character in the system such as a god or the God. Indians are great at mixing vast inspiration with logic.

The Buddha presented his ideas partly in contrast to ideas from the Upanishads and Jainism and partly in parallel. He taught compassion and morality – monks strain water. He rejected (a) any eternal soul-self and (b) the relevance of a world system of which each soul-self is a part. He did not reject such a system in principle, he simply denied it was finally relevant, and he ignored it. Except for Dharma, he would have rejected depending on a Big Principle, not even Life, and would have rejected merging people into Life, Dharma, Mind, Emptiness, Love, or any Big Idea. Buddhism also is both inspired and logical.

On the Net, find Cynics, Stoics, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and David Hume. Aristotle's "Ethics" is great. Aurelius was a Roman Emperor, like the old good emperor in the movie "Gladiator". These people were not exactly like Siddhartha but close enough to make both similarities and differences worth knowing. Keep them in mind also for the chapters on Taoism, Zen, and Confucius.

Buddhism has two-and-a-half big schools: (1) Theravada ("ter-ra va-da", "Elders' way"), (2) Mahayana ("ma-ha ya-na", "bigger vehicle"), and (2.5) Vajrayana ("vaj-rai ya-na", "lightning diamond way-vehicle"). Vajrayana came from Mahayana and is usually linked to Tibet. I don't write about it. Theravada likely is closest to the original ideas of the Buddha but other schools dispute the claim. Theravada is mostly in mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Mahayana likely came after Theravada, maybe 200 years after the Buddha. The forerunners of Theravada and Mahayana split officially around 250 BCE at a meeting in India. Mahayana is all over the Far East, and it is what most people think of as Buddhism. I lived in a Theravada nation, Thailand, and am closer to Theravada in spirit, so I am biased. Mahayanists call Theravada "Hinayana", meaning "smaller vehicle", to put down Theravada in contrast to Mahayana. Please do not use "Hinayana" for Theravada. Mahayana gets its own chapter.

Much of what I say about Theravada applies also to other religions and to mysticism. I do not point out similarities, the differentiating "spin" that religions put on similarities, or how similarities remain despite spins. Keep this chapter in mind for later.

Sanskrit is the traditional high language of India, like Latin in the Roman Catholic Church and old Hebrew in Judaism. Pali came from Sanskrit and is close to it. Already at the time of Siddhartha, Sanskrit was old and Pali was spreading, like the English of Chaucer first and then of Shakespeare. I don't know if the Buddha used Pali. Until about 200 years after the Buddha, little was written. People memorized. Some old texts were in Sanskrit but most were in Pali. Nearly all texts relevant to Theravada are in Pali. Many Sanskrit and Pali terms are in daily languages of Buddhist areas just as Greek and Latin terms are in languages of Europe and the Americas. "Nirvana" is Sanskrit, "Nibbana" or "Nippana" is Pali, and "Nippan" is Thai after Pali. The word checker on my computer recognizes Sanskrit but not Pali, so I use Sanskrit even though almost all Theravada is in Pali.

My terms do not match exactly with Buddhist terms although they are not far off. In this book, it is an error to "get hung up" on formal terms. If a basic idea in a religion cannot be said in natural language then feel wary. Sometimes I mention a term because you will meet it in other reading.

Theravada canonical texts are collected in a set called the “Tripitaka” (Pali: Tipitaka). It means “three baskets” for three major fields and texts: (1) Sutras, including sermons and explanations; (2) Codes of Conduct for monks and lay people, that is, Buddhist ethics; and (3) Buddhist view of mind, body, life, perception, and being. For lay Buddhists, “sutra” can be a catch-all term for all official texts. Rather than explain the status of a text, not relevant here, I too use “sutra” for a canonical or important text. “Sutra” in Pali is “sutta”. A sutra is like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, Koran, or like the Bhagavad Gita. Most sutras begin with “The Buddha said” and claim to be verbatim copies of sermons by him. There are so many texts, they are so long, and disagree enough, not all could be exact direct copies of his words. Buddhists know this. I don’t know which words likely are his and which not. Buddhists know Part Three of the Tripitaka came after the Buddha but still accord Part Three high status, like the Hadith in Islam. Mahayana accepts Theravada sutras but reinterprets them. Mahayana has sutras that Theravada does not have and does not accept as canonical even if held highly, such as the Lotus Sutra. Mahayana has sutras written in local languages such as Tibetan and Chinese. Mahayana stresses its texts that are not shared with Theravada such as the Lotus, Heart, and Diamond Sutras. As in all religions, both Mahayana and Theravada teachers select whole sutras, and passages, that help them and hurt foes. I do not cite any passages but do adapt lines. Some teachers are so influential that their work is effectively canonical (Buddhaghosa and some Zen masters).

PART 1: BACKGROUND IDEAS

“Buddhists think” and “Buddhism says” refer to fairly astute people. I do not refer to folk Buddhism unless I say so. “Dogma”, “doctrine”, “orthodox”, and “official” do not mean arbitrary rules but mean standard respected teachings. Dogma and doctrine are not propaganda. No term disparages.

The Dharma.

I do not define karma. The common idea of karma is not exact but it is close enough. This chapter does not need a long or precise definition of Dharma or “the Dharma”. The Dharma is the basic stuff, doing, being, life, mind, self-knowing, sociality, morality, and spirituality of the universe. Dharma is how it all works at the most basic and pervasive. Cause-and-effect is one mode of Dharma but only one. Dharma is physics, life, sociality, and morality, but more too. Dharma is the regularity and liveliness of the world if liveliness is not merely an evolved delusion but is fully true. In my view, Dharma would be like the mind-behind-it-all that I call “God”. Followers of Dharma think of it not as god but as supra-personal.

“Dharma” also means knowledge about the world and it means wisdom. The world has order, so we can grasp the order, and sometimes can say it. When people say “study the Dharma” they can mean to learn Buddhism, Hinduism, and wisdom. Buddhism and Hinduism call themselves “the Dharma”. They are the Dharma making itself known to its creation and known to itself in its creation. This use is similar to the idea that to read the Bible or Koran is to learn the mind of God and those texts are the Word of God.

Puzzles of the Dharma.

The puzzles here are all aspects of one puzzle: “Why is there evil?”, and “Why is there so much evil?” All religions face the problem, all offer solutions, and no solution satisfies me. Max Weber wrote short clear books describing the major religions by how they respond to evil, how their responses make them distinct,

and the results on society of being guided by a particular view. Keep in mind the points here for some puzzles mentioned below and for chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, and Hinduism.

(1) Many people tacitly assume that Dharma and Nature are the same. The Nature that people have in mind is Romanticized Nature of TV ads and shows for children, not the real nature that scientists study. Dharma, Romanticized Nature, and real nature are not the same. Even Max Weber mistook Dharma for nature and thought religions based on Dharma have as a main goal “back to nature”. Don’t make that mistake. Think out relations of Dharma and real nature.

(2) Real nature has quite a bit of violence, and, to me, has some badness and even some evil. To make real nature and Dharma the same, you have to accept that nature, and so the Dharma, intrinsically have violence, some badness, and maybe some evil. Nature-Dharma is not all-and-only “you are that”, love, compassion, and one harmonious system. Most believers in Dharma want Dharma-Nature to be all about goodness and light regardless of how it seems.

(3) Regardless of nature, or any association between Dharma and nature, Dharma is not all goodness and light. Dharma accepts violence, badness, and even evil. Followers of Dharma have to explain this dark aspect of its character. Even if the badness is only an illusion in the long run, apparent badness is real enough for most people during their lives, and it has to be taken seriously.

(4) People want the good light-filled part of Dharma to win in the long run. So, one side of the Dharma has to be pitted against another side of the Dharma, and one side has to defeat the other side. You have to split Dharma, allow for a long conflict, and make one side win. Even if, in the end, the light side and dark side reunite, splitting and conflict are true for the long time in which we live particular lives.

(4A) One way to win is to make victory happen along with conflict, at the same time, all the time. If victory is not a distinct event, as in the Second Coming, then it must be mystic, everywhere, all the time. Some people see the whole story including conflict as the victory, as in “the journey is the destination”. Splitting is merging and merging is splitting. The never-ending moral wrangles of humans do keep us engaged and occupied.

(5) Some people dwell on the Dark Side of the Dharma and think they serve the Dharma when they seek power and do dark deeds. They are confused and wrong, and should be opposed.

(6) It is easy to turn the drama of Dharma into the interplay of good and bad, and to think good and bad need each other. This way of thinking almost does not occur in Theravada although some individuals in Theravada do think this way. I consider it wrong, for which see Part One of this book. Some Mahayana and Hinduism developed this view.

Widespread Then-New Ideas from about the Time of the Buddha.

About the time of the Buddha, a set of ideas appeared from Italy through India. It is not clear where they began and if they began together. The ideas spread because they make sense of the world, of badness, and different life situations such as lord and peasant, rich and poor, healthy and sick, weak and powerful, and lucky and unlucky. The ideas fit well in mature agrarian (farming) stratified (class) states, conditions

common when the ideas spread. The ideas showed up in Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism. The set resembles variations (C) and (D) of the “many lives” stances described in the chapters in this book on Issues.

-Many particular lives are unfair. Good people get no reward; bad people live well.

-Much about life is hard, unpleasant, and unavoidable, such as disease, getting old, hunger, political disappointment, love, children, etc.

-Life changes. Life is unreliable. What is here today is gone tomorrow. A river changes course. A tree dies. The crops fail or we have a bumper crop. Kin and friends die. Ideas about the gods change. The government changes policy, causing changes in business. One ethnic group rises up while another falls down. One religion rises up while another declines.

-Much in life is so changeable and so unreliable as to be an illusion: security, happiness, good relations with neighbors, friendship, and even good relations with kin.

-Even concrete aspects of life such as your body, even recurring aspects, such as the coming of the seasons, have much about them that is unreliable and illusory.

-What is obvious about life cannot be fully real. There must be something underneath what we see that is more real. What is underneath might generate what we see but the two are not the same.

-Even though what we obviously see is changing, unreliable, and illusory, it is still appealing, and people still commit to it. The changing, unreliable, and illusory world can be a lot of fun.

-We need to wake up to the unreliable and illusory nature of this life. If possible, we need to wake up to what is really real beneath. We need to stop clinging to what is obvious, and instead wake up to what is more real.

-Indians called the unreliable, changing, and illusory world “samsara” or “maia”. They called waking up “release” or “moksha”. We now call it “enlightenment”.

-Although we are individual human beings, still we are much like other people and other forms of life. In the words of the Upanishads, “you are that”. The proper attitude when we realize how much we are like others is empathy and sympathy, kindness, and being helpful.

-People should seek enlightenment. They should seek it much more than any worldly success, even family success, even more than conquering the whole world.

-Understanding the world might require long hard work. There might be a process of “ascending” to a full understanding of life’s secrets and to fully waking up.

-Not everybody can awaken in his-her present lifetime.

-If we allow that people are reborn and have more than one life, we can solve many problems. If we allow that having many lives forms a system, we can solve even more problems.

-Rebirth solves problems of bad luck, unequal social situation, unequal wealth, unequal power, unfairness of all kinds, the fact that good people don't seem to get rewarded, the fact that bad people don't seem to get punished and might even prosper, and badness.

-Rebirth solves a problem that affects awakening. If a person does not awaken in this lifetime, he-she will awaken in a future lifetime. There has to be a way that spiritual progress and spiritual regress in this lifetime can carry over into future lifetimes,

-Rebirth also causes problems. Indeed, it is a major problem. To be reborn into a series of illusory, changing, unreliable, unfair lives is a bad thing, even if many of the particular lives are good. When a person wakes up, he-she ceases to be reborn; he-she ceases to participate in the whole system of many lives. To cease being reborn entirely is a good thing.

-This point is unclear and will be contradicted below: A person might awaken to the idea that particular lives are unfair, unreliable, etc. but not awaken to the idea that all lives, and the system of multiple lives, are undesirable. That person could accept rebirth as a good thing without seeing it is also a bad thing. If a person wakes up to the fact that the whole system of rebirth is undesirable, he-she would also have to realize that all particular lives are undesirable even if some are superficially enjoyable.

-While it does not always seem so, and while any particular lifetime might be poor, the world as a whole is moral. The world as a whole rewards good and punishes bad. The world as a whole supports spiritual striving and spiritual achievement. This is part of the reason why we feel that we are like other sentient beings and like all life, "you are that".

-The system of rewarding good and bad, in this lifetime, and in future lifetimes, is called "karma". Karma extends not only to explicitly moral deeds but to all deeds of all kinds. Karma responds to what kind of occupation you have, whether you act diligently or not, whether you are aware of nature, etc.

-The system as a whole is called the "Dharma" or the "Dharma". The role that any person plays in the system is also called the "dharma" of that person. The fact that a person is a teacher or a farmer is the dharma of that person.

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha but more likely a few hundred years later in Hinduism. To keep the system going, each person should carry out his particular dharma (destiny, duty, role) correctly. For any person to do that, all others need to carry out their dharma correctly too, even most bad guys. We need each other, need society, and need some bad guys. This is the big lesson of the Bhagavad Gita, and one big lesson from the "Spoon River Anthology". If you are a farmer, farm; if a householder, see to your family; if a warrior, fight; if a ruler, rule, if a holy person, seek release; if a thief, steal; and if an egomaniac intent on taking over the world, sincerely try.

The Following Points are Important in Mahayana and Hinduism.

-This point might have arisen about the time of the Buddha; likely it was developed after him; I doubt the Buddha held exactly this view but he might have held something close: If you keep in mind the above points, carry out your Dharma-karma, and set your mind to spiritual growth, then you can enjoy this life to the extent it allows, and this life can be graceful or worthwhile, at least in passing.

-The following points likely originated after the Buddha, and certainly were developed after him.

-Although any given life might not seem worthwhile, there is a system. The system has mind-like being. The system is overall moral even if it allows some immorality. The system overall is good and worthwhile. Although it might not seem that some particular life is worthwhile, the system of lives as a whole is good, worthwhile, and even joyous. Each life is worthwhile in that context.

-We are part of a system that is bigger than us. Just because we are part of a system, we are important too. We are the system working out its way through us. This one reason we feel "you are that". If we feel our life right now is not worthwhile, we are wrong because we do not see our life in the whole system.

-All lives have some suffering and some lives have a lot of suffering. That is too bad but it is not the great tragedy it seems. The joy of future lives can more than make up for suffering now. Especially the greater joy of the system of many lives dwarfs the suffering of any one particular life.

-Suffering is something that pertains to particular lives, not to the system as a whole. What appears to be suffering is an illusion. It is only a transient part of one particular life. It only arises because lives are one aspect of the system and not the whole. The joy of the system is the true reality while suffering in any one life is only a passing part of the total joy.

-The system never appears as a whole all at once. It only shows in particular lives in particular situations. Even so, there really is a system, it really is big and important, and it makes each particular individual big and important too. It makes each of us big and important too. So, there is no real difference between particular individuals and the system. The system is the individual lives that we obviously see because that is all we can ever see of the system. If we look hard enough, we can always seem the system in all individual lives. There is no difference between daily un-awakened life and awakened life. If the system is "God", then you are God too. If you are a part of God, then the whole system is God.

-When you see the relation between yourself and the system, you do not merge into the system and you do not disappear somehow. Instead, you become part of the system in a deeper better way. You help other people, and other life forms, to realize the same ideas and feel the same feelings.

The Wheel of Dharma-Law-Karma-Life.

-From "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

"Oh yeah, life goes on
Long after the thrill of livin' is gone"

The cycle of birth-death-birth-etc. is called the “Wheel of Dharma”, “Law”, “Karma”, or “Life”. Now, we glamorize, Romanticize, and extol the Wheel. Listen to “Proud Mary” by CCR; I bought a cereal called “Dark Cocoa Karma”; and you can get a credit score from “Credit Karma”. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the Wheel became good as the Great System of Dharma-Karma, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind. That was not original. Originally, life on the Wheel was not good and it was not worthwhile. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan. To live here again and again is not worthwhile; it is suffering. The Wheel is the Cross on which we must be nailed over and over again. Life on the Wheel is like being trapped inside the Matrix, Walking Dead, Breaking Bad, Orc town, a sappy tear-jerker movie, TV show about conniving, or plot-free action movie, forever. People want off. To get off, it helps to see that life on the Wheel is not worthwhile; if you do not see that life is not worthwhile, then likely you can’t get off. To get off the Wheel means no rebirth. Recall, in India, spiritual success is called “moksha” or “release”.

This was the view of life in the milieu of the Buddha. Life is not worthwhile. The Buddha offered his ideas as a way to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life. The Buddha did not offer his ideas primarily as a way to make the Wheel better and so make life worthwhile; making life better in some ways is good but not key. When the Buddha taught how to defeat suffering, I think he meant that as a step toward seeing that life is not worthwhile and so getting off the Wheel. To get off the Wheel did not mean to find a secret way that made it all better or find a secret view from which we could see it had really been great all along. All that came later after the Buddha.

I differ from official doctrine. Buddhism stresses suffering instead of not worthwhile life, and says it cures suffering. Buddhism now does not deal with whether life is worthwhile and it does not refer to the Wheel. In contrast, I think suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Really, suffering is not the main issue. To stress suffering without asking what it means, without seeing implications of suffering, became a way to avoid dealing with the bigger issue of worthwhile life. I don’t know what Siddhartha thought. Buddhists feel I distort Buddhism. Because I differ from doctrine, I return to this issue often. I do explain official doctrine also. Please be patient.

Repeat: The World is Intrinsicly Moral.

In religion based on Dharma, the world is intrinsicly moral. Morality is in the nature of Dharma’s world. All relations between sentient beings and the world are guided more by morality than by chance, physics, chemistry, psychology, and biology, including relations between sentient beings and: sentient beings, animals, many plants, environment, nature, big features of nature such as the oceans, and social groups. You feel the effects of your deeds, and others feel the effects of your deeds, according to morality more than according to results for wealth, power, sex, family success, or any worldly success. The Dharma can support neutrality and chance, and can support various characters, including some bad characters, but, in the end, good is more important than neutrality or badness, and good wins. Accident or badness might win in the short run but good always wins in the long run.

The Dharma might enjoy some badness, and the Dharma tolerates a lot of badness, but the Dharma likes goodness more. You can get short term benefit from acting badly, but, in the long run, you do better by acting morally and by going along with the Dharma and its world. Bad guys might be needed to move the plot along and to make life more interesting but they are still bad and the good guys still win. Mahayana and Hinduism can get confused on the need for bad guys to move the Dharma plot and they can excuse

or even extol bad guys too much. Yet even in Mahayana and Hinduism, good is still better than bad over the long run. Badness is another level of control that lets people think they are superior but really it only keeps people deluded, on the Wheel, and confused. Rebellion is really only more servitude and deeper servitude. To succeed in a Dharma system, eventually you must be good. If you go against Dharma by acting badly, you will fail. You will fail not only in the moral terms intrinsic to the Dharma but in all other ways including mundane ways. Whether life in the system (on the Wheel) is worthwhile or not worthwhile, whether you want to stay in the system or get off, you still have to be good eventually.

Two Important Contradictions, a Crucial Choice, and an Implication.

Contradiction (1): (A) On the one hand, Dharma and its world are good and satisfying, and you must go along with Dharma. “Must go along” is fine because the world is good. Going along is fun. Violence, hurt, badness, and even evil are only temporary and might be mere illusions. They make the world more interesting and help the plot along – think of TV such as “Animal Kingdom” and “ Fargo”. People want to stay on the Dharma world for a long time, many lifetimes, maybe forever. (B) On the other hand, the world also is painful, hard, tedious, annoying, beset by suffering, often bad, and often evil. Life is not worthwhile. The world is hurtful enough, and satisfactions cannot make up for badness, so people want off the Dharma system. People want off the system in this lifetime if possible or in a lifetime soon. They don’t want many lifetimes. People want to go against Dharma and its world system.

Which is correct? There is no clear answer.

People in a Dharma system try to have both at once. Most attempts don’t make much sense; at times, attempts to get both are sublime; often, attempts are sublime but false; and often they are silly nonsense. Too often the nonsense sounds sublime and people can’t tell the difference.

At first, “get off” prevailed; and likely it prevailed at the time of the Buddha and Upanishads. Afterwards, the following prevailed, especially in Mahayana and Hinduism: “The world is good and is really secretly joyful; apparent suffering is a clever disguise and it actually increases long-term joy; everything is as it should be; especially everything is as it should be if you do what you were meant to do; so do that”.

In Theravada, “get off” should prevail, but Theravada followers resist this view and they look for ways to get around “get off” and to have successful happy lives. I comment more below on this contradiction and on the desire for a good life.

Choice: Followers of the Dharma face the four issues listed above. In addition, followers of the Dharma have to choose between (A) Go along with the Dharma, stay in its world system, try to find success in its terms, and try to find secret joy, OR (B) Reject the Dharma world system and try to get out.

People who choose (A) can also (A1) choose a secret Dharma system or (A2) can find joy without such a system. Few people try to find contentment in the Dharma and this life (A2) without also finding a system to magically secretly resolve all the problems (A1). If you choose (A) in any form, you are almost doomed to find some sort of magic system (A1).

Sometimes people start out by thinking they can eventually find a version of (A) if they apparently start with (B), with apparent rejection but really with underlying acceptance (A). They get confused between (A) and (B). I think most Buddhists are confused this way, even many monks.

Regardless of love it or hate it, the Dharma and its system is all there is. Whatever you do is rooted in the Dharma, including your desire to get out of the Dharma world.

Contradiction (2): People who want off the world system have to use Dharma to overcome Dharma, like using Nature against Nature. The Dharma has to permit people who want to reject the Dharma world to get off the Dharma world. At least, Dharma has to provide them with the tools to do so. Dharma has to provide people with the tools to overcome itself and-or go against itself.

It is useful to look at these situations from the view of someone who wants to get off the world system and so to see only one big problem: being stuck in a system where life is not worthwhile and having to use the tools of the system to get out of it. This is the situation in Theravada. This should be the situation in Mahayana and Hinduism as well but they try to escape the bind.

Implication: Whether you choose to stay on the Dharma system (Wheel) or get off, you do not choose only for yourself, you judge the entire system and implicitly choose for everyone, especially when “you are that” is an integral part. If you say “the Dharma system is good for Sally but not Bob”, you really don’t say anything. If it is good for Sally, it is good for Bob and everybody. Bob might not see it is good yet, but, in a few lifetimes, he will. If it is bad for Bob, it is bad for Sally and everybody. Sally might not see it is bad yet, but she will. You can’t hedge or have it both ways. Either the whole system is worthwhile for all or not worthwhile for all. People in Dharma systems don’t like getting cornered but this choice is a clear implication of a Dharma system.

Contradictions bolster systems that eat the world, especially bolster the hole at the center, and especially through nonsense that seems sublime. Logically, a contradiction can support any nonsense. In “2001: A Space Odyssey”, the computer “Hal” went crazy because he faced contradictory tasks. People go crazy too and they take up more bad ideas that make it all worse.

The Buddha and Awakening.

“Buddh” (“bood” like “food”), means roughly “active mind” or “awakened mind”. “Buddha” is not a name but a title, like “Christ” (anointed person), “The Christ” (one particular important anointed person), or “Lao Tzu” (wise old man). “Buddha” means “awakened person”. “Buddhism” is “the way for people who seek to wake up or are awake”. The founder was “The Buddha” (one particular important awakened person), named Siddhartha Gautama, of the Shakya Clan (also sometimes spelled “Gotama”).

Technically, anybody who awakens is a Buddha. However, Buddhists tend not to say that. Christians do not say “David, a Christ” although David was a key anointed person. Christians keep the term “Christ” for “Jesus the Christ”. Likewise, Buddhists keep “Buddha” not for anyone but for “Siddhartha the Buddha”, and often call him “The Lord Buddha”. Only a male human may awaken and be a Buddha, for reasons that I do not go into. If the sexism and species-ism offend you, ask a Buddhist or Hindu.

“Buddha” also can refer to a person who is central in the great Dharma system, comes along every few thousand years, comes to teach and to awaken people, has amazing powers, helped make the world, continues to make the world, embodies the system in him-her, and embodies cosmic principles such as Compassion. The system and its virtues are incarnate in him. This Buddha would be like The Christ if The Christ came every few thousand years. This Buddha does not figure much in Theravada but does in Mahayana where Siddhartha is one appearance of this Buddha. Each appearance of this Buddha is like a Hindu avatar such as Krishna. I don’t use this Buddha here. The only relevant Buddha in Theravada is Siddhartha Gautama, and he came only once.

Siddhartha was the son of the prince of a small state in the area around Nepal, likely the eldest son and heir of his father. From his clan name, Japanese and Tibetans call him “Shakyamuni” meaning “jewel of the Shakya” or “sage of the Shakya”. As a youth, Siddhartha’s parents married him to a woman of similar rank. By then, Siddhartha already doubted normal life. The couple had a son, who Siddhartha named “Rahula”, meaning “fetter”, “tie that binds us to this world”. When Siddhartha was twenty nine years old, one night he snuck out, leaving his wife, child, parents, palace, duties, and privileges. His wife and son would have a good life even without him. Siddhartha had to “figure it all out”. He lived in the forest, and trained with teachers, for six years. Training included severe asceticism such as fasting and hard yoga. Siddhartha advanced quickly at first, then bogged down, and finally he felt disappointed with the teachers, ideas, and practices. He left the teachers but stayed in the forest, and he taught himself. He had his own ideas, with his own regimen, which was moderate yet firm. His techniques allowed his body and mind to reassert their natural vigor. He found what he wanted. His mind became fully active and he “woke up”. He explained his ideas, and soon got students. Students became a movement. Soldiers, aristocrats, merchants, and crafts people joined because he denied the final authority of ritual and Brahmins, urged individual people to run their own lives, and supported autonomy. At the request of followers, Siddhartha set up an order. He lived over eighty years. Eventually peasants, workers, and other commoners joined the movement. Siddhartha became “the Buddha”. I do not tell more of the story. The ideas count. The book “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse is a good fictional account of a man like the Buddha, with the same name, set in the same time and place. Hesse is too Hindu but that should not corrupt innocent minds too much. The movie “Young Buddha” is fun, and you can learn about Indian-Buddhist-Hindu ideas from it, but it also clings to Hinduism too much; it makes the Buddha into an avatar.

After awakening, Siddhartha liked to call himself “(the) Tathagata”, which means roughly “‘thus gone’ person”, or “‘thus arrived’ person”: a person who no longer holds to this world yet who is deeply present. Fans of jazz used to call a musician “gone” who knew the music well, lived for music, and put the world apart: Bix Beiderbecke, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker. Rockabilly fans said “real gone cat”: Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Look up the “Real Gone” music company on the Web. I guess “Tathagata” also means “person simply fully here without pretence, obvious for all to know”. In American idiom: “real up-front simply honest integrated whole person with no pretense, posing, or guile”. Siddhartha strikes me as a simple decent person who sought a way so other people could be simple and decent too. Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Francis of Assisi, and likely Moses, were much like that.

Nirvana and Enlightenment.

A person who is “awake” is also “enlightened”, also called “Nirvana”. One likely root for “Nirvana” is “snuff out” or “extinguish” as with a candle. Suffering, wrong ideas, desires, and clinging all totally end for an

awakened person. He will not be reborn and so snuffs out when he dies. Another likely root for “Nirvana” is “cool down”. A person cools down by ending the same things. The fire stays warm enough to maintain life until life ends naturally. The person does not freeze into a block of inert numb ice.

Western people, and even Buddhists, wrongly say you “reach” Nirvana or “achieve” it. Nirvana is not a place, condition, situation, attitude, or thing. You do not reach any place or achieve anything when you “reach” Nirvana. You simply wake up. Westerners say Buddhists “seek enlightenment” as someone seeks a bargain. That view is misguided. Suppose you have a sweet taste in your mouth so you can’t taste properly, you think food is better than it really is, and you can’t stop eating. You are a “junk food junky” as most of us are “life junkies”. Then the sweet taste goes away, and you taste normally, so you can taste food as it is, including good flavors and bad. Food is not nearly as sweet as you had wrongly thought. Now you can judge food and can control eating. You choose adeptly what to eat, can stop when you are as full as you wish, and know eventually you will get tired of eating. Your taste buds and mind are now properly awake. If all your friends still have the wrong overly-sweet taste, you could not explain; they can’t “get it” until they too lose the wrong taste. You have not achieved anything and are not in a special state. Maybe you are where you should have been all along. The same thing happens when we see life properly and are not obsessed with life and the things, ideas, relations, and attitudes in it.

PART 2: MY SYNOPSIS

Material here rests primarily on my view about worthwhile life and not on ideas of suffering although I do write about suffering. I repeat ideas and I cannot present the ideas serially.

The Core Insight: Life is Not Worthwhile.

Basic Buddhism is simple. What is taught as Buddhism usually is not basic Buddhism. Almost all of that came later. What came later is not always wrong or worse, it is just not the original idea. Much of what came later, especially in Mahayana, was reasserting of ideas which likely the Buddha had purged. What happened later was similar to what happened to Jesus when he became the One Divine Cosmic Christ and Christians made elaborate theology to make sense of that role for a real historical person. The drift went further in Mahayana than Theravada, and in folk Buddhism than thoughtful Buddhism. You have to decide what Buddhism is true Buddhism and what is best regardless of whether it is true Buddhism.

The core insight: Each single life, and life overall, is not worthwhile. This life now is not worthwhile. Your life is not worthwhile no matter how much you think it is and how good it seems. When you know life is not worthwhile, you can let go, and wait to die. You will not be reborn. You must act morally always. People who see all this wait calmly. This is the whole message. All else is added.

Even if there is a system of many lives, the whole system is not worthwhile. Even if you have good lives in the future, those lives are not worthwhile and the system of many lives is not worthwhile. Even if you fully get all the points from above, this life now is not worthwhile and any system of lives is not worthwhile. Even if good wins in the end, your life, all lives, and the system, are not worthwhile. Maybe especially if good wins in the end, because there is no real risk, life is not worthwhile.

Below, I mention the roles of desire, clinging, stickiness, struggle, suffering and wrong ideas in how we come to think life is worthwhile when it is not. Ideas about these factors can help us see that life is not worthwhile but ideas about them are not needed if we simply see directly that life is not worthwhile. You do not have to get rid of all wrong ideas (mental defilements) and think perfectly to see directly that life is not worthwhile; you simply see it directly.

We mistakenly persist in thinking life is worthwhile even in the face of good evidence it is not. Buddhism explained why people mistakenly think life is worthwhile. Some Buddhist explanations anticipated ideas from the modern theory of biological evolution but I cannot go into that topic much here.

People dislike the term “not worthwhile”. It is not as harsh as it sounds, there is no better way to say the idea in any language that I know about, and the term does make us consider basic issues. It does not mean “life is miserable” or “life is disgusting”. Don’t get annoyed until you have read more.

Until Buddhism settles whether life is worthwhile, both before and after awakening, I doubt Buddhism can: (a) bridge the gap between thoughtful deep Buddhism versus folk Buddhism, (b) bridge the gap between Buddhism based on awakening versus Buddhism based on karma and charisma, (c) take out enough of the irrationality, magic, superstition, metaphysics, and glamour that it has accumulated, (d) be rational enough in the ways required of modern life, and (e) re-see itself to serve as the basis for good modern life in modern states. Neither Theravada nor Mahayana now measure up. (No religion can take out all irrationality etc. and be perfectly rational, nor should it; all religions could do better.)

You can think of “not worthwhile” like this although I ask that eventually you get over thinking of it like this: Life is a giant “con”. The Dharma cons itself and cons us. The Dharma does this to amuse itself. Our life amuses the Dharma and keeps it from going crazy. All our running around, and even striving for wisdom, adds to the Dharma game. It is time you grew up, woke up, quit enabling your own confusion, and opted out of the con game. You lose nothing by giving up rebirth and life, and you avoid a lot of running around and suffering, for yourself and others.

Regardless of what the Buddha thought about whether life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, I take the central issue of this chapter to be whether life is worthwhile. The Wheel is a way to focus attention on the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life. I take Buddhism to be really about not worthwhile life even if Buddhism says it is about suffering. Even if Buddhism really is about suffering only, does not engage the issue of worthwhile life, and I am wrong, I still use Buddhism to think about whether life is worthwhile, and to think how to make life more worthwhile. The issue of worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. Even if, by Buddhist standards, I am wrong to focus on worthwhile, my ideas bear on the Buddhist use of suffering, so the material in this chapter is still worthwhile.

Suffering and the Orthodox View.

At its base, Buddhism offers Four Truths about suffering. Almost certainly the Truths come directly from Siddhartha. The Truths are the bedrock of all official Buddhism of any school. All Buddhist schools must begin with their view of the Four Truths. The simple question whether-life-is-worthwhile-or-not-worthwhile gets confused because Buddhism now does not simply say life is worthwhile or not. Buddhism now starts with the Four Truths to build attitudes about life that suit practitioners. Often what is supposedly built on

the basis of the Four Truths essentially ignores the Four Truths or contradicts them, usually in an effort to make life worthwhile.

(1) Suffering besets life. Suffering is the first problem of life. Suffering puts its stamp on all of life and on all that we do, think, and feel. We need to cure suffering. We need to cure suffering before we can do anything else effectively. Even if curing suffering does not by itself solve all other issues, we cannot see what is really important or not important, and cannot make any progress on what is really important, until we deal with suffering. If we do deal with suffering, then likely we will make progress toward dealing with what is really important.

(2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

(3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

(4) The Eightfold Path of Buddhism is the way to end suffering. The Eightfold Path is being right in all of these: (a) Views (accept the Buddha's teaching); (b) Thought; (c) Speech; (d) Conduct; (e) Livelihood; (f) Effort (hard work, diligence, and little lapsing); (g) Mindfulness (intent, focus); and (h) Concentration (meditation and other ascetic-like practices, like yoga with meditation, done in Buddhist style).

The term for suffering is "dukkha" or "dhukkha" ("doo kha", like "Count Dookoo"). Some Buddhists insist no translation of "dukkha" is adequate, all translations are misleading, and writers should use "dukkha" until readers get a sense for it not limited by their own language. I get the point but to do that would lead to dozens of foreign technical terms, so I don't. Religion needs to be said in natural language. If religion requires special terms, something is amiss.

In orthodox Buddhism: (A) To end suffering is the central problem and key to all other issues. Once we end suffering, other issues should fall into place or not matter. If we don't end suffering, we can't really get our lives on track. (B) But, to end suffering, we need to end wrong ideas and desire-and-clinging. So, really, to end wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging becomes the key, often displacing suffering. See Part 3 here. (C) But, then, to end wrong ideas, and desire-and-clinging, Buddhism uses methods and ideas, what I call "Aids". Aids displace the need to end desire-and-clinging, and become more important even than the goal of dealing with suffering. So, now, using Aids becomes the real key and the real focus of Buddhism. See below and see Part 7 here.

Even monks and adept lay Buddhists often fall into obsession with suffering, wrong ideas, desire-and-clinging, and methods. This stance raises some contradictions. Notice that the question of worthwhile life is gone, the Wheel is now gone. Yet the Four Truths strongly imply "life is not worthwhile" both before and after defeating suffering, before and after awakening.

Not all Buddhism really does center on the Four Truths even if all Buddhism must begin with them, no more than all Christianity centers on the moral teachings of Jesus. Schools in Buddhism use suffering as

entry to other issues that they think more important. After paying lip service to suffering, schools jump it and forget it. Theravada sticks more to the issue but even it uses suffering as entry to other ideas and to practices. Mahayana puts suffering in the context of a great Dharma system, suffused by joy, in which the issue of suffering is only the first step toward seeing the big system, and in which system the issues of suffering and not worthwhile life disappear.

Introductory books on Buddhism often give background that includes the Wheel and its lesson that life is not worthwhile. Books include supporting ideas such as about Samsara and Maya (we don't see life as it is but instead see it in ways that keep us overly engaged and wrongly engaged). The books quickly move to the Four Truths and books drop the Wheel and "not worthwhile" although they bear on suffering. The books then also effectively drop the problem of suffering to focus on related issues of desire-and-clinging and Aids. The issue of not worthwhile life and its relation to suffering and awakening gets lost. When you read about Buddhism, be aware of these transitions and overcome them.

"Suffering" might once have been a way to face the issue of not worthwhile life but now is not. In theory, suffering is the key problem by itself. In practice, one or more Aids become the main focus.

It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought about the Wheel and about not worthwhile life, especially what suffering and the Four Truths implied for worthwhile or not worthwhile life. It would be good to know fully what Siddhartha thought was the fruit of not suffering, and what we should do after we end suffering, especially whether life becomes worthwhile after suffering. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought the end of suffering allowed people to make up their minds whether life is worthwhile or not. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought people who were free from suffering would know what to do with life after suffering, including acting to make life more worthwhile. It would be good to know if the Buddha thought that to end suffering and to awaken were the same. I don't know any of that. Modern Buddhism does not say officially although individual Buddhists and Buddhist schools have their own opinions.

I don't know if the Buddha assumed that people accepted "life is not worthwhile" as background, and he offered the Four Truths as what to do next. I don't know if the Buddha decided the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life was not important due to the need to end suffering; if we should deal with suffering first and then the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life would take care of itself. I don't know how focus got away entirely from not worthwhile life and got entirely onto suffering, desire, clinging, and Aids. Think about all this yourself.

I think Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile both before and after ending suffering. To end suffering, a person must, at least for a long time, leave ALL normal life. After a man has fully defeated suffering and fully awakened, then he waits to die and he is not reborn. To stop all suffering, and to awaken, you have to be willing to let go of all desire, including the desire for life. To let go of the desire for life, you cannot think life is deeply worthwhile. Schools differ, but mostly a man who has fully defeated suffering and is fully awake cannot lead a normal life. The Buddha did not lead a normal life after ending suffering and awakening. All this goes along with the idea that the Wheel is bad and we should seek release. To end suffering in the Buddhist way does not defeat suffering in the sense that life becomes happy and worthwhile despite the usual problems, as a Christian or Muslim says defeat of evil makes life

worthwhile. Instead, the end of suffering in Buddhism reveals life was not worthwhile before and is not worthwhile even after.

Standing outside Buddhism, ranking its priorities, I think seeing life is not worthwhile is more important than seeing how suffering permeates life – contrary to official doctrine. The issue of suffering is only a way to see that life is not worthwhile. It is an Aid.

Buddhists sense this problem of not-worthwhile-life behind the official problem of suffering and the official Four Truths, and this lurking problem about not worthwhile life makes Buddhists uneasy. People like a religion that says “we can remove suffering” but don’t like a religion that says life is not worthwhile even without suffering. People want the end of suffering to make life abundantly worthwhile. That is a reason why Buddhism after Theravada got away from suffering even if it paid lip service to the issue of suffering. Theravada seems to avoid any implications of the problem of suffering for not worthwhile life. The focus of Theravada only on suffering is, ironically, a way to avoid implications of suffering for not worthwhile life. It is like steadfastly focusing on the pain of a broken leg instead of on the broken leg.

Beginners in Buddhism also sense this problem, sense there is no response to it in official Buddhism, and so get uneasy. When they first hear about the end of suffering, they think that is great and expect the end of suffering to give a much improved life. Most Buddhism is sold in the West through much improved life. Then new Buddhists sense that suffering never really gets solved, and, even if it did get solved, life would not be better. But no Buddhists will tell them for sure. They feel cheated. So they get more anxious, that is, add to their suffering.

Is suffering the most important issue? Does the end of suffering do everything that we need done? Does the end of suffering remove other questions? Does the end of suffering make life that was not worthwhile into worthwhile life? Did the Buddha intend to make the problem of suffering a way to see the problem of not worthwhile life or did he avoid the issue of worthwhile life? Did the Buddha think that ending suffering would turn a not worthwhile life into a worthwhile life, even if the Buddha expected awakened people not to live normal lives and to die away completely? Did the Buddha think ending suffering allows people to see clearly and so make up their own minds about worthwhile or not worthwhile life, what to do in life in general, and the Wheel? Did followers of the Buddha shift attention away from implications of suffering for not worthwhile life, and instead focus on suffering, because they wanted to avoid the bad feelings that are raised by “life is not worthwhile”? Did Buddhism get stuck on suffering and lose its original focus on how to get off the Wheel? Did misguided focus on suffering then lead to the metaphysical speculations of Mahayana and Hinduism? These questions have no sure answer.

I believe the Buddha used “end suffering” as a way, an Aid, to help people think better; and, when people think better, he expected they would see life is not worthwhile, not go back to normal life, and so get off the Wheel. The Buddha did not think to end suffering makes life worthwhile. Thinking better does help us solve other problems and does, ironically, make life more worthwhile even if not fully worthwhile. The Buddha’s followers then focused entirely on suffering and overlooked the issue of not worthwhile life, and Buddhism got stuck on suffering while overlooking the original deeper prior issue of not worthwhile life. I cannot prove my guesses. Buddhists disagree with me.

The basic idea behind suffering and its defeat is not hard to get but is hard to do. The difficulty led to the basic idea being raised to the key, being covered in metaphysical awe, and surrounded by sticky opaque confusing Aids.

The ideas that (a) we suffer because we expect too much and (b) we can get past most suffering, are not only in Buddhism: A person lives long enough, gets knocked around, loses a few, wins fewer, so he-she finally sees with fair clarity, sees what is important and not, chooses important, lets go of not-important, with no regrets, and gets on with simpler better life. The world does not come to an end. Most of life falls into place, and past concerns don't seem important. A person does not have to see with perfect clarity and consistency, only well enough. A person does not end all suffering but does overcome it enough to keep a fairly clear head and to stay mostly in control. Commonly, the newly-wise person gets on with a more moderate life and more effective life.

In what I think was the original Buddhist version, the newly-wise person sees life is not worthwhile and lets go of it all. In one official Theravada view, the newly-wise person sees that all life, even family life, is beset by suffering, and lets go of it all. In another quasi-official Theravada version, the newly-wise person now controls suffering and so goes back to limited but real participation in the world with family life and business. In a Buddhist version common to Theravada and Mahayana, a person is now in total control of suffering and the world, and goes on with anything in life including family, business, career, and politics.

Buddhism asks for a reckoning with life deeper than most of us think possible. Try to imagine that deep reckoning. Buddhism would be valuable if it only led us to this reckoning and had no other benefits. The orthodox view of the reckoning is "mastery of some Aids, total mental clarity and consistency, total control of desire, total end of clinging, and total end of suffering". I think the original answer was "now I see that life is not worthwhile". I think both answers are wrong.

As naturally evolved creatures, we lie to ourselves a horrendous amount, mostly so as to succeed in this life. Our lying brings suffering to ourselves, other people, animals, and nature. The deep reckoning that Buddhism offers can help stop most of the lies, and can help you act better to you, everybody, and all. It cannot make you or the world perfect.

You need to decide what suffering is, what it means to manage suffering, what it means to end suffering in the Buddhist way, if humans can end suffering the Buddhist way, and if that is the same as awakening.

The Irrelevance of a Big System, Big Idea, Gods, Merging, or Anything Similar.

As far as I know, Siddhartha never said there is a Supreme God, Big Principle, or a few gods, and never said there is not. He said they are not relevant. Siddhartha knew that both Brahmanism and the then-incipient-Hinduism had many gods, the gods were important to people, yet belief in gods often misled people, belief in gods was not relevant to awakening, and relying on gods kept people from awakening; but Siddhartha didn't argue against the gods. He ignored them. I don't know if he would say Dharma is not relevant in the same way, and I let Buddhists decide.

If you can manage suffering, decide whether life is worthwhile, and act well, then why do you need a big System, a big Dharma system, Big Principle such as Life, need God, or the gods; and why do you need to

merge with them, serve them, have them guide you through life, or follow them? Do they need that from you? If you can't manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then what good comes of God, Big Idea, etc, and what good comes from to believe, merge, serve, or follow?

If believing etc. helps you to manage suffering, decide about life, and act well, then fine; but the important part is to manage, decide, and act well. If believing etc. does not lead you to manage, decide, and act well, then you have gained little and given little. Once you are comfortable with managing suffering, have decided about life, and act well, then hopefully you will see that is what counts and you don't need the others. The others can work well as temporary steps but they are not the enduring platform on which to live properly. You can learn to live well without them.

If believe, merge, serve, or follow get in the way of manage, decide, and act well, then stop. If belief in God or a Big Idea leads you to think poorly, such as by seeing the Devil everywhere, you should revise your belief or stop entirely. You should not condone other people who let belief etc. get in the way, such as terrorists. If you can point out the error of their ways without getting you and all-your-neighborhood killed, then you should do so.

This stance that we don't need the gods or a Big Idea leads us immediately to see we don't need magic, superstition, metaphysics, glamour, fortune telling, grand ideologies, and most "isms" including atheism, modern academic fads, and the ism that we don't need isms; this stance shows us that they get in the way and they actively hurt; and this stance leads us to shun them. We help the world when we debunk them. We help individual people when we lead them away from such misleading bad practices – as long as they don't get angry, get more confused, and lash out.

This stance is much like the stance that I offered in Part One of this book where I stressed that we should do the right things for the right reasons (even though we will be assessed in the end).

This attitude toward the gods, Dharma, Big Ideas, merging, etc. is similar to an attitude that developed in Classical Greek philosophy and among Cynics and Stoics. They also promoted managing, deciding, and acting well, and denied the relevance of gods, big ideas, merging, etc. Unfortunately, especially in Neo-Platonism, people reverted to believing in, serving, and merging with the Good and God, but that did not erase the previous insights.

How does my stance differ from atheists who also promote acting well, deny the gods etc, and point out that thinking about the gods etc. often hurts acting well? See the chapter on atheism in this book. Briefly, atheists believe so strongly in Justice and morality that they raise them to the level of the supernatural but they also deny they have allowed the supernatural and they will not see the implications for allowing even a little supernatural. If you believe in acting well, you must accept that your belief in acting well invites the supernatural and it opens the door to belief in God. Belief does not necessarily lead to abuse. Belief in one good God does not require that you believe in angels, demons, ghosts, magic, etc. and it does not require you to do bad things. It should require rationality and good behavior. Atheists believe we cannot think well until we erase the idea of God from our minds and so they waste a lot of time and effort fighting an idea that has a tenacious evolved basis. I believe we can think well if we accept God and even if our ideas have an evolved basis and are not fully accurate.

How does Buddhism differ from atheism if Buddhism also stresses the importance of acting well and it fears that focus on gods or big ideas leads to confusion and bad acts? Like all Dharma-based systems, Buddhism accepts intrinsic morality. Dharma is supernatural even if it is known only through its natural effects. Unlike atheism, Buddhism does not deny the gods, or their ties to morality, it only says the gods are ultimately irrelevant to the quest to manage suffering etc. and are ultimately irrelevant when you have managed suffering etc, and have learned to think well. You need not waste time and need not confuse yourself by arguing against gods. To focus on that leads to confusion, error, waste, and bad acts. When you have managed suffering, then you can speculate, if you want. I think Siddhartha thought most people wouldn't care much about the gods and Big Ideas after learning to manage suffering. Buddhism allows in only as much supernatural as it needs for intrinsic morality and cause-and-effect, and then it disdains and so effectively banishes all the rest.

Why do I accept the supernatural? Again, see the chapter on atheism. I accept that morality allows the supernatural and accept that even this small amount of the supernatural through morality leads naturally to thinking about God. God ties it all together well without leading to bad ideas or bad behavior. I accept God even though the basis for the idea of God evolved. A general drift toward morality and acting well is not enough. We need some specific ideas, and those specific ideas have to serve as the basis for good institutions. We got them from Jesus. Jesus believed in God and his ideas are rooted in his belief. Now that we have them already, we can derive Jesus' ideas without God but that trick seems artificial and false. We might as well respect his belief in God when we respect his ideas even if we don't adopt formal Christianity and we don't believe Jesus is God. I believe in his ideas and his God. Stressing morality while denying the supernatural, and accepting the supernatural without seeing the implications, especially for a mind behind it all (God), is contradictory enough to lead to confusion, errors, waste, and bad acts. I think I, and other people, think better and act better because we accept the supernatural and believe in God – but not because belief in God scares us – that would be worse.

I think Buddhists would say much the same about the Dharma. You think and act worse if you deny it and think and act better if you accept it and try to go along with it.

Also close to Siddhartha's stance about not needing gods etc. is the stance that we don't have to believe Jesus is God to follow him. We don't have to decide whether he is God or whether he rose from the dead. His divinity is ultimately irrelevant to his moral message. If his moral message does not stand on its own then his divinity will not make it do so; and, if his moral message does stand on his own, we should follow it whether he is God or only human. It helps to give the matter hard thought and it helps to decide; but you don't have to decide; and, if stress from deciding makes you confused and act badly, then don't. Part of my love for Buddhism comes from this overlap in stance.

Does my stance conflict with Buddhism? Yes. I do not seek perfect harmony between my ideas and Buddhist theory. I am more interested in how well Buddhists act, and, in that, they do well. Accepting the idea of God can help us think clearly as Buddhists wish to think clearly and to act well as Buddhists wish to act well. Accepting God can help avoid "mental defilements" such as confusing success in an Aid with awakening, overlooking the issue of worthwhile life, and stressing total victory over suffering rather than merely managing it.

Is there a link between accepting the supernatural (in my case, through goodness) and seeing that life is worthwhile? I think so. Is there a link between avoiding the supernatural and avoiding the question of whether life is worthwhile? I think so too. Any link is not cut-and-dried; for example, agnostics avoid making up their minds about the supernatural yet likely most think life is worthwhile (agnostics seem not aware that stressing goodness implies the supernatural). Here it is not worth going deeper.

Buddhists need to consider what it means to live in a Dharma system in which the Dharma is intrinsically moral. What kind of supernatural is the Dharma? What do the goodness and the supernatural status of the Dharma imply for worthwhile life and suffering? What does Buddhist stress on goodness imply for any supernatural? Does even that little bit of supernatural open the door to God as long as the idea of God is not abused? Do we need to be honest about morality and the supernatural, if being honest about morality and the supernatural leads to better thinking, and not being honest leads to worse thinking?

Put Theravada, Aristotle, Cynics, Stoics, some Taoism, Zen, and Confucius all in one group as holding the stance described above about the irrelevance of gods, big ideas, etc. to acting well and thinking well. Put Mahayana, Hinduism, some Taoism, most Confucianism, atheism, and nearly all theism in another group that requires gods, big ideas, devotion, some merging, etc. If I could not have my stance, and I had to choose between groups, I would quickly choose Theravada, etc. I feel no wavering. I love the stance of original Buddhism that we don't need the gods, magic, superstition, or a big idea. It makes Buddhism hugely charming.

Buddhist Aids, with some Assessment.

Buddhist Aids include practices such as meditation and chanting, and include ideas such as Dharma, karma, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, nothing is permanent (what begins also ends), confusion (mental "defilements"), a mind free from defilements (clear consistent thinking), empty mind, compassion, cooling, non-self, morality, bodhisattva, suffering, stickiness, clinging, desire, letting go, the Middle Path, the self is not an enduring transcendent integrated soul, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Joy. I consider all the Four Truths to be Aids. Aids have a place in Buddhism similar to Christian ideas and practices such as prayer, liturgy, sacraments, Grace, God's Will, Works, Justification, Heaven, Salvation, Incarnation, and Crucifixion. Buddhist Aids tend to be more rational. Most schools of Buddhism have similar Aids but differ in which Aids they stress. See Part 7 of this chapter.

Most thought and effort by Buddhists is in Aids rather than directly on suffering or awakening, as most thought and effort by Christians is in church, prayer meetings, liturgy, Heaven, works, cultivating faith, etc. rather than directly on doing what Jesus asked, on doing the right things for the right reasons.

You do not need any Aid to awaken if you can simply see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering, and you can defeat desire-and-clinging. Aids can help us to see how the world works, and that helps us to see life is not worthwhile or is beset by suffering. Still, you do not need any Aid if you can simply see that life is worthwhile. I am not sure if that stance is orthodox Buddhist doctrine. If, in contrast, you see directly that life is worthwhile, you can still use Aids to help you see better how the world works and how to make the world more worthwhile for yourself, other people, and nature.

Buddhist Aids can help much but they also are a great danger. People get lost in an Aid as if it were the real religion, thus miss the real idea, hurt self, and hurt others. They mistake means for end. Sublime appealing nonsense from contradictions in Dharma mixes with Aids to make both even more dangerous. Buddhist Aids now cause more harm than help much as do ideas and practices in Christianity. (This is how Protestants see Roman Catholic practices such as the Rosary, devotion to Mary, and sacraments. This is how Roman Catholics see Protestant ideas such as a personal relation with Jesus, knowing the exact moment of personal Salvation, seeking Grace, and obsession with Baptism.)

I think the idea of suffering and of overcoming suffering was originally an Aid but got raised to the status of the main point, and this confusion causes damage.

Despite any danger, here are a few good Aids that everyone should know:

(1) Aristotle in Greece lived about 150 years after the Buddha. Both extolled the value of the Middle Way or Middle Path. As Americans have learned since the 1970s, usually extremes are wrong no matter how right they seem; the best way is the middle; we must compromise in real life; and, without the middle, we stall, bite throats, and die. Seeking the middle does not mean you compromise goodness away. Uptight moralists are as bad as self-indulgent immoralists that use relativism as a tool. Terrorists are committed to extremes and are dead wrong. The real Middle Way requires experience, thought, and heroic effort more than any extreme. The Buddha's idea of the limited self is an example of the Middle Way.

(2, 3, 4) Cause and Effect, Dependent Origination, Impermanence: Almost everything that is, is because of causes (the only exceptions are Dharma, maybe awakening, and maybe some free will (free choice)). Almost everything also has effects. Almost everything is both effect and cause. Almost nothing makes itself, causes itself to be. Everything depends on other things to come into being and to stay in being. As long as its supporting causes keep it going, it is; when they stop, it stops. "Whatever has a beginning has an end". Everything has a beginning except Dharma, so everything ends except Dharma, including souls and the world. Almost everything comes from several causes and effects, from a nexus; and everything goes away when its nexus goes away. Think of rain-and-wind storms, fog, gardens, forests, prosperity, conflict, tantrums, love, family, your country, your religion, or scientific research. Cause and effect also hold sway over our self, mind, ideas, and attitudes. We feel pain, and we suffer, because of causes. We can manage pain and suffering partly by managing the causes of conditions and partly by managing the causes of attitudes. We make spiritual progress if we put ourselves in situations conducive to it, including those that affect ideas and attitudes. We should avoid situations that hurt progress or lead us backwards. We can adjust causes so we have fewer bad things to cling to and we are less likely to cling in bad ways.

(Light affects our eyes to help cause the effect of seeing red. So the mix of light, eyes, brain, and mind, causes the effect of seeing red. The origination of seeing red depends on the prior origination of light, eyes, brain, and mind. When causes of seeing red are gone, then seeing red is over too. All the same is true of you-as-a-being-person, of your mind and its contents including feelings, and of your suffering.)

We cannot change the world simply by changing our attitude; we cannot take away all suffering simply by ignoring it or "rising above" it. We do not unilaterally control the world. The idea that we control the world through our attitude ignores the totality of cause and effect, dependent origination, and impermanence. It

is a common mistake in Buddhism. I think some texts are clear that it is a mistake and caution against it but I do not cite examples.

We do have enough free choice so we can work toward goals and succeed. We work with the world toward goals. Buddhism does not solve the problems of evil or free will anymore than any other system but it does well enough and does better than most.

These ideas are well-known in Buddhism and can help us avoid trouble:

(A) The Buddha insisted we think for ourselves and make up our own minds. We should accept nothing on authority alone, not even his authority. If we do not think out an issue for ourselves then we will not believe conclusions and will not live them. The Buddha would understand people who think it is better to be honest atheists than to believe in God from fear of Hell, hope of Heaven, or social pressure; or to be honest rascals than to force sweet goodness. You can never be bad. The Buddha liked logic, reasons, insight, and argument. Not all people are smart enough, think fast enough, or have the aptitude, to think out all of life and religion from scratch. We have to rely on some authorities. That is alright. Do the best you can. Back up if something feels wrong. Learn from people who do think well. That I should make up my own mind and I can disagree with the Buddha gave me in comfort in writing.

(B) “That topic does not lead to edification”. The Buddha disliked questions about heaven, hell, salvation, spiritual power, angels, demons, luck, etc. because they did not help people see how the world works and did not help people make progress. They are beside the point, distractions, wastes of energy, and traps. Keep to the point, which is to end suffering and get off the Wheel. Don’t confuse yourself and others by secretly lusting after some vain supposedly smart triumph.

Buddhism looks at the world with what we now call a “scientific attitude” or “rational attitude”. It explains spirit and spirituality rationally. It explains the mind scientifically. Buddhism accepts that we choose and change, so it is not reductionist like simplistic materialism. It is not pop psych. Buddhism avoids magic, metaphysics, empty ritual, glamour, mysticism, spiritualism, and “airy fairy”. Those are not useful and can be bad traps. I doubt the Buddha would enjoy most “New Age”. Good Taoism and good Zen are similar to Buddhism but are not scientific in attitude.

In Greece, about the time the Buddha explained his stance, science, logic, math, and philosophy arose. Ideas of the Buddha did not come from Greece or vice versa. Good ideas can develop independently. This parallel is a reason why Buddhism gets along well with modern science.

Mixing “Think for Yourself”, “You are Responsible”, and “No Gods, Big Systems, or Big Ideas”.

When you think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself. You don’t need big ideas etc., and they get in the way of self-responsibility. Even if you don’t think for yourself, you are responsible for yourself, your ideas, your acts, and what flows out of your acts – but that is another topic.

When you add “no gods, big systems, or big ideas” to the fact that people are responsible for themselves, then you see that people, we, are responsible for nearly all the badness and evil of the world. The Devil, Mara, Chance, Nature, Science, etc. are not responsible. We are. No excuses. “The government” is not

responsible because, in the democratic world, we are the government. We can put some blame on the economy because it runs partly on its own apart from us; but, even so, if we wished, we could figure out the situation and do something. We can put part of the blame on crazy groups such as terrorists, bigots, and political idiots; but, again, even there, we could figure it out and do something about it.

Buddhism certainly makes clear that people are responsible for their own attitudes and “hang-ups” but it does not always stress that humans are responsible for big outside problems. Buddhism does stress that we should not use gods, systems, etc. as excuses. I stress this logical implication of Buddhism because it goes along with what I said in Part One of this book and I like backup. We do the damage and we are the only ones that can fix the problems. We cannot blame god, the devil, our religion, another religion, religion in general, secularism, or atheism.

Of course, humans can also take credit for much good, and I am happy with that as well. On the small scale of interpersonal relations, business, and doing our job, usually we do more good than harm.

What a Buddhist Awakens to, with Some Assessment.

Oddly, what happens after the defeat of suffering is not clear, and what a person awakens to is not clear. The lack of clarity in each area reinforces the other, and the confusion makes a difference. I deliberately omit considering whether awakening is conditioned, that is, caused, and whether it is chosen.

(1) As far as I can tell, officially: To end suffering is to awaken; and to awaken is to end suffering. That is it. Nothing else is needed. All Buddhists have to deal with this identity between not suffering and waking up in some way, even if they think awakening requires more than simply the end of suffering.

I think orthodox Theravada Buddhism says that to-awaken and to-fully-defeat-all-suffering are closely tied or identical. If you awaken, you defeat suffering, and vice versa. To awaken this way, you do not have to deal with the question of the Wheel or the question of not worthwhile life.

I am not sure if to defeat all suffering automatically results in your mind becoming active in a way that it could not be active before. I can imagine defeating all suffering and still not being awake but that seems odd. So it seems reasonable to say that to defeat all suffering awakens the mind.

I can easily imagine having an active awakened mind and yet not defeating all suffering. I do not mean merely pain, I mean suffering. So, even if defeating all suffering would awaken the mind, we do not have to defeat all suffering to awaken the mind. I am not sure Buddhists would count this awakening as true Buddhist awakening but I count it as awakening enough.

I do not believe we can defeat all suffering, for various reasons, but mostly because we evolved and our evolutionary history set some limits for us. If we cannot defeat all suffering, then we cannot awaken in the stereotypical Buddhist way. Yet some people do seem to awaken enough. Buddhists need to think about this result. Luckily for me, I think we can awaken enough without totally defeating all suffering.

(2) Some Buddhists say: When you end suffering, you awaken; then you can decide about life and figure out what to do; you can decide to be a regular person again if you wish, even if the Buddha didn't.

Whether life is worthwhile or not does not play a role in scenario (1) or (2). The second version is not far from the official orthodox version but I can't say if the two are the same. It depends on what you may do after you awaken. You may not do just anything.

(3) Some Buddhists, especially Mahayanists, say: When you awaken, you see you did have to master suffering but suffering is not really that important; the great Dharma system matters. Really, you awaken to the great Dharma system. Some Mahayanists continue: After you can handle suffering, then you can do whatever you wish; likely you will wish for a successful human life; in pursuing that, you also will help the great Dharma system much like a deer, tiger, or buffalo.

(4) Some Buddhists say that mastery of desire-and-clinging is waking up and vice versa.

(5) Some Buddhists continue: To stop suffering and defeat desire, we need to stop clinging to the world. People have many useless or harmful desires, and people cling, because they do not see clearly, they are confused; their minds are "defiled". To stop desire and clinging, we need to see consistently and clearly. If we see clearly and consistently, we will stop clinging, stop useless and harmful desires, and stop suffering. Here the focus is on getting rid of mental defilements and so seeing consistently and clearly. So, to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and not suffer are waking up; and waking up is to see clearly and consistently, not cling, not have useless desires, and so not suffer. The exact relations between not clinging, not having useless desires, seeing clearly, getting rid of mental defilements, and waking up are not clear. It is not clear if you can have one without others, or which causes which.

(6) In practice, most Buddhism says that mastery of an Aid, such as meditation or the theory of cause-and-effect, is waking up, and vice versa. (a) We should use Buddhist Aids to understand suffering and to awaken, (b) and-or we cannot awaken unless we are adept in some Aids, (c) and-or we will become adept in some Aids when we do awaken, (d) and-or to awaken and to become adept in some Aids is the same thing. For example, if you fully know the idea of impermanence or are fully adept at meditation, then you are awake, and vice versa. I am not sure about official dogma for relations between Aids and awakening. Buddhists might aim to awaken by use of Aids, or might not think that far ahead and simply practice Aids because the Aids are meritorious in themselves. The large majority of Buddhist practice is not done not through thinking about suffering or about worthwhile life but through Aids.

(7) In some Theravada, but mostly in Mahayana, especially Zen, Buddhists say to appreciate Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Empty Mind (Free Mind, "mind of a baby") is to wake up, and vice versa. You came from Emptiness or Mind, you are connected to that even if you don't know it, you will return to that, and likely you will issue forth again. I consider all these ideas mere Aids, and dangerous. You will meet them again often if you read more about Buddhism.

(8) I am not clear on this point. Buddhists sometimes talk about awakening, and the end of suffering, as if it (they) means to be suffused with Dharma, like mystics feel suffused with God, Holy Spirit, or something similar. I am not sure how this view differs from (7). I do have mystic feelings but still I am not sure how Buddhists feel suffusion. Buddhists can talk as if they feel suffused by Dharma even when they are not fully awake or suffering is not fully ended, much as some Christians are "taken up in the Spirit" even when

they are still sinners. Intellectual Buddhists often disdain such feelings but there is precedent for them in the sutras, and even intellectual Buddhists, and monks, feel a bit happy with themselves when they have the experiences.

(+) Sometimes Buddhists say that awakening is to see the importance of good behavior, of compassion, promoting goodness and avoiding badness, and doing your duty. Most people are so numb to their own selfishness that to see we should act better is life-changing, an awakening. Likely, a person does need to awaken this way before he-she can awaken in the ways listed above. There is precedent in the sutras for waking up as moral waking up. Moral waking up might lead quickly to one of the other ways of waking up listed above. I put simple decency, honor, the Golden Rule, and being a useful person, in the foundation of what I wish people to wake up to; see Part One of this book. But, in Buddhism, moral awakening is not the key central important waking up that the Buddha had in mind and that most Buddhist adepts have in mind. Something more is needed. What? Why?

I dislike all the numbered options, and disagree that: suffering is the pivot of life, the defeat of suffering is the first goal of life, we need to end suffering to think clearly enough, and awakening is the same as to end suffering. Some schools substitute other ideas, such as Empty Mind or Buddha Mind, for “end suffering”. Those other ideas are supposed to be the same as awakening. I deny those versions as well. I am not interested in setting what awakening is for Buddhism; I am interested in making up my own mind about awakening, managing suffering, and worthwhile life.

I think: Originally, Buddhists learned life has suffering and that desire-and-clinging make suffering and-or add to suffering. The suffering from desire-and-clinging likely is more than innate suffering and it is what matters. Suffering-apart-from-desire-and-clinging, desire-and-clinging, and suffering-due-to-desire-and-clinging all cloud our minds. After a Buddhist has reduced suffering to a manageable level, he-she can think more clearly. When he-she can think more clearly, he-she can decide if life is worthwhile. Then he-she awakens to: (a) Life is not worthwhile before and after waking up. (b) We can stop the bad effects of not-worthy life simply by thinking more clearly, seeing that life is not worthwhile, and not desiring-and-clinging. (c) We cannot make life worthwhile by not desiring-and-clinging or by waking up. (d) We should always act morally. Full waking up comes in seeing life is not worthwhile. I explain later how not desire-and-clinging goes with seeing that life is not worthwhile. When a Buddhist sees all this, he-she waits calmly to die and is not reborn on the Wheel. Seeing the roles of desire-and-clinging and suffering was a step on the path to waking up; it is not waking up itself. The idea of suffering originally was an Aid.

(If you think life is not worthwhile, likely you suffer; so sometimes people think that to end suffering also means automatically to solve the problem of worthwhile life and make life worthwhile. It is a clever trick but does not hold up. To see life is not worthwhile is not necessarily to end suffering. To end suffering does not mean also to solve the problem of worthwhile life and to make life worthwhile. We do not end suffering so as to make life worthwhile. Even after suffering, the issue of worthwhile life remains. The question of worthwhile should be decided before dealing with suffering.)

You should decide what Buddhists wake up to and what happens then. Buddhists should give people a clear idea of what they wake up to and what happens. Buddhists should do this even if words cannot get across the fullness of awakening and even if words mislead. Getting some clarity is worth the risk. You

should be ready to ask Buddhists what they awaken to and what happens. Ask about relations between awakening, suffering, and Aids.

Not being clear about what we awaken to is a case of the “hole in the center” that I described in sections on “systems that eat the world” in chapters on issues. Other sources contribute to the hole in the center. Below I describe other sources and the results of having a hole in the center.

Hopefully Typical Buddhist Behavior.

Ideally, when a person feels fully that he-she follows Jesus, he-she should love neighbors and treat them better even than him-herself. That rarely happens. Instead, what Christians do depends on their local culture (English Christians act differently than Spanish Christians); particular Christianity (Calvinists act differently than followers of Saint Francis); historical, economic, and social situation (English Christians in 1000 AD acted differently than English Christians in 1950 AD); and on Christianity in general (Christians really do try to follow the Golden Rule, follow “applies equally”, and build good institutions). It is almost impossible to separate out distinct contributions. The same is true of Buddhism, so I don’t try. I give a few ideas of how pretty-good-but-not-ideal Buddhists might act. Enough real Buddhists act well enough to add to Buddhist charm.

After you take seriously that life is not worthwhile or suffering besets life, and before you awaken, what do you do or don’t do? You don’t indulge. You don’t seek mere pleasures. The antidote to suffering and to “not worthwhile life” is not kicks. You don’t hurt any person, any animal, or nature. You also don’t deny yourself reasonable human joys as long as you don’t get them in a bad way. You don’t add to suffering, yours, of anyone else, of any animal, any community, or nature. You don’t break the law. You don’t break morality. You don’t act above anyone or above nature. You don’t act “above it all”. You don’t act haughty, a spiritual lord. You don’t act with feigned indifference as if immune to human feelings, as if you were in total control. You don’t treat other people as animals because they have not achieved your lofty sensibilities. You do not seek to make or to store “merit points” or to give them to others. You do not support divination, mysticism, superstition, magic, glamour, irrationality, or pointless metaphysics. You don’t go against other religions or other believers without strong cause.

You do have a sense of other people and other beings, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act with compassion, as in the Upanishads and Jainism. You act like the Buddha acted in his relations with other people, government, and nature. You try to ease all suffering. You explain and educate without holding yourself above. You contribute to community and good government when it does more good than harm. You help religious institutions such as temples and monks. You help educational and medical institutions. You reduce your belief in magic, mysticism, superstition, and metaphysics. You try to be gracious, calm, patient, and accepting, again without holding yourself above. You think how to be a good citizen and then you actually do it. You learn from others. You learn how to think, reason, and assess. You may engage in ardent discussion about religious ideas with Buddhists and non-Buddhists as long as you don’t cling to such discussion. You don’t live a normal successful life because your greater sense of morality and of others prevents you from full normal competition and full success.

What do you do after you awaken fully? That is not clear. Mostly you do and don’t do as above although you limit the scope of your public action. You can try to emulate awakened people but Buddhism has not

had many clear-cut cases of real awakened people, other than the Buddha, to use for examples, and few people expect to be just like the Buddha. You do prepare to die and to go away completely. You cannot live a normal life, and mostly you shouldn't want to.

If all this sounds like good Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism, it should. This is what people stress when they see similarities between religions. It is definitely worth appreciating this similarity as deeply as you can for as long as you can. It also implies that you don't need to wake up in the Buddhist way or appreciate suffering in the Buddhist way to act well. Taoism is a bit distinct but the difference is not very important here.

Two differences between Christianity versus the religions that came out of India (Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism): (1) Indian religions stress abstract Compassion while Christianity stresses specific rules such as the Golden Rule and "applies equally", and (2) Christianity developed specific institutions to carry out its ideas. I defer more on this issue to the chapter on Hinduism.

Brief Assessment, Mostly on Worthwhile.

It is important to make up your mind whether life is worthwhile or not regardless of what you think about suffering and regardless of your interest in any Buddhist Aid.

I decided life is worthwhile. I disagree that life is not worthwhile. Nearly each life is worthwhile and life in general is worthwhile. Some lives are so painful or bad they are not worthwhile but that does not thwart my general assessment. I can manage suffering well enough and I can think clearly enough. I am not perfect at either task. I don't have to be. I get better sometimes. I appreciate help.

Life is worthwhile just because it is. God or the Dharma might have made life worthwhile but that doesn't matter. What matters is that life is worthwhile regardless of how it got that way.

We evolved to think life is worthwhile whether it is or not - but life is worthwhile anyway. We cannot use evolution to discount or credit the idea that life is worthwhile or to discount or credit alternatives. We have to judge the idea on its own merits, and, on that basis, I judge that life is worthwhile.

Life is worthwhile not because of any system. Life is worthwhile not because we will be reborn, and, on average, life in the system is good. This life is worthwhile not because it gives us the chance to awaken and get off the Wheel.

Look at this life right now for what it is. Decide about that.

You do not have to judge the universe, or anything in it, to decide if life is worthwhile. You do not have to avoid judging the universe, or anything in it, to decide. You do not have to avoid moral, social, political, gender, religious, or ethnic judgment to see whether life is worthwhile.

The universe can be dismal or great, or you might not be able to judge whether the universe is dismal or great, and life can still be worthwhile. You can be celibate, shy, gregarious, sad, in pain, have children or not, succeed or fail, and life is still worthwhile. Life as a whole is worthwhile even if no particular activity,

relation, cause, person, institution, or thing in life is worthwhile on its own. Despite being able to manage suffering, still sometimes you will fail, and yet still think life is worthwhile - and life is worthwhile is despite your failure and despite what others will take as your rationalization.

My view is not the same as "Say 'yes' to LIFE". It is not New England Transcendentalism, westernized Jainism, westernized Hinduism, New Age, or American booster-ism.

Rather than think with perfect clarity and consistency, we should strive to think well enough. Rather than fully overcome desire, clinging, and suffering, we strive to manage them. This approach is more in line with real naturally evolved people than is ideal Buddhism. This approach goes with the morality of both Jesus and Siddhartha. It allows us to use ideals without letting ideals thwart real acts and their benefits. It is on the Middle Path. See Part One of this book.

You do not need a Big Idea, Big System, or Big God to decide whether life is worthwhile and in particular you do not need a Big Idea, System, or God to decide that life is worthwhile. They do not automatically make life worthwhile and the lack of them does not automatically make life not worthwhile. If you decide they do not exist and-or are not important, the lack does not automatically make life not worthwhile. Your life can be worthwhile with no system of Dharma, karma, Wisdom, or God. Those things can embellish a worthwhile life and can give it direction but they are not necessary.

Decency and doing the right things for the right reasons are part of what makes life worthwhile but they alone do not make life worthwhile and the lack of them alone does not have to make life not worthwhile. Fighting for them can make life more worthwhile but not to fight for them does not have to make life not worthwhile. Some people don't have it in them to fight, the meek, but that does not mean their lives are not worthwhile. I think: To love decency and do the right things for the right reasons helps greatly to keep our hearts-and-minds focused on worthwhile life; and God helps us to love decency and to do the right things for the right reasons, helps us to see life is worthwhile, and helps us to make it so. Simple decency, simple rightness, God, and worthwhile life all go together for me.

Some people, without God, a Big Idea or Big system, get lost and despair. If they cannot give up those things, as I cannot give up God, that is fine, but the people have to recognize that life can be worthwhile just because it is. Ironically, the insight makes God, Idea, and System even better.

You can have a worthwhile life if you are an eternal soul-self (atman). You can have a worthwhile life if you are not an eternal soul-self but are merely a temporary self (an-atman). You can have a worthwhile life whatever God decides to do with you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God assess you after you die. You can have a worthwhile life if God does not assess you after you die. You do not need to be an eternal soul-self, a temporary self, be judged by God, not be judged by God, be reborn at God's grace, or vanish entirely after God assesses you, to have a worthwhile life or to make up your mind if life is worthwhile.

All these situations are irrelevant to a choice about worthwhile life. So, make up your own mind, adopt ideas accordingly, and act accordingly.

You should think about what conditions might make life not worthwhile. Then think what your ideas show about how you see worthwhile life.

(One logical option is to think life is not worthwhile but to do the right things for the right reasons, and-or act as you should, and-or do your duty, and-or do what God wishes, and-or do God's (Dharma's) work, anyway. Here is not where to go into that option. It is odd to think a person could do the right things for the right reasons etc. and not think life is worthwhile, even if the world stinks. Some Christians seem to screw themselves up into something like this stance but often it is a dour cover, as in "The Scarlet Letter" and other critiques. Some Buddhists say this is the right stance but they don't really believe it and they are not as dour as Christians.)

Siddhartha the Buddha wished people to give up depending on gods, systems, and big ideas. I do not know if he avoided the issue of worthwhile life and focused on suffering so as to get people to give up depending wrongly on gods, systems, and ideas. I strongly suspect so. If so, Siddhartha got confused and he threw out the baby with the bath water. To grasp worthwhile life, people do tend strongly to err by misusing gods, systems, and big ideas. But it is possible to handle the question of worthwhile life and not to fall into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, especially if we are warned in advance and we monitor our minds along the way. That is a better path than focusing on suffering so as to avoid the issue of worthwhile life so as to avoid the traps of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha the Buddha had stayed focused also on worthwhile life, and did not look primarily in terms of suffering, he could have seen how to find worthwhile life without also falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Buddhists do not like me to imply that Siddhartha was imperfect. (In fact, avoiding the issue of worthwhile life to concentrate on suffering opened the door wide for Mahayana and Hinduism which brought with them, in many-fold, the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If Siddhartha had foreseen this turn, I am not sure he would have avoided the issue of worthwhile life to focus entirely on suffering.)

Although I disagree (a) with the basic stance of the Buddha that life is not worthwhile; (b) with the basic stance of Buddhism that life is about defeating suffering; and (c) with the idea that we must end suffering to find a worthwhile life; still (d) I learned hugely from the Buddha, from his issues, methods, and from Buddhism. If Siddhartha intended his ideas to help us to more freedom so we could decide for ourselves, then, in my case, he succeeded. Other thinkers helped too.

Buddhists need to ask if their approach as-a-whole implies that life is not worthwhile. What are the roles of suffering and overcoming suffering in not worthwhile life or worthwhile life? Buddhists need to consider if they wish to stay with the view that life is worthwhile or they should change it. Mahayana and Hinduism changed this view quite a bit. Modern Theravada in practice also changes it quite a bit.

I doubt Buddhists can take care of suffering until they have at least a strong working conviction that life is worthwhile or not. How they see suffering and handle suffering depends on that choice.

In fact, nearly all Buddhists, including the large majority of monks and adept lay people, think their own lives, and life in general, is worthwhile. They find meaning and satisfaction in life just as other people do. They do not seem to see or to accept that the Buddhist emphasis on suffering and Buddhist view of what happens after awakening strongly imply life is not worthwhile. They accept the Wheel and its implications as part of Buddhist history and as background but then ignore it. They avoid the question. Some monks

and lay people assume that, by following Buddhist practice, they are justified, or will be justified, and so they do not have to face the issue of worthwhile life. This approach is a bit hypocritical but not more so than contradictions in other religions such as Free Will versus Grace in Christianity. Not dealing with the issue of worthwhile life, acting as if life worthwhile, but following doctrine that strongly implies life is not worthwhile, does put a contradiction deep in Buddhism. For myself and my curiosity, I wish adept monks and lay people would face the issue of worthwhile life, and face the implication of the Four Truths for worthwhile life, and would come up with Buddhist ideas. This resolution might not be possible as long as Buddhists hold to standard interpretation of the Four Truths.

If Buddhists decide life is worthwhile, they can use many parts of Buddhism to make life better and more worthwhile for self, all people, and nature. Buddhists do who stress the common morality that Buddhism shares with major religions, ideals such as not being selfish and the Middle Path, already do that. It is what Buddhists do when they seek Buddhist reasons for ideals such as gender equality, democracy, fair economies, justice, diversity, education, and science.

In my view, what happens after we see that life is worthwhile? What then? What do we awaken to and what do we do? See Part One of this book. If we decide that life is worthwhile, regardless of Buddhist teaching, because of Buddhist teaching, before awakening, or after awakening, then we have to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to something like the ideas that I gave in Part One. Buddhism is congenial with the ideas of Part One, especially if we ignore God. But I think we are not led inevitably to the ideas of Part One, so here is not the place to discuss how strongly we are led to those ideas and to discuss relations of Buddhism, awakening, and worthwhile life to those ideas.

Buddhists tend to say that, after awakening, then “We are free and we can do whatever we want as long as it is moral, including going back to the farm, market, town, family life, sex life, and political life where we can use ourselves as examples of the Dharma”. That is not what the Buddha did and not what other awakened Buddhists did. So the saying amounts to a superficial defense of normal competitive life with striving for success, and it avoids deep real issues. Buddhists are not clear how awakened people should act, and this lack of clarity has caused some problems.

Buddhism has ethics like the ethics in other major religions including Christianity. Buddhists know right from wrong. They respect moral people. Buddhism knows the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, rule of law, citizenship in democracy, pro-active helping, and community responsibility. It did not stress them in the past and did not develop them until recently. The Buddhist stress on suffering does not promote the good ideas and, I think, retards the development and appreciation of them. Still, Buddhists now do know the value of the ideas and try to make good modern states based on them. Buddhists are moral.

Despite the fun, insights, and benefit from Buddhist Aids, all that we could ever gain from Buddhist Aids, including the idea of suffering as an Aid, is little compared to what we gain from deciding whether life is worthwhile. You are better off to give up Aids entirely if they get in the way of deciding the issue. Careful use of Aids can help you to decide but there is so much danger in Aids that you must be ready to give them up if you begin to lose your way.

Awakening makes sense as a strong version of “coming to my senses” but not as the big boom that most Buddhists, even monks, think of. That idea of awakening causes as much harm as the idea of salvation

does in Christianity, Islam, and some Mahayana, and Hinduism. You are better off not thinking of that kind of awakening at all but instead simply working to be a better person.

Other religions have problems with worthwhile life and try to avoid the problems. In Christianity, we get abundant life once we are saved by Jesus; so what did we have before? Do people who are not saved really have a worthwhile life? Christians don't treat them as if they did. In Islam, life is worthwhile after you submit to Allah and to the local Muslim clerics. Was life worthwhile before? Do non-Muslim infidels have a worthwhile life? Do people who will not go to Muslim heaven have a worthwhile life? Do women have a worthwhile life? In both Islam and Christianity, is life a gift from God and so worthwhile before you are saved? In Hinduism and Mahayana, in theory, people have worthwhile lives because they are part of a system and only for that reason; in theory, because everybody is part of the system, everybody has a worthwhile life; but the people high in the system, the ones who should know better, certainly don't treat the low people as if low lives are worthwhile. Do Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Sunnis, Shiites, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and Confucians all live equally worthwhile lives?

Taoism, and some Zen, insists life is worthwhile, especially if we find the Tao and learn how to live along with it. Taoists do not dream of overcoming suffering; they do manage suffering well without awakening in the Buddhist way; in some Taoist stories, Taoists live well despite suffering and they do not have to end suffering to live well; you do not have to defeat suffering to live in accord with the Tao and to have a worthwhile life; and no Taoist ever enjoys suffering. Taoists do not imagine forcing thought to conform to clarity, consistency, and purity; yet they think well enough. Except for a few odd individuals, Taoists do not think any single normal person can wake up to know the full Tao but are happy with insights that allow them to go with the Tao and enjoy life. My view is similar to Taoism and Zen but is not exactly like either. I like the blend of Taoism and Buddhism that Zen tried to make.

Brief Assessment Continued: Human Nature and Modern Life.

Evolved humans are by nature imperfect. We see the world with bias, and we lie even to ourselves. We desire and cling. We cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. We cannot be simply whole and fully integrated. We cannot be perfectly moral. We can get better and likely can get good enough.

All religions go against evolved human nature somewhat. At the least, they ask us to be more moral than we are comfortable with, and more than we can usually do. Sometimes they ask a lot, far more than any evolved being could give. Few of us can love enemies or even love our neighbors a little bit, let alone as much as we love ourselves.

To end suffering, Buddhism asks for a lot from evolved people. Buddhism wants to use nature to negate nature or, at least, overcome it. To end all desire and clinging is beyond us. People cannot stop suffering as Buddhism wishes them to stop. Buddhists had to reinterpret original ideas from Siddhartha quite a bit to make a version to serve as the basis for the daily life of peasants, merchants, soldiers, and politicians. Buddhists have to think if the original ideas of Siddhartha are reasonable. Buddhists have to think if pure Buddhism, the ideas of Siddhartha, alone can serve as the basis for normal life for evolved humans in any era but mostly in modern times. I doubt it.

All major religions handle the problem of rising above evolved human nature by saying obvious evolved flawed human nature is not our real nature. By following a religion, we go from obvious evolved flawed human nature back to our real much better nature. In Christianity, the work of Jesus returns us to the original grace of Adam and Eve. In Islam, faith in God does that. Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen say we are really in Emptiness, Buddha Mind, or Tao, and that to awaken is to see that. I think Siddhartha did not want this “out” and he accepted that real human nature is flawed. He insisted we could rise above it anyhow. In rising above our obvious (evolved) nature, he insisted we do not return to any big system. He insisted the normal human self is not eternal and perfect. I agree that we are flawed but disagree that we can rise above it totally anyway. Questions about original human and returning to purity remind me of the movie “Dr. Strangelove”, which shows what happens when we believe too much in purity, keeping it, and getting back to it. On the other hand, don’t Romantically wallow in impurity as a new kind of purity.

Theravada waffles. It cannot accept an eternal-soul-self-with-a-big-Dharma-system, as in Mahayana or Hinduism; but it also does insist real human nature is much better than corrupt obvious evolved human nature, we can get back to the ideal, to return is to awaken, and to awaken is to return. I am not clear about what Theravada Buddhists think our true nature is but it is something like being suffused with the Dharma. When we are suffused with Dharma, we awaken, and, when we awaken, we are suffused with Dharma. Theravada wants to have the cake of purity-of-nature and eat it too. In doing so, it opens the door to little-eternal-self-in-big-eternal-system. There is no point reviewing various schemes.

Brief Assessment Continued: Why Bother?

If I disagree with the core idea of Buddhism, expressed either as “not worthwhile” or “beset by suffering”, then why did I write and why should you read? I disagree with many of the ideas described in this book but I still wrote about them and it is still worth knowing them both for content and to get along honestly with believers. (1) As I said at the start of the book, I do care about doctrine but I care more about what people do. As long as people act well, I care more about that than details of belief. Buddhists generally act well. At the least, they seem less prone to war and terrorism than followers of the major God-fearing religions and Hinduism. (2) Buddhism fosters a great attitude toward truth and life. Buddhism is sane, even-minded, open-minded, quiet, dignified, and graceful. Sincere Buddhists are among the most sane and helpful of people. Particular people in other religions approach Buddhist grace but not always as result of their religion. (3) It is a joy to study its ideas and ways even when I disagree. (4) Buddhism is among the most forgiving and tolerant of religions, more so than most Christianity. (5) Buddhism has beneficial practices. We can gain from the practices even if we don’t know the ideas behind the practices or even if we disagree with some ideas. It does help to know Buddhist ideas behind practices, and why you agree and disagree. (6) Buddhism has ideas that go well with science. (7) We gain when we face ideas that we don’t agree with. (8) We gain when we decide issues, decide through sound thinking, and we commit. Buddhism helped me to see the importance of worthwhile life and suffering. (9) As Jesus said: “By their fruits you will know them”.

Brief Assessment Continued: Suffering and Worthwhile Life.

At the risk of boredom, it is important to get clear about suffering because I disagree with Theravada and because differences between Theravada versus Mahayana-and-Hinduism pivot on issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and the value of a system. While paying lip service to suffering, in fact, Mahayana and

Hinduism get around it so as to make life worthwhile in the context of a system. Officially, Theravada insists suffering is the main issue; if we deal with that, we deal with all; but, in practice, Theravada does not focus on suffering either. We cannot see how Mahayana and Hinduism grew unless we appreciate Theravada insistence on suffering. I disagree with Mahayana and Hinduism too.

Also, a good look at suffering can help undo any bias I have due to my view based on worthwhile life. We need confidence in what Siddhartha had in mind by his stress on suffering so we can feel confident about how we see suffering and worthwhile-or-not-worthy. Buddhists should think about what Siddhartha had in mind because they often approach suffering with formulas rather than think about what suffering meant to Siddhartha, means to them individually, and what role it plays generally.

I don't overlook suffering or make light of it. Suffering does permeate life, erode quality of life, and attack relations with people, nature, and God. It blinds us to simple truth. I know all the kinds of suffering that Buddhists refer to. I have not left out anything. I know suffering that comes from the self, desire, other people, society, limited resources, the state, and the bad breaks of the world. I know suffering that can be helped by managing personal desires and suffering that can be helped only by working on problems of the world. The Buddhist idea of suffering is important and is largely accurate, more so than ideas of most other religions and philosophies. Suffering deserves to be an important Aid. Suffering is a start in getting at worthwhile life. But the Buddhist idea also is dangerous. It is too easy to fall into the idea and too hard to jump out of the hole once in it.

Again: The idea of suffering reflects original ideas about how bad is the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life but suffering was not the basic idea. The original point was that life is not worthwhile. Originally, the idea of suffering helped people see that life is not worthwhile and so get off the Wheel. A shift from "not worthwhile" to "suffering" causes confusion (mental defilement), causes clinging, gives rise to objects of clinging (suffering and the war on suffering), and causes damage.

Again: In Buddhism, the focus is on suffering plain-and-simple without much thought for what suffering implies. Life is beset by suffering and Buddhism defeats suffering. That's it. Likewise, the focus is on methods to overcome suffering, on Aids, without much thought for what that implies about worthwhile life. To defeat suffering is to wake up and vice versa. To become adept at an Aid is to wake up. It is all about suffering and Aids. If suffering once did reflect the Wheel and the lesson of not worthwhile life, the idea of suffering used in Buddhism now does not show up like that. Now it is dogma that suffering sours life, we should overcome suffering, Buddhism has the tools, to overcome suffering is to wake up, and that's it. We might, or not, remain on the Wheel after we do overcome suffering.

Again: I am not sure, in doctrine, of the exact relation between waking up and overcoming suffering but I think anyone who has overcome suffering is awakened and vice versa.

Again: I think the following ideas imply that life is not worthwhile. Even separately they imply that life is not worthwhile but together the implication is strong. "Suffering besets life. A huge goal is to overcome suffering. To end suffering, at least for a long time at first, we must withdraw strongly from ALL normal life. After we end suffering, we are not reborn again on the Wheel. After we end suffering, we do not go on with normal life as a normal person." To end suffering, we have to be able to let go of all, including life. To let go of life means not to hold on to the idea that it is worthwhile. For Buddhism to hold the ideas

but not deal with their apparent implication about not worthwhile life is odd and does not make my mind any clearer and does not lead me to end my suffering. To focus on suffering without also considering worthwhile life leads to confusion over what desires and clinging to end, overcome, let go, or hold.

(1) Key Point: All lives have some suffering, and some lives have much suffering, but most lives are still worthwhile, and most lives were worthwhile in the time of the Buddha. Suffering in itself does not make a particular life not-worthwhile unless the suffering is great. A life can be worthwhile with much suffering or, if badly misused, not-worthwhile with little suffering. The big majority of modern lives have more hope and contentment than suffering except in horrible places. Even there, most people still have some hope and joy to pierce the suffering.

(2) Key Point: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper and more important than suffering. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile-or-not-worthwhile-life but cannot see worthwhile-or-not-worthwhile-life in terms of suffering except for a few bad cases that do not change the basic judgment.

(3) Key Point: If we think life is worthwhile, we can handle much suffering and can learn to think clearly enough; if we think life is not worthwhile, suffering is not really that important. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not totally defeat suffering but you only think well enough and only manage suffering. You can lead a worthwhile life if you do not awaken in the Buddhist manner but you only have some good insights, think well, and act well.

(4) Key Point: Once we see that the issue of worthwhile life is more important than the issue of suffering, we can still accept that we need to manage suffering, bad thinking, desire, and clinging. We can see that we need to manage rather than end them. We can accept the use of some Aids. But we take a different attitude toward suffering, desire, clinging, thinking, Aids, defeating, ending, and managing.

Again: I doubt a person can manage suffering without first choosing whether life is worthwhile. Making that choice clears your head and allows you to work on suffering. Not making that choice keeps your head muddy and interferes with managing. If, while learning to manage suffering, you change your mind, that is fine, and you do have the ability to do it, but you should first take a stand. Even if you choose wrongly at first, the clarity of mind is worth the risk. To be honest, I doubt you can really manage suffering unless you see that life is worthwhile. But Buddhism likely disagrees with me.

Again: Siddhartha the Buddha wished people not to depend on gods, systems, or big ideas. To keep people away from the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, Siddhartha might have focused on the end of suffering and so overlooked the issue of worthwhile life. The issue of worthwhile life tends strongly to the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas, and it was worth avoiding the issue, important as it is, so as to avoid the errors. I understand his tactic but disagree. To focus on suffering does help to avoid the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas but it also overlooks the issue of worthwhile life. To do that is to give up too much, to throw out the baby with the bath water. If the issue of suffering distracts entirely from the issue of worthwhile life then more is lost than is gained by defending that way against the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. Unless the questions of worthwhile life and suffering are posed together, and answered together, then too much is lost. I believe we can pose them together without falling into the errors of gods, systems, and big ideas. If we do not, we practically demand compensation through the mistakes of Mahayana, Hinduism, cosmic Christianity, Islam, and other such big religions.

Again: Naturally evolved people do suffer but we are not “born to suffer and to endure suffering”. Nor can we reasonably expect to escape suffering entirely. To live is to desire, strive, and cling, and those lead inevitably to some suffering. Still, life is not a “weepy” movie in which we revel in misery. Suffering is not the central fact of life or the key to life. We do not control life if we defeat suffering, if we make it optional, or manage it. Like pain, suffering is one part of life among other parts; we have to accept that; and we have to manage suffering as well as we can with the tools that nature gave us. Some Christians and some Buddhists revel in suffering. The opposite error, in Buddhism, is that we can we make evolved humans fully consistent, clear in thinking, and so free from all suffering, fully able to make suffering optional or to end it. Buddhists use nature to negate nature. I say, as evolved beings, we can get more adept at thinking but we cannot get fully consistent and clear at thinking, and we can get more adept at managing suffering but we cannot totally overcome suffering through better thinking or any other common natural way. We can get morally better as people but we cannot be perfectly moral and so totally overcome suffering. We can manage suffering most of the time. We can get better at thinking, more moral, and more adept at managing suffering. That’s all. It is enough. If ever we do totally end suffering, we lose so much of what is human and good that the end result is dubious. We have to work with what we evolved, and we can. Buddhism acts much of naturally evolved beings. Usually Buddhism can adjust to go with naturally evolved real humans.

In Buddhism, to end suffering, we remove the causes of suffering. We end suffering partly by removing false ideas of the self and so by not desiring and clinging as a result of false ideas of the self. We help to end suffering by removing the false bolstered idea that all selves, and my particular self, are eternal simple unified soul-things. Yet to see you are not an eternal soul-self (atman) does not necessarily end suffering. You can see with clarity and fullness that you will end completely someday and yet still suffer. Atheists might be absolutely sure that they will end someday, and might even strongly reduce desire and clinging, yet still suffer. Some scientists see clearly that the evolved self, at least on this world, is not the simple ideal soul-self of most religions yet the scientists still suffer. Especially since about 1850, I think some painters and sculptors – Impressionists, Pointillists, Fauves, Cubists, Abstractionists - have seen clearly both that the self is not the ideal soul-self yet still some self persists, but the artists suffer. The idea of the limited-but- still-present-self and his-her relation to the world runs through the work of James Joyce and maybe of some writers after him. The Buddhist idea of non-self (an-atman) or limited self is not the necessary and sufficient key to end all suffering (or even to make us all not selfish and helpful).

To know deeply that we are caught in cause-and-effect does not necessarily remove suffering or give us the tools needed to remove suffering. A scientist can deeply know the cause-and-effect of a tsunami but still truly suffer when his-her entire family and-or village is wiped out by one.

Much suffering does come from ourselves; we do enable our own suffering. But not all suffering comes from a mistakenly bolstered idea of self, from mistaken ideas about the world, or from mistaken ideas. Some suffering comes from the world and it is not under our control. We cannot end all suffering simply by changing our attitude or by using dismissive phrases such as “it’s not a big deal”, “nothing is that important in the long run” and “it’s nothing because it will pass”. A cancer patient truly suffers even if he-she manages suffering, and it is nasty to say he-she suffers only from a bad attitude. A twelve-year old forced soldier, or ten year-old victim of gang rape, truly suffers, and it is nasty to say otherwise. If they could have removed the causes of suffering, they would have; but some causes we cannot control. If

they could entirely forget and let go, they would, but some things we cannot erase. That is part of what evil is. Maybe God can turn every evil into a greater good but we can't. We can manage even such suffering sometimes but it is mistaken to say we can turn it into not-suffering with an "attitude adjustment". We can reduce suffering by seeing that we desire security, safety, continuity, and freedom; but even if we control those desires, we still suffer because of what happens in the world. Not to see this is deliberate blindness, deliberate bolstering of self into more than it is; and it purposely overlooks Dharma, cause, effect, and dependent origination. Someone who suffers because he-she did not get a well-deserved promotion, or did not get well-deserved recognition, should work more on him-herself than on the world but it is not true of all cases. That some real suffering is of the world, and we can't change this fact with a mere attitude adjustment, is a big theme of the novel "Catch 22" by Joseph Heller. We're not all totally crazy. Sometimes it really is them.

We cannot end suffering by not making value judgments, by not judging the world. Moral relativism does not end suffering. We can see that bacteria do not mean to kill us when they invade our blood but we still suffer and so do our friends and kin. We can see that good sometimes leads to bad ("Scarlet Letter") and bad sometimes leads to good (Batman movies and revenge movies) but that fact does not mean we can end suffering. Right and wrong can add to suffering – when robbed, we feel not only loss of goods but also feel wronged - yet they do not alone make suffering. Being too moralistic does add to suffering and we are better off by not being very moralistic. But neither fact means no moral judging would remove all suffering. Most animals do not judge the world and I doubt they have the idea that they are eternal souls yet they still suffer and no attitude adjustment could change that. A world without any judging at all would still have too much suffering.

I do not misunderstand suffering and so err about sources of suffering and removing suffering. I do not confuse suffering and pain. People who think we can remove suffering with a better idea of the self, by knowing cause and effect, changing self, changing attitudes, or not using moral judgment, misunderstand the world and fool themselves about suffering. Buddhists misunderstand suffering and fool themselves. Even the Buddha himself, if he thought like this, misunderstood suffering and fooled himself. Sometimes the fooling is deliberate in service to an ideology.

Don't go overboard the other way by blaming the world, or "them", for all your suffering, as in the modern style. Don't demand all your rights without any responsibilities, including your right not to suffer. You still cause most of your suffering, you still make others suffer, and you should work mostly on yourself. The proper response to the suffering from the world is to work hard to make the world better. To do so, you need to know what really causes suffering and what really works to cure it.

(Since the 1960s, a Thai Theravada monk, Pali: Buddhadasa [Thai: Phuthahaat], and some other Thai Buddhists, have accepted that an individual alone does not control all suffering. The world does add suffering apart from the desires of an individual. The world adds suffering through harm to nature, and through economy, politics, society, and culture. You-as-an-individual might defeat your own personal suffering, even that portion caused by the world apart from you, by controlling desires and clinging; but you also have to see that suffering has various causes and some lie outside you. I think this approach is more consistent with basic Buddhist ideas of Dharma, cause-and-effect, and dependent origination. This approach potentially is a big development. Still, I am sure that Buddhadasa and most Buddhists would disagree with me about worthwhile life, suffering, and awakening. As Buddhists are finding out, seeing

that the world causes suffering is hard enough but figuring out what really to do is even harder. It leads easily to problems of desire and clinging for individuals who otherwise mean well. I wish them luck. We need the help. See below, especially Parts 3 and 4.)

We can learn much from a battle with suffering but we lose more than we gain if we let suffering become the whole war. We need to put suffering in the context of “(not) worthwhile life” and we need to think what suffering implies.

As Buddhism now presents suffering and ways to battle it, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile, at least before a person defeats suffering. Nearly all of us live in a cloud of suffering. So Buddhism implies that normal human life is not worthwhile. Buddhism is not clear what happens after a person defeats suffering but, to me, Buddhism implies life is not worthwhile even then. Few people defeat suffering. By the time a person has defeated suffering, often he is too old or too far from normal life to return to normal life. When people defeat suffering, they do not go back to normal life but stay retired, as did the Buddha. After they defeat suffering, they do not go on to more rebirths that are happy but they die out and are not reborn. All this implies getting off the Wheel and implies life is not worthwhile.

Buddhism says people cannot achieve secure real happiness in life because life is beset by suffering. The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Happiness serves as a good case for seeing the pervasive effects of suffering. Here would be an apt place to go into the issue but it takes too long. See (A) of Part 3 of this chapter.

The idea that we must totally overcome clinging and suffering is a negative absolute, like iconoclasm (no pictures, statues, or relics; not much literature, movies, or TV) or like abstinence from sex and alcohol. It is not a positive absolute like “love your neighbor”. It can put on heroic dress but it is still an absolute and still negative. I am wary of absolutes, especially negative. It is better to manage clinging and suffering as we manage pictures, words, drugs, and sex. If you feel you must totally defeat clinging and suffering, go ahead; but don’t think other people must follow; then, when you think you are done, you must overcome the suffering that you feel from clinging to the need to totally overcome clinging and suffering.

People dislike the idea that “life is not worthwhile” and don’t want it as the main message of their religion. Getting around the problem of “not worthwhile life” was a big way that Mahayana and Hinduism overtook original Buddhism. In them, “overcome suffering” sounds happier, focused not on the defeat of suffering but on how to make a better happy world for ourselves. Mahayana and Hinduism used that view of “end suffering” to veer away from Theravada into making a joyful Dharma system of which all of us are small permanent parts (atman) and into which we merge.

I don’t know if the Buddha originally said we have to control suffering to be free to handle life properly, to decide if life is worthwhile, and see what to do. If the Buddha originally stressed suffering as Aid rather than the main focus, I don’t know if he or his successors moved it from Aid to main focus. If the Buddha did not originally face the issue of worthwhile life, and did believe that a focus on suffering is all we need, then I disagree with the Buddha. I can still assess these issues and still assess Buddhism if I disagree. It is still worth deciding if life is worthwhile, and still worth using Buddhism to do so.

It is almost impossible to think well, perform well artistically or athletically, compete, or fight, if you are too tense. Yes, energy helps, but tension hurts. Likewise, we have to relax to make lasting changes in our lives and to advance spiritually. We need energy, drive, and nerves but tension is a killer. We need to let go of some suffering so as to think more clearly and let go of more suffering. Letting go of some suffering and thinking clearly can make a reinforcing process. I am sure the Buddha had this effect in mind when he wished us to end suffering. But, I think, and I am almost certain Buddhism teaches, the Buddha had more in mind when he offered the Four Truths and he wanted us to end suffering. He had in mind the kind of deep reckoning with life that I described above.

We have to let go of some suffering to relax to let go of more suffering. To decide if life is worthwhile, it helps to manage at least some suffering first. We face an old chicken-and-egg problem. Just as judges, lawyers, actors, mechanics, programmers, gymnasts, martial artists, and musicians face and solve this problem, so can spiritual seekers. People solve chicken-and-egg problems all the time. Sometimes, as in Zen, you need a hard knock to get you going, but you can do it.

When we decide that life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, we have already more than taken the first step. Already we have gone a long way toward managing suffering.

We all think our ideas are the correct ideas and are the ideas that everybody should care about. Maybe I make the Buddha an advocate of my ideas because I hold him in high regard and I want him to be on the right track. Maybe I think he really did hold ideas similar to mine and I care about truth. Maybe I try to use his prestige to support me regardless of what official religion says, even if the official religion is tried-and-true and almost 2600 years old.

Regardless of the past, right now we have to face that (a) how Buddhism sees suffering and deals with it implies that life is not worthwhile, and (b) the issue of worthwhile or not worthwhile life is deeper, prior, and more important than the issue of suffering. There is no getting around this issue by saying we have to deal with suffering first. We need to decide about worthwhile life. We have to deal with worthwhile life first before we can adequately deal with suffering.

Brief Assessment Continued: “I Teach only Suffering and Release from Suffering”.

The Buddha said something like “I teach only suffering and release from suffering”. He meant that he did not speculate in metaphysics, theology, pointless ethical dilemmas, politics, and economics. He wanted people to focus on one big task and to get that done. Unless suffering is greatly reduced, people cannot think well enough to do anything else properly.

As far as I know, the Buddha deliberately did not say what happens after the end of suffering. He thought we would be better people but did not specify better in what ways except morally.

(1) By not specifying what happens at the end of suffering and beyond, the Buddha allowed people to imagine whatever they wished, imagine whatever they thought fulfilled Buddhism regardless of Buddhist teachings or whatever fulfilled their desires regardless of Buddhism. People gladly did so and still do, usually with the magic, glamour, metaphysics, and mysticism that the Buddha disdained. People have determined imaginations.

It is easy to make the Buddha mean “life is worthwhile, especially after a person ends suffering”. I think most Buddhists make that jump. I ask Buddhists not to jump. I think the Buddha would want you not to jump, at least not until after you had ended suffering and thought more. Hopefully the end of suffering frees you enough so you can make up your own mind about worthwhile life. I repeat: the general drift of early Buddhism, and the milieu in which it came, imply life is not worthwhile even after the defeat of suffering. The Theravada and Zen way of saying not to make this jump is to say that Buddhism offers nothing, that you gain nothing from it (with no metaphysical implications of the term “nothingness”).

(a) Some Buddhists take the saying to mean that, once we get rid of suffering, and we awaken, we can take on our full human nature, our full Dharma nature, and we can handle anything that comes our way, including vexing metaphysical, moral, and practical issues. (b) Some Buddhists think that, when we end suffering, we are suffused with Dharma (Emptiness, Buddha Mind). Dharma works through us, and we do the work of the Dharma in its world. (c) We succeed in all ways.

I doubt the Buddha meant those. I don't think he meant the end of suffering to be the gateway to all kinds of other success and fulfillment. I doubt he expected awakened people to be suffused with Dharma like mystic candles. Buddhists need to seriously consider why they want so much from the end of suffering. What did the Buddha want people to do after they had ended or strongly reduced suffering? Zen is a little more limited in what it expects.

I do think the Buddha wished to reduce suffering to allow us to think more clearly, if not perfectly, and so to be better all-around people, to live gracefully what is left of our lives, and be prepared to die gracefully when it time. I think he also meant the end of suffering to open our eyes that life is not worthwhile. To really end suffering, we have to be ready to let go of life too, all life, and we see so when we get near the end of suffering. We do not let go of something that is intrinsically worthwhile when we let go of life. To see that life is not worthwhile enough to hang on to is all, and it is a lot.

It is worth wondering why the Buddha thought that ending suffering was sufficient. Sufficient for what? What does the end of suffering do for a person? What did Siddhartha want us to do after we had ended our own suffering?

(2) We can take the Buddha to mean “the end of suffering” is a self-validating experience sufficient in itself that requires no other explanation, clarification, justification, or comparison. When it happens, you get it; it is valuable-in-itself; and that is that. So stop the chatter and get to work, especially by meditating. I think Siddhartha did mean it this way, just as other religious teachers intend to lead us to their versions of self-validating experiences.

Also as with other religious teachers, Siddhartha meant his version of a self-validating experience, “the end of suffering”, to be the most important self-validating experience, the one-and-only gateway to other such experiences, the best gateway to good experiences that are not self-validating, and he meant it is intrinsically good and leads only to goodness. (You might have other self-validating experiences later but Siddhartha kept that possibility out of this discussion, likely largely to avoid magic etc.)

A certain amount of awe comes with self-validating experiences. The companion awe leads believers to add mysticism, etc. to the lore of the self-validating experience. Siddhartha did not do that, and warned against it. Yet followers did so anyway and continue to do so. The false awe-and-lore takes the place of the real self-validating experience. It sustains and channels people to the bad use of Aids.

The awe warns us to be careful with all self-validating experiences. Self-validating experiences tend to create their own self-validating worlds, to live at the heart of systems that eat the world.

There are many self-validating experiences, and not all are good. Some preclude others while some can go along together (“God loves us all” and “So you’ve made your first kill now”). To evaluate “the end of suffering” as a self-validating experience I would have to put it against other self-validating experiences and other similar strong experiences. That is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I simply state some opinions.

-It is hard to shed all magic etc. once it attaches to the lore of the self-validating experience. I doubt that all but a few quite adept Buddhists can do shedding this now. Shedding accumulated magic etc. likely is the hardest task on the road to the end of suffering. Other religions suffer from the same problem.

-Buddhists believe, or wish to believe, that “the end of suffering” goes along with experiences such as had by the followers of Jesus, Chuang Tzu, and Mohammad. They would like to see all core self-validating experiences in all good major religions as pretty much the same.

-I doubt they are all the same. You have to think about what each religion says about big self-validating experiences, compare experiences and religions, and choose which experiences to work for. Because they are self-validating, it is harder to compare than you might think. To know them, you have to get into their world, then it is hard to get out, and comparison is next to impossible. It can be done. You have to learn how to get in deep enough and then get out – as in the movie “Donnie Brasco”.

-On the whole, when done the traditional Buddhist way, the process that leads to “the end of suffering” is good and so likely “the end of suffering” is good too. Even if you do not totally end all suffering, still the process is good. The idea of “the end of suffering” can be abused, but you have to work at abusing it, so I don’t take that up here.

-I doubt people can have an experience of “the end of suffering” as glamorized in Buddhism. People can have the experience of being able to manage suffering, as I describe elsewhere. They are not the same. I don’t know which the Buddha had in mind. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience that ends all other concerns, as in magic Buddhism, I disagree with him. If he had in mind a huge self-validating experience qualitatively unlike simply managing suffering, or if he thought people in other religions could not have his experience, I disagree with him.

-As with other self-validating experiences, you have to look past the Buddhist self-validating experience. Then what? What do you do next? Siddhartha does not say. What happens next is important in itself. Also it “works backward” to affect the validation of the self-validating experience. If what happens next is bad, useless, or nothing, then we likely self-validating experience was not really so self-validating after all. It was phony, or, even if real, not so important.

-If what happens next is as important as the self-validating experience, or more so, then why worry over the self-validating experience? Why not just do what happens next? Why not work on that? You are as likely to have a good self-validating experience by working to do the right things for the right reasons as by going directly after the glamorized self-validating experience.

-Even if the Buddha meant "end suffering" to be an entirely self-contained self-validating experience, the context of his life and thought, the fact that the experience is about suffering, the attitude that Buddhism takes toward normal life, that fact that people who have ended suffering withdraw, and other factors that I have mentioned, all indicate life is not worthwhile. So we have to take "end suffering" in the same context and assume it also implies life is not worthwhile. This result conflicts with self-validating experiences from other religions and with my insight. So even if "end suffering" is self-validating, it is not self-contained, we have to put it in context, and we have to think about what comes after "end suffering".

Brief Assessment Continued: Possible Overlap, with Fun Excursions.

The topic in this section is a hypothetical way to reconcile (A) life is not worthwhile on the Wheel and so we should strive to get off the Wheel with (B) this life is worthwhile. Do not seize on this idea in the wrong way. I do not know this idea from any particular work that I recall but my memory is poor and I am not the first to think of it. The point here continues from the section immediately above.

(1) Suppose life is not worthwhile as long as we suffer enough. Most people do suffer enough to affect their lives, and their thinking is so confused, so their lives often seem not worthwhile. To reduce, or end, suffering in one particular life can make that one life worthwhile even if it does not make all lives worthwhile. To reduce or end suffering can help one person think better, and so make his-her one life worthwhile. When I reduce suffering in my own one particular life, I do not have to aim to make all my future lives worthwhile and the lives of all other people worthwhile. We do not aim to be reborn many times with our newfound worthwhile life, so all our future lives will be worthwhile. We do not find our way into a great system just because now we see that one life is worthwhile. We simply accept that one life now is worthwhile while it lasts, do what we can while we live, and die when the time comes. If there is anything more, we don't worry about it or expect more. While alive, we treat this life as worthwhile, and treat all life as potentially worthwhile, which means we try to be useful, caring, and thoughtful. It does not mean we are successful in normal life or as a mystic.

(2) We can combine (a) making one particular life worthwhile through reducing or ending suffering with (b) not-worthwhile-life while still on the Wheel.

(2A) My one particular life is not worthwhile until I end my suffering; when I do end my suffering, my one life is worthwhile. To end suffering gets me, and only me, off the Wheel of rebirth. To end suffering for one life does not change the Wheel so life on it is now worthwhile generally for all life. To end suffering in one life now does not mean he-she who ends suffering must have good lives for all the future without any suffering. To end suffering does insure that the person who ends suffering is not reborn. Not to be reborn, not to be reborn on the Wheel, was a big goal of Buddhism. To end suffering, and not be reborn, come together and cannot come separately. To end suffering, to make this life worthwhile, and not be reborn, all come together and cannot come separately. This is one reason why the Buddha insisted the

self is not eternal. In contrast, to be reborn must mean more suffering, and must mean that lives still on the Wheel cannot be fully worthwhile. Rebirth, suffering, and not worthwhile life also come together.

(2B) To make life worthwhile, you have to end suffering. If you end suffering, you also die completely with the end of this life; you are not reborn. So, to make this one life worthwhile is also to insure your life does not go on past this lifetime. There is no way to make any life worthwhile, to get off the Wheel, and insure that any life goes on forever. To make any life worthwhile is also to make sure it ends. We have to accept a final end to this life so as to make sure this life is worthwhile. Yet even if this life must end as a result of being worthwhile, and I don't make any other life worthwhile, it is still worth ending my suffering and making my own life worthwhile.

Because to end suffering and make life worthwhile leads to the final end of a person, it is easy to think a person is punished for ending suffering and making life worthwhile. In contrast, people who fail to deal with suffering and so make life worthwhile get rewarded with more life. It seems the people who succeed at ending suffering and making life worthwhile are the ones who should get more life while those who fail should die completely. But that is not how the Wheel works. This result only makes sense if unexamined normal life on the Wheel is not worthwhile. This is another reason people want off.

It is also natural to think: If one person can make it, why can't everybody? Rather than force the one good person who "makes it" to vanish into total oblivion, why not keep him-her around to help others? If possible, keep him-her for many lives. That is part of compassion too. He-she would like staying around to help, and everybody would like it. This idea was one of the founding ideas in Mahayana, was the basis for the bodhisattva. Yet the Buddha did not teach this option, even if the Buddha did stay around and teach after he awakened and before he died.

Mahayana and Hinduism strove to arrange things so that to end suffering does makes life worthwhile and more abundant for the person who ends suffering but also to end suffering does not end the Wheel even for the person-who-ends-suffering-and-so-makes-his-her-life-worthwhile. Mahayana and Hinduism strove to incorporate the feeling above about staying on due to compassion. The way to do all this is to make the Wheel not a place of suffering but a place that is worthwhile and joyous. To end suffering in this one life and to make this life worthwhile leads to better life on the Wheel for the person who ends suffering and it leads that person to see all life is good on the Wheel even for people who appear to suffer and who do not see that their lives are worthwhile. It leads an adept person to see that even people who think they suffer do not really suffer. It makes the Wheel a big joyous system. The adept person sees all people do lead worthwhile lives but not for the silly reasons that they fool themselves with such as family, fame, success, etc. but because their lives add to the one big joyous system. As with Jesus in Christianity and Mohammad in Islam, heroes who changed the world, saved the people, and made life worthwhile and abundant, the arrival of one person, Cosmic Buddha, who ended his own suffering and made his own life worthwhile, also changed the lives of all people so they could make their lives worthwhile on the Wheel. Another reason Siddhartha, the merely real Buddha, insisted the self is not eternal was to forestall this kind of error and confusion.

(3) (more like 2A than 2B) To see your life as worthwhile even if other lives might be confused, even if you end completely, even without heaven, is like how David Hume, a famous atheist-or-agnostic, saw his life. Hume did not totally end suffering. He died in pain from illness although that does not necessarily

mean he suffered uncontrollably. He did manage suffering well. He died feeling his life was worthwhile even though it ended in pain and ended completely. This stance is close enough to what I have in mind with “life is worthwhile” so I don’t split hairs. This stance shows a good attitude. I hope the Buddha had something like this in mind. Many people in all religions and in atheism come to see this stance. This stance is not a big cosmic bang as most Buddhists see awakening but it does change lives.

I, Mike Polioudakis, do try to manage my suffering but that is not what makes my life worthwhile. I do accept a final end but I do not think my acceptance also conquers my suffering while I am alive or also makes my life worthwhile. My life now is worthwhile because it is, whether it ends at death or goes on. If my life were not worthwhile, if I could not end suffering, that situation would not make me continue in future lives, on the Wheel. If I do succeed in managing my suffering, my success does not necessarily lead to my having many future lives in which I help other people. Nearly all lives are worthwhile although people are ignorant, foolish, confused, and suffer. Lives are not worthwhile because they are in a great system. Few people will be reborn, on the Wheel or off. We are not not-reborn because our lives are worthwhile or because we end suffering. We just end; we just are not reborn. Still, I respect people who see a link between accepting a final end to their own life, working to end suffering, making their own life here-and-now worthwhile, working to be useful, and working to make the world better.

People suffer largely because they are ignorant, wrong, desire, and cling, but not entirely. Much suffering is real and comes because the world is just like that. Much suffering is self-enabled but not all. Much is caused by the world including human-made situations.

The Buddha might have had something in mind like the view in the numbered paragraphs above. If he did, then largely I agree. We have to reduce suffering before we can come to our senses and can see. I disagree that we have to totally defeat suffering to make this life now worthwhile while it lasts. I hope the Buddha had this view in mind and I wish he had been clear that he had this view in mind.

This stance does not have much support in sutras. Sutras say “end suffering” without saying what that implies for worthwhile or not worthwhile life and without being clear on what next except no rebirth. I can find passages to support the stance as I can find passages that say something else. I don’t know where the preponderance lies, and, because I am not a Buddhist theologian, I don’t have to declare definitely. The main drift seems to be: In the time of the Buddha, people feared life was not worthwhile but strove to make it so in wrong ways. They often acted out of fear, ignorance, blindly, foolishly, and selfishly. The Buddha offered a cure for suffering as a way to get people to handle life gracefully while here, not have future lives, accept that life is not worthwhile, and to die gracefully when the time comes. I write this chapter mostly on the basis of that premise.

Even if the Buddha had in mind that the end of suffering can make a particular life worthwhile, what I write in this chapter is still valid because it confronts issues that Buddhists and all people need to confront.

If you think ending-suffering-does-make-at least-this-one-particular-life-worthwhile is what the Buddha really had in mind, you should work out the implications for Buddhism. The implications do not support what most Buddhists see as Buddhism but they do support other good ways of life. They do not support Mahayana or Hinduism. This chapter, and Part One of this book, can help you work out the implications.

Brief Assessment Continued: Rationality, Wisdom, Unstated Premises, and Confusion.

Any faults described in this section belong not only to Buddhism but to all religions and ideologies, and usually affect them more than Buddhism.

(1) Buddhism is rational in a simple easy-to-follow satisfying appealing way. Buddhism offers a limited set of simple obvious premises such as the Four Truths, and it reasons clearly from them to conclusions that make sense even if, like me, you don't agree fully. The average Buddhist seems amenable to reasoning; and I love that effect of Buddhism on people. Basic Buddhism is not complex as are ideologies that try hard to be rational. It is not like Thomas, Spinoza, Luther, Calvin, Kant, Hegel, systems theory, or Post Modernism. The simple rationality of Buddhism is a great and deserved part of its charm.

Buddhism does have complicated sutras and individual writers such as Buddhaghosa; but you don't have to read those, and, if you do, conclusions are clearly stated and you may decide for yourself.

(2) Still, Buddhism is not strictly rational and only rational. Buddhism puts rationality in service to Wisdom ("panya"). Logical argument leads you up to conclusions, but you cannot always step into conclusions using mere logic alone, sometimes you need an intuitive leap. Always conclusions should serve Wisdom. Sometimes you have to look beyond mere logic to Wisdom. You should not go against logic if you can help it, but, if you have to leap logic to serve Wisdom, do so. In Zen, logical points are not intended to be satisfying, and sometimes they are annoying, but they should let you leap. The Four Truths get us to see we need to cure suffering, and open us to the right methods. Putting rationality in service to higher truth should not offend you. It is the rock of faith-based religion. Staunch atheists put rationality in service to their values. Almost all Western philosophers use rationality to serve Wisdom and some are clear about doing so. Plato is logical and he is clear that he uses logic to serve Good, where "Good" plays the role of Wisdom. A country song is not about the story but about Wisdom. Without the Wisdom behind the song, few people care about the tremendous rational craftsmanship.

What is the Wisdom that rationality serves? Part of Wisdom is to end suffering but there is more Wisdom than simply the end of suffering. With Wisdom, you should be able to see directly the truth of the Four Truths, the power of desire, and the value of various Aids. Hopefully this chapter will give some insight. You should read more Buddhism to get more insight. I would guess that Wisdom is what you see after you end suffering. I think we also gain much Wisdom along the way to the end of suffering. Compassion, the non-self, and "don't be selfish" are part of Wisdom.

Where does Wisdom come from if not through rationality? Wisdom does come through rationality in that rationality leads us up to Wisdom, and, in most cases but not all, reason is the best way there. Rationality is not sufficient but helps. Wisdom comes through proper meditation. Wisdom comes through example by monks and other adept people. In the case of Zen, it comes through a knock on the head or escaping traps. I would guess that much Wisdom comes after a person defeats suffering. I hope most people don't have to wait for the total end of suffering to get some Wisdom. I hope much Wisdom comes when we learn merely to manage suffering, desire, and clinging.

How can we be sure Buddhist Wisdom is the correct and best Wisdom, especially since rationality is not enough by which to assess Wisdom? Briefly, we can't be sure of Buddhist Wisdom any more than we

can be sure of Wisdom in any other religion or ideology. Because rationality is not the sure-and-only road to Wisdom, because Wisdom is beyond rationality, we cannot be sure any proposed Wisdom is truly wise. Still, again, "By their fruits you will know them". The best way is to get a fair sample from each of several religions and ideologies, without getting lost in any, then think, consult, and take the best. When people do this, they tend to credit their own native religion or ideology with having had the best Wisdom all along even if it did not, but that is part of human nature, and one lesson of Wisdom as yet unlearned at the time. I do not consider claims of divine revelation to be a sufficient guarantee of Wisdom, especially when one claim contradicts another claim, some claims are used to discredit others, and claims are used to enable "us versus them". God might have given us some bits of Wisdom but we still have to assess those much as we do Wisdom from Buddhist sources.

Does Wisdom necessarily imply a great system of which the individual is a small but still important part? To Mahayana, Hinduism, much Zen, and most Christianity and Islam, it does imply this, but Siddhartha disagreed. As far as I can tell, he avoided this issue as not useful and as potentially a severe distraction. It is better to concentrate on the end of suffering, on Wisdom that we gain while we work to end suffering, and on Wisdom we gain when we end suffering. Then, if we still care, we can decide if Wisdom needs such a great system. I think effectively Siddhartha denied a great system.

(3) Buddhism has some premises that it does not state clearly. Usually Buddhism does not intend to hide any assumptions but it simply overlooks making all assumptions explicit. Usually the premises come out so clearly, without being stated explicitly, that there is no problem. For example: (a) the world is sticky, (b) wrong behavior occurs always-and-only due to wrong ideas or "mental defilements", (c) right ideas can completely push out wrong ideas, (d) correct action automatically follows when right ideas push out wrong ideas, and (e) a natural (evolved) human is able to think with full clarity and total consistency. Sometimes premises are not clear such as that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. To go through the assumptions even of Theravada would require a book so I don't try. I do try to be as explicit as I can but I am sure that a few ideas got by me. When you read Buddhism, think what ideas have been taken for granted without being stated, and then assess those ideas.

Western science tries to bring all assumptions to the fore, and it does amazingly well, but it is not perfect, and it always has background assumptions such as about cause-and-effect, the rationality of the world, the ability of the mind to know the world through rationality, and no magic. Science still does the job that it claims to do in approaching truth, and does the job better than any alternative, so we should consult science first. For us in our age, the road to Wisdom goes through science even if the road does not stop there. I think Buddhism would agree.

If you must reveal the assumptions of a living person, leader, or school do so politely. While in grad school, I worked through the assumptions of ideas in anthropology, such as systems theory, evolution, social structure, structuralism, and post modernism. Once, during his class, I badgered a teacher about his assumptions. The teacher gave me a distressingly low grade.

When the real goal is Wisdom rather than mere rationality, tacit assumptions often play a big supporting role yet stay hidden. People who use the grandeur of the universe or of mathematics to speculate about order and God use tacit assumptions but we can see the assumptions and we forgive them because we share in their wonder. What are the tacit assumptions of super hero stories, what is the main goal, and

how do tacit assumptions serve the main goal? You can ask the same of any work of literature. If you love to read, you can see how Plato's assumptions about Being and Good shaped all his dialogs but only gradually came out as his work went along. Atheists assume Justice is so important that effectively it is really supernatural although they never say so and hate to have it pointed out.

(4) The mix of seeking Wisdom, using rationality to serve Wisdom, and unstated assumptions, invites magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. In this mix, even rationality can serve magic, glamour, etc. Examples from the West include metaphysical-mystical Neo-Platonism, how Greek philosophy was used to serve mysticism and Christianity, Romanticism, and Post Modernism. In Buddhism, the best examples come from Mahayana but folk Theravada is full of solid cases such as the dominance of karma, karma is simple bookkeeping, and the great charisma-grace of religious and political leaders. Donald Trump would be called a bodhisattva or a "chakravartan" (world conqueror).

The mix also bolsters the hole in the center of systems that eat the world and it bolsters the systems. It gives the systems pseudo-logic, pseudo-gravity, and provides them with methods to handle evidence so evidence only supports them and never denies them. How all this happens is beyond the scope of this chapter but it is worth saying that it does happen. Buddhists hope this bad result does not happen in Buddhism but it does happen as when Buddhists says life is dominated by suffering although, to me, it is clear that suffering is one big component in life but not the dominant component.

Brief Assessment Continued: Personal Responsibility.

"With great power comes great responsibility". "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Thai Buddhists told me the Buddha offered the best system for individuals while Jesus offered the best system for societies (Chinese would say Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu for individuals and Confucius for society). Buddhists did not tell me how to blend the two.

Theravada Buddhism seems selfish. You take care of yourself, and that's it. The Buddha told people to look after themselves, warned that nobody else could save them, and they could not save anybody else. Buddhism urges Compassion, Buddhism follows the Dharma in morality, the Buddha did condemn selfishness, and Buddhist monks generally are among the kindest people you will ever meet; but still Buddhism comes across as selfish. Individuals end their own suffering without worrying about others, worrying about world issues, how they added to problems in the past, what they add now, how to help, and how to help without hurting their quest to help themselves. Many individual Buddhists do not follow this pattern but the attitude pervades Buddhism and it leads to a real difference between Buddhists versus people of other religions. With the rise of modern concerned Buddhism, Buddhists are finding a better balance but the tension remains.

Selfishness and self-centeredness are mental errors, they are "defilements", and they lead to desire and clinging. Compassion is important. Morality is an intrinsic part of a Dharma world, and morality inherently includes consideration of other people and nature. How do these ideas square with "saving yourself is most important" and "save only yourself"?

Much of folk Buddhism relies on the natural need for people to help others, to save them if possible, even at the expense of self. Thus people think in terms of merit points and people transfer points to parents, children, and kin. Beginners in Buddhism sense tension between saving only self versus compassion and the power to act for others, and they get confused.

The problem of selfishness is compounded because humans have much power and humans bear much responsibility. Only if we have power over the causes of our suffering can we alter those causes and so save ourselves. Only someone who feels responsibility for past deeds and toward others has the moral sensibility to succeed in Buddhism, at ending suffering. If we have power over self, we have at least some power over the suffering of others. Through misusing their power, humans cause most of their own suffering. Humans cause most world problems. So we bear much responsibility to our selves, other people, and the world.

Power leads to abuse, even power over self and power to help others. We do not have complete power, not even over self. Seeking more power than proper leads quickly to abuse of what power we do have. We should not seek complete power over ourselves or others even if we intend to use power well. We should seek wise use of power, which includes limiting it.

Yet, in Buddhism, the ability to end my own suffering is an absolute power. As such, it directs attention away from relations between self and world entirely to myself. Responsible modest use of power is hard if you obsess over your salvation.

The ability (power) to end our own suffering is not exactly the same as the power (ability) to help other people and help with world problems. To say we can do one fully but cannot do the others, or we have no duty to do the others, is legitimate in theory. But it is also a little “flaky”, self-indulgent, and suspect. It might be right but it still has a bad feel. Can the two abilities be entirely different? Although one power might be full and the other limited, we can still abuse either or both.

From what I have seen, Buddhists are not more selfish than people in any other religion, and seem a bit less selfish and more inclined to sympathy and helpfulness. The calm and the understanding of human weakness that come with Buddhism make up for the selfishness of “save yourself and don’t worry about anybody else”. But the ultimate tension remains.

You cannot save someone despite themselves but you can help, especially if they want to get better; this is true in all religions; and Buddhists help when they can. You can compare Buddhists to other religions on this basis, and Buddhists come off well, but still there is a difference in feel.

If individual Buddhists should look to themselves first, cannot save the world, and have no responsibility to the world, then gods and demons rule the world. So, in that case, people should worry more about their relation to gods and demons than about ending their suffering. Folk Buddhism and superstition are more correct than the teachings of Siddhartha. In any religion, to focus entirely on the self is to open the world to gods and demons, and is to deny personal human responsibility generally. Selfishness and even well-intended self-ness spawn demons; and demons spawn selfishness and bad self-ness. Gods and demons are part of the corruption that comes with seeking absolute power even over merely the self. On the other hand, if you do not want gods and demons to rule, do not want to make a peace with demons,

think people cause most problems, or think that God gave us stewardship, then you personally must take responsibility. I think a large necessary part of taking responsibility is helping others and nature, and that includes more than saving only yourself.

I doubt Buddhists really can totally control even their own suffering. The fact that Buddhists cannot totally control even their own suffering is not an excuse to concentrate even more on the self to the exclusion of others but should lead Buddhist to think about their relation to the world and how to help. If you cannot fully control even your own suffering and you cannot control the suffering of others, then we are all in the same boat, and what helps them helps us and vice versa. We are not exactly the same as them but we are close enough. Then we see that humans do have responsibility for the world, and the demons don't matter. Accepting both limits on the ability to save the self and as much responsibility as possible can be a way to vaporize demons.

Two lessons of dystopias such as "1984" and "Brave New World" are that we cannot totally control the self or society, and too much society is bad. Movies about computers taking over the world carry on the themes. One lesson of modern "dystopias" such as movies and TV about zombies, apocalypses, and vampires, and TV shows such as "Breaking Bad", "The Sopranos", and "Game of Thrones", are that too much self is bad, and we cannot fully control and-or assert the self. Too much self becomes a demon; too much society makes us all demons. All the genres teach that we have to take responsibility for our self without asserting too much self, and we have to take responsibility for society and to help society without letting society eat us. We have to accept the limitations of self and society, we have to learn how to assert the self properly, and we have to find the right balance of self and society. No modern political ideology and no religion, traditional or new, tell us how to do that. Political ideologies and religions err in their own ways. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism tells us what we need to know, and each errs in its own way.

I think Siddhartha understood these issues well enough for his times, and he offered his idea of the finite temporary self as a way to head off some problems. But, as developed in Buddhism, and as understood now, Siddhartha's idea of the finite temporary self does not head off problems well enough. I don't know if the idea can be grown to do so. I don't know if such a development would be a "return to the Buddha".

The fact that not all suffering is caused by us as individuals, or even by humans, makes the issues harder but does not take away the central problem.

Buddhists may not rely on a shallow forced external calm demeanor as a way to confront their personal responsibility and world issues. Buddhists may not use that false smug façade as a screen behind which really to be selfish.

One reason that Mahayana displaced Theravada is because it (seemed to) offer ways to blend dealing with individual salvation and dealing with world problems. The biggest way was through the person of the bodhisattva, like the Christ. You cannot truly defeat your own suffering until you defeat world problems. You have to work on them together. The Mahayana way does not work but it is hard to fault Mahayanists for trying and it is easy to see why Mahayana would appeal to people who felt compassion and wished to help the world as well as save their own limited temporary self. Mahayana appeals to people who

understand the power and responsibility that go with the idea that we can end suffering, wish to use the power correctly, and wish not to abuse ability.

My solution to these issues is in Part One of this book and my solution is represented in this chapter by the idea of “managing”.

It might be that, ultimately, individual Buddhists do have to reject helping the world in favor of ending their own suffering. Maybe Buddhists do have to be selfish of a kind. If so, Buddhists must clarify this stance and all the implications.

Other religions have versions of these issues even if other religions accept limits on the human ability to control self. A fun adept look at this problem is the movie “The End” starring Jay Baruchel with a big all-star cast. Do we act selflessly to seem good and so really serve-ourselves-and-go-to-Heaven or do we really help others, even at our expense, because that is the right thing to do? Supposed Christians deny global climate change, deny they can do anything, and deny personal responsibility; yet they expect God to take them (and family) to Heaven because they go to church. Because Taoism does not accept any need to help the world, its dilemma is like Buddhism. But the versions in other religions are not at issue here and do not lessen the problems for Buddhism.

Brief Assessment Continued: Hole in the Center and its Effects.

Holes in the center are one way that a system eats the world, and they cause problems. In Buddhism, some sources for a hole in the center are:

- (1) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what people awaken to.
- (2) Theravada Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end suffering.
- (3) Buddhists are not clear if life is worthwhile or not; are not sure of relations between worthwhile life and suffering; and not sure of relations between awakening, suffering, and worthwhile life.
- (4) Modern Buddhists overlook the original lessons about the Wheel of Dharma-Karma-Law-Life and its implication that life is not worthwhile.
- (5) In practice, Buddhists believe that life is worthwhile despite that “life is beset by suffering” implies life is not worthwhile and despite that the Wheel (and so the Buddha) taught life is not worthwhile. Buddhists do not accept that to overcome suffering also reveals that life is not worthwhile.
- (6) In practice, Buddhists really work to make their own life worthwhile on their own terms despite doctrine about suffering or worthwhile life. They avoid questions of worthwhile life and suffering, that is, they avoid issues at the heart of their religion. They work against ideas at the core by seeking a worthwhile life and by seeking it in terms other than sanctioned by their religion. This stance is a normal human reaction but it is also a contradiction.

(7) Buddhism is not clear about what it means to end desire and end clinging. Buddhism overlooks that we cannot end all desire and clinging, such as to the Dharma. Buddhism is not clear about all relations between desire, clinging, and suffering.

(8) Buddhists focus on sub-goals, Buddhist Aids, rather than focus on awakening by seeing that life is not worthwhile and-or by overcoming suffering. The focus on Aids lets them work on their own lives and lets them avoid issues of suffering, worthwhile life, and awakening. The focus on sub-goals can be an evasion of the original issues of the Wheel in Buddhism, that is, of worthwhile life.

(9) Buddhists should work to awaken in this life but few try, not even monks. Instead, Buddhists put off awakening until "next life". Buddhists can put off the core religious goal in a way that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even Taoists and Confucians, cannot. The core goal of the religion is gone from its center. In its place, Buddhists put many sub-goals from base selfishness up to high sub-goals such as meditating. Even when Buddhists use high sub-goals, the center is still empty. I am as sick of hearing "God willing" (Allah, Eloi, Yahweh, Heaven) as of hearing "next life".

(10) "End suffering" is presented as a self-validating self-sufficient experience, and it is given as if nothing else is needed and nothing else reasonably follows. This presentation seems intended to thwart magic, metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour yet, paradoxically, it clearly invites magic etc. to fill in the void of what it means and what happens next.

(11) Buddhists explain awakening negatively by what it is not rather than give a positive sense of what it is. They do this with other ideas too such as suffering and Aids. Other religions use the negative way. Saint Thomas Aquinas liked it. I use it. The negative way can be a good tool and sometimes it is the only way. But used carelessly, it allows people to fill in whatever they want for what is supposed to be left over after taking away, including prattle, metaphysics, mysticism, magic, glamour, and hokum. Try defining a bird or dog by what it is not, then use your imagination to fill in what it might be after you have removed what it is not.

(12) Seeking after wisdom, assuming wisdom is beyond rationality, still using rationality to seek wisdom, and opaque assumptions. Magic etc. come of this practice.

(13) Adept good people are punished with the end of their good lives life while inept and-or bad people are rewarded with more life.

(14) Buddhism teaches Compassion, yet the good adept people do not stay around through many lives to teach the inept and-or bad people to be better and get better. Buddhism wants everyone to succeed but it does not keep around the best tool, adept good people, to make that happen.

(15) The tensions over self first, helping self, responsibility to others, over power, responsibility, and limits of power.

The effects of these causes are as below. I do not dwell on common problems of Dharma-karma-based systems such as accepting, rather than fighting, socio-economic class, poverty, sexism, ignorance, bad government, magic, metaphysics, mysticism, glamour, and superstition.

Most Buddhists either don't know the role of "life is not worthwhile" in Buddhism or refuse to consider its importance; a contradiction. This attitude would be like Christians insisting that Jesus is fully divine but has nothing to do with God or the Holy Spirit. Sometimes in literature, TV, and movies, the role of "not worthwhile" rises to the surface when someone who has suffered bitter defeat runs away to be a monk or nun – but that "out" is only a literary device, and still even literate smart people will not face the idea.

Theravada Buddhism invites other Buddhism such as Mahayana, invites Hinduism, and invites poor ideas and practices to co-exist with it such as magic, metaphysics, divination, and spiritualism. Such ideas and practices cannot be removed from Buddhism and these ideas and practices almost necessarily have to play a large role in folk Buddhism. As long as Buddhism has a hole in its center from the above causes, I don't see how Mahayana, Hinduism, and bad folk Buddhism can be avoided.

Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, suffers from hypocrisy, sometimes bad hypocrisy, and suffers from a malaise that feeds on hypocrisy. Buddhism-in-spirit is no more hypocritical than other religions, usually less. But common Buddhism, even with smart people, is as hypocritical as other religions, and Buddhists feel hypocrisy more because Buddhism prides itself on logic, consistency, coolness, and objectivity. I found even smart and successful people in Buddhism suffer from unease, an affliction that puzzled me until I understood better the contradictions in Buddhism.

I never stopped feeling annoyed at the magic, superstition, and divination in folk Buddhism although I did learn to get along with it. I feel the same about magic, superstition, and TV evangelists in Christianity. I feel much the same way about worship of saints, Mary, relics, and religious leaders.

Focusing on Buddhist Aids can make Buddhists daffy. Focusing on Aids makes them like Hare Krishna chanters at airports and not like Christmas carolers. It is like Christians morbidly worried over Works, Grace, Faith, Justification, and Salvation rather than just doing the right things for the right reasons, doing what Jesus wants. It is like being stuck saying the Rosary forever or stuck praying with your hands in the air forever. It is like trying to "beat the system" in Las Vegas; you might learn about some math but you will have a poorer life and you will get a bit wacky. The fact that prestigious Buddhist Aids are part of the hole in the center allows Buddhists to gloss over the hole and daffiness, and that makes everything worse in a feedback loop.

Recall comments above on Aids about reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, spiritual ascent, and hidden knowledge. These trends reinforce daffiness and feelings of spiritual power. These ideas and feelings push out better ideas and feelings. They enable people to use the Aids to seek power instead of seeking to awaken or seeking simply to do good. They encourage the worst of folk Buddhism. The effects were stronger in Mahayana but are strong enough in Theravada.

A hole in the center allows not only bad non-orthodox thoughts but good thoughts of all kinds, orthodox and not. Buddhists use the freedom allowed by the hole in the center to cultivate motifs that most people find good such as tolerance and help. Buddhists try to make life more graceful. The hole in the center can help in cultivating good ideas such as Mindfulness, the limited self, honesty, and helping. This I enjoy among Buddhists all over. This is how most people think of Buddhists.

What Buddhists do in practice to make their lives worthwhile depends in part on teachings that go along with Buddhism, such as compassion, but mostly on values and ideas of their particular culture apart from Buddhism such as social ranking, proximity to power, and making sure you come out alright. Some ideas that go with Buddhism are almost unique to it such as the stress on cause-and-effect and the idea of not-self. Most of the teachings that go with Buddhism are not unique to it such as the stress on mental clarity. Not-unique ideas are not less good – kindness, clarity, and the Middle Path are good. Not-unique ideas enrich Buddhism and Buddhists. The mixing of ideas from Buddhism with ideas from local culture does make it harder to assess Buddhism. It is not clear how much uniquely Buddhist ideas affect the search for worthwhile life in Buddhist countries, and I cannot go into that query here.

The hole in the center erodes the basis for a good political state and dealing with nature. It undermines the basis for rule of law and good institutions.

Brief Assessment Continued: Religion, Culture, Good Ideas, and Good Institutions.

All religions wish to be the basis for a society, and, when big enough, the basis for a state. Theravada Buddhism did serve as the basis for societies and states but not by using only Siddhartha's ideas of suffering and awakening. It relied heavily on ideas of karma, merit, and what Westerners might call Grace or Charisma. That kind of Buddhism has little to do with the original ideas of Siddhartha, is a grandiose version of folk Buddhism, and is more like Hinduism than like original basic Buddhism. Here I don't worry about Buddhism and the state. I say a little more in Part 4 of this chapter. Mahayana did not have to develop Buddhism to serve as the major basis for society or a state because, almost everywhere Mahayana grew, Confucianism already did that fairly well.

Buddhists now wish to make Buddhism the basis for a modern state, democracy, development, social justice, and good relations with nature. I wish Buddhists well. But the original ideas of Siddhartha cannot alone serve as the basis. I don't think he meant them to. I hope modern Buddhists can merge the ideas of Siddhartha with ideas of a good state from elsewhere without falling back into karma, merit, Charisma, grandiose folk Buddhism, and a Buddhist version of Hinduism.

Christianity and Buddhism are systems that eat the world, with holes in the center, but Christians made great institutions such as rule of law, science, democracy, and education while Buddhists did not. It is easy to praise or blame religion but religion alone is not the key. Rather, cultures-and-societies are more important. (The people in) Cultures-and-societies use religion to rationalize what they wish to do for their own reasons. Religion added to differing drifts of East and West but it did not cause them. Religion now would not stop any cultures from making good institutions if the people set their minds to do so. People can adopt good ideas and institutions if they wish. Buddhism can help. (I lump South Asia in the East although most of the obvious dominant motifs in South Asia came from Indo-European culture.)

Then how can Buddhism help make good institutions and a good modern state? Buddhists have to accept that the ideas for good institutions and a good modern state do not come intrinsically, directly, inevitably, and only out of the original ideas of Siddhartha. The basis for good institutions and a good modern state have to be added to his ideas. Christians had to add ideas of the Greeks and Romans to Jesus to make Western civilization, good institutions, and good states. Jesus' ideas alone are not enough. Buddhism helps because, like Christianity, it can recognize and accept a good idea when it sees

one, and nothing in Buddhism is against the ideas and institutions needed for a good modern state. Much in Buddhism, such as rationalism and the idea of being helpful, can support a good modern state.

Buddhists should not worry about borrowing ideas. They have to borrow. Everyone has to borrow, and societies do it all the time. The Greeks borrowed geometry from the Egyptians and the alphabet from the Phoenicians. Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos all added to Buddhism to make distinct ways of life although each boasts that it got its distinct life directly and only from first principles from the Buddha. Buddhists should not worry about total originality and about getting everything directly from first principles from the Buddha. They should worry that they borrow only good ideas and use them well. They should pick the best from the Buddha and make sure that what they do borrow does not go against that. When they do this, they can bring Buddhist identity into the modern world and still preserve their own basic cultures and national identities.

Originally, Buddhism denied the system of rulers and Brahmin priests. Buddhism insisted people could and should take care of their own spiritual business and general conduct. But modern Buddhists love to explain how Buddhist ideas are closely tied to governing, Buddhism validates the state, the state supports Buddhism, they need each other, ritual is a big part, and it all needs monks. If a modern Buddhist dislikes the current state, he-she explains how it goes against his-version of idealized Buddhism, how his-her idea of a good state goes along with his-her version of idealized Buddhism, and how his-her type of Buddhism supports his-her idea of a good state. In effect, Buddhism and the state are one again as Brahmins and the state once were one. "Déjà vu all over again". Buddhist argument about close relations between Buddhism and the state is not useful anymore than arguments for a close relation between Methodist Christianity and the state. Buddhists need to see what they do, and, in this case, need to go back to the idea of Siddhartha that identity between state and religion is not the highest goal.

Brief Assessment Continued: Enough Good-Enough Adept-Enough People.

If Buddhism waits until enough people have awakened and have defeated suffering before it can build a good government and tackle world issues, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough people to awaken-enough-and-act-well-enough-through-working-on-the-defeat-of-suffering, it will fail. If Buddhism waits for enough Buddhists to master an Aid well enough, such as Empty Mind, before it can build a good state and tackle world issues, it will fail. Likewise, if Christianity waits for enough Christians to be surely saved so they can build good government and tackle world issues, it will fail, and it has failed. If Christianity waits for enough people to act well enough because they "see the light", "fear the Lord", "love the Lord", deeply want Heaven, and want to do good in His Name, then it will fail, and has failed. The same is true of all religions. In a state with many religions, all of them combined will not do the job.

We need enough good-enough adept-enough people, soon, to build good institutions and tackle world issues. We don't have that. We won't get it by going through religious and moral revival first. We can use religious ideas and institutions, and should, but that won't be enough and we can't wait for religion to do the job. We must rely on general education in morals, character, and reasoning, and on the natural, biological, and social realms. We must be honest about the historical role of religion in giving ideas and goals but we have to go regardless. Religions need to think not only how they can save people from sin and suffering but also how they can assist in this task even if they do not dominate the task.

Few places in the world have brought good quality realistic education to the majority of their citizens and the United States is not one. It is worth inquiring why we failed but here is not the place for the inquiry. Mostly the citizens have themselves to blame. Bad leaders helped.

Brief Assessment Continued: What is Unique about Buddhism?

No major religion was unique in its time except maybe Hebraic ethical monotheism when it first arose, and none is really unique now. Then why do people insist their religion is unique and why do they resist other religions so much even when the moralities are so nearly the same? How do differences between ideal religion and practiced religion affect attitudes? To answer, and to assess Buddhism on the basis of the answers, is a topic outside this book. The most commonly cited unique feature for Buddhism likely is the non-absolute self. I invite readers to list key features of their religion without thinking if the features are unique and to list key features of a rival religion. Focus on behaviors such as the Golden Rule and Compassion more than on dogma such as “there is only one god”. Make a list for your ideal religion and one for your practiced religion. Make both lists for the rival religion. Compare the lists. Make sure to compare your ideal to their ideal and your practiced religion to their practiced religion. When you know enough about Buddhism, add it to the exercise.

Brief Assessment Continued: Success in Buddhism.

Very few people can succeed by Buddhist standards, can totally end suffering and fully awaken. It might seem odd to have as the one-and-only goal(s) of a religion a task at which exceedingly few people can succeed. It is not so strange. People can succeed partially in lesser ways than through full awakening and totally defeating suffering, and those are good goals in themselves, such as acting morally. I explain a bit more in Parts 3 and 4. People in Mahayana and Hinduism have the same problem because they too are based on a Dharma system in which the total end of suffering and full awakening is the supreme goal(s). They too have in-transit goals similar to Theravada; Mahayana and Hinduism use savior figures; and Hinduism allows other ways to succeed well such as devotion, asceticism, intellect, and wisdom. Christianity and Islam do not allow a human ever to succeed on self merits, people can succeed only by the Grace of God, and God need not give His Grace; so it might seem those religions are gloomier than Buddhism. But, in those religions, people also can succeed on lesser levels, and, in the end, God does seem to give Grace much more than people feared. Judaism, Taoism, and Confucianism stand apart somewhat, and there is no point in reviewing them here.

I don't know how to address whether Buddhism is more or less gloomy for the average not-so-adept Joe and Jane than, say, Christianity. Some people who get the ideas of suffering and of awakening might be discouraged just as Protestants get discouraged when they get the ideas of Fallen Humans and Original Sin. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin could be “real downers”.

Still, there is a difference between the ultimate goal of Buddhism versus the ultimate goals of a religion like Christianity (following Jesus' teachings). The provisional goals of Buddhism, such as good conduct and success in meditation, certainly are good but they are not the final goal and are not lesser versions of it. In following Jesus, only one person could completely love God and neighbors but provisional goals are similar to the ultimate goal and are lesser versions of it, such as forgiving people and following the Golden Rule as much as possible. The final goal of loving God and neighbor is an unreachable ideal but it is an

ideal that gives real guidance. In Buddhism, the final goal remains unreachable and does not really guide intermediate goals. Intermediate goals are not lesser versions of the final goal. The relations between ultimate goal, ideal, intermediate goals, and real, differ in the different kinds of religions. One reason that Mahayana and Hinduism overcame Theravada is their variety of intermediate goals that make sense on their own without much reference to the final goal. It would take too much space here to go more into how differences play out. Given that most people don't worry much about this issue, intermediate goals are similar for all religions, and are worthwhile on their own, this chapter is not the place to dwell on the topic. I come back to this topic in other writing.

Suffering versus “Not Worthwhile”, Buddhist Aids, and the Self; See Parts 3 and Part 7.

Here I should comment more on suffering and “not worthwhile”, and defend my use of “not worthwhile”. That takes too long. I put more material on this topic at the end of the chapter. It is easy to convert what I say below about “not worthwhile” to “suffering”, so, if you wish to use “suffering”, do so. You can benefit from the material in this chapter whether you see in terms of “suffering” or “not worthwhile”.

PART 3: DESIRE, CLINGING, STICKY LIFE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND AWAKENING

This part of the chapter looks at Buddhist ideas that are relevant to everyone. Buddhism excels at these issues and gives its greatest benefit by making us look deeply at life through these issues.

We need to see that we do desire and cling and we should let go of many things. We also need to see what we wish to hold, to what extent, how, and why. We need to feel the depth, diversity, and tenacity of clinging before we can manage it. We need to think what makes life worthwhile, what hurts worthwhile life, what might make life not worthwhile, and what makes needless suffering. How could smart Buddhists say life is beset by suffering and imply life is not worthwhile? Seeing their view is better than retorting “Damn, life is worthwhile” or shouting “God said creation is good, so it is, including all life, including mine”. What do we all wake up to?

For the topics of awakening and “not worthwhile”, I present material mostly negatively. I give ideas about awakening and “not worthwhile” and then show how Buddhist ideas have to go beyond those. I challenge Buddhists: “You, an adept Buddhist, thought that was how Buddhism saw awakening and-or suffering. But you are wrong. So what does pure real full Buddhism say? What is Buddhism really all about?” Non-Buddhists have to think why the idea that I critique is not enough, think what idea might be correct, or see if there is no correct response in your frame. Siddhartha wanted us to think for ourselves and here is a good place to start.

I apologize that the detail can get annoying. The detail is not as important as what it points at, which is “What kind of life does Buddhism aim for?” I can't get directly at life for Buddhists without going through all the detail first. A Buddhist can't decide what kind of life is possible without deciding first what desires to keep or defeat, and how to handle which desires.

Even after the detail, this book can't get at the best life for a Buddhist. That is another big topic, it would need a work itself, and likely it should be done by a Buddhist. If I did it, I would not do it from a Buddhist

view but from the stance given in Part One of this book. My view would give Buddhists material to fight with me but it would do little good.

Instead, please ask yourself often what kind of life Buddhists could live given what the detail here implies about what they aim for, what they have to give up, what they can keep, and how to give it up or keep it. What kind of life would a dedicated Buddhist live? No more than most Christians, most Buddhists don't live dedicated to religious ideals but instead seek success in this world, and seek a rationale for success. The rationale should act to keep them within bounds of decency and within some (but not all) bounds set by their religion. What kind of rationale can Buddhism give for a normal successful life in this real world, within fairly decent limits, a rationale that takes into account evolved human nature, and accepts needs for family, religious activities such as ritual, religious power, competition, capitalism, the state, modern plural states, many states in one world, differences in wealth and power, and the needs for material well being, progress, justice, social justice, to keep the environment, the influence of distinct cultures, and the need to keep some distinct cultures? Other religions have to do the same.

(A) (1) Wrong Ideas, Impermanence, Desire, and Clinging.

From my version of the Four Truths from above, pretty much in accord with official doctrine:

Truth (2) Suffering has causes. The closest cause of suffering is clinging; desire causes clinging; and wrong ideas enable desire. Although not the only wrong idea, the root wrong idea is that some things in the world are permanent and so can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction, especially the wrong idea that our self is eternal and can serve as the source of permanent full satisfaction.

Truth (3) The causes of suffering can be ended (defeated), and so suffering can end. Buddhism can end the wrong idea of permanence, end other wrong ideas, end desire, end clinging, and so end suffering.

It looks as if we should begin with wrong ideas about permanence-and-impermanence, then move on to other wrong ideas, before we tackle desire, clinging, and suffering. We should see better the roles of knowing, permanence, and impermanence. Some teachers do take this path. In the West, Socrates and Plato took this path (via Knowing, Being, and Becoming). It is not the best first path. It is better to go into desire and clinging first. I hope to go more into this topic in other writing. Here I give enough to let you feel better about going to desire and clinging.

-The problem of impermanence usually is tackled with the "picking apart" that I described in an earlier chapter. Those methods, and the results, are easily abused. They have to be handled with care, and that careful handling takes a lot of space.

-Different things are (a) impermanent or (b) durable in (1) different ways and (2) different degrees; and the differences matter. If you leave an orange outdoors, it degrades faster than a car and in different ways. If you leave an orange or a child in a car on a hot day, similar things happen but the difference matters. If an orange gets a moldy spot, you throw it out; if your body gets a moldy spot, you go see a doctor; if your mind gets a moldy spot, what do you do? The impermanence of a chance for sex is not the same as the impermanence as an almost-car-accident, and which is more important depends on age.

-If a monk gets sick, he-she sees a doctor. The visit can cost the temple support group a lot. The money might be better spent on a young healthy replacement monk. Why does any monk go see a doctor? Why not just let nature take its course and, in case you die, be reborn again?

-Buddhists disdain everything impermanent, which means almost everything except maybe the Dharma: Everything impermanent is misleading more than truthful, and so bad more than good. This attitude is part of the general stance that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. Impermanence is not always the enemy. Some impermanent things are useful and even help spiritual advance. Your mind is not forever but, when the Buddha says to think for yourself, he seems to agree with the Jefferson Airplane: "Your mind's guaranteed, it's all you'll ever need". A good teacher is not forever but he-she can mean the world to a student. A copy of the Tripitaka is not forever but every temple should have one. The sutras from the era of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama are not forever, will be lost, and will be replaced by sutras of another Buddha, which in turn will be lost, etc. Your body must wear out but we all have one and should care for it. Without it, we could not awaken. Helping a child cross a swollen stream brings up many impermanent things but the task is still worth doing. Jesus might not appear on every planet with sentient beings. It is wrong to rely on these things absolutely but not wrong to rely somewhat, to gain what they can give, as long as we keep perspective.

The key is not to deny all impermanence or deny all that is less-than-absolute but to learn what is useful, how useful, how not useful, and to use properly what is given to us. This stance is harder than simply denying all impermanence or non-absolute.

The glib Buddhist attitude that all impermanent things are bad effectively blocks this better attitude about usefulness. I doubt Siddhartha had this glib attitude against all impermanence. Buddhists should ask how Buddhism got this glib attitude and why they keep it. Much the same happened in Greek philosophy and in some Christian and Muslim theologies in the battle between being and becoming and in ideas of the Fall and Fallen Bad World. This glib attitude invited some good Mahayana and Hinduism, those that accept and correctly use some impermanent things, but also a lot of bad Mahayana and Hinduism.

-Some durable recurrent things are bad and are not the platform on which we wish base progress: pride, greed, anger, lust for power, lust for sex, selfishness, etc. Welcome to the Dark Side.

-People know quite well that what-they-use-as-the-basis-for-satisfaction is not permanent but they do it anyway, such as with house, car, job, fame, and family. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still do it anyway.

-People know some things are permanent but do not use them as the basis for living and satisfaction, such as logic and rationality, the findings of science, the Dharma, God, Grace, Love, Compassion, and Justice. They are not fully ignorant in the Buddhist sense but they still not do it anyway.

-As Socrates, Plato, Paul, Augustine, Aristotle, and Hume saw, and every parent sees, knowledge alone is not enough, not even clear knowledge of permanence and impermanence. It takes more. I do not guess here what more it takes and how to get that across.

-People over-commit in a way beyond the irrationality inherent in the thing itself, such as by being a fan of sports, fashion, art, politics, glamour, romantic love, or religion.

-People under-commit given the temptation inherent in the irrationality of the thing but still cannot let go fully in the way that Buddhism needs, such as with politics, family, job, romantic love, and religion.

-"Do it anyway" and degree of commitment are not a matter merely of knowledge, of good ideas and bad ideas, of mental clarity and mental defilements.

-People sometimes do act appropriately on the basis of the permanence or impermanence of an idea-or-thing yet they are not awake in the Buddhist sense. People can kick a bad kid out of the house but that does not make them awake. People can work for a corporation without loving the corporation because, in the modern world, they cannot make a living by begging or out in the forest, but that does not make them awake. People can love art to the extent that it adds to their life and to the extent that it is a great legacy of humanity, and only to those extents, but that does not make them awake. People know some political causes are ridiculous and can't last but support them anyway to the right extent. People can act aloof and act as if not enticed by desire and clinging but that does not mean they are awake.

-No naturally evolved sentient being can think with full clarity and consistency and no such being can be entirely integral and consistent. We cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas and we cannot entirely get rid of all wrong ideas with roots in mistakes about permanence and impermanence. We cannot get rid of all wrong ideas enough so that we can get rid of all desire and clinging. In contrast, we can think well enough to manage as I describe below but still we cannot think with perfect clarity and consistency. If Buddhism requires perfect consistency and clarity, and that seems to be its claim, then people can never succeed in getting rid of all wrong ideas and can never wake up in the Buddhist sense. If Buddhism requires perfect clarity and consistency, then it is wrong. I think some people, but not all, can think well enough and can wake up enough.

-The large majority of Buddhist texts do mention impermanence before getting on to desire, clinging, and suffering; but they make only a perfunctory ritual nod to be orthodox, and what they say is not helpful and can be confusing. They too see the real first problem as desire, clinging, and suffering but they do not actually say so.

If Buddhism could mix its ideas of human nature with scientific ideas of evolved human nature it could strengthen arguments about impermanence, all other wrong ideas, desire, clinging, and suffering. It still might not succeed perfectly as it wishes or as I wish.

It is still worth thinking about permanence, impermanence, right ideas, wrong ideas, desire, and clinging even if permanence and impermanence are not alone the key to right and wrong ideas and right and wrong ideas are not alone the key to desire, clinging, and suffering.

(A) (2) End Clinging and Overcome Desire.

To awaken, we must end suffering. To end suffering, we must end-or-overcome clinging. And, to end-or-overcome clinging, we must overcome-or-end desire.

Buddhism is not entirely clear what desires and clinging we should defeat and what we may hold on to. This issue is not a mere game because, for example, while we might let go of watching TV, we cannot let go of the Dharma, Buddhism, Wisdom, all compassion, logic, science, or the idea of temporary person (an-atman). Other religions tell us to let go of desires, material things such as wealth, attitudes such as hate, and ideas such as “we are better than them” or success; but they never tell us to let go of wisdom, morality, compassion, the Golden Rule, prayer, devotion, God (Allah), nature, integrity, or spontaneity. Confusion over what to end, what to hold, how much to hold, and how to hold, is bolstered in Buddhism because it focuses on suffering and does not come to grips with the issue of worthwhile life yet Buddhism strongly implies life is not worthwhile. If Buddhism were clearer about issues of not worthwhile life and the relation of not worthwhile to suffering, Buddhism would be clearer about ending, overcoming, letting go, and holding on to desires and clinging.

We desire, and cling to, not only material things but also to ideas, feelings, and attitudes, especially ideas and attitudes such as power, love, success, help God, help Dharma, find the Tao, serve Heaven, the Four Truths, art, do not cling, end desire, end suffering, awaken, and “I am a smart astute skeptical guy”.

“End” and “overcome” are not the only approaches to desire and clinging, and they are not hard-and-fast techniques. They represent attitudes-and-methods to take toward desire and clinging. The material here should suggest variations that you can use.

(A) (2) (A) I do not define desire here. To “cling” to something is to keep it in the back of your mind, think of it often, think about it from time to time, wish for it, feel life would be better with it than without, want it whether life would be better with it or without it, depend on it, or depend on the wish for it. You don’t have to be a fiend. Most people cling to hundreds of things without knowing it. A grudge is clinging but so are: kissing mommy goodnight, love, loving art, loving order, science, and giving to United Way.

Desire and clinging are similar but not the same. To cling is not to desire-a-desire or we get a strange loop, and, besides, they feel different. Because they differ, we have to use different techniques to handle them. Because they are similar, the techniques overlap and we can easily get confused, so we have to be as clear as we can. For instance, it is hard to draw a sharp line between love versus the usual clinging that comes naturally from love; but it is easy see that some love runs over into bad clinging and even into obsession. It is harder to see that ALL love causes clinging, so it is almost impossible to separate love from clinging and good-love-without-clinging from bad-love-with-too-much-clinging.

Nature gave us many desires and nature usually made sure we cling to them, as for example for wealth, family, a good reputation, community, power, to uphold morality, to have relations with spirits, and to seek deep ideas such as awakening.

(A) (2) (B1) End. Think of desire and clinging as idea-attitude. To end an idea-attitude is to stop it, not feel it if possible, and never to act on it. To end might entail not thinking about it at all, effectively to erase it from our minds. We can do this with some ideas-attitudes such as desire for goose liver spread but it is much harder with others such as for basic food, shelter, friends, affection, and security.

(A) (2) (B2) Overcome. To overcome is not always to end. “Overcome” does not mean that we never feel an idea-attitude or that we erase it from our sensibilities and minds. We can overcome the desire for, and clinging to, fashionable clothing but that does not mean we erase the idea of clothing from our minds and that we never buy new pieces when old ones wear out. We can overcome desire for friends and we can even end clinging to friendship but it is hard to entirely erase the idea-attitude of friendship and never to act on it. “End” is stronger than “overcome”. “Overcome” is stronger than “control”.

(A) (2) (B3) I would guess that both to overcome and to end is to think-feel-act so that an idea-attitude-thing does not lead to suffering. If an idea-attitude-thing does lead to suffering, we have not ended it or we have not sufficiently overcome it. This definition is fine in theory but it doesn’t give us what we need. We need to know how to deal with clinging and desire so they don’t lead to suffering. That is hard. It takes work and experience.

(A) (2) (B4) To stop an idea-attitude-thing from leading to suffering, sometimes we have to end it but we don’t always have to kill it and delete it. We have to take a different approach to specific different desires and specific different instances of clinging. Hopefully looking at a few cases can give us an idea.

(A) (2) (B5) Different schools of Buddhism stress different ways to end and to overcome desires and clinging. We have to learn about the approaches and what schools say. I don’t go into details but you have to know some background.

(A) (2) (B6) Buddhism as-a-whole is not clear if we should end desire-in-general and clinging-in-general or overcome desire-in-general and clinging-in-general; and Buddhism is not clear which desires to end or overcome and what clinging to end or overcome. Buddhism is not clear what end and overcome mean; different schools have different ideas. Especially when Buddhism advises merely to overcome rather than end, it is not clear what “overcome” and “end” mean and is not clear how to end or overcome.

(A) (2) (B7) Often in writing you see “let go”. “Let go” seems to lie between “end” and “overcome”, seems more effective than both, like a magic middle. “Let go” has much value and I do get around to comments on it. But “let go” is not a magic answer. To appreciate the value of “let go”, we have to go through “end” and “overcome” first. When you get comfortable with “end” and “overcome” then “let go” makes more sense. “Let go” is more like “overcome” than “end”. If it helps, think of “let go” as a variant of “overcome” and vice versa. If you want a mental workout, wherever I assess end or overcome for a case of clinging or desire, try applying “let go” to see how it works or doesn’t work.

(A) (2) (C1) Clinging. Simplistically, in theory, Buddhism might advise that we end all clinging, end many desires but not all, and overcome the desires that we cannot end. In practice, it is hard to end all clinging, so we have to merely overcome some clinging; and it is hard to overcome many desires without also ending them, so we have to end many desires. It is hard to tell which is which.

Some Buddhism becomes “end all desire and end all clinging” – likely not possible. Some Buddhism becomes “overcome both desire and clinging” – likely not effective enough. Much Buddhism becomes an unclear mixture. Zen, likely due to Taoist influence, says “Trust your own judgment about what to end and overcome, and how to end or overcome, but do end most clinging and do overcome most desires”. I like that.

(A) (2) (C2) In theory, end all clinging. Clinging is bad. Not only in theory but as a matter of obvious fact in real life, clinging leads to suffering. In practice, the line is not easy to draw and some clinging is not so bad. Buddhism insists we feel morality and act morally. It is hard to do that without clinging. Buddhism insists on compassion, and it is hard to do that without clinging. The Buddha taught for about fifty years, and all Buddhists would say he did it without clinging, yet I am not sure. Monks teach lay people, and I doubt all monks do so without clinging. There is nothing wrong with a monk doing a bit of science but most scientists cling to their work. Monks extol monks who are experts in the scriptures and in Buddhist theory but I know from direct observation that people cannot become experts without clinging. We want doctors, teachers, journalists, and priests to be dedicated. Of course, most clinging is bad, and it is still worth trying to end as much clinging as possible. But to try end all clinging is to cling to the idea of end-all-clinging, and we don't want that either.

(A) (2) (C3) As it is hard to end some clinging – compassion - also it is hard to overcome some clinging without ending it. It is hard to be involved in love or politics without clinging. You cannot have a child without clinging. Clinging to political positions causes much damage in the world. It is almost impossible to really believe in a religion without clinging, even Buddhism. It is hard to muster just the right amount of belief in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, to be a good believer, without also clinging to the religion and its comforts, and so opening the door to disdaining others and causing harm. Yet should we end all religion, whether God exists or not, the Dharma exists or not, because religion must cause more harm than good? Do we foster political anarchy (a position to which people cling) because politics and political positions cause much of the damage in the world?

(A) (2) (D1) Desire. What would happen if we ended nearly all desires? People would not be Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Hindus. People would not support democracy. Nobody would learn Buddhist texts. People would forget about the Buddha and Dharma. Nobody would meditate. People would not bother with families. People would be neither very friendly nor at all abusive. Nobody would do science. We would revert to a haphazard gathering of wild food for a living. Even in the all-natural world, nobody would bother to look at a beautiful sunset and likely nobody would be sure if it was beautiful or only rosy colored. Some people might think this would be a good world, but they would have to give up that opinion and that desire too. Many desires are useful, not only for life, but for supporting the kind of world that Buddhists, even the Buddha, want. Even some good desires with attendant clinging are useful, as when people ardently meditate and study the scriptures.

(A) (2) (D2) In theory, we can desire something but not cling. On a hot day, we can desire an ice cream cone; but, if we don't get the ice cream right away, and we are able to not fret about the lack, not take firm steps to get ice cream, and forget about the desire fairly soon, then we can have the desire but do not cling to the desire. It is not clear if this action-attitude ends clinging, lets go of clinging, or overcomes it.

(A) (2) (D3) So, it seems we should overcome desires so we use them but we do not cling through them. In some cases we might be able to overcome desire but not end it and not cling through it. We can put off the desire to drink water, urinate, or serve the Dharma, but we might not be able to end it. If we can put off desire enough, we might be able to overcome-or-end any clinging that comes of the desire, such as the need to drink only cool well water or build a monastery with a stupa (pagoda). It is not clear if this attitude-action is to overcome the desire but I think so.

(A) (2) (D4) INTERLUDE: The desire to end all desires is a desire. In fact, it is obsessive and compulsive in a way that most normally human normally problematic desires don't come close to. It is near insanity. Of course, it is self-contradictory. Its self-contradiction is related to the logical issues that I discuss below under "let go of letting go".

More than a logical puzzle, it is a real problem that Buddhism has to deal with and that all seekers have to deal with. If we end the desire to end desires, does that mean we have to fall back into the whole sticky icky world with all the mistakes and pain that we tried to leave? Are we doomed to fail? Some schools of Mahayana and Hinduism seem to say so, and then make this apparent failure into a greater success (as God makes evil into greater good) by making this particular falling back into the world part of the great joyous Dharma system.

Or, can we end the worst desires but keep the best desires, such as compassion, in the right amounts? I think we can cope. Is coping what Siddhartha tried to teach? Likely, but I can't argue this view against 2500 years of Buddhism. All religions teach some coping, which is why I suggested Classical Stoics and Cynics. Coping is part of managing. To overcome bad desires, and control even most good desires, is part of managing. Managing is a lot harder than it sounds. It is as hard as trying to end all desires but, to me, it is a lot saner.

Trying to end all desires, or even strongly overcome all desires, supports the implication that life is not worthwhile. Shifting to cope, firmly overcome, and manage, does not have to make life worthwhile but it does help. Managing makes it easier to accept that life is worthwhile and to work on making life more worthwhile for us and others.

Jesus knew the allure and value of ending desires when he pointed out that lust begins in the mind, and, to be pure, we would have to clean our minds. He also knew to scrub the mind was impossible for mere humans, and he advised ways to deal with bad thoughts and to prevent bad acts. I suspect Siddhartha the Buddha had pretty much the same ideas but they got out of control.

(A) (2) (E1) To overcome desires without ending them is good in theory but hard in practice. It is hard to merely overcome a desire without eventually having to end the desire. It is hard to end being moralistic, feeling superior and telling people what to do, without also ending morality and simple moral judgment – especially for beings in which morality evolved. The cases in which we can merely overcome desire and do not need to end desire likely should NOT set the pattern for general strategy about desire. In the case of ice cream, even if we avoid clinging now, desire might give rise to more clinging later that we cannot end, let go, or overcome. That is one reason why ice cream trucks make regular rounds. "It is easy to say but hard to do".

Some desires we might be able to end such as the desire to murder someone who wronged us. Even with these desires, more likely we overcome rather than end entirely – dreams of revenge linger on for decades. Desire is like that.

(A) (2) (E2) If we cannot end a desire, we don't have to act on all desires. We really don't have to murder a bad person who wronged us. We don't have to embezzle even if we would not get caught. We don't

have to seduce anyone. We don't have to eat junk food. Inaction on desires might be to end, let go, or overcome clinging and desire.

(A) (2) (E3) Trying to end clinging without also ending or nearly-ending desire is like telling an alcoholic to have only one drink or a smoker to have one cigarette. Clinging and desire don't work that way. When a problem is out of hand, it is better to forbid than to say "only a bit". When we forbid, and the forbidding works, it is not clear whether to call that result "end" or merely "overcome". Mohammad forbade alcohol and human images, and some Christians ban alcohol, icons, movies, and singing. Buddhist monks may not drink alcohol, have sex, marry, or have children. In the normal human condition, it is easier (a) to get rid of the desire and its objects entirely, to successfully forbid desire, than (b1) first to overcome clinging and then (b2) indulge the desire only to the proper non-clinging extent. Eventually, Buddhists get around to "end or nearly-end desire" even if they also teach to end clinging or overcome clinging.

(A) (2) (E4) We can't end all desires, and we can't overcome some desires without ending them. What to do?

Buddhism is not clear on these situations yet the points cannot be overlooked. The training needed to deal differs with situations, the chance of success differs, and the kind of possible success differs.

Buddhism tends to say we should end nearly all clinging; and I agree. But the need to end clinging is not definite, and to end clinging is hard, so we might end most clinging but need only to overcome some other clinging. Buddhism varies on what to do with desire. I think, mostly, Buddhism says to overcome desire; but some Buddhism also says to end all desire. In theory, Buddhism is clear that we need to end suffering. But, to end suffering, first we must deal with clinging and desire, and uncertainty about doing those tasks makes Buddhism also uncertain about suffering. That strikes at the heart of Buddhism.

Some Buddhism says "End all clinging, end all desire, and so end suffering". Some Buddhism says "You may desire anything as long as you do no harm and don't think about it too much, as long as you do not cling hard. Merely overcome even clinging. Not to harm, and not to think too much, is to overcome, and to overcome is all that is needed to end suffering". Most Buddhism is a mix in between.

(A) (2) (E5) Think about what it means to end desire or even to merely overcome desire. We are not logical machines destined to think with perfect clarity and consistency. We are not slaves to emotions either. Nature gave us many of our desires. To end a naturally-based desire means to go against nature in a harsh definitive way. Once you cross that line, you can't go back. It changes us in a deep way forever. Even to overcome a naturally-desire does much the same. We do have to control most of our desires most of the time, even naturally-based desires. We cannot give in to hatred, revenge, and the urge to pee anytime anywhere. But if we take out all the desires that nature gave us, or all the desires that are based on the desires that nature gave us, we have little left. Likely, we won't know what to do with what little we do have left.

Most people want to keep a fair amount of evolved human nature (natural nature). That does not mean you keep it all. It does not mean you don't end some parts and overcome other parts. We do have to end some clinging and desire, and overcome some clinging and desire. We have to let go of some parts of natural nature.

Likewise, keeping a lot of natural nature does not mean you have to see yourself and natural nature as part of a giant beautiful Dharma system in which the bad secretly supports the good and it all works out well in the end. Natural nature is not necessarily secretly all joy. Don't make a "rebound" mistake when you reject the rejection of natural nature.

What does Theravada, Mahayana, or Hinduism really want you to be like? Think about what to end or overcome and why. Think about what to keep and why.

(A) (2) (F) All this uncertainty causes confusion and some damage. Likely you are confused and bruised. I try to lessen confusion but I cannot take it all away because confusion is in the subject.

I get tired of writing only "end" and "overcome". Because they overlap, I can use similar words that imply both, such as "defeat" and "conquer", and sometimes I can use them as synonyms, without making more confusion and damage. When I need to be more precise, I am.

(A) (2) (G) Advice: Before you try to end clinging, think through problems of suffering and worthwhile, and think through your desires in light suffering and worthwhile - what you might hold on to and let go of. When you have better ideas about those, then you can work on clinging and you have a better chance of success against clinging. When you think about suffering and worthwhile, also think about desire, even if desire is not the main inquiry.

(A) (2) (H) The usual term for clinging is "attachment" but, in my English, "attachment" is neutral, clinical, polite, dry, high, and far. "Clinging" is closer and wetter. "Attachment" has technical meanings from psychology and biology that could cause confusion. In the Thai version of Pali, the usual term for both the relation of clinging and object of clinging is "kilet" ("gee" as in "go", "ee" as in "bee", and "late", so "gee late"). "Kilet" can mean anything from consistent interest to full-blown obsession. It can also mean a strong desire. There is no point going through the many Pali terms and I am not an expert anyway.

(A) (2) (I) I do not say whether to end desire and clinging, or overcome, is to suppress them. Buddhism is not clear. Buddhism is clear that, when fully successful (awake), we should never feel suffering even if we feel the conditions that lead to suffering such as missing a friend after he-she dies. To see Buddhist ideas primarily in mental ways, in terms only of psychology, leads easily to errors. Sheldon from TVs "Big Bang" correctly complained of this view when Amy held it. Also, "suppressing" raises issues about mental health, especially in the modern age when we are supposed not to suppress anything, and those issues are not useful here, so I avoid them.

(A) (2) (J) When you read enough Buddhism, you might see that Theravada tends to say on "end desires, and clinging automatically is not an issue" while Mahayana tends to say "end clinging and automatically you can overcome desires". The distinction is not sharp. Both schools try to handle both desires and clinging, and both schools pretty much teach the defeat of desires and clinging. Both schools teach both end and overcome although I have not detected typical patterns (I have not looked hard).

(A) (2) (K) Humans evolved desires and clinging. Desires and clinging are natural. The Dharma gave us desires and clinging. As noted in Part 1 of this chapter, to end-or-overcome desires and clinging is to use

nature against nature, Dharma against Dharma. Smart people in Dharma systems say it is not to use Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma but to use Dharma to fulfill Nature-Dharma, to realize its highest potential. I don't think that is what original Buddhism had in mind. Also, using Nature-Dharma against Nature-Dharma is related to a logical problem about "let go of letting go" that I note below. These issues get worse when we recall that our desires evolved and are part of our deepest nature. I don't belabor any of this because it takes too long and is not needed here. I do point the issues out because they are fun to think about and because they show up in various guises in further reading.

(A) (2) (L) My response to all this is "manage", which is like a mix of overcome, end, and "let go" but does not require the full success of any. I work with desire, clinging, end, overcome, let go, and defeat as best I can. My stance is like Taoism and Zen but not exactly like either. I say more about manage below. I do not say much because this chapter is not really on that subject. The first Part of this book gives my idea of manage. Use and channel your evolved nature. Do the right things for the right reasons. Jesus told you what those are. Work hard to make the world better. Be decent. Make good institutions. Trust God.

(A) (3) More on Desire, Clinging, Balance and Imbalance, and Manage.

Buddhism becomes: to awaken, to end suffering, we have to defeat all desires. So, one of the highest-level goals of Buddhism becomes to defeat desires. Although not explicitly in the Four Truths, tradition adds: To defeat desires, end clinging. So, to end clinging and awaken, we use Aids such as meditation, and must become adept in using some Aids. That is how many laypeople and monks present Buddhism, as seeking to defeat all desires, as having the means to defeat all desires, and as dwelling in the means. But, Buddhism is not clear if defeat means to overcome or end; not clear what overcome or end mean; and it is vague about how to defeat, overcome, or end desires, despite definite techniques. The lack of clarity causes confusion.

I disagree with Buddhism that ending desire is effectively the highest goal by leading to all other goals. Instead, I think we need to manage desires, and we manage desires to make worthwhile life more so and to better work hard for the world. "Overcome", "end", "defeat", and "manage" have much in common but they are not entirely the same.

We cannot end all desires or even all clinging, yet Buddhism says that we do have to end all desires and clinging to end suffering and to awaken. I think (a) confusion over suffering and awakening, and (b) not coming to grips with the issue of worthwhile life, (1) lead to confusion over the teaching that we have to end all desires and clinging, and (2) blind Buddhism to the desires and clinging that it does keep. This, in turn, opens the way for Mahayana and Hinduism and for confusion in Mahayana and Hinduism.

Reminder: "Desire" includes not only obsessing over a job or a car but also the need for water on a hot day, the wish to see a particular person, the wish to see a particular show on TV, love for art, ideas such as triumph of democracy and awakening, attitudes such as irritability and compassion, emotions such as love for family and hate of "them", the search to end clinging, seeking to end desire, seeking to awaken, seeking to follow the Dharma, hopes, and dreams. Often desires have objects such as the family that we love and to wake up. Even irritability has a kind-of object in that we wish to be left alone or wish to bite somebody's head off. It is useful sometimes to think of desires in terms of their objects.

(1) People have desires given to us by evolution, as for air, water, food, shelter, clothing, sex, mates, family life, some wealth, some power, friends, community, and links to spirits. (2) We can abuse natural desires by (a) doing them too often or too seldom or (b) doing them too much or too little, (c) so they are out of normal healthy balance with other desires and activities. (3) We can learn desires such as for success in a profession, a big asset portfolio, success as a monk, awakening, or salvation. (3a) Some learned desires have a firm natural base such as interest in pretty people. (3b) Some desires might have a basis in evolved nature but seem fairly independent such as desires for a tattoo or to make a scientific contribution. (4) As with natural desires, we can abuse them by (4a) doing them too often or too seldom or (4b) doing them too much or too little. We can go crazy over pop music, money, fashion (“The Devil Wears Prada”), or cornering the market on oranges (“Trading Places”). Some learned desires are fairly reasonable, we do not go crazy over them, and we fit them into our lives, such as the need to care for a lawn or to see a stage play. (5) Some desires are good or bad, regardless of their closeness to nature, how much they are learned, or their role in balance or imbalance. How much and how often we do them might make some difference but not enough to consider here. We must stress the good and reduce the bad. (6) Some desires are so bad and so aberrant that all religions and penal codes descry them, such as serial child molesting. I don’t consider them here.

Badness such as clinging comes through desires but some good things come through desires as well, often indirectly, but just as surely. We learn lesson through what we get that we weren’t looking for, and what we learn indirectly often is more valuable than the object of the desire. Put aside the movies and TV, and think how much young people learn when they buy their first car, especially, in the old days, when it needed work. People learn when they buy a house, especially if it needs work. People learn when they take care of a child even as a babysitter. People learn when they get a job with real responsibilities for property, life, and other people, even small responsibilities. People learn from disappointments from the objects of desire, as when a beloved old car finally dies. We learn to let go of desires but we also learn how to better manage some of the desires that we hold on to.

In the modern world, few of us have a good balance in our desires, so we don’t lead satisfying worthwhile lives as a result of a good balance. We are too far from nature and human nature. We compulsively do things to make up for emptiness such as binge TV or treat ourselves. Few of us are fiends obsessed and warped by desire, and so do harm, like a serial killer or rapist. Most of us live in a cloud of befuddlement, out of balance, compulsively seeking treats, compulsively pursuing a few juicy things such as success or romance, not treating other people and nature as we should, not being good citizens, with gnarled minds, doing more harm than we can admit. We all need to do better.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teach us to accept most desires that have a fairly firm link to evolved human nature, are moral, and not far out of balance. They teach us to be moderate so we keep a healthy balance and our minds are clear enough to connect with God and to make us good neighbors. They also teach us not to be entirely natural but to depart from nature and rise above nature: “Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s wife or other stuff” (the sexism is deliberate). They teach us to suppress bad desires even if those are natural such as to steal, gossip, and kill. No religion is purely natural.

In theory, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism teach us to get away from nature entirely and to escape the Wheel by overcoming or ending all desires including all natural desires. In practice, they leave that goal for an indefinite “later time” and instead they teach people to defeat their desires. Still, they never

entirely abandon “end or overcome all desire” as the highest goal. They treat all desires, natural or learned, in balance or out, as if those desires were among the desires that drive us out of balance, drive us half-crazy, or make us fiends.

Don't brush off Buddhism and Hinduism as silly and don't embrace deistic religions as if they are all for nature and all for balance. Buddhism certainly knows a good healthy natural balance from an unhealthy unnatural obsessed imbalance. Achieving a good healthy natural balance is a huge intermediate step on the way to final release, like the Buddha giving up harsh asceticism and letting his own natural vigor re-assert. It is on the Middle Way. In practice, Buddhism seems more likely to lead to good healthy natural balance than most deism. That is why, despite the dogma of “no desires at all”, Buddhism is charming and it appeals widely. Deistic religions can get crazy and lead people far away from nature and healthy balance. To me, John Calvin and Calvinist schools seem unnatural, bent on suppressing normal healthy desires, obsessed, out of balance, and near crazy.

While, in practice, the Dharma-based religions allow for keeping many desires and for finding a balance among desires, even so, they are not clear about ending desires and about balance. Lack of clarity makes confusion and contributes to the hole in the center of a system that eats the world.

No religion has a magic formula, or even a magic hallowed code, that says unerringly which desires, in which amounts, how often, we should pursue, and which we should overcome or suppress. Especially no religion has a formula for the modern world. All religions give good advice; and some codes, such as the Ten Commandments and the sayings of Jesus, still have great value. Simply mouthing “The Middle Path” does not do the trick but it can be a good place to start. All religions give bad advice and bad codes. When modern people find a pattern that suits them, often they can't tell if the pattern fits with the spirit of their religion or any religion. This gap leaves us open to anxiety and to control. It is worth thinking about you own desires and pattern of acting in light of your religious convictions, if only to reduce anxiety and make you less vulnerable to stupid ideas and bad people. Don't think the end of the world is nigh if your pattern does not mesh perfectly with some religion.

Likely the strongest example in recent art of bad desire, bad balance, clinging, struggle, and suffering is Gollum from “Lord of the Rings”. We find it hard to accept that Gollum is not a total aberration but is an extension of natural tendencies. Gollum is what happens to people trapped in a sticky world; caught in desire and clinging; mind defiled; twisted horribly; and suffering. Each of us is like Gollum in our ways. Recall “you are that” from the Upanishads. Even good Frodo falls victim. We are like Gollum not only in obvious addict-like clinging to power, wealth, sex, serving God, Dharma, the Tao, and magic rings, but in many smaller ways such as in loving sport, wanting a nice backyard, wanting to look good, loving family, and wanting our party to win always. Seeing Gollum as a logical yet perverted extension of nature and seeing our own self as like him is not a hammer seeing every issue as a nail. It is not an overstatement. It is not seeing the world as a sour melodrama of clinging and suffering. It is partial waking up, seeing what is really going on with ALL of us more than we had imagined. We are all Gollum-in-the-making. After we see, then we have to figure out what to do, and then actually do it. Buddhism sees the Gollum in all of us and wants to lead us away from that.

The orthodox Buddhist view is based on suffering and strongly implies that life is not worthwhile. In that view, a person must defeat all stickiness, desire, and clinging so as to defeat suffering and succeed, to

awaken. A person needs to end all mental defilements and needs to think with perfect consistency and clarity to end suffering and to awaken. To make sure you never are Gollum, you have to end not merely excess or imbalance but use a purified intellect to defeat all desires. The Buddhist ideal is “anti-Gollum”. The Buddhist ideal does not follow the Middle Path; it goes to one extreme to defeat all desire.

In my view based on “life is worthwhile”, in what I call “managing”, a person need not overcome all desire totally but needs only to manage stickiness, desire, clinging, etc. well enough. A person need not think with perfect clarity and consistency but only well enough. It is not easy, it is hard. My ideal is less anti-Gollum and more like Tom Bombadil, although I do not aim for the perfection of Tom Bombadil, his ability not to desire or cling to even absolute power. (Tom Bombadil is not the anti-Gollum any more than he is the anti-Gandalf, anti-Frodo, super-Frodo, anti-Sauron, or super-Sam.)

You can gain from this chapter whether you think in terms of overcoming-ending or merely managing, you think of an ideal mind free of all defilement or an evolved mind well skilled, and think in terms of suffering, not worthwhile, or worthwhile.

Regardless of overcome or end, in Buddhism, you may not have any desires for anything immoral or harmful to people and nature. If you want to awaken soon, then Buddhism also disallows sex. Buddhism disallows family because family needs a high level of commitment and participation. Buddhism disallows other interests that quickly lead to obsession and over-indulgence, such as politics, even if through them you might do some good. Buddhism is wary of art for the same reason even though art also does a lot of good. Although Buddhism seems to allow some desires, in fact, still the ideal seems to end-or-overcome any-and-all desire.

Buddhism allows different attitudes toward desire for people of different “grades” of spiritual achievement and striving. Monks hold higher standards than lay people. Even so, it is not clear to what standards monks are held, to what standards what grades of lay people are held, and why. Desire can be an all-bad word, a half-bad word, or a merely natural word.

A common Buddhist reply to “which desires and clinging, how much, and what to do” is simply meditate. Stop all this jabbering. Stop seeking formulas – “that topic tends not to edification” - and do something proven. This advice actually does work well, about half as well as Buddhists wish. If you meditate at least fifteen minutes per day, you do reduce many desires, get rid of others, develop some good desires, and find a more healthy moral beneficial balance. All the people who do yoga-with-some-meditation or who take “mindfulness” courses can testify that it works. But meditation is not the whole answer. Even if you simply sit quietly for 15 minutes daily, you would gain much the same benefit. If you sit for 15 minutes a day and do nothing but think about your desires, you would gain much the same benefit. If you chant 15 minutes daily, likely you would improve. Despite claims that special techniques of Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism differ much, in fact they are much the same. Yet the outcomes, what people see, feel, and wake up to, differ. What people get out of meditation depends a lot on what they expect and on what teachers and fellow students tell them. I think the result depends more on that than on the actual techniques. So I doubt meditation alone is the answer even when it comes with correct teaching. In any case, it is not the answer in this book, and, here, we have to use our minds to see what is right. We have to find the correct teaching. This is one lesson from the Buddha leaving his meditation classes and teaching himself.

The desire to defeat desires, and confusion over what it means to defeat desires, leads to bad attitudes among Buddhists. Buddhists, including Mahayanists, think that to defeat desires leads to a person who is cold, haughty, indifferent to the world, above the world, and above other people. In this mistaken view, a spiritually advanced person becomes repressed, fairly nasty, and a master of passive aggression. Of course, the perpetrator denies that he-she is like that. While Buddhists understand this perversion, and condemn it, still, when they want to act Buddhist, this is how too many act. Without doubt, Buddhism and the Buddha would deny this use of Buddhist ideas and would advise these people to “knock it off”, grow up, and get better.

Deistic religions have the same attitudes toward human nature, human quirks, and sin. They offer many ways to control troublesome quirks and sin. Most ways don't work well and many lead to bad attitudes typical of deistic religions.

This confusion in Buddhism over which desires needs what treatment leads to many special terms for desire, attitudes, and objects of desire. Buddhists like special terms because the terms give Buddhists a feeling of precision and the terms makes it easier for Buddhists of one school to argue with Buddhists of another or with non-Buddhists. I do not deal much with terms here. I do discuss a few below.

For convenience, here I give one attitude as the standard view but allow for variations. I adhere to what I think was the original view of Buddhism shortly after the Buddha – I don't know if this was the view of the Buddha. The ultimate goal is to defeat ALL clinging and desires. If necessary, you should be able to starve. End all clinging, not merely overcome. Ultimately, you need at least to overcome all desires. In practice, you have to end most desires too. You may feel a few desires such as for air, water, and the Dharma. You may act on simple natural desires such as for food, water, and basic shelter as long as you do not cling. Seeking any particular food is wrong. Until you can do better, you may have some bad thoughts such as about triumph over a foe but may not act on them; and, in the end, you have to end such thoughts too. You must to let go of (end) many natural desires such as for family. Eventually you must end links to family too. You may have friends as long as you do not think of them much or often, and you can do without them in case they go away or die. You do not seek balance (balance is a desire) except perhaps a simple balance made of only a few basic desires. Only this way can you end all mental defilements, think with full consistency and clarity, overcome suffering, and awaken.

I disagree with this stance. I advise readers to seriously think through their opinions on desire, acting on desire, and managing or controlling desires.

When you read a text in Buddhism or any religion, ask what the text thinks about: desire, natural desire, learned desire, good desire, bad desire, acting on desire, ignoring desire, letting desire go through you, not feeling desire at all, clinging, the balance of desires, and letting go of desires. Ask what the religion wants as the final goal with desires and what it allows for most normal people in the meantime. One text can have multiple views. Then decide for yourself.

(A) (4) Life, Stickiness, Desire, Clinging, Not Worthwhile, and Suffering.

Recall Gollum from above and that he is an extension of normal natural life with normal natural desires. How do we live without becoming Gollum? Can we live normally without becoming Gollum?

To live normally is to desire. In the orthodox view, as long as you live, until you have conquered suffering and awakened, you must still desire, and nearly all desire goes inevitably to clinging, mental distortion, more desire and more clinging. Even desire for normal natural things such as family and friends usually is bad because it leads us to cling and leads to a muddled mind. As long as you do not see that life is not worthwhile, desire cannot end. In my view also, you cannot live, and you cannot think life is worthwhile, without desiring. Much of what you desire is harmful but not all of it. You need to sort out what you can reasonably desire without causing too much confusion and harm, and you need to let go of the rest. In both views, even if you are not aware you desire, as long as you think life is worthwhile, you must desire. In the orthodox view, that is bad. In my view, that can be good as long as we learn to want less and want reasonably.

The Buddhist term that I render “desire” is usually translated “hunger” or “crave”. It can also mean “have a strong appetite for”, “wish for”, or “want”. The term can be used for sex drive, drive for power, etc. The phrase for “obtain the object of hunger” is to “eat” the object, so that a woman who seduces a man can be said to “eat” the man; she does not roast him and devour him in forkfuls.

The Buddhist terms remind us that already we are using metaphors. Buddhist terms are biased toward seeing normal natural un-awakened relations with the world as aberrant and harmful; we “crave” water, love, and wisdom rather than simply “thirst” for them. More usefully, the Buddhist terms reminds us that hunger can be put off for a while but always returns. No matter how we stuff our bellies on Thanksgiving, we will be hungry again on Monday. No matter who we have sex with on Saturday, we fantasize again on Sunday. No matter who pledges love to me on Monday, and how ardently she pledges her love, I wonder again by Tuesday. We are never satisfied. The terms also remind us of close links between body and mind. We think of hunger as from the body but also it is guided by the mind, and is of the mind too. We thirst for water, wisdom, and security. People that crave chocolate have bodily and mental addiction. In Buddhist mythology, people who crave strongly in this life, after they die and before they are reborn, go for a while to a hell where they crave always but can never be full, like Tantalus; they are called “hungry ghosts” or “praet”. The term “praet” also applies to living people who crave power, sex, wealth, fame, success, justification, salvation, heaven, be a hero, to save all the unborn, save nature, save “my people”, be a bodhisattva, awaken, etc.

The average life is not a rancid cloud of perverted craving but it is lost in stickiness, desires, and clinging anyway. Buddhism seeks not only to save (awaken) abject sinners but more to save (awaken) average people who do not even see how lost in desire and clinging they are. To see desire and clinging among common persons, we can use strong-but-still-mostly-sane cases such as of shopping addiction or sports addiction. We should not rely on obvious crazy clinging, such as by Kim Jong Un (North Korean dictator in 2017). You personally need to feel how much you desire, strive, and cling, how much it shapes your mind, how much it channels your life, and how much of it is not necessary and harmful. Then you need to manage or to stop altogether.

I use “desire” because “desire” gets across the ideas and it reminds that I am not using official Buddhist terms. “Hunger” and “crave” suggest all naturally-based desire is wrong, perverted, and bizarre addictive

disease. Both terms imply we cannot have reasonable natural desires, all natural desires are necessarily harmful. A person can be retrained not to desire harmful things but a person cannot be retrained not to crave air, food, and water unless he-she is willing to die. We learn most desires but we do not learn most hungers. We do learn most cravings but not all learned desires are cravings, for example, desire to vote. People see that many desires are not addictive hunger-driven mad cravings. They wrongly think: "I am not caught up in stickiness, desire, and clinging; I am not confused; I am stronger than what Buddhists say; all is right with me; and Buddhism is silly." We need a term to see that most people are lost in vainly chasing swollen natural desires and silly desires without implying all of us are fiends. It is better to use a modest term than to use a strong scary term that overstates and so gives people a false out.

I assume the orthodox Buddhist view based on suffering implies that life is not worthwhile, and I take "life is not worthwhile" to be the Buddhist view. I assume "life is not worthwhile" is implied by the meaning of "desire" that I gave above, and vice versa. They go together. I use the idea of "not worthwhile" more often than the idea of "suffering" but I still intend "not worthwhile" to refer to Buddhism. When I want to stress my view, I say so.

All desire, even reasonable desire but especially too-strong desire, leads to thinking life is worthwhile, and thinking life is worthwhile leads to desire. To desire and to think life is worthwhile is to cling and is to fall into the stickiness of life. They all come together. This insight is basic. This idea is true in the Buddhist view and my view. Buddhists think it must be bad while I think some of it is alright.

When we think life is worthwhile and we mix up our desires with worthwhileness, then our desires become too big and entrenched. We need to reduce desires and clinging by reducing the link between them and the feeling that life is worthwhile. In my view, we need to see that life is worthwhile without using that as an excuse to desire too many things too hard. We need to use that as a basis to manage rather than as a basis for error.

We can have strong desires and strong clinging, and then convince ourselves that life is worthwhile as a way to justify our obsession. In art, people who are obsessed with power feel their lives are worthwhile, regardless of others, as a way to justify their greed, such as Voldemort. It might help to think of ordinary lives as weaker versions. In my view, we need to make the sufferer see life is worthwhile apart from his-her desires, and he-she can find the true worthwhileness of life only by giving up wrong desire. That is what literary heroes do, as when Luke Skywalker saved his father but not the Emperor.

We could get people to stop desiring and clinging if we convinced them life is not worthwhile. Buddhists may do this if they really think life is not worthwhile, if "beset by suffering" makes life not worthwhile. If you do not believe that life is not worthwhile, then telling people life is not worthwhile as a way to get them to stop clinging is dishonest and dangerous. If we do believe life is worthwhile, it is better to accept what we believe, and then find a way to desire properly and to hold properly without going too far and without clinging harmfully. All the same is true of suffering.

People overlook that life is "sticky" and we cling to it. "Stickiness" is to get involved, often more and more involved. An old term for having a romantic attachment was being "stuck" on a person, as in "George is 'stuck' on Sally". Another old term for a romantic attachment is "involved". We call romantic relations "an attachment". A funny TV show in 2016 was "My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend". We say that life "sucks us in". You

can recall for yourself the line from “The Godfather”. In a TV ad from in 2015, a young man out with his buddies at a party sees many attractive young women and says he will never commit to only one, but he does and they marry; the couple sees other couples with kids and says “we’ll never have any kids”, but they do; they say “we’ll always live in the city, never in the suburbs”, but they move; they say “we’ll never buy a minivan”, but they do; after the angst of the first child, they say “we’ll never have more children”, but they do. People start out watching one football game in college and stay lifelong fans even if they don’t really get the game and they don’t really enjoy the game more than alternatives such as watching movies. People take a path in college, such as anthropology, and stay on it all their lives even though they don’t get nearly as much satisfaction as they hoped and they never really try alternatives. People buy a house in one school district and that is their lives, and the lives of their children, for thirty years. We roll a dice or deal some cards, and it is five hours later. We pick up the first beer and it is a six pack later. We open a bag of chips and suddenly it is empty. All life is like this. In the novel “Light in August”, William Faulkner described how life easily traps us: a man has to care for a pregnant woman although he is not the father but just because she is Life and Life needs tending. Once you’ve made the first kill or the first save, it’s all over.

To desire is to cling. To desire and to cling are to fall into the stickiness of life like a fly on flypaper. To desire food, water, and shelter is to cling to them. Even when what we desire is normal and good, to desire is to cling and to fall into the stickiness of life. To desire an apple is to cling to the apple even after we have eaten the apple and are no longer hungry; we remember the apple so we can think of it again when we get hungry, think about what temporarily allayed our hunger, and go find another apple; and that is to cling to the apple. To love a person is to desire the welfare of him-her, and that is to cling and stick. To desire social justice is to cling and to stick.

Life inevitably is a struggle. Clinging is a struggle, even when successful. To struggle is to cling even if we are not aware that we cling. If we desire food, we have to struggle for food. In our past, the idea that life was desire, and desire was struggle, was more obvious when we had to go out every day to look for food, and when we had to fight other beasts. Even now, if we think a little, it should be clear that we have to struggle through “the daily grind”, and we have to compete to get and hold a job, because we desire. Even if we make a good salary, going to the grocery store is a struggle, a truth about which many funny TV sketches have been done. We desire and we struggle because we live and because we think life is worthwhile. With every breath we take, every swallow of water, every bite even of veggies, every time we walk on the lawn, we kill thousands of small life forms – or else they would kill us. We have to struggle to live and killing is part of struggle.

Because life, desire, and struggle come together, other ways to say “life is not worthwhile” are: “life is not worth the struggle, bother, fuss, or aggravation” and “life isn’t worth the candle”. This view does not mean life is a torment and we should kill ourselves. It only means there is no sure pot of gold at the sure end of a sure rainbow. Nor is looking for the pot of gold better than finding the pot of gold; the journey is not the destination. Even if we find a rainbow, an end to the rainbow, and a pot of shiny metal, often the metal is only glitter. Even if the gold is real, soon gold runs out and we want more. There is no end to struggle, clinging, and stickiness. For elusiveness of pots and gold, see the old Disney movie “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” starring young Sean Connery. It is good family fun.

Desire, clinging, and struggle lead to fear and suffering. Even if this life seems happy, even if right now we have a lot, life is still fraught with fear and suffering. At the least, like dragons and Sith, we fear to lose what we have. We fear other people. We suffer when we do lose even small things. We need not suffer great loss, such as death, for us to be haunted by fear and suffering. When we fear, we cling harder and we desire more. Then we fall into a vicious circle, the Wheel, out of which it is hard to climb.

Even when we think we “see through life”, even when we see life is unfair, illusory, changeable, painful, a struggle, and often not very real, we wrongly cling to life. We think life is worthwhile. We struggle against the results of our own mind. We allow one part of our mind, irrational hope, to dominate our whole mind. We cling to aspects of life, such as family, friends, wealth, power, goodness, fun, career, etc. because we think those are worthwhile. When we think parts of life are worthwhile, we think all of life is worthwhile. When we think all life is worthwhile, we think parts of life are worthwhile, even when, as in business, love, and family, often they are not. Buddhism offered insightful accounts of why we cling, and how, many of which insights anticipate modern ideas from evolutionary theory.

Life, desire, the mistaken idea that life is worthwhile, clinging, stickiness, struggle, fear, and suffering all come together.

In Buddhism, the best antidote to this complex of mistakes is to see that life is not worthwhile. We can undo this complex of mistakes by focusing on any component but the most direct and total way is to see directly that life is not worthwhile. As long as we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize other aspects in this complex of mistakes. If we think life is worthwhile, we can rationalize stickiness, clinging, desire, struggle, fear, and suffering. Once we see life is not worthwhile, all aspects in this complex fall. If we do not see that life is not worthwhile, we err. The idea “life is not worthwhile” best conveys the totality of Buddhist thinking. Orthodox Buddhism picks apart the complex of errors by starting with suffering and desire but it stops short of explicitly saying life is not worthwhile.

It does help to see that suffering is anti-desirable; it hurts. The only way to end suffering is to see that life is not worthwhile. To see life is not worthwhile, it helps to see the roles that desire, stickiness, clinging, and struggle play in leading us to think life is worthwhile.

Rather than cure this complex of mistakes only by seeing that life is not worthwhile, orthodox Buddhism also says we can (1) think with total clarity and consistency, so see that life is beset by suffering, and so totally conquer all suffering. We conquer suffering by conquering clinging and desire. I suggest we can (2) think well enough and thereby managing desire, clinging, and suffering. Option (1) is harder and less accurate than simply seeing life is not worthwhile, and likely it would lead us to see life is not worthwhile in the end. You might as well see life is not worthwhile from the “get go”. So option (1) often amounts to seeing directly that life is not worthwhile. Option (2) is hard, takes much practice, is not guaranteed, and takes constant work, but it can succeed. We can learn to let go of a lot of stuff, think well enough, and manage our lives, if we put our minds to it and we have help. Option (2) is not as metaphysical and glamorous as option (1) or as Mahayana is but I prefer it. Again, I don't know what the Buddha did or what he would advise.

(A) (5) More on Not Clinging and on Letting Go.

Rather than say all the time “end clinging and overcome desire” it is easier to use one phrase, so usually I choose “let go”. Besides convenience, “let go” fits with how people see Buddhism now, and I like the idea of “let go”. “Let go” is like “just walk away” but it happens not only on the obvious level such as walking away from a relationship or a damaged car but also in your mind and your self.

In using the phrase “let go”, we are tempted to forget the variety of things that we have to let go of, forget we cannot approach each sticky desire the same, and that the world is sticky in itself. So “let go” is not a simple single “attitude adjustment” by us. Please don’t forget.

Ideally the largest time-and-effort spent on Buddhist Aids is on learning to see how we are caught in a sticky world, see how we cling, and learning to end clinging, defeat clinging, or to let go (in practice, the largest time-and-effort likely is for mental-spiritual power). I think the original intent of the Buddhist Aid “suffering” was this, learning to see how we are caught and learning to defeat clinging. Aids of cause-and-effect, dependent origination, “whatever has a beginning has an end”, learning to see satisfaction is limited, and the limited self, are all aimed at seeing stickiness, clinging, and how to let go. Learning to let go is a big deep art. It is valuable in itself, and in learning how to manage, regardless of awakening. Learning Buddhist Aids so as to learn how to let go is well worthwhile.

Not to cling, to “let go”, is not like giving up something for Lent and it is not like Muslim Ramadan. It is not giving up on the world in the usual sense of having been defeated by the world. It is not giving up one thing to get another, even better, thing, like an athlete giving up parties. It is more like these: (a) You are a good golfer but now you are 40 years old, and you realize you are never going to win the Masters’ Golf Tournament. You are fine with that. (b) You go to China for a vacation where you eat real Chinese food. You know that, where you live, you will never get food like this again. You savor what you had and then give it up. You are fine with that. (c) You work for a big company or for the state. You know you could start a business, succeed, make a name for yourself, and maybe a small fortune. But you also see the toll it has taken on others. So you give it up. You are fine with that. (d) Your children are smart enough easily to go to a good state college but the children of your neighbor are smart enough to get scholarships to Ivy League schools. You are fine with that. (e) Your “ne’er-do-well” sad-sack brother wins the Lotto for 276 million dollars. You and your kids will see only a dribble. You are fine with that. (f) Your daughter gets knocked up by a loser. You learn to live with it and to make the best of it. (g) You are out for a long walk in the country and the rain pours. In your head, you hear the Beatles’ song “Rain” and you finally really get it. (h) You finally accept that mass populist democracy is failing. (i) You see that your religion does not have all the final truth, even if it might be better than other religions. (j) You see that whoever you held as the highest and most holy, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Moses, or Krishna, is not really a supreme being with unlimited powers.

In most cases above, people can be “fine with that” because they got what they could out of it, and, on the whole, they gained more than they lost. In Buddhism, letting go is not like that. It is not giving up something because you got what you could out of it, or because, by giving it up, you gain more than you lose. You just give it up. You just let go. You don’t worry anymore about where the balance falls, about gains and losses, costs and benefits. In Western terms, by letting go, you gain freedom, and in Taoism, you gain by living in accord with the Tao, but in Buddhism, you don’t even think in those terms. You just give it up. The time for it has come and gone, and now it goes. Yes, you can. Some Buddhists might say you lose the world but gain the Dharma, like Taoists gain the Tao, but, I think, “pure” Buddhism would

not even seek this bargain. You can say what you give up held you back so you must gain more than you lose when you let it go, but that view really distorts what happens. You can say you gain final release, but, since you would be dead and totally gone at the end of such a lifetime, it is odd to say that you gain something. You can gain some peace during what remains of this lifetime but, if that is primarily why, then you still cling to peace, you won't get peace, and you need to let that go of striving for that kind of peace too. Just let go.

Again: "Just let go" is much easier if you also see life is not worthwhile, and much harder if you can't see life is not worthwhile or you insist life is worthwhile. The same applies to learning to manage what we can properly hold on to from what we should let. "Just let go" and "not worthwhile" go well together and they do not go well separately.

In Buddhism, one of the hardest things that people have to let go of is the idea that they are an eternal soul-self. They have to let go of that idea of the self so they can see that their own self comes into being, holds together, and goes apart, like many other things of the world, like an elephant or an ecosystem. You need to practice on letting go of other things before letting go of the mistaken idea of the self as an eternal soul-self. See Part 7 below for more on the self in Buddhism.

Using "let go" opens the door to bad thinking and to abuse. It can become a source of confusion or "mental defilement". "I have let go", "I will let go", or "I can let go of whatever I wish whenever I wish" becomes a bad excuse. By simply saying "let go", we forget that not all clinging and desire are the same, that we have to approach different cases of clinging and desire differently, and sometimes "end" is better while sometimes "overcome" is better. We get sloppy and make needless hurtful mistakes. We think we end-or-overcome clinging and end-or-overcome desire when all we really do is gloss over them. They are still there. We still desire and cling but not we cover it over with another layer of desiring and clinging. We think we have let go because we have a phrase but really we hold on harder than ever. "Let go" has become a magic phrase, and that use is an abuse. It is always a good idea to check "let go" by thinking through the case in terms of end, overcome, desire, and clinging. Only after you have become adept at end and overcome in many cases can you relax when you use "let go".

Even if, like me, you think life is worthwhile and do not accept Buddhist ideas about not worthwhile life and suffering, it is still worthwhile to see the reality of stickiness, desire, clinging, and the suffering that they bring. It is still worthwhile to manage. Buddhists Aids help. Buddhism can make a worthwhile life even more worthwhile through managing stickiness, clinging, desires, and suffering.

(A) (6) More on What to Cling to and What to Let Go of.

This section does solve the title problem but it might help some. For what I think we should hold on to and what let go of, see Part One of this book.

Evolved nature guides humans to hold on to some things and let go of others depending on the situation; yet that is precisely what Buddhism wants people to rise above. Virtually all religions and philosophies say hold to some things hard (God, Justice) and let go of others sometimes (Pride). Even hedonism says hold to pleasure and let go of pain. Virtually all schools differ from simple nature or they would not be needed – even Taoism is not only natural. How does Buddhism differ? What makes Buddhism distinct?

This question is hard to answer and I don't give a firm answer here. Again, you have to read and decide. Ask some Buddhists.

Buddhism does not advise that we stop breathing, stop drinking water, or stop eating until we die. It does say a monk should be willing to starve to death if nobody gives him (now her) food. Nobody can let go of morality. Breathing, drinking, eating, and morality can be enjoyable. Buddhism differs on whether it says we should try to breathe, drink, eat, and act well without the joy – some schools sprinkle ashes over the food of monks to cover any possible good taste to which monks might cling. Buddhism does not advise that we never talk to other humans or we could not teach. Buddhism used to advise men monks almost never to talk to women.

Once we open the door to as little as the good taste of water or the incidental joy that comes of doing the right thing, it seems as if all else might come rushing in but usually that is not the case. Instead, simple things such as breathing, eating, drinking, talking, and acting well give seekers practice for what might be too sticky and so should be let go right away and what might be used to benefit in modest doses. Practice on simple things shows that anything might be a problem. It does not show that we can deal with everything if only we are adept enough – some things remain too dangerous regardless of skill level such as family and power. I don't go into specifics or methods.

This step forward still does not show how Buddhism differs from other disciplines except it shows that, in ideal Buddhism, unlike Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, we should be willing to let go of anything if need be. Everything is a candidate for “too sticky” and for letting go. As monks practice Buddhism, in fact most monks do eventually try to let go of everything except bodily functions and needed social functions. Lay people are not expected to let go of that much but they are expected to understand deeply the idea of letting go and to see how theoretically it could apply to anything.

Practicing on simple things also teaches another important lesson: If we are careful, we can enjoy some things while they last, if we don't expect them to last longer than their natural length, don't expect them to be more enjoyable than they usually naturally are, and don't take steps to make them last longer or make more joy than their natural span and strength. If you have to breathe, sometimes you might as well enjoy it – meditation uses that tendency to advantage. As long as you know you do have to let go and you do actually let go, then go along with what comes your way.

In theory, as I understand theory, monks and lay people differ this way: Monks should plan nothing that leads to enjoyment for the enjoyment while lay people may, can, do and should plan. In practice, even monks do some planning as when they plan to learn Pali so they can read Buddhist texts in the original languages. Monks plan for fewer things than do lay people. Except for religious devotion, the level of planning by monks to sustain something desirable is much less than among lay people for most things in their lives such as house, car, and entertainment, and the level of planning by monks should dwindle as the monk's career goes along. While lay people may plan, they should learn not to plan too much and not to expect too much. For that, they can get the help of experienced and good-minded monks.

Now we have a range of possibilities:

(1) Let go of everything.

- (2) Be willing to let go of everything or be on the verge of letting go of everything.
- (3) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you take no current steps to extend or enhance.
- (4) Let go of conventional useless morality but keep real useful morality.
- (5) Enjoy things as they come, as long as you don't plan to extend or enhance.
- (6) Plan to extend or enhance as long as nothing is immoral, most of the joy is in normal human things such as family, and you are sure you won't fall into anything like lust for power.
- (7) Plan to extend or enhance but have confidence on your ability to step away even from things such as wealth, sex, and power.
- (8) You may plan for normal modest human activities such as career and family but you must stay away from ways that suck you into pride, power, and lust such as politics, business, academia, media, art, and administration.
- (9) Participate in responsible professions even if they are tempting and sticky because the world needs responsible smart people to guide it.
- (10) Let go of morality of as much real morality as you wish.
- (11) Go ahead and enjoy all aspects of the world as much as you want without regard to morality, or enjoy morality too if that's what "gets you off".
- (12) Force the world to give you what you desire for as long as you desire.

Most people, including most Buddhists, are not sure where Buddhism lies for whom. Different schools of Buddhism give different answers. Mahayana accuses Theravada of pushing everybody toward (1) and it claims to lie somewhere about (3) to (5). Theravada says that Mahayana actually falls somewhere along (6) through (11) because the temptation is too great and the world too sticky. Some Mahayana monks are allowed to carouse, have sex, and have families. Westerners think Buddhism falls somewhere along (3) or (4), and many Westerners would like to do that too, but few people ever achieve it. All abbots of big monasteries dabble in (6) and (9) whether they know so or not.

I often stress that we should manage life, clinging, and suffering rather than forcibly let go. Managing lies in the range of (3 to (9) most of the time, but can go to (2) or (1) if conditions get bad.

In Part 2, I mentioned that happiness is a good test case to understand how suffering afflicts life, and the "ins and outs" of clinging and letting go. Here would be the right place to take up that question again but I delay the topic until after dealing with a few more issues.

(A) (7) Really Letting Go in Buddhist Style.

Religions say we are too caught up in selfishness and worldly affairs but they offer little by way of what to do other than platitudes, good wishes, and ritual. Christianity offers a great general frame in the Golden Rule but few specifics about how to quit selfishness. In contrast, Buddhism offers specific effective ways. I do not describe them here. The release we get from Buddhist methods not only can help us to awaken but makes us better persons and helps make the world better. The methods are among Buddhist Aids and so have risk but, used adeptly, they are worth the risk.

Everybody knows we are caught up in worldly affairs such as materialism, party politics, ethnic strife, and religious competition. We all know we are greedy. We like power, wealth, sex, booze, drugs, and media too much. We have the disease of gadgets such as cars and cell phones. We compete with neighbors. We are fashion slaves or we despise those who are fashion slaves – too often both.

Yet we do not see how we are also caught up in deeper self-ness. We think we really do deserve a break today and every day ten times a day, and we will take it regardless. Fine things exist, and other people have them, so I deserve fine things and I will get mine, if not for me, for my kids. I am the one-and-only exception to every rule. We excuse every grab because others are ahead of us and they are getting theirs so we should get ours. They made me do it, over and over again. Too often we are bad Sheldon. We think there is a level of wealth and power above which you “make it” and don’t have to worry, and we will do almost anything to get there. If I can’t get there myself, I make sure my kids get there and other kids remain below mine in comparison. I don’t make any of the above mistakes, I am a good person, I help others less able than me, and I am proud of it.

Even if we really aren’t selfish, we hold mistaken ideas such as: truth is always beautiful, if it is ugly it isn’t the truth, if it is too beautiful then it isn’t the truth, people show character in their faces, the world will turn out well in the end, it isn’t the end if it hasn’t turned out well, good guys will prevail, goodness will win just because it is good, bad systems are innately self-destructive, and bad guys all get theirs in the end either here on Earth or later in Hell.

Buddhist methods can lead us to these gritty levels and can make us confront ourselves. That is hard but is worthwhile. People who extol “mindfulness” are pushing in the right direction. Few religions other than Buddhism have Aids that work as well at this task.

Maybe the ideal is to blend Buddhist self-examination techniques with Christian-style morality. Taoism, Zen, and martial arts offer similar techniques but that is another topic.

(A) (8) What Happens, or Doesn’t Happen, When We “Just Let Go”.

In most religions, good things happen when we “just let go” in the right ways and right amounts. We see things that make life better. The world really was worthwhile all along but we did not see how worthwhile because our fear and ignorance blinded us. We become better. I do not list the good things that happen. “Islam” means “surrender (to God)”. Christianity teaches “just let go” in “trust God”, “love God”, “love your neighbor”, “cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you many fold”, and “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open”. Learning to let go and to manage suffering lets us see more clearly,

think more adeptly, notice more good things in life, and make life more worthwhile. I don't think it makes life all wonderful.

In Theravada Buddhism, when we let go, the world does not get a lot better, get worthwhile. Usually we do become better individual people, we help others and the world, and we enjoy more honestly what is truly joyful – but we do not make the world worthwhile. We do not see that the world has been worthwhile all along but our fear and ignorance had blinded us. We see more clearly the same old beset-by-suffering pain-filled not-worthwhile world. Most Buddhists dislike that letting go does not reveal the world as better in the same way other religions say so. Buddhists have developed similar ideas of how letting go does make the world better, even make it worthwhile, or how letting go allows us to see it had been worthwhile all along. A key idea of Mahayana is that the world was deeply worthwhile all along; in fact, the world is full of magic that we can see and use only when we let go. The difference between Buddhism and other religions over letting go, matters. Think about implications of the difference between original Buddhism, what most Buddhists want, and what other religions say.

(A) (9) Trust the Dharma.

The real Buddhist version of letting go might not be “stop clinging” but “trust Dharma”. Buddhists believe the Dharma will help them if they act morally, study sincerely, listen to authorities, and practice diligently. They will make progress and they will be useful. They are as correct as are believers in other religions who think God, Tao, or Heaven will help them if they are sincere etc. I cannot argue against this belief because I share it: the world likely was set up so this belief is mostly true. We do get better when we try. In this sense, Buddhists do get a lot when they “just let go”. I like that.

Theravada Buddhists still don't get a world full of joy, Dharma, love, shiny magic, and realized embodied metaphysics (Jesus, often Mohammad, Great Buddha, bodhisattva, or avatar). Theravada Buddhists still don't solve suffering this way although they can seem to dispense with it. Mahayanists think they do get joy etc. and do miraculously overcome suffering but they are mostly wrong.

Trusting the Dharma can make us think more clearly and reduce suffering, so we can then think yet more clearly and reduce suffering even more, and so on; and this process seems to dissolve the problem of not worthwhile life. If we trust Dharma, life becomes worthwhile enough and we need not worry more. “Trust Dharma” can help with clear thinking, ease some suffering, and make life more worthwhile but it does not solve the problems of suffering or whether life is worthwhile. I don't go into detail why.

“Trust the Dharma”, if taken too far, stops being traditional Buddhism. Rather than using the ideas and methods of the Buddha to overcome suffering. “Trust Dharma”, becomes more like trusting God, Tao, Heaven, Dharma in Mahayana and Hinduism, Emptiness, or Buddha Mind, or like devotion in Hinduism. Buddhists who have a strong attitude of “trust the Dharma” can seem more like deists, etc. even when they use Buddhist Aids and Buddhist rhetoric. They do not see that they have veered from traditional Buddhism. A strong attitude of trust easily merges with magic, bad metaphysics, superstition, astrology, and bad elements of folk Buddhism. It can be hard to tell if a person trusts Dharma or trusts magic, spirits, astrology, his-her own pride, etc. Other religions have the same problem with simplistic trust and devotion. “Trust the Dharma, a lot” might be alright and it might even be better than traditional Buddhism

but it is not traditional Buddhism. A little of “trust the Dharma” is quite good but more is too much - a case of the Middle Path even with core ideas.

(A) (10) Let Go of Letting Go.

The material in this section runs up against a logical problem that you should not get “hung up” on. The logical problem is not simply a fun game but also introduces a real issue. It came up above in the issue of the joy in knowing there is not satisfaction in life, and it comes up again later.

To think clearly, you have to stop clinging. You even have to let go of cherished ideas such as trusting to the Buddhist “church”, the monkhood, and you have to let go somewhat of doctrines such as Dharma and karma. If you still cling to them, they become mere rule-based dogma and obstacles in the path.

Eventually, you have to see that “letting go” is a mere rule-based dogma, and you have to let go of letting go. If you stick to letting go then you cling to letting go and you can’t let go. “Let go” becomes a mere rule-based dogma, an object of clinging itself, and an obstacle. Stop clinging to not clinging. End the desire to end desire. Seeking to not suffer makes you suffer.

Clever people often see that, after you let go of letting go, then you have to (3) let go of (2) letting go of (1) letting go, and so on. Don’t worry about this infinite fall too much. After the first two levels (let go of letting go), then more levels don’t matter.

When you let go of letting go, you learn what you can let go of, what you can hold on to for a while, and what is dangerous to hold on to. You find your way among the scenarios mentioned above. In my terms, you learn to manage.

Here comes the logical fun: If you let go of letting go then you are likely to hold on to some things. So, if you let go of letting go, you don’t let go. And, if you don’t let go of letting go, you cling to letting go and you don’t let go.

You have to jump out of this level of mere logic and make up your mind what you need to do and not do. In this way, the logical problem is a useful “kick in the pants”.

You have to decide how much to let go and how much to let-go-of-letting-go and so-hold-to-something. I think we really do have to let go of “let go” as mere rule-based dogma and we have to get accept holding on to some things, at least for a while from time to time.

Letting go of letting go is not an excuse to cling on to everything we crave. It is not an excuse to get back to normal sticky confused often-stupid wasted life. It does not mean the sleeping life and awakened life are the same. It means we have to use our abilities to manage. We have to think what we really can let go of, what we might have to cling, what we wish to cling to, what dangers we put us in, and why. The same is true whenever we run into this kind of conundrum.

As mentioned, when people get the idea of letting go, and learn to let go of something, they feel really good about their new-found outlook, new-found skill, and themselves. I think these false joys add to the

idea from Mahayana and Hindu that the Dharma system is really joyous despite apparent hardship. Don't cling to this first step or to the joy. Don't be dour either. Take many breaths, and continue on down the road for a while. Letting go of both the over-joy and the reactionary stern dourness that comes with this first step can help in learning properly to let go of letting go.

Letting go of letting go does not mean you must convert to Mahayana, some kind of Hinduism, Zen, or any discipline that sees awakening to be the same as the ordinary world of stickiness, clinging, desire, confusion, and suffering. It does not mean the world of clinging must be deeply satisfying. It does not mean waking up is a mistake, and there is no point to struggle and to try to wake up. It does not mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. It means only that you are working toward a better healthier balance. When you are closer to that, then you can decide what to do next.

(A) (11) Mistake: The Joy of Renunciation.

Keep the idea of this section in mind for comments on the Dalai Lama, below, and for Mahayana in the chapter on it. Sometimes in Buddhism you hear a phrase similar to "what great joy to know there is no happiness in life". (A) When people first learn to let go, they feel contentment, peace, and joy, often much greater than the sticky icky jolt they got from whatever it was that they clung to and let go of. You get this feeling of joy not only from letting go as the result of studying Buddhism but from letting go due to following any religion or similar discipline; Buddhists know this and are fine it; they care more that you let go than that you let go as a result of Buddhism. Buddhists warn against this feeling as another form of stickiness and another object of clinging. They advise to let go of this feeling too when you can. (B) In addition to the first rush of joy, there is also contentment that comes when you have let go of many things and you feel fairly sure you can let go of anything that you have to, including this feeling of contentment. Ask Buddhists what to do. (C) The point here is not to pursue the joy of letting go in place of joys from clinging. Don't substitute one gigantic object of clinging for many smaller objects of clinging. Don't try to let go so as to get that big joy. Learn to let go because it is the proper thing to do. You can get incidental joy from Buddhism but Buddhism does not offer joy as its primary goal or as a large goal. Using joy as an enticement, no matter how well-intended, is a mistake.

This mistake is an instance of logical puzzles and in particular an instance of the artificial splitting that I describe below in connection with the Dalai Lama.

(A) (12) Mistake: How Much Happiness is Too Much?

A mentioned in Part 2, Buddhism says we cannot have enduring real happiness. The issue of happiness makes a good arena to look at suffering and letting go. The term for suffering is "dhukkha" while the term for happiness is "sukkha". For most purposes in Buddhism, the two are opposites. Problems with terms can confuse this issue yet I am not precise with terms. I follow my version of English, so "happiness" and "satisfaction" are similar enough.

(A) People look for satisfaction and-or happiness in life as a whole. (B) They also look for it from things such as a collection of cars, activities such as prowess in golf, status such as head of a business firm, relations such as love or family, and in power, wealth, etc. According to Buddhism, we can never get real satisfaction from life in general or from particular things. Impermanence, clinging, and suffering stop real

satisfaction. So we must stop clinging to these things and to life. Often Buddhism is correct. People look far too much for satisfaction automatically from life and from particular things. We are better off not to put much hope in satisfaction, especially from particular things.

Buddhism is not always correct. Most people do get satisfaction from life as a whole even if not from any one thing or set of things. Recall that I decided life is worthwhile. Worthwhile does not guarantee any satisfaction, and it does not say that life is worthwhile because of satisfaction, but it makes chasing some satisfaction a fairly reasonable activity. Rather than seize on any one limited thing in life as the source of satisfaction, and hope that we can expand that one thing to make all life satisfying, usually we are better off to make what we can out of what we get as we go along.

Some people do get satisfaction from life as a whole regardless of satisfaction from particulars. Some people do get satisfaction from particular activities, things relations, etc. I think most academics don't get satisfaction from their careers but some do, their satisfaction is real, and I am happy for them. Many teachers, police officers, fire fighters, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, farmers, and grocers get satisfaction from careers, service they perform for the general public, and service they give to individuals. People get satisfaction from a family even if not all the family members turn out well, and sometimes if none turn out well. Impermanence by itself does not necessarily destroy happiness. It only destroys happiness if we expect conditions to be permanent. Families, countries, and churches are not permanent yet people get satisfaction from them. I hope Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein got satisfaction from their lives despite disappointments and personal issues. You can get satisfaction out of service to God, Dharma, Heaven, Nature, or church. You can get satisfaction from following the Tao. Some of these might be permanent, and, even if they are not, we can still get real satisfaction from serving them.

Although it seems as if people do get satisfaction, Buddhism still insists we do not, we are deluded about happiness. Buddhism does a good job showing how the conditions that lead to happiness cannot endure and how people usually fool themselves. I don't go into details here; use your imagination.

I get the point from Buddhism, and Buddhism is right in many cases, but not always. Just as you can use your imagination to tear down satisfaction, so you can use it to build reasonable cases of limited but still real happiness. Then decide for yourself. Then think what your choice implies about worthwhile life and vice versa.

Don't disdain happiness while it is here. Be content to enjoy while it is here and let it go when it is gone. Don't try to prolong happiness beyond its natural size or natural time. You may plan to make conditions that lead to happiness as long as you know there is no guarantee and you do not think your planning can lead to more happiness and longer happiness than the natural duration. A lot of people already have this attitude. Even after reading a fair amount of Buddhism, I don't know if doctrine is in line with this attitude or if it disdains all happiness. Taoism is in line with this attitude and, as far as I can tell, so is Zen when it is not too fierce or too mystical. Mahayana and Hinduism try to expand happiness too much to make sure life is worthwhile. Sometimes Zen suffers from that Mahayana legacy.

(A) (13) Mistake: Suffering, Worthwhile, and Happiness.

Before we awaken, impermanence, clinging, and suffering erode happiness so we cannot have enduring happiness. Yet even after awakening, and we have seen past impermanence, and we have overcome clinging and suffering, we still do not have happiness and cannot get real happiness.

The reasons that cause suffering also insure we cannot hold happiness; lack of happiness and suffering are two aspects of the same problem. Most of what we think is happiness is a delusion caused by desire and clinging. We want particular conditions (happy family, wealth) to last forever so we can be happy forever through them. Buddhism reminds us that all things end but the Dharma, so, when we base hope for happiness on normal human expectations in the real world, we are doomed to disappointment and no real happiness. Most supposed happiness really is suffering already or is suffering about to happen.

We have to give up our human-but-wrong expectations, and so have to give up hope for human-style happiness. Life cannot be happy both (1) because of suffering and (2) after suffering is overcome.

To me, this situation suggests that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. Buddhism says this situation only shows that life is beset by suffering and impermanence. To me, his situation also implies that the question of worthwhile is deeper than issues of happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering. I see a logical problem that leads me to the question of worthwhile life. To be clearer about Buddhism and suffering, and for our own sake regardless of Buddhism, we need to decide about worthwhile life before we decide about happiness.

(1) As with suffering, worthwhile life and happiness are somewhat independent. Where they don't overlap, we can see directly that worthwhile is more important. Even where they do overlap, still we can figure out that worthwhile is basic. (2) When life is worthwhile, happiness is not as important as the fact that life is worthwhile, and the lack of big lasting happiness is not as important as that life is worthwhile. Life can be worthwhile even if we are not very happy as long as we don't suffer deeply. Worthwhile life does not need big constant happiness. Most people don't expect big constant happiness so as to think life is worthwhile. Most people don't expect big constant happiness. (3) If life is not worthwhile, then some happiness or some unhappiness is not as important as the fact that life is not worthwhile. Even a not-worthy-life can have some happiness. Life can be not worthwhile despite some happiness. (4) Some unhappiness does not by itself make life not worthwhile. Some happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Even a fair dose of happiness does not by itself make life worthwhile. Worthwhile life is worthwhile in itself, not primarily because of happiness. Not worthwhile life is not worthwhile in itself, not only due to lack of happiness or only through unhappiness. (5) Worthwhile life does not guarantee happiness. Not worthwhile life does not guarantee that we suffer or that we lack happiness. (6) We need to decide worthwhile life first. Then decide the roles of hope, happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, and suffering in life.

We can be happy for a while if we don't expect situations to last, we don't expect happiness to last, and we don't expect huge happiness but only modest happiness suited to real life; that is, if we manage living. I don't know what Buddhism says about this alternative of limited happiness. People dream of forever big happiness but most people don't really expect to get it and so most people base real acts on temporary small happiness. That behavior too goes along with ideas about managing. I don't know what the real expectations and behavior of people implies for Buddhist ideas.

(A) (14) Some Managing Advice.

Even if you decide life is worthwhile, decide you can chase some satisfaction, and use “let go of letting go” as a magic formula, you still need to work on not clinging and on letting go, and you still need to not demand too much. The average person, even a really smart person, clings far too much.

Don't think the task is impossible. The fact that most things in life, and your own whole life, are transient does not necessarily mean there is no real satisfaction.

Most people get satisfaction from serving something that is good and that is bigger than themselves such as God or the Dharma. Even so, don't force yourself to serve an imaginary “bigger than me” just because I said so.

Usually people get more happiness when they do not aim hard at happiness but instead aim for other goals such as enjoying work, doing something useful, and a healthy family. Happiness comes as a bonus along the way, and it comes in the right amounts for the right duration. This is a case where we are more likely to miss if we aim right at the target and more likely to hit the target if we aim at something nearby. Do what works and is good.

(A) (15) Some More Words.

(1) The following is easy to say but hard to do: “Take it as it comes” and “let go”. Don't try to hold on to anything beyond its natural span and don't try to make happiness more than it is. Don't try to arrange the world so you have greater longer happiness than comes naturally. When something good comes along, welcome it. When the good thing is over, let it go. This idea is one key in what I call “managing”. I love this idea but I know I can't live by this idea alone.

“Take it as it comes” and “let go” is hard to do for three good reasons. (1A) People are not lower animals that take what food and sex come along and then walk on. People see ahead and plan ahead. Even some animals see ahead and might plan ahead. People plan for bigger longer happiness. That is part of our evolved nature. To go against that part of our nature is as much to go against the Dharma as to steal, lie, murder, and clench. “Only dead fish ‘go with the flow’”. Do you really want to base marriage on “take it as it comes and let it go when you feel like it”? The “plan ahead” part of our nature has to be worked into “take it as it comes” and “let go”. For all their wisdom, religious teachers such as the Buddha, Jesus, and Chuang Tzu never told us how.

(1B) Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow but he also told us to work hard for the Kingdom of God, not only for today, but to plan for tomorrow. He sent people out to work for the Kingdom of God. He set up an organization to help bring in the Kingdom of God. If you enter the monkhood, you anticipate working hard to make a better world. Part of our action for today and our planning for tomorrow is to work hard to make a better world. That is hard to do on the basis of “take it as it comes” and “let go”. This kind of planning for this kind of world also is a part of our natural evolved nature. There is no obvious solution to this dilemma. It helps to keep in mind that the ultimate fate of the world is not in your hands but in the hands of God or the Dharma. You still have to try hard.

(1C) Like it or not, big societies, the state, capitalism and big business, and self-government, are part of life now. There is no place to escape. For better or worse, we have to live in them. We might as well live for better. We can't do that with "take it as it comes". We cannot run democracy on the basis of "take it as it comes". When you have a problem, do you want officials to brush you off with "Let go, sad little aggrieved misguided ignorant being, and learn Dharma wisdom"? This issue was an argument between Taoists and Confucians in China 2500 years ago.

(2) Many Westerners believe Buddhism champions the idea of "take it as it comes, let go when it is done". People take this idea as the heart of Buddhism. I love the idea. I use it below. The idea does show up in Buddhist texts written clearly after the Buddha, especially in Mahayana texts. I wish I could declare that this idea is an obvious integral part of all Buddhism. But it does not show up in early texts, at least as far as I know. In early texts, you are more apt to read how sticky life is, how much suffering besets life, how hard it is to escape suffering, how transient happiness is, and how we should forget about any happiness and should work instead on escaping suffering. Again, this is one reason why I was led to contemplate "not worthwhile" and the relation between "not worthwhile" and "suffering".

We should not take this situation too far down any direction. We should not take it to mean that the idea was entirely absent in early Buddhism, that it appears only later, that it appears only in Mahayana, and that it was not a key part of the thought of the Buddha. We also should not take it as the hidden heart of real Buddhism that was so obvious and strong that early Buddhists did not need to write it down.

I learned this idea not only from texts but from real flesh and blood Theravada monks who had little to do ever with Westerners. Some were quite literate in Buddhist texts, and certainly did know of Mahayana texts, but I think they did not pick up the idea that way. Rather, it seemed to be a part of Buddhist oral culture that they had learned from other monks and that they were happy to pass along. Versions of the idea are part of Buddhist popular culture. These facts do not mean the idea was a part of early Buddhism from the time of the Buddha and has been passed along by word of mouth. These facts do not mean the idea was such an obvious integral part of Buddhism that the idea did not have to be written down. These facts do not mean the idea is far more important than "defeat suffering". They also do not mean the idea is mere fluff spun off as a shallow truism to make life more superficial and easier. There is real meat on those bones, and it takes chewing too. I think it is reasonable to associate this idea with Theravada and with Buddhism in general. Other religions are free to take credit too; I think Jesus and Chuang Tzu knew the idea and were quite comfortable with it.

As with all ideas, we have to assess "take it as it comes" and "let it go" on its own merits in the context of other ideas including "you may plan ahead" and "work hard for a better world". You have to do that. That is part of what the Buddha and Jesus wanted you to do.

(A) (16) Is Life Too Sticky?

Maybe the most classic and entertaining case of sticky life is Mowgli and the village girl in Kipling's great "Jungle Books". When all is said and done, is all this talking about trying to find a balance of what to keep and how much just silliness? Is life so sticky that we really can't play this game? Do we have to let it all go, including, maybe, Buddha, Dharma, the Sangha (Community of Buddhists), meditation, Compassion, the Four Truths, the Eightfold Way, Love, Beauty, and Hope? If we try to find a few things to hold, are we

doomed to recreate the whole sticky spider's web and get eaten by the giant spider of our own desires? There is a good reason why people forbid talk of religion and politics at gatherings.

Mahayana and Hinduism say "Yes, we are doomed to recreate the whole thing over and over in various guises but that is a really good thing. We are agents of the Dharma, doing its Will, and finding its Joy, through us".

Theravada says we must let it all go except for the Dharma, Buddha, Sangha, Four Truths, and Eightfold Path. You have to ask particular schools and people in Theravada what to hold on to and what to let go, and I suggest you do ask them.

Most people don't lead well-balanced well-ordered effective self-aware lives. Most people are caught up in silly desires with short satisfactions. Most people go through life from cling to cling. Most people are useful only because they are part of a social-governmental-economic system in which they help others by seeking their own benefit, as in capitalism, bureaucracy, and academia. Yet most people are not harmful either except when caught up in unusual selfishness or in "us against them" such as "end all programs except those that serve only us" or "our lives matter". Most people don't get so caught in stickiness that they recreate an evil-empire-of-the-spirit or an empty-desert-of-desire-mirages. Most people could do a whole lot better but they won't. The majority simply end at death. I think their lives and your life are worthwhile anyway.

Now, you decide. And cling, or don't cling, to whatever you decide. Or, don't decide, refuse to decide, and cling, or don't cling, to that. And see these choices as part of the stickiness of the world.

I think we can deal with sticky life even if we fail often and even if some of us fail completely. If we decide that life is worthwhile, as most of us do, then we also decide we can deal with sticky life. Then we need to decide what to do. I think we are led strongly to the ideas in Part One. If any religion, or any believer, decides he-she can deal with sticky life, and life is worthwhile, and he-she has to decide what to do next, then he-she has to think about the ideas in Part One too.

(B) Dharma as Law, Dream, Game, and More.

-From "I Fought the Law" by Sonny Curtis, sung by the Bobby Fuller Four, Lou Reed, and The Clash:

"Breakin' rocks in the hot sun
I fought the law and the law won
Y'know my race is run
I fought the law and the law won"

-Quoted by William Butler Yeats from an old play; also from the poet Delmore Schwartz:

"In dreams begin responsibilities"

-Recall from above from "Jack and Diane" by John Mellencamp:

“Oh, yeah, life goes on
Long after the thrill of livin’ is gone”

(B) (1) Dharma as Law.

Buddhism and Hinduism often call Dharma “the Law”. The Dharma does not control us absolutely but it does guide strongly. It is like “God’s Wish-Will” or a hard version of “the Tao” (see chapter on Taoism). The Dharma is like the rules of a play when you are in the play. It is the game we all play just by being. It is like “the system” that Americans rebel against or “the game” in “game of love”, “got to love the game”, or “hate the game, not the player”. We must work within the rules of Dharma. In Buddhism, cause-and-effect and Dharma are aspects of each other. For Law versus Love, see the movie “A Matter of Life and Death” starring David Niven.

Anyone who defies the Law comes to grief. Anyone who goes along with the Law likely succeeds. Even for people who see that life is not worthwhile and wish to escape stickiness, clinging, struggle, etc, it is better to go along with the Dharma and use it than to fight the Dharma by pretending that you can bend all to your will. People who try to bend the Law to their will end up serving time in bad lives, in Dharma prison, Dharma hell. “I fought the Law, and the Law won”. When people or even gods fight the Dharma, it defeats them and punishes them to get them to reform: “Breakin’ rocks in the hot sun”. This is part of the intrinsic moral nature of the world. Seeing that you cannot bend the Dharma to your will goes with seeing the limited coherence of selves; see below on self. Buddhism is not about being so free that you can do as you wish. Buddhism is not about knowing the universe so well, and being such a key part of it, that you can bend reality and can do as you wish, as in some versions of Mahayana. When you learn to use the Dharma to get out of a bad game, then you simply do not reappear: “Y’know my race is run”.

(B) (2) Dharma as Dream.

Everyone dreams of having his-her dreams come true. We think having our dreams come true means everything goes our way, troubles end, and bliss begins. In fact, that is not true. “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it”. All dreams entail stickiness, clinging, striving, hardship, etc. A dream is not freedom but instead is responsibility, especially if it comes true, and more so when it includes other people. If we dream of a family, and get one, we soon learn “in dreams begin responsibilities”. If we dream of business or academic success, and get it, we soon learn the same. In teaching, we have to give grades, meet students, write proposals, kiss up to authorities, etc. Even merely having the dream leads to the responsibility to fight for the dream; see the movie “Breakfast Club”. All dreams, for lowest worm to highest god, entail binding responsibilities. If we want to get rid of binding responsibilities, we have to stop clinging to dreams. To stop clinging to dreams, we have to see that even realized dreams are not worthwhile. We use the Law to avoid clinging to dreams and to dreams-come-true.

One way to see the world is as Dharma’s dream. Dharma dreams the world into being and-or becoming. Even in Dharma’s own dream, in dreams begin responsibilities. You should think out what responsibilities the dreaming Dharma might have in a moral universe with much drama, moral dilemmas, and many kinds of needy characters. That thought can be a big step on the road to Hinduism. The Dharma itself has problems when it dreams the world. Buddhism is a way out of the dream problems of the Dharma. As

individuals within the Dharma dream, to get out of the dream problems of the Dharma, we have to go along with the Dharma. We wake up out of the Dharma dream by playing out the Dharma dream.

Buddhism is like old-fashioned blues without any upbeat hopeful ending, without the lingering sadness, and especially without lingering self-pity. It is not like raunchy or funny songs with a blues scale, rhythm, structure, or idiom, like Bessie Smith or Jerry Lee Lewis. It is not “blues inflected” “guitar rock” or “jam rock” from the 1970s or 1990s. It is not “New Age”. It is about facing sadness, not overcoming sadness so as to be happy. Like classic blues, Buddhism does not overcome tragedy and sadness but accepts them and endures until the game plays out, like “St. James Infirmary”, “Motherless Child”, or the versions of “Black and Blue” and “Shine” by Louis Armstrong. Buddhism is longing for Shenandoah and knowing you will never find it in this world but also knowing you can get by for a while on this side of the wide Missouri. It is like “Crazy” and “Walking after Midnight” sung by Patsy Cline or like half the songs of Hank Williams but without the self-pity. It is like Joni Mitchell if you overlook the lilt and listen to the words and where the music goes. Buddhism is about facing all inevitable sad bad things, accepting them, and then letting go. It is not about letting go so you can move on to better or so you can show the enigmatic smile from the novel “Siddhartha” or the movie “Being There”. You might enjoy the lilt from Joni Mitchell after you let go but you don’t let go just so you can feel the lilt.

(B) (3) Dharma as Game.

The Dharma made the game, started the game, and runs the game. Buddhists are in a Dharma game but they can’t escape without using Dharma. In Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God built the game and what God did was good until humans and Satan ruined it. It seems reasonable that what the Dharma did was good. The Dharma world does not have to be good in a conventional sense, conventional moral sense, economic, or simplistic sense, but still is good. The Dharma made the world sticky. The Dharma made you with desires, urge to cling, and so suffer, and it made you with your urge to stop clinging and stop suffering. So, it stands to reason that the game is good despite stickiness, clinging, and suffering or even because of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. The game does not have to be good for everybody all the time, just good overall. It seems contradictory, presumptuous, rebellious, ungrateful, spiteful, and selfish to reject the game, like rejecting God. Why not see that you are wrong instead of blaming the Dharma? You set yourself up to break a lot of hard rocks. Anyone who rejects the game puts him-herself above Dharma and so is caught up in the egotism and selfish clinging that the Buddha sought to cure. You try to use the Dharma as a tool to overcome the Dharma and merely that. You put yourself above Dharma when you reject the bounty of the Dharma. You seek to turn Dharma against itself so that, like a child, you can say “No” to all that your parents generously give you. This problem with Dharma is related to the logical problem mentioned above.

Buddhists know of these implications, and their responses help define schools of Buddhism. I cannot go into the possibilities here. Briefly, most Buddhism ignores the implications, and it repeats teachings about the importance of overcoming stickiness, desire, clinging, self, and suffering. It says: meditate and all will sort out. Buddhism says it goes along with the Dharma and does not use the Dharma for selfishness. I do not pronounce on this position. It is worthwhile to know Buddhist critiques of the game and the self, and to learn a little of meditation and “Buddhist Aids”.

On a more practical level, most Buddhists, including most monks, use the Dharma to bring out the best aspects of the Dharma and to suppress any possible bad aspects of the Dharma. They use meditation, study, and practice to make themselves kinder, mindful, aware of the ebb and flow of life, less selfish, and more moral while making themselves less hasty, less hot, less selfish, and less angry. They do not make an elaborate theory of why the Dharma has good and bad aspects, why they should favor good over bad, or why Dharma provides good tools for favoring one aspect of itself over the other aspect of itself. This stance by Buddhists might offer a hint why Jedi in Star Wars perpetuated a myth about ultimately merging the light side and the dark side.

Mahayana and Hinduism used this dilemma for their ends when they reaffirmed the system as a whole over the suffering of any particular individual in any particular situation in any particular lifetime. They urge people to embrace the system as a whole even if particular individuals have trouble in this life now. If the Dharma made you, it wants more of you than to reject the system that the Dharma also made. In Hinduism, the “more” that the Dharma wants is for you to do your social and cosmic duties, to keep the Dharma going, and so to make the world better in the way that the Dharma thinks is better. The avatar (Hinduism) or the bodhisattva (Mahayana) sometimes serves as the “chosen one, the savior” who unites the dark side and light side of the Dharma. I disagree with the uses by Mahayana and Hinduism even if I think life as a whole is worthwhile and we should all work to make the world better.

If you want to beat the system, the game, you don’t rebel against it. The game counts on rebellion and uses that to keep you playing. It is another level of control like “the One” in the “Matrix” movies, rebels and artists in Romanticism, or bad guys in Hinduism.

To beat the game, you play by the rules until you play out the hand, and then you simply stop playing. It is like the movie “War Games” with Allie Sheedy and Matthew Broderick. The only way to win the big game of “Global Thermonuclear War” is to play the little game of “tick tack toe” until you see it can never lead to victory within the game. Likewise, the big game can never lead to victory within the big game, and the only way to win is not to play.

Herman Hesse in “Siddhartha”, Rudyard Kipling in “Kim” and the “Jungle Books”, and the Mahabharata, all suggest the game is sticky. We cannot play only a little bit. Once we begin at all, we get sucked into it totally. Mahayana and Hinduism suggest, if we do accept the game wholeheartedly, that can be a very good thing. If we can’t see through to the goodness of the game, then the only thing we can do is opt out, refuse to play. On the other hand, I have suggested that throwing yourself into the game is dangerous and usually bad, and that we can play only a little if we manage well. We can’t commit to total victory, or we will be sucked down in a bad way. We do the best we can with what nature gave us. Hesse would say I am wrong and foolish, I am doomed to be sucked into the game totally, and, sooner or later, I have to stop playing and opt out. This is what Michael Corleone felt at the end of his life. You have to decide, hopefully before you get sucked in too far and before you opt out without knowing why.

Be careful. Often thinking you are opting out really is only another play within the game, and really you are falling farther than you can imagine. You do not let go of letting go (see above). I found the best way to let go of letting go is to play a little bit while always mindful that you can get sucked down the rabbit hole. You are less likely to get sucked in too far if you think it is all about worthwhile life and managing

than if you think it is all about the defeat of stickiness, clinging, and striving, and you act both as if life is not worthwhile and life is worthwhile.

(B) (4) Dharma Game is Not Worthwhile.

It might make more sense to say “the (Dharma) game is not worthwhile” than “life is not worthwhile”. After you decide if the game is worthwhile then you can decide about life. You can decide (a) the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile or (b) the game is not worthwhile and life is not worthwhile too. If you say the game is worthwhile, you almost have to say life is worthwhile. Smart people often wish to say the game is not worthwhile but life is worthwhile. The choice is not so simple. Settling up with the game is a tempting idea but it turns out to be an in-between step that it is best not to take.

Instead, start by deciding whether life is worthwhile or not. If you decide life is worthwhile, then you don’t have to worry much about the game. If you decide life is not worthwhile, you have also decided the game is not worthwhile and also don’t have to worry much about the game.

People wish to say life is worthwhile but the game is not. People cling to the game so they can conquer the game so they feel clever and strong. In contrast, they really get only extra unneeded steps and get caught in the trap of feeling clever and strong when they are not. The game wins. Trying to reject the game but embrace life is that higher level of control. To think about the game so as to reject the game is to cling to it, and the game wins again. The best way to reject the game is not to think about it much, not to play it. Go on with your life without referring to it.

(a) The kind of life that you lead when you decide life is worthwhile when you manage suffering and clinging, and (b) the kind of the life that you lead when you say the game is not worthwhile but life is modestly worthwhile, are (c) so close that it is not worth splitting that hair here. Splitting tempts too strongly to wrong ideas. Choose option (a) and you get (b).

Some people say they can’t decide if life is worthwhile without first deciding about the game. If you feel you must decide about the game first, then do so, but ultimately the important question is whether life is worthwhile, not the game. Regardless what you decide about the game, you also have to decide about life, and you might as well think about life while you decide about the game. You can take what I say in this chapter about worthwhile life and not worthwhile life as a way to see through the game so as to make up your mind if life-without-the-game is worthwhile or not, and then decide what to do. If you try that path, you had better go slowly and be careful.

The stance that life is worthwhile despite the game is similar to how good Classical Cynics saw the world and how David Hume saw it. They illustrate adept good people who avoid most traps.

(B) (5) Buddhism as Crazy Clinging; Let Go of All Striving.

Here is another instance of the logical problem mentioned above. Anything that sticks in our heads and we pursue, we cling to and are stuck on that thing. Sticking and clinging are obvious with obsessions such as wealth, power, sex, beauty, love, and smart phones but they are as true of everyday life such as success at work, a house, steady good job, food, etc. Yet Buddhists pursue advancement in Buddhist

prowess with zeal that would shame mad business people, buyers of cosmetics, politicians, academics, sports fans, and celebrity fans. Monks can let go even of basics such as steady food. They spend hours reading arcane sutras in foreign languages and meditating. They deny simple pleasures even in balance with reading and meditating. Monks dress funny. Buddhists obsess. They are stuck on, and cling to, ideas of awakening that are odd, against evolved human nature, unrealistic, and that they only dimly understand. They are lost in a way. Isn't Buddhist awakening a false idol of the sort that the Buddha warned against? To awaken, shouldn't Buddhists let go of awakening? If they don't let go of awakening, they can never wake up.

The simple answer might be part of the Middle Path. Buddhists can-may-and-should pursue awakening but not like crazy self-starving mortifying yogis or like crazy celebrity fans. That is one mistake made by the first teachers of the Buddha, before he was enlightened. True Buddhist seeking is not the same. It is more like how a champion pro golfer pursues golf knowing that there is an end to his-her career or like a mathematician pursues puzzles knowing that, once a puzzle is solved, it is solved forever.

Whether you find this answer satisfying depends on you. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to say. Mahayana used this puzzle to say that normal everyday asleep life and awakened life are the same, and to put life into a big Dharma system. Hinduism did the same although with its own spin. Zen says you do have to pursue awakening with zeal at first but can-may-and-should let go later on when the time is ripe. Taoists disdain or ignore the issue.

I could easily use these dilemmas as a snide way to discredit Buddhism but that path is low. All ways of thought, life, and religion have dilemmas. They also have valid insights and they deal with problems that are not merely of their own making but are of the real world. They all have their own value. It is better to take on religions and other stances at their best terms fairly. You should think about these dilemmas to see how you would handle them.

My advice about not making awakening into a sticky object of clinging is the same advice that I give to Christians about Salvation, Justification, Grace, Works, and Heaven. Don't worry about Salvation and Heaven. God will assess you. If you worry about those, you will freeze up and screw up. Genuinely let go. Don't pretend to let go as a roundabout way to Heaven. Trust God and really let go. Be the best you can along the lines Jesus taught. If you can't let go and trust God, don't worry about that either but still be the best person you can along the lines Jesus taught. Buddhists should learn about awakening and value the idea but don't be trapped by it. Learn what you should do to be a better person and better Buddhist. Do that. If you do that, then you can let awakening take care of itself. Don't follow magic, empty rituals, or silly pursuit of external merit. Enjoy rituals if you can. Trust Dharma. My answer is like the Taoist and Zen answer. Many Buddhists do this already, more so than Christians.

(B) (6) Using Logical Traps to Our Advantage: "Manage".

This section recalls the logical trap from above. This trap is similar to other traps including a famous trap in formal logic called the "Liar's Paradox" ("I always lie"). It is similar to "damned if you do, damned if you don't" and to "Mexican Standoff". It is related to the idea that, if you push any idea to its limits, it becomes nonsense, and can become its opposite ("only a Sith deals in absolutes"). The material here is a taste of what Tao and Zen teachers do to get people to jump out of traps and to think for themselves. This might

seem like a silly game but it is more. These logical conundrums are signs to start thinking. You need to be ready for these games because Mahayana and Hinduism use them to make us think and use them to attack other religions, especially Theravada.

We want to not cling. If we cling to not-clinging, then do we not cling or do we cling? If we not cling to not-clinging, do we still cling or do we not cling?

To “reach Nirvana” we have to let go of a lot, maybe all. Do we also let go of reaching Nirvana? If we do let go, we never reach Nirvana. If we don’t let go, we never reach Nirvana. Choose. Then go through the same exercise with “awaken” and “get saved”.

The Dharma tells us that we have to let go. Do we also have to let go of the Dharma? If we let go of the Dharma, do we then have to stop letting go? If we stop letting go, can we go back to the Dharma? If we do not let go of the Dharma, we cannot fulfill the Dharma, and so we kill the Dharma. Most Buddhists abhor the idea of letting go of the Dharma and are quite uneasy with the idea that “let go” implies letting go of the Dharma.

“Fear nothing but fear”. If you don’t fear fear, then you will fear. If you do fear fear, then you will fear. Keep this problem in mind for material below.

“Hate nothing but hatred”. If you do hate hatred, you will hate. If you don’t hate hatred, you will hate. “Do everything in moderation”. If you do moderation in moderation then sometimes you will do too little and sometimes too much. If you don’t do moderation in moderation, you miss out on a valuable idea in life.

Pure rule of the majority soon leads to tyranny, which is the complete negation of democracy. Besides pure rule of the majority, we also need basic rules and the people have to follow the rules. Democracy can only exist when it is not pure democracy.

In human affairs, almost every big idea should apply to itself to some extent. This principle is similar to “applies equally” and “what if everybody did it?” or “what if nobody did it?” from morality. If an idea can’t apply to itself, you need to work on the idea until you can understand it better, see what is going on, and see some paths through the problem.

When we are near these logical traps, it does not necessarily mean something has gone so wrong that we are stuck in agony. It can be an opportunity. It means we have to use judgment. Usually it means we have to take from both sides according to what is best – the Middle Path. Step back. Think “outside the box”. See what you lose by clinging to one side. Think what you gain by taking from both sides. See if you can take good from one side without necessarily killing the other. As evolved sentient beings, luckily evolution gave us the ability to do all this enough. It might be one way we are superior to machines, at least for the next few decades. I call this skill “managing”. Some people call it “coping”.

If we let go of letting go, that means we do have to hold on to some things. So what? We manage. We cope. We choose what to let go of and what to hold. I prefer this option to being stuck trying to let go of letting go or trying to rationalize why we have to let go of everything but can’t.

Democracy has to be a mix of majority force and principles. So what? We can manage this situation if we try and we don't think we will get it perfect for every case for all time.

Even the Middle Path is not always the Middle Path, and sometimes the off-center is the Middle Path. When bullies find out that we compromise, they are quick to take advantage. Then we have to stand our ground, get tough, stick to our guns, find out what we believe in fight for that, and even have to get crazy. The rules in democracy are the residue of people sticking to their guns in the past. Then the good Middle Path includes residue from not the Middle Path, residue from the extremes. Of course, if we stick to our guns all the time then we get crazy and we are as vulnerable to bullies and crazy people of other kinds; and we are back to the obvious Middle Path. Yes, we can manage all this but it takes some experience.

Managing is a skill as hard and deep as letting go and it requires much more than clinging mindlessly to a mere dogma, to God, Dharma, Tao, or Heaven. It does not contravene faith.

(B) (7) Instead: Manage Clinging and Suffering, and Think Well Enough.

Dalai Lama (1): "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional".

Dalai Lama (2): "The ultimate source of happiness is our mental attitude".

French proverb: "He (she) who fears to suffer, suffers from fear".

These lines are not quite the same as "let go of letting go" but are in the same family and they require us to think and to manage. They teach lessons. One undoes the others. The Dalai Lama is a Mahayanist (Tibetan) but that doesn't matter in this episode.

I revere the Dalai Lama, the idea in the first quote from him is valuable, and likely the Buddha had some idea like this in mind. I think the Dalai Lama had in mind something like that we can be angry, or even hate, but we don't have to act on anger or hate. This is a good idea, and it is about the best we can do with anger and hatred. Even then, the best is to manage, and we can expect to slip up sometimes. But desire, clinging, pain, and suffering don't work exactly like anger and acting on anger, and the difference makes a difference. If we err on how we treat desire, clinging, pain, and suffering, we will not be able to handle anger and hate, and we will act on anger and hate.

As a result, the quip is more clever than wise. It divides things that have much in common, so as to make a distinction sharper than it really is. It uses a small difference to make a metaphysical chasm. It asserts a qualitative difference between us and the world. Pain is in the world but suffering is only in us, not from the world. We control the world by changing our attitude; we can make it all better by changing our attitude. That is all we need to do. We are all-powerful. Quip (1) leads directly to quip (2). Both are false and dangerous. They imply that we have magical control of an illusory world, as in the story of Vimalakirti from Mahayana (see chapter). They support Mahayana, Hinduism, and Romanticism. The quips and the attitude overlook that the world is as real as we are and that we are in many relations with the world, ideas that are basic in Buddhism. The quips imply that people who "get it" are sharp and so the quips invite the smug end of thinking rather than the curious start of thinking. We have to accept that we are in

relations with the world, and we cannot make the relations entirely one-sided. We cannot merely win by totally overcoming suffering or by changing our attitude.

Although quote (1) uses the mild word “optional”, really it says we can and should defeat all suffering. It promotes a mere dogma, and so promotes bad clinging. This particular clinging has distorted Buddhism. What happens to suffering when it is fully optional? If so, then who opts to suffer, when, how much, or why? How do we decide which suffering to accept and which to deny? Only a crazy person would opt to suffer at all if he-she could avoid it. If taxes were fully optional, who would pay? In love, if heartache were optional, would anyone choose it? Does pain still have its sting if suffering is optional? What about life? Is life rotten before we find an attitude to make pain optional but “hunky dory” and is abundant fun after we find a way? Can you make suffering optional by popping pills and so changing your attitude that way? I disagree that we can defeat all suffering or that we should.

Sometimes pain is suffering. Often suffering hurts like “real” pain. Sometimes pain and even suffering are good. Some kinds of pain and suffering change us. We can learn to let go of some pain and some suffering but not all of either. We have to learn the difference. It takes more wisdom to do that than is implied in this quote. Think about caring for a spouse with dementia after you two have lived a long time together and have succeeded and failed together at many things, things that he-she might not remember but that helped people and helped nature. I challenge you to draw clear lines.

Compare: “I love him but I don’t love-love him”. “I love my country but I don’t love-love it”. “Buzzed is not drunk. I can drive buzzed”. “Everybody is multi-sexual so specific gender is optional”. “Reign is inevitable but democracy is optional (or tyranny, monarchy, Communism, fascism)”.

I think of managing suffering, managing clinging, and managing problems rather than overcoming them; and I think of thinking “well enough” rather than of thinking with perfect clarity and consistency. People who merely manage still feel some suffering; they cannot opt out of all suffering. Sometimes events and suffering defeat even a person who is adept at managing. People who think adeptly still err. People who merely manage have to accept some risk. My use of “managing” and “well enough” is on the Middle Path. Making suffering totally optional is not on the Middle Path.

Sometimes you have to let go of letting-go-of-suffering. People who dedicate themselves to eradicate suffering cling to suffering and cling to their clinging. They make suffering an object of clinging and they make letting go of suffering an object of clinging. People who fear suffering and so cling to suffering also cling to their fear and so cause themselves suffering. Instead, when we (1) manage clinging, we have to manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and (2b) clinging-to-fear-of-suffering. To manage (2a) clinging-to-suffering and to manage (2b) clinging-to-fear, we don’t obsess over that extra clinging too; we don’t add another pain-suffering-fear-and-guilt on top of this pain-fear-and-suffering. Instead we find a way to live with it all. We follow the French proverb. We find a way to live with fear-of-suffering and suffering. We don’t banish all suffering and all fear. We manage most (nearly all) suffering and fear.

If by making suffering optional, the Dalai Lama meant that sometimes we have to let go of trying to control all suffering, that we can only manage suffering, then I agree. If by making suffering optional, he really meant get rid of all suffering, then I disagree. I think the Buddha and the Dalai Lama meant eradicate all suffering, so I disagree.

People who merely manage suffering accept that sometimes suffering overcomes us; and they are willing to take that chance as part of a worthwhile life. "Sometimes you get the bear and sometimes the bear gets you". People who are not content to merely manage suffering, people who wish to make suffering optional and to defeat it, are afraid that suffering will overcome them sometimes. They are not willing to take the chance. They fear suffering. They are willing to say life is not worthwhile in order to avoid the chance that suffering might sometimes overcome them. People who wish to defeat suffering (make it optional) cling to fear of suffering and do whatever is needed to service their clinging to a fear. People content to merely manage suffering also manage their fear and largely let go of that one fear. People who fear life also fear suffering and wish to end suffering so that they can control their lives. Apparently the Buddha feared suffering and he did what he had to do to avoid suffering including saying (implying) that life is not worthwhile.

In the Hindu epic poem the Mahabharata, and in "Siddhartha" by Herman Hesse, people who live normal lives also gamble in-and-with life while people who wish to end suffering refuse to gamble. A major hero of the Mahabharata, Yudisthira, had a gambling problem, and it started the story. In "Siddhartha", just before walking up, Siddhartha spent years lost in gambling. He only wakes up when he sees how sticky gambling and life are. People who do not fear life must gamble. People who do fear life will not gamble and they seek to end suffering so as also to end all risk. They fear suffering and gambling. The view in the Mahabharata and Hesse is ultimately wrong but it is useful here. If you fear suffering then you say that life is not worthwhile. If you say that life is worthwhile then you must risk some suffering and failure. Even if you manage, you still must risk some suffering and failure. You do not have to like gambling, in fact you can detest it, and I think most people who think life is worthwhile don't like gambling, but you have to be willing to take a chance. You have to choose.

As long as we are beset by suffering, we cannot think clearly enough and we cannot decide whether life is worthwhile. We do need to manage suffering before we can decide about worthwhile. To do that, we need to think more adeptly than most people think. We don't need to think with perfect consistency and clarity but only well enough. We don't need to completely overcome suffering but only to manage it. To manage suffering is not to make suffering fully optional. The Buddha gave us ideas and methods to think well enough (not perfectly), and to manage suffering enough (not overcome it totally), so we could decide if suffering is the main issue or worthwhile life is the main issue, and to decide if life is worthwhile. Even if suffering is the main issue, you still have to decide if life is worthwhile. Some people, even without much training, are close to being able to think well enough, and to manage suffering well enough, to decide. Even many non-Buddhists are not so far away.

You cannot conquer suffering until you can manage suffering well enough. When you manage suffering well enough, you will see that likely you can't conquer suffering completely and likely you won't want to. Clinging-to-conquering-suffering thwarts learning to manage suffering, and so likely thwarts conquering suffering. You cannot think with total consistency and clarity until you can think well enough. When you can think well enough, you won't need to think with total clarity and consistency, and likely won't seek it. Clinging-to-thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity thwarts learning to think well enough, and likely thwarts thinking-with-perfect-consistency-and-clarity. Conquering-suffering and thinking-with-perfect-clarity-and-consistency sound more like the wrong overly-strict teachers of Siddhartha than like his Middle

Path. Sooner or later, you have to trust your ability to manage suffering and to think well enough. If you can trust, you manage better and think better. See the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

If you think life is worthwhile, it is easier to manage pain and suffering. If you think life is worthwhile, you cannot automatically conquer pain and suffering. Those relations are fairly easy to see. I cannot figure out all the relations between worthwhile, not worthwhile, conquering suffering, making suffering optional, and before and after.

You cannot pretend to (seek to) manage suffering and to (seek to) think well enough and then leave the issues of worthwhile life and suffering hang. At some point, you have to say “enough” and then decide about suffering and about worthwhile or not worthwhile. Don’t evade. You can work on “suffering” and “worthwhile” both at the same time until you can see clearly enough, and then you must decide. Use Aids but don’t abuse them. Not to decide is more a betrayal of the Buddha than to disagree with him.

You guess what the Buddha decided when his mind cleared (enough).

(B) (8) Buddhism as Getting Free.

(A) While we suffer, we can’t think well; while we can’t think well, we suffer. The Buddha offered ideas and ways to free us from this impasse so we can think well and manage suffering. (B) Now that we can think straight and manage suffering, we can decide if life is worthwhile or not, we can decide about the game, and what to do with life. The Buddha freed us to decide. Buddhism is about getting free. I do not specify what kind of free. Buddhism is the only way to get free.

Some idea of Buddhism as getting free might have been important when people adopted Buddhism at its start. Buddhism gave freedom from the Brahmin-and-rulers system, and people then mixed up political-religious freedom with the kind of freedom described above. I don’t know.

This view of Buddhism as freedom is a step to Mahayana and Hinduism. Some Western Buddhists act as if this were their view of Buddhism, although they don’t say it clearly. “Buddhism as how to get free” appeals to Westerners and to modern people as economic and political freedom become more important. As far as I can tell, Western people did not lead Buddhists to see Buddhism in this way until recently, and the Western view was not important to Buddhists until recently.

Buddhism helps with freedom but I don’t like seeing it primarily that way. If life is not worthwhile, whether we are free does not matter a lot. We only need to be free enough to opt out. If life is worthwhile, then we should see that life can be worthwhile even if we are not fully free in all ways. We can be not-fully-free in some ways or even not-at-all-free in some ways. We can be working toward freedom. If we were not-at-all-free in any way, we couldn’t glimpse the ideas and ways of Buddhism. Here is not the place to wrangle over how free, and in what ways, we need to be to keep life worthwhile, or how we got enough freedom in the first place to begin Buddhism.

So, before we can assess this view of Buddhism, we have to deal with issues of worthwhile life, suffering, and the roles of worthwhile life and suffering in Buddhism. We have to think if Buddhism intended to say whether life is worthwhile, and we have to think how Buddhism focuses on suffering. We have to decide

if suffering is the main issue in life, and is correct to make it the main issue. Even if we think the Buddha really intended his ideas to make us free, Buddhism now does not see itself first that way. We have to deal with the terms in which the problem was originally given (Wheel) and the terms in which Buddhists see their religion (suffering and thinking clearly). If the Buddha intended to make us free, he intended to make us free so we could decide about suffering, the Wheel, and whether life is worthwhile. Freedom was a means at least as much as an end. We have to focus on the ends toward which freedom aims and not treat freedom and the one-and-only great-everything-in-itself self-justifying end that we tend to do in the modern over-politicized-over-populist world. This chapter is about the questions of worthwhile life and suffering rather than the question of whether Buddhism is all about freedom.

We are lucky to be at least partially free and thus able to decide well enough. Working on questions of worthwhile life and suffering first is necessary preparation for later thinking about Buddhism as freedom, and for getting free. Working on those questions first is more effective than directly going after the issue of Buddhism as freedom and better than directly going for freedom. We have to decide those issues to get free even if deciding them does not alone make us free.

(B) (9) A Common Practice.

You can pursue a version, even your own version, of letting go, not clinging, letting go of letting go, not suffering, making suffering optional, or managing, and call it whatever you want. Letting go of some things while valuing other things is common to all religions and philosophies. The distinction between what to let go and what to hold does not always coincide with the distinction between profane and sacred. Much of what all good major religions and philosophies advise us to let go, or hold, is common among them. People call it by different names. That coming together can be quite good.

(C and D) Avoiding Mistakes, and Thereby Sensing What the Idea is About.

People don't like the idea that life is not worthwhile. They want something more glamorous from the mind of the Buddha. They don't want to think the Buddha taught that life is not worthwhile. They want to think life only seems not worthwhile but they personally can awaken to a great truth that does make life secretly deeply worthwhile, even abundant and fun. That is what the Buddha secretly really taught. They want to think their own life is worthwhile even if the mistake-ridden miserable lives of most others are not. To hell with the stupid people who are still ignorant and still live in misery. All this thinking is natural but wrong. It leads people astray. It led people astray in Mahayana and Hinduism. I have to ease people into seeing the simple idea that life might not be worthwhile. The labeled and numbered sections do that task. I don't try to persuade you life is worthwhile or not worthwhile.

If it helps, think that life is unsatisfactory; "I can't get no satisfaction". Or, think that you have to be crazy to live in this world, wish to live here, or need to live here. Instead of crazy serial killers, we are all crazy serial lifers. It is better to be not-here-and-sane than to live like this even if life seems fun. Waking up is getting sane, ending the need to live crazy. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, noted Christians who should value life, at times wrote as if life were a disease to get over or a bad dream to wake up from. If the other ways of seeing life as not worthwhile help, use them for now but later rethink in terms of worthwhile and not worthwhile.

It is easy to say life is a dream from which we need to awaken. Not all dreams are bad. We could live forever in a good dream. The dream need not be ours; maybe it is Dharma dream. We could be meant to live like this. This view is like Mahayana and Hinduism. The movie "Inception" plays with this theme, not always adroitly. Only if the dream is not worthwhile should we wake up. Eventually we need to see that life itself, the basis for any dreaming, the dream, is not worthwhile.

(C) What We Don't Awaken To.

Think about what Buddhism wants us to awaken to or what any religion wants us to awaken to. What is unique about what a religion wants us to wake up to? Much of what religions extol is common between them. People are often confused about what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, thinking it is something common such as deep compassion. By taking away what is common and by taking away errors, we get a better view of what the world is, what humans are, what Buddhism wants us to wake up to, and whether we really agree.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that life is crappy. For most people, life is not crappy, not even for women, men, gays, the working class, the beset middle class, true liberals, true conservatives, Christians, and Muslims. For many people now, with modern medicine, lots of food, entertainment, and the illusions of populist democracy, life is fairly good. A crappy life is not worthwhile but not because it is crappy. A good life does not become worthwhile because it is good. A good life still is not worthwhile. All life is inherently not worthwhile simply as life. A crappy life, and crappy things in life, can show that life is not worthwhile but they are not what make life "not worthwhile". Dwelling only on crappy things in your life, in the lives of some other people, or in most lives generally, can lead you astray and obscure that all life is not worthwhile. You mistakenly think: if you could get rid of crappy things, if I could live only with the good, then life would be worthwhile. That idea is false. You have to stop thinking in terms of crappy or good and have to start thinking about worthwhile or not worthwhile. This mistake about crappy life is similar to the mistake that life would be good if we could only overcome suffering.

Waking up is not about seeing that life is good or bad. Life can be good if you are not sick or old without a home and insurance. Even if life seems good, still life is not worthwhile. We notice life is not worthwhile when life is bad; but even when we do not notice, and even when we enjoy it, still life is not worthwhile. Pleasure can far exceed pain, we can do our duty, be a good person, make the world better, make great art, make scientific advances, find deep love, raise successful happy children, see cause-and-effect and dependent origination, or stop most clinging, yet life is still not worthwhile. Nothing inside life can make life worthwhile. Nothing outside life can. You can say it however you wish but get used to it.

Awakening requires not only seeing that life is not worthwhile but requires a little bit more. Some people glimpse that life is not worthwhile and they respond with anger, bitterness, and lashing out. Some people use "not worthwhile" as an excuse to do and take what they want. Such people do not see fully what "not worthwhile" means and so do not really let go of desire to make life satisfying on their terms. Residual clinging leads to bitterness etc. If they also let go of the desire to make life worthwhile, and fully accepted that life is not worthwhile, they would not be angry, bitter, hurtful, and selfish.

Even so, simply seeing that life is not worthwhile might not do the trick. We also need to see the value of morality, compassion, and acting well. We need to see the value in other persons. These things do not

go away when we see that life is not worthwhile; and we cannot properly see that life is not worthwhile if they do go away because we would lack full standards by which to see that life is not worthwhile. When we let go, we need to let go as a person, a self, and, if we lost morality, compassion, and acting well, we would not be full enough selves to let go properly. We can see that life is not worthwhile and still remain good persons who act well; we can only see that life is not worthwhile if we are ready to be good persons who act well. Still, we do need to see that valuing selves, morality, compassion, and acting well are not by themselves the same as awakening; we do need to see that life is not worthwhile, and that is the hard part; see more on the role of morality below and see more on the self below.

In Japan, a Zen Buddhist monk (I think the Sixth Patriarch) said something like: "Before I was awake, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, disdained everybody, deplored the ideas of others, and was never satisfied. Now that I am awake, I am still miserable etc". Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as finding another source of joy and contentment even if seeing it does bring you some joy and contentment. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is not the same as transforming life into something that is worthwhile. It is not the same as putting you in a state of grace so now your life is worthwhile. You have to take good and bad, and have to let go of good and bad. Only now you can manage it.

Waking up in Buddhism is not about seeing that most of everyday life for most people is a quagmire of silliness, stupidity, selfishness, false goals, aimlessness, and mild immorality, and then rising above the foolishness of the apish masses. Waking up is not about seeing that most of life consists of small traps that steal intellects, hearts, and souls, such as cars, beauty, entertainment, success, and tiny victories. Many people in many religions, and many people apart from any religion, have those insights. They are true but not enough. We have to see that much but we also have to see more. It is unlikely that a person could awaken in Buddhism and not already have seen through the silliness of ordinary life to something more rational, ordered, decent, deeper, and dignified; but still that insight alone is not enough. You need to build on that insight.

Waking up in Buddhism is not primarily about seeing through all the silliness and traps and then settling in to a measured rational life in which you rise above most things to live as a wise person in the middle of a vexing world. It is not about being "the fool on the hill", the wise monk or wise nun who can find just the right word to say, the good teacher, music lover sitting down to booze and hip-hop, the one-in-a-million person who can read theology, a patient gardener, or Chauncey Gardner from the movie "Being There". Those paths usually are distractions. Once you have walked those paths for a time, you need to think what else Buddhist awakening might be.

Waking up is not about becoming a mirror for the universe, reflecting all its glorious diversity and unity, and sometimes reflecting it back in a better way.

Waking up is not about seeing morality and becoming a more moral person. It is not about becoming a good person. Morality is an intrinsic part of Indian thought, and so morality does play a role in Buddhism. Buddhism takes moral awareness for granted and asks what you should do. The universe is intrinsically moral. The Dharma is intrinsically moral and promotes morality. If you struggle against the morality of the world, you will go backwards. If you go along with the morality of the world, you are more likely to go forwards. If you do not see the value of morality and do not almost always act morally then you cannot awaken. But morality alone is not enough even if you never act badly, are a good person, and are pro-

active in morality. In Buddhism, it is not enough to work hard to make a better world. It is impossible that you could awaken if you were a bad person; but awakening is not primarily about being a good person.

People are so confused by morality, moral vigor, and apparent moral laxity in Buddhism that I return often to morality in Buddhism and repeat often that Buddhism insists on morality.

Awakening is not about seeing through conventional morality to deeper morality. It is easy to see through the hypocrisy, conventional morality, moral deception, and moral conniving that most people in the world live daily. It is easy to see through all that to deeper moral principles such as the Golden Rule and “don’t be a lazy leech living off state support (for individuals or business firms).” It is not hard to imagine a better world based on deep real moral principles. Again, it is unlikely that you could awaken if you did not have these insights but these insights alone are not awakening.

Awakening is not about seeing that good and evil are mirror twins that depend on each other. Not only is this insight wrong but it would not be enough even if it were true.

Awakening is not about getting beyond all morality, getting beyond good and evil, to something deeper and better (better in some non-moral sense). It is not hard to glimpse this possibility of getting past all morality; still it is wrong to think it is part of Buddhism and that awakening depends on this insight. Likely, it is necessary to see this possibility and see it is false, to awaken in Buddhism, but seeing this possibility is not the same as accepting the need to overcome all morality, and getting past this mistaken insight is not awakening. Even if some people do somehow get past all morality, and some smart people think you have to get past morality to be one of them, still, getting past morality cannot be the same as awakening in Buddhism.

Awakening is not having the ability, without error, to know what we can cling to and what we cannot. Awakening is not unerringly using “natural” or “moral” to decide what we can cling to and what not. To live is to face stickiness, desire, and clinging; we must cling to some things; so we have to choose; and choose wisely. Awakened and not-awakened people both have to choose. We have to: (1) distinguish between sticky things; (2) distinguish between what we can safely do, that is, almost-cling to, versus what we cannot do because it is too sticky; (3) be able to choose correctly; (4) be able to act on our choices. (5) We may use ideas of natural and moral to help. These tasks are part of one skill. This skill helps us to awaken before we awaken, and comes out of awakening after we have awakened, but in itself it is not awakening. For example, all desire, even for food, water, air, and to avoid extreme temperature can be clinging and harm the quest to awaken. Yet we all must eat, drink, breathe, etc. to pursue awakening; they are natural to a human; breathing is needed for meditation; breathing in meditation is not simply natural; but food, water, air, etc. need not be sticky clinging and need not lead to losing the way. We have to handle them wisely without clinging. Yet this ability is not the same as awakening. We have to forego other desires such as to be adored by lay Buddhists yet that ability too is not the same as awakening.

I make a point of the ability to live in a sticky world with managed clinging because: First, some people, including monks, think the ability to handle stickiness and clinging is the same as awakening, and I do not agree. Adept people in Hinduism and several schools of mysticism appear to manage clinging as well as Buddhists yet Buddhists would not call them awakened. Second, some people think awakening is the

same as not clinging at all, and I doubt that is strictly true. If we did not cling to breathing, we would die. Awakening goes along with correct management for the right reasons rather than not clinging at all. Even then, correct management for the right reasons is not exactly the same as waking up. The ability to manage clinging, to choose and act wisely, comes with awakening even if it is not same as awakening. Awakened people have a huge ability not to cling to anything – food and water – more than most of us can imagine, but few even of them can simply stop breathing or wish to. Even monks like to talk to anthropologists; and that is a form of clinging; but monks managed it for the best rather than gave it up entirely. Third, the ability to live in a sticky world without clinging does not mean we can do whatever we want. People in all religions make that mistake, as when some early Christians felt above Tanakh (OT) Law and civil law, and Paul set them straight. That stance is clearly wrong in Buddhism too.

For examples of the need to choose, manage clinging, and the role of natural and good, remember that nature can be abused, and natural and good do not always coincide, and sometimes we have to pick. Awakened people might, or might not, always choose correctly – they are more adept than “sleeping” people – but skill in making this choice is not awakening. Recall that breathing in meditation is not simply natural but also learned; we cling to it in learning meditation; yet it is useful; we need not cling to it so much that we lose the way; but, unless we are careful and lucky, we can cling to breathing so much that we do lose the way. Awakened people know eating one apple is alright while eating eight apples gives you a pain in the gut but that is not the same as awakening. We can be hungry and eat a single apple or eat an entire bag of junk food. Knowing the difference is not awakening. Awakened people know eating an apple fallen from an abandoned tree is alright but picking an apple from an owned tree without permission is not. Awakened people know that, for married people, having sex with a spouse is alright but having sex with a willing able 14-year old person is not. Such discriminations are not awakening. Awakened people know that squirrels naturally store up nuts for winter and people learn to store up milk in the refrigerator yet hoarding gold and clothes are wrong; but that discrimination is not awakening.

Friendship is natural; it can be morally good; it can be morally bad; it can be overdone or underdone; it can help with awakening or it can hinder awakening; awakened people can have friends if they do not fall into stickiness, desire, and clinging; the naturalness, morality, and stickiness of friendship all should be managed and can be managed.

Advanced people know both that (1) ANY desire and clinging can be misplaced and (2) some of what seems like desire and clinging can be rightly placed. Craving to eat an apple can be a source of clinging if we are in Antarctica. The desire to restrain a man can be NOT clinging when the man is beating a child – or the desire can be clinging if we also “get off” on violent domination. It is false that any desire can be passed through by an advanced Buddhist without clinging. With training, most desires can be passed through, so an adept person sometimes can do things that seem inherently sticky. Still, this skill and the freedom that goes with it are not awakening. Pride is natural and often good; to suppress natural pride is bad; but it is hard to feel pride and not cling. A great skill is to know the difference between modest honest helpful pride versus pride that leads to a fall. When you know, you do not put yourself in the way of temptation by engaging in activities that lead to pride.

But even knowing all this and being able to manage all this is not the same as awakening.

Gangsters, politicians, business people, lawyers, killers, criminals, and accountants can manage desire and clinging. They focus attention. They see cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Somebody called adept politicians “monsters of patience”. Adepts of other religions select and focus attention, see and manage cause-and-effect and dependent origination. The ability to manage does not mean anyone manages in a way that leads to Buddhist awakening. A Buddhist can find small differences in focus and technique to account for the shift but I ask you to look past finagling to get the point that managing desire and clinging is not the same as awakening.

Recall that a monk should be ready to starve if nobody gives food. Starving to death is not natural, and, mostly, even for a monk, not good. I think the Buddha gave this guideline because he wanted monks not to mistake skill in choices about natural, moral, desire, sticky, and clinging for awakening. He wanted all people to see such skill as leading up to, and coming out of, awakening rather than as awakening itself.

Awakening is not the same as feeling great compassion as in Jainism, and in some Islam, Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism. It is good to feel great compassion. I suspect it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if a person has not sometimes felt great compassion. But feeling great compassion in itself is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as being an un-selfish person, fully successful at unselfishness, and without mistakes at unselfishness. An awakened person likely often knows when to be selfish, self-interested, helpful without hurting self-interest, mildly altruistic, and strongly altruistic; but this ability is not awakening. Many people in many religions cultivate this ability and some people become quite adept at it but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. Moral atheists cultivate this ability but they are not awakened in a Buddhist sense. For more on un-selfish persons, see Part 7 below.

Awakening is not the same as the feeling of being a small person in a big world, and is not the same as feeling you matter anyway even if you are a small person in a big world. It is not the same as the Grand Canyon feeling. It is not the same as feeling the connections between everything in the world, how you are a little bit them and they are a little bit you, as in the Upanishads. It is not the same as discovering ecology, the environment, nature, and the cosmos. It is not the same as feeling that the universe will take care of you. It is not the feeling that you will take care of the universe and help the universe take care of other people and nature. Again, likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you have not felt these feelings but they alone are not yet awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that your body-mind work the same way as the universe works, and seeing that the universe and your body-mind reflect each other. It is not the same as seeing the links between the micro-cosmos (your body-mind) and the macro-cosmos (the universe). It is not the same as seeing the universe working through you, using you to do its work. It is not even the same as seeing the universe working through all people, using all of us to do its work.

Awakening is not “mindfulness”. It is not social, humane, or cosmic awareness. Many books have been written on mindfulness since 1980, so see those. Mindfulness is similar to having a feeling for others, like compassion, seeing that others are real too, have feelings, and are sentient. It is empathy and sympathy. It extends to nature. It is seeing that your mind works the same way as the minds of other people, other

beings, and nature. It is using these insights for good. Likely it is not possible to awaken in Buddhism if you are not somewhat mindful but mindfulness alone is not awakening.

Awakening is not the same as success in meditation. Success in meditation can help with awakening but is not the same. Meditation is a tool, like aerobic exercise. It can be a goal in itself if you are satisfied with it as a goal in itself. But primarily, in the past, meditation was a tool to a greater goal, awakening. Unlike as with other insights mentioned here, it is possible to awaken without meditating. But meditating by itself without use for awakening is rarely harmful and it is usually helpful as long as we do not mistake the successes of meditation with the real goal of awakening.

Awakening is not the same as seeing that the world is caught up in cause-and-effect. These days, some scientists think they see the world as entirely a mechanism running on cause-and-effect (I doubt they do really see the world this way, but that is not relevant here). Seeing the world this way does not often lead these scientists to see the world as moral, see connections between things, see the stickiness of the world, see how people cling to the world, feel mindfulness, and feel compassion toward anything. Seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect might lead to such insights but it might not. It might also lead to amorality and a deep numbness. It might lead to despair. As with meditation, seeing the world in terms of cause-and-effect can help to awaken but it is not necessary and it can be misleading.

If you want to use the idea of cause-and-effect to help awaken, keep in mind how the Buddha likely saw cause-and-effect. Here morality matters again. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in the physical arena but that was not very important. The most important arenas for cause-and-effect were what we now call psychological and moral. If you do a bad act, you have to pay the price, and likely you will become more of a bad person. If you fear, you are likely to lash out. Fear turns easily into hate, hate turns easily into bad acts, and bad acts easily trap us in hate and bad acts; this is what the Emperor knew and he used it to manipulate Anikin Skywalker, not to liberate Anikin. In the movies "The Matrix", standard ideas about cause-and-effect are given by the character "The Merovingian" or "the Frenchman", who is also Hades or "the elder Satan". He does not use cause-and-effect for good. Simply seeing cause-and-effect alone is no guarantee the insight leads to goodness and awakening. We need more besides cause-and-effect or we need to introduce specific causes into cause-and-effect. Love is likely to break the cycle of hate and break the prison around us. This both the Buddha and Jesus knew, and many other religious teachers too. Cause-and-effect has to be used to good ends. Using it for good ends helps free us. Ultimately, knowledge of cause-and-effect is a great tool to help free us as long as we include in our view of cause-and-effect the right ideas-causes. The Buddha saw cause-and-effect in these terms. Usually cause-and-effect works to keep us in the silliness of everyday life; but, once we understand it, and if we are astute enough, we can use it to help awaken us.

Seeing that we are bound by cause-and-effect can help us see the ties between life, desire, clinging, striving, suffering, and disappointment, and so help free us. Seeing cause-and-effect also can lead us to see links between desire, striving, and joy, as when parents set up a college fund and eventually a child graduates. In Buddhism, that "good" outcome really is deceptively bad, so seeing cause-and-effect also can trap us. We can use ideas of cause-and-effect to advance toward awakening, but also we need to see beyond cause-and-effect, to see that life is not worthwhile despite some links between good things. Seeing cause-and-effect alone is not awakening but seeing cause-and-effect can be a tool on the way to awakening. I return to cause-and-effect below.

Awakening in Buddhism is not about becoming a decent person or simple good person. I think anyone who did awaken in Buddhism would be a decent simple good person, that awakening comes with simple good decency, but awakening is not the same as simple good decency. Even simple people, and decent people, “mistakenly” think life is worthwhile. Hopefully, I am in that group.

As a Buddhist meditates (including all austerities and withdrawals from the world), he-she increasingly sees that things are not as important as they seemed, that things come and go. He-she lets go, stops feeling attracted to the world, the world seems less sticky, and he-she stops clinging. Still, he-she does not let go of morality. He-she still has to see morality in interactions among sentient beings (relations among people) and still has to make moral decisions and do moral acts. He-she does not cling to the outcome of moral acts as before when moral sight was biased by worldly stickiness but he-she does not discard morality to become amoral or immoral. He-she develops better moral judgment and better moral action because he-she is not as biased and is not as manipulated by the world.

This moral acuity is not awakening. The better-moral-judgment-and-better-moral-acts of an advanced Buddhist are not the same as awakening. Likely moral acuity is necessary for awakening but it cannot be exactly the same. People who have not gone through Buddhist meditation, or any meditation, can have moral acuity as high as an advanced Buddhist. People who have gone through other forms of meditation can have moral acuity as an advanced Buddhist. I do not think there is any moral insight that a Buddhist can have that other people also can have, not even a fully awakened Buddhist. Even if there were some moral insight that a fully awakened Buddhist could have that other people cannot have, I think that moral difference still would not be the same as awakening.

Moreover, when a Buddhist does let go of the world, is not hurt by stickiness, and no longer clings, but still feels morality and acts morally, the Buddhist needs a set of moral principles by which to see, assess, and act. As far as I know, other than avoiding suffering, Buddhism does not have moral principles that are peculiar to Buddhism and that distinguish it from other religions such as Hinduism and Christianity. What are the principles by which an adept and-or fully awakened Buddhist acts, and what have they to do with awakening? I do not address these issues here because they are not addressed well in Buddhism. I urge Buddhists to adopt the moral principles in the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. In practice, that is what many modern Buddhists do. Adopting these principles does not betray Buddhism. Adopting these principles is not the same as awakening. But it is worth thinking about the relation of these principles to the insight and acts of an awakened person.

This paragraph won't make full sense until you know Taoism and Zen but it belongs here and I hope you keep it in mind for chapters on Taoism and Zen. Awakening in Buddhism is not simply acting naturally without pretense. It is not “doing without ado”. It is not finding that your inner nature conforms to the true nature of the universe, and then being able to go along with the true nature of the world simply by acting on your own true nature. It is not transcending conventional morality by linking your nature to the true nature of the universe. All this is a wonderful goal for its own kind of awakening, and it would be delightful if it could merge with Buddhism; maybe it did in Zen; but it is not original Buddhism.

Awakening is not the same as being a simple whole integrated person who has no contradictions and no guile, and who “speaks from the heart”. As I said in the chapter on evolved human nature, I doubt that

any evolved sentient being can achieve full simplicity, integration, and guileless truthfulness. Like many simply decent people and like many simply religious people, an advanced Buddhist is more simple and integrated than other people but that still is not the same as awakening. I don't know if a fully awakened person such as the Buddha is fully ideally integrated and I don't know if full simple integration is needed to fully awaken. Even if full integration and full awakening go together, I doubt they are the same. I also doubt it is worth considering deeply how they differ. If you pursue one, you will advance in the other even if you never fully achieve either.

Awakening is not the same as being a "real" person as opposed to a phony, pretender, or poser. You cannot awaken if you are a phony pretender poser, and you should be as real as you can, but awakening still is not the same. As with full integration, I doubt that an evolved being can be fully real and genuine. Awakening is not the same as being a real person in the sense that Americans wanted of their artists (writers, rock artists, hip-hop artists, actors, movie makers), politicians, friends, spouses, and selves after about 1960. It is not the same as a genuine person without false consciousness in Existentialism. If you pursue awakening, you will become more genuine just as you will become more simply integrated with less guile but they still are not the same. An American or European who met an advanced Buddhist likely would see the Buddhist as genuine, real, and not phony, but awakening and being fully genuine, still are not the same. You can pursue awakening and know nothing of the real-phony distinction even as you become more real through pursuing awakening.

The following issue is related to the idea that Buddhism uses the Dharma to overcome the Dharma. The formal exercises that lead to awakening, and awakening itself, are not entirely natural. They are based on the view that nature and the natural life are full of suffering (not worthwhile) and must be overcome. The goal is to leave the natural world. These days, not being all-natural seems like Devil worship; but it is not as bad as it sounds. Recall that nature is not all good and sometimes we have to choose not to pose, lie, steal, rape, or murder. ALL religions claim to overcome nature somewhat. The morals of Jesus come from evolved human nature but they are not simply natural and Jesus' followers to suffer a disadvantage compared to all-natural self-interested people. Often religions claim to fulfill nature or fulfill God's plan for nature. When religions seem to go against nature, they claim to really make us more-natural-than-nature, as, for example, with Christian ideas about birth control, abortion, and family, and with Christian policies that both condemn homosexuality and say it is really all right. Buddhism claims that awakening fulfills human nature by using Dharma to highest capacity. Mahayana and Hinduism enlarge this claim. They say an awakened person identifies with nature (Dharma) to carry on the Dharma program. I think original Buddhism cannot claim to fulfill nature and to identify with nature; I let Mahayanists and Hindus fight their own case. Original Buddhism is far enough from nature so Buddhists have to worry about the gap. You have to assess how important Buddhism's particular anti-naturalness is. You have to say if contradicting nature makes Buddhist awakening too amiss.

Buddhist morals and meditation techniques can enhance evolved human nature, becoming more alert and mindful is good if you don't wallow in it and don't force it on others, but the goal of escaping nature is misguided. Buddhist insights about the self, mind, and body are inspiring. Being able to see clearly nature and your own silliness due to your evolved nature is a great tool. Wishing to end suffering or make life worthwhile automatically by ending suffering are mistakes. Meditation does not necessarily awaken. Awakening is not seeing how the world makes suffering and, through that insight, automatically to escape suffering. We cannot end desire, clinging, and suffering entirely and still remain human. We can lessen

the worst, and we can help with some pain. We can choose and we can learn. Some of us can learn to help other people and nature. We are better off pursuing those goals. Buddhist methods and sensibilities can help. That's what most Buddhists who are good people do. Mahayanists and Hindus are wrong to claim that awakened people merge with nature (Dharma), or see that they already are at one with nature (Dharma), and thereby enhance its plan.

Many people, on reading the above mistakes about awakening, think: "Hold on. They are a good deal, better than straight Buddhism as Mike (Polioudakis) describes it. I would be well off, and likely satisfied, if I could awaken to modest morality, seeing cause-and-effect, compassion, mindfulness, spontaneity, simple goodness, simple decency, and managing desire and clinging. Surely this success would make life worthwhile after all. Maybe that is what the Buddha meant. Maybe getting rid of suffering through ending clinging is really only the biggest step in making life really worthwhile. To end clinging to bad things, so to remove suffering, is the big step toward being a good person and living a worthwhile life. Maybe Mike is wrong, so awakening in Buddhism really is about becoming a simple mindful good mildly aloof person and about seeing that my life and all life is worthwhile in that light." Most Buddhists think this way though they would not say so. Even most monks likely think this way. Buddhists might be correct that this is what the Buddha really intended; but I doubt it. Some mix of other ideas of awakening might be superior to original Buddhism. A mix of other ideas might be better than what now is taught as Buddhism. Still, awakening in the other ways is not original Buddhism. You have to decide. If you think these other ideas are superior to what the Buddha originally said, then you have to decide if the religion suggested by the other ideas is superior to the original religion of the Buddha or is superior to versions of common Buddhism.

I too admire these ideas. I hope anybody who awakens in Buddhism also would be a simple good decent mindful spontaneous useful caring helpful person. I don't like aloofness. I would add that you act as true to yourself as you can without hurting anyone, you not try to force yourself to be a goody-goody, but you do try to be good. Cultivating good qualities can help with awakening. I suspect anyone who claimed to be awake but did not show good qualities. Still, not any one of the qualities, nor any mix, is awakening in original Buddhism. Buddhist awakening is something else. Whether it is something more and better, or less and worse, you have to decide.

I especially like mixing morality with the Taoist-Zen sense of acting naturally. Zen followers tried to find the right mix of morality, spontaneity, and naturalness. They felt they could find it, and felt this mix was both true Buddhism and true Taoism. I think Jesus had this sensibility too. Jesus also had a tremendous sense of us as persons made by God relating to other persons made by God and relating to a beautiful world made by God.

Working through the possibilities, and seeing the contrast of these ideas with the intent of the Buddha, led me to see more in general; appreciate Buddhism and all religions more; and see the value of the ideas of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values.

(D) (1) Life is Not Worthwhile: Avoiding Mistakes about "Not Worthwhile".

Everything that has a beginning has an end. You have a beginning and so you will end. Not just die from this life, but end. You are not an immortal soul-self. If you will end, why defer the inevitable, especially if

so much of life so has no purpose, and so much of life is empty, boring, often painful, beset by suffering, and not worthwhile? Why not seek a way to get out of this circle, to end the situation naturally in this lifetime? This conclusion does not mean life is devoid of all enjoyment and satisfaction but it does mean it all has to end. You can live with grace in this lifetime as long as you don't let yourself get lost again. Simply accept reality and deal with it by going along with the natural flow of things and doing what you need to do to end completely. (That we all began and all will end does not necessarily mean we all will awaken. That is another issue that I can't go into here.)

"Not worthwhile" seems like despondency, despair, defeat, and resignation. It is not. The blues has roots in despondency and despair but it also grows above those roots into a larger tree with large flowers and fruits, even if it does not become happy sing-along music. Despondency and despair are wrong ways to see the world, they are sticky, and they lead to clinging and suffering. "Not worthwhile" is what happens when you feel in your guts that you have watched too much TV and you turn the damn thing off for a long time; you decide to stop being a sports fan and you actually start living a real, more meaningful, and more satisfying life that includes people and movement; you finally give up on a bad love affair; you accept that politics stinks, even your party and its leaders can't get the job done, and you start looking for other ways to help. It is what happens when you, or a dear one, gets cancer, and you have to get past that badness to make something of what remains. With "not worthwhile", the arena is large, the whole world, but the feeling is the same. If you think of "not worthwhile" through these images, or similar ones, you will be more on the right track than if you think of it in terms of defeat and resignation.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because the world has fallen into sin and depravity as in Christian and Islamic stories of the Fall and Original Sin. Unfairness in nature such as cancer, and evil acts by humans such as terrorism and economic inequality, do make the world less appealing and can make life not worthwhile for some people. But, even if we cured all disease, made the economic system work fairly, and made all people act nicely, still life would not be worthwhile. Bad things make us more aware life is not worthwhile and make life less worthwhile but they alone do not make life "not worthwhile". Our situation in life and our intrinsic attitude toward life, its stickiness and our desire and clinging, make life not worthwhile. How this works out is best seen indirectly through re-reading mistakes about awakening from above and by reading more about "not worthwhile" in this section.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because we are bound by cause-and-effect. We cannot escape cause-and-effect but that in itself makes life neither worthwhile nor not worthwhile. Life might be worthwhile even in a web of cause-and-effect; life might be worthwhile for a spider if the spider could think. Life would not necessarily be worthwhile even if we could escape cause-and-effect as in fantasies of magic. Life might be even less worthwhile if somehow we could escape cause-and-effect. Seeing the extent of cause-and-effect helps you to see whether life is worthwhile or not. You have to accept cause-and-effect just as you accept breathing or the color red, and then decide.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because it is an illusion. Life might, or might not, be an illusion overall. Life could be full of illusion. Life could be free of illusion. In fact, evolutionary theory says we do not see the world simply as it is, and we distort so as to do better. So life does have some intrinsic illusion-ness. But, mostly, we do see the world clearly enough, and we can overcome many illusions.

None of this matters. We could see life clearly but still life is not worthwhile. If illusion is a problem, and we get rid of illusion, what we then see clearly is that life is not worthwhile; we do not see a better life, a good system of lives, or a way to make life worthwhile. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is an illusion as in the movie series “The Matrix”. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of nested illusions. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a fun good illusion or a hurtful bad illusion. Life is not “not worthwhile” because it is a series of fun good illusions or bad hurtful illusions, or a series that is a mix. We could see through all that, even see through a series to the bottom, even find that the bottom is fun and interesting, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could defeat Agent Smith, make peace with machines, eliminate the Matrix, free all people, secure the future of Zion, and live within ultimate reality, and still life would be not worthwhile. We could see that life is a never-ending series of illusions with no bottom, some illusions fun, some illusions scary, and still life would not be worthwhile. We can be totally clear about life but still life will not be worthwhile. We can free ourselves of all illusions and delusions except the delusion that life is worthwhile, and still life will not be worthwhile.

Delusions can make it all worse, and usually do, but not because they make life hard, ugly, unpleasant, or a failure. In fact, illusions and delusions can make life happier and can help us achieve worldly success. Delusions make it all worse because they impede seeing that life is not overall worthwhile; so we have to get over them, usually one-by-one, until we see clearly. It is hard work to get over the illusions that go along with self, family, work, community, success, fame, etc. Even when delusions make life enjoyable, especially when they make life enjoyable, they are still delusions, cause us to cling, and so block seeing that life is not worthwhile. Especially when they work, it is hard to get rid of our delusions and illusions. Sometimes a few hard knocks help to open our eyes.

Some people say, “Yes life is a struggle, life is painful, and sometimes there is more pain than pleasure, but life is still overall worthwhile.” Below I agree with this idea; I say life is worthwhile overall despite the fact that much in life is bad. Buddhism says: This idea that life overall is worthwhile despite aggravations is typical of clinging to life. “Life is still worthwhile despite its aggravations” is something people say when they are still lost in the complex that includes the mistake that life is worthwhile. The only way to get over this mistake is simply to see that life overall is not worthwhile.

Some people say, “Yes, life is a struggle, the struggle is painful when we lose, and the struggle is painful even when we win, but the struggle itself is worthwhile. The struggle is worthwhile regardless of whether we win or lose. The struggle adds to life. Overcoming obstacles is part of life and adds to life. Even pain and suffering can add to life. The struggle can make us better. The struggle can be worthwhile because it is painful, not despite its pain. Thus life overall is worthwhile. Life overall is worthwhile partly because of struggle, and not despite struggle. What matters is not the game but how you play.” This attitude is heroic, and partly true, but it is still overall wrong. It is something people say from within the confusion of life, not from an objective assessment of life. This attitude is true in that we can gain from pain, and we should gain from pain when we can; but this outlook still does not make life worthwhile. This attitude is wrong if it says we can gain enough, through struggle, pain, and living, to make life worthwhile overall. In the end, what we should gain is the insight that life is not worthwhile.

Life is not “not worthwhile” because we are reborn or not reborn. The main insight of Buddhism does not depend on karma or rebirth. The ideas of karma and rebirth can make sense of inequality, and they can be used to support the Buddha’s message – I don’t do that here – but that is not necessary. The ideas of

karma and reincarnation also can be interpreted to make the fact that life is not worthwhile harsher and clearer: it would be horrible to be reborn over and over, blind to reality, sometimes enduring the suffering of this world, and forced to make up for previous bad acts. Recall that, contrary to Western confusion, this is how early Indians and Buddhists thought of the system of karma and rebirth; not as an adventure but as a wheel of torture; and they wanted escape it. The Buddha offered a way out. But the Buddha also offered a way out even if we live only one life. Listen to “Do It Again” by Steely Dan.

We could see that the point is the journey rather than any destination, or see that life has no destination and that not having a destination is alright, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that the point is to participate in the series of illusions rather than to uncover some mysterious truth at the bottom, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that life is a game that is fun in the play rather than is fun in the winning, and still life would not be worthwhile.

We could be the savior of this world (messiah), and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the hero of a joyful system of many lives (bodhisattva or avatar) and we could save all people, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could see that we ourselves made life with its games and illusions, and still life would not be worthwhile. We could be the one God who made this world and all worlds, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God who suffers and dies for everybody, and life still would not be worthwhile. We could be the God (bodhisattva) who leads all beings to grace and salvation, and life still would not be worthwhile.

Sometimes when people start to see that some aspects of life are mistakes, delusions, or not worthwhile, they begin to feel good. It feels good to see through the mistakes of life such as wanting a giant house, believing a political party, or allegiance to race. It feels good to see that large aspects of life are absurd and to see other people running around like idiots. When people see this, they feel they have figured it all out, and their particular life is worthwhile after all. If you can figure out what in life is not worthwhile – a lot – and figure out what in life is worthwhile – not much but quite valuable – and you feel good, then maybe your particular life is worthwhile after all. This idea is a mistake. Even when you see all the particular things that are not worthwhile, the absurdities and silly people, and you feel good, still life as a whole is not worthwhile. Half-smart people think they have gotten to a privileged place where they see through absurdities and silly people, and have found what is worthwhile about life, but, really, usually they are mired in some fairly silly ideology-fantasy of their own. You have to go farther, and, when you do, you will find that all of life is not worthwhile.

(D) (2) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not Caring.

Here is an old quip about Buddhism: “Don’t just do something, stand there”. Super villains cannot defeat super heroes one-on-one in combat. Instead, villains go after people that the hero cares about: romantic interest, parents, friends, co-workers, random children, or simply people in general. Caring makes us vulnerable. Villains say it makes us weak. It sucks us into the world. It makes us depend on the world even if we are super. Even when caring gives us great rewards, it also makes us sad; it causes suffering. Maybe we can see Buddhism a living out of the slogan “just don’t care”. On the other hand, Westerners believe caring makes us great, makes us human, and makes us who we are even if in some ways it also makes us vulnerable. Caring makes us strong. James Bond wins because a woman cares. John Wick wins because he has friends and he loves his wife and dog. Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter make a

point of telling Tom Riddle that they have friends who all care about each other, and they believe in good things, while he has nothing. The greatest speech in the “Lord of the Rings” movies is by simple Sam Gamgee about how some things are worth caring about and fighting for.

Looking at Buddhism through caring and not caring has pitfalls, especially for Westerners who now make so much of caring. When she was fifteen-years-old, my modern Thai niece replied to everything: “I don’t know and I don’t care” (mai ruu mai son). She turned out a useful adult. In our world now, “don’t care” sounds like a spiteful immature child. It sounds like a typical “me” person who cares only about career, “making it”, and markers of success such as trophy children and the latest phone. “I don’t care” sounds like a person who has been beaten by the world and is bitter but would care if he-she could get another real try. It does not sound like someone who has lived a bit, won a bit, lost a bit, and decided the game as a whole was not worthwhile despite some wins. “Don’t care” sounds mean, bitter, and spiteful rather than intelligent, thoughtful, the end of a line of serious thought, following the Dharma, and part of the Buddhist Middle Path.

In fact, Buddhists can care, do care, and should care. Buddhists just should not get lost in caring, and so get stuck in the world, and become overly vulnerable. Instead of saying “I don’t care” say “I don’t cling”. Not to care at all turns yourself into old rusty metal. But, in fact, you are not crumbly old rust or you would not know about Dharma and Awakening and you would not care about them and seek them. If you see a kitten up a tree, rescue it. Share your bowl with a bum who hasn’t eaten. Teach about the Dharma. Help a child with homework. Study math for fun. Explain to villagers why a dam across a stream might or might not work, and so save them effort and suffering in building it or not building it. Explain to all people why terrorism is horrible. An intrinsic part of the Dharma and the universe is morality, and morality implies some caring. As a good Buddhist, you have to act morally, and it is hard to act morally without caring a bit. When you do care a bit, you act morally as Dharma intended. They come together. The Buddha cared for all sentient beings and so taught the Dharma, that life is not worthwhile, and how to escape from suffering. Be ready to let go and walk away when things turn into a vortex and you feel sucked in and twisted. It is hard to care some yet not get sucked in but it can be done.

If you want to think about the issue in terms of caring, think this: “Life is not worthwhile enough so that I should risk caring enough to get permanently sucked in and forget myself but I may care up to that point”. Every time in this chapter you see “life is not worthwhile” you can think about the longer version.

To deliberately not care is a mistake about as big as caring too much. Deliberately not caring is a desire, clinging, and a way of getting stuck on an abstract dogmatic stance. It is caring in reverse. It comes too close to disdain, pride, and hate. Deliberately not caring takes a lot of energy that would be better spent finding the correct limits of caring and not caring.

“If you love someone, set him-her free”. The following view is somewhat misleading but can be useful. If you really care about somebody, you want him-her not to suffer, and you want the best for him-her. The best for him-her is to see how the world works and to attach (cling) or not attach (not cling) appropriately. “Perfect” would be awakening but we can’t do that for others. We can manage our clinging to the person so we don’t bind that person and instead we set that person free to pursue Dharma as fits him-her. In contrast, when we care a lot for a person and show it, we almost demand of the other person that he-she care for us as much. When we say “I love you”, we expect him-her to say it back, and feel it, or we get

angry. “Two and a Half Men” and “Big Bang Theory”, among other TV shows, had good episodes about what happens when a person does not say it back. Don’t put other people there. Don’t care for them so much (cling) that they have to cling to you or they feel guilty and confused. Care for them as much as you can to help them along the Dharma path. Any more is wrong for both of you. That much is best for both of you. If he-she really cared for you, wouldn’t he-she do the same for you? This is one version of a Buddhist Golden Rule. You don’t have to limit caring only to what sends him-her along the path, you can be nice to him-her and can share good times and common interests, even those that have nothing to do with the path, you can play golf or watch sappy movies together, you can talk about which candidate best, but not so much as to endanger the path for either of you. You should not force, or use guilt to force, a person to “be better” and “to reach his-her full potential” along the Dharma path or in other ways either. That is not really caring.

The idea of “caring” can highlight the contrast of Western with Buddhist. Westerners say the people and ideas that we care about are exactly what make life worthwhile even when they bring pain and even though too often they don’t work out. We think what we care about, who we care about, and how much we care, is what makes us distinct as a person and makes us valuable, and we think the same is true of all peoples. Caring matters, makes us people, and makes us distinct. Buddhists say even people and ideas are not worthwhile in that way, and caring for them does not make our life worthwhile or their lives worthwhile. Caring brings suffering and the suffering is not worth it.

Don’t dismiss the Buddhist view because the contrast is clear and because modern people have been trained to accept the Western view. Westerners repeat their point so often that it seems they are trying to talk themselves into something they secretly doubt. A flip of the TV remote reveals how often shows and movies promote caring. Even the violent movie “Predators” is about how caring is better than strategic selfishness and better even than strategic mere self-interest. In real life, how often does love win the day or does family really win? Wouldn’t it be better to care in the context of reality where the caring is much more likely to do good? Is caring really what it is all about, does caring really make us fully human, and does caring really make each of us distinct, unique, and valuable? Are we really that individually distinct and that valuable? Do we really make the world by what we care for and how much? That kind of caring seems, paradoxically, selfish.

Too much caring leads to religious fervor, nationalism, racism, sexism, terrorism, and us and them. Even too much caring for a person leads to political corruption and family corruption.

Despite the sense of the Buddhist stance, I still hold the Western position although softer than common. Caring is important, helps make us persons, and makes us distinct. Life is worthwhile and caring helps make life worthwhile. Western culture is going through a Romantic whirlpool of sticky clinging stupid silliness about emotions and caring. By putting too much stock in caring, we care wrongly and we hurt the ideas and people that try to we care for. The Buddhist view could help. You can still be a worthwhile useful person if you don’t have all the deep squishy family, friends, and causes that media glamorizes. Too often caring really is about me and not about them. The Buddhist idea of the limited self can help here if we think both of them and me in that way, and we live up to the potential of that kind of self rather than the super self of Western myths about caring. The Buddhist Middle Path is worth considering even for caring commitment.

(D) (3) Life is Not Worthwhile: Big and Small, Great Compassion, and Not Caring.

The feeling of “big and small” is two feelings: (1) We are all only small parts of a very much bigger whole. (2) Although we are only small parts, God (Dharma, Tao, and the Whole) cares about us and all the small parts, and God wants us to do well by his standards.

Recall that a feeling of “big and small” and great compassion often, paradoxically, comes with a feeling that somehow life and the world are not worth it. Someone who feels all of this still intends to care for people and nature but knows caring might not do the job. Someone who feels this way accepts and goes on anyway. My wife calls this mixed feeling the idea that God cared about us once but now God has left us to the squalor that we make here – maybe God finally shrugged his shoulders and left - we do deserve our fate even if it is sad. While this feeling might be related to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim idea of a fallen world, it is not the same as their idea of a fallen world. It is less dramatic yet sadder. I don't know why these feelings come together, but, if you know what I am talking about, you gain an insight into Buddhism.

Most people who have all these feelings together try to suppress the feeling that it might not all work out and try to foster the feelings of “big and small” and great compassion. Buddhists accept all the feelings, and instead see the message that it is not worthwhile even if it does work out. This Buddhist stance does not mean you stop caring within the right limits and does not mean you stop feeling. It does not mean you do not appreciate the whole and the Dharma. It means you see reality as it is, stop fooling yourself, and start thinking and acting accordingly. Unless you have had all the feelings in this way, it is hard to describe any more.

Most people do have all these feelings at some time in their lives. They nurture the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them to hold onto and they suppress the feelings that their culture-or-religion tells them not to have. The next time this happens to you, if you are able, dwell on all the feelings for a while but not permanently. Don't suppress the sadness that comes with “big and small” and with compassion. Accept the feeling that the world went awry and won't work out. Think about what that outcome might imply. If all this frightens you, then stop right away.

(D) (4) Life is Not Worthwhile: Illustrations and More Explanation.

In the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, in movie two, the Architect (Dharma or God) gives Neo a choice. Neo can either (1) give up the woman he loves, Trinity, partly save the city of Zion, and so continue the game of the Matrix for one more round; or (2) Neo can save Trinity and win freedom, but very likely lose Zion totally, let the machines win, bring the demise of nearly all humans, impoverish existence for all survivors, and end a long-running somewhat mutually beneficial game between machines and people. Five saviors have come before Neo and faced a similar choice. Neo and his predecessors were groomed to choose to keep the game going by instilling in them deep love for humans. All Neo's predecessors chose to save Zion and continue the game. All five thought the game better than nothing, thought life worthwhile. All five clung to the game, seeing that as the correct moral choice between self versus others. All five struggled to a moral choice. Krishna urged Arjuna to choose likewise, and he did. All five predecessors acted like Mahayana bodhisattvas or like Hindu avatars. Unlike his predecessors, Neo chose to save Trinity and to assert freedom. The result of his choice, at first, seemed like disaster; but it ended well by saving Trinity, saving Zion, ending a bad game, and bringing humans and machines to accord. Through

struggle and choice, in the end we can have it all. This outcome is a common human fantasy. Now, in the West, this common human fantasy is tied with ideas about political freedom, wealth, patriotism, love for people, romantic love, and love for family. "Star Wars" teaches much the same.

As my wife, Nitaya, pointed out, unlike his predecessors, Neo did not choose to continue the game. He did not act like a bodhisattva or avatar. Neo acted somewhat like a Theravada Buddhist in not making humanity, life, and the continued game, an ultimate priority. Yet if Neo were a true Buddhist, he would not be in this situation to begin with. Neo did not care about the game as given to him but he still cared about Trinity and other particular people, and about people in general. If Neo were a true Buddhist and he was in this situation, Neo would not choose at all. Any positive choice implies life is worthwhile, and renews clinging etc. Neo would not save Trinity, Zion, the game, humanity, or the machines. He would not fight Agent Smith. He would not mistakenly think that choice-in-itself is moral glory or is glamorous moral victory. He would not glamorize struggle, morality, choice, or success. Neo would not heroically choose or refuse to choose. He would simply do nothing unusual, and so let the game play out and end. He would not see doing nothing as a glamorous moral choice either. If Neo did choose Trinity, and the result worked out well all around, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. The Brave New World is not more worthwhile than the old. Neo would not let himself believe the Western fantasy that romantic love eventually wins everything. Neo would believe the common human fantasy that family and family love eventually wins everything. Neo would know that, even if the fantasies are true, their success leads to nothing worthwhile. If Neo chose to let Trinity die and so let Zion and the game turn through another cycle, Neo would not fool himself that anything had been gained. Few Buddhists could let go as in the choices above, after any choice, or with no choice at all. All Mahayana bodhisattvas and Hindu avatars would choose as did the heroes who came before Neo, as with Arjuna. I don't know what normal flesh-and-blood merely human Buddhists would do. Many Westerners think they would choose as Neo did, choose love, and so have it all at last, including freedom and prosperity.

By choosing "Trinity", the movies imply that by choosing God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Western values, we get it all, including a glamorous identity as a moral romantic hero. This sounds like what I am saying. It sounds like my rejection of Buddhism and Hinduism. It is not. The Trinity of the movie myth is not the God that I believe in, and my idea of making the world better is not "getting it all". I insist we can't have it all, and we should not glamorize. I do not confuse romantic love with working hard to make the world better or with anything else. I do reject the idea that we are in a game, and that we should keep the game going. I do reject the idea that sacrificing ourselves or others to keep the game going is heroic, moral or, glamorous. I do reject glamorizing morality or indecency.

It is hard to see that life is not worthwhile, life is often painful, goals are often delusory, we cling to life with our delusions, clinging leads to suffering, and they all reinforce each other. This idea goes against what I have said all through this book about doing good and about working to make the world better. If you wish to go along with Buddhism, you have to see what it says and to overcome what I said.

Millions of years of evolution have channeled us to see life as worthwhile even when life stinks. Evolution made it hard to see life as not worthwhile, almost no matter how bad it is. Evolution made sure we almost always cling to hope. The fact that evolution leads us to think life is worthwhile does not, by itself, mean life is worthwhile or not worthwhile. Even so, we still have to evaluate the worthwhile-ness of life on its own terms. We have to override how evolution has channeled us to assess life as it is. The fact that

evolution led us to see life as worthwhile means we have to be careful to give full weight to the evidence that life is not worthwhile and maybe we have to discount some of the evidence that life is worthwhile. Buddhism accepts the natural tendency to see that life is worthwhile regardless of facts – another way in which Buddhism and modern biological theory coincide. Buddhism assessed the issue on its own terms apart from the natural tendency to see in rosy terms, and without reacting against the natural tendency, and Buddhism concluded that life is not worthwhile.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I said that we do not see the world exactly as it is, some of our delusions are useful, we are contradictory, some of our contradictions are useful, and we can never get rid of all contradictions so we are one simple whole integrated being. We can get rid of enough confusion so we can see clearly enough to follow the Golden rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law. Buddhism seems to require us to get rid of all our delusions so we can see that life is not worthwhile. It takes a lot of clear minded integrity to see that life is not worthwhile especially if evolution is pushing hard to make us think life is worthwhile. Arguing this issue back and forth here is not useful. So I say you don’t have to be perfect in Buddhism any more than you have to be perfect in my version of following Jesus. Despite the push of evolution, we can be integrated enough to be clear enough to see that life is not worthwhile. This stance does not mean that intellect wins over emotion or vice versa. It only means we can see enough of what we need to see when we are ready to see it. I assume we evolved the ability to do this too, along with our delusions and contradictions. I do not make a big deal out of this evolved ability to overcome delusion and confusion such as by claiming that the Dharma (God) set up evolution so we would evolve this ability. Please keep these comments about integration in mind for remarks below about the self in Buddhism and in the modern theory of evolution.

The idea that life is not worthwhile is like the feeling we get when we have to wash the same dishes over and over again or wash the same clothes over and over again. It is like getting up every morning to go to work so we can buy food and pay rent so we can get up every morning and go to work again. There is no end to it. It does not get us anywhere. It doesn’t even move us forward; it just keeps us from falling back. Nothing is ever complete, finished, done, and accomplished. Even if we wash the dishes after a good meal with family and friends, and should feel satisfied, we still face the same old pile of dishes over and over again.

People think life would be worthwhile if they could be a hero, face constant adventures, face a few small defeats, but win overall, over and over, like James Bond, Matt Dillon, Jason Bourne, or Michael Westen. Evolution might predispose us to be fooled in this way but ultimately it is not true. Even that kind of life gets boring after a while, and usually sooner than we hope. The movie “Robin and Marion” makes this point, and I have heard that some brave soldiers say the same.

In the time of the Buddha, people did not have the chance to continually cure different diseases or hope to cure a big complex disease such as cancer once-and-for-all. We think that might make life worthwhile but don’t be so sure. If you are the one who does it, yes, you will feel good for a while. But, if you didn’t do it, somebody else would. Does the fact that you did it make your life worthwhile but make the lives of other people not worthwhile, even if somebody else would find the cures eventually? If somebody else does it but not you, does that make his-her life worthwhile but not yours? Don’t confuse getting a Nobel prize, fame, glory, or wealth with making life worthwhile.

You are bored watching TV all evening every evening. You decide to do something a little naughty, such as play risqué music, invite the person down the hall in for a drink, a smoke, or a pill, and maybe have sex. That is fun. You do it again. You go out to look for people who do the same thing. You do a little crime such as a drug deal or stealing. Life is fun again. But that lasts only for a while. Pretty soon you get tired of sex, drugs, rock and roll, hip-hop, music about righteous anger, and petty crime. Even if you escalate to bigger, you get tired of that. Many nights, now all you want to do is watch Nature, Discovery, or History on the TV. Eventually, you know in your heart that nothing will keep you engaged all the time every time, not even conquering the world.

Everybody once in a while gets the feeling of deep bone weariness with life. You would know life is not worthwhile if you took seriously that feeling. You do not have to be disappointed or hurt to have this feeling. Sometimes you just feel it from the center outwards. You might even feel it in the middle of a happy event such as a wedding. Evolution guards us from dwelling on those feelings and taking them so seriously that we use them as a turning point. In contrast, Buddhism insists those feelings are right, and Buddhism tries to get us to overcome our evolved programming to go on anyway despite what we can see is the truth.

Recall the chapters in this book on “Worlds”, especially the second chapter. There I described scenes of increasing boredom and of increasing helplessness with boredom. I reviewed techniques for fending off boredom, including the ideas of rebirth, life is a game, and losing yourself. The techniques might work for a while but ultimately they cannot stave off boredom. Not even The Game in the novels “Kim” (Rudyard Kipling) and “The Glass Bead Game” (Herman Hesse) can fend off boredom forever. Think of boredom as a proxy for “not worthwhile”. The moves that fend off boredom might make life seem worthwhile for a while but not forever. Eventually we see through all moves to the fact that life is not worthwhile. A merry-go-round can be interesting for a long time but it cannot make life worthwhile. The idea of not worthwhile is like a very deep qualitatively distinct unfixable kind of boredom.

Besides, even if life is not boring, even if life is fascinating, that still does not make life worthwhile. To a stoned person, reruns on TV are amazing but that does not make them worthwhile.

If you read enough fiction, eventually you realize there are no new stories, and more fiction is not going to get you anywhere. Even good stories get empty after a while. How many gangster or vampire movies can you watch? Fiction is not worthwhile. If then you go back to real life, after not long you realize most life is more boring than fiction. To make life more interesting, usually people turn to life that is dangerous or thrilling, or turn to the “underbelly”. Even then, after a shorter time than they feared, they realize thrill and danger too are empty. “The thrill is gone”. After that, there is little to turn to.

“Not worthwhile” means all the lessons from all the scenarios. It does not mean “boring and unlikely to pay off our investment”. It means pointless despite the fantasy, endless variation, and engagement. For a wonderful novel about this realization, read “Kim”.

Rebirth might solve some problems but it also creates worse problems. Rebirth helps keep people lost in the system. Understanding that life is not worthwhile gets us out of a system of rebirth. It does not make the system of rebirth more fun or make it worthwhile as a system.

The idea that we can keep dying and getting reborn, so stave off boredom, and so make life worthwhile, is probably a reaction to the idea that life is a delusion. This solution – rebirth to fend off boredom – is central in Hinduism and Mahayana. This solution is similar to the idea that God can lose himself in play and-or dreams, so enjoy himself, and so ultimately find himself in an even better way. I think the Buddha would have rejected this alternative and this view of God and the self. I don't know if this alternative was available in the time of the Buddha and that he did, in fact, reject it. If this alternative appeals to you, then you might disagree with the Buddha. If you prefer Mahayana or Hinduism to Theravada, then you should consider the role of this idea in your thinking.

The idea that God judges us after death does not make life worthwhile even if we expect that God will be kind to us and even if we hope that God allows us to try again in other lifetimes. No matter how well we do with God, no matter how many times we try, life is not worthwhile. God cannot make life worthwhile. God is fooling himself if he thinks he can make life worthwhile. We fool ourselves if we think God has made life worthwhile or can make life worthwhile. The ideas that God saves us, Jesus saves us, or we are justified by our faith in God and by following his Will, do not make Life worthwhile. The idea that we go to heaven does not make life worthwhile; even heaven gets boring; "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens". Life is not a great-and-wonderful gift from God.

(D) (5) Life is Not Worthwhile: Life has no Meaning.

Life is not "not worthwhile" because life is meaningless although the lack of meaning in life can open our eyes to the fact that life is not worthwhile. For readers who recall high school "lit" courses, the idea that life is not worthwhile is like the idea from Existentialism that life is absurd. Recall Albert Camus' novels "The Stranger" and "The Plague". (In the movie "Life of Pi", while in "high school", the hero reads "The Stranger" in original French.) In "The Plague", a doctor fights the plague although he knows he does not make the life of anybody better, good people die who should live, stupid and bad people live who should die, and the plague will mutate to return over and over, so there is no end to it and nothing is ever finally done – in contrast to what Jesus said on the Cross. People who have the plague and people who do not have the plague make up ideas about why it has come and what life is all about, but the ideas seem silly. The challenge is to make meaning in the face of all this. Existentialists claim we can make meaning although life has no intrinsic meaning and life is absurd, and that this meaning makes life worthwhile. I am not sure Camus believed this. I do believe this. Buddhism does not. We can make up meanings, even real meanings, but that does not make life worthwhile.

At a first level, Buddhism is like the doctor when he feels life is absurd and all meaning is merely made up self-defense fantasy. We "see through" all meaning. We see that life is absurd. When we see through all meaning, and see that life is absurd, then we also see that life is not worthwhile.

In the movie series "The Matrix", ideas about the absurdity of life are introduced by the character "Agent Smith", especially when he opens his heart to Morpheus. The idea that life is absurd makes everything absolutely the same, and vice versa: "everything means less than zero". When Neo first defeated Agent Smith, Neo took meaning (purpose) from Smith's life. When Neo merged with Agent Smith, Smith got the power to make everything the same, to make it all him. Agent Smith must defeat Neo to reassure himself that he has found a new purpose in making it all the same. Without at least this purpose, Agent Smith cannot go on. Because Agent Smith cannot fathom the purpose-in-non-purpose of life, eventually he

must cease entirely. If the Merovingian is the old Satan then Agent Smith is the new Satan in which life has no meaning regardless of cause and effect or anything else.

Buddhism does not deny we can have real meanings or even that we can make up real meanings but it denies that meanings make life worthwhile; even real meanings do not fully make up for the plague. For Buddhism, life can have real meaning but life is still not worthwhile. To “see through” meanings can help us to see that life is not worthwhile but ultimately it is not necessary to see through all meaning. Some people assert their meaning cannot be “seen through”, debunked. For them, life is not absurd. People say this about family, love, God, religion, science, and country. Buddhism does not have to argue with them. It simply sees that life is not worthwhile even for people who make real meaning; these people only think life is worthwhile. Even when life has meaning that we can’t easily see through, and life is not absurd, life is still not worthwhile. Even a meaningful life is not worthwhile. “Meaningful” is not always the same as “worthwhile”. “Not worthwhile” is not exactly the same as “absurd” or “not meaningful” any more than “meaningful” is exactly the same as “worthwhile”. “Meaning” is a game that is played within the limits of the mistake that life is worthwhile, and, within those limits, meaning is fully meaningful. Once outside those boundaries, meaning is not wrong, it is irrelevant.

Stories like the writings of Camus help us understand these issues. For more stories, read excerpts from the “Lotus Sutra”. It is a Mahayana sutra (book) rather than a Theravada sutra, but still useful, and won’t cause much damage.

(D) (6) Life is Not Worthwhile: Not “Bleak House”.

When people begin to feel that life is not worthwhile, they can get despondent. It seems a bleak vision. But it is not nearly as bleak as the ideas below. The idea that life is not worthwhile is not the same as any ideas below. Unlike as with the ideas below, after we see that life is not worthwhile, we still have a lot of life to live and a lot of scope to live in. We can still be useful in life, enjoy life, watch, teach, have friends, do science, and make art, without thinking those activities make life worthwhile; and we don’t have to fall into clinging. This scope for modest living is part of what gives Buddhism its charm.

The idea that life might not be worthwhile does have benefits. It leads us to really think through whether life is worthwhile and what might make life worthwhile. It makes us think through the meanings that we others and that we make up. Thinking about whether life is worthwhile helps us make ourselves, much as confronting moral issues helps us make ourselves. Although life might not be worthwhile, life does not end right away as soon as we know that it is not worthwhile, and we should carry on well.

- Life is intrinsically meaningless
- Life is absurd
- We cannot give meaning to life
- All meanings are false and we should see through all meanings
- All life is bad delusion
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, we can have no choice
- Because we are caught in cause and effect, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- Because we evolved, life is necessarily meaningless and absurd
- We cannot see otherwise than as evolution programmed us, so life is meaningless and absurd

- Morality is a delusion and-or a tool for control
- There is no objective truth, everything is relative
- Life is disappointing
- Life is pain and suffering
- Even deep emotions such as love are delusions and meaningless
- Life is necessarily deeply boring (“ennui”)

(E) More Comments.

(E) (1) Letting Go, Again.

We can overcome the complex of mistakes. Because life is not overall worthwhile, we should not commit to it. We should see that life is sticky, that the stickiness cannot be avoided within a normal life, and so we need to avoid normal life with its stickiness. We should not cling to life or to any thing in it: material, mental, artistic, emotional, social, or spiritual. We should let life go on around us without clinging to it, we should wait to die, we should not fear, and be content when we do die. Not to cling is a way to see that life is not worthwhile. Seeing that life is not worthwhile is a way not to cling. Just as desire, clinging, and life push each other, so not clinging and seeing that life is not worthwhile help each other. Given how the mind works, usually we have to let go of some clinging first before we can see that life is not worthwhile. In practice, the two ideas often come together in small reinforcing partial steps.

At the same time, we should not commit against life because that is an indirect way of clinging too; killing yourself is an indirect way of clinging to life, especially in a system of many lives with rebirth. We should not kill ourselves. In a system of many lives, if we kill ourselves, we will be reborn, and then will have to go through it all again. Even if there is only one life, we should not get angry at life, or at least we should not stay angry.

It is fairly easy to stop clinging to obvious obsessions such as the White Whale in the novel “Moby Dick”. It is harder to stop clinging to more natural objects such as family. Letting go in Buddhism is not like letting go of the White Whale. It is more than simply working fewer hours at the job and so caring more about your family. It is subtler and harder. One lesson of “Moby Dick” is to look at many aspects of life as if they might be the Whale and to let go of them as we would the Whale. Letting go in Buddhism is more like letting go of the Holy Grail in the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”. Even things that seem good can be bad if we think of them too much and don’t think about other more important issues. “He chose wisely”. Yet, in Buddhism, everything in life is like that. We can only think properly if we let go of all particular things in life, learn to take issues as they come, and learn to put them down when we have disposed of them properly.

We should learn to accept thoughts, feelings, and actions, as they come, and then to let them go. If we learn to let go that way, we are ready to die at any time, and ready to wait until we die naturally.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you have a parent, siblings, spouse (partner), children, other family members, and friends, and you care about them. It is impossible not to struggle and cling if you have to tend other people. If you truly wish to wake up, then you must give up family life. If you have not married, don’t marry. If you do not already have children,

don't have children, and give up your spouse. If you already have a spouse and children, give them up. When the Buddha set out to find truth, he gave up his wife and child. It is true that his wife and child lived well at his father's palace, but he still gave them up.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile, and to give up commitment to life, if you still want fortune, fame, power, glory, success, intellectual achievement, spiritual achievement, or a place in history. To seek those is to mistakenly believe they are worthwhile, and so to struggle and cling.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you wish to serve people, do good, and make the world better. To vigorously seek goodness is to cling and struggle. At the same time, you may not act badly. You do not have a license to do what you want. You do not have a license to act badly. That is a worse form of clinging than moral action. Act with simple moral decency. Dogmatic morality and anti-morality are both forms of clinging and of thinking life is worthwhile. Moral action is better than immoral acting, but to cling to morality is still clinging and so is still bad. To cling to morality hides that life is not worthwhile. This clinging makes life sticky. You must be willing to give all that up. You might do good along the way but that goodness is only incidental.

It is impossible to see that life is not worthwhile if you care about anything, if, in Western terms, you care. You do not despise anything, and you might see the value of many things, but you cannot really care about anything, anybody, any god, or any cause. You can be a good person but not a caring person.

It is alright to have feelings and ideas. It is alright to enjoy your mind as it goes along. "Being dead to the world" is not the same as seeing that life is not worthwhile. You should not make your mind (self) "a pile of dead ashes". It is alright to act on some feelings and ideas, such as "I want to go pick an apple off that tree", or "I should tell my neighbor that his dog has ticks". The point is not to cling, not to commit, not to obsess, not to care, and so to see life truly. Once you have had a feeling or idea, and have acted rightly, then let it go. If you can't get the apple off the tree, don't worry about it. Some feelings or ideas you can have but should not act on, such as "I want to kill my neighbor because he throws cigarette butts on the apartment lawn". From an old story: A senior monk and his student came to a stream. The stream was swollen, and thus hard to cross. At the ford, a young woman waited, wishing to cross but unable. The elder monk picked her up, carried her across, and put her down. The monks walked on. Monks should not touch women ever. The younger monk was distraught. After an hour, he said, "Master, you carried that woman. You know touching women is forbidden. Why did you do that? What am I supposed to do now? Who am I to believe now? What am I to believe now?" The elder monk replied, "Are you still carrying that woman? I put her down long ago."

You may enjoy nature as long as you do not cling to it. You may enjoy beauty as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy art as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy science as long as you do not cling. You may enjoy theology as long as you do not cling. You should work for goodness as long as you do not cling. All this is hard to do. Many Buddhist monks have gotten lost in clinging to natural beauty and-or theology.

Not clinging is not the primary end. Not clinging is not an end in itself. Do not cling to "not clinging". Not clinging is a way to overcome desire and stickiness, see clearly, and see that life is not worthwhile. After you see that life is not worthwhile, then you stop clinging automatically. Life is no longer sticky. You no

longer desire. It sounds like a trick to say “stop clinging to not clinging” but, once you see the ideas and practice them, it does not seem like a trick, and it does not seem like a contradiction.

Once you begin to let go of things in life, you might feel much better. This is not your goal, although you should not reject it. You should not mistakenly think, because you feel better due to Buddhist ideas or techniques, that, in fact, life is worthwhile. You should not mistakenly think you can conquer stickiness, suffering, and clinging. To do so is another form of stickiness, clinging, and suffering. Sometimes people feel tremendous joy at realizing life is not worthwhile. That is not the goal either, and to seek that joy is another form of stickiness and clinging. Either to pursue or to reject the feeling that comes with letting go is itself another clinging. Accept what satisfaction or dissatisfaction comes your way as a result of your quest. Many people feel joy but not as they expected, not as in religious ecstasy, and not as in therapy.

Recall the monk in medieval Japan who said: “Before I was enlightened, I was miserable. I was cranky, hated people, etc. Now that I am enlightened, I am still miserable etc”. You have to take the good and the bad, and let go of the good and bad.

You may not commit any crimes or immorality. You are not above the rules. Freedom from mistaken ideas is not the same as not being bound by rules. Breaking the rules will not set you free. You cannot steal and then say “Oh, I put that down long ago”. You need not worry about rigid moral rules or arbitrary moral conventions but you do still have to be moral and you still have to respect the sensitivity of others. Moral rules still apply to you. Buddhism is quite strong morally without clinging to conventional morality or false uprightness.

As with all Indians of his time, the Buddha took the moral nature of the universe for granted regardless of whether life was worthwhile. The universe is intrinsically moral. Through karma, the universe rewards good deeds and good intentions, and it punishes bad deeds and bad intentions. That is part of the law of cause and effect; see below. You should act well regardless of any reward or punishment, but, whatever you think about purity of motive, the universe still responds to your deeds and intentions.

You cannot make spiritual progress if you commit bad acts. Bad acts cloud your mind and so keep you from the clarity needed for spiritual progress.

You do not have to become a monk. Being a monk is an aid in your search, and helps the rest of society by clearly showing people that you are searching and are no longer in normal society. A person who is searching but is not a monk often looks like a bum, and he-she scares other people. Somebody dressed as a monk is more likely to bring a smile. As a monk, you can help other monks, that is, other searchers. It is not misleading to help as long as you do not cling to being helpful. It is not wrong to be a monk, and it can be useful; but it is not necessary.

Exercises such as meditation, yoga, and Tai Chi can help but are not essential. Ideas such as karma, Dharma, reincarnation, spiritual force, merit, demerit, sin, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, the non-self, and Enlightenment can help but are not essential. They can help us get rid of some delusions and clinging. They help calm and focus our minds so we can think well and can overcome the mistakes of normal thinking. But they can also be a source of delusion and clinging in themselves. We should do them to the extent that they help but only to that extent. We should not do them so that they get in the

way. The young Buddha left his teachers because they reveled in ascetic practices to the point where practices got in the way of further spiritual progress. Only after he had given up rigorous asceticism for moderation did the Buddha fully see. Overly-rigorous asceticism taught the young Siddhartha a valuable lesson about clinging, the inevitability of clinging in life, and the not-worthwhile-ness of life.

(E) (2) What Happens After You Awaken 1: An Awakened Person Does Not Lead a Normal Life.

An awakened person sees that life is not worthwhile. He-she sees that life is sticky, we cling to life-as-a-whole and to particular things in life, and so we suffer. An awakened person reduces-or-ends clinging and suffering. An awakened person lets life flow through him-her without clinging to life. The Buddha offered methods to help us do all this.

After awakening, when an awakened person dies, he-she is not reborn. His-her karma is “spent”. In a common image from Theravada, he-she “goes out like a snuffed candle”. The person is over and done. In Theravada, this is a desirable event. It is called “pari-nirvana”.

Most people who are not awakened can understand not suffering, but they dislike that they simply cease totally at death. They want to go on living but without suffering and with worldly success. In Theravada, this goal is not allowed although I think most Theravada Buddhists secretly hold this desire. In Mahayana Buddhism, this goal replaces the goal of enlightenment-and-then-simply-going-out. In Mahayana and Hinduism, people (as Buddha Mind or as Dharma) lived forever before they were born in this lifetime, and will live forever after. They are unborn and undying. I think Siddhartha Gautama denied this possibility but it still runs through various forms of Buddhism anyway.

A person who seeks awakening cannot live a normal life. An awakened person cannot live a normal life. Even after awakening, a normal life too readily leads to clinging and suffering. If you disagree, then try following a particular sports team, a particular sport, a style of music, a style of movie, TV, or novels, politics, the economy, the ecology, fashion, beauty, or celebrities. You cannot follow anything interesting in this world without getting sucked in, getting stuck, clinging, and getting confused. You cannot run a business if you seriously seek awakening or have awakened.

An awakened person need not reject some normal things such as curiosity, education, exercise, friends, etc. An awakened person does have to avoid things that are strongly sticky and that lead to clinging such as family, career, politics, business, formal religion, being a famous scholar, etc. To awaken, usually we have to live apart from society; the Buddha left his family and made monks live celibate. After awakening, a person can come back to society a bit, but still cannot live a normal life; the Buddha did not return to his family, did not start a new family, and did not carry out an occupation such as merchant. The Buddha did advise awakened people to teach other people, and advised that awakened people could live in the normal world somewhat without falling back into clinging and suffering. He advised them to “go to the market” to explain his ideas. Still, that advice does not mean seekers and awakened people can lead a normal life. The Buddha would not allow people to be cutthroat merchants, conniving politicians, or careerist academics. Jesus and Mohammad said people who feel the call of God cannot lead entirely normal lives but the two leaders differed on how their lives departed from normal.

I doubt that a person could be a public school teacher or an academic and be a dedicated seeker or fully awakened person. Teachers and academics can be really good people, and many helped me, but they cannot be a dedicated seeker or an awakened person.

At the least, true seekers and already-awakened people will suffer a disadvantage due to their greater feeling for morality. This is the same disadvantage that followers of Jesus face. To compete with other business people, and to deal with authorities and politicians, you have to do “questionable” things such as pay off bad police officers and buy elections. You have to lie on your EPA reports and taxes. Yes, if all business people, all officials, and all politicians were honest, and the playing field were entirely level, you could be fully moral and not suffer a disadvantage – but the world is not like that. Yes, a moral business person, official, or politician does gain some advantage when customers see that he-she is moral; and this advantage can partially make up for the advantage that others gain from “cutting corners” – but not enough for all honest people and not enough over the long run. You might go to the market to teach but you could never do more than run a small shop. Some Christians settle for this much and I am fairly sure some good Buddhists do as well. Yet imagine if all monks opened shops in any predominantly Buddhist country; Thailand has tens of thousands of monks; then you get the point.

Don’t fool yourself about this point. People want very much to have spiritual success and a normal life at the same time, and so people fool themselves into thinking they can awaken from clinging and suffering and can still lead a normal life. You cannot.

Most Buddhists do not work for full awakening in this life but only work toward eventual awakening. They lead somewhat normal lives but try to be spiritual along Buddhist lines at the same time. I don’t speculate on: how much, and in what ways, you have to be spiritual along Buddhist lines to be a good successful Buddhist and still lead a somewhat normal life; how much you have to give up so as to follow a somewhat normal life as a striving Buddhist; how much you can keep and still be a real Buddhist; when you stop being a real Buddhist if you keep too much; what added particular ideas, acts, or morality you need to live a somewhat normal life and still be a real Buddhist.

This point about not leading a normal life is important because Mahayana does say both a seeker and an awakened person can lead completely normal lives such as “married with children”, soldier, farmer, police officer, merchant, or politician. In Mahayana, with the right attitude, you can live in the world without worrying about clinging and suffering. In Mahayana, seekers and awakened people need not name their children “fetter” (Rahula) as did Siddhartha. In Theravada, it is not true that you can live in the world but not be subject to the cause-and-effect, desire, stickiness, and clinging. This idea is a point of contention between Theravada and Mahayana.

If Buddhism says that life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot live a normal life, and successful Buddhists do not live a normal life, then why did ordinary people follow Buddhism? See sections below.

Suppose you do awaken, then what? If you are a monk, then mostly you continue as a monk. You teach other beings, human and non-human. If you are not a monk, you adjust life so you do not do anything bad or anything that might erode awakening. You allow your native personality to play itself out, as long as your native personality is not criminal. If you are a fussy gardener, garden fussily. If you like to paint, paint. If you like to sing, sing. If you like to write logical treatises, do so, as long as you do not perpetuate

misleading ideas or get lost in the maze. Don't fall back into attachment. Wait for your life to run out, and for you to go away. While you are waiting, you can watch the world play out. In particular, you can watch the world act out Buddhism: cause and effect, clinging, suffering, moments of suffering, moments of joy, moments when people see Dharma, hardening of egos, softening of egos, morality, immorality, amorality, and the rise and fall of states. You cannot do anything bad. You can do as much good as you like, and likely will, but you should not get attached to good acts. Teaching is a good compromise. Being a patient watcher, mild liver, and mild doer of good deeds, who sees the world in terms of Buddhist Dharma law, all contribute to the charm of Buddhists, as I describe below.

For more on this topic, some of it not completely orthodox, see the section "What Happens after You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up" below.

(E) (3) Non-Metaphysical, Non-Mystical, and non-Glamorous.

The original teaching of the Buddha was not metaphysical, mystical, magical, or glamorous. That is part of the charm of Buddhism. The Buddha did not take a stand on metaphysical or mystical issues; he just ignored them as irrelevant. It does not matter if there is a bigger-than-me, I feel the bigger-than-me, I reflect the bigger than me, the bigger-than-me sees through my eyes, I do the work of the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me loves me, I am the bigger-than-me, the bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, individuals are real but the general (species) is not, the general is more real than particular individuals, we are all one, or we are all particular and one at the same time. It does not matter if there is God, heaven, hell, judgment after death, making the world better, objective truth, etc. It only matters that life is not worthwhile, we see this, and we take steps to correct the problem. Even though God exists, the life he made for here-and-now is not worthwhile.

In Buddhism, the ideas that life is sticky, we cling, life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, karma, and dharma are not metaphysical or mystical because we can see them directly in experience.

Metaphysics and glamour go together. When we want to exalt something as metaphysical we also make that thing glamorous. When we hold a person, such as Jesus or the Buddha, to be a savior, we also make him glamorous. Jesus did not really have a halo around his head and likely did not look like a movie star. The Jewish Law is not only given by God, it is also exalted, powerful, deep, and glamorous. We cannot make the union of good and bad metaphysical without also glamorizing badness a bit and making their union glamorous too, as Blake did in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell". As far as I can guess, the Buddha wished his ideas to be non-metaphysical and non-glamorous too. There is nothing exaltedly heroic about seeing that life is not worthwhile and then letting the game play out to the end. You just do it.

To explain the Buddha, people after the Buddha used many aids. Aids always reintroduce metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. Reintroducing metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is almost always hurtful and an impediment. Theravada Buddhists glamorize the Buddha, his teachings, and their religion. For example, they glamorize the "Middle Path" not as an observation about how the world works, and a piece of good advice, but as the "Yellow Brick Road" of Buddhism and the magic solvent that allows them to cure every problem. Mahayana depends on glamorizing both this world and the overcoming of this world.

Even Zen masters who likely knew the Buddha well often made this serious mistake by glamorizing the Void, Buddha Mind, and the idea that everything is as it should be.

As part of how our minds work, as part of seeing a lively world, we naturally tend to some metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour. They are natural ways to think. It is natural and easy to reintroduce them in explaining a hard idea such as that life is not worthwhile. Yet to reintroduce them is still a mistake. To think without metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour is a bit unnatural, difficult, and takes practice. It can be done. You do not have to deny metaphysics, mysticism, and glamour to do it. Ironically, to deny them is to take a mystical and metaphysical stand, to glamorize your renunciation, and so to reintroduce them. You simply learn to play with them and ignore them, and learn to focus on other concerns. Some great Buddhists, and great Zen masters, understood this, could do it themselves, and advised other people to do it. Yet so strong is the natural tendency to mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour that great masters often lapsed back to them in their explanations.

Science contains a fair amount of metaphysics and usually contains more than a dollop of mysticism. That does not invalidate science, and it is not a concern here. It is not usually a concern to practicing scientists but only to philosophers of science.

(E) (4) Honoring Normal Everyday Life.

By ignoring mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha gave more status to normal everyday life than was common among religious seekers of his time, and he supported the idea that the world is as it is and not otherwise. The Buddha used examples from normal life to support his ideas, and so also valued normal life and common sense. I do not know whether the Buddha intended to support normal life and common sense or if he supported them inadvertently, but they did become part of Buddhism.

By supporting everyday life and common sense naturalism, the Buddha did not undermine his basic idea that life is not worthwhile. We might enjoy common life and common sense, and value them above mystic life and vision, but that still does not make life overall worthwhile. In supporting everyday life and common sense, the Buddha did not make mystic, make metaphysical, or glamorize everyday life. Life is what it is. Just because we should live in everyday life does not mean we should exalt it.

In supporting everyday life and common sense, and devaluing mysticism and metaphysics, the Buddha put up a block to people with a natural mystic temper. The Buddha did not deny natural mysticism; he simply ignored it as not immediately relevant.

As compensation, people who are natural mystics tend both to over-extol and under-value normal life and the common sense world at the same time; I do not say how. Natural mystics bend the religions around them to mystic visions, often by interpreting visions and religion in metaphysical terms. Mystics seem to like Buddhism, and they want to put metaphysics back into it. There is much scope for doing so through Buddhist aids, but, eventually, mystics come up against the fact that the Buddha avoided mysticism and glamour. When they reach this impasse, rather than bow to the Buddha, they often greatly over-stress the Buddhist aids and greatly stress their own metaphysical interpretations. They “double down”. They try to stress both, on the one hand, normal life and common sense, with, on the other hand, mysticism,

metaphysics, and glamour. They both make humble and exalt everyday life at the same time. They want to have their cake and eat it too. I think the Buddha did not do this.

Several hundred years after the Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism tried to fuse the ideas that normal life is valuable and normal life is somehow mystical. I think Mahayana failed. But the Mahayana attempt was rooted in attitudes that can be traced back to the Buddha. In the next chapter, I use Mahayana as my chief example for the mystical, metaphysical, and glamorous reshaping of Buddhism.

I agree with the Buddha that a common sense naturalistic approach to life is where we should start, and that we should stick to it as much as possible. I believe in the taste of peaches until somebody can give me a conclusive argument otherwise. I agree that we should respect normal lives and that normal lives have as much value as lives devoted to mysticism or metaphysics. Yet I have had mystical feelings and I also understand the desire to inject them back into our normal life and common sense. I understand the desire to reshape religion along the lines of our own mystic visions and I know how to use metaphysics and glamour to do it. Because I see this, I have tried to use my mystical feelings without falling into error. I sympathize with the desire of natural mystics to inject Buddhism with metaphysics and glamour but I think this is a mistake and it goes against the original intent of the Buddha.

(E) (5) Middle Path Again.

Usually we err when we go to any extreme. Usually we make progress when we are about in the middle. Not to cling usually brings us to the middle. Usually finding the middle helps us not to cling. The story of how the Buddha took the last steps to awakening usually serves as an important lesson about the middle. Palace life was an unending party where nobody was sick, nobody got old, and nobody died where young Siddhartha could see it. When Siddhartha left the palace, he went over to the opposite end. His studies under spiritual teachers were quite harsh, abused his body, brought him near death, and left him no mental strength with which to figure things out. Not abundant life nor stark death, extreme pleasure nor extreme suffering, was the key. When Siddhartha left his teachers, he ate properly and he moderated his exercises. His mind cleared up, and he thought through the issues of life, death, suffering, and clinging. He realized that anti-life was just as much an impediment as clinging to life, and that pain was just as much an impediment as pleasure. The Buddha urged seekers to find and follow the "Middle Path", and sometimes called his way the "Middle Path".

Again, the Middle Path is not the end in itself; it is merely a proven means to the end. If you cling to the Middle Path, then you are not on the Middle Path, and you have erred. The Middle Path should allow your mind to work properly so you can see what is what. When you can see that, then you can follow the obvious middle path or you can veer off temporarily as appropriate. For people who have been through a college course in politics or philosophy, the Buddha's idea of the Middle Path was much like Aristotle's idea. Both men had similar ideas at about the same time.

Often Buddhists say they follow the Middle Path as a synonym to say they follow Buddhism and they lead a good life. If they are middle class and middle most things, they think they are automatically also good Buddhists. They use the term "Middle Path" like a mantra or PC slogan. They do not know, or avoid, the idea that life is not worthwhile, and instead follow a path between moral craziness and amorality, between being a fussy helicopter parent versus one who lets kids do whatever they want, a political true believer

crusader versus ignorant slacker, etc. Here the “Middle Path” is a religion in itself that borrows its validity from the historical validity of Buddhism. The Middle Path will magically take you to wherever Buddhism is supposed to have taken you. Usually there is nothing wrong with this approach, even when followers do not understand that, in Buddhism, the Middle Path is not an end in itself but is only a means to an end. It is better for these followers of the Middle Path to live morally and well in slight temporary confusion than for them to seek bizarre spiritual, cultural, and political extremes.

The Golden Rule is the middle way between diffuse unproductive empty good wishes Compassion versus specific-rules-and-moral-fervor, and between selfish indifference versus moral fervor. “Applies equally” and “rule of law” are the middle way between rigid highly specific law versus ad hoc make-it-up-as-we-along judgments, strong tyrant versus no central authority, and mass populist pseudo-democracy versus rational legalism. Old-fashioned representative democracy is the middle path between fascism (including Communism) versus mass populism pseudo-democracy, between rigid political party war versus chaos of many small ineffectual narrow minded parties.

PART 4: MORE COMMENTS

Clinging, Commitment, and the Not Worthwhile World; “Just Let Go”, Again.

“Clinging” has bad connotations, like a clinging boyfriend or girlfriend that you wish would go away. The word “commitment” has good connotations, like commitment to a cause or to lifelong marriage. That view is wrong. Commitment is clinging; we just wrongly think some clinging is good clinging. Commitment to any religious life is clinging to a dogma just as much as commitment to the idea that a losing team will finally break through this year is clinging to a vain hope.

Clinging causes suffering. If we end clinging, if we let go, we stop suffering. Clinging makes us think life is worthwhile when it is not. If we fully let go, we don’t have to worry whether life is worthwhile. So why wonder if whether life is worthwhile and why think about suffering directly? Why not just focus on not clinging, and let all the rest take care of itself? In this way, we avoid the trap of clinging to a religious life.

To stop clinging is good advice. It is a good idea not to get too lost in things, not even good things. It is a wonderful skill to participate without obsessing, without zeal, and without losing yourself in a bad way. “Don’t obsess”. I don’t go through all the situations, objects, and people for which it is fine to participate but bad to get obsessed.

Worrying whether life is worthwhile can be a form of clinging. Not worrying if life is worthwhile seems to eliminate one type of clinging. Why add another layer to the puzzle? If life turns out not worthwhile, then so be it; by not clinging, you have taken a big step toward letting go of life that is not worthwhile. If this particular life turns out worthwhile, then so be that; you have enjoyed this life even more by not clinging and by not worrying if this life was worthwhile. If life in general turns out worthwhile, including all future lives, then so be that too; you have enjoyed this particular life more by not clinging and by not worrying if any life is worthwhile. If life in general is not worthwhile, then at least you took a big step in this life by learning not to cling, not even to dogma. The situation is like Pascal’s Wager in which we believe in God because it is the gainful thing to do.

All this advice about not clinging is good advice. This is the attitude that many people take in Buddhism without actually saying so. Officially, Buddhists always have to refer back to “end suffering”. “Just stop clinging, just let go” is an attitude that shows up also in Zen and Taoism. As long as you can stick to this simple plan, I see little wrong with it. See Part 4, Section (A) (1) and following.

There are two problems. First, we shouldn't let go of everything, and, of what we do let go, we don't want to let go of everything the same way. We may not let go of deep true morality. We can let go of moral convention, but that is not an issue. We may not, and cannot, let go of the Dharma. We may let go of Buddhist teaching and Buddhist texts, but likely we don't want to do that right away or fully. After we have let go of most everything else, maybe we want to keep a few Buddhist texts for reminders and because they are no longer dangerous. We don't want to kill all desires. We have to breathe, drink water, eat, and sleep. We have to let go of particular friends when they die but we don't want to let go of friendship. We wish to let go of desire for beauty or for particular works of art, but that does not mean we cannot enjoy a beautiful sunset, beautiful animal, or piece of music when it comes up. To reject the world is another form of clinging. We have to learn not to cling to that either. We have to learn to see the wonderful variety of the world without clinging to it. If we think only of “don't cling”, then we forget that the world is sticky and that to let go is not a simple “attitude adjustment” by us but needs mutual change with the world. When we think “let go” is one simple thing that we impose on the world, really we show pride and power, and we are more caught than ever.

As we think what to let go and what to hold, and how best to let go or hold particular desires, inevitably we will seek guidance from a religious vision. As for which particular vision I think is best in deciding what to hold, what to let go, and how, that is what this book is for, especially Part One. There is nothing wrong with taking advice from several visions as long as they are not too contradictory. (Most religions become heavily relevant, get heavily involved, at the point where people have to decide what to let go of, what to hold, and how to do it all. Coming in hard at this point gives religion a lot of power. Other ideologies do the same with the same power, such as Leftism and Conservatism. That does not necessarily make any ideology evil. But the ideology better be correct.)

Second, people don't stick to this simple plan to just let go. When they begin to let go of clinging, they begin to feel good, and begin to think life is worthwhile after all. They find excuses for indulging all the traps of the world, thinking they are above it all, all the time clinging while thinking they are not clinging. They think they are the one person in the world who can get away with it when everybody else gets stuck. They are like the cigarette junky who says “I can quit anytime I want, so I'll have one more”. They think their love for their particular high-quality spouse, family, church, or country is the exception; they are not stuck in their own desires but all other people are stuck in theirs. They forget about change, suffering, illusion, unfairness, stickiness, etc. They are the lucky recipients of cosmic joy. They think “Not all particular lives are worthwhile but the entire game of many lives is worthwhile; those lives are worthwhile that are aware; and my own particular life is worthwhile because I am aware”. They are saved because they are smart. Their cleverness gets in their way. Sooner or later, you must face the issues of suffering, stickiness, and worthwhile. From the context in which the Buddha learned, and from what he said, he did not think life was worthwhile in any way that people usually think. If the Buddha saw life this way, it is a good idea to take his vision seriously before fooling ourselves again. Likely you are not smarter or better than the Buddha. I am vain enough to disagree with the Buddha but even I am not vain enough to think I am the one person who can master letting go, so I can cling to or let go of whatever I want without worry.

Puzzles Over Not Clinging.

The following puzzles do not derail Buddhism. They enhance it for people who like puzzles. It is worth spending time thinking about them. Just don't get stuck. Because I am not a Buddhist, I don't have to know the answers. See "Just Wake Up" below.

Can we awaken without not-clinging? Can we not-cling and not awaken? If we not-cling do we have to automatically wake up? If we cling, then we cannot awaken, and, if we are not awakened, then we must still be clinging, so: If we don't have one, do we automatically not have the other? Are waking up and not-clinging the same?

Are not-clinging and not-worthwhile the same? Can we not-cling yet not see that life is not worthwhile? Can we see that life is not worthwhile yet continue to cling?

I am not sure, but I think it is possible to defeat clinging yet not awaken in a Buddhist way. On the good side, other religions also advise that we not cling or that we cling as little as possible, such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Christian and Muslim asceticism and mysticism. Think of Christian monks who take a vow of poverty. On the bad side, some people seem unattached to the world and almost unfeeling such as some psychopaths. We don't want to call psychopaths awakened. Buddhists can argue that these other ways of not clinging are not "really real" and so only Buddhism has true deep insight on true not clinging - I don't take sides in that argument. Rather, assume some people can nearly stop clinging yet do not necessarily wake up in an obvious Buddhist sense. Something else is needed besides not clinging. What is needed? I say: originally Buddhism said we also need to evaluate life and see that life is not worthwhile. Buddhism now says: we also need to see that we must defeat suffering. Some people say even those insights are not enough; to stop clinging you need positive content too. See Part One of this book for my ideas on what further positive content is needed. In practice, Buddhism also requires more positive content such as Compassion and skill in Aids such as cause-and-effect and Emptiness.

When you have defeated clinging, do you also give up not clinging? Do you also give up clinging to the doctrines of Buddhism including the doctrines about awakening and not clinging? Do you let go of the Dharma? Do you give up relying on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (society of Buddhists, especially of monks)? Do you give up on morality? All orthodox Buddhists would emphatically deny that you give up on any of these. Is their emphatic denial more clinging? What can you believe in but not cling to? What are the implications?

In practice, Buddhists do not really think not-suffering or overcoming-suffering comes with not-clinging. In practice, Buddhists pick elements of personality and social relations that they extol for reasons other than Buddhist doctrine and they use those as markers of success at not clinging. They cultivate those traits as a way to show how far they have advanced just as some Christians show off wealth as a sign of God's favor. Many Buddhists use aloofness and the supposed ability to see through all kinds of human motives to the desire, clinging, and suffering that beset all of us normal low-life people but not them. Buddhists think not-clinging gives magical insight and so they act as if they have magical insight. You should think about how a person who has reduced clinging might act.

What Happens After You Awaken 2: Just Wake Up.

If this section appears to contradict anything in the chapter above, it does not. The ideas here are useful in my assessment of Buddhism, and for Taoism and Zen later. These ideas are not necessarily orthodox.

Beforehand, we need to get over two points. First, waking up can't be only seeing that most people live in a dream – the Matrix - with few purposes other than biological urges and what TV ads put in their heads. Every half-smart kid sees beyond that. Waking up can't be only living a life that is smarter, more mindful, aesthetic, and better than “the herd”. Those are not bad goals but are not awakening. Self-styled “better” people are not awake. Waking up has to be more. Sometimes less is more. Second, “just wake up” is related to “just let go”. They share many good and bad points. I don't go through all that. Please apply the assessment of “just let go” to the topic here. After this section, apply ideas here backwards to “just let go”.

The three main themes here are:

- (1) “Just wake up”, the most important theme
- (2) Acting naturally and-or spontaneously
- (3) Seeing the world as it is and appreciating daily life

Set aside issues of worthwhile life and of suffering, but agree that we need to wake up. Instead of waking up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, why not just wake up without saying beforehand what we wake up to? We can, and should, use ideas of suffering and life-is-not-worthy to help lead us to wake up, but, when we awaken, we can let go of those ideas too. We don't have to decide if life is not worthwhile and-or full of suffering, before waking up, during, or after.

It is hard to wake up without waking up to something. Usually we need to wake up to some vision that tells us how the world was before we woke up, why everybody is not awakened, and how the world is now that we have awakened. Usually other people give us their visions, which guide us in our quest and fill up our visions. The Buddha offered a vision of life as not worthwhile. Most religions offer visions of a bright and glorious bigger-than-me (God, Dharma, Tao) into which we merge. Mahayana and Hinduism offer visions of a bright glorious joyful bigger-than-me that is a system of many lives.

How do we make sure we wake up to something good? How do we make sure we avoid waking up to something bad? How do we avoid mistakes? How do we avoid becoming merely a powerful demon? Here the ideas of suffering and that life is not worthwhile can help, as can Buddhist aids. We can know in advance to avoid some mistakes, such as thinking we are above the law or we are above the intrinsic moral nature of the universe. After we start to awaken, we should not lapse into the idea that we are special, don't suffer much, and our particular life is superior, just because we are so clever. Hinduism is quite clear about the mistakes and about avoiding them. We can avoid this trap of wrong ideas if we are forewarned. If we avoid the wrong ideas, then, when we wake up, we stand a good chance of being on the right track.

If we know to avoid mistakes, and use the ideas of other people to guide us without seeking to remake their visions, then maybe we can wake up without having a vision to wake up to. We just wake up. We let our awakened self fill in whatever we think is correct as we wake up.

The Buddha might have had this “context free” idea of waking up in mind. He might have used the ideas of suffering and life is not worthwhile to get people to wake up, and to wake up the right way. The ideas of suffering and “life is not worthwhile” were Buddhist aids. We should be careful with this interpretation of what the Buddha had in mind because it is not orthodox. People see ideas in prophets as a way to justify their own ideas. We have to be careful not to do this with the Buddha or any prophet. Hopefully I avoid this pitfall. See below.

It is worth stressing this point in passing: It can seem like a relief not to have to worry about suffering and whether life is worthwhile. It sounds easier just to wake up. That is not so. It is easier to rely on a mental aid such as the idea of suffering. It is easier to have a context. It is hard to advance without some guide such as the idea of suffering. It is hard to wake up without some clear idea what to wake up to. Not even Zen masters can do this, not even if, on awakening, they (think they) get rid of context, like forgetting about the stairs once we have climbed them to high ground. The need for some context might be why the Buddha offered the idea of a “not worthwhile” present and-or of suffering. The ideas get us away from normal life for a while so we can just wake up. Then we can make up our own minds. If you think “just wake up” is not enough or gets in the way, then forget about it, and go back to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy has worked for about 2500 years.

The idea of “just wake up” goes along with seeing the world as it is and valuing ordinary life. I think the two ideas go together well. We can think about them together without necessarily making “daily life” the context that we must wake up to.

This idea of “just wake up” goes along not only with Buddhism but with any religion that is critical of the usual unexamined selfish normal life – which is all major religions. We can use this interpretation of “just wake up” for all religions that are critical even if they also insist the world is as it is and they value ordinary life, including Judaism, the teachings of Jesus, and commonsense Christianity and Islam. I do not go into this point in this book for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

What do you do after you “just wake up”? The answer is not clear. You cannot act immorally. You are not above the law. Contrary to misconception, you can’t “return to the marketplace”. You can’t become a politician who is “above it all” even while he-she strives to make it all better. You can’t go back to ordinary life. Not even Tao and Zen masters of the past led ordinary lives in the bustling city market or took up positions as Prime Minister.

You might try acting spontaneously and-or naturally. Don’t worry about worthwhile or not worthwhile, suffering or not suffering, waking or sleeping, karma, dharma, etc. Don’t even worry about good or bad much, although you still can’t do anything immoral. Most people are basically decent. Few people get intrinsic satisfaction from being bad, hurting people, or hurting nature. If you are the kind of person who has sought earnestly to “just wake up”, then likely you are more good than bad. Trust your nature. Trust what led you to seek to “just wake up”. Trust God. Then act naturally and spontaneously according to

your nature. You can act naturally without necessarily making “act naturally” the context to which you must wake up.

If “just wake up” is much the same as trusting your inner nature, your natural nature, your self, then “just waking up” is the same as acting naturally, and acting naturally is the same as waking up. If you can see to act naturally, and do it without anguish, then you have “just woken up”. There is no difference, and it is not worthwhile trying to figure out some subtle theological metaphysical difference. As we will see in later chapters, Taoism and Zen saw “just wake up” and “act naturally” as much the same without insisting that “act naturally” is the key vision to impose on waking up.

“Just wake up and act naturally” is a good way to go. In acting naturally, usually we act out daily life and we appreciate daily life. Waking up, acting naturally, and living daily life go together naturally. This is an even better way to go.

The idea that “just wake up”, acting naturally, and living daily life, all go together, became a central idea in Zen Buddhism. Although, in theory, the idea that all three themes go together appears in Mahayana, most Mahayana does not stress it. Instead, most Mahayana sees ordinary life as fabulous because it is part of a grand system. We do not wake up to ordinary life as it is but to life transfigured. Unfortunately, seeing daily life in terms of a grand system undermines “just wake up” and “act naturally”. I don’t explain. Zen got rid of that misleading exultation. In doing so, it returned to a Taoist vision.

Now we can better ask again, is “just wake up” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? Is all the business about life not worthwhile, life full of suffering, and letting go just a way to get us out of the traps of ordinary life and to just wake up? Zen said so. Theravada knows of the idea but the idea is not a big theme there, and official Theravada continues to stress suffering. Some Mahayana thinkers seem to say this idea is what the Buddha originally had in mind though most Mahayana thinkers saw the idea of “just wake up without reference to suffering” to mean that life is worthwhile as part of a grand system. I don’t know if the Buddha originally had in mind “just wake up”. I doubt it. I am sure the Buddha would understand and I think he would approve. I think this idea is an improvement on what the Buddha likely originally had in mind.

Is “just wake up and act naturally” what Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha originally had in mind? If the Buddha did not have “just wake up” originally in mind, then likely he did not have “just wake up and act naturally” originally in mind. Still, again, Zen said “yes he did have both in mind”, Theravada knows of the idea but does not stress it, and Mahayana knows of the idea but prefers that we wake up to a fabulous system. Again, I think the idea is an improvement, and Siddhartha would approve, but this is not what he had in mind originally.

Does the fact that the Buddha did not originally have in mind “just wake up” and “act naturally” mean that the ideas are necessarily wrong or inadequate? No, they could still be true even if they alter a deep view in Buddhism.

Does the fact that the Buddha appreciated daily life necessarily mean that life is worthwhile, life is not full of suffering, “just wake up” is necessarily true, “just wake up” is necessarily false, “act naturally” must be true, or “act naturally” must be false? These questions are too subtle for me.

Can a person “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile? This is the mistake that Mahayana made. I doubt you can “just wake up” and then think life is worthwhile if you think of “worthwhile” in terms of wealth, power, family life, success, or belonging to a grand system.

Feeling sure we can “just wake up”, act naturally, and life is worthwhile, is the mistake I am tempted to make when I want to merge Buddhism and Taoism with what I believe, that is, merge them with how I see the message of Jesus. It is not hard to imagine scenarios in which we just wake up, think life is modestly worthwhile, act mostly naturally, and work hard to make the world better – all without clinging and without thinking that wealth, power, success, Justification, and heaven are what it is all about. Even so, this is a tricky path. It is worthwhile thinking about this issue. Thinking about it helps get you clear on waking up, “just wake up”, natural action, not natural action, not worthwhile life, worthwhile life, my admonitions about how we should act, and Jesus. Don’t begin with the conviction that the ideas must merge simply because they all are so wonderful. Just let yourself think and wander and think.

When I thought about it, I found I had to give up “just act naturally” in favor of “mostly just act naturally but also rely on principles such as the Golden Rule”. We will see why in the chapter on Taoism.

What Happens after You Awaken 3: Common Bad Mistake, or I Might be Wrong.

I did not look through English translations of major Buddhist texts for citations for what I say here. I am sorry for the lack of citations. Even Buddhist writers that I otherwise respect seem to make the mistake here. The issue is big enough to bring up despite no citations.

Some Buddhist writers imply: A person who wakes up is able to see that things, ideas, feelings, power, wealth, etc. do not last. He-she sees arising and disappearing, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, emptiness, and maybe Buddha Mind. He-she sees that none of this makes life worthwhile. Still, because he-she sees how the world really works, he-she can get along in worldly life well, even can succeed. He-she can manipulate the world as well as it can be, as well as any business person or politician. He-she is immune to clinging and so is able to avoid suffering and avoid using others. So he-she could live in this world successfully. Power, wealth, family, and fame are back in play. This view is akin to the idea that an awakened person should take his-her view back to the marketplace and to the fields and palaces, and teach by example.

I understand the wish for this alternative. It is important in Mahayana. But I doubt that it is so. I think the Buddha doubted this alternative. The world is too sticky. The world is too adept at “sucking us in”. We think we can see how it all works and so avoid getting taken in but we can’t. If we try, we get lost. This is a major theme of the novel “Siddhartha” by Herman Hesse.

Whether true or false, the idea that an awakened person can work on the sticky world with impunity, skill, and worldly success is dangerous. It easily misleads. It gives lay people wrong ideas of awakened persons. It makes lay people think a successful business person or politician must be awakened, almost awakened, or have many merit points. Most of outwardly successful people are hardly awakened, and many are far from it. This idea makes Buddhists seek for signs just as Jews, Christians, and Muslims seek for signs of God’s favor and of Salvation. It makes people believe in magic and in monks who claim

to have powers. It makes lay people overlook Buddhists who are truly advanced, really good people, and have a lot to give, but might not be charismatic.

We should never suppress a true idea only because it is dangerous. If the idea that an awakened person can use the world easily and without danger is true, we have to accept it. Then we must deal with results. We should not suppress even untrue ideas just because they are dangerous but we need to assess those ideas openly, in public, deeply, and truthfully. Keep the warnings in mind. Keep mistakes in mind, don't make them, and point them out. These are Buddhist duties.

I don't believe the idea is true. In the end, you have to decide if an awakened person could-and-or-should thrive in the sticky world.

Buddhist Aids.

Here is the logical place for a discussion of Buddhist Aids but that takes too long. The basic idea is that people get stuck on issues about meditation, cause-and-effect, dependent origination, and the non-self instead of thinking directly about worthwhile and not worthwhile. Any idea, no matter how good it seems, even ideas like desire, sticky, clinging, and suffering, can distract us from direct insight about worthwhile and not worthwhile. So I moved discussion of Buddhist Aids to the end of the chapter. See discussion of the not-self below before going on to material about Buddhist Aids.

Buddhist Code as Buddhist Aid.

Buddhism does offer a code of conduct that nearly everybody can follow. The code differs for monks and lay people, and differs in strictness for grades of lay people. When people follow the code, they feel they are improving and are moving to success. Following the code does not necessarily wake you up. I like the Buddhist code. It is like codes in large formal Western Christian churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed. It is like a version of Jewish Law that has been made more rational and consistent. It is like French Rationalist law.

Still, the code is like external worship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is not enough to think you are making external progress now, so you can defer real (internal) progress and success (awakening) to an indefinite future. It is not enough to do things because of a code; you have to do things because they are right and to help other people. Following an external code gives people the sense that they are getting somewhere because of what happens outside. People need to use the code to see beyond the code but they rarely do. Buddhism knows about this flaw in its own code, and nearly all codes, but can do nothing about it except warn people.

Religion should offer a reasonable chance of reasonable success in this life to every normal person. You should not have to be really smart or a "born saint" to succeed in the terms of a religion. The Buddhist code gives people that. If you try to live by the standards of the code then you have succeeded to a fair extent in ways that everybody can understand. I have nothing against religion offering fun ideas for smart people to chew on but success should not depend on those. Zen moves toward simple ideas that people can master in this life now. Most of Mahayana does not but instead elaborates the Buddhist aids.

PART 5: PRACTICE

I do not write about popular Buddhism and I don't write much about how Buddhism, society, culture, economics, politics, gender, etc. work together. Popular Buddhism uses the idea of Karma much more than ideas of Dharma and waking up. It has only a dim notion of the idea that life is not worthwhile, and it uses the idea of suffering largely to explain away bad results. With Karma, popular Buddhism explains the order of society, including high and low, bad and good, good luck and bad luck, and it gives ways for people to wiggle within the social order to improve their positions. It explains big rises and big falls. How the idea of Karma does this is too much to go into here. The popular Buddhist view of Karma is enough to support various somewhat different orders of society, it supports modest change, and it worked well with agrarian societies until recently, so it survived robustly. It is not clear what will happen in the modern world of global quasi-capitalism and modest democracy in a populist appearance. As of 2017, it seemed to be doing fairly well. Many people, academic and not, have written about Buddhism in society and vice versa. I give a few samples in the Bibliography but not many. You can find many on the Internet.

Briefly.

People often call Buddhism a religion of "renunciation" but that view is not accurate. To say the world is "not worthwhile" is not to reject it the way that we spit out bad food. If we know the food is bad and have not yet taken a bite, we simply don't take a bite. Or we take a bite because we need food to get by, hope our stomach can handle it, and don't expect food to cure all ills. If we take a bite and taste that the food is bad, but can't spit it out, we go ahead, chew, try not to get attached to the taste, swallow, and let it go through our system. Then we can refuse another bite. Monks do not dress strangely because they reject the world in the sense of spoiled food but to remind themselves and everybody else that they are not the same as everybody else.

It might seem a religion of "not worthwhile" or of "renouncing" would not get along in society and would not support society, that it should fail and disappear, but this is not true. With allowances, Buddhism, monks, non-monks, and society all support each other fairly well.

In the beginning, Buddhism appealed to the upper middle class and upper class because they did not want to live under the yoke of the Brahmin priests and the political machine that priests supported. The Buddha told everybody to rely on his-her own self, and declared that everybody had the ability to rely on his-her own self. Buddhism appealed to people generally because they liked being their own master, determining their own spirituality and destiny. As Buddhism grew, these achievements were not enough. People wanted a positive relation between their religion and success in their ordinary lives. Desire for a positive relation between religion and success in this life play a large role in Mahayana, as we will see. It led people to reinvent Buddhism as a joyous system of many lives rather than as based on the idea that life is not worthwhile.

In Theravada countries, people applied the idea of being their own spiritual masters to all of life. A person could control his-her own destiny in family, economy, and power as well as in spiritual life. Of course, this degree of self-determination is never fully true, but is true enough if you believe it. It makes a good place to start. The same thing happened in the West with our ideas of the free person and that God makes us responsible for ourselves.

People in Theravada countries saw they were not likely to be enlightened in this lifetime but they could work on the quality of life in this lifetime, especially as they were their own masters. Working on quality of this life runs the risk of stickiness and mistakenly thinking life is worthwhile but not much more risk than any other attitude and it is a good attitude. Working on a graceful quality of life is a good base from which later to better appreciate stickiness and “not worthwhile”, and it builds up good karma rather than bad karma. Non-monks could seek the middle path, be good neighbors, get an education, be good leaders, act morally, feel self-reliant, be self-reliant, and contribute to well-run society. Non-monks could do as they wished as long as they didn't hurt other people. All this was preparation for more advanced lives in the future and for enlightenment but it also built a solid foundation for a good life now for particular selves and for neighbors.

Non-monks could be good people, good neighbors, and good citizens. Monks could help non-monks in all the tasks. At least, monks could educate many children and serve as the moral foundation of their local society. In return, villagers and aristocrats could support monks modestly. A close relation grew between monks and non-monks which benefitted both, and avoided the vexing question of working hard for enlightenment right now by replacing enlightenment with a good moderate life for everybody. This resolution is part of the charm of Buddhist countries, Theravada or Mahayana. The rest of the chapter explains in more detail.

Monks and Society.

Modern people find the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk charming without realizing what the robes came from. The robes are death shrouds. In India during the time of the Buddha, before a body was cremated or buried, it was wrapped in old cloth that sometimes was deliberately dyed yellowish (“saffron”). Monks took those shrouds from graveyards to use as clothing. If the cloth was not already died yellow, monks died it. Monks made robes from shrouds to reinforce the idea that monks were no longer normal people with normal lives. They were “dead to society and the world”. They were “thus gone”. Monks literally left all family, as Jesus said a person's family had to be dead to him-her to follow Jesus. A monk may not return a greeting because a monk is not really here, not even from parents or the King. King Bhumipol (“Phumipon”) of Thailand was a devout intelligent Buddhist and did not expect monks to return a greeting. In the movies “Kill Bill”, the wonderful haughty Kung Fu master Pai Mei (“pie may”) destroys the Shaolin monastery because the abbot did not return his greeting with sufficient vigor. For Americans, the idea is a good plot device, but, in Buddhist China, Pai Mei would know that a monk may not return a greeting. (Some monks nod so as not to upset a person who mistakenly greets them, as the Buddha ate meat that was offered to him so as not to upset people who wrongly did so. I think the abbot in “Kill Bill” did nod.)

The Pali term for a male monk is “bhikku”, which means “beggar of alms”; for a female, “bhikkuni”. The word is also spelled “bhikkhu” and “bikku”. In Buddhism now, for a monk to offer a “begging” bowl is not like begging but instead the bowl is an opportunity for a lay person to appreciate the monk's quest and for the lay person to gain “merit points” by supporting the monk. I am not sure how the Buddha saw it.

Westerners think monks all live in quaint pretty monasteries but monks should live in monasteries only part time. In theory, monks should wander “begging” most of the time, that part of the year outside the rainy season. In the modern urban crowded world, they can't do that.

Monks seek enlightenment on their own, for themselves, and only for themselves, just as the Buddha had to give up his family and his teachers to awaken on his own. No person can awaken another person; you can awaken only yourself; only you can awaken you. In Christianity, no person except Jesus can save you directly; you can only save yourself, by correctly inviting God's Grace, usually with the help of Jesus. In Buddhism, you can help another person toward awakening as Muslims and Christians help another person invite the Grace of God and so be saved. In Buddhism, "learning the Dharma" is like inviting the Grace of God. So, nearly all Buddhist monks are happy to help other people learn the Dharma. Helping others, mostly by teaching the Dharma, can largely overcome any selfishness latent in the idea of seeking awakening only by yourself just as, in Christianity and Islam, bringing others to God helps overcome the apparent selfishness of one person being able to save only him-herself. The Buddha saved only himself but he also taught the Dharma to everybody and so brought millions of others up to awakening. In a later chapter, we will see that Mahayana carries the idea of helping others to salvation too far, in the character of the bodhisattva.

If life in general is not worthwhile, then certainly social life in particular is not worthwhile. So it seems monks and society would have little to do with each other but Buddhist monks took an important part in society. In practice, Buddhist lay people overlook the idea that life is not worthwhile to focus on morality, karma, meditation, advancement through lives, and spiritual power. As a result, monks and society can have close ties, and monks and lay people can carry on useful lives in the context of mutual relations. Monks help the people with morality, proper behavior, getting along, spiritual problems, learning, social order, spirits, luck, and success while the people support the monks. Monks are very important as moral teachers and often important as arbiters of peace. This stance is not necessarily hypocritical any more than similar stances in other religions. In all major religions, serious practitioners hold themselves a bit apart from mainstream society in which people primarily seek success yet religious practitioners still help society and play a role. For a hundred years after Jesus, Christians could not be politicians, military, police, or too rich, but now Christians pride themselves on all those. Christians could not have imagined their ideas being the basis for whole societies and empires, but they have been. Exactly how Buddhism goes along with society depends on particular Buddhist societies - Buddhism in Thailand, Japan, and China has different relations with society there just as Christianity in Russia and the United States has different relations with the state - and I can't go into details here.

Before the Buddha, Brahmins dominated religion, somewhat like ancient Egyptian priests, Christian bishops, or mega-church leaders but not as well arranged in a single system, somewhat like Americans think of Celtic Druids. Priests were the highest rank of a ranked society. Even aristocrats and warriors were below priests. Before any venture, a ruler had to consult priests. The rulers had to maintain priests. The rulers had to give priests a share of spoils. Suddenly, Buddhism said priests were irrelevant. Only the Dharma is relevant. As long as an aristocrat or military person follows the Dharma, he-she is alright, and may dispense with priests. Aristocrats and military people can do what they want. Buddhism spread first, and quickly, among the upper classes and merchants. Although the rulers did not become monks, they could embrace the new ideas, and the new freedom; they could always tell themselves they would become monks in a future life. The rich merchant class embraced Buddhism for the same reasons. The first patrons of the Buddha were rulers and rich people. From the rulers and rich, Buddhism spread to the common people because they emulated superiors. About 1200 years later (after CE 800), Islam spread through island Southeast Asia in the same way.

Monasteries and monks became the centers of lore, learning, education, and even research. The same Buddhist ideology that denied hard distinctions between rulers and priests also served common people through the benefit brought by monks. Monks did not limit their teaching only to rulers and rich people, they taught everybody, including common village people. They taught people according to ability to learn, not only according to ability to pay or power. Monks allowed common people to know their own society and even to advance in society.

When Buddhism is well-established, nearly every large village, or village cluster, has a monastery. The villagers support the monks. In return, the monks teach the village children. The monks prepare children for good lives as rural cultivators rather than just lives as slaves of the land. The monks prepare some village children for a better life beyond the village. Boys have greater access to the monks but even girls are taught to read and write. In Thailand, where Theravada was well-established, literacy was over 90%.

Monks ratified social projects such as digging a canal, building a palace, or building a large house. In this capacity, they did act like the old Brahmin priests. Monks also took the place of the old Brahmin priests as fortune tellers, and monks sometimes took the place of the Brahmin priests as fighters against black magic. The difference is that the monks did not seem to “squeeze” the aristocrats and the villagers as had the priests.

A few monks do live apart from society. In Thailand, they are called “forest monks”. They are interesting people and among the best people in Buddhism. They are not relevant here, so I omit them. I urge you to search the phrase “forest monk” on the Internet.

Some people, especially Westerners who first learn about Buddhism, think close links between monks and society is hypocritical, and a monk cannot really work on enlightenment in the typical monastery. The relation can subvert the spiritual quest and subvert Buddhism just as it does in other religions but usually the spiritual quest goes on pretty well anyway. According to the original precepts given by the Buddha, monasteries are supposed to be located at least so far from villages that monks cannot hear the sound of women talking; since shortly after the Buddha that was rarely possible because of dense population, and now over most of the world that distancing is almost impossible. So monks must have a relation with society and must strive to make it as little tempting and hypocritical as they can. Most monks succeed. For some monks, close relations to society, prestige, and popular acclaim for his-her magical power, is a temptation off the path.

Any serious monk who wants to work on awakening can find the time, energy, and seclusion even in a modern monastery. It is more a matter of will and of learning from other such dedicated monks than of place. Social duties are not usually a burden unless the monk allows them to be, and even the Buddha interacted with society. Some monasteries are more serious, both in practice and theory, and a monk who wants to work hard can move to that kind of monastery.

I was lucky to live in a village for two-and-a-half years in which the monk was well educated, interested almost entirely in awakening, disdained all magic, and enjoyed talking to me. Later, my wife and I were lucky to live near a good monastery, Wat Suan Mokh (“Temple of the Garden of [force for] Liberation” and “Temple of the Foggy Garden”, thanks to a play on words), begun by a great monk, “Phutathaat” (in Thai,

or “Buddhadasa” in Pali). We gained much from teaching there. Monks who really need to be alone can become forest monks even in the modern world of many people and few trees.

Monks and Magic.

Regardless of official religion, common mass religion always has much magic; I don't go into details here. Christian priests perform many acts of magic as part of their official role as priests, such as transforming bread into the body of Christ; and perform acts of magic as magical beings living in society in addition to their official role as priests, such as blessing businesses, persons, children, ships, and planes. Christians might not see that priests are magical figures in addition to being priests, but they are. So are politicians; we look to them magically to control weather, forest fires, earthquakes, and the world economy. In the same way, monks in Buddhist societies fill roles as magical figures in addition to monks. Buddhist society demands it, as Christian society does for priests. Magical roles are set by society and culture rather than by official Buddhist doctrine. Monks can be fortune tellers, seers, healers, give blessings, remove spells, provide amulets, and transfer magical potency simply by hanging around. Individual monks differ in how much they act as magicians. Some monks relish their role as magical beings, and make considerable (unauthorized) return from it in money, prestige, and popularity. I find use of magic by monks sad. My wife and I were lucky to find monks who had little interest in magic and had much interest in awakening. I was lucky that the monk in the village where I first lived had a strong grasp of doctrine and had no interest in magic.

Buddhism and the State.

People interpret and change their religion to get validation for success in life and for ways life. People in a state society interpret and change their religion for the same reasons, often to validate the state and the institutions of the state, including institutions that take care of power and leaders that use power. King and religious savior often merge into one sacred soup. Subgroups in the state do the same with their religion, or their version of the main religion, for their particular situations, both for and against the state. Farmers have one version of a religion while bankers have another version of the same religion. Rebels and bankers have their own versions. To workers, Jesus was a carpenter while to modern middle class capitalists Jesus was a supporter of free trade and the right to work. The same is true of all religions.

There is no formula for how much interpreting and change occurs within the original scope of the religion and how much is really out of the original scope of the religion but accepted by people anyway. Some ideas that start out of the original scope eventually become accepted as part of a new baseline scope. Circumcision might have started outside the scope of Abraham's religion. Christianity started outside the scope of Judaism. Likely ideas about the body and blood of Jesus started outside the scope of original Christianity. Terrorism is outside the scope of Mohammad. Whites, Blacks, Liberals, and Conservative Christians see Christianity differently. It is not clear how much Christianity can stretch to accommodate differing views and still remain Christianity. “Back to the roots” movements often are less about back to the roots than about making up ideas about what the roots were to get extra support for your group now. Protestants since 1700 have had many different ideas of what it means to go back to original Christianity and they have uses their own ideas to support versions of a good society. The exact situation varies by country and by historical periods in countries.

All this is true for Buddhism and Buddhist countries. You have to decide what true Buddhism is, what is presented as true Buddhism due to a long history of accommodation to the state and society, and what is claimed as true Buddhism by present groups that wish to have religious validation. I cannot go into any details here.

What Most Buddhists Do.

Other than monks, what most Buddhists do is what most Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus do: they go to “church” in a monastery once a week, where they hear sermons and chanting, and participate in a liturgy-like service. They help build monasteries. They repair monasteries. They provide air conditioning to high-ranking monks. They do good deeds to acquire merit. They use their merit to succeed in this life or to have a better next life. They give some merit to kin so kin can have a good life now or a better next life. Sometimes they support charities and public policy such as a national health service or defending the environment. Some Buddhists follow charismatic leaders, usually priests, as Christians and Muslims follow particular “preachers”. In Mahayana, Buddhists devotedly follow a non-living spiritual leader, the bodhisattva, like Jesus or Mary. In Mahayana, some Buddhists seek to be reborn in a paradise later as a result of worship now, like Christians and Muslims expect to go to heaven. It is not hard for a churchy Jew, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu to adapt to Buddhist worship practices, and vice versa as long as they focus on the good that is done, “mitzvah”, rather than on absence of God.

Self Sufficiency.

The Buddha taught that the self is not a strong eternal thing like the soul-self of Christianity, Islam, and the Upanishads but the self is a semi-coherent bundle as in modern evolutionary theory. At the same time, he insisted every person could work out his-her own “salvation” alone, did not need Brahmin priests, did not need any priests, did not need monks, and did not even need the Buddha. As part of human nature, even if our nature is not absolute and eternal, we can think, and can think well enough to figure out the world. The Buddha’s insistence on the ability of the self was a big part of the appeal of Buddhism.

Sometimes people see a contradiction in the idea that the self is not a pure metaphysical eternal thing with the idea that each person can work things out on his-her own. I don’t feel this contradiction although I can see how other people might feel it. We don’t need to be an absolute self to be enough of a self, and to have enough abilities, to work things out on our own. A squirrel is not an absolute self but it can still figure out how to avoid hawks, get nuts, and hide hundreds for the future. It is not much harder to save yourself along Buddhist lines if you don’t screw yourself up first and cling to the screwed-up self. It helps when working things out to let go of the absolute self and to get used to the lesser self.

Both ideas are important in Mahayana Buddhism and Zen: the not-absolute self and the fact that even the not-absolute self is able to work things out and awaken.

Besides saying we are sufficient, the Buddha also said we can rely on the Buddha (himself), the Dharma, and the association of Buddhists, in particular monks or the “Sangha”. These two ideas also seem contradictory although most Buddhists deny they are. One resolution of the conflict is that people rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha when they begin practice but rely more on themselves as they go

along and ultimately rely on themselves alone. I do not decide if these ideas are contradictory. I point them out because they are relevant to the following issue.

Dr. Chamrat (“Moh Jamrat”), a wise Christian physician in Nakorn Sri Thammarat (“City of Dharma Rule”) in Thailand, told me that Christianity and Buddhism differ precisely on self reliance. The Buddha said “work it out on your own” while Jesus said “where two or three of you are gathered together, I am among you”. American Christians say “you’ve got a friend in Jesus”. Buddhists are alone while Christians have God as a friend, Jesus as a friend, and have a community. God loves us. I doubt God intervenes directly much to help us but he might intervene sometimes. Buddhists would think this Christian belief was all silly self-indulgent wishful thinking. Yet Buddhists also insist that we can “lean on” the “Three Gems”, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (the Buddhist “Church” or society of monks and lay people). So, despite what the Buddha said, Buddhists are not alone except in a dogmatic sense or in the way that all seekers have to go through times of aloneness.

At the same time I think God loves us, and Jesus cares about us, I also think we are mostly on our own, God through evolution gave us the abilities to deal with most issues if not all, and the world provides us with many opportunities. So my views are a bit contradictory too, and I can’t reconcile them gracefully. In practice, I work out issues on my own. Sometimes God’s creation gives me hints. This result does not mean the Buddha was right, Dr. Chamrat wrong, I am wrong, and Christians are delusional. Buddhists contradict as well. This result means I don’t understand everything, and neither do Buddhists. This result means there are issues on which Buddhists and followers of Jesus really do differ.

(Technically, the passage in which Jesus says “two or three” refers to the requirements for a valid court proceeding, and might not, or might, have the meaning intended by Christians that Jesus is literally with them although he died. Whether it has that meaning, and whether Jesus does attend Christians, matters less than what Christians believe and the contrast with Buddhists. Buddhists have a similar attitude of “always with me” when they rely on the “Three Gems”. These are other issues.)

PART 6: MORE ASSESSMENT

No Simplistic Bliss.

You cannot simply “follow your bliss” in Buddhism. You need not and should not be miserable. You may enjoy what you enjoy and what the world gives you as long as you do not cling. You may plan to enjoy as long as you do not cling. But you cannot follow your bliss as in the common understanding of that slogan. In other religions, and life in general, you also have to be careful about following your bliss – life is not as it appears in the simplistic slogan “follow your bliss”. If your bliss is to be a dictator and oppress people, you may not. In Hinduism, you may follow your bliss only if it coincides with your Dharma-social-duty. If your bliss is MMA fighting, you can follow your bliss if you are adept enough and less than about 40 years old, otherwise you will get hurt for no gain. I am not sure what to say if your bliss is to give sexual service. “Follow your bliss” implies you should not be a slave to convention or harsh expectations but instead you should do what you are good at, enjoy, and does no harm. In that way, in Buddhism, you may follow your bliss, again, as long as you do not cling. The Buddha enjoyed teaching so teaching might have been part of his bliss. I don’t know if he clung to teaching or to anything in his bliss. I warn that to follow your bliss and not cling is hard.

Letting Go, Worthwhile Life, and Not Buddhism.

All the skills below contribute to a worthwhile life and can even make a sad life worthwhile.

- Learning to sort what you can cling to from what you have to let go. We all have to breathe, we do not all have to kill animals for sport.
- Learning to sort what you can cling to somewhat energetically from what you can cling to only softly or not at all. We all have to eat, we do not all have to be “foodies”.
- Learning to let go completely of many things.
- Learning to manage suffering without necessarily overcoming suffering fully.
- Learning to blend these skills with spontaneous natural “from the heart” acts and thoughts.
- Learning to “just let go” (not cling) when it feels right without worrying about all letting go and about using letting go for some other goal such as to make life worthwhile or to overcome suffering.

The problem with these skills and Buddhism is that learning to let go in this way and-or making your life more worthwhile in these ways is not to overcome suffering and it is not to awaken. These skills with their goals are not the official main goal of Buddhism and they might interfere with Buddhism’s main goal. All these skills are good, and some Buddhists do, in fact, take these skills as the goal of Buddhism just as many Buddhists make success an important goal of Buddhism. Taoism and Zen pretty much take these skills as the main goal. If you think these skills are better than the official goal to awaken and overcome suffering, then you have to decide how much of a Buddhist you really are. What was the Buddha really like? What did he really want from you and everyone?

You can’t get out of this problem by saying: “Oh, well, I will work along the above lines in this lifetime, and let future lives take care of themselves. If, in a future life, I get “beyond” these skills and I work to overcome suffering directly, great. If I actually do overcome suffering and awaken, better. Until then, I won’t worry about it.” You might as well figure out your true religion now. That will serve you better in future lifetimes than confusion and prevarication now.

Buddhism, Modern Science, and Darwinism.

Buddhism and Western science go together well.

The Buddhist versions of Dharma, dependent origination, and cause and effect, are like the Western idea of natural law. Everything that happens does so according to cause(s). Everything has results. Cause and effect are in proportion to each other. If we want to understand a thing, we should look to its causes and its effects. If we want to change a thing, we need to change its causes. Nothing exists on its own apart from the total net of causes and effects. For a given purpose, we can understand a thing according to its immediate causes and effects. For greater purposes, we can know a thing only in the context of a wide range of causes and effects. The rules of cause and effect apply not only to physical things such as trees but also to processes such as star formation and society, and to mental things such as anger, joy, seeking, clinging, and suffering, and to morality.

The idea of dependent origination is similar to Western ideas of a thing in terms of its context: Nothing arises by itself. Nothing is sufficient in itself except Dharma. Everything arises out of causes. Everything depends on its causes. Causes tend to come in clusters. One cluster depends on prior clusters, and so on back indefinitely to the Dharma. To know anything, we have to know its cluster of causes. "Thing" here includes you, your self, all selves, psychology, relations, moral acts, immoral acts, karma, desire, clinging, and spiritual progress or stagnation. To understand a cluster of causes, in Western terms, we use: multivariate analysis, systems theory, graphs, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, and deconstruction. The Buddhist versions seem less pretentious than Western ideas of the 1900s and the 2000s such as post-modernism. The ideas of cause-and-effect and dependent origination go along with the Western biological idea of an organism. On a bigger scale, they go along with Western ecology and the mutual making of the parts of an ecosystem. The idea of dependent origination goes along with Western ideas of a self-determining system as in idealized capitalism. The idea of dependent origination does not have to be abused as in the Western New Age "it's all connected".

The Buddhist self is a bundle held together by the delusion of self and the force of clinging. See below. Specific mental abilities, the overall operation of our minds, the coherence of our minds, and our overall mental lives are subject to laws of cause and effect, to dependent origination. Each of us is not the metaphysical eternal soul-self that we think we are. The mistaken idea of a soul-self arose as part of desire and clinging. Our mistaken idea of our self serves to perpetuate desire and clinging; it is part of how clinging sustains. When we examine the idea of a soul-self, we find particular currents of desire and clinging without anything under them to hold it all together. This idea goes along not only with Darwinian ideas of a self but with the idea of the philosopher David Hume of the self in the middle to late 1770s. In Darwinian terms, we evolved to think we are more of a self than we really are because that is a useful misconception for personal action and for social success. We evolved to see other people as more selves than they really are for the same reasons. When we examine a self, we find primarily a bundle of proximate mechanisms or mental modules rather than an integrated whole.

Buddhists and Darwinians run into a similar problem with the self and with reductionism. Buddhists do not think the self can stand up to being picked apart but they insist Dharma can. Dharma persists on its own regardless of whether people exist to understand it and believe in it. In the same way, scientific laws and scientific method persist on their own regardless of whether there are any Darwinians around to know the laws and use the method. One thing, the self, can be reduced; but the other, Dharma and science, cannot be reduced. I do not go into this issue more here.

In current Western evolutionary theory, long ago on Earth, chemicals arose that replicated themselves in the right context. The replicating chemicals became the basis for life later. As far as I know, the earliest replicating chemicals likely were similar to short strands of Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) or were such strands. It does not make sense to say the early chemicals, and the early life to which they gave rise, desired the means to their reproduction and clung to the situations that allowed them to reproduce; but the fact that they did well in those circumstances, and they developed means to get into those circumstances, form the basis for later seeking and clinging in life. When life had evolved, those bits of life that did seek some situations more than others, and clung to some situations, did better. Thus was born seeking and clinging in all life, and eventually in all sentient beings on Earth. Even amoebas have something like smell, they seek some smells and avoid others, and they attach themselves to some smells. Seeking and clinging arose automatically as part of the automatic process of natural selection of replicating chemicals and life

forms. Seeking and clinging are intrinsic to all life. Now as evolved sentient beings, we cannot master seeking and clinging until we see this fact. When Buddhism simply insists on this insight, it is consistent with modern science. What we do with this knowledge depends on our religion.

Recall that life does not see the world exactly as it is but develops biases that help success more than if life did see the world exactly as it is, such as when daylight creatures fear the dark or when we jump at the glimpse of a stick as if it were a poisonous snake. The development of bias also is intrinsic to life, and is consistent with the Buddhist view that perception and thought are more often biased than neutral, so as to allow us to strive and cling. In Buddhism, people have to deliberately cultivate neutral perception and thought. Scientists do that through scientific method and the scientific community.

Some particular evolved biases deserve mention. Buddhists think the self does not see the world as it really is but instead sees the world in distortions that allow desire and clinging to persist, and lead us to mistake life as worthwhile and full of happiness even when life is not worthwhile and is full of suffering. A Buddhist would understand that people see their mates as more beautiful than the mates really are so as to perpetuate the mating relationship. Buddhists agree that people love their children so as to better reproduce. We evolved to give life meaning even when it is an automatic process without meaning. We evolved to think we are successful even when we are only average or are below average. We evolved to think great success is just around the corner even when it is not. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast". We evolved to cling to life, and most things in life, regardless of the intrinsic worth of life and of everything in it. We evolved to have a stake in our spouses, children, nieces, nephews, friends, children, grandchildren, cousins, neighbors, and even enemies. We evolved to get involved in politics, religions, morality, and making a living. We evolved to meddle. We evolved to make ourselves beautiful. We evolved to seek fame, fortune, reputation, and power. We evolved to cling to life. We help life be sticky. We evolved to overlook pain and suffering so we could go on even in the face of sure defeat. We evolved to make life seem worthwhile even when it is not. The Buddhist analysis of stickiness and clinging is an amazing anticipation of modern evolutionary analysis.

The Buddha did not have the modern idea of evolution although likely he had an idea of transformations of life; and he did not think any of the present forms of life were necessarily absolute. "Whatever has a beginning must have an end; and every conditioned thing (most of the real world including planets and species) had a beginning." The evolved self is both not absolute and amazingly capable. The evolved self can handle most problems that come up in life, if not all. The evolved self has enough ability to figure out most spiritual issues and enough ability to awaken. The Buddha might have argued that evolution gave us both the not-absolute self and enough of a self so that we can work things out. However, I do not want to put words in the mouth of the Buddha. I put it this way: the evolved self is not absolute but it did evolve enough ability to know right from wrong and to see that we face God after we die. It did evolve the ability to wake up enough.

Life has no intrinsic necessary purpose. Life makes life, which makes more life, which makes more life, and so on. Life is a mechanism. People evolved a desire to make meaning where there is no meaning because meaning makes it easier to carry on and reproduce. Even the pursuit of science has no intrinsic value but is only something people do as continuation of abilities that evolved in our past for other uses. If people saw no meaning, they would be far too likely simply to stop trying. People who saw meaning in the past reproduced better than people who did not. For Buddhists, meaning is an illusion too. The idea

that life has meaning allows people to think mistakenly that life is worthwhile, allows people to cling to particular meaningful things such as freedom and wealth, cling to meaningful people such as our parents and children, pretend suffering is not important, and seek satisfaction. Only if we get rid of the evolved delusion by seeing it in terms of dependent origination can we see that there is no intrinsic meaning and that life is not worthwhile.

Not all evolved perceptions are pernicious. Because Buddhism sees cause-and-effect and dependent origination operating in all spheres, it sees all aspects of nature as connected and dependent. It quite specifically includes humans as part of nature, especially if we think of nature as Dharma and as subject to karma. What we do to the planet, the planet will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. What we do to other species, nature will do to us, one way or another, sooner or later. Only recently have Western people come to re-discover and appreciate this truth.

Buddhism and modern science coincide in most of their views about morality. Even to Buddhists, most practiced morality is not intrinsic to a situation but is a distorted judgment that people make in order to advance our own interests and continue to cling. Morality develops in people as part of the development of craving and clinging. Darwinians say the capacity for morality evolved, and show that people are highly adept at using morality to serve their own ends.

Buddhism differs from modern science in some ways. To a Buddhist, the universe is intrinsically moral and Dharma and karma are intrinsically moral. Morality is part of scientific law. People might abuse it horribly, but morality still exists apart from people, and would continue as a part of Dharma and karma even if all human beings vanished. To Darwinism, the universe is not intrinsically moral. If anything, it is amoral. In current orthodox Darwinism, morality “exists” only to the extent that it appears in evolved beings. Morality is not one same thing for all evolved beings. Morality differs according to the species that evolves it. The particular uses that people make of morality are all there is to morality. Dharma and karma are moral only because people think they are. Dharma and karma do not exist apart from people and so could not be intrinsically moral apart from people.

I largely agree with the Buddhist view because I think there is only one morality, and that a version of the same basic morality arises whenever morality evolves, not only on this Earth. Certainly the details of morality differ between particular species that evolve morality, and those details will be very important if ever evolved sentient-moral beings meet. But all sentient-moral beings will recognize “applies equally” and the Golden Rule.

A successful Buddhist gives up family, friends, society, success, and almost everything that we think of as typically human. In the evolutionary past, an adept Buddhist would have left few genes to serve as the basis for kin to follow his-her path. (I assume kin selection and inclusive fitness would not have made up for what an adept Buddhist lost by not using direct reproduction). The personality of an adept Buddhist could only have arisen as the unnatural extension of abilities that arose for other reasons, such as analytic skills and a good imagination. An adept Buddhist is not a human in the usual sense that we think of a human. This does not mean an adept Buddhist is a monster or that we should be appalled. It only means that we should not easily think of an adept Buddhist as a natural growth of human potential and as the peak of what it means to be human. An adept Buddhist is more like a starving non-reproductive artist than like a successful athlete or politician. With a perfect Buddhist like the Buddha, it might be more

accurate and useful to think of them as having transcended human nature entirely. Needless to say, a Darwinian would not accept such an assessment of any being in this universe.

In the chapter on evolved human nature, I mentioned that evolution might be able to surpass itself in the sense that it could lay the basis for true glimpses that could not be fully developed through evolution, could not be sustained through evolution, and could not be very prevalent. This is the same sense that a dog might understand human society. I do not know if Buddhism is such a case. I invite you, and skillful Buddhists, to comment on this question.

Other religions share some of the same coincidences and differences with modern science as Buddhism, such as Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, and Islam. I think the overlap is purest with Buddhism but I do not argue the point here. I do not repeat these observations when discussing other particular religions so please look out for whatever you can see.

If Buddhism wants to use similarities between itself and science, especially to validate Buddhism, then it has to accept that people evolved naturally and so have an evolved nature. It has to take into account the strengths, limitations, and needs of people. It has to wonder if a naturally evolved person can actually overcome suffering, see that life is not worthwhile, or cease to cling, as Buddhism says we should try to do. Buddhism has to think what success it should offer to people in this lifetime to satisfy their evolved needs without their screwing up too much. Buddhism has to expect that people want superstition and magic, and has to present Buddhism so as to minimize the bad effects of the desires – it has not done well on that score so far. Even really smart people have their own versions of superstition, magic, and worldly success. While the Buddhist idea of the self and the scientific idea of the self from evolutionary theory are pretty close, they are not the same, and Buddhism has to think of differences and what the differences mean.

See Below for More on the Self.

Here is the logical place to insert more on the self but that takes too long. See the end of the chapter.

Buddhism and Modern Ethical Issues.

Because of its stress on dependent origination and cause-and-effect, people sometimes think Buddhism is amoral like simplistic materialism, but that is not true. Buddhism takes for granted the strong code of empathy and help that prevailed at the time of the Buddha, and is expressed in the slogan “you are that” from the Upanishads. The world is intrinsically moral and we must go along with its intrinsic morality. The issue in Buddhism and Hinduism was how to express this world-morality. Modern Buddhists have not yet thought out specific issues such as abortion, nationalism, environment, role of women, gay rights, class struggle, capitalism, and other problems that beset Americans. Buddhist nations are as plagued by these issues now as America is, and so eventually Buddhist thinkers have to ask “What would a close follower of the Buddha do?”

Buddhism aims to remove suffering. Few people can achieve awakening in this life, so it is not realistic to argue that Buddhism aims to remove all suffering all at once. Instead, modern Buddhist thinkers argue that Buddhism also aims to reduce suffering, including the overall extent of suffering among a group of

people. Buddhists can safely support policies that genuinely reduce the overall extent of suffering. For example, if economists can show that a national health care system is worth the cost, and thus reduces overall suffering, then a modern Buddhist could safely support such an idea without worrying too much that he-she is clinging to a dogma. If capitalism brings the greatest prosperity and freedom from worry, a Buddhist could also support capitalism. This approach to ethics is a good idea, but it leaves a lot of work to be done. I hope Buddhists work on it. In this form, Buddhist ethics is like the Western ideas of "utility", the general good, and maximizing the general good. This result does not mean one group has copied the other. This result is a good thing, and it means two great schools of thought are converging in different directions on the same conclusion.

The fact that Buddhists take for granted the moral nature of the universe puts them in line with moral atheists but might put them at odds with more strict atheists for whom morality is also a delusion. I leave this issue between those camps to settle.

Because everybody has a unique history, and because people are somewhat the product both of their history and present circumstances (dependent origination of the self), Buddhism does not expect people to conform rigidly to roles. Buddhism supports social rules that promote general morality but it does not necessarily support conformity. My impression is that Buddhists are much more comfortable around behavior that Jewish-Christian-Muslim traditionalists find difficult such as transvestites, gay men, lesbians, and independent women. As long as people do not compel you to immorality, do not hurt people, do not disrupt society, and do not disrespect long-standing cultural customs, there is no intrinsic reason to force them to act as you wish. Contrary to misconception about Thailand and other Buddhist nations, the vast majority of Buddhists are conventional moralists who would fit in with middle class people everywhere. They promote orderly and decent society, and they work hard. Buddhists who are not conventional by traditional Jewish-Christian-Muslim standards still respect people and individuality more than do many Americans. For example, they rarely force their sexuality on to anybody and they get confused when other people force foreign standards on to them. Even robbers rarely do bodily injury as long as they get the material goods they desire.

Buddhism has no inherent mistrust of the future, change, and changing roles. Because of dependent origination, Buddhism expects change. As a result, Buddhists seem more relaxed about new social roles such as for women, gay people, and old people. Buddhism is not inherently liberal but it is not offended by liberality. Buddhism is conservative in expecting serious Buddhists to treat all beings morally and with respect.

Why Follow Buddhism?

If Buddhism says life is not worthwhile, seekers cannot lead normal life, and successful Buddhists cannot lead normal life, then why do ordinary people follow Buddhism? There is both a historical answer and a general answer.

Historically, for the first time in India, Buddhism said both that people are responsible for themselves and people are able enough by themselves. The world is as it is, it is not some magical otherwise that takes a wizard to deal with. Every normal person is up to the task. Who you are and what you do is up to you. People could be free of Brahmin priests and the political system that was based on Brahmin priests, and

still succeed. While not reaching full Enlightenment, still people could make spiritual progress and seek modest worldly success. Ordinary people could mix worldly success and spiritual progress. They could do spiritual good deeds by supporting monks and education. They could use their minds, reason, and experience, and could trust the conclusions that they came to on this basis for both spiritual insight and worldly action. They could use commonsense morality based on ideas of sympathy and persons. This outlook appealed to aristocrats, soldiers, successful farmers, craftspeople, and merchants; those were the people that first adopted Buddhism. In these ways, early Buddhism was like early Christianity, like some Protestantism and some enlightened urban Reformation Roman Catholicism after 1600, and like Enlightenment Christianity such as held by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. This outlook is extolled now in idealized small-business private enterprise capitalism.

Generally, people don't have to give up a lot to gain the benefits of Buddhism. People do not have to decide the issue of "life is not worthwhile". They can put that idea aside while they concentrate on more modest spiritual goals and on success here. You can be kind and "mindful" if that suits you, or you can be an aggressive business person as long as you don't break obvious commonsense morality. People can follow Buddhism as lay believers while leaving to monks the rigors of strong seeking and the hard questions such as whether life is worthwhile and the dogma of non-self. This is what most Christians do with issues of theology such as the Trinity, general Resurrection when Jesus returns, and exactly how Jesus saves. Buddhist laypeople and monks maintain a relation, described above, in which monks teach people and protect them spiritually against (mostly imagined) threats while people support monks. Monks and people use Buddhist ideas such as morality, cause-and-effect, and personal sufficiency. People can follow both Buddhist ideas such as cause-and-effect (science) and modest animistic spiritualism without worrying too much about logical consistency.

Theravada Buddhism appeals most when it contrasts with Brahmanism and with austere religions such as Jainism. When other competing religions can offer the benefits of Buddhism; offer priests who are helpful rather than tyrannical; offer spiritualism; offer magic; offer a system; teach that this life, and all lives, are worthwhile, as part of a system; teach that worldly success is spiritual success as when Arjuna goes to war; and teach that you can reach ultimate spiritual success and still have a normal life; then they can supplant Buddhism. When religions offer people ways to have their cake and eat it too, then they can overcome Buddhism. Exactly this happened twice in India, first when Mahayana supplanted Theravada and then again when Hinduism supplanted Mahayana. It happened in America to modest Enlightenment Christianity when various Christian religious revivals, Transcendentalism, fundamentalism, relativism, "New Age", and the occult supplanted Enlightenment belief in Jesus as moral teacher and prophet.

More on Buddhism and My Views.

I do not explain all the points on which I agree with Buddhism. Despite liking Theravada, I disagree with the Buddha, and Buddhism, on several points. I stated my skepticism about Buddhist aids, and stated the need for naturally evolved people to be able to achieve reasonable success in this lifetime. See also the chapters on Mahayana, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism.

I think life is worthwhile. Everybody suffers, and for some people life is not worthwhile due to suffering. Even so, overall, for most people, life can be worthwhile.

Likely, evolution programmed me to feel life is worthwhile regardless of whether life is worthwhile. Still, I do not think life is worthwhile only because evolution programmed me to feel that way but because I do feel that way based on as much evidence as I have been able to process.

Life is rarely worthwhile because of particular activities or successes. Life is rarely worthwhile because we get a PhD or win the Nobel Prize. Having a good satisfying successful family can go a long way to making life worthwhile but even families can detract from life rather than add to it, and even having a good family in itself does not necessarily make life worthwhile. Just as no particular activity necessarily can make all of life worthwhile, so, also, the fact that no particular activity is obvious worthwhile does not mean life as a whole is not worthwhile. Rather than any particular activity, life overall is a good thing and is worthwhile. We can be disappointed in our careers, grow bored with our spouses, grow disinterested in our children, see our hobbies as mere shiny pebbles, get bored with art, and find science predictable, and think politics a cruel joke, yet still find life overall worthwhile. We will necessarily be disappointed in some ways in any particular thing we do yet still find life as a whole worthwhile. Life is worthwhile regardless of the satisfaction of any particular activity and regardless of the sum total of many activities.

All of us age, get sick, feel disappointment, and face unfairness. Some of us get screwed really badly. Many of us go through bad jobs, bad bosses, bad colleagues, bad marriages, ungrateful children, drugs, alcohol, stupid ideologies, and the frustration of not knowing how to contribute to the world. Still, life is not simply suffering. It is not possible to say if the total of joy (pleasure) exceeds the total of suffering, but, for most people, that is likely the case as long as they let themselves enjoy some of life. If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because the total of suffering exceeds the total of joy, then it is false.

If Buddhism claims that life is not worthwhile because of deep suffering, because life is just not worthwhile despite superficial joy, then all I can do is repeat that life is worthwhile for most people. The Buddha was wrong. Even with deep suffering regardless of superficial success, still usually life is worthwhile.

Buddhist advice about clinging and stickiness is correct. Life is sticky. We cling to everything. Clinging does lead to suffering. We cling to crazy girlfriends or boyfriends, crazy children, bad jobs, bad ideas, bad politics, the hope that our job will turn out, the self-delusion that we are victims of society, the hope that we can justify our lives through our professions, and so many other things that I cannot even suggest them. Even the good things that we cling to cannot guarantee satisfaction in life, such as family, friends, love, children, a useful job, an active enlightened church, and correct politics. We are all better off if we learn to let go appropriately. Buddhism supports that. Evolution programmed us to cling and to commit sometimes. So sometimes we have to get over that part of our evolutionary programming. One program, our judgment, has to overcome another set of programs, our clinging. This is hard but it is possible to a large extent. We can do manage stickiness and clinging without falling into the other mistake of thinking all life is not worthwhile because of stickiness and clinging.

Getting over clinging is not entirely possible, at least not for the vast majority of people. We all cling to some things. Only a miniscule number of very special people can get over all desire for all family, fame, wealth, and success. Probably the hardest things to get over are family, the desire to be right, dogmas, and the desire to leave a strong positive legacy of reputation and-or ideas. It is hard to face the fact that you might die with nobody to remember how much spiritual struggle you went through and how much progress you made.

Even though people cannot get over all clinging, that apparent deficit does not mean life is not worthwhile and nearly all of us are mired in clinging and suffering. Even with some clinging, life can be worthwhile, and most of our lives need not consist of clinging and suffering. Some clinging can even lessen suffering and make life more worthwhile. Most people cling to their families but that does not necessarily create suffering and it does not necessarily make life not worthwhile; usually it creates joy and makes life more worthwhile for the kind of beings that we are.

Working hard to make the world better, trying to do good, keeping morality in mind, using our talents to their best, avoiding zealotry, and thinking of morality in terms of “applies equally” are all forms of clinging. We can carry them to excess, and they can be hurtful. But usually we err in the other direction. We do not strive hard enough; we do not act like a Buddhist monk seeking to awaken. Clinging to principles can be a good clinging, just like clinging to the goal of awakening.

Buddhism forces us to deal with paradoxes such as “what is satisfaction?”, “clinging”, and the “self”. It keeps us mentally alive, especially when we disagree with it. It gives rise to some silly intellectualism, but most people can avoid the silly games to focus on the real issues.

Buddhism is intrinsically moral, and it teaches empathy. It has its own versions of the Golden Rule and of “applies equally to everybody”. Unlike as with Jesus, it does not stress those moral points or make them central to its mission and way of life. Buddhist nations have not created the institutions that support a good life as I have described. Buddhists are amenable to those institutions, do understand them, and do take them up to the extent that their culture, society, and government allow. As the world becomes more capitalist and democratic, I hope Buddhist nations can take up strong institutions of pro-active service naturally. I hope Buddhists do so without resentment toward Jesus, his message, or Christians. I hope Buddhists can do this while acknowledging Jesus and his ideas, just as I hope Westerners learn from the Buddha. Yet if Buddhists do adopt pro-active service but insist on seeing it entirely in Buddhist terms, overlooking Jesus, that stance is fine with me.

Rather than to Theravada Buddhism, the following criticism applies more to systems of “many lives” such as Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism; but Theravada nominally is a system of many lives, so I offer this point here. It is easy to get lost in the tools of Buddhism, including karma and rebirth. Some Buddhists glimpse the grandeur of many lives and of time without end, and get caught up in that. Whether there are many lives does not matter. What matters is what you do right now right here. Even if there are many lives, you can do no better over the course of many lives than if you do well right now right here. If you do not do well right now right here, then having many lives makes no difference. You will not progress, you will not enjoy your many lives, and your many lives will do you no good. If you squander this instant, you squander not only this instant but all instants and all lives to come. If you save this instant, you save everything. To see this point is part of what it means to understand morality and good life. This is why I think we have only one life and our one life if important. This point does not mean you should live self-indulgently frivolously in the moment. I discuss more of what it means in the next chapters, especially in the chapters on Taoism in Zen where living here and now is part of mental freedom.

Theravada and I agree in a way that might make neither Buddhists nor readers of this book comfortable. I expect to meet God when I die. God might decide not to send me back to live again or to send me to

heaven, but instead simply to end me. Naturally I prefer a better next life or a vacation in heaven but I have to be ready for the chance that I might simply end altogether forever. Even if God does give me a few chances and a few vacations, eventually I think he will end even the great me. Theravada Buddhists have to be ready for that outcome as well. In fact, they should work toward that end even if they do not yearn for that end to the point of clinging. Other versions of Buddhism, and mainstream Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism deliberately avoid this possibility. (Hinduism allows this possibility as a good thing but does not stress it, and diverts attention to other possibilities.) “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Mostly other religions get around this end by putting us into a joyous system of many lives; another reason why I do not accept a system. I don’t think my view, or the similar view of a Theravada Buddhist, makes us unduly gloomy or heroic. It is just something you have to deal with. Dealing with it does make you a better person but not in any way to brag about.

The Worthwhile-ness Continuum.

Imagine a sequence of stances toward satisfaction with life.

First is the true skeptic who makes no value judgments. I leave him-her to another book.

Second is the person who sees nastiness, evil, and the devil everywhere. Everything should be totally good but turned out totally bad. Nothing is as it should be. It is all our fault. We are all and only bad. As Martin Luther said, we are a pile of dung covered with a thin coating of snow. I don’t like these people and I ignore them in this book.

Third is the person who is overcome by the troubles of the world. Life might be good but it just isn’t. It is a tribulation, rather like Satan wished to make Job see the world. I also ignore these people.

Fourth is the Buddhist who sees the fleeting joy in aspects of life but thinks life overall is not worthwhile. While you are in the game, play it out moderately to the end, and then let it go.

Fifth is my position, the position of Mike Polioudakis. “We are in it. We might as well play (work) hard to make it better. Things too often go badly, but often enough they go well, and they might go well in general with some luck. Some parts of life are really wonderful. Life is worthwhile as a whole even if much of it is annoying. We will not all be saved in the end. Life is real. Some of will succeed spiritually and some of us will fail. God will judge. We can trust God.”

Sixth is the business-and-political style American optimist. Life is hard work but it will turn out well in the end. I don’t care if other people fail as long as I succeed, and I know I will. My career and family make life worthwhile. Everyone could have this if they tried and knew what to do. People who don’t have this have only themselves to blame, and we can forget them.

Seventh is the exuberant style American optimist. Life is always a lot of fun. Look in the sunny side. If you are not making people happy, you are making them sad, so make them happy. We can all do well enough if we only try and if we help each other. Think of life in terms other than material success. Think in terms that will lead you to your success. “Follow your bliss”. “Be kind and mindful”.

Eighth is the idea that not all lives right now are worthwhile but life in general is worthwhile as part of a system of many lives, many lives are worthwhile right now as they are lives, and each being eventually gets at least some lives that are worthwhile while they are lived. If you are lucky enough to have one of the good lives, enjoy it, and don't worry too much about other people. This idea is typical of Mahayana and Hinduism.

Ninth is the mystic. We are all one. We are all God. We will all be saved in the end. The Great Risk of Life is an illusion. We all are part of the single great Void or Mind. We are all drops in the one ocean, and we all will sometimes be part of a shallow pool, inside a fish, part of a crashing wave, deep in the dark cold, or filling the lungs of a drowning person. Good and bad are both all one and different at the same time. Mountains and valleys are both all one and different. Everything is just as it should be even though it is not all good all the time. We should appreciate that. "Follow your bliss" and it will lead you to see how everything is right with you and the world. Be joyous.

In this frame, Buddhism is near the middle path. My differences with Buddhism are not as much as with other stances. The second and ninth stances are almost mirror images, and likely they are related both psychologically and in terms of how we might frame theology. I disagree with the stances that are either pessimistic or exuberant, for example the second, eighth, and ninth stances. I think both extremes are seriously misleading. I make this assessment not because I am on the outside looking in but because I have felt both directions myself.

Alternative Understandings of "Waking Up" and of Buddhist Success.

It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile. The idea goes against a long evolutionary history that leads us to try to succeed and to think only in terms that help us to succeed. We deny what leads us away from succeeding. Very few Buddhists, and even few monks, really accept life is not worthwhile. They do not think "waking up" means seeing life is not worthwhile. Buddhists, even intellectuals, resented me when I pointed out that "life is not worthwhile" was the core teaching of Buddhism. They could see the idea, but they disliked it. To Buddhists, including intellectuals and monks, Buddhism is about the richness of its ideas and the quality of its practice. That is not a bad way out.

Instead of thinking that the core idea of Buddhism is waking up to the fact that life is not worthwhile, most Buddhist lay people, and most monks, substitute other ideas that we wake up to. They substitute other ideas of what it means to succeed in Buddhism. Here I am not concerned with the ideas common in all mass popular religion of religious success in terms of family success and other success in mundane life. I am interested in intellectual alternatives to seeing that life is not worthwhile and I am interested in cultural values that take the place of seeing the world as not worthwhile.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the world is not as it appears to be, that there is a lot more going on, that much of what is going on is hard to see on the surface, and that much of what is going on undermines our normal values. That is not quite Gnosticism but it is like Gnosticism. It can lead a person to be more moral and to be intellectually curious, but not necessarily.

Some people think of waking up as seeing that the normal values of the world are silly, and that there are deeper better moral values. Usually they become more concerned and more moral. I think this is an

important kind of waking up, and so I agree with them to a large extent. I wish more people would wake up in this way.

Some people think of waking up as seeing the world is foolish and annoying. The world often is foolish and annoying but that is not what necessarily makes the world “not worthwhile”. We do not wake up just because we get deeply annoyed at the world. We do not awaken because we are cranky.

Some people seem to think that waking up means taking seriously that there are sacred powerful things in the world and that we have to respect them. This sounds like waking up to crude animism but usually it is more than that. Often it means waking up to the truth of other religions and cultures.

Some intellectuals think that waking up consists of deeply understanding the ideas of Buddhism, that they are close to awakening because they know so much so deeply, and so they are better than the common people in the same way the Buddha was better than the common people. In fact, knowing more about a good religion can make people better. It depends on what they do with their knowledge and what attitude they take. Too often, knowing more makes people stuck up. In that case, the ideas that they know are not a help but are a hindrance. This attitude is a disease of half-well-read and half-smart people in all religions, not just Buddhism, and so needs no further comment.

Some people think waking up and succeeding is not having any commitments, in being able to let go of all attachments, especially to material goods, sex, power, wealth, TV, pop culture, going to the beach, eating an ice cream cone, etc. I have met only a handful of people who come close to really being able to do this. I have met fewer people who can enjoy the world without clinging to the world. Most people who think they can do this seem far too committed to their own spiritual superiority and achievements. In any case, letting go is not the same as waking up. Letting go is one means to waking up. It can be one result of waking up.

At least among some Asians that I have met, people take the idea of waking up, and letting go, to mean a pose of superior diffidence about the world and about people. They are “above” politics, art, intellectual controversies, pop culture, and the masses. They are above the petty squabbles of their neighbors and business associates. They don’t want to get caught up in conflicts or to make commitments. Democracy is a passing fad. They don’t have to participate. They look at most people as chattering squirrels. They think of themselves as somewhat ethereal, not determined by the vagaries of this world, and not confined to the doings of this world. In strong versions, they learn to literally look past or look through people when they want to avoid people. It is odd to be overlooked in this way. In my experience, these people are not so much above the world as extremely selective in what they wish to deal with and how they wish to deal with it. They ignore what it makes their life easier when they ignore it, and can become quite agitated by issues that concern them personally or that affect family success. Haughty diffidence is not the same as waking up. It is not the same as non-commitment.

Waking Up and My Views.

We all face God whether we wake up or not. If we wake up to the idea that life is not worthwhile, then we have awakened to an error. In the same way a person can be decent without knowing he-she is decent, so a person can be successful as a spiritual being without having the idea of awakening. Just as the idea

of decency can impede decent people, the idea of Buddhist awakening can impede people who want to properly assess life. So, strictly speaking, I should describe Buddhist waking up as a pernicious delusion. But I don't feel that way about it or about striving for it. It is good to wake up to the difficulties in life not only for yourself but for other people. It is good to wake up to many of the Buddhist ideas such as cause and effect and the self is not necessarily eternal self-sufficient soul-stuff. The techniques of Buddhist meditation are worthwhile even if they do not lead to Buddhist awakening and even if they do not lead to my ideas. People who really study Buddhism tend to be more decent than average. We can think of Buddhist waking up as like a mystic vision, and so partly true but not wholly true. So I cannot condemn the ideas or the methods. I only ask that Buddhists look with the same critical eye on Buddhism that they turn on other dogmas such as the eternal soul-self. Don't be afraid to come to conclusions other than that life is not worthwhile and life is inevitably suffering. Don't look down on other religions as merely inferior versions of Buddhism or as stopgaps in this life on the way to deeper awakening in future lives.

Buddhist Charm.

This section does not take all Buddhists to be saints. I know most Buddhists in Thailand do not follow what I call Buddhism but are "animists" obsessed with magic, power, spirits, amulets, luck, fortune telling, and getting an advantage through connections to the spirit world. I ignore that here.

This section seems to contradict the idea that a religion should give normal people clear guidelines for reasonable success in this lifetime as preparation for meeting God. My guidelines for success come from Jesus, mixed with realism, and with Western ideas of government. I care more about acts than dogma. Acting well along Buddhist moral lines and intellectual lines goes with what I want people to do and with what leads to a good interview with God. It might be better for me personally if Buddhists all agreed with my dogma but likely not better for Buddhists. God will make up his own mind.

Buddhists often seem charming to Westerners. Thai people are charming apart from being Buddhists, so Thais can be doubly charming. Most Buddhists that Westerners meet are monks, or are serious about religion, are fairly well off, are students, intellectuals, artists, or academics, have travelled, or are in an international "do good" mission such as saving forests or farmers. When people of other religions meet Christians with these traits, the Christians can seem charming too. Americans used to give off this kind of charm until the 1980s.

Aside from the usual dose of magic that is found in all societies, Buddhism has a simple wooden-headed straightforward wonderful attitude. Most Buddhist goals are simple and clear, the techniques are clear, and people can be clear about what their particular goals are and what they will do to achieve their goals. You do not have to aim for awakening right away. You can simply aim to improve. You should strive to act morally. You should use logic and reason. You can make as much or as little progress as you wish on your own or in a group. You do not need to depend on other people but you can get help from other people if you wish and you can give help to other people if they wish. You do not have to depend on anybody else to save you. Nobody can send you to hell or heaven. Nobody expects you to awaken next week. Salvation is a goal but it is not a crisis issue. For most people, continual progress is more a focus than awakening. Generally, magic plays little role. At least traditionally, and even in the modern urban world, Buddhism tends to produce decent people. Despite the individualism of Buddhism, Buddhists have as much fellowship as among people in any religion. Buddhism encourages science, intellect, and

an open mind. It is no wonder that Lisa Simpson prefers Buddhism although she also follows the moral teachings of Jesus.

Buddhists aim for “lesser” goals such as clarity, mindfulness, calmness, kindness, sympathy, empathy, doing good, promoting kindness, rationality, science, and promoting the order in society that minimizes suffering and maximizes clarity. The “lesser” goals are quite valuable in themselves regardless of any attitude about worthwhile life, and would be admirable in any religion.

Buddhist aids, such as karma, rebirth, dharma, emptiness, Buddha mind, etc. are fascinating, can never be fully resolved, and make good topics of conversation. They can help sharpen the mind. Sometimes they give us insight into other topics such as how the mind evolved, causality, and the fact that most of our categories for knowing the world are made up. Sometimes they even help quiet the mind so we can think better. Studying them allows smart people to feel satisfied with themselves without necessarily leading to posing or to looking down on others people. They are like good art.

A few smart Buddhists do have a sense of the Buddhist idea that life is not worthwhile. Their response is like Existentialism: they make meaning for now, and are content to live in the present meaning that they make, even if their intellectual superiors, like the Buddha, know better. They achieve what Existentialism achieves but without pretense and self-congratulation. They are content to allow other people to find their own meaning, and they tend to respect the meanings of other people. This attitude does not lead to self-indulgent anarchy where each person lives in “his own private Idaho”. Buddhists live in society, and they adjust meaning to get along with others. To find meaning without too much pretense is quite charming in itself even without the other sources of Buddhist charm.

Most Buddhists take morality seriously without being zealots. Buddhists have empathy and compassion without losing themselves as clinging enablers. They understand that other people are like themselves and other people face the same problems they do. They know other people can get caught in clinging and other people suffer. They help other people while remembering that they need to take care of their families and themselves, and they need not to undermine society. Buddhists try to be polite and to talk nicely to other people.

Buddhists engage in causes, such as saving the forests and species, on the same terms. Buddhists can agree to disagree on social and moral issues. A Buddhist might have strong views on either side of the abortion issue but would not kill doctors who perform abortions. A Buddhist tries to follow the law while keeping in mind that few formal systems can encompass all the variety of life. Although women’s rights did not originate in Buddhist countries, Buddhists have accepted the idea because it makes sense in light of cause-and-effect and rebirth. Many people who are men in this life were women in past lives, and a person born a man in this life might easily be reborn a woman later, so there is no point in oppressing a class of person’s (women) you might have been or that you might join again soon enough. Buddhists would easily understand the philosophers Immanuel Kant and John Rawls.

Buddhists accept cause and effect. They like rationalism and science. They rapidly see the scientific point of view, and have no trouble with evolution and Relativity. They see the business point of view in which aspects of the economy influence each other. Buddhists might not have invented modern medicine

but they pick it up very quickly. Buddhists can be both stoic about the hazards of living in a body, and the inevitable decline of old age, yet see the value of medicine in relieving suffering and sustaining vigor.

Buddhists accept art as part of the charm of the world. They succumb to art because they don't expect to resist all clinging and all joys of this world. Art can bring some joy without too much pain. Buddhists are happy to learn lessons about religion and life from art without expecting art to reach the depths of the Buddha's mind and without expecting art to tell them all about life.

To many Buddhists, the Middle Path does not consist of the correct balance between asceticism and a normal healthy body. The Middle Path means trying to understand a variety of views, and then coming down somewhere in the middle, usually within the limits of common sense and general moral principles. Drink in moderation. Wear skirts neither too long nor too short. Defend a point of view but don't get into fist fights. Save some money while using some money to have a good time. Meditate but don't give up your job and your family unless you become a monk. Be brave but not foolish. Work through politics for the improvement of society until it wears you down or until politics becomes hopelessly corrupt.

This Middle Path is much like what Aristotle advised, at about the same time as the Buddha. A Buddhist who accepts that the world is worthwhile, at least for now, is much like an Aristotelian.

All this makes any person charming. It would be nice to combine many Buddhist traits with the concern and dedication of Christians and other followers of Jesus. As the world goes along, something like that might happen.

Sweet Western Buddhists.

When Western Buddhists adopt Buddhism, they learn that life is "not worthwhile", but, as far as I can tell, they don't take that idea seriously, maybe because most Western Buddhists learn Mahayana. Western Buddhists learn about suffering but tend to think of it in terms of bad situations and bad attitudes such as a long slow burn about being overlooked at work or lingering anger at a bad romance. They do not think much about the deep suffering that goes on even when life seems successful (see Part 7). They have a caring circle of friends, do good deeds, meditate, and are mindful. Instead of dwelling on life as "not worthwhile", Westerners are drawn to meditation; many lives; a joyous system of many lives; Buddhist Aids; Buddhist empathy and sympathy; mindfulness; not returning bad for bad; returning good for bad; seeing the root causes of sadness and bad behavior in general in selfishness; the beauty and goodness of nature; and many other points that make Buddhists charming. They write self-help books about not getting into bad situations and about getting out of bad situations. They write about how to be useful and help others. They write about using emotions so you are a nice person instead of a hurtful person. Sometimes they try to be diffident, un-emotional, and mildly "above it all" but not too often. Sometimes they think they are secretly better than non-Buddhists because they are so good or they are so close to true ideas, but they indulge this attitude no more than do people of all religions. All this is fine with me. It can get a little over-sweet but over-sweet is better than glamorizing villainy and better than self-righteousness and crusading. Their overall stance is not really different than the stance of love, help, and kindness as in some Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, etc. That is fine with me too.

The only problem I have with sweet Western Buddhists is the same issue I have with all dogmas: when they want to convert me to be like them and they want me to share exactly their concerns, experiences, feelings, and attitudes – the “Agent Smith” problem. I am a mild person but I am not like them. All I ask of them is good behavior, and I wish all they would ask of me is good behavior and that I make sense. It would be better if the good behavior on both sides was based on the same principles and it would be nice if we could talk with each other better. But we can’t always get what we want, and I don’t want to force them to think like me and be like me.

Buddhism Back to Almost Hinduism.

In the list of widespread ideas that began this chapter, the last points amount to accepting that the system-of-many-lives is good even if a particular life is painful, we should do our duty (dharma) as part of our role in the total system of many lives, we should enjoy this present life, and so life really is worthwhile. Buddhists reject this conclusion. The whole system is not good even if it sustains rebirths that lead to awakening. Such a system is self-contradictory, and self-contradictory systems are rarely mostly good. We can do our duty as part of our present life but we need not worry about doing our duty to uphold the whole system. We can enjoy this life in moderation but we should not get smug about this life. Hindus eventually worked their way to the non-Buddhist view; see the chapters on Mahayana and on India. They see the Buddha as one of the gods-forces who sustain the total good system of many lives. All this is a big difference between Hindus and Buddhists.

Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to enjoy the present life, feel happy about the system as a whole, do their duty as part of sustaining the system as a whole, and do their duty as part of sustaining their society. Buddhists who take the view described in the previous section seem to act like practicing Hindus even if they do not follow Hindu doctrine. Most Buddhists are not happy about being described as Hindus by default. I leave it up to Hindus and Buddhists to figure out how they differ and then to tell non-Buddhists and non-Hindus.

Buddhists who want to separate themselves from Hindus should consider the points above, and should consider what the Buddha said about life being not worthwhile. If they conclude the Buddha did say that life is not worthwhile, they should consider what that means. If they conclude they can take part in this life, they should try to explain the terms both to themselves and to non-Buddhists. If they conclude that life is worthwhile, then what makes Theravada different from Mahayana, and what makes Buddhism different from Hinduism?

For most practicing Buddhists and Hindus, what matters is not intellectual doctrines about whether life is worthwhile, this particular life is worthwhile, or the total system of many lives is worthwhile. What matters is their own particular culture, and how their culture gets them to see their religion and to act their religion. Hindus are Hindus because they have roots in Indian culture. Hinduism is as much about Indian culture as about a set of ideas. Buddhists are Buddhists because they have roots in Southeast Asian, East Asian, European, or American culture. Thai Buddhists are Thai while Indian Hindus are Indians. Culture is more important than dogma. I leave Buddhists and Hindus to explain how their cultures and religious doctrines interact. I leave Buddhists to explain why non-strict Buddhists are not Hindus.

In the future, people of all cultures will face religions that were not originally of their culture, and religions will move into cultures from which they did not originate and from which they have not taken their basic character. This is already happening in America and Europe, and, to a lesser extent, India and China. It will be interesting to watch the interplay of culture and doctrine then. It will be interesting to see how far a doctrine can stretch to accommodate a culture. It will be interesting to see if a doctrine can actually shape a culture.

(Uninteresting personal note: While I was in graduate school, socio-cultural anthropologists pretty much said: society, culture, family, economics, morality, and religion are the same thing; religion takes the lead; religion and morality are closest, and form a complex; and religion-morality determines family, economics, society, and culture. Society, culture, economics, and family are a particular religion-morality in practice. Their anthropological doctrine was like a Buddhist aid. In their view, they had found the key to social life in a formula that centered on religion and morality. I disagreed. While religion and morality are important, religion, morality, culture, society, economics, and family are not identical, and which one leads depends. Using religion or morality as the key causes us to overlook culture, society, family, and economics, just as using “cause-and-effect” or “mindfulness” causes us to overlook Buddhism. Using only “not worthwhile” or “suffering” as the key might have the same result. My later experience confirmed my ideas about anthropological theory. I had to figure out my own ideas, much as the Buddha had urged. I could not have thought through the issues in this chapter or book if I had converted to the wrong views that were taught in graduate school. Buddhist students take note.)

PART 7: (A) SUFFERING VS. “NOT WORTHWHILE”, (B) BUDDHIST AIDS, AND (C) SELF.

This end part of the chapter is optional but firmly recommended. It delivers on the promise for “more later”. It goes into detail on the topics listed in the header, and includes more assessment.

(A) WORTHWHILE, NOT WORTHWHILE, AND SUFFERING.

Short Whimsical Prolog.

The idea of suffering in Buddhism and Hinduism gives me the same uneasy creepy feeling that the idea of heaven and hell gives me in Christianity. Christians sometimes corner you and demand, “Do you want to go to Heaven or Not? Do you want Heaven or Hell?” If you reject the dichotomy and you answer “No”, then you will go to Hell. If you answer, “Of course, forced to make the choice, everybody would rather go to Heaven”, you are trapped inside their view. You have to accept what they say about going to Heaven and Hell. The Christian inquisitor does not allow rejecting the frame. Suppose a Buddhist asks, “Do you want to end your Suffering or do you want to spend forever in Ignorance and ugly Suffering?” This is the same frame and dilemma. The Buddhist inquisitor does not allow you to reject the dichotomy anymore than the Christian does – the Buddhist does not allow the Middle Path. I don’t like this. The difference is the Christian openly scorns you if you don’t accept while the Buddhist merely damns you with pity and smug superiority. “Stupid not-Buddhist doesn’t even know when he is suffering”.

Like many people, my reaction is “a pox on both your houses”. I don’t live in these frames and I don’t like being forced to live in these frames. This dilemma is one tool of systems that eat the world. This is why the Buddhist view of suffering is one of the most dangerous of Buddhist Aids. A difference between me

and a few other victims is that, after a long life and a lot of thinking, I can give a few good reasons why I can reject the frames and I can give some alternative better views. Traps like this are one reason I came to enjoy Taoism and Zen.

If you desperately seek enlightenment, then you cling to enlightenment and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop clinging, then you cling to not clinging, and you suffer.

If you desperately seek to stop suffering, then you cling to suffering and not suffering, and you suffer.

Recall my comments earlier that the command to stop clinging and stop suffering is a negative absolute like iconoclasm, Prohibition, and sexual abstinence.

It is better to manage than to try to totally wipe out. Buddhist Aids used adeptly help manage.

“Not Worthwhile” versus “Suffering”, in More Detail.

This section can get technical. I repeat myself.

Westerners think of suffering as what happens to cancer patients or to people taken by the police in bad states. Buddhists see suffering as a common part of all life and see it in sickness, pains, aches, old age, love, accidents, disappointment, bad acts, taxes, the decay of society, and sorrow. Suffering appears in the hazards of life such as car accidents and plant closings, normal changes of life such as first crush and growing old, inevitable annoyances such as taxes, lingering unfairness such as the success of people who kiss ass, and the doubt that ever gnaws our hearts and minds. I see all this too. I don't overlook any suffering that Buddhists might consider.

Buddhists do not necessarily aim to end suffering or end all bad feeling; they aim to overcome suffering so it does not distort thought and keep us wrongly attached to life. When suffering is overcome, then it comes and it goes with no lingering bad effects or distortions. To “end” or “defeat” suffering is the same as to “overcome”. To “manage” suffering is to respond to it so as to minimize how it distorts thoughts and acts but not necessarily to end suffering or to not feel it. People manage suffering who accept that life has hard knocks and do the best they can anyway with as little bitterness as possible. They do not try to end all suffering. I advocate that we manage rather than overcome. I do not dwell on the difference between manage and overcome.

It is not clear if a person who overcomes suffering also does not feel suffering at all or does not feel much of anything at all. I doubt it. Some Buddhists act as if not feeling is the aim but they are wrong. A person who has overcome suffering still feels but he-she does not hold on to (attach to) feelings.

The issue of suffering is about something in life, about some of the content of life. In contrast, the issue of worthwhile life is about all of life, life itself. The issue of a worthwhile life contains the issue of suffering. The issue of suffering is one way to get at the issue of worthwhile life but that way is dangerous because a person can get stuck on the idea of suffering and so forget that the real issue is worthwhile life. I think that is what happened in Buddhism. I don't know if that happened to the Buddha but I doubt it. I think he

saw the real issue as worthwhile life. He used suffering to get at worthwhile life, and his followers got stuck. I cannot prove my view of what happened.

We all can be overcome by suffering. Suffering makes all of us think “crooked”. Crooked thinking leads us to more suffering and traps us in suffering. Our crooked thinking makes us make others suffer and it traps them too; then they do it to us; and so on. It could be the Buddha focused on suffering so as to alert us to these problems and to show us what is important. He gave us a way to handle suffering so it would not overcome life. He gave us a way to think clearly so as to undo crooked thought caused by suffering and crooked thought caused by anything. In the face of suffering, he offered a way to make life better, to think adeptly, and “get on top of” life, even if not to make life all good. For example, the Buddha found a way to overcome suffering so we also could end selfishness. Many Buddhists think like this although they do not usually say so. I think the Buddha used the issue of suffering to wake us up to what matters, and he promoted overcoming suffering to make life better. I don’t know for sure what the Buddha wished us to wake up to after we overcome suffering. I think the Buddha did not think that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. I cannot prove my view of what the Buddha thought.

Even if the Buddha offered a way to manage suffering to make life better, I disagree with the approach. The Buddha needed to say for sure if we awaken when we defeat suffering, what we awaken to, if life was worthwhile or not worthwhile before we defeated suffering, and if life is worthwhile or not worthwhile after we defeat suffering (and awaken). It seems odd to base a way of life (religion) on the idea that we must overcome suffering without also saying what makes life better and without focusing more on what makes life better. The Buddha’s approach amounts to falling back on the problem of suffering only, and it forces us to identify awakening with the end of suffering. That stance forces us to conclude that life is not worthwhile; certainly life is not worthwhile before we manage suffering; and likely is not worthwhile after. We conclude “not worthwhile overall” tacitly even if not overtly.

So, that is what happened. Orthodox Buddhism fell back on the problem of suffering, it avoided the issue of worthwhile life, but fell back on a stance that only tacitly sees life as not worthwhile, regardless of what the Buddha had intended. Orthodox Buddhism asserts the Buddha said suffering besets life (ruins it), we have to do what we can to end all suffering, and that is that. Orthodox Buddhism says ending suffering does make life better as a benefit along the way but Buddhism denies that the Buddha offers overcoming suffering primarily so as to make life all better, as a kind of therapy. Overcoming suffering is not a means to any other end except awakening. Buddhism focuses on overcoming suffering without tying the defeat of suffering to any other gain except awakening. The issue is suffering, plain and simple. This view is not so odd. A similar idea is the Christian and Muslim view that the world is fallen, beset with sin, sin ruins life, and the task is to overcome sin and all the evil that follows, plain and simple. This is how Christians and Muslims get stuck on fighting Satan and how they forget there is much more to life than fighting the Devil and fighting evil.

As far as I know, Buddhism takes no explicit stance on whether life is worthwhile before overcoming suffering, after overcoming suffering, or in general, except to say being born a human male is an amazing rare opportunity to defeat suffering, awaken, and to end dependency on the suffering of karma-Dharma-rebirth. This life is worthwhile because it allows us to end suffering and end normal life, and that is the only reason this life is worthwhile. To overcome suffering does not, in itself, make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before, after, and in general. Buddhists wish to

avoid that implication but I don't see how. I think the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile. (Women cannot end suffering and cannot awaken. Adept women must be reborn as men to awaken. I don't make the rules of Buddhism.)

I disagree that suffering ruins all life and I disagree with a focus on suffering. Suffering does not usually make life "not worthwhile". I disagree that to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile and it is the only thing to make life worthwhile. Managing suffering makes life better but does not make life worthwhile. Life is worthwhile despite most suffering. Life is worthwhile, plain and simple. I disagree with the Buddha and with orthodox Buddhism. My stance disqualifies me entirely for many Buddhists.

(0) The logic in more detail: To repeat: The issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering and it contains the issue of suffering. "Suffering" is about some of the content of life while "worthwhile" is about life, all of life. We can see suffering in terms of worthwhile life but we cannot see worthwhile life in terms of suffering except for a few bad situations that do not change the basic relation. We have to make up our minds about worthwhile life before we can assess how suffering affects life.

(0 continued) As developed in Buddhism, the ideas of suffering and of overcoming suffering, and all Aids, are bolstered ("reified"). They are overly strong so as to force themselves on minds. They do not follow the Middle Path. The ideas of suffering and overcoming suffering could be more useful if they were not so strident. I don't know if bolstering was done by the Buddha or by his followers but I think more likely by his followers. I don't know if "manage" is more along the Middle Path but I think so.

(1) Assume life is not worthwhile overall regardless of suffering. Then: (1A) The issue of suffering is minor in comparison. (1B) To defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile – what counts is that life is not worthwhile. So what if we end suffering but life is not worthwhile? (1C) Why work hard to overcome suffering? Especially if you feel fairly good already, working hard to end suffering gets you little more at a high cost. (1D) To overcome suffering still would not settle a serious issue in life. We would still feel malaise. It is not clear if this malaise is "suffering" by Buddhist standards but it is by mine. (1E) So, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering unless to defeat suffering also makes life worthwhile; for this set of points (1), we assumed life is not worthwhile; orthodox Buddhism implies both that life is not worthwhile and to defeat suffering does not make life worthwhile; so, again, to defeat suffering does not defeat suffering. (1E) As long as life-in-general is not worthwhile, and not-worthwhile is a kind of suffering, we can't really manage suffering. Usually we can manage suffering if we feel life is worthwhile.

(2) The apparent Buddhist stance is based on the ideas that (a) life is not worthwhile, (b) life is beset by real suffering, and (c) to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile. The Buddhist stance offers some good advice but is not a solution. (2A) Suppose in Buddhism, we defeat suffering so as to make life worthwhile. I say: then the real goal is to make life worthwhile, and to end suffering is only a means. It is odd to focus on the means (ending suffering) and so to obscure the goal (worthwhile life), especially when we need clear thinking to defeat suffering. If the real goal is to make life worthwhile, or to see that life is worthwhile, then say so, and go after that goal directly. (2B) Regardless of worthwhile, it is worth overcoming suffering because suffering hurts, we need to overcome suffering to think well, and then we can see clearly that life is not worthwhile. We do gain by overcoming suffering, and the gain is more than worth the cost. I agree that we need to manage suffering and to think clearer. When we do, we do not have to see that life is not worthwhile. We might see that life is worthwhile but standard Buddhism does

not allow this conclusion. (2C) Even though life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering lets us live more gracefully until we die, and grace matters. I agree that grace matters. (2D) If people think life is worthwhile even with suffering, then people will not pursue Buddhism, and Buddhism will die. So, to keep Buddhism, we need to stress suffering and overlook the issue of worthwhile life or imply that life is not worthwhile. I disagree. See below. (2E) To overcome suffering in the Buddhist way avoids the issue of worthwhile life: worrying about worthwhile life is one kind of suffering, and it is overcome too when all suffering is overcome; the issue of worthwhile life disappears after suffering has been overcome; people do not long for a worthwhile life after suffering ends; so Buddhism does not have to deal with the issue; and-or Buddhism deals with the issue of worthwhile life when it deals with suffering; to overcome suffering is to fully awaken and to reach perfection. I disagree. See below. (2F) Even if people do not know they suffer, they still suffer, even when they feel good; and it is worth working hard to see hidden suffering, defeat hidden suffering, and defeat all suffering. I agree that people do suffer even when they don't know so. People need more insight about their real situations and how they really feel. People need to quit fooling themselves. That still does not mean suffering besets and ruins life in the Buddhist way; people should see suffering the Buddhist way; and should remove suffering in the Buddhist way. People can see suffering in other ways and can use other methods to manage it. See Part Four in this chapter.

(3) I think the Buddha thought: Life is not worthwhile before and after overcoming suffering, and so life is not worthwhile before and after awakening. The Buddha uses suffering to get at worthwhile life. Still we should overcome suffering because suffering hurts, we see much more clearly when we end suffering, and living gracefully matters. I think the Buddha thought that overcoming suffering would also take care of the issue of worthwhile life by letting us see that life is not worthwhile. I doubt that way of dealing with worthwhile life dispenses with the issue of a worthwhile life without directly confronting the issue. I think the Buddha did not care if Buddhism dies out as long as people find clear thinking, truth, and grace, learn how to deal with suffering, and see that life is not worthwhile.

(4) My stance is based on (a) the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, and (b) life is worthwhile. See (2) above and Part Four below. If life is worthwhile, then: (4A) Most of us can deal with suffering, with help. (4B) That (a) all lives have some suffering, and (b) some particular lives have much suffering, do not make all life not worthwhile. (4C) Even a life beset by suffering can be worthwhile, and many are. (4D) Even if most lives are beset by suffering, life can still be worthwhile, and is. (4E) If life is worthwhile and we manage suffering, we can better decide what to do next. We do not have to totally defeat suffering to manage suffering. If we defeat suffering and life is still not worthwhile, then we don't know what to do. (4F) Managing suffering can help us see more clearly but we do not need to fully overcome suffering to see clearly enough, some suffering helps us to see better, and ending suffering does not necessarily lead us to see perfectly. (4G) Again: If the goal of overcoming suffering is to make life worthwhile then the real deep goal is to make life worthwhile, we should say so, and we should work on that directly. (4H) Wondering-about-worthwhile-life is not the suffering that Buddhism seems to see and its methods aim to overcome. Even if Buddhist methods reduce suffering, still we have to deal with the issue of worthwhile life. Buddhism does not sidestep the issue of worthwhile life. (4I) Wondering about a worthwhile life is not wondering about the meaning of life. We can not-know the meaning of life but still decide life is worthwhile; people do this all the time. The two issues are related but I don't need to go into it here. (4J) Buddhists make the same mistake in their focus on awakening as Christians do with Salvation. Overcoming Suffering plays a similar bad role as do Grace and Justification. Christians worry about those instead of worrying about doing what Jesus wants and doing the right things for the right

reasons. Christians should stop worrying about S, G, and J while Buddhists should stop worrying about Enlightenment and Overcoming Suffering. Get better and be more useful. (4K) If you want insight into suffering and worthwhile life, ask someone who is depressed. You can “have it all” but, if you feel life is not worthwhile, you have nothing.

(5) (A) Maybe a life that does not defeat suffering is not worthwhile but a life that does defeat suffering is worthwhile. We defeat suffering to make life worthwhile. Maybe to defeat suffering is to think clearly and adeptly, to think clearly and adeptly defeats suffering, to think clearly and adeptly and to defeat suffering make life worthwhile, and is the only way to make life worthwhile. They go together. Maybe the Buddha meant all this. (B) Whatever he meant, I think: the ideas in (A) are wrong; life is worthwhile regardless of most suffering; we do not need to end suffering to make life worthwhile; and, in general, to end suffering does not make life that was not-worthwhile-before into life that is worthwhile after. Learning to manage suffering helps almost everyone. For a few sad people, learning to manage suffering might let them go from not-worthwhile life to the worthwhile life that most of us have. Buddhist methods help. None of this means that managing suffering turns life-that-is-generally-not-worthwhile into generally worthwhile life. Thinking adeptly is another issue. The Buddha and Buddhism are not clear if to-overcome-suffering-makes-life-worthwhile but Buddhism, with a focus on suffering, strongly implies that life is not worthwhile before and after. I think neither the Buddha nor Buddhism intended us to overcome suffering so as to make life worthwhile. If anything, the Buddha intended us to overcome suffering so we could see that life is not worthwhile and so to endure gracefully.

(6) We have to decide if life is worthwhile before we can really deal with the issue of suffering, even if, by using the methods of the Buddha, we seem to overcome suffering. We have to decide if life is worthwhile despite suffering, and we have to say so. If we think life in general is worthwhile, say so. If we think life in general is not worthwhile, say so. If we think life is not worthwhile before overcoming all suffering, say so. We have to decide if to overcome suffering makes life worthwhile. If to end suffering makes life go from not worthwhile to worthwhile, say so. If to overcome suffering does not make life worthwhile, say so. If to manage suffering and to think more adeptly make already-worthwhile life even better, say so. I hope I do say that.

(7) Not to decide about worthwhile life inevitably promotes alternatives, such as Mahayana and most of Hinduism, that push out Theravada. They succeed because they change the view of view suffering so it does not erode worthwhile life and worldly success. They redefine suffering, worthwhile, and success. In effect, they define away suffering so they can offer their version of a worthwhile life and success. I think their methods of salvaging suffering, worthwhile life, and success are wrong, and I think most Theravada Buddhists would agree. The best response is not to drown the question of worthwhile life in the issue of suffering but to get at worthwhile life directly, simply, and correctly.

(7 continued) Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, and other good religions assert that life is worthwhile. Despite all its great features, orthodox Buddhism cannot really face other religions unless it makes clear how it thinks life is worthwhile or not worthwhile, and how its view differs from other religions. If Buddhism feels other religions overlook the issues of suffering and worthwhile life, Buddhism has to be clear about how it stands and how (it thinks) they stand.

(8) This point won't make sense now to anybody new to Buddhism but please return to it later when it does make sense. Life and the things in life are inevitably sticky; and we cling to life, perceptions, ideas, hopes, stances, dreams, pleasures, feelings, etc; Both stickiness and clinging play a role in how suffering works and why it negates life. The analysis of stickiness and clinging were great advances in Buddhism and the analysis largely holds regardless of conclusions about worthwhile life and suffering. The analysis helps us see how suffering works and helps us to overcome suffering. But the analysis of stickiness and clinging itself can become sticky and become an object of clinging. We have to manage the stickiness-and-clinging of stickiness-and-clinging while not killing the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging. We have to manage the overcoming of stickiness-and-clinging. This task is hard as long as suffering is the core issue. This task is not too hard with worthwhile life at the core. With suffering, it is hard to overcome clinging to the ideas of stickiness-and-clinging because those are integral to how suffering works. In contrast, those ideas are not integral to the issue of worthwhile life. Those ideas help us appreciate worthwhile life and help to make life better but they are not vital. We can use the ideas of stickiness and clinging as needed or can let them go as needed.

(8 continued) Some parallels not from Buddhism might help. We have to learn how to be wary of all dogma without rejecting all dogma, including the dogmas that (a) we should be suspicious of all dogmas, (b) we should not reject all dogmas, and (c) we should be suspicious of all dogma but not reject it all. We have to learn how to not worship idols without also hating images. We have to learn to not worship Mary-Mother-of-Jesus without rejecting all reference to her and curiosity about her. We have to reject the Devil without denying that evil matters. We have to work at a job not so much that we neglect life and family but we do have to work some to have life and family. We have to reject superstition, magic, and bad religion without scorning all belief and all curiosity about supernatural and without enjoying art that uses magic. We have to suspect politics and politicians without hating them all and without turning favorites into demigod saviors.

It is worth repeating my guesses of what the Buddha thought and the implications. He used suffering to get at "not worthwhile". The Buddha felt life is not worthwhile before we defeat suffering and after. "Beset by suffering" is another way to say "life is not worthwhile". Most people won't accept "not worthwhile", so it is easier and more effective to use suffering. Used adroitly, suffering as a way to get at "not worthwhile" turns a question about some of the content of life into a question about all of life. The Buddha thought some people could defeat suffering well enough; then they would quickly see that life is not worthwhile; and then live graciously. You have to think yourself why the Buddha felt life is not worthwhile. I think it was part of the complex of ideas that were current in his time, what people meant by being trapped on the Wheel of Dharma-karma. The Buddha used ideas adroitly but that does not mean all his listeners did and then all their listeners did too. Used not-adroitly, focus on suffering loses people in an issue about some of life when we should think about all of life. Still, it is worth managing suffering even if life is not worthwhile, worthwhile, or we are not sure. Maybe some people who manage suffering will "break on through" to see that life is not worthwhile or is worthwhile. People who are trying to deal with suffering see not only their own suffering but the suffering of others, and they act better toward all living beings; they act morally and graciously. This goal is worthwhile even if people who seek to awaken through overcoming suffering do not fully awaken. Yet, of course, as long as life is not worthwhile, to overcome suffering cannot make life worthwhile. Even if we overcome suffering and make our lives better in some ways, still life is not worthwhile, and that remains a serious problem.

Remember the Buddha lived when people believed in many lives. If the Buddha had thought life was worthwhile after overcoming suffering and waking up, he could have arranged to live a long time in that blessed state or to live many lives in that blessed state. Instead, he chose to die at the normal age of about 85 years old and not be reborn again. He chose to get off the Wheel of Dharma-Karma. I have to conclude it was not worthwhile to live longer or to be reborn again, even in the blessedness of awakening. Again: "Oh yeah, life goes on long after the thrill of livin' is gone".

The Buddha was like a few other people who believe that this life is all there is and we should be ready to give up everything when we die, such as like David Hume. Live gracefully, then let go. To live gracefully, it helps to overcome suffering.

The Buddha wanted us to make up our own minds even if we disagree with him. In that spirit, I say the Buddha was wrong and Buddhism still is wrong. I cannot prove the Buddha thought life is not worthwhile and he used suffering to get at the problem of worthwhile. I cannot prove orthodox Buddhism is stuck on suffering and so overlooks the deeper question of worthwhile. I can see issues with all Buddhism, such as endemic spiritualism and magic, but I cannot prove they result from this problem. I can see the unease of many smart Buddhists but I cannot prove it results from this problem.

It is possible the Buddha never meant us to overcome suffering in the sense that the idea was developed after him. It is possible the Buddha wanted us to manage suffering enough so we could see grace and kindness, put ourselves in proper humble perspective, see life is not worthwhile, see the value of others despite that life is not worthwhile, and then wait to die. He gave his followers good tools. Then followers who bolstered suffering took over. It is not possible to settle speculation like this. We have to deal with issues as we have them now, including that we have to make up our minds about suffering, worthwhile, overcoming, managing, awakening, and the correct use of Buddhist Aids.

Because I think life is worthwhile and the issue of worthwhile life is deeper than the issue of suffering, I need not worry about the exact role of suffering. In this book, I may focus on "worthwhile life" and see what that implies for waking up and for conduct.

Some Christian churches, and maybe some Hindu churches, think suffering adds to life in ways that I find a little creepy; I do not rest any argument on that view; and I dislike it. We can learn from suffering but we should never glamorize it. Some Christian churches glamorize suffering. I do not glamorize suffering or worthwhile life. The Buddha did not glamorize suffering, not even to make it into a bigger dragon to slay. If any Buddhists do dramatize or glamorize suffering, they err.

Although I disagree with the Buddha about worthwhile life, he remains one of the people that I admire most. Although I disagree with the monkhood ("Sangha") about both worthwhile life and suffering, I have rarely met such good, delightful, modest, and useful people. "By their fruits you will know them". The Buddha made a good case. He honed strong tools for thinking and doing. He had excellent insights about the self, mind, and world. In showing us how to manage suffering, he also showed us how to be better people, and his insights into better are useful regardless of the issues of worthwhile and suffering. It is worth studying him to learn, be clear about where we agree or disagree, how we see suffering, and about worthwhile. Despite reliance on the idea of suffering, it is monks who carry the message of the Buddha just as Christian priests carry the message of Jesus.

Although Buddhism officially says the goal is to end suffering - and that's it - most practicing Buddhists, including most monks, don't act this way. Rather, most feel that managing suffering makes life better and worthwhile in various ways, such as by making us more mindful, making us not-selfish, "turning us on" to Emptiness or Buddha Mind, or allowing us to succeed in life and business. Most Buddhists are uneasy with the idea that life is not worthwhile and uneasy that Buddhism says life is not worthwhile. I do not say much on why Buddhists think so. In chapters on Mahayana and Hinduism, I explain how the yearning for a worthwhile successful life shaped alternatives to Theravada.

Suffering in More Depth.

I did not explain the Buddha's insight in terms of suffering partly because of the confusion just noted but mostly because people misunderstand when they think of suffering. They think: "If I can stop obvious suffering, then I have won". They use four tactics. All are wrong, and all actually reinforce stickiness and clinging. (1) If, on balance, pleasure (broadly reckoned) exceeds pain, then I have won. If I succeed in my job and family, have friends, am good, and am not disappointed, then I do not suffer overall. I have won, and I do not need the Buddha. (2) I am different from other people; I can overcome the stickiness of life even while I enjoy life; I can join fully in life and enjoy life without clinging to it. (3) I will succeed in life while I am young and so not yet taken by suffering. After I have established a family and set my children on their feet, and I begin to feel suffering, then I will withdraw from life and follow the Buddha. (4) I am in a system of many lives. The system is about joy-and-love. Stickiness in life leads me into the system; so stickiness and clinging are overall good rather than bad. Suffering is an illusion in the big arena, although real in its own way in the small arena of particular lives, so I need not worry about suffering. I can defeat apparent suffering by giving in to stickiness and clinging, losing my apparent self, finding my true self in the system of many lives and great joy-and-love, and doing what I was meant to do in the great system.

People misunderstand suffering. You still suffer at a deep level even if you are not keenly aware that you suffer. Nature gave us ways to cover up suffering when it interferes with biological success. The Buddha saw both obvious suffering and deep suffering. Deep suffering is the malaise, fear, nervousness, and ennui (deep boredom) that goes with all life, even good life. There is no cure for that in any success, not even in a joyous Dharma system. Even when you live with external happiness, you still fear to lose what you have and you compare yourself with other people and gods. You fear other people will take what you rely on. You fear to lose your reputation and standing. Even if you can get over fearing loss and get over comparisons, the fact of being caught up in having, society, and nature makes you anxious. Even if you do not fear for yourself, you still fear for other people, animals, country, church, and planet. You fear your life's work in business, science, or helping others will come to nothing. You fear God has forsaken you or the planet. You want to please God in ways impossible for humans. The Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering but he had in mind deep suffering too.

I think the Buddha explained in terms of obvious suffering because that idea was easiest for his listeners to understand. In the Buddha's time, hunger, accident, deformity, disease, war, bad politics, old age, and death, were more obvious than now. Then, it was obvious that people have babies, who have more, who go on to have more babies, and so on, without end, and without any real purpose but to keep going on. People did get sick of life. People wanted release. The wheel of rebirth was not a joyous system but a wheel of torture in which cause-and-effect (Law, Dharma, Karma) were fetters to bind us to the wheel of

rebirth and suffering, and are tools of particular tortures. Rather than say “life is not worthwhile”, or try to explain deep suffering to the majority of people who could not see deep suffering even if they felt it, it is easier to point to obvious suffering. Obvious suffering was enough. Some people could understand the deep suffering of life as well but you did not have to understand the deep suffering of life to understand simple obvious suffering, and to want it all to stop. Anybody who had the ability to bring deep suffering to consciousness would get the idea from examples of obvious suffering. A simple, clear, moral plan such as the Buddha’s had considerable appeal.

Even now in the modern world, often it is easier to see clinging if we begin with suffering and heartache. All of us have felt them. All of us have been sick, lost a loved one, and been hurt by love or by the lack of love. All of us meet and fear old age. All of us have felt the sting of a good cause thwarted by mere self-interest and selfishness. All of us have held on much longer than reasonable to some pie-in-the-sky cause or dream of success. When we can see this in specific excessive episodes, then we can see it in other episodes that are not so excessive, and then we can see it generally.

You have to struggle to see clearly the causal chain around clinging and suffering. The struggle is a kind of clinging but you have to go through it to get to the other side.

Spoiler Alert: You can get a sense of the struggle, what you have to give up, what letting go is, Dharma logic, and the chain of cause-and-effect, through the book-movie “The Maltese Falcon”. First, the movie is an extended study of suffering when we cling to material things, love, glamorized wealth and power, rivalries, sex, and stories. The most obvious object-of-clinging-and-cause-of-suffering is the Black Bird – “the stuff that dreams are made of”. But that material thing only embodies one of many confused mental fantasies that cause suffering.

Second, the hero, Sam Spade, is a private detective, with a partner. Spade falls in love with one of the villains, Bridget Wonderlee or Bridget O’Shaunessy, both aliases. It is never clear if she falls in love with him or is merely playing him, and that is part of the dilemma. She murders Spade’s partner. The partner was a womanizing careless skunk, Spade did not like him, and Spade was having sex with his wife. Still, he was Spade’s partner, and Spade has to follow the moral Dharma of his profession, the moral Law of his profession, including loyalty to clients, his partner, and to some truth. Spade can help Bridget cover up her crime. Yet, in the end, Spade turns her in to the police. The decision is an agony. Had he not turned her in, Spade would have suffered more even though he would have had a woman well suited to him and a woman that he loved. Spade would have suffered because he feared what she could do to him and, more importantly, he would have violated his moral Dharma. He would have suffered both externally and deeply. By giving up what he loved most, Spade was able to go along with the Dharma, the moral Law, (almost but not quite fully) stop clinging to a bad personal relation, and gain some release. Spade runs through the reasons behind the decision out loud for all to hear. Spade knows full well the causal chain behind both not turning her in and turning her in, and Spade follows the logic of the chain that leads to the least suffering and the best outcome. The release is far from complete but it is a big step down the path toward full following of the Dharma and full release. Many viewers think Spade chose wrongly should have “gone for love” as Neo did in the Matrix movies, but I agree with Spade’s choice. In Neo’s case, I agree with his choice.

If you overlook “seeing-the-causal-chain-letting-go-partial-release-and-less-suffering”, and instead focus on Spade doing his Dharma duty to institutions greater than personal self, to profession, society, human law, and the greater Dharma of the whole system, then the story reinforces Hinduism. If you overlook those options and think Spade should have acted on love, and see the love that Spade has for Bridget as representing the joy that the Dharma offers us, then you are close to Mahayana. The three religions are that close and that distant. I could give the story interpretations rooted in Christianity or in any big way of looking at the world – the story does not exclusively support the Dharma and the Buddha only - but that diversion would not be useful here.

The writers of the Upanishads had heard the same ideas about the sadness of life that the Buddha had heard, at about the same time, and they remade the ideas to suit themselves. I think the Buddha remade the ideas to suit his own insights. That does not mean he was right or wrong – his correctness depends on what he made of the ideas rather than his source.

In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, people are saved from sin and the depravity that comes of sin. People who grew up in those traditions often cannot accept that not everybody feels sinful and depraved. You can feel the mistakes you have made, sins you have committed, harm you have done, and missed chances to have helped, without necessarily feeling totally sinful and depraved. One good idea of the crazy 1960s was seeing the difference between knowing our faults versus feeling smothered by an all-encompassing blanket of sin and depravity – a gain now likely lost. I have heard fervent Christians and sincere missionaries try hard to talk people into feeling sinful and depraved so the Christians could then save the others on Christian terms. I don't like this way of doing things “ass backwards” and of creating harm, often largely just to gain control.

As with Heaven and Hell above, Buddhist stress on clinging and suffering reminds me of Christian ideas of sin and depravity. Fervent Buddhists have tried to talk me into seeing my own suffering, mental defilement, despair, and depravity so they could show me how Buddhism had a way out. If I don't see right away how lost, clingy, in pain, suffering, and defiled I really am, the Buddhist pities me as lost in my own fog of self-delusionary depravity. Most Buddhists, like most Christians, are happy to leave you alone as long as you do no harm. I know my faults but I don't feel lost in clinging, defilement, and suffering anymore than I feel lost in sin and sinful depravity. I know when I suffer. That does not mean either that I want out of all my suffering or that I am a slave to clinging and suffering. Although loving and caring have caused me pain, maybe more pain than pleasure, still I prefer to endure the pain than to lose my inner ties to people that I have loved or do love. I also know when the pain is too much and I know how to let go of a particular relation rather than all relations. Buddhists should accept that some people do not feel suffering as Buddhism seems to require. Buddhists should think what people do feel, the implications, and what to do next. That is a sufficiently fertile ground for the ideas of the Buddha.

Buddha's Time and Our Time.

Imagine you live in a ruler-priest-peasant-merchant-worker world where everything stayed the same for 5000 years. The rulers might come and go, but taxes remain. The occupants of the land change but the land remains, and so does the hardship of making a living on the land. The seller of cloth changes but the selling of cloth remains. You come, you go, and you die. Your children come, go, and die. In a few years, nobody even remembers you or your children. At best, you are a pile of bones in a mausoleum for

a few hundred years. If anybody does remember, the memory is so distorted, and so serves the purpose of other people, that it is not you. If anything, memory serves delusion. People in the peasant villages and markets know they depend on each other, and sometimes depend on the lord, but that does not stop famine or old age, and it can make life worse. Yes, there are happy times, but so what? Nothing you can do makes the world any better. Every year we people eat more of nature but nature seems always there, and nature comes back whenever a village or market dies out from famine, fire, flood, taxes, or invader fury.

In this situation, a person really seems to gain by overcoming suffering. The question of a worthwhile life is not very important. You might as well take care of your own suffering. You can't control the suffering of anyone else. You don't owe them that. All you owe them is basic morality.

Now look at our lives. Through struggle, Americans, and some other peoples in the world, can make their lives better, and can improve the lives of their children. We are part of the government. We are part of the world, stewards of the world. If we don't take care of nature, we face horror, and we undo all the good that we do for our children. Life matters. Life can be made worthwhile and can be made not worthwhile. Life is worthwhile in general if we work on it. Suffering becomes a lesser issue than how life matters and how to make it better not only in our now but in general.

So, does the validity of a religion depend on its times? Do ultimate questions vary according to what era somebody asks? Do the Golden Rule and "applies equally" apply in some times but not in others? Are the Buddha and Jesus heroes in some times but not in others?

If questions vary according to the times, still it seems we can ask the same questions about suffering and worthwhile life in all times. People might be prone to one answer or the other in different times but the questions are still valid regardless of the times.

While the description above of old times might make suffering a more relevant question than worthwhile life, that view is not how people responded, not even in the time of the Buddha. What people took from the Buddha was his idea that each person is his-her own boss and each person determines the quality and validity of his-her own life. You need not depend on Brahmins, Lords, or Spirits. You can work it out for yourself. What you make can be worthwhile even in Theravada but certainly in Mahayana. People looked to the teachings of the Buddha not so much for ways to end suffering and get out of life but for ways to gain control of life and to find success. They acted as if life was worthwhile and they could do something about it. Let "ending suffering" wait for another life. A devout Buddhist might say that people misunderstand, and people chronically misunderstand, but that is not the issue I raise in this paragraph. I point out that the question of a worthwhile life pertained even in the time of the Buddha and it still pertains now. We face suffering. We are better off learning how to deal with it. When we have reduced our suffering to the point where we can think well enough, or even to the point where we can think about as good as any evolved sentient being can think, then we can consider worthwhile life.

To keep the historical record straight: In fact, in the few hundred years before the time of the Buddha, and in the Buddha's time, the area of what is now northern India and Nepal had changed a fair amount in its economy and politics, but not nearly as much as life has changed all over the world since about 1900. The changes were mostly in who had the power rather than in the nature of the power. The changes

then, as now, led to increased suffering for some people and increased success for others. It is possible to say the Buddha's stress on suffering was in part a response to the hardship that he saw in the changes around him. Many Buddhist writers offer that view. I have no idea if it is true. Even if partly true, it does not change the context for the general view of life as given in the points at the beginning of this chapter and in this section, and it does not change the view here that valuing life only little and wanting out of life is a reasonable response in the right conditions. It is easy enough to say that the changes around the time of the Buddha led people to see life as better and qualitatively worthwhile as social scientists have argued about changes in Europe in the late Middle Ages, during the Renaissance, and during the rise of capitalism. People then picked out of the teachings of the Buddha not that life is full of suffering and not worthwhile but "I am my own boss now". It is easy enough to blend stories to reinforce the points of this section – or other views - but I don't go through that exercise.

What the Buddha Really Said and Really Intended.

As mentioned, a "sutra" is an important religious book, like a chapter of the Koran, a book of the Tanakh, or a Gospel in the New Testament. The large majority of sutras claim to be transcriptions of a lecture given by the Buddha himself, as with the Hadith (Sayings) of Mohammad, the words of Jesus in the New Testament, and the claim that Moses wrote the whole Pentateuch. This claim cannot be true of all the sutras and all the words of the Buddha because there are too many sutras and words, and they don't all agree. Likely, when the sutras were written, people did not expect the words in a sutra to be actually the words of Siddhartha Gautama. Rather, a monk wanted to say what Buddhism was all about, wanted to explicate a point of dogma, or wanted to make points against what he considered wrong dogma, and so wrote a sutra. This practice was not dishonest. We have to assess sutras according to their content and not according to the claim that they are the exact words of the Buddha.

Theravada claims that it uses the earliest sutras, and only those sutras; those sutras are likely closest to the real words of the Buddha; most likely to represent what he said and only what he said; and so the ones that Buddhism should be based on. Theravada has all the orthodox sutras and only the orthodox sutras. Nobody else has this. Mahayana disagrees but I leave their argument to a later chapter.

The sutras that are clearly orthodox agree that the Buddha intended to relieve suffering and he expected awakened people to die out and not return. Overall, the view is consistent between sutras and the view does support the standard orthodox position about suffering, overcoming suffering, and then quietly dying out. Differences seem less important than consistency. The consistency and the sticking-on-topic are evidence that the original message about ending suffering was important to the Buddha even if not all the words of the sutras are his words. The Buddha did intend people to deal with suffering and to deal with it in his way.

Even so, I doubt that the sutras recorded everything the Buddha said on every important topic. The fact that the early orthodox sutras focus on suffering likely means that they did not record all that the Buddha said even on other topics that are important. The focus on suffering might show a bias of monks rather than a full sample of all the Buddha said. Mahayana says this about Theravada sutras, and Mahayana claims it has sutras about other topics and other ways to look at awakening. It claims that its sutras are more authentic to the spirit of the Buddha and his whole teaching. Both Theravada and Mahayana seem

to imply about their favorite sutras something like Christians say about the writing of the New Testament, that it was guided by the Holy Spirit. I do not assess claim versus claim.

The facts that the sutras are not all the Buddha said on everything important does not mean suffering is not the central issue or the most important issue in Buddhism. Other important topics might not be most important or most central. We would not be able to say unless we did have all the words of the Buddha, and only the Buddha, on all the topics that interested him; and we do not have that. Without that, most of what we say about topics other than suffering is just guesses. I am fine with just guessing as long as we know we are guessing and guesses are more likely to reflect what we care about than what the Buddha cared about. After guessing, we have to use our minds to assess.

I do say this: The Buddha might have intended all this talk about suffering to be only the springboard to a better fuller life. We have to get past suffering to get there. We can only get there through dealing with the problem of suffering; no other road goes there. No other groundwork clears the way and lays a firm foundation as does finally dealing with suffering. Once we are past the problem of suffering, then we can live a better worthwhile life through a mix of meditation, mindfulness, morality, and insight into cause-and-effect and dependent origination. Trust the Dharma, study, work hard, be a good person, listen to monks, give up superstition and magic, and become an unselfish person. All this is to awaken and end suffering. All the good stuff follows. I think most Theravada Buddhists really believe this version rather than strict orthodox Buddhism as I describe strict orthodox Buddhism – even monks. I think the large majority of Western Buddhists believe this version. This view of what the Buddha really meant is on the borderline between Theravada and Mahayana. It is humanized Theravada. It is Mahayana without the great joyous Dharma-Emptiness-Mind system. It is similar to my version of following Jesus. I cannot say if this is what the Buddha really intended. You have to read and decide for yourself.

Suppose you say this is what the Buddha intended because it is what YOU really want rather than what you think the Buddha really intended, and you follow this new program, and you make the world better. Then I would not fight you over doctrinal purity.

I cannot decide the intent of a man from 2500 years ago, especially when his words have been swallowed by hundreds of sutras each claiming authority. I don't care about accurately determining the intent of the Buddha. Rather than argue about what the Buddha really said and really intended, it is better to figure out what is correct and good, and what you have to do, regardless of your heroes. Your heroes can help with this task.

By focusing on individual suffering, Theravada set the stage for, and practically demanded, the invention of Mahayana and then Hinduism. I let Buddhists and Hindus work out this issue.

Suffering and “Not Worthwhile”; Some Summarizing.

Between suffering, deep suffering, and “not worthwhile” there is not much practical difference, and there is little hope of searching the sutras to build a case that the Buddha meant one more than the others. A Buddhist still has to follow the same meditation techniques and will see the same linkages of cause-and-effect. Still, I say a few more words about why I use “not worthwhile”. I repeat my view is not standard orthodox Buddhism even if it is close.

I think the sutras are mostly not the words of the Buddha, they are not a complete record of what he said, they are the words of monks, monks focused overly much on the problem of suffering, and monks left out what the Buddha said about other important topics. The focus on suffering is largely due to the mindset of monks and to the fact that they had to hammer fat nails into the thick hard reluctant heads of listeners. I disagree with Mahayana that Mahayana has better sutras and disagree with how Mahayana resolved the problem of suffering and a worthwhile life.

The ideas that were widespread during the time of the Buddha show a clear and strong disappointment with ordinary life, and imply the disappointment is inevitable in this diminished world of mere becoming. They promote a pessimistic attitude similar to Christian and Muslim belief in a fallen bad world. That Buddhist view is stronger than to say mere suffering is the problem. Suffering is a symptom rather than a root cause. Deep disappointment is the issue that the Buddha internalized and with which he had to deal. He dealt with it through the more obvious issue of suffering.

When people focus on suffering and will not face the issue of whether life is worthwhile, they get confused and make mistakes. I hope I have corrected some of the mistakes here but my intent was to explain in terms of "not worthwhile" rather than to correct the mistakes made by focusing on suffering.

The facts that the Buddha did not go back to a normal life after awakening, monks are not supposed to go back to a normal life after awakening, and that an awakened person disappears from the world entirely for all eternity after he-she dies (pari-nirvana), all reinforce the idea that life is not worthwhile. If the problem was mere suffering, and awakening cured suffering, there is no reason not to go back to normality in this life, and no reason not to have an infinite number of lives in the future. That too is what some Mahayana writers think.

If life really was worthwhile, we could work on curing suffering, and could eventually find a worthwhile life for ourselves, loved ones, the planet, and even people who are not determined dolts. We could seek a biological and political solution to the problem of suffering. If we had good leaders, there would be no suffering. We could give everyone drugs. We could live in the Matrix forever and not worry about outside the Matrix. Because life is not worthwhile, we can only cure suffering by ending all clinging and by seeing that life is not worthwhile. A problem as serious as the Buddha saw could not be suffering alone but had to be something on the order of "life is not worthwhile".

From Italy to India, some-people-who-accepted-that-life-seems-not-worthwhile-yet-also-wanted-to-make-life-worthwhile resolved the problem in similar ways. The West had Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, some Cynics, Gnosticism, and all their influence on Christianity. The East had Mahayana first and then Hinduism. All do away with the problem by placing it within a big system in which people think they are miserable but really everyone would be happy if he-she saw his-her place in the big system. Some holy people are happy because they do see their part. You might disappear as one distinct individual but you become part of the mystic stuff that manifests itself all over in other ways.

Look at this result the other way around. Because they are so similar, these solutions imply a common problem, a problem that they did not solve but avoided as best they could. The problem is not suffering but deeper. The common solution implies a common problem, that life is not worthwhile. My "take" does

not have to mean the Buddha faced the same problem, but I think so. My dislike of these solutions does not mean they are wrong but I think that as well. They are wrong partly because they were not as honest as the Buddha's solution. He faced a version of the problem head-on and he did not try to sugar-coat the problem or the solution.

The fact that these wrong ideologies were driven by the same problem to the same bad solutions does not mean the problem is real, that life is not worthwhile after all. I think life is worthwhile but for different reasons.

Suppose life is worthwhile but beset by suffering. Then the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. Suppose life is worthwhile but not beset by suffering. Life still has a lot of suffering, even for people who seem to have it all. As long as some honest people suffer, as long as we hurt the planet, then everyone suffers whether he-she knows it or not. Again, the insights of the Buddha and his methods still have great use. You might not use his insights and methods to awaken in the Buddhist sense in this lifetime but most Buddhists don't expect that. If you use his insights and methods to be a better person and make a better world, that result is just alright with me.

(B) BUDDHIST AIDS.

Zen saying: If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him. Here "the Buddha" refers to Aids.

Buddhist Aids.

This section lists Buddhism Aids. It helps to read the chapter in this book on the Self with its explanations of "picking apart" and "bolstering". Most ideas here were current at the time of the Buddha, but he came up with some on his own, and he so much shaped previous ideas that the ideas became his own. Some ideas were developed in the few hundred years after the Buddha. I starred ideas that likely came directly from the Buddha. Nearly all these aids are more important in Mahayana than Theravada but it is best to list them here. I provide a little annotation. Do not memorize.

-Big Awakening. Buddhists expect awakening to be mind-shattering, world shattering, life changing, and a total change from everything even as it preserves the appearance of normal life or even as it preserves normal life. Because awakening is such a Big Thing, Buddhists both greatly anticipate and fear it. Buddhist Awakening is somewhat like Christian Salvation. In standard Christianity, you can't have a little salvation, you can't rely on God to take care of you as much as you deserve and as much as you are able, you are either fully saved to amazing glory for all of eternity or you are damned. In both Christian and Buddhist cases, having such a huge goal is more stultifying than encouraging. With Big Awakening or Big Salvation hanging over our heads, we cannot live normal useful lives and rationally assess better and worse. Some Buddhists schools, mostly Zen, allow for: awakening in small ways, backslidings, and that partial awakenings can accumulate to bigger awakenings. But this view has not really caught on, and I don't do anything with it here.

-Morality. See above.

-Dharma. See the chapter in this book on common ideas. “Dharma” means how the universe works. Dharma is like the Western idea of natural law but includes morality as well. The Dharma was also called the “Law”. Effects such as striving, wanting, suffering, cause and effect, clinging, and dependent origination are in the idea of Dharma or Law. The fact that we can find release by letting go of striving and clinging is part of Dharma. Anybody who opposes the Law faces greater suffering and ultimate defeat. The best course is to go along with the Law, take your lumps, get through it, enjoy what you can, and let go. This is why I began the chapter with the quote from Bobby Fuller.

-Karma. Merit and demerit. Keeping a strict ledger of merit and demerit.

-Many lives.

*Suffering.

*Stickiness.

*Clinging.

*Letting Go.

*Dependent Origination. This idea is an immediate result of cause and effect; see below. Nothing comes into being on its own and persists entirely on its own. What a thing is, it is largely because of its relations to other things. We have to pay attention to what a thing is and to its relations. The Mom in your family has her own personality but she has also been shaped by the other people in the family, and she, in turn, shapes the other people in the family. We tend to overall value our own self, our importance, and the quality of our suffering and happiness. We overestimate how independent we are and how long we last. The idea of dependent origination helps put us in context. The strongest driver of dependent origination as it pertains to human life is human desire and clinging (attachment).

*Cause and Effect. Everything has causes. Everything influences a lot of other things. If you change the causes, you change the thing. Things only originate, persist, change, and go away, through causes and effects. Everything that originates dependently, that is, almost everything, has causes. People originate dependently and have causes; if you had a different father, you would not be who you are now. Suffering originates dependently and has causes. If you want to end suffering, change its causes; the Buddha tells you how. Whether awakening is subject to the laws of cause and effect, or is beyond cause and effect, was a controversy in Buddhism, into which I don’t go. Whether awakening is the result of removing other causes, and so is not directly caused itself, I don’t go. The importance of cause and effects inevitably causes issues with free will, intuition, and determinism, into which I don’t go. These questions raged in Buddhism as they have in the West and in Hinduism. .

*Rationality and Logic. They are excellent tools, usually good. Use them.

*Not Self. The term for the doctrine of “not-self” is “anatman” or “an-atman” or “not (‘an’)” “self (‘atman’)”. The self is not one whole simple thing, not the logic machine that Mr. Spock seeks to emulate, not the enduring soul of Christians, Muslims, some Hindus, and some Mahayanists, and not the self of grand

emotions and appetites of Romanticism. The self is a composite of somewhat independent tendencies such as for sex, power, love, food, beauty, etc. The abilities for logic and rationality are one part of the self. Buddhists are proud of their idea of not self; Buddhists have been credited with thinking up the idea; Buddhists and non-Buddhists often consider it the one distinct contribution of Buddhism to world religious ideas, and they might be correct. Buddhists assert we cannot properly disvalue or value life if we do not clearly see that the self is really a not-self; we cannot stop desiring, stop clinging, and overcome suffering if we do not clearly see the self is really a not-self. Thus awakening and seeing the not-self amount to the same. This claim about the power of seeing the not-self might be a slight exaggeration. See the chapter on the self and see below in the parts on my assessment.

-The Unselfish Self.

*The Mind. The mind is a part of the self, and it is composite too. Buddha Mind as The Mind.

-Wisdom.

*Emptiness or "The Void". Think of all the dog-like creatures: wolves, red wolves, coyotes, twenty kinds of foxes, dholes, jackals, and hundreds of breeds of dogs. What makes them all dog-like? There is nothing exact and concrete at the heart of the idea of "dogginess". There is no one single ideal dog after which all the other dog-like things are patterned; and we cannot think of all particular dog-like things as clear-cut variations on one single pattern. The idea of "dogginess" is empty at the center. Yet the fact that the idea of "dog-like" is empty at the center is what allows us to hold together various related-but-not-exactly-the-same things. Emptiness is what allows the self and the mind to cohere and to work. All specific forms (things) come out of emptiness; all forms are empty at their heart. But that is what allows them to work.

-Cleaning the mind of "defilements", confusion, and errors. The mind becomes a simple mechanism to assess what the senses bring to it.

-In some versions, the mind becomes "like a baby"; it simply reflects; it responds naturally and rapidly. These versions became important in martial arts.

-All reality is somewhat illusory. All reality is a mixture of being and becoming. All reality is a mixture of form and emptiness. All forms (things) are both real and not real; emptiness is both real and not real.

-Everything is connected to everything else. Whether connected things form a system is contended.

*Meditation techniques that focus on the above Buddhist aids.

*Emphasize practice rather than dogma. Emphasize practice rather than Buddhist aids.

*Expedient Means. Use ideas and examples that suit the student and the situation. Do not try to force ideas on people who are not yet ready for them or who cannot understand them at all. A useful half-truth is better than a hurtful three-quarters truth.

*All dogmas are misleading. All dogmas are, at best, only means to ends.

-The Dharma body of the Buddha.

-Buddha nature.

-No nature (no essence).

-Buddhist psychologies.

-Mind only.

-Non-differentiation, in particular non-duality. See chapter on Taoism. To understand and to appreciate, we divide the world into mutually-exclusive contrasts such as "American" versus "non-American", "boy" or "girl", and "animal" or "plant". Usually it is easiest to divide into two although we can divide into three or more; I do not explain the more complicated kinds of dividing up. After we divide, then we cling to one item in the contrast. We like "Westerns" rather than "chick flicks". To divide up the world so as to get along for a while is not necessarily bad; but it easily leads to clinging, and clinging is so bad, that we need to beware of dividing. Minimize it or stop it if we can. So we can appreciate beauty, we need to contrast beauty with ugliness. To appreciate goodness, we need to contrast it with badness. We make things artificially ugly or bad so we can accentuate the beauty and goodness in other things, and, in so doing, distort the world. "Nature people" hate the city so they can love nature all the more; and vice versa. When pushed, things tend to become other than they originally were, and can become their opposites. Too much love smothers. Much good can reside in ugliness. Beauty can hide evil. Effusive care hides bitter anger. Anger at others arises out of our own fear. Pursuit of heaven is a kind of hell. Fear of hell leads to zealotry and to hell. It is better not to stress one item, and, to avoid stressing one item, it is better not to differentiate very much to begin with. Non-differentiation came to be one of the deepest Buddhist aids, a touchstone for true and false doctrine.

Ironically, stressing non-differentiation is a form of differentiation.

-The unity of particular and general without subsuming either the particular or general. You cannot use particular to explain away (pick apart) general, and vice versa. You cannot use general to reify (bolster) itself, or use particular to reify itself.

You should think hard about compatibility of the idea of non-differentiation with the command for morality. This apparent conflict played a big role in later Mahayana Buddhism and Zen.

-The "storehouse consciousness" from which originated everything and to which everything returns. It is both empty and completely full at once.

-Vast compassion. Compassion is good, and is not clinging, when it leads to specific acts within the ability of particular people, and to specific good institutions. Compassion is an error when it does not lead to specific acts and to institutions but only to intentions that are not acted upon and to confusion about the depth on a person's real compassion.

-Nirvana or Enlightenment. It might seem odd to list Nirvana as a mere Buddhist aid when it seems to be the entire goal, but it is not odd. The idea of Nirvana can become a stepping stone, and so a crutch and hindrance. You do not use the idea of Nirvana to get to Nirvana. You just wake up.

-Mindfulness.

-Full simple being versus continual becoming. This aid is similar to “reality versus illusion”. It is similar to the distinction in Classical Greek thinking between being and becoming. The world of normal experience changes and is not reliable. It is hard to find something permanent and permanently fully good. Still, at the heart of all is simple full being that does not change and is fully satisfying. The changing incomplete imperfect world is only a misleading imitation of simple full being. We don’t usually experience simple full being unless we are a mystic or until we are enlightened. The difference between being and becoming is like the difference between our ideal of justice and the justice that we have to settle for in real courts; see any episode of the TV show “Law and Order”.

Until we see simple full being, becoming seems not worthwhile. After we see simple full being, whether becoming then is worthwhile varies according to personal experience and schools of Buddhism.

Some Buddhists conflate “becoming” with ordinary sleeping (un-enlightened) life and conflate full simple being with enlightenment. To see that life is not worthwhile is to see that life is becoming and becoming is not usually worthwhile; and to see that becoming is not usually worthwhile is to see that becoming is sleeping life and sleeping life is not worthwhile. To see these together naturally leads us to think there must be simple full being and to seek it. To see that life is not worthwhile leads us toward simple full being. Some Buddhists think un-enlightenment, staying asleep, is to live in becoming without seeing a clear glimpse of full simple being, and vice versa. Some Buddhists think enlightenment is seeing clearly full simple being, and vice versa. Being can be the same as “Buddha Mind” or “Mind Alone”. Somewhat ironically, simple full being can be the same as Nothingness (Void).

Buddhists who think in terms of being and becoming have to decide if full simple being is worthwhile, and have to decide if knowing full simple being makes becoming (ordinary un-awakened life) worthwhile.

In one version of this view, full simple being is worthwhile. Only becoming is not worthwhile, or more precisely, only mistakes about being and becoming make becoming (seem) not worthwhile.

For the Buddhists who think being (existence) is worthwhile, the idea that being is worthwhile mixes easily with the idea that a system is worthwhile even if some lives in it are not. This mix of “simple full being is worthwhile”, “enlightenment is seeing simple full being”, and “great dharma system” became important in Mahayana and Hinduism.

For some Buddhists who think being is worthwhile and being is in (is the same as) a worthwhile system, ordinary sleeping life is worthwhile even if we can’t usually see so. Ordinary sleeping life only seems not worthwhile until we see full simple being and the system.

In some versions of “being is worthwhile and is the same as a system”, there is no difference between being and becoming, enlightened and non-enlightened, the world after enlightenment and the world before enlightenment; it all depends on attitude and point of view; to see one is to see the other; and we can only see the one through the other. This idea combines readily with the value that Buddhism puts on daily life; see below. The idea that being and becoming are similar was the source for some wonderful ideas about reality and illusions, for which see Mahayana.

As with some philosophers and mystics in the West, Buddhists who take seriously being and becoming, in any version, spend their lives seeking simple full being in itself or as it presents itself in becoming. If they can see simple full being, they are enlightened; they can be enlightened only if they see simple full being. In effect, the search for simple full being (Mind) takes the place of the search for awakening.

The idea that being and becoming are closely related was the basis for some great literature and art. The Japanese call the world of becoming “the liquid world” because it continually changes, moves, and adapts like flowing water. The phrase “liquid world” also was a euphemism for areas in cities of brothels, drugs, drinking, gambling, and fighting. The Japanese attitude shows the ideas that crop up naturally in systems like Romanticism, Mahayana, and Hinduism. The famous Japanese woodcuts of the late 1700s and early 1800s often showed the liquid world, as with Utamaro, Hiroshige, and Hokusai. Looking at the pictures, it is easy to believe that the world of deep being and the world of becoming are indeed the same.

Even with its charm, the Buddhist aid of being and becoming is one of the most misleading and harmful. It can be useful but must be used with care. Once we begin thinking in terms of being and becoming, we find being and becoming in Buddhism whether they were there originally or not, see waking and sleeping in terms of them, and see worthwhile and not worthwhile in terms of them.

Mistakes Latent in Buddhist Aids.

(1) People use Buddhist aids to avoid the Buddhist plain truth that life is not worthwhile. People don't like this idea. They seek any way they can to get around it and to make life secretly worthwhile. What better way than to use important ideas from within the religion itself to undermine the religion? In case you think this is a fault of Buddhism alone, Christians use ideas like heaven, hell, salvation, justification, and grace to get around Jesus' simple teachings and to undermine Jesus.

(2) Buddhist aids are dogma. They have the same problem as any dogma: they mislead too often. They can be helpful and can be hurtful. All in all, for most people, I think they are hurtful. People get caught up in the supposed aid and they never get back to simple waking up. The supposed aid takes the place of simple waking up. People cling to the aid, and thus suffer. If you have to focus on anything then focus on suffering and on whether life is worthwhile; don't focus on an aid. Many Buddhist texts, written by brilliant people, are marred because they go on about “emptiness” and “no self”; even Zen masters do this. The Buddha explicitly did not do this.

(3) In particular: People think: (A) “If only I could understand ‘emptiness’ fully, then I would wake up”. (B) “I cannot possibly wake up until I have mastered ‘emptiness’”. (A and B) “If I could only be morally perfect for a whole lifetime, I could wake up. I can only wake up if I am morally perfect for a whole lifetime”. (C) “If only I could master meditation, I would wake up”. These ways are wrong. The idea that you have to

master an aid to wake up is like the Christian idea that you have to be justified to go to heaven. The idea that you will wake up if you totally know a Buddhist aid is like the idea that God must take you into heaven – you can compel God – if you worship strongly enough. To abuse an aid puts the aid in place of waking up and clings to the aid. The Buddha did not awaken by mastering the idea of emptiness first; after the Buddha awakened, he did not worry much about the ideas of awakening, no-self, emptiness, Mind, etc. If you master non-differentiation, you do not automatically wake up; if you do not master it, you are not held back from waking up; if you wake up, you do not necessarily also master non-differentiation.

You don't have to be perfect to face God. Likewise, you don't have to be perfect to wake up. Just as I offer no ideas about how good you have to be to face God comfortably, so I offer no ideas on what you have to "achieve" to wake up for sure. Both ways of thinking are wrong. As with following Jesus, in Buddhism, do what you would do anyway and then see how far that takes you. You can wake up without being perfect and without even knowing about "emptiness", "cause-and-effect" or "no self". This "general access to waking up" is a part of the Middle Path. This approach of "perfection not needed" reappears in good Zen too.

(4) Buddhist aids are hard to understand. They are harder to understand than the ideas of this chapter, and they are harder to understand than the simple idea that life is not worthwhile. Only a few religious near-geniuses can understand even some of these ideas and only a true genius can get them all. This situation is not what the Buddha wanted. The Buddha did not wake up by first mastering hard overly-intellectualized ideas. Buddhism should use a clear simple set of ideas and practices that most people can follow with reasonable chance of reasonable success. The Buddhist aids usually make it worse for most people and make people feel they cannot succeed.

(5) Buddhist aides inevitably reintroduce metaphysics and mysticism beyond what the Buddha needed. It is one thing to say "life is sticky" and another to say "life is sticky because Dharma planned it that way and wants us to get involved and committed" or to say "life is sticky because that helps us do our Dharma duty in the great joyous system". It is one thing to say "life is not worthwhile" and another to say "life's a delusory bitch". In Mahayana, thinkers often assumed people were part of a system, and the system was unborn and undying. We are saved (awakened) when we realize we are part of this great unborn undying system. The Buddha never said this, and never needed to say it.

(6) People need a certain amount of magic and magicians, such as the Mahayana bodhisattva, Hindu avatar, or Christian view of Jesus as embodied cosmic principles. Buddhist aids are the Buddhist version of magic. You can try to master the aids as an adept Hindu masters spiritual force or an adept Christian masters sacraments and masters having a personal relation with Jesus. In Buddhism, magic puts you to sleep. Magic is the enemy of waking up. So, focusing on aids prevents you from waking up by letting you make a world of magic. I don't know of a formula that lets us satisfy our need for magic without also turning magic into our enemy and without turning Buddhist aids into magic. You have to learn to do this by feel, and likely success in this endeavor is a good illustration of the Middle Path.

(7) Buddhist aids often are clinging. As much as some people cling to Heaven, some Buddhists cling to meditation or ideas of Mind, cause and effect, and dependent origination. Just as you have to be willing to let go of the idea of Heaven, so also you have to let go of meditating, Mind, etc. This does not mean you can't meditate at all; it means you have to learn how to meditate without clinging to it. You have to

think about Mind without clinging to the idea of Mind. If you can't do that, then you are just as caught as if you clung to Power as a way to make life worthwhile. You are better off not meditating and not using your mind to think about Mind.

(8) People use Buddhist aids to make their own religion that is not Buddhism, such as religions of Great Emptiness, Great Mind, Mindfulness, Unselfish Persons, or Mahayana, as a way to avoid the idea that life is not worthwhile and as a way indirectly to make life worthwhile. Some variations are good such as the modern religion of mindfulness or the contributions of some Buddhism to martial arts. Some are not good such self-indulgence as a way to break past clinging. Most variations are intellectual elaborations to keep smart people engaged. Alternative religions are such a big part of the story that they should be studied in themselves, and often writers on Buddhism make them the major subject rather the plain Buddhism that I present here. That is what you get when you read about Buddhism. But writing about them and critiquing them is outside the scope of this chapter.

(9) These points are a variation on (1) and (8). Most writing about Buddhism is not simple description of its main ideas but elaborate explication of Buddhist Aids. I find that writing hard to read and not helpful unless I am in the mood for hair-splitting metaphysics. Most writers use explication of Buddhist Aids as a way to make points about their view, and to fight against other writers who previously did the same thing. They do this even when they do not say they do this. Too often, they struggle to put enough spin on an Aid so they can make life seem worthwhile although the Buddha clearly said life is beset by suffering. They make suffering mean what they want it to mean so they can overcome suffering and still get along in this world. I think they do this so they can appeal to people who want to succeed in this world but happen to be reading their version of Buddhism. Hopefully, when I did this, at least I was honest that I was doing this. Buddhist Aids get in the way of clear explanation.

(9 continued) If you want to know what the Buddha really said but instead find yourself reading whether dependent origination applies to all things and perceptions or only to those begun in attachment, then you should switch your reading for a while. Don't feel guilty about not reading that stuff anymore. You can always go back to it after you personally think you sense what the Buddha really meant. Don't feel you have to agree with the view of a writer because you happen to be reading his-her explication of cause-and-effect. I wish I could suggest readings that explain what the Buddha really meant without mumbo jumbo but I can't. So you do have to wade through some material on Buddhist Aids so that you can make up your own mind.

The Buddha did not expect most people to awaken in this lifetime, so it is harsh criticism of Buddhist Aids to say most people can't use them to awaken right away. Even so, Buddhist Aids are too hard and too misleading. Besides, in my view, a religion should offer ideas that most people can use in this lifetime to achieve fair success; so, Buddhist Aids are not useful overall. They are like Christian theology and much of Christian dogma.

Value of Buddhist Aids.

The aids can be fun, and even can be useful for some people. Really smart people need ideas that they can chew on. Most people need ideas to keep the mind busy so the mind eventually gets quiet enough to think well. The ideas don't have to be false and don't have to be merely "doggy treats" with no nutrition.

The ideas can be real ideas with real substance. I like the idea of the Middle Path; almost all Buddhists like it; and it shows up in other good thinking as, for example, in Aristotle. Aids often help people practice the Middle Path. Both simple being and simple non-being are mistakes, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. Both simple differentiation and simple non-differentiation are false, and, if you can find the middle path between them, you have advanced. It can help you sort things out to think about the relation of empty to partially full to fully full. Think of: an electric dishwasher; books on the shelves of a library; and the numbers not used in street addresses. How does Buddha Mind differ from the mind that I think is behind it all, that is, God? Difficult ideas can be true aids to advancement even if they cannot guarantee success. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim theologies can help. (Jews do have some excellent theology but they don't seem to get hung up on it enough to include here.) But the ideas are not needed to awaken, and Buddhist aids should not serve as baited hooks. Even for smart people, they become that too often.

(C) SELF AND NON-SELF (AN-ATMAN).

More on the Self and the Non-Self.

I doubt Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha stressed ideas of the non-self as much as they are stressed in modern Buddhism but here is not the place to sort out the issue, so I write as if modern Buddhist ideas of the non-self are intrinsic to Buddhism.

(A) Ideal strong self: A common idea of the self is a single whole integrated soul that endures forever either in heaven or hell, or as part of a great Dharma system. Christians, Muslims, some Jews, and a lot of people of no particular religion hold to the first version while most Mahayanists and Hindus hold to the second version.

(B) Nil self or "really weak" self: The opposite idea is that the self is merely a bunch of stuff with some similarity but no real coherence like a pile of old leaves in autumn. When the wind blows, when hardship arises or we die, the self goes away like old leaves.

(C) A variation on (B) is that the self is merely good and bad feelings, especially good feelings. As long as the good feelings endure, the self endures. When the good feelings stop, then the self stops. When the good feelings stop and the self stops, it does not matter because there is no self around to feel the loss. So, while they yet live, selves might as well cultivate what joys they can and they need not worry about much else. This view of the self can be seen as intermediate between the strong self and nil self but here really should be seen as a variation of the nil self.

(D) In the Brahmin religion at the time of the Buddha, people were interested in a version of salvation just as Christians and Muslims now are interested in salvation. They held to a version of the strong self just as most people always do. To get saved, people had to depend on the Brahmins. People didn't like that. The Buddha said people didn't need Brahmins or ritual. People can know issues, make progress, even awaken, or get saved, by themselves. Ultimately, you are the only way to make spiritual progress for yourself. You are the only rock upon which your progress is built. To talk like this is to strengthen the idea of the self. It is an idea of the self like the Western idea of the person. People liked the integrity of self, independence, self-reliance, and responsibility that the Buddha taught. That was one big reason

Buddhism succeeded. Self-reliance and responsibility are big factors in Buddhist charm when Buddhists really live them.

(E) It seems that, for people to have desires and for at least some of the desires to be legitimate, we also have to be firm selves. If we want to love a spouse, love children, love our neighbors, and love God, it seems to make sense if we have a strong soul-self. It makes more sense if the self is eternal. I don't go into why it makes more sense. We want to tie good desires to a strong self, and vice versa? What about bad desires such as to molest children or commit terrorism? We want to attach good desires to a good eternal soul-self and to separate bad desires from any kind of eternal soul-self, or, at least, to make sure the bad soul-selves are not lumped in with the good soul-selves.

(F) The Buddha wanted people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition so they could also overcome suffering. This desire of the Buddha implies a self that is not an eternal soul, is less than an eternal soul.

(G) To wish to awaken (cool down) and to work to awaken, something needs to wish and strive. Some self has to be the source of wishing and working. To let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competing, and to overcome suffering, it seems some self has to be doing this. Something has to let go of all that. Something has to awaken or there is no awakening, and Buddhism is an illusion.

(H) To see that life is not worthwhile requires a self to see and to assess worthwhile and not worthwhile. After (when) the self sees that life is not worthwhile, still the self needs to value other selves, morality, and acting well. Morality does not go away with awakening. To retain morality, the self has to remain at least somewhat a self.

(I) An eternal soul-self with intrinsic necessary desires cannot simply vanish at death after that kind of self has awakened. That kind of self might awaken but not in a Buddhist way. That self might transform after death but cannot simply go away completely. To go away completely after awakening and death, the self cannot be a soul-self of the Upanishad-Hindu-Dharma kind.

Philosophy, religion, and the human imagination provide a host of variations on these themes but there is no point listing them here.

The Buddha wanted a self that was strong enough to seek to awaken and to work on awakening but not so strong that desire, clinging, striving, and competing were intrinsic, necessary, and eternal. The Buddha wanted a self that could lose desire, clinging, striving, competing and a lot of individuating traits such as a love for music. The Buddha wanted a self that could separate good inclinations from bad inclinations but not get hung up on holding to either. The Buddha wanted a self that could last through thousands of reincarnations as long as it still clung but would go away completely after it had awakened. The Buddha needed something more than a pile of leaves and less than an eternal soul-self of the kind used by Christians, Muslims, Mahayanists, and Hindus.

The Buddha thought that he could get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition if he could get people to see there was no eternal soul-self, thus no basis for desire etc., and no long-term benefit from desire etc. It is like getting people to let go of the need to gamble if you can get them to see

that all they are playing for is plastic chips and that the kind of self they are can't eat plastic chips, trade them for anything useful, or get any benefit from them. The kind of self that you are does not support the sport of gambling so you might as well not gamble.

The Buddha developed that idea of the self in his doctrine of "anatman" (an-atman). The Buddha found a compromise self that is coherent enough but not too much. The doctrine that developed is pretty good. It is fairly logically consistent and it meets the needs of Buddhism without going too far either way. Whether it is entirely true or not true cannot be argued here. It is worth reading more to see what you can make of it. I suggest further readings on this topic at the back of this book.

It is more accurate to say that later Buddhists developed the idea, based on original inspiration from the Buddha. It is more accurate to say Buddhists did not so much find a specific kind of self as they made a space to imagine the right self. They did this by negating their opponents on both the side of the firm self and the side of the soft self. What is left unspecified in the center is the useful Buddhist "anatman". Many theologians and philosophers use the technique of creating an appealing unspecified space by negating opponents. This technique is related to a "hole in the center" that I described with "systems that eat the world" in the chapters on issues. Letting people imagine what they want, within limits, is a way to appeal to people but it also, again, opens the door to bad ideas and abuses.

The term "anatman", "an-atman", "no-self", or "not-self" is not accurate. It implies a weak self like the pile of leaves, and that is not what the Buddha and Buddhists were after. Buddhists used that term in contrast to the then-current Upanishad and later Hindu "atman", an eternal soul-like self that is part of the great Dharma system. The Buddha did not want that Upanishad-Hindu kind of self so Buddhists used a term that contrasts clearly with "atman". I think the choice of term is unfortunate.

To argue various versions of the self, Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, people who followed the Upanishads, Jains, and later Hindus all used picking apart and bolstering, both to support the selves that they promoted and to attack ideas of others. Without always seeing what they are doing, Christians and Muslims also use picking apart and bolstering to argue their ideas of an eternal soul-self. I cannot here show how various techniques were used in particular cases. That topic is difficult and often boring but fun to people who like logic and it can shed light on human psychology.

When the idea of the non-self spread in Buddhism, the idea turned into a Buddhist Aid as noted above. It became a strong idea in itself, like another strong self again. It became one of the most dangerous and abused of Aids, especially when combined with Emptiness. That Buddhists use the technique of negation on both ends, leaving an unspecified hole in the center, supports this confusion and abuse. This fault of bolstering the non-self is serious, and it deserves much more criticism than I can give. I think the Buddha would be dismayed by this development, and Buddhists should be wary of this path.

In any simple straightforward terms, you cannot have it both ways. One the one hand, Buddhists say that your self is adequate to all tasks and it is the only thing that is adequate to all tasks. It endures through karma and rebirth. It creates karma and endures the results of karma. It is you who realize that life is not worthwhile and see the other truths. It is you who practices meditation. It is you who sees all things and any thing. It is you who resists temptations of the world and of other religions. It is you who acts morally. It is you who feels pain and pleasure, gets old, and gets sick.

On the other hand, Buddhists say your self is not deeply real, to trust in the self is a delusion, and you need to get over yourself to make progress. When you see that the world is not worthwhile you have not seen anything amazing. Seeing that does not make your self cosmic and glorious. When you do see the truths of Buddhism, nothing special happens except you die out completely after this life. Good karma cannot build up to a determined threshold and so force you to awaken, it can only predispose. So there is no real thing that karma hangs on. Yes, you do good deeds, but so do cats and dogs, and they are not real in the way that you hope your self is real. Getting born again is not a blessing, it is a curse. You don't feel pain and pleasure; pain and pleasure, getting old, and getting sick, happen to the bundle that you think is yourself. So don't get big-headed about yourself.

Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism developed amazing rationales to have it both ways, which I don't go into here. I don't think they succeeded anymore than Christians worked out the Trinity, Salvation by Crucifixion, Justification, Grace, Faith, Works, or Free Will either. This confusion about the self added to the bad effects of the self as a Buddhist aid. If you are interested in this sort of thing, reading arguments about the self and non-self can provide insight into people, especially if you read with evolution in mind.

Trying to keep together ideas of a not-eternal soul-self, strong enough self, too weak self, and non-self confuses relations between self and society. The Buddhist idea of the non-self allows ideas like Hindu religion to coalesce and it allows society to dominate the self. Their idea of the self allows Buddhists to be selfish sometimes, and to flout society. How the balance works out depends on particular culture and society. Buddhists are opportunistic about which idea they stress.

I invite evolutionists to think about the idea of the self while keeping in mind this tension between ideas of the self and the relation between self and society. Evolutionists already do this in theories of the self and group, and theories of self and economy. Economics has a long tradition of this argument. Think of the evolutionary idea of the self as a kind of bundle when you read about Buddhist ideas of the self.

It might help to think of the Buddhist idea of the self in light of some literature. A Buddhist has to break down the incorrect strong view of the self. The self has to be broken down. Then the self can be rebuilt in a better way. This new self is not as strong in the same way as the wrong idealized unreal self but it is strong enough for what it needs, and, in some ways, because it is not a wrong strong self, it is stronger correct self than before. We all need our forty days in the wilderness. This is what happens in tragedies, stories about coming of age, stories about personal growth, and in some modern melodrama. In "King Lear", Lear falls to pieces before he finds a better self and better world. In "Moby Dick", while Captain Ahab dies before he can find a better self, his breakdown is a lesson to the crew, the crew break down too in their own ways, and so they find better selves. Odysseus in "The Odyssey" had to break down before he could give the gods their proper but limited due, come to see himself in true perspective, and come to accurately value his limited contributions rather than overvalue his cleverness. In the TV show "Burn Notice", Mike Westen breaks down partly several times, and in the end breaks down totally, before he can see what is really important and who is really important. In several Batman films, Bruce Wayne and-or the Batman has to break down before he can remake himself. The remade Batman is stronger in character than the original Batman even if weaker physically or even if he has his weaknesses exposed. The remade Batman can never be as strong as the idealized Superman but he can be strong enough.

To the extent that I understand the Buddhist literature, originally the Buddhist self was not enough on which to base Western ideas of law, responsibility, citizen, and state. Thinkers in Buddhist states have to give some thought on how to make the self strong enough to be a good citizen of a good democracy but not so strong as to violate the needs of Buddhism.

It is easy to argue that Asian states in which Buddhism or Hinduism prevail did not develop democracy, rule of law, education, science, and important Western-style institutions because the Buddhist-Hindu idea of the self could not serve as the basis for those institutions and, in fact, undermined those institutions. If a scholar wishes to argue this way then maybe I will read what he-she says. In the meantime, I suggest not thinking too hard along these lines. While religion can be important in guiding what people possibly can think or cannot think, in this case religion is not the deciding factor. Rather, culture is the deciding factor. Asian cultures did not have the needed personalities, ideas, attitudes, and institutions to develop Western-like institutions needed for successful democracy. Asian cultures promoted the picked-apart self of Buddhism and Hinduism after it had been picked apart because a vague idea of that picked-apart self sort-of went along with ideas that Asians already had from culture. The picked-apart self of Buddhism did not make the self of Asian cultures. It is more accurate to say that Asian cultures adopted the picked-apart self of Buddhism because it work for them. While some Asians understood the picked-apart self of Buddhism, the vast majority neither understood nor wanted to. That arcane topic was something priests thought about. The self for most Asians was more like the self of other cultures and more like the self of Hinduism in which the self participates in the Dharma system for a long time. Evidence for my view is that Asian cultures have changed, and now are developing the needed ideas of self, state, and education to support democracy even though their official religion(s) and official religious view of the self has not changed.

The selves of Mahayana and Hinduism are not as solid as the eternal soul-self of Christianity and Islam but stronger than the self of Buddhism. They are stronger because they tie the self to the great Dharma system. Life is worthwhile, and each particular life is worthwhile, in the context of the Dharma system, and only in that system. Each self is a “spark” of the system and participates in the system. Especially selves participate when they do their social-karmic duty in Hinduism. The system is worthwhile so each participant is worthwhile. If you do not participate in the system, then you cannot be worthwhile or feel worthwhile. This non-participation might be part of the problem with old-style Theravada Buddhism, and why Mahayana calls it “Lesser Vehicle”. Mahayana and Hinduism try to use the right kinds, and right amounts, of picking apart and bolstering to support this kind of self and this kind of system. I do not find their arguments at all convincing, not the picking apart, bolstering, nor context of the Dharma system.

My Idea of the Self and the Buddhist Idea of the Self.

My idea of the self has these bases: (1) God assesses us when we die. We need not be eternal. God made us and God can do with us as he wishes including ending us forever. Most people end after this life. I think, over the long run, everybody ends permanently. It might be bad for a human to live forever. (2) The self of evolutionary theory is a mix of distinct mechanisms and several levels of integration. The self of evolutionary theory is together enough to think of it as a self but not as together as the soul-self of Christian, Muslim, Mahayana, and Hindu lore. (3) We need a self that is strong enough to serve as the basis for legal, social, moral, and personal responsibility, and to be a foundation of democracy. I am quite sure the self of idea (1) and idea (2) meets these needs.

In my idea of the self, we can learn to let go of a lot of desire, striving, clinging, and competition but not all of it. We can learn to let go of the idea that life is worthwhile but only after much effort; and, besides, we need not learn to let go of the idea if, in fact, life is worthwhile. We can learn to be better but we cannot learn to be perfect either morally or in our ability to think. We can learn to think more adeptly but we cannot learn to think perfectly without any mental “defilements”. We can do well enough.

This brief description should get across both similarities and differences. Going into more detail here is not possible because I would have to refer to particular passages in particular texts.

The Unselfish Intermediate Self.

I first met the idea of the Buddhist unselfish self in the commentary by Santikaro Bhikku (Monk Santikaro) on the writing of his teacher Buddhadasa Bhikku (Thai: Phutathaat), who was a wonderful Buddhist and teacher. Selfishness is the source of confusion about the world, how it works, seeking, clinging, badness, and suffering. I mention the unselfish self because it might figure in future “theology” relating Buddhism to modern science, other religions, democracy, and conservation. The idea is worth watching. I do not know if Santikaro further developed the idea beyond what I have read of him so far, and if others picked up the thread properly. This idea of the unselfish self as the proper self has roots in other ideas of the proper self but I did not research the topic and do not comment further here.

The bolstered self is the selfish self. The selfish self bolsters the idea of its own selfness so that it can be selfish. Only a self that thought too much of him-herself can be selfish for long. If we can learn not to be selfish, then we can learn we are not as grandiose a self as we had thought. Then we can learn how the world works, stop seeking and clinging as much, be mindful of others, and stop hurting others. If we learnt that our selves are not the solid unified strong bolstered selves that we thought, then we are likely to be much less selfish. Santikaro figuratively likens the selfish self to Satan. The original sin of Satan was selfish pride, so the similarity is not far off.

My comments: An unselfish self is still a self but not as much as Mahayana, Hindu, Christian, or Muslim selves. The unselfish self is neither too picked apart nor too bolstered. As such, it is an intermediate self. An intermediate self is a companion to the Middle Way. It is the self version of the Middle Way.

I don't know what kind of behavior would be expected of an unselfish self other than that it would not be greedy, sexually perverted, lust for power, etc. I presume an unselfish self would be honest and would be interested in genuinely helping people. I don't know if an unselfish self would follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally” but it is not hard to make that alignment. I don't know if an unselfish self would work hard to make the world better.

I don't know how the unselfish self lines up with the evolved self. Non-biologists have the wrong idea that the evolved self must be selfish, perhaps bolstered by the title of the book “The Selfish Gene” by Richard Dawkins (a book that does not assert there are genes for selfishness and does not assert that the selfish person is the naturally evolved person or the modal person - read it). Even in natural selection and the competition that is part of natural selection, people can be too selfish and so can thwart their own long term self-interest. An adept competitor in the arena of natural selection takes account of other people

and gets along with them as much as possible. Ask gangsters and police in major cities. So the evolved self is somewhat unselfish and he-she is in the middle between selfish and altruistic. Still, the evolved self is self-interested in a way firmer than what I think Santikaro had in mind. Any reproducing self that was not firmly self-interested would leave fewer genes. Likely there is a gap between a naturally evolved self and the unselfish intermediate self of Santikaro. Still, the comparison is fun.

It is also not clear how the unselfish self could serve as the basis for a real society. This is a problem not only with Santikaro's idea but for any religion, moral secularists, and moral atheists. An unselfish self could serve as the basis for society only if nearly all people were unselfish, and that will not happen. (If it could happen, this discussion would not be needed.) I do not mean we need people to turn into nearly perfect selves or angels but merely unselfish selves. Anybody wishing to promote the middle unselfish self as the basis of society has to relate the unselfish self to the naturally evolved self and has to tell us how to get to the unselfish self from the naturally evolved self. I leave that topic alone here.

Logical Twist on Using the Weakened Self to Let Go.

The Buddha argued a weaker version of the self so as to get people to let go of desire, clinging, striving, and competition, and thus end suffering. I understand this logic. This logic might work with the idealized beings of religious imagination but likely it would not work with real evolved beings and it might not work with idealized beings either. The movie "Amadeus" is factually flawed but it does make the point that one ideal (real artistic beauty) need not go with another (high-minded or graceful) even when we think they should go together. There is no reason why, once a self does not feel like an ideal eternal soul-self, that he-she should stop desire, clinging, and striving, or feel less suffering.

In a naturally evolved self, there is no reason why a shift from feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self to not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self should end desire, clinging, striving, and suffering; and there are good reasons why natural selection would make sure it did not.

Even in ideal selves of religious discourse, if a person stops feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self, there is no necessary reason that he-she should also stop feeling desire or should stop clinging to desire. Not-feeling-like-an-eternal-soul-self does not necessarily end any original feeling, end clinging to the feeling, or end clinging to the object of the feeling.

Confusion over this topic is like the confusion that people had over the idea of cause-and-effect before David Hume pointed out that one does not magically follow from the other.

Just because I am not an ideal eternal soul-self does not mean that my desires etc, and the satisfaction that I get from them, are any less real and satisfying, and does not mean I should give them up. One does not follow from the other. My desires etc. go on, and might have value, even if they are not part of an ideal eternal soul-self and even if they are part of a weaker soul-self. I personally do not feel like a necessarily eternal soul-self (I let God decide) yet I have not given up desire, clinging, and striving, and I have not reduced my suffering greatly as a result (it helps but does not change the world). I assume animals are less ideally integrated than people and do not feel like ideal eternal soul-selves but it makes no sense to talk a panda out of eating bamboo or a lion out of killing a gazelle. When I taste strawberries, I taste strawberries, whether I am an eternal soul-self of Christians, transient modest self of Buddhists, or

a talking ape. Tasting strawberries might be a good thing or it might be a bad thing. Whether it is good or bad does not depend on how integrated I am. I might not need the Buddhist idea of the self to make it a good thing as, for example, by learning to let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries and simply enjoy the taste of strawberries now. I might let go of clinging to the taste of strawberries as a result of seeing myself in Buddhist terms or as a result of seeing myself in other terms.

When people first hear the Buddhist argument, they can temporarily feel reduced desire, clinging, striving, and suffering. I think that is a natural reaction but here I don't go into why. Still, as evolved natural beings, for most of us, the reduction does not endure because nature made sure it would not. Buddhists need to work out how their argument applies not to idealized selves but to real evolved selves (the idea that not feeling like an ideal eternal soul-self reduces desire, striving, clinging, and suffering). Likely the Buddhist argument it does not apply to real evolved selves enough to serve as the basis for overcoming suffering in the Buddhist manner.

The Buddhist vision of the self is better than the Christian-Muslim or Mahayana-Hindu visions. Studying the Buddhist vision is worthwhile. But that does not mean you have to believe all of it, and does not mean you have to believe it so as to learn to think better and to better manage your suffering. You can use the Buddhist idea of the self to learn to think better and manage suffering better without adopting it entirely. You can learn to think better and to manage suffering better even without the Buddhist idea of the self. You can adopt the Buddhist idea of the self and still have trouble with desire, clinging, etc. You can use whatever parts of the Buddhist idea that you need for your own idea of a self.

To weaken bad desires, or abuse of good desires, Christians do not weaken the eternal soul-self (though they do blather on about dependence on God). Instead, they use moral arguments and arguments about heaven and hell. In the long run, I doubt moral arguments work better than Buddhist weakening of the self unless moral arguments are well supported by reference to ecology, society, etc.

(A case can be made for the Buddhist idea that "seeing we are not ideal eternal soul-self" automatically does reduce our desire and clinging, but only with a companion Buddhist idea of cause and effect. Like Thomist-based Christian theology, Buddhist theology does all fit together into one whole. This debate is much too technical for here, and I don't accept the conclusion anyway.)

24 Mahayana

The introduction to Mahayana is long. To skip directly to points, read the starred (*) material first then go to “Reminders about Mysticism etc.” below. I request that you read the entire introduction.

*Mahayana is the dominant form of Buddhism now. “Mahayana” means “big vehicle” as in “big ox cart”. Mahayanists call Theravada “Hinayana”, “small vehicle”, as in “small goat cart”. The comparison intends to denigrate Theravada and to assert Mahayana is better. Theravada rejects the term “Hinayana” and the idea that Theravada is less. Mahayana might have developed as early as 300 BCE (BC), or two hundred years after the Buddha, but more likely later. “Zen” is a movement within Mahayana, from around 500 CE (AD) in China, the subject of a later chapter. Mahayana is to Theravada somewhat as Romanticism is to the Enlightenment, or Christianity is to the simple original teachings of Jesus. A “sutra” is a Buddhist text, usually holy, like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran. The term “Dharma” refers to how the world works or to useful teaching about how the world works. Nearly all that I say about Mahayana also applies to Hinduism and to other “systems that eat the world”. Usually I do not point that out but I do when the item is especially relevant.

*Mahayana combines:

- (1) The traditional teachings of the Buddha about suffering and how to avoid it. For me, the teachings include: life is not worthwhile, each life is not worthwhile, there is no great system that is worthwhile, participation in a great system does not make the self eternal and ideally soul-like, and both monks and lay people should be careful about their dealings with the sticky world.
- (2) A strong desire to see life and the world as worthwhile
- (3) A strong desire to see each life as worthwhile and potentially successful.
- (4) Belief in a system that is overall worthwhile and joyous even if particular lives do not seem worthwhile and joyous now. This system is a clear case of a “system that eats the world”.
- (5) Common ideas of mysticism such as individual union with a great system.
- (6) The bodhisattva, a mediator savior between humans and the great joyous system. The bodhisattva pledges not to go to full enlightenment until he-she brings all sentient beings to full enlightenment. There are many bodhisattvas in the big system.
- (7) A profusion of sacred texts (sutras) and stories. These are often beautiful.
- (8) Contradictions, such as between “this life is not worthwhile” but “this life is successful”.

(9) Confusing doctrine that tries to make sense of all this. The confusing doctrine uses mystical motifs to combine the above points, especially to combine traditional ideas of the Buddha with the idea that each particular life can be successful.

*Mahayana asserts it is the true teaching of the Buddha. Theravada is simplistic superficial ideology for people of limited capacity. The Buddha gave different teachings, at different levels, to different people, according to ability and situation, a practice called “expedient means”. (1) Public teachings were not deep. The Buddha gave (2) deeper teachings orally in private to advanced students. (2A) Some oral “inner teachings” can be written down but not all. (2B) Some inner ideas cannot be written down; they can be given orally only. (3) The Buddha gave the deepest teachings non-verbally through gestures or in a “Vulcan mind meld”; these teachings cannot be spoken, let alone written down. Monks with the proper deep feeling developed ways (4) for direct non-verbal transfer of true Dharma. A smart lay person could learn from another enlightened person, monk or lay person, or could find truth for himself-herself without needing a teacher. Monks who understood only the simplistic public teachings (1) wrote down versions for each other and lay people. Those monks and lay people needed structure, as evident in writings. Their writings were the basis for Theravada. Theravada is so shallow that it stops seekers from finding the true spirit of the Buddha’s teachings and so subverts the Buddha.

In contrast, Theravada feels its writings preserved the true simple clear teachings of the Buddha and the true simple meditation that leads to awakening. Mahayana is a fantastic elaborate unclear self-serving deviation from true Buddhism.

By about seven hundred years after the Buddha (200 CE), Mahayana had overcome Theravada in India. Theravada disappeared from India. It had already moved to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where it persisted to modern times. Theravada was like core American blues of the 1920s while Mahayana was like jazz, R-and-B, rock-n-roll, and hip-hop combined. Blues was great, and it bore great children, but was not congenial to mainstream American culture and most of human nature. When core blues had done its work, it shrunk under the shade of the larger trees it had grown. R-and-B, R-and-R, and H-H lived on as much larger institutions and for much longer.

Mahayana didn’t last in India. Mahayana was closer to Indian culture than Theravada, and suited human nature better; but, by the time Mahayana arose, India already was developing Hinduism, which is even closer to Indian culture and serves human nature at least as well. Mahayana was a temporary revival inside Buddhism of one version of dominant Indian culture, a version which was taken over by an even more mainstream revival in Hinduism. By about 500 CE, all but a few islands of Buddhism had vanished from India, its home. Mahayana was to Hinduism like Jazz was to American pop music: it came from the same tradition, was glamorous and beguiling, had its own character, was different enough to be fun, had variety, referred back to the main tradition of pop more than did blues, made a lasting mark, but was not so different as to keep from being absorbed back into the mainstream when its time was over.

Mahayana veered from Buddhism as I think of Buddhism. Mahayana tried to have the cake of skepticism about this life while eating the cake of worthwhile successful life too. Mahayana covered the cake with fantasy, mysticism, and spiritual glitter. Mahayana tried to combine seemingly incompatible ideas such as: life is suffering but to realize that life is suffering is great joy; everybody is already a Buddha but does not know it; already we all are enlightened yet we still have to try hard to awaken; we all are saved yet we

are in danger of hell; and you can have wealth and power while avoiding stickiness. Mahayana used the vigor of young Buddhism to fuel a vision in which power infuses smart people, soldiers, merchants, and lords. Smart metaphysicians recast non-mystical non-metaphysical Buddhist ideas, to make them serve the new mystical vision, by putting them in a cosmic-metaphysical system that is a pyramid scheme and “eats the world”. The mythical-metaphysical system was not true to original Buddhism. Along the way, Mahayana had some great ideas and wrote some great stories.

Despite declaring that true teachings should not be bandied about in public, and truest teachings cannot even be spoken, Mahayanists wrote a lot, including both highly technical treatises and charming dramas. Mahayanists claim for their technical writing and stories holy status equal to any writing in Theravada. In Mahayana, although ultimate truth cannot be spoken, writing is justified because Mahayana writing helps you get to where you can take the last leap of intuition on your own. This process of taking you along the path is where some of the great ideas of Mahayana come out.

Although Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India, Mahayana remained the dominant major religion in Tibet and Nepal, and Mahayana moved to China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. East Asian cultures put their “spin” on Mahayana. Mahayana there is like an Asian version of Hinduism. Some new ideas and truths arose due to the East Asian spin, mostly in Zen. Zen stressed direct non-verbal transmission. My ideas about Mahayana have been influenced by Zen, maybe too much.

Regardless of differences in theory, most Mahayana monks live like Theravada monks, in monasteries, reading, chanting, teaching, meditating, and trying to figure out Buddhist aids. Most people could not tell the difference between the monks. Mahayana monks have similar ideas about suffering, illusion, clinging, morality, Dharma, karma, non-duality, self, Middle Path, rebirth, meditation, Emptiness, and Mind as do Theravada monks, but they get the ideas from different sutras. Lay people in Theravada and Mahayana do good deeds so they can be successful. In Mahayana, lay people might devote themselves to a bodhisattva so they and their families can be reborn into paradise much as Christians devote themselves to Jesus, Mary, or a saint so they and their families can go to heaven.

All major religions distinguish between what the “unwashed masses” believe versus true doctrines. It is easy to satirize any religion if we describe only the mass version. I try to avoid that, and to stick to the best ideas. Mahayana and Hinduism pose a problem because mass religion and official dogma are similar. Mahayana and Hinduism offer sublime versions of the same stances that appeal to masses. Mahayana and Hindu ideas aid mass practice even as they rise above it. I describe what an educated person or educated monk might believe.

Mahayana generated amazing logical-philosophical sutras but still Mahayana teaches more by stories than argument. I cannot retell its beautiful stories except as poor paraphrases. The Bibliography lists books that tell them. “Star Trek”, “Star Wars”, and the book and movie cycle “The Never Ending Story”, fairly well represent imagination in Mahayana and Hinduism. The first movie in the “Story” cycle is one of the best fantasy movies ever, and fine for most children but not young children – long live Atreyu and the Luck Dragon! The stories of Jorge Luis Borges (“Personal Anthology”) give a flavor of Mahayana and Hinduism, and show how easy it is to get lost in the hall of mirrors. The movie “The Magic Flute”, written by Bruce Lee, largely starring David Carradine, is a good example of the Mahayana imagination, multiple worlds, and the unity of the self and great system.

Like Hinduism, Mahayana depends on the idea of Dharma and on organizing the idea of Dharma into a mental and social system. Because I go into Dharma as a system in the chapter on Hinduism, here I go into the topic only as needed. The term “Dharma” always implies “system” and almost everything I say about Hinduism as a system applies also to Mahayana, and vice versa. I mean nothing bad by the term “system” but Mahayanists and Hindus probably won’t like it. Mahayanists might prefer something like “actions, thoughts, and their results, that occur through, and for, the Dharma” or prefer that I always say “Dharma system” instead of “system”. Some Mahayanists, Hindus, and Westerners might prefer that I say “game” or “deep play” instead of “system”. Games have systematic rules. Whatever has systematic rules is a system. Games should be fun. The dharma system is fun only for some people even if, in the idea, it should be joyous for all. For many people it is not fun. It is only really fun if it is true and it leads most of us to act well. I don’t think it is true, and it does not lead enough of us to act as we should. Keeping track of all this bickering is much too hard. I am making points about Mahayana and Hinduism from the outside, not making points from within them. So I stick to “system”.

In thinking about Mahayana, always keep in mind a simple question: What are they trying to get you to wake up to? Even in sudden enlightenment that cannot be spoken, you have to wake up to something, and you need words to guide you to it. From the chapter on Theravada, see the ideas that are good to know before awakening but are not what the Buddha had in mind to wake up to. The Buddha wanted us to go beyond those ideas. He had in mind that life is not worthwhile. Mahayana wants us to wake up to something more too but Mahayana is not often clear what. Why is Mahayana not clear? How does not being clear set us up for a system that eats the world, for a kind of spiritual pyramid scheme?

What if Mahayana is true enough anyway? In the first chapter of this book, I said that what matters is if ideas are true and good, not where they come from, not even if they are in a system that eats the world. Mahayana might be true even if it is a contrived system that eats the world, and it uses contradictions to channel minds. It does convey a lot of truth and does convey the need to be good to each other. I still think it is not true. I do not argue against each idea of Mahayana. I state them as clearly as I can for the purposes here, and make clear that I disagree. I argue against the system as a whole. Please read the Lotus Sutra and decide for yourself. I take the same stance toward Hinduism.

In arguing against Mahayana, I argue against all systems that eat the world, including: all major religions as they were developed formally such as Christianity; Romanticism; secular semi-religious systems such as Marxism; and movements such as post-modernism, “systems theory”, strong feminism, Liberalism, and Conservative ideas. I cannot here sort out what is right and wrong, point by point. They all develop the same form and spirit regardless of origin and original intent. Please see for yourself what is similar between Mahayana and what you believe, and decide for yourself what is right about what you believe despite how it works as a system that eats the world and works to channel minds. Then check what you find to be true against the moral teachings of Jesus and the political ideas described in the first two chapters of this book.

Optional Section: History of Ideas.

Here I speculate on a parallel history of ideas in India and Europe. I can’t recall who first said Theravada Buddhism (India) is like Protestantism (Europe) in compactness, simplicity, commitment, rationality,

individualism, and rejection of hierarchy while Mahayana and Hinduism are like Roman Catholicism. Other parallels of Europe with India also hold.

(1) One response to the widespread ideas at the time of the Buddha about rebirth etc. was strong austere stances such given to the young Siddhartha by his first teachers, and of a religion called "Jainism" ("Jine"-ism) that is strictly pacifist and vegetarian. Modern day "Vegans" are somewhat like Jains at the time of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhism is not supposed to be austere in this way. The Buddha deliberately moved away from this austere position.

(2) Another response was given by the Upanishads and Plato. Both Plato and the Upanishads took this world to be a pale transient imperfect shadow of something more important and more definite, stressed ethereal love as a proper response, stressed strong morality, and an immortal soul. The Upanishads stressed the links between people, and between people and nature. The idea is captured in a slogan famous in Indian thought: "you are that". Both advised clear separation from the normal world so as not to be contaminated and misled.

(3) The Buddha and Aristotle offered the middle way. Aristotle was partly a common sense response both to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to Plato, just as the Buddha was partly a common sense response to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to the kind of thinking that is found in the Upanishads. Both Aristotle and the Buddha were cool-headed and were not given to metaphysical flights. Neither stressed austerity although both advised discipline. Both stressed living in the world as it is and coping with issues as they come up. Neither condemned regular life although both knew that deep thinkers had to keep some distance from normal life. Both stressed moderation. Both disliked extremes. Both valued free thinking and were wary of ideologies. Both developed a theory of the self in which the self unfolds in a response to the world around. Both accepted the appetites that are part of a normal self, and accepted the results of having appetites. Both liked nature and both used examples from nature and from everyday life in their teachings. Jesus was similar, but later.

(4A) First Mahayana, and then later Hinduism, were partly a response to the austere tendency of some Buddhism and to other similar austere religions of around the same time such as Jainism. Neo-Platonism (late Platonism) was unlike original Platonism. Neo-Platonism arose at the same time as Mahayana and early Hinduism. Like Mahayana and Hinduism, Neo-Platonism stressed an elaborate system of many lives. The One system was one thing sufficient in itself although people experienced it as various. The One spawned the Many of everyday experience. People came in different grades. People varied in how close they were to the One. People could ascend to the One. After they had ascended to the One, and realized the unity of many in one, they could live separated from the world or they could carefully interact with the normal world. In Neo-Platonism, the world remained suspect and corrupt while in some Mahayana and some Hinduism the normal world and the One became the same. Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism offer some important helper beings such as the bodhisattva, avatar, and philosopher. All three systems allow for, or encourage, devotion to saints, teachers, helper beings, and the One, as a way to reach higher levels and-or to reach the one.

(4B) I think Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism represent long-standing Indo-European patterns in speculative thought that show up from time to time. I think Romanticism uses similar ideas. The ideology of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and then again in the 1700s and 1800s, with a stress

on saints, Mary, devotion, and hierarchy, might be another form. Protestantism arose against this pattern as a backdrop. This is the pattern against which Theravada looks like Protestantism. I don't know how the basic pattern is stored in our cultural background, why it lays dormant sometimes, and why it surfaces sometimes. I don't know why, when it surfaces, it surfaces in the particular form that it does at that time in those places.

Patterns One (austerity) and Three (middle way) can be found in many cultures although maybe not as well developed as in Indo-European culture. I believe patterns Two (Upanishads) and Four (Mahayana and Hinduism) represent deep-seated forms in Indo-European culture. I don't know if each pattern can exist as an independent idea set or if they need each other. I don't know if only one can dominate at a time. As with the Mahayana-Hinduism pattern, I don't know what governs when they surface or subside, and what governs how they appear when they do appear. I don't know if we can find patterns similar to Two and Four in other cultures and-or civilizations, such as in China or in the Americas. Other cultures have patterns that are distinct to that particular culture and-or are more developed in them than in Indo-European culture, such as Taoism in China.

Reminders about Mysticism, Metaphysics, and Systems that Eat the World.

From previous chapters, recall these ideas about mysticism and about systems that eat the world:

-Mystic visions can be partly true but no mystic vision offers full contact with the bigger-than-me and full truth.

-Mystics usually feel they are connected to the bigger-than-me, to all persons, and nature; feel everything that seems distinct is really one; and everything is really an aspect of the one bigger-than-me.

-We are all parts of a joyous organic whole, a system. Often, as part of full participation in the joyous system, we have many lives.

-Some mystics feel the bigger-than-me Descended into the World; Emanated into the different-but-united many things of the world, including all people; and remains in the world. We can Realize the bigger-than-me and our Unity with the bigger-than-me. We can Ascend to Union with the bigger-than-me.

-Mystics do not feel that other beings are necessarily more distant from the bigger-than-me than mystics simply because other beings do not have mystic vision. All beings are always united with the bigger-than-me even if they are not aware of it. Mystics are aware of it.

-I compared idea systems that eat the world with a painting that had colors but no images. We project onto the color splotches our ideas.

-While this particular life might be difficult, the system as a whole is joyous. Usually, eventually, we all have some particular lives that are wonderful, and these wonderful lives make up for the bad ones.

-Idea systems that eat the world typically feature ideas that are thrown together. The ideas might have a theme, or a "feel", but they are not necessarily consistent.

-Even so, there is a central idea, or focal idea, or focal person, or focal person-combined-with-idea. This idea is soft and “absorbent”, a “hole” like the eye of a hurricane, around which other ideas move, and which is the main maker of the feel of the system.

-The central soft core usually is a combination of a person with cosmic principles. In Mahayana, the central core is the combination of the bodhisattva (see below) with cosmic principles of Compassion, Emptiness, and Buddha Mind.

-From nonsense, you can assert anything. Contradictions are a kind of nonsense but they also sound deep and profound. Systems that eat the world use contradictions to beguile minds.

-People project onto the systems whatever they can that is consistent with the overall feel and style of the system. Systems can be compatible with many ways of life. Mahayana offers many “splotches” onto which people can project what they need. Contradictions make it easy to project.

-Metaphysicians later organize mystic visions into systems that eat the world. The inject ideas (“aids”) designed to explain the mystic vision. The aids usually have the effect of making the system that eats the world more inclusive, stronger, and more resistant to disproof; I do not explain how.

-Mystics tend to see the world as infinitely beautiful, and tend to assimilate all badness and ugliness into a greater beauty and goodness. Mystics see this world right now as heaven on Earth.

Anticipation, One.

This section is the first in a series of sections labeled “Anticipation” that sketch major points. I repeat these points throughout the chapter. You may skip these sections if you wish but I recommend that you read them. If you skip them, return here if you get confused. If you skip them, go to the section entitled “Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision”.

(1) Orthodox Theravada-like Buddhism is hard to accept. It has great ideas such as cause-and-effect, the not-absolute (fragmented) self, and individual self-determination. But it is hard to know what to do with the core message. It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile and that we cannot have strong success in this ordinary life. We want this life to be fully meaningful.

(2) People have a feeling (mystic sense) of a bigger-than-me. They feel that the system is worthwhile even if any particular life is full of hardship. People feel the system will give their life meaning and will take care of them if only they can “plug into” the system.

(3) It is hard to put the full mystical feeling into words. Point (2) above is only an approximation. We don't have to put the feeling exactly into words to have the feeling. At the same time, words can help us to get the feeling.

(4) Despite what the Buddha said, some people do seem to succeed at being spiritual and succeed at this life. These people become one with the bigger-than-me. These people would not abandon everybody

else. They will help us to connect to the bigger-than-me and to make this life worthwhile and successful. They are mediators. In Mahayana, bodhisattvas play this role; in Christianity, Christ, Mary, and the Saints do; in Hinduism, avatars do, such as Krishna; in Islam, Mohammad did.

(5) If we are part of the big system, and successful people want to help us, then, really, there is no big difference between a holy life and an ordinary life as long as the ordinary life is a good life. Spiritual success (life) and worldly success (life) are the same.

(6) If you are a good person, you are part of the bigger-than-me and you are successful. If successful, you are part of the bigger-than-me and a good person. If you are part of the bigger-than-me, you are a good person. If you feel it, you are it; if you are it, you feel it.

(7) To succeed, all you have to do is adjust your attitude.

(8) The Mahayana system-with-a-hole-in-the-center-that-eats-the-world results from the above points embedded in a structure that allows us to project onto all this ideas that we think are important and that keep people interested. It results from allowing people to project their hopes for success onto a cosmic mystic system. Most major religions have similar ideas and structure.

Anticipation, Two: Stages of Possible History.

The development of Mahayana came in logical stages. I don't know how these logical stages correspond to actual history. I repeat from above, in words that make stages more obvious:

(A) Some Buddhists reacted against the idea that life is not worthwhile by using Buddhist ideas, such as cause-and-effect and dependent origination, to support a mystical vision in which the world is not really suffering. Instead, suffering is an illusion, we are all alright, and we are all linked. This vision supported the typically Buddhist ideas that we can find salvation ourselves and that the world is pretty much as it appears to be. This vision was minimally mystic and minimally fantastic.

(B) Early smart metaphysicians tried to explain the mystic vision using Buddhist aids such as Emptiness and Buddha Mind. They relied on the idea that the new core message (new waking up) cannot be put into words. This early elaboration was not necessarily an ideological system that eats the world. This vision and its elaboration appealed to successful lay people and it was important in the early success of Buddhism.

(C) Along with mystical visions and clever rationale came a full-blown system that eats the world, centered on the bodhisattva, re-interpreting rebirth and karma as a joyous system of many lives, and using Buddhist aids as the splotches onto which we project.

(D) The early metaphysical explanations opened the door to more elaborate fantastic mystical visions such as infinite Buddhas and bodhisattvas, unfolding of the Buddha Mind, Storehouse Consciousness, Western Paradise, multiple heavens and hells, etc. Now not only are you tied into the bigger-than-me, now you are really the Bigger in disguise.

Most of this chapter is about items (B) and (C).

(E) When Mahayana moved to East Asia, the Chinese developed Zen, likely as a fusion of Taoism and Buddhism. Zen might represent an attempt by East Asians to recover the original simpler mystic vision that began Mahayana, or to produce their version of a similar simple mystic vision.

(F) Why did Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha tell everybody that this life is full of suffering, advise us to turn away from this life, and tell seekers to live as monks? Because that is the level most people work on. His external teaching is a giant expedient means. The Buddha needed to shock people out of delusions about this world and away from other seductive wrong religions such as Brahmanism, Jainism, and (all teachings like) the Upanishads. He had to force people to face their stupidity and had to give them strong reasons to seek something better. When they had overcome stupidity, and learned how to be good on a deep level, they would be ready to face the truth of Mahayana and make their regular lives transcendent. The Buddha found that, when people were on the verge, any words would inevitably lead them astray and backwards. Better not to use words, and words are not needed. When students reach this level, they will intuit what the Buddha had been about all along. When students are settled into something better, then they can use words, and any expedient means, to help others along the path without confusing words and expedient means for the path itself. The Buddha did not mislead, deliberately or through ignorance. He merely used the best public means he could in teaching about suffering, and he saved the one best true private means for later.

I dislike secret inner (esoteric) teachings no matter what religion. True: many people cannot get deep ideas, and religions rely on deep ideas even when religions try to be plain. But limited human intellect does not mean that all hidden deep teachings are true – not even alluring ones. It is best to assume that all teachings that claim to be hidden, deep, and reserved for the smart few are wrong, and then to make the ideas themselves prove they are right. By this standard, nearly all deep teachings fail. We can assume they are not offered primarily because they are true but out of misguided hope, desperation, and/or as tools for control.

To be fair, Christianity had its share of deep inner secret teachings. Originally, if Christians believed “the truth shall set you free”, that truth was not public truth. I think simple public truth is more likely to set us free. Christian teachings are all “out in the open” now only because of Christianity’s long history and the fact that it became the dominant religion of a big region. Christians turned the Old Testament (Tanakh) into a secret code for generating deep opaque forebodings of Jesus that only Christians could decipher – against the intent of the Jews who “owned” the book. Originally the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) was not given to all followers but only to a select few of the inner circle as a way to get immediate direct mystic participation with Jesus and with godliness, and as a way to exclude people who would not go along. I don’t like any of this either.

Anticipation, Three: Mysticism (again).

To properly evaluate Mahayana, I would have to convey its mystic visions clearly, place them in context with other mystic visions, show how all the visions were subsumed into particular ideological systems that eat the world, and evaluate everything all together. I would have to contrast mystic visions of Mahayana with my own ideas about God, Jesus, prophets, and Western values. I can’t do this task here. The best I

can do here is to give a feel for the elaborate Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysical system-that-eats-the-world and say why I am uneasy with it. I do this in bits throughout the chapter. I give a synopsis of the Mahayana mystic vision below.

The Mahayana mystic vision and system is well-intended but wrong. Mahayana ideas-aids create more hardship than benefit. Some people do benefit from Mahayana ideas-aids but they have to overcome the ideas-aids to do so.

To the extent that Mahayana stresses mystical union in something like Buddha Mind or the Storehouse Memory, I don't see how Mahayana differs much from other systems that stress mystical union, such as Neo-Platonism, the Upanishads, Transcendentalism, Sufism, or Hinduism. To the extent Mahayana stresses Descent, Emanation, Realization, and Ascent, I don't see how it differs much from similar mystic-metaphysical systems such as Gnosticism or Neo-Platonism. To the extent Mahayana stresses that you personally are equivalent to the system and are Big, I don't see how it differs from other similar ideas in Hinduism and some Islamic mysticism. I don't see how Mahayana sutras differ from metaphysical writings in other systems that deal with issues such as non-duality, merging with Void, or a Great Mind. I don't see how the Mahayana bodhisattva differs from Christianized Jesus, the Hindu avatar, or the Mohammad of irrational devotion. I don't see how devotion to a Mahayana bodhisattva differs much from Hindu bhakti, devotion to Mohammad, worship of Mary, worship of Jesus, or devotion to saints. How Mahayana can be like non-Buddhist mystic-metaphysical systems but remain essentially Buddhist is a question that I cannot answer and that I leave for Mahayanists.

I happily admit that all different mystical-metaphysical systems have a distinct feel to them, and that this feel is important to their adherents. Adherents do argue over which system is truer and better. I can get a sense of the distinct feelings. I do "get it" for each system. But the distinct feelings of various systems are not important to me. Other ideas and feelings are more important.

The important ideas of Mahayana are below. You do not need mysticism, metaphysics, or system to get these ideas.

-There is something out of which everything comes and to which everything returns.

-That one thing makes the diversity that we see. The diversity is not really distinct from the one thing. The particular things are not as distinct from the one thing as we think they are.

-We too are of the one thing. We are not as distinct as we think we are. We were "in" the one thing before we were born, and return to it after we die. Death is something of an illusion.

-Being part of the one thing is worthwhile and a lot of fun. It is not suffering.

-The one thing is the same as the personal bodhisattva, who wishes to save us all. We already are bodhisattvas even if we don't know it yet. The point is to see it.

-We can approach the one thing through aids such as Emptiness, Buddha Mind, non-duality, and the unity of the particular and general. Historically those were the most important aids in Mahayana.

Although these aids can help us approach the one thing, they are not the same as the one thing. Other important aids include the unity of the awakened and sleeping worlds, and the value of the person.

Anticipation, Four: A System with a Hole in the Center that Eats the World.

-Early on, Mahayana used Emptiness as the “splotch in the empty center onto which we project ideas”. The idea of Emptiness went to China. Early Chinese Mahayana also used Emptiness. Then it switched to the idea that Buddha Mind makes the world including us. Our minds know the Buddha Mind because we are Mind likewise. From China, the ideas of Emptiness and Mind spread through the Far East and became integral to Mahayana. The idea of Buddha Mind is like ideas of Mind that developed in the West especially with Neo-Platonism and afterwards.

-Mahayana asserts that the deepest truth cannot be spoken. China used Emptiness and Buddha Mind as ideas at the empty center. Together, these three motifs make it easy for me to describe Mahayana as a system that uses a hole in the center to eat the world. Emptiness literally is emptiness at the center onto which we project what we wish. Mind literally is all the many projections that spill out of Emptiness at the center.

-If Mahayana were so obvious, it would not have lasted. Mahayana does not go directly to Emptiness or Mind.

Rather, Mahayana uses stories to involve people and to imply emptiness at the center without specifying. That is one way to use words as an indirect means but not a direct means. Mahayana allows people to fill in the story as they wish. When some people want more, Mahayana philosophers give them “can’t be put into words”, Emptiness, Mind, or another Buddhist Aid. Mahayana tells stories by finding something concrete that people can think about. It shows how that concrete thing is not really important, often it is only an obstacle, but some other thing that we can’t really talk about is important. We should be concerned about the other thing that we can’t talk much about. Mahayana never has to specify the other thing as Mind or Emptiness. By remaining vague about what Mahayana has us wake up to, the center remains empty and we can project what we wish.

Even if it is true that the central secrets to which a person wakes up cannot be spoken, this tenet is more often a ploy to “suck people in” than a way to get people to find the right stance. I accept that some ideas-ways-insights cannot be spoken well but I do not accept that the central core of Mahayana is so strange that it cannot be spoken well enough. Insisting on “a big hush” is more often a ploy than a good religious stance in any religion.

-Here I retell Mahayana stories from the Lotus Sutra to get across the point. A man has been shot with half-a-dozen poison arrows. His fellows call for a doctor. When the doctor arrives, he does not ask what color each arrow is, if it uses feathers of eagle or vulture, if it has a shaft of willow or hickory. The doctor removes each arrow according to where it is and what wound it made. Taking away bad arrows is the first step to health. Here, health is the self-evident goodness at the center about which we don’t have to be specific. We can think of a healthy man any way at all.

Now that the doctor has all the arrows out, the doctor needs to remove the poisons. Poisons also are bad ideas. The doctor does not have to know the color, taste, texture, or atomic weight of each poison. The doctor only has to know how to counteract the poison and how to remove bad effects. The doctor does not have to go into details of bad ideas, he-she only has to remove bad ideas and then good ideas arise automatically. The doctor does not have to say what health is, the doctor only has to remove illness. The doctor does not have to say what it is we wake up to, he only has to remove bad ideas and we wake up to Mahayana Emptiness or Mind.

-Rather than use Emptiness or Mind to show the empty center, how emptiness works at the center, and how we project onto an empty center, later in the chapter I use the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is a hero at the center onto which we project our ideals of success, who acts out the workings of a Dharma system, and to whom we can appeal for help.

When smart people first sense the Mahayana technique and the Buddhist aids, they tend to go “hog wild”. Often they don’t sense the technique at a conscious level but do get it unconsciously from repeated exposure, like people learn to play table tennis. Mahayana subtlety is not a hard technique to learn and it is powerful. People love to use it, usually not maliciously, but because it enhances feeling important and because it is partly true. In doing so, despite conveying some truth, they reinforce confused Mahayana in themselves and in “victims” too. They lead people astray. This veering happened not only in the sutra writers of yore but happens now with modern Buddhists. If you can sense the method and then not use it, you will feel good in another way.

Anticipation, Five: Good Words about Mahayana Mystic Vision.

Because I criticize Mahayana, here I offer a feel for some of the good in Mahayana by using examples from mystic-like visions-and-feelings that many Westerners have. I am not saying only Mahayana has these visions-and-feelings or these are more typical of Mahayana than any other stance. I only offer them to put Mahayana in a better context than mere logical argument.

(1A) Your friends cajoled you into a picnic. The sun was too hot; ants overran the food; mosquitoes attacked everyone; the drinks were not cold enough; the softball game went on but it was not fun the way you wanted because the skill level was too low; and your would-be girlfriend spent all her time with her friends and not much with you. Yet, as the afternoon fades into evening, you realize that it is all good anyhow. All of it is all good. You can’t explain.

(1B) The same thing happens on a trip to the beach. The wind blows too much, everybody gets burned by the sun, the surf is a little too high for anyone but the body surfers, the hotels have blocked off most of the access, the hotels have attracted tourists so now there are a lot of tourists but not many of you locals, food vendors have invaded, and now litter is everywhere. But still all of it is all good.

(2) You and friends watch the evening news. Terrorists have attacked a humor magazine and a tourist train. A White cop kills a misguided young Black thug in self defense, and Black people riot and kill five more of their own. The government says the unemployment rate has fallen to 6.5% but the only jobs you and your friends can get are in a chain store. A report says there are more added chemical residues in so-called organic food than in the food sold at the supermarket. Outside, the birds are singing and some

kids are playing football in a small park, dodging piles of dog shit. Your friends have warmed up for you a brand of frozen dinner that you particularly like. You have strawberries for dessert. You feel deeply that this world could be so good and so beautiful if only a few bad apples didn't spoil the whole barrel. Twenty percent of people ruin it all for the other 80%. If we could get the 80% to see what they've got, and get the 20% to stop acting bad even if they don't get it, then the whole world would change. That is not such a hard job. Maybe you can't make it your life's work but you can do your share.

The two situations go together. When we see that it is all so beautiful, we want to help. When we want to help, we see it all could be so beautiful. If you have never seen this, then you are not fully human, and you need to wake up to your humanity.

American sitcoms have their own version, effective in the 2010s because now all families have to be charmingly-functional-within-dysfunctional by fiat of the drama police. After a terrible drawn-out holiday experience, a family comes to see they all need each other, help each other, and love each other. Their family, and the world, is better for mutual love. They usually don't show mutual love, but it runs like a deep hidden river through all. It keeps them from doing much real harm, keeps them on the right track, and rescues them when in need. They don't have to feel it all the time or say it ever. They show it to each other often enough.

Even if we don't understand everything, still it is better to have the right attitude and try to help than to do nothing and miss the beauty and goodness of the world.

(3) As a business person, you might not have it all figured out intellectually but you know what the world is all about. Through your work you serve both the bigger-than-me and the people. You are plugged in. You don't have to be a monk, a wimpy wide-eye, or a tree hugger to know there is a force that drives the world, the force is good, the world is good, you are part of it, you know what is going on, the force does its work through you, and you do the work of the force in your business and your life. As long as you do the work of the force, it takes care of you. It gives you the answers that you need to know. You never hurt anyone or anything on purpose. You know how to work on the world - that the force created - and to get things done. You see behind mere appearances to what matters. You bring other people to their senses too. You are lucky and happy in your luck. See "Vimalakirti" below.

(4) "This world is fallen. The Devil (Satan) reigns here. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran all tell me so. Yet I can't help but enjoy this world. I can't help but love God, my family, country, church, and friends. I can't help but love nature sometimes, even if I don't really understand nature. Life can be so good. I know that bad people, bad events such as economic recession, and bad diseases such as cancer, all can ruin life for some of us sometimes. But, really, life can be so beautiful. I know I can get lost in bitterness at bad people; but I can also overcome bitterness to make something better of my life and the lives of the people around me. My church helps me. We can overlook the fact that this world has fallen. We can enjoy the beauty that is left over from God's original creation."

(5) "I made up my mind, I saw the light, when I was twenty. I became a feminist, or a crusader against abortion, Republican, Marxist, martial artist, economist, academic, Roman Catholic, or Buddhist.

"I know feminism is not all the truth; men are not all bad and women are not all right; women of the past were not all stupid; they had minds and they did what they thought was moral and was good for their families just as we do now; they were as free in many ways as we are now or can hope to be. But there is still so much work to be done. If I don't do it, nobody will. To get it done, we need a point of view. Somebody has to stand up for the highest moral standards. I might make some mistakes; hurt some people; not do as much as can be done; and overlook some bigger urgent problems. I might defend an entrenched position, like the people I fight. I might become moralistic; a crusader who uses morality to make myself feel better about myself. Still, overall, I will do more good than harm and I will help a lot of people. All of us will be better off for what I do. In the end, we can all be free and equal. This is what I can do now and this is what I have set myself to do now."

Anticipation, Six: All You Need Is Love.

I am not making fun of hippy, hippy revival, post-hippy, or New Age cultures. I asked what Mahayana wants you to wake up to. It is easy to say "Love" ("mindfulness"). We wake up to the love and beauty of the world, and we want to wake up everybody to love and beauty. This answer goes along with Jesus' teaching to love our neighbor as our self, to love our enemies; this answer goes along with current ideas of Christianity; and with a general yearning for love left over from formal Christianity. There is nothing wrong with this ideal; it is high minded; and it is one of the best stances when mixed with practicality. If Mahayana had merely stressed love and beauty, Mahayana might have avoided being only a system that eats the world and only a pyramid scheme. I don't think Mahayana can avoid that fate through getting everybody to see love and beauty but this issue is not the main point of this section.

Mahayanists of 2020 CE (AD) might say wake up to "love and beauty" but that is not what Mahayanists of 200 CE (AD) said. That is not how Mahayana was born. Love and beauty were a part of it all but, if you focused on them, you got distracted and fell into stickiness. The original answers were "Emptiness" or "Void", "(Buddha) Mind", "can't be said in any words", joy of system, and spiritual power in fantasy worlds. Originally "Emptiness" and "Mind" were not focused on "love, beauty, and mindfulness". I leave modern Mahayanists to sort out the relations between Love, Beauty, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, Silence, spiritual power, joy, suffering, and fantasy realized. They do not seem to succeed well.

Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision and Its Elaboration.

Now that we are past the anticipation summaries, I begin again.

An original simple mystic vision similar to the vision of Mahayana is common to many people who have a "Grand Canyon" experience, and the vision is found in many religions. In the cosmic scheme of things, we are small. There is something much bigger than me. Yet we are also important to the bigger-than-me. As parts of the bigger-than-me, people are all connected. We are tied to nature. We come out of the bigger-than-me and merge back into the bigger-than-me. As individuals now, we do suffer. But the bigger-than-me does not suffer in the same way, and the bigger-than-me gains through our suffering. It makes up to us for our suffering somehow. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the bigger-than-me is a Dharma system and a person while in Christianity and Islam it is a person.

As Mahayana developed, eventually some people had the feeling that we are not only a small member of the system but somehow we are the entire system too. Each particular person is the system as a whole but is temporarily manifest in particular bodies over the course of many lives. There is no bigger-than-me distinct from me because you are the bigger-than-me, although, while you are in any particular body, you feel smaller than the system as a whole and feel there is a bigger-than-me. The feeling of bigger-than-me that you get in a particular body is the gateway to the real feeling that you are the whole system at play. The bigger-than-me works through the particular me as I am right now.

This feeling is not necessarily crazy although it can be. This feeling is not as common as being a simple part of a bigger-than-me, and so it is hard to find positive examples from current pop culture. Imagine you are the tool of God because you are God acting through your particular body right now. You are both Jake Blues and Elmore Blues on a mission; and you are on some mission all the time. Sometimes you are Jake, sometimes Elmore, and sometimes some other character such as the character portrayed by Aretha Franklin. Or, you are a secret agent always on a case. You are the hero of all stories and hero of the entire system of the Big. You are a super hero. You can be every super hero if you want, depending on whichever hero is needed for a mission now. If you are a woman now, you are not only linked to all other women because you are all sisters but also because you really are every other woman even while you are this particular woman. Before, you were a little rock sloughed off by a mountain, rolling down the mountain. Now you are the mountain sloughing off all the rocks. You are all the birds, bees, and flowers that have ever lived.

Then smart people in Mahayana had to explain and justify this new vision. They had to explain so that other people might have the vision too, or at least could sense and respect it. For people slightly less smart, they used aids such as Nothingness and Buddha Mind. For some ordinary people, they used the character of the bodhisattva. For many other ordinary people, they used the idea of paradises to which devotion takes you. The various approaches can be combined.

Officially, the world is not worthwhile, and yet, if you look at the world the right way, the world is infinitely beautiful and worthwhile. The bad ugly world of everyday illusory life is the same as the good beautiful world of awakened life. We can assimilate ugliness and badness into greater beauty. Is this Mahayana mystic vision the same as what I earlier (in the chapter on Common Ideas) called “heaven on Earth”? Without going through texts in detail, I cannot argue the issue, but I think so. In Mahayana, I think the mystic idea of “heaven on Earth”, an infinitely beautiful world, overwhelmed the prior Buddhist idea that “life is not worthwhile”, and I think metaphysicians tried to merge the two so that the idea of an infinitely lovely heaven on Earth assimilated the idea that this life is not worthwhile. Metaphysicians used the idea of a joyous system of many lives to complete the merger. The result was Mahayana. Whether this story about Mahayana is true or false, if you have any feel for the idea of “heaven on Earth”, you can use your feeling to get in touch with the Mahayana vision, understand it better, and have some sympathy with it. Try seeing: this life as hard; the system of many lives is beautiful; and the system of many lives makes every life in it just as beautiful, including this hard life.

Most people can't reach the full version of identity between themselves and the whole system; especially they can't get the idea that they are both a particular individual and the system as a whole. Most people settle for something less but something that still has the flavor of an identity between the individual and the system. For most people, this identity is captured in the idea of the bodhisattva. The system has a

hero through whom it acts most of the time. You are both the hero and the hero's sidekick. Here, I do not dwell on the abstract metaphysical version of Mahayana but focus on a slightly lesser version, centered on the bodhisattva, but still greater than the initial simple modest version.

To illuminate Mahayana thought below, I use contradictions between an orthodox Buddhism that features fear of suffering versus Mahayana that goes beyond suffering.

Mahayana Motives for Elaboration.

Here I retell the story from above of mysticism systematized. Because Mahayana elaborated the early mystic vision to appeal to powerful people and the common masses, it is easy to dismiss Mahayana as hucksterism, like televangelism, aimed to recruit the rich and powerful by allowing them to feel successful both in spirit and in daily life, and to dazzle the masses into going along by using complex emptiness, projections, contradictions, fantasies, and paradises. All religions do that, and Mahayana is only a little worse than others. It is better to think of the situation like this:

The original teachings of the Buddha (similar enough to Theravada) were a great improvement on mass religion in India and on Brahmin ritualism. Buddhism's intellectual advances, such as self-determination, cause-and-effect, analysis of the self, assessing life, and waking up beyond ordinary self-indulgent life, were so strong that all religion in India and the East had to face them. Buddhism developed a big strong organization that had to be lived with and a group of adept people that had to be argued with – monks and educated lay people. All variations on Buddhism had to find a place for monks and for relations between monks and lay people.

Yet the core idea of Buddhism is hard to take, and most people cannot live as monks. People dislike the idea that life is not worthwhile. Even most Theravada Buddhists do not really live by the idea that life is suffering. People want religion to justify their ordinary lives and their pursuit of worldly success. Mystics think life is worthwhile and joyous. Mystics think the world is part of a joyous bigger-than-me system, and we are all important parts of the system. People dislike thinking the highest goal is to disappear forever after accepting that life is suffering. People like to think they will live in great joy forever after succeeding in this life. It was almost inevitable that somebody would combine the desire for justification in ordinary life with mystic participation in a great system.

Some very smart people and some mystics took over the ideas of Buddhism and the monastic structure, and they put the ideas into the service of well-intended mysticism. Metaphysicians explained the feelings and the system in a way that validated ordinary life and success in it, and gave spiritual "power" to ordinary life. This way appealed to lay people who were successful in the world and felt they were good people, did not want to be monks, and did not want to work toward vanishing after death. Lay people supported Mahayana monasteries rather than other monasteries. Mahayana won out. In the modern world, this is called the "marketplace of religions".

All this reinterpretation could not be done without some stubborn contradictions such as that people are both damned and saved at the same time, and without odd metaphysics such as that "form is emptiness and emptiness form". Contradictions and metaphysics actually support the package because they permit religious adepts to say anything, they provide ingredients for smart people to weave speculations, they

keep smart people busy, allow people to fool themselves, let smart people argue others into submission, and allow imaginative people to make up paradises. The contradictions and metaphysics let people feel good by acting out as normal people but with added drama, like the pseudo-reality TV shows of our time. They are the color splashes on which people project what they need.

Non-monk non-mystic non-metaphysical ordinary people enjoy the imagination of religion and enjoy the paradises but they are not comfortable with the mysticism and dense argument. Most people are not comfortable with the contradiction between “life is suffering” but “we are all in a joyous system”. Yet, if we want to have the good parts of Buddhism such as self-determination, if we want to feel justified in our ordinary lives, want fantasies and happy paradises, then we have to pay a price. In a Buddhist context, the price is Mahayana cleverness and clever metaphysics. In a Buddhist context, those are needed to overcome the tense contradictions so as to allow the justification in common life. Ordinary people were happy to pay that small price. Mostly they could ignore the heavy thinking and just carry on.

People need some idea framework. Because Mahayana theory is so abstruse, people needed something more relatable. The two biggest ideas are the bodhisattva and the idea of a paradise after death. I talk more about the bodhisattva later. A Buddhist paradise works much the same in ordinary religion as does Heaven in Christianity and Islam. Schools arose with different ideas of paradise and ideas of how to get there. In this chapter, I do not describe the paradises or how to get in them except for one example later in the chapter. One technique for getting to paradise was to recite the name of a Buddha or bodhisattva, or to recite a spiritual formula, like “Hail Mary etc.” Smart people made paradises spiritually acceptable by interpreting the paradises as a metaphor for how a person would see the world once he-she saw he-she was really already saved. Stories about how people lived in the paradises taught people how to act well here. Ordinary not-so-smart people took paradise at face value. As long as smart people could see that metaphor was the real basis for the paradises, then it was alright to let the masses believe in them literally and to recite formulas – another case of expedient means. Often enough, even very smart people go for the paradises.

The mystic-metaphysical take-over of Buddhism did not have only bad results; it had some good results too. Mahayana built solid arguments for the value of ordinary people and ordinary life, and for seeing the world as it is. Mahayana promoted connection and compassion. We all have the same mental ability to see the great joyous system. We all share the same mind. Mahayana did accurate analyses of mind in general and of human capacities for morality and spiritual insight. Here I cannot give the details of these ideas. Mystics are imaginative. Contradictions and metaphysics spur imagination. Mahayana opened up the imagination. As I said, it has wonderful stories.

One Reason Mahayana Failed in India and Why Confucius Keeps Resurging in East Asia.

In the chapter on Theravada, I explained how monks mesh with society to become a part of society even though officially they are not in society and even though in daily life they live a bit apart. They reinforce society even though they are not supposed to live in society. Although Buddhist-like religion can support society it does not always do as thorough a job as do more blatantly obvious society-affirming religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. If religion is going to support society, then it is better to have a religion that supports society “up front” in a clear strong positive way. Buddhism can support society, but only round-about.

In India, Hinduism also rejects ordinary life as most people see it but, at the same time, Hinduism offers a powerful obvious clear up-front support of ordinary life and society as it was lived when Hinduism arose and when it defeated Mahayana. See the chapter on Hinduism.

In the Far East, in particular China, Mahayana and Confucianism always carried on side-by-side, along with Taoism; and most people in their daily lives were more Confucian than Mahayanist. Buddhism was the religion for death and Confucianism was the religion for life. Confucianism provides a strong clear up-front fairly practical support for most of ordinary social life. In its elaborate forms, Confucianism offers a blueprint, for most social and political situations. Confucianism is poor at death and metaphysics. So Mahayana and Confucianism go well together, and neither can completely disappear as long as the other one is around, but Confucius usually has the upper hand because most people live in social situations and most people require guidance. See the chapter on Confucius.

Dealing with the Central Issue.

Like Theravada, Mahayana accepts that there is a problem with the way people usually live in this world and experience this world. Normal life leads inevitably to sorrow. Unlike Theravada, Mahayana denies that the problem is “in” existence, that life is inevitably not worthwhile. The problem is in how we live this particular life and experience this particular life, in how we carry on. The problem is in us, not in the world. Mahayana resolves the contradiction as below. The ways below are all mixed up in practice. If you don't understand all this, don't worry. Focus on the fact that Mahayana has methods to live with its contradictions and to gain strength from them.

(1) If we change how we live this life and experience it, if we change our attitude, then the problem goes away. With the right attitude, we overcome stickiness, clinging, and suffering. We don't have to make up our minds whether this life is worthwhile. We don't have to make up our minds about what the present world is like. We don't have to make up our minds about the system of many lives. We just have to find the right attitude first.

(2) There is a system to the world. The system is moral. It seems there is a mind behind the system. Although any particular life might be unhappy, most lives have enough happiness, and the system as a whole works. People who are unhappy now are happy later. Even if you are unhappy in your particular life now, you can be happy with the idea of the system as a whole just as a failed business person can still take comfort in the success of capitalism as a system. The system as a whole is joyous. The system as a whole takes care of the people in it.

(3) If we see our particular lives in the context of a joyous system, we can overlook the problems of our lives to focus on the system and its joys. For most normal people, the great joyous system meant some kind of paradise after death.

None of the solutions actually works; and they are not always compatible. Having the right attitude need not make you see life in the context of a greater joyous system, and seeing life in the context of a greater joyous system need not lead you to have the right attitude.

(4) Mahayana creates a hierarchy that folds back on itself, a hierarchy that folds back on the central soft dominant focus. The hierarchy is made up of spiritually adept beings. I explain this below. Rather than dwell on any contradictions, people find themselves in the context of the hierarchy, and relate to what is most relevant to themselves in the hierarchy. Usually they forge a relation to the bodhisattva, the highest level. The bodhisattva cares about ordinary people. Therefore the highest level (bodhisattva) and the lowest level (common people rather than monks) fold back to touch each other, and the system appears to be complete and not contradictory. This hierarchy plays a big role in the Mahayana version of a system that eats the world.

(5) Mahayana avoids its contradictions through one of its core ideas: Mahayana cannot be explained in words. It must be intuited without words. If you cannot explain, then you can hold any contradictions. In effect, you smother over contradictions with mysticism and metaphysics. Even if some of mysticism and metaphysics is true and good, it is so hard to tell the true from false, and good from bad, that the result is confusing. Mostly people succumb to confusion, and then try to find their own partial success by piecing together their version from the many floating ideas of Mahayana.

(6) In particular, Mahayana is vague about what a person wakes up to apart from usually waking up to the great joyous system. What we wake up to cannot be spoken. Because it cannot be spoken, we can use whatever works. Smart people wake up to resolving one of the metaphysical dilemmas such as non-duality or the Buddha Mind. Normal people wake up to the fact that they, and their families, will go to a joyous paradise when they die.

(7) “Expedient Means” and Relativism. No teaching in words is absolutely true. All teaching is only approximately true. Still, some teaching is more useful in moving you toward awakening than other teaching. Our teaching, Mahayana teaching, is more effect while the teaching of other religions is less effective. Our teaching is so effective as to be categorically right. Other teaching is so ineffective as to be categorically wrong. You don’t have to pay attention to them, only to us. We are entitled write a lot because what we write is useful. Even when our teaching seems confusing, it is still useful and correct.

This multi-pronged technique for “sucking people into the system” is not limited to Mahayana. It is a general tactic for making self-validating thought systems that “eat the world”. People who worship the market do this; people who cling to simplistic populist democracy and the culture of victimization do this; Christian theologians do this; and Muslim theologians do this; Hindu theologians are great at it. I do not explain how the combined approaches are so effective and how they work in other cases.

For most of Mahayana, the right attitude begins with an experience of bigger-than-me which includes the idea that me and bigger-than-me are the same. The right attitude comes in seeing this life only appears sad sometimes but really the whole system of many lives is joyous. You show you have the right attitude by helping other people to see the same thing. In helping others to awaken to Mahayana terms, you perpetuate Mahayana as a comprehensive self-validating thought system; you participate in a religious pyramid scheme.

I think the Mahayana approach is not what the Buddha had in mind. The Mahayana approach might be true, might be truer than what the Buddha had in mind, and might be more beautiful than what he taught; but it is still not what the Buddha had in mind. You have to decide if Mahayana differs from what the

Buddha had in mind and, if different, Mahayana is truer, more beautiful, or better. I think Mahayana is different, better in some ways, but not overall better. I have said I disagree with the Buddha in some things and especially I think life is worthwhile. Mahayana is good in fostering compassion and in valuing this life. Mahayana is more fantastic and interesting than Theravada but the fantasy is so misleading that I feel uneasy saying “more beautiful”. I understand the ideas that ordinary life is both worthwhile and not worthwhile, and that ordinary life and awakened life are both different and the same; I just don’t accept them in the Mahayana context of a greater system.

The ideas that normal life is valuable, and that the common sense naturalistic world is where we should stand, are great ideas. I agree with them. I am glad that Mahayana stresses them in its own way. Sadly, rather than take them at face value, most Mahayanists overlay them with mysticism and metaphysics, and so contradict them and nearly destroy them. I am sorry the ideas get so lost in contradictions, mysticism, metaphysics, aids, contrived resolutions, and attitudes, that most Mahayanists do not appreciate them as they should.

New Attitude.

Since the 1920s, Americans have seen a parade of movements and products that appeal by offering a change of attitude as the solution to all problems. You don’t have to change the world or change your deep self; you don’t have to seek good principles; you don’t have to assess the fit of world and principles; you don’t have to work hard on the world; you only have to change your attitude. To change attitude, you only have to join us or buy our product. Some examples are: “the Jazz Age”; “coolness”; “I got a new attitu-u-u-de”; “M-m-m-my generation”; “I gonna get all up in yo’ face”; “gangsta”, “be aware, mindful, and loving always”; “with your qpad, qbox, or qphone, you are cool”; and “those people are not assholes, they are just exuberant, or they have a legitimate grievance, they represent LIFE, and I should learn to put up with all the variety of LIFE”, “feminism”, “neo-conservative”, and “mindfulness”. To the extent “attitude alone” ignores real issues, it is hurtfully wrong. It is like popping pills or zealous crusading. The idea that you can change the world by changing attitude alone is narcissism. It might be well-intended nice narcissism but it is still narcissism. “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss”. It is a bad version of the idea that you are the whole system, you are God, instead of only a small part of a bigger-than-me.

I think: Instead of only changing your attitude, you have to start by accepting the way the world is and the way you are, the bad and good. The world really does have both good and bad. Bad and good are not only an illusion to make the play of the system more fun. Sometimes you have to change the world, and sometimes you have to change yourself on a deeper level than mere attitude. If your ethnic, gender, or religious group is bad, you have to change yourself, and change your group, or you have to abandon your group. Even if change in attitude is among the first steps, we can’t solve issues of world, self, and group just a change in attitude.

Mahayana reminds me of this silly mistake about attitudes. Westernized popular Mahayana goes along with “change your attitude”, and it feeds the silliest aspects of “New Age”, spiritualism, cheap mysticism, pseudo-rebellion, pseudo-Liberalism, and Conservative backlash. Mahayana says, “Look at the world in terms of a Dharma system in which you are only a small part but you are still what the system is all about, and, really, there is no suffering, everything is wonderful”.

Rebirth and Karma.

Among the ideas that were “in the air” at the time of the Buddha (after 600 BCE) were rebirth and karma. At first, the idea of karma was not as well developed as Buddhists and non-Buddhist Indians later made it. Now, Westerners tend to think of rebirth as like a magic carpet ride. We get many lives to have fun in and to improve spiritually. If we screw up this life, it doesn’t matter much. We can have fun not only during this life but trying to remember our past lives. Karma is relevant but how is not clear, and so it doesn’t matter. You can see the 1970s view of rebirth in the movie “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever” with Barbara Streisand. Among Westerners who knew a little bit about karma, it meant “poetic justice delayed for a while but certain to come”. If somebody treated the poor badly in a previous life, he-she would be born a worm or would become a homeless bum in a future life. “Instant karma”, as in the John Lennon song, is poetic justice on a faster track.

Contrary to the American misunderstanding, in the time of the Buddha, rebirth and karma felt much more ambivalent and sinister. Karma helped explain inequality, and it could give some comfort in the idea that things would even out over the very long run. At the same time, karma felt like harsh fate. What you are now is what you were doomed to be, and so you had to accept it. Life might be pleasant for a few people but not for most people and not overall. The idea of rebirth meant you were doomed to repeat a tedious suffering life forever and ever. Life is a long drawn out curse. Your only chance is to somehow snap out of it. Karma and rebirth were not boons but big burdens. The only silver lining to rebirth is that it gave you many chances to snap out of the cycle of death and rebirth. All this was how the Buddha took it, and how it developed in Theravada and “official” Buddhism. This is why the Buddha said that life is suffering and why he presented his ideas as a cure for suffering.

I am not sure when, and to what extent, Mahayana began to change the official version more to a version like what Westerners see in pop culture. Karma and rebirth are part of a system. The system might be harsh for some particular people for a short lifetime. Yet overall the system is tremendous fun. We suffer largely because we don’t realize that we are part of the “emptiness” or “mind” that generated the system, and, anytime we want, we can return to the mind and go back out again into apparent reality. Suffering is only apparently real on the large scale although it is terribly real to particular people when it happens. Suffering is our way of sometimes reminding ourselves that we are not one particular life but part of a big system of joy. I have seen bits and pieces of the new view in various sutras, and it emerges in beautiful sutras like the Lotus Sutra, but, in most sutras, both views are together at the same time. That sustained dual view is also part of Mahayana. I cannot here argue about various passages in various sutras and how best to interpret them.

The Issues, and some Contradictions.

Mahayana ideas can contradict ideas from traditional “official” (like Theravada) Buddhism. Mahayana has to accept the official ideas because Mahayana is officially Buddhism. Mahayana holds its own ideas while not denying the official ideas that openly contradict its own ideas. The tension between official ideas versus Mahayana ideas actually helps reinforce Mahayana as an ideological system that eats the world, largely by keeping people off balance and making them seek rationalizations.

-Officially, this particular life is not worthwhile and-or is afflicted with deep suffering. In Mahayana, this life can be worthwhile; in fact, it can be joyous.

-Officially, suffering is real. In Mahayana, suffering is mostly an illusion.

-Officially, all life entails intrinsic necessary suffering. In Mahayana, we suffer only when we are trapped in illusions and errors, especially the errors that we are alone and incapable of awakening. As long as we are trapped in illusion and error, then we do suffer. We suffer when we are separated from the system and-or the essential stuff of the system. When we reunite with the essential stuff of the system, then we stop deep suffering.

-Officially, people wake up to the reality of suffering and that life is not worthwhile. In Mahayana, people wake up to the fact that suffering is mostly an illusion and to the fact that life is not assessed according to whether it is worthwhile. Once people are over the illusion of suffering, then they stop deep suffering, and then life is worthwhile. This particular life in the system of many lives is joyous.

-Officially, after people realize that life is suffering, they still feel the suffering, but it doesn't bother them that much because they are on the path out. In Mahayana, after people realize they are part of a bigger system and identical with the "stuff" of that system, a lot of the suffering goes away but not all of it. What remains does not bother them as much. They still feel the aches and pains of the flu but they don't care, they accept it, and they get on. The attitudes toward suffering officially and in Mahayana are similar but the explanations for the attitudes differ.

-Officially, there is no eternal unchanging soul-self, and no essential eternal "stuff" at the core of a system of many lives. We cannot identify our soul-self with the essential stuff of the system because neither is real in that way. The only thing real is that "stuff happens" according to the law of cause-and-effect. For example, our soul is not the Buddha Mind. In Mahayana, there is an eternal unchanging soul-self (see below), there is an essential identity to the system, and the two are the same. Each of us individually is the Buddha Mind or the Unborn; in the terms of Christian and Muslim mystics, each of us is God. Particular and general are resolved in the joyous system of many lives, and only in this way.

-Officially, although the self is not absolute, it is still self enough to save itself. "You can do it". You can work out your own salvation. Sometimes Mahayana carries over that confidence in the self, especially when the self is able to find its connection to the greater joyous system of many lives. More often, the self needs the joyous system of many lives to step in to help, especially in the person of a bodhisattva (see below). We can't find salvation without the help of a great semi-divine mediator. We find salvation only when we take our turn as the bodhisattva, the semi-divine mediator representative of the system, a self that helps all selves.

-Officially, the system of rebirth and many lives can be useful in allowing people to be reborn in a life that might lead to awakening; but overall the system is a burden, not worthwhile, and makes particular lives not worthwhile. In Mahayana, the system always is worthwhile in itself and it can make particular lives worthwhile.

-Officially, people live a sequence of lives. One life of a person is distinctly different than other lives of the same person. The particular soul-self of a particular life does not carry (“anatman”) on but karma does carry on. In Mahayana, all the lives of one person are really the same life. They are all lived together. There is no distinction between the lives of a given person as there is no distinction between any person versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. This self underneath it all is the same as the joyous system. Sequence is an illusion that helps give rise to illusions of separation and suffering. In terms more familiar to modern Western mystics, time is an illusion. What appears as a sequence is really a single simultaneity. What appears to persist through sequence, and to change through sequence, your soul-self, is really what was there all along and what continues as the same through the illusion of sequence.

-Officially, there is a difference between normal people versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. In Mahayana, there is no difference.

-Officially, there is a difference between the life of a common un-awakened person versus the life of an uncommon awakened person. There is a difference between samsara and nirvana. In Mahayana, there is no difference common life and awakened life, between samsara and nirvana. All lives are the same. (“samsara” is the term for misleading everyday life.)

-Officially, there is a difference between asleep people versus awakened people. In Mahayana, there is no difference. All people are already awakened (saved); they just don’t know it yet.

-Officially, normal un-awakened human lives might be as good as any other lives such as of angels, but even human lives are beset with confusion and clinging. In Mahayana, normal human life is filled with the success and joy of the system but normal people don’t know it yet.

-Officially, people are kept asleep by participating in the system of many lives. In Mahayana, people are awake in the system of many lives even if they don’t know it yet.

-Officially, a monk is better off than a lay person. Although you do not have to be a monk to awaken, it is hard to awaken unless you renounce the world, and hard to renounce the world unless you become a monk. In Mahayana, a monk is both better off than a lay person and not better off than a lay person. A seeker is both better off than a non-seeker and not better off. You can just as easily awaken as a lay person as a monk.

-Officially, this world is the only world but this world still is beset with stickiness, clinging, delusion, and dissatisfaction. In Mahayana, this world is as it is, and nothing is better. When the illusions go away, the world does not appear differently. This world is only one way that we look at a greater joyous system. The situation is like a movie, such as “Pretty in Pink”, in which, at the end, the hero (including heroines) discovers that, all along, life was just as it seemed, the apparent illusions were only confusions, the world as it is still is very good after all, and people did love her (him) after all.

-Officially, a person is responsible for his-her own awakening. A person can give some help, and can receive some help such as teaching from the Buddha, but a person has to figure out it for him-herself. In Mahayana, one person can be of considerable direct help to another. Without help, most of us have no hope. Because we need people to help, the system makes sure there are people to help.

-Officially, the highest achievement is to leave the system. In Mahayana, the highest achievement is to stay in the system forever, offering help, until all beings realize the above points, until all beings realize they too are already saved (awakened), realize suffering is an illusion, and realize the system as a whole is worthwhile.

-Officially, if ever everybody realized what is going on and awakened, humanity as we know it would be over. For the system to go on forever would mean that some people remain in dark slumber forever, and the Dharma is never fully realized. Officially, that is bad. In Mahayana, although some persons work to make every other person see the light, that probably won't happen. Some people are always in the dark. So it is more likely that the system will go on forever. The fact that the system goes on forever does not mean that people are trapped in dark evil slumber. It only means not everybody at once knows that he/she is already saved, already enlightened. A few people can wake up and the system still continues on. It works better if a few people do wake up. For the system to go on forever with a mixture of awakened and not-yet awakened beings is a good thing.

-Officially, emotions such as compassion lead to the stickiness of life and keep us from awakening. A moderate amount of compassion is normal, healthy, and helps us awaken, and it goes along with the intrinsic moral quality of the universe; but too much compassion is a trap. In Mahayana, overflowing compassion is a good thing, and it is necessary for the highest beings, the bodhisattva. We can have huge compassion and still avoid the stickiness of life. We need to have huge compassion if we are to see the total system of Dharma, find our place in it, and save all other people.

From contradictions, we can argue anything, including nonsense. From contradictions, Mahayana does argue many things, some of which are sublime, and some of which are nonsense: The idea that this life is worthwhile even if we don't know it is a good idea. Holding both that this life is not worthwhile and this life is worthwhile is a bad idea. "Suffering is an illusion" is a bad idea. "Pie in the sky" imagined kingdoms in which people live in bliss forever is a bad idea. The hope that we can have unlimited mundane and spiritual success at the same time is a bad idea. The hope that we can have wealth and power but not fall into stickiness is a bad idea.

Mahayana Aids: Metaphysics and Mysticism Again.

See Buddhist aids from the chapter on Theravada. Some interesting ideas from Mahayana are listed below. I do not here explain how these ideas lead easily into mysticism and fantasies.

-The bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, or, sometimes, just unborn.

-Emptiness.

-Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Form and emptiness entail each other.

-Everything is mind.

-Buddha Mind.

- Buddha Nature.
- Buddha body in various forms such as Dharma body.
- The unity of particular things with the one source.
- The distinction of particular things even though they are unified in the one source.
- Everything is the same thing, or an aspect of the same thing.
- We are all already awakened.
- We are all already Buddha.
- Buddha nature is in everything and in nothing.
- Nobody ever really is born or dies.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress good versus evil much. If you can, don't find any difference between them at all.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress differences between things. Mountains become valleys and valleys fill up to become plains. Plains rise up to become mountains. Different people are similar.
- The unity of self and other, of particular and general. Particular remains particular even when unified in the whole. The whole remains whole even when distributed into the particular. The particular and whole are unified and distinct in time, through time, and out of time.
- The unity of opposites: we are both saved and damned, we are already lost and already saved, the everyday world and nirvana are the same, etc.
- Great compassion combined with detachment.
- Storehouse consciousness (memory) from which everything came and to which everything flows.

Theravada Monk Self is Wrong.

Not even most Theravada monks really live apart from society. Most Buddhists are not monks, so they cannot feel Buddhism in terms of being a monk and they cannot judge that life not worthwhile in the same way that a monk would. Most Buddhists need a different understanding of Buddhism, and of the relation between Buddhism and normal life. Although most Mahayana thinkers were monks, not all were. Some were lay people. Mahayana says that a person need not be a monk to succeed in Buddhism. This view requires re-assessment of the self in Buddhism.

The Buddha walked the middle path between picking apart the self and bolstering it. Mahayanists said Theravada monks were selfish. Being “selfish” in Buddhism is serious. It means to bolster the self, to make the self more than it is, and thus to contradict the Buddha directly. The usual way of clinging to the self is to see it as an eternal distinct thing; the Buddha debunked that idea. You can also cling to the self by trying too hard to get rid of it, and that mistake is just as bad as clinging to an unreal immortal soul-self. To Mahayanists, that is the mistake of Theravada monks. Theravada monks seek only their awakening and benefit, without regard for anyone else or for society. They cling to the self even while appearing to denigrate and lose the self. They make the same mistake the teachers of the Buddha made when they pushed rigorous self-denial on the young Siddhartha. Theravada monks do not follow the example of the Buddha, who taught after awakening, a sign the Buddha neither clung to the self nor denied it. The Theravada self is a bolstered delusion that Theravada monks use to justify selfish isolation. It is a false re-occurrence of the soul-self that the Buddha long ago had debunked, even though Theravada monks should know better. The Theravada self cannot truly awaken, the Theravada quest for awakening cannot be a true quest for awakening, and Theravada awakening cannot be true full awakening.

Mahayana Levels.

Mahayana thinkers could not just denigrate and discard Theravada monks. Mahayana thinkers had to accept Theravada monks as better than most average people and as true Buddhist monks but without giving them status as the highest grade of Buddhist adept. Mahayana thinkers went beyond a simple distinction between lay people and monks. Mahayanists divided people into grades according to level of “spirituality”. If you accept their system, the grades are fairly clear, and they do go along with human nature. The scale I give is not official but is fair enough. I avoid technical terms (“rysi”, “stream winner”, “arahant”, “shravaka”, and “pratyaka”). Levels (1) through (3) and maybe (6) appear in Theravada but are used differently; it is not worth explaining how.

(1) The first level is a person who understands Buddhism and is committed to eventually awakening but who is not ready to devote his-her life to the task.

(2) The second level is a person who is definitely on the road to awakening, and is ready to devote his-her life, but is not ready to awaken in this lifetime. These people likely will awaken soon, perhaps in the next lifetime. Most monks hope they are this level or higher.

(3) The third level is a person who soon could become awakened if he-she wished. Again, if this kind of person thinks only of his-her own awakening, Mahayana considers him-her to be selfish.

(4) The fourth level is a person who could awaken anytime he-she wished but who chooses not to fully awaken right now, and also not to “go away” and be “thus gone”. He-she chooses to stay in the normal realm of people and to teach people. He-she pledges to remain here in this life, and all future lives, until all people understand and are ready to awaken. In Mahayana, really, this is the highest being regardless of the next levels. This person is a “bodhisattva”. See below. Despite official Buddhist doctrine, the bodhisattva is higher than a Buddha, and people strive to emulate the bodhisattva rather than strive to be a Buddha.

There has been more than one historical Buddha. In fact, there have been millions, perhaps an infinite amount. Not all Buddhas are alike.

(5) The fifth level is a “normal” or “minor” Buddha. This is a Buddha who awakens but does not choose to stay and to teach. This Buddha vanishes from all existence when he-she dies. It is odd to call a Buddha selfish, but I cannot avoid seeing that Mahayanists thought this Buddha selfish. They accused Theravada monks of wishing to be this kind of Buddha and only this kind of Buddha.

(6) The sixth level is a Buddha who does stay to teach. Buddha’s are supposed to completely vanish from all existence when they die, but this kind of Buddha might live a very long time or might even come back more in future lives to continue teaching. I am not always clear on the difference between this kind of Buddha and a great bodhisattva. I think Mahayanists would not allow that a Theravada monk could be this kind of Buddha even if he-she were somehow awakened and then taught, because he-she would be teaching false doctrines. Thus this kind of Buddha was always a Mahayanist.

(7) The seventh level is a great Buddha who changes the world. This Buddha can live for a very long time if he-she wishes. This Buddha can depart after he-she teaches in this lifetime because he-she has changed the world through his-her teaching, and so need not come back in future lives. This Buddha leaves future work to his-her disciples and their disciples, in all their lifetimes. The Buddha of our world and time, Siddhartha Gautama, was this kind of Buddha. By implication, The Buddha was a Mahayanist.

(8) The eighth level is the union of everything while still remaining particular, including bodhisattvas, all Buddhas, and you. The union can be done in terms of emptiness, Buddha mind, or Storehouse Mind; it does not matter.

Although, in theory, a Buddha is above a bodhisattva, in Mahayana doctrine and practice, a bodhisattva is higher. The bodhisattva is the real hero, highest being, and role model of Mahayana – like Jesus or Mary in Christianity. Common people look to the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva ties the ladder of spiritual achievement to the common people and makes the religion come alive.

The Bodhisattva.

For a funny satirical take on how pseudo-spiritual New Age Westerners see the bodhisattva, listen to the song “Bodhisattva” by Steely Dan, and listen to their entire album “Aja” (“Asia”).

“Bodhisattva, bodhisattva
Gonna sell my house in town”

People in chiefly and state societies need figures who are both human and god, and bridge the mundane and sacred realms. These figures are big, transcendent, powerful, and “sparkly” yet also homey and loving. The bodhisattva is an outstanding example of such a figure. Most bodhisattvas were pure made-up characters but some of them had a basis in real people, which makes them an even better example. How the bodhisattva works in the Mahayana system is typical of what happened to other similar figures and how they work in their systems, including people who were both made up and real such as Lao Tzu, Krishna, Moses, David, Jesus, Mary, Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammad.

Believers transformed religious leaders even when real people insisted they were only human and were not God, such as did the Buddha and Mohammad. I do not describe similarities between the Mahayana bodhisattva and other figures. Look for similarities and think how the systems of religions have been molded around their figures as Mahayana has been molded around the bodhisattva. All this yearning for a bridge to the divine and all this mutual molding is true of Jesus too even if he really is God. How we see Jesus is shaped by our need for a divine-human mediator. Think what truth survives mutual molding, in any religion, and how we find the truth in the middle of the system with its glorious leader.

At the core of a system that eats the world is a vague idea, often negative. In Mahayana, the core idea at first was “emptiness” and later “mind”. Most core ideas are too vague for normal people, including mind and emptiness. So, the working core of most systems that eat the world is not an idea but a quasi-person. The person can represent ideas but cannot be too definite in ideas because that would hurt the ability of the system to eat the world. If you believe in him-her, you don’t have to get the ideas fully. You can still be saved. The person does not have to be god officially. Hindus call this solution “bhakti” or “devotion”, and aim it toward gods and avatars. Christians believe in Jesus and Mary, Muslims believe in Mohammad, and Taoists believe in Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and in a variety of super people.

In Mahayana, that person is the bodhisattva. If you are a normal person and can’t work through the odd bewildering abstruse ideas of Mahayana, you can still believe in the bodhisattva and still follow him-her.

In Mahayana, unlike Theravada, you don’t have to save yourself because the bodhisattva does it for you, just as Jesus (and Mary) does it for you in Christianity. Because you don’t have to save yourself, you can participate in normal life and should. You don’t have to avoid normal life because you are saved even while going after normal life. You should vigorously pursue normal life because normal life is the way by which a bodhisattva saves the world. Without normal life, there would be no bodhisattva. Normal life gives rise to the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva sanctifies and saves normal life. You are part of that holy relation when you get promoted in your job, send your child to an elite school, or win a lawsuit. You give the bodhisattva something to do in saving you, and the bodhisattva gives you something to live for.

Bodhisattvas achieve almost perfect awakening. The only difference between a bodhisattva versus an awakened person in Theravada is that a bodhisattva declines to disappear until everybody else has awakened too. The bodhisattva promises to work hard always to make sure all sentient beings awaken fully, before the bodhisattva disappears. A particular bodhisattva might die in this one lifetime but he-she will come again in other lifetimes as the same underlying bodhisattva identity with the same good will and the same powers. Or, a particular bodhisattva might not die in any lifetime but live on until his-her work is done. Because the bodhisattva will not fully awaken until all sentient beings have awakened, in the end, when the bodhisattva does awaken, all sentient beings awaken all at once. All good Christians go to Heaven together in the Rapture.

The character of the bodhisattva satisfies the need of good-hearted people to help others. It gives them a reason to live and a way to live out their needs. In Christianity, a good-hearted godly person can be a priest or monk while in Mahayana the same type tries to be a bodhisattva. The role of the bodhisattva gives good-hearted religiously minded people a way to live their needs without themselves causing too much trouble socially, politically, intellectually, or religiously – they don’t have to win battles, support causes, or argue in churches – unless they wish. They don’t have to save everybody right away. They

can save whoever they can save in this lifetime and then keep plugging away through countless billions of lifetimes, or forever. They only have to meditate, do good deeds on any scale suited to them, be mindful, and preach sometimes to whoever is ready to listen.

The bodhisattva and the common people make a mutual support relation, as Theravada monks do with their people. Through the bodhisattva, Mahayana makes roles for all kinds of people with different hearts and tempers, as did Christianity in the Middle Ages and as did Hinduism until recently.

The bodhisattva lives simultaneously in spiritual and worldly levels. The bodhisattva is a huge success in both realms at once. The bodhisattva can have great wealth and power without being corrupted. The bodhisattva can have spiritual purity and aloofness while still being effective among common people and people of wealth and power. The bodhisattva is like how Roman Catholics see some great popes, how Protestants see Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Billy Graham. The bodhisattva is what Jesus would be like if Jesus saved everybody, Jesus overcame the temptations of the Devil in the desert, and yet Jesus took over the world physically. The bodhisattva is like Saint Francis absorbing early Renaissance power struggles. The bodhisattva combines Jesus and Michael; Mary the mother and Mary Magdalene; Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and Kurt Cobain; or sensitive Alt rock with head-banging Metal. The bodhisattva leads children into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. You too would follow the bodhisattva into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. Who can feel any spirituality at all and not want to be a bodhisattva?

Like a bodhisattva, you can live in both the spiritual and worldly realms at once, and succeed in both. Even if you do not fully succeed in either now, your trying is justified and your life is justified.

The bodhisattva is a cosmic principle embodied, "THE" cosmic principle embodied, all cosmic principles embodied, or the cosmic system embodied. A similar counterpart to the bodhisattva is the Christian idea of Jesus as The Word Made Flesh. "The Word" in Christianity is like one of the key ideas from Mahayana Buddhism such as Buddha Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva is Buddha Mind or Emptiness made flesh. I dislike thinking of Jesus as embodied cosmic principle and I dislike thinking of the bodhisattva in the same way. A similar counterpart in Hinduism is the avatar such as Krishna. Followers of any of the religions can get a feel for the other religions by thinking of how their major figures are the embodiment of a cosmic principle and then seeing how major figures in the other religions are similar embodiments of similar cosmic principles.

Unlike Christianity, which has Jesus alone (or Mary and Jesus in some versions), Mahayana has many bodhisattvas although people usually focus on one as their personal savior. In theory, bodhisattvas, like Jesus, start as normal humans. Some bodhisattvas likely once were real people but now, like Jesus, their mythical attributes eclipse their old human personality.

Mahayanists think Theravada monks are selfish. The good opposite of selfish is all-compassionate or all-loving. So, bodhisattvas are infinitely compassionate. They understand everybody no matter how bad, love everybody, see everything, hear every prayer, and respond to everybody in the way best suited to that person. The bodhisattva ideal of compassion embodies an important value in Mahayana, a value which people definitely feel even if they are not a bodhisattva. People know they are supposed to be

compassionate toward others, and actually try. This value of compassion is one of the most endearing features of Mahayana.

In Mahayana, everybody will get saved in the end because bodhisattvas are all-compassionate and they work actively to make sure each individual is saved. Bodhisattvas love everybody without conditions. Universal salvation is the guarantee of Mahayana that is not in Theravada. Over the long run, you need not worry in Mahayana. The Mahayana guarantee is not just in dogma, the guarantee is manifested in the body of the bodhisattva.

The compassion of the bodhisattva is not a mistake as it might be in Theravada. The compassion of the bodhisattva is not clinging and does not lead to suffering except as some bodhisattvas share the suffering of non-saved beings. The Buddha showed similar compassion when he stayed in the world to teach. The compassion of the bodhisattva is another version of the compassion of the Buddha and vice versa. The exalted compassion of the bodhisattva implies that compassion by ordinary people is usually not a mistake either.

We should not get confused about the idea of salvation in Mahayana. Unlike Theravada and Christianity, to be saved does not mean to escape the suffering of the world. To be saved means to see that you and the bigger-than-me are the same although you are distinct in your limited view here-and-now, and to see that suffering is a normal part of it all. What you feel in salvation is like joy at the beauty, grandeur, and infinity of it all. When you are saved, you go on about your business as an aware part of the greater-than-me, knowing that you contribute to the joy of the system and to the joy of all.

The bodhisattva personifies the cosmic principles of Compassion, Salvation, and Unity with the Bigger-than-Me. The bodhisattva unites Giant Person with Cosmic Principles. That is one what the bodhisattva becomes the soft core of a religious system that eats the world.

Because most people don't get ideas that are so abstract, for most people, the bodhisattva is a person who merges with Compassion, Help, Success, Love, and Heaven. For people who do understand the abstract principles, the lesser understanding of the common folk is alright because (1) they are part of the bigger-than-me even if they don't know, and (2) they will be reborn until they do know.

If you believe in the bodhisattva idea (Savior, Messiah, Christ, or "Maud Dib"), believe the bodhisattva is the representative of the entire system, have found a bodhisattva, have a personal relation with him-her, believe the bodhisattva cares about you, believe he-she can save you, and believe you might become a bodhisattva or become like a bodhisattva, then you are saved in the general Mahayana sense. You are also part of a system that eats the world.

As with Christian saints, there are many bodhisattvas. Each bodhisattva has his-her own personality and preferences. They are like patron saints. The most well-known bodhisattva probably is Avalokitesvara, who started as a man, and then became a woman. In China, (he)-she is known as Kwan Yim, in Thailand (he)-she is Kuan Im, and in Japan is Kannon. She is the equivalent of Mary, and has similar traits. She hears ALL cries for help throughout the universe and helps all needy beings. She appears in Chinese Mahayana fantasies as the Queen of Heaven. She appears in many Chinese movies. She appeared in a delightful TV miniseries about the Monkey King; the series is a good example of Mahayana imagination

mixed with magical Chinese culture; sadly I forgot the name of the series and cannot find it. Needless to stress, she appeals to women.

Mahayanists often become more devoted to their particular bodhisattva than to the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, any Buddha, or Buddhism. They treat the bodhisattva as their patron god much as Christians treat their patron saints as patron gods. They worship their bodhisattva, and are devoted, in the same way that Christians de facto worship Mary and are devoted to her, worship saints, or even worship Jesus. As noted, Mahayanists practice the devotion that Hindus call "bhakti".

Just as the caring of the bodhisattva does not lead to clinging and suffering, in seeking to save people, the bodhisattva does not get caught up in the stickiness and clinging of life in general. Ideally, the bodhisattva is not like a modern-day tree hugger, anti-abortion crusader, worshipper of the free market, or old-style Communist. The bodhisattva can work to save people, love them, and get vested in their welfare, without him-herself getting confused. I am not sure exactly how this happens but in theory it does. The bodhisattva is an apparent exception to stickiness. If the bodhisattva does get trapped in stickiness and clinging sometimes, remember that we are all one with the Bigger-than-Me anyway, and such minor stickiness and clinging is part of the distinction of the bodhisattva within the unity of the bodhisattva with the One.

Because the bodhisattva does not get caught in clinging even though the bodhisattva cares and he-she lives in the world, in the same way, somebody who fully appreciates the bodhisattva ideal and the truth of Mahayana does not get caught up in clinging and he-she can fully participate in everyday life. Everyday life is not a danger to someone who appreciates the bodhisattva and the system. Everyday life is the fulfillment of the ongoing work of the system.

Bodhisattva and Avatar.

In a later chapter, we will see that the Hindu avatar is similar to a Mahayana bodhisattva. To avoid any confusion, it is useful here to point out how the bodhisattva and avatar differ.

The bodhisattva has active compassion for each particular person, wants to save each particular person, and works to do so. The bodhisattva not only helps people as in curing headaches or guiding them to a good used car; the bodhisattva aims to save individual people. In this way, the bodhisattva is much like the savior Christ. The bodhisattva cares about you personally and wants you personally to awaken and succeed spiritually. In Christian terms, the bodhisattva loves you personally, wants a personal relation with you particularly, and wants you personally to go to heaven. The bodhisattva is not mostly concerned with maintaining the system except as the system allows people to awaken.

In contrast, the avatar is more concerned with the system than with individuals. The avatar is here to keep the system going. Individuals need not awaken for the avatar to do his-her job of perpetuating the system. It is only necessary that the avatar get people to feel that they should do what they should do and do it; people need not see that there is a system; need not feel that they are a part of the system; and need not fully awaken even if they do see there is a system and see the need for their role. If sometimes some people do awaken, that is fine, but not necessary. The avatar need not have a personal relation with any particular person to help the system, even if, in some cases, as with Krishna and Arjuna, the

avatar does have a close relation with the person that he-she helps, and the avatar helps the person to see that the system is real (to partially awaken). The bodhisattva is more like Jesus than the avatar is like Jesus even if all three are divine mediators.

In practice, distinctions between bodhisattva, avatar, and the Christ are not great. In saving individual people, the bodhisattva also perpetuates the system. People believe the bodhisattva is concerned with them, and will save them, personally, because of the particular features of the bodhisattva. In that case, their belief perpetuates the system. When people believe the bodhisattva loves them because the bodhisattva is the representation of Buddha Mind and shows infinite compassion to all sentient beings, that belief keeps the system going. In Hinduism, people have a personal relation with a god or avatar through devotion, or “bhakti”. People do not always think of their own personal relation as helping the system, and people are concerned directly with their own personal salvation rather than with perpetuating the system. They do their duty out of devotion to a particular god or avatar rather than because they know their duty is needed for a system, as Krishna taught Arjuna.

I am not sure how much the average Mahayanist feels the love of a bodhisattva for him-her individually and feels that the bodhisattva wants him-her individually to succeed. I am not sure how much system-maintenance overrides personal relations in Mahayana. I am not sure how much difference the idea of a personal relation to a divine mediator makes in the Mahayana support for good institutions and good government. The idea certainly is present in theory. The situation might be as in Christianity, where the idea of Christ’s love for all of us individually is present in theory but the average Christian does not feel it on a daily basis.

This variety and these nuances are typical of systems that eat the world. Although Mahayana, Hinduism, and Christianity differ somewhat in theory but are closer in practice, it is still useful to know something of the similarities and differences in case you read more on any of the religions.

Bodhisattva Pyramid Scheme.

In Christianity and Islam, you are saved to a specific goal. You go to heaven. People who work to save other people work to save them for heaven. In Mahayana, this cannot be so. Heaven is not important in Mahayana. You do not save people to heaven. Because we are all already saved, even people who don’t know they are saved, you don’t save people by getting them to see they are saved. You could do that, but you don’t have to. You could save people in the sense that you open their eyes to the fact that there is a Great System (Emptiness, Buddha Mind) and that they are a part of it. But, again, you don’t have to because they already are a part of it and they already express its operation even if, in their case, its operation does not include knowing about its operation. If people know they are already saved, know they are a part of the Great Joyous System, their joy is greater. In that case, you could save them in the sense that you increase joy. But Buddhism, even Mahayana, is cautious about increasing joy and about guiding people through the promise of increased joy. The increased joy that you get by knowing you are a part of the Great Joyous System is not really much more of an addition than simply being part of the Great Joyous System without necessarily knowing it.

You could save people in the sense that you lead them to see that we are all linked and we all should be good to each other. But, if that is all Mahayana does, it is not different from any other religion. It is no

different than the many kinds of waking up that I listed in the chapter on Theravada, and those, in theory, Theravada went beyond. Mahayana wants to go beyond other religions and beyond those other ways of waking up too.

What do you save people to in Mahayana? To some Mahayanists, that was the point. You don't save them to anything. Most Mahayanists have trouble with this approach.

Yet there is still a sense in most Mahayana that people need saving and you save them to something.

Think about what a bodhisattva does and the causes-effects he-she sets in motion. (1) The bodhisattva puts off his-her own awakening so he-she can awaken other people. (2) What do they awaken to? They have to put off their own full awakening so they can bring other beings to awakening. What do they do as a result of this (moderate) awakening? They in turn put off their own awakening so they can bring other people to awakening. They make another link in a chain. (3) What does the next link do? Those people in turn do the same thing and form a third link in the chain. (4) And so on.

This is a religious pyramid scheme. It has no point. It has no end unless you think of the final awakening of everybody at the same time in a kind of spiritual Big Bang, and most Mahayanists don't really think that way. I distrust pyramid schemes. I return to this theme later.

The pyramid scheme becomes easier to accept if we think this way: Compassion and good deeds are part of the identity of a bodhisattva. You can't be a bodhisattva unless you feel great compassion and are ready to do good deeds. It is part of the bodhisattva pledge. While teaching some people to awaken, the bodhisattva also teaches them compassion and good deeds. When students delay final awakening and instead teach more people, they also teach compassion and good deeds. When those additional people also delay awakening, they teach even more people compassion and good deeds. And so on. Along the way, during the pyramid scheme, a lot of people learn compassion and good deeds. The compassion and good deeds are a pyramid scheme but one with some kind of point. So it is a good pyramid scheme even if misguided about its real mission (compassion and good deeds rather than waking up). This accumulating compassion and good deeds is what most people think of when they think of a bodhisattva and his-her teaching. This strategy is not so different from the idea that all Christians should go out to preach the Good Word, and so through the accumulation of many small efforts, the Kingdom of God will be reached on this Earth.

Unfortunately, many Mahayanists do not think of the compassion and good deeds but of the power and magical abilities of the bodhisattva. People want to tap into that. They do not think of the humanity of the bodhisattva but make him-her into a god. Then waking up is really about becoming god-like even if it is phrased in other words such as Nirvana, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Compassion. I can become like a god if I teach people to wake up. How do I get them to want to wake up so I can teach them about waking up and so become a god? By tacitly getting across the idea that waking up is about becoming god-like. This outcome too is not so different from what happened in Christianity, Islam, and Theravada Buddhism, and deliberately happens in Hinduism.

More Good and Bad Words about the Bodhisattva.

Hopefully, to many people, the bodhisattva is a high-minded goal and a high-minded person. The ideal likely comes from feelings similar to the feelings that guide me to work hard to help the world and guide some Christians and Muslims to help people get to heaven. Some people really do want to work hard for other people and the world. Some people really care about other people and are willing to work for them. This caring is not bad. It does not necessarily lead to bad stickiness. What is wrong with trying to make people better even if it does not necessarily lead them to full enlightenment? The ideal of the bodhisattva is another version of the spiritual knight – and that is a good thing, not a silly thing.

As with many Christians and Muslims who want to save people, the bodhisattva ideal also is often self-indulgence. Anyone who is familiar with Christian or Muslim proselytes knows that many act not so much to help other people as to help themselves. They feel righteous, powerful, and spiritual when they teach other people and when they think they save other people. They do not save other people to heaven, they save themselves to worldly glory. Buddhists are usually less bombastic but the underlying feeling is the same. People who want to be a bodhisattva, and who think they might be a bodhisattva, feel good about being fonts of spirituality. As a font of spirituality, you have to teach (save); if you do teach (save) then you are a font of spirituality (a bodhisattva). In its own softer way, this Buddhist stance is as annoying as the Muslim or Christian who knows the one-and-only way to heaven, and the way is through him-her. I know we all want to feel like spiritual heroes but the bodhisattva way might be a deceptive way to get that. Better to teach people and help them along rather than try to save them.

The bodhisattva enables magical wishful selfish thinking that I would like to minimize in all religions. The Jew, Christian, or Muslim who has an “in” with God trades on magical wishful thinking as much as the Buddhist. It is hard to deal with salvation and spiritual power without descending into mere ugly magic. Buddhists do it as badly as any religious people, and the bodhisattva is as much a magician of success as anything else.

We need to think how to keep good ideas including compassion, and good deeds including giving advice about spiritual advance and being a better person, without misleading elaborations that grow up around figures such as Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, and the bodhisattva.

Quantum Leap.

“Quantum Leap” was a TV show in the late 1980s and early 1990s, starring Scott Bakula. A scientist had found a way for his soul to leap through time and space. He could do so only by entering the bodies of other people in the times and places to which he leaped. While he was in other bodies, the minds of the people lived in his body back in his lab. In the situation to which the scientist went, some severe trouble was coming such as a car crash or kidnapping. Bakula had to solve the problem there so that everything turned out well and life went on properly. When he did, he would leap out of that body and into the body of the next person to help; and so on. The program was a variation of the “Lone Ranger” and similar shows where a hero helps other people despite that the hero is in distress. I think this is the first show in which the male hero took on the identity of women and gay men. The episodes were among the best TV at the time, one of the best shows never to win an Emmy as best show (I think it never won).

Ideally, when the hero had helped enough people with problems, he would leap back into his own body and stay there. As the show went along, the hero met angel-like beings who said they would help him get

back home. However, when it came time for him to get back home, the angels led him to see he did not really want to get back to his own limited body. He liked what he was doing. He liked helping. He liked sustaining life and morality. He liked being all kinds of life and all kinds of people. That was his true real self. In fact, he was like the angels, and among the leaders of the angels. When he saw his true real self, he was willing to abandon his original body and to live forever in limbo so as to keep helping people indefinitely. This is the ideal behind the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar. This same ideal drives James Bond and the characters in the movie “Sucker Punch”. People “get off” on this ideal.

Neither Scott Bakula nor the bodhisattva primarily aim to keep the system going but rather to save individual people; still, by saving people, Scott Bakula and the bodhisattva do keep the system going. In James Bond movies, and “Quantum Leap”, the self-sacrifice of the hero perpetuates the system; and the system was good for the vast majority of people. England, with its class antagonism, was a better option than Russia, China, or North Korea. When the bodhisattva saves people, people do not vanish from the system as in Theravada but keeping going and keep everything else going as well.

You have to decide if this ideal represents something true and deep about the universe, something about human nature, only a theme in Indo-European culture, only a theme in Mahayana as it went through Asia, only a theme in Hinduism, or all the options. You have to decide for yourself if Scott Bakula is more like a bodhisattva or more like God come down to Earth incarnate as perpetual Jesus; or if they are all versions of the same thing.

A Bit More on Waking Up in Mahayana.

Some schools of Mahayana stress the idea of “just wake up” without any preconceived notions of what the world is, you are, what you need to be saved from, or what you need to be saved too – see previous chapter on Theravada. In theory, that is what the idea of awakening without words implies. In practice, nearly all Mahayana stresses waking up to a bodhisattva and the system that the bodhisattva entails. You wake up to become a bodhisattva and to making the system work well. You wake up to getting other people to wake up to the same thing. Some schools of Mahayana have people wake up to being close to their favorite bodhisattva and to living in a paradise forever with him-her, much as Christians do with “being saved in Jesus”. These three versions of waking up are not compatible; they are examples of the basic contradiction of Mahayana. Mahayana schools use various means to make the get along, which I don’t go into here. Zen is the exception that does stress “just wake up”. It gets away with this primarily by ignoring the other ways of waking up and not trying to resolve the contradictions.

The first two ideas of waking up – be a bodhisattva or live with a bodhisattva in paradise – form the basis for a religious pyramid scheme. I don’t describe details more than above. The mix of a pyramid scheme with waking up to a glorious person or a glorious state is common. It is what we find in most Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Gnosticism.

An Imaginary Dialog between Two Advanced Mahayanists.

As far as I know, nothing like the following appeared in Mahayana writing. I can find the ideas in some sutras but I do not cite the sutras. The ideas are mine in that I take responsibility for them but not in that I thought them up. I make fun of Mahayana and Christianity but do not ridicule them. The ideas belong as

much to Hinduism as Mahayana, so keep them in mind. The speakers need not be monks and gender is not specified. “Sati” is spoken “sa tee” but the “ee” is shorter than in American speech. The little girl in the “Matrix” movies is named “Sati”. Both “Jit” and “Sati” can translate as “mind”.

Jit: Hey, Sati, how you doing?

Sati: Hey, Jit, doing fine. Hope the same for you.

Jit: Yeah. I’ve been thinking about bodhisattvas. I think something screwy is going on.

Sati: I’ve been wondering the same. Tell me what you think, and we can compare.

Jit: The goal of the bodhisattva is to enlighten all other beings before the bodhisattva lets go, right? There is more than one bodhisattva. They can’t all enlighten all beings at different times. They have to succeed all at once. They all have to enlighten all beings at the same time and then let go at the same time. So, imagine they all succeed all at once. Then what? Suddenly everybody wakes up. Zillions of them all at once. Then what happens to the world?

Sati: Exactly. Does the world snuff out like some simplistic Theravada candle-headed monk? Does the world start over and do the same thing, and then again, and then again? Saving the world only to have it totally snuff out, or only to start again and need saving again, does not seem like what a bodhisattva has in mind when he-she sets out to save everybody once-and-for-all.

Jit: How about this instead: The world does not ever start or stop completely. Instead, all the time, everywhere, a few beings reach enlightenment, but most beings don’t, at least in this lifetime. The bodhisattva wishes to awaken all beings in their turn but not all at once right now. The bodhisattva enlightens all beings but only in the course of many lifetimes. It’s like “Steady State” instead of “Big Bang”.

Sati: That helps but it doesn’t stop the world from ending. If every being goes out when he-she awakens, then, eventually, all beings go out. The fire smolders to a stop instead of having the bodhisattvas throw water on it a cupful at a time. It’s like “the big chill” or “the big rip”.

Jit: Ok, then, when beings awaken, they don’t go out. That is only a bad Theravada idea anyway. They go on.

Sati: What do they do as they go on? What do they go on as?

Jit: That depends. Some of them go on as a Buddha or bodhisattva. But all of them get reborn so that the world does not run out of beings and vanish.

Sati: Why not just have new beings come into being whenever old beings go out? That would be more like Steady State.

Jit: I suppose you could do that but, then, where do the new beings come from? Why are there only so many total beings at a time? Why are the new beings necessarily asleep? If you think about it, there is not much difference between having new beings come into being versus recycling old beings. It works either way. There are still a few kinks to figure.

Sati: I see what you mean. OK. We can forget about new beings for now. Let's say old beings get recycled even if they awoke in the previous lifetime. They get reborn just like beings that have not yet awakened. But, if they get reborn, aren't they asleep again?

Jit: They are if they don't remember they were awake in a previous lifetime, which, of course, most won't. But that sleeping isn't so bad because it is not the drug-like illusionary not-worthwhile sleep of Theravada. To awaken, and then get reborn, is to become a link in a chain that runs from bodhisattva-to-Buddha-to-common-person without end – in a good way.

Sati: I get it. Everybody gets his-her turn but not all at once. It's like the world is both being enlightened and being reborn not-yet-enlightened all the time in little pieces all over. It is always enlightened and always asleep.

Jit: Yeah, I think that's okay. Anyhow, it gives a Buddha and all the bodhisattvas something to do while they are around. It means their work is never done and always worthwhile.

Sati: And always done.

Who knows but maybe all the beings right now were once awakened but we just don't see that clearly yet? Even if some of the beings have never yet been awakened, still, the world will go on as it is, in a good way, and that means the work of making-and-saving the world is done.

If the work of the bodhisattvas is always done, then what is the difference between being in the world for awakened people and for not-yet-awakened people? People are always fretting about illusion but, if you get this idea, illusion doesn't matter. It is only illusion if you let it get to you. If you don't let it get to you, but go on about your Dharma business, even if you are not yet awakened, then it is the same world for both awakened people and not awakened people. If it were a different world, that would be really odd and lead to contradictions.

Jit: I am glad we don't have to go through all the contradictions. I can follow all that logic but I don't have a knack for it like some people, and it gives me a headache. If the world is the same for both awakened and asleep people, then what is the difference between an awakened person and a sleeping person? Of course, an awakened person knows we are all born and reborn in a wheel of Dharma while the sleeping person does not right now, but so what? We all eat and sleep. We all see the same stars. We all sigh the same sighs.

Sati: Yeah. That has to be true. We were always enlightened, and now we know it. It is good knowing about it but it doesn't make you special or better, unlike what Vim thinks. Even most shitheads are worth something but I wish they would stop being shitheads all the same.

Jit: What about bodhisattvas then? If everybody is already cool, then I wonder why bodhisattvas do what they do. Of course, if they didn't do it, then we wouldn't know about the Dharma, and the upper part of our brains would go on meandering, seizing, sticking, chattering, and being obnoxious. To help people quiet down the annoying part of the mind for both help giver and help receiver. In this way, eventually a wannabe bodhisattva can figure it all out. Helping other people helps both them and yourself. Whenever you have beings who have reached sentience, you have to have a bodhisattva so the sentient beings can use sentience properly, or else sentience is more of a burden than a help.

Besides, in helping people, you have to lead people to see the value of goodness, at least most of the time. Goodness is good. So helping is worthwhile even when it doesn't lead immediately to knowing you are already enlightened.

Sati: A bodhisattva promises not to fully awaken until he-she teaches the true Dharma to everyone. But all bodhisattvas seem to know (almost) all the true Dharma already, so they likely know that other beings don't need to know the true Dharma in an intellectual sense to act according to the true Dharma and so to be awake in their own ways. What is going on here? If a bodhisattva knew all the Dharma but was just holding back until everyone was enlightened, then the bodhisattva does not know all the true Dharma. It is hard to put this in words.

Jit: I can think of a couple things.

First, when a bodhisattva says "until all true beings are enlightened", he-she doesn't mean "all at once". He-she knows that all beings really are enlightened but just don't know it yet, and he-she sticks around to help them all awaken in their turn. Bodhisattvas don't explain it that way because that way is confusing. Normal people think of enlightenment as like heaven, and they want to go to heaven, so the bodhisattva puts it in a way that makes it seem as if everybody will go to heaven all at once. There is nothing wrong with putting it this way as long as the bodhisattva knows better. A bodhisattva who knows this is more like a Buddha than a bodhisattva.

Second, it might be that some bodhisattvas know everything about the Dharma except the one fact that not all beings can be enlightened at once, and so they do dream of enlightening all beings. This seeming lack of knowledge about the Dharma is not much of a lack. It is the last small step before the bodhisattva is enlightened and lets go him-herself. When the bodhisattva figures out that not all beings can awaken at once but they are already awake anyway, then the bodhisattva has done the task and can let go.

The apparent small lack of the bodhisattva is like the little bit of sleep that allows the dream and so allows all the world to be made. Without the desire of the bodhisattva to save all beings, then the world would not be at all. When seen this way, it is not a lack but a fulfillment even better than what would be if the bodhisattva did lead all beings to awaken all at once.

Sati: We need bodhisattvas to teach us. Bodhisattvas remind us of how things work. They remind us that the world cares about us, not in the common way of caring which is finite and sticky, but in its way of caring, which is infinite and not screwed up. When we do good work, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When we see other people as sentient beings and treat them with respect, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When the world works through all of us to fulfill its goodness, we follow the

example of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva reminds us how the world made itself, and continues to remake itself all the time. In effect, the world was made through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the world become conscious of itself through him-her and the others, and through us together; and that is a good thing.

The bodhisattva can represent the goodness and caring of the world. The bodhisattva personalizes the world. The bodhisattva gives people someone to think about when they think want to think a more useful matter besides their breakfast muffin or how cool it would be to have those sunglasses. People can think "You've got a friend in the bodhisattva". Each particular person can think about the bodhisattva however they want. In that way, some people use the bodhisattva to focus attention on becoming a better person and getting along with the Dharma.

Jit: Doesn't that open the door to people thinking whatever they want about the bodhisattva and thinking really weird and selfish stuff like justification, black and white salvation, heaven, hell, levels of heaven and hell, grace, works, God, the Will of God, theocracy, and snuffing out like a candle?

Sati: Yeah, but what are you going to do? There really are bodhisattvas. They do care about the people. Whatever you say, people are going to get wrong ideas. It is up to the community of bodhisattvas (saints) and monks (bishops and priests) to keep all believers (church) on the right track. To do that, they have to be free to think and to share ideas (councils). They have to treasure the sutras. It is up to thinkers to stir things up when needed, like the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama did.

Jit: So, here's the situation. Because the bodhisattva tries to get everybody to awaken all at once, it can't be true that everybody can awaken all at once, or that everybody even needs to awaken. Because not everybody can awaken all at once, we need bodhisattvas to teach. Some bodhisattvas might be a little incomplete but their lack is very small and it helps everybody and themselves, and that is what they mean by holding back the last step until everybody is enlightened. I know that sounds like a contradiction but it isn't. If the bodhisattva did not try, nobody would know what is going on. Because the bodhisattva does try, not everybody all at once can know what is going on. Because not everybody all at once can know what is going on, the bodhisattva has to try. It is good if sometimes some people do know what is going on but not good if everybody all at once knows what is going on.

Sati: You know you come perilously close to logic when you describe the contradiction. The bodhisattva wants to awaken everybody all at once but it is not possible to awaken everybody all at once, at least not without destroying the world. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't"; "I am my own negation". I can overlook that small amount of logic if you can.

Jit: Ha ha. You should hear yourself too.

Sati: You do know that the Buddha did not want to set up an order of monks and nuns at all, don't you? Now both that he didn't want to do it but finally did do it makes sense too. If everybody is already plugged in, then the awakened world is not different from the sleeping world. If the awakened world is the same as the sleeping world, then everyday life is the same as enlightened life. Everyday life is enlightened life. All we need to do is live everyday life in a good way. So this is what the Buddha was really getting to. I can see now how people could screw it up and go on strange diversions. I feel sorry for the poor Buddha.

He had to set up the order of monks so that people wouldn't go off along even weirder roads than being a monk. Monks might not have it all, and might not be able to get it while they are monks, but they are needed so most people can get started along the path, so sentient beings don't abuse the intellectual part of their minds, and so the mind of the world doesn't abuse its intellectual part.

Jit: It feels good to talk this out and to talk with you. I know this is how it should be for everybody, but it can't be like this for everybody all the time anymore than everybody can awaken all at once. Still, the fact that it can't be happy and cordial all the time for everybody does not make the world worse but better. I have a kind of peaceful feeling like everything is alright anyhow.

Sati: Me too. I like talking with you too. Everything is just as it should be. We need the bad stuff to learn from, appreciate the world more, appreciate good people more, and finally wake up. I've see that, most of the time, people can turn bad stuff into good if they try and they have help. When it seems we can't turn one of our particular bad episodes into good, other people can learn from our bad experience and avoid more badness. The world can turn even badness to a greater good. If it weren't like that, then the bodhisattva couldn't eventually save all beings. If the bodhisattva can eventually save all beings, then it has to be like that. All in all, everything really is just as it should be. Ack. We are getting more than a little too sweet here.

Jit: OK. So what do we do? I don't like buying and selling; the hot sun out in the fields makes me dizzy; deciding cases in court pisses me off because most people are such short-sighted selfish jackasses; and if I have to recite one more hearth fire ceremony, I am going to literally piss on the fire and the house holder instead.

I think I will write abstruse sutras explaining all of this. If a person gets them, he-she will think he-she is really smart but really he-she is just too intellectual for his-her own good. That will keep those annoying kind of monks out of our hair so we can live properly. Maybe not-so-annoying monks will talk to us in their free time.

Sati: We could preach along a circuit like Siddhartha did. I hear a dozen monks went somewhere far to the east teaching similar ideas, including our smart friend Bodhidharma. Maybe I will help you write your sutras. If we throw in a few puzzles too, that should keep them busy for hundreds of years.

Jit: I've got an idea for a kickass sutra. If you think about it, the world is about sentient beings yearning for the bodhisattva and about the bodhisattva helping sentient beings. If you think about it, as we agreed above, the bodhisattva makes the whole world. The world would not be what it is without the bodhisattva, so the world could not be made without the bodhisattva. Nothing real and important gets made without the bodhisattva. Everything that is real and important is made through the bodhisattva and only through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the body of Dharma, that is, the world. The ideas of the bodhisattva are the blood of the world. The bodhisattva is all the words of all the sutras come true in a person. Run that through your logic mill.

Sati: Thankfully, most ordinary people have the sense to ignore what we write for monks and to carry on with their lives, being as good as they can. If they listen to good teachers, the good bodhisattvas, without paying too much attention to what we write for monks, then that is best anyhow.

A Kind Word About Mahayana: The World Is as It Is.

Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysics can support the idea that the world is as it is. The world is as we see it and it is not otherwise. This idea is important in Mahayana because it overcomes the idea that the world is full of suffering, and it allows Mahayana to appeal to ordinary people who want to succeed in this world and who want to feel good about succeeding.

Mahayana holds four views about the world: (1) the orthodox Buddhist view that the ordinary world is characterized by suffering and, ultimately, failure; (2) its own view that the world is not really suffering, the world is as it is, and we can succeed in the world; (3) Mahayana used the idea that the world is plastic to imagination (Mind), and used fantastic images of gems, flowers, time, and bodhisattvas to get across the system and our role in it; and (4) [from (2) and (3)], the world is both a fantastic playground and we can succeed. Mahayana never reconciled these views. That it never reconciled the views contributed to its power as a system that eats the world. It is worth looking at the idea that the world is as it is because of its role in visions such as Zen. We can see this Mahayana idea better in contrast to Theravada.

If the awakened world and sleeping world were not the same, then there would be a difference between awakened people and sleeping people. In Mahayana, there is not. So the awakened world and sleeping world have to be the same. The two ideas support each other.

On the one hand, if an idea, practice, or work of art does not change our world then there is little point in committing to it. It is only an amusement. Great ideas and works of art change the way we see the world so much that, in effect, they reveal a new world to us, different than the world in which we had been living. In moving from the old world to the new world, we discredit the old world. We find the old world false in some important aspects. The old world is not necessarily false in the sense of a pernicious delusion but might be false by not living up to its promises and-or our needs. On the other hand, the new world can't be too different than the present world or the difference would be so bizarre that we could not handle it. Even in "The Matrix", the imaginary world is very close to the normal world before the apocalypse, and, while the real world is bleak, still it has people, food, water, machines, programs, life, and death. We have to be able to adapt. The new world must be truer than the old world. If we test the new world, and find it false, then we return to the old world although we know it is not entirely true. Sometimes people can abandon a discredited old world without having a better new world to go to right away, but not very often. We can't leave "here" unless we have a better "there" to go to.

Theravada does not have to prove the world false, only show that it is not worthwhile. But, as a matter of fact, Theravada does harshly discredit the world so as to get us to stop clinging to the present world. The world is not what it seems because people are deluded and follow illusions. People think the world is all about love, affection, planning for the future, and having an immortal soul that goes to heaven. Instead, the world is all about cause-and-effect on bundles that only appear to be a full human self; there are no selves as we think; and we do not have fully free will. As a result of seeing all this, an awakened person lives in a different world than does a person who is still deluded and asleep.

Mahayanists rejected this attitude toward the world. Mahayanists had four motives. (1) To discredit Theravada, Mahayanists had to pick apart the Theravada discrediting of the present world. They had to

discredit Theravada discrediting. They had to re-credit the present world, at least in some ways. They had to place the Theravada discrediting in the greater context of their own style of discrediting and crediting. They had to show that Theravada ideas were wrong. They had to make sure the present world is much as it seems to be. (2) Mahayanists really like this world. They think this world is much more worthwhile than Theravada did. (3) If Mahayana was to appeal to many people, it had to give them a world with meaning for them. It had to come up with a world that preserved the freedom that Theravada had given common people as people and as individuals. Theravada freedom was enough to attract landowners, merchants, soldiers, and the aristocracy but not enough to hold them. Mahayana had to give those people a world that was essentially like their everyday good world but that allowed them to tap into spiritual power too. Mahayana had to give them a world in which they could pursue success while feeling religiously correct. Christianity did the same thing in its arena, using the words of Jesus. (4) To extend (1), Mahayanists had sparkling imaginations. They had another vision of real world, a vision that mixed wonder with mundane reality. To support their glittering vision, they could not allow Theravada to discredit the world in Theravada fashion. Mahayanists might need to discredit this obvious world a bit to shift over to their alternative world but they would not need to discredit this obvious world the same way as Theravada did. To support their vision, Mahayanists still need to discredit the Theravada discrediting of this world and to re-credit this world somewhat.

The motives are not all compatible, but I don't sort out what can go with what. Mahayanists show all four motives and mix them up. There is no point speculating too much about which is the real motive.

It helps to look at how mechanistic reductionism discredits this world and how I respond. Like Theravada, mechanistic reductionism also says that everything is a matter of cause-and-effect, we are all machines, we are nothing but machines, and we have no immortal souls with total free will. I don't dispute much of that. My issue is not whether this idea is accurate but whether it is complete and whether I can live by its picture. It is accurate as far as it goes. I think it is not complete, and I know that I can't live by it. I don't have to return to a made-up world of souls and free will to live by a better alternative. All I have to do is assume the real world is much as it seems. The world is as it is. Clouds might be the product of cause-and-effect but they are real just the same. The color red might arise out of cause-and-effect but it is a color, and it is red, all the same. Love is real. My wife, kin, and friends are real. I allow qualities. I allow that various things are real. To allow qualities and a rich reality does not mean I have to live in a false world of illusion and delusion. That depends on how open-minded I am.

Mahayana takes a similar attitude toward the present world as I do but not exactly as I do. The world is not an ugly delusion. An awakened person does not reject the present world as an ugly false delusion, and that is not how he-she sees the world after awakening. After awakening, the world is as it always has been. Cause-and-effect go along but they contribute to the richness of the world. To a person before enlightenment, the wonder of the world seems like magical illusion, as science would seem to a stone age person. To a person who has awakened, the wonder of the world seems like the natural scientific play of mind, a richer deeper science. What we now think of as fantasy and illusion are really an integral part of the same world. After we wake up, we can accurately gauge the extent to which we ought to commit ourselves to anything. Thus there is no reason to distance yourself from this world. You might as well participate in this world because it is the only world. You only have to not cling to anything in this world more than it merits.

If this were the extent of the Mahayana re-crediting of this world, it would be charming. I would love to go along with this version of the re-credited world. But this version would not have caught on. People need much more. So, instead, Mahayana offered people an augmented re-credited world: The world is as it is. In addition, everybody gets saved eventually. You are part of the joyous system of many souls. You and the real world are at one with the deepest level of truth. Because everybody gets saved eventually, you can continue to do what you want as long as you want. Although the world is mostly as it seems, it is not entirely as it seems. The ways in which it is not as it obviously seems do not undermine your desire for worldly success, as in Theravada. There is a gap between the obvious real world and the real world only because the real world is more fantastic and interesting than most people can imagine. The identity between your soul and the real world is only one aspect of how interesting the real world is. The world goes on forever. To be saved is to understand the identity between your soul and the real world. Because your soul and the real world are identical, you are already saved, you only need to see this. Eventually you will see it. In the meantime, you have all the help you might need in the bodhisattva.

Mahayana could not have offered this version of the world and the self if it had not said first that the world before awakening and the world after awakening are the same world.

This view of self and world is like the metaphysical-ized Bhagavad Gita as I gave it in an earlier chapter on Codes. This Mahayana view is much like the intellectual Hindu view. Once Mahayana developed this view, it no longer differed from standard Hinduism, and so it disappeared. (Standard Hinduism did not develop until several hundred years after Mahayana disappeared, but the precursors were firmly in place, and so the argument stands.) In other places where this view was not already widespread in the culture, Mahayana because the principle vehicle for this view, caught on, and spread, in places such as China, Korea, Japan, and, eventually, the West.

Some Zen thinkers saw this situation and saw that the augmented re-credited world likely was a mistake. They developed the idea of “just wake up” without necessarily waking up to any pre-conceived ideologies. Unfortunately, Zen never got out of the Mahayana metaphysical heritage and often is mired in difficult doctrinal traps.

What is a world like where the awakened world and the sleeping world are the same? If I could convey this idea, I would be a Buddha, and I am not. According to Mahayana doctrine, it cannot be described. To me, if the awakened world and the sleeping world were alike, the situation would be much like the mystic idea that this world already is perfect and heavenly. I cannot see how the two ideas differ. I have already rejected that mystic idea in the chapter on common themes. In any case, here are some hints: (A) It is like watching a parade while marching along with the parade. (B) It is like being a character in a play in a play, like the “play within a play” in “Hamlet”. (C) It is like watching the “Matrix” world of numbers and then realizing you were also a sequence of numbers, watching numbers, and that somewhere there were other sequences of numbers watching you, as a sequence of numbers, watching them. (D) It is like watching a drug addict desperate for a “fix” and thinking that is part of it all too, it adds to the variety, and it is good in its own way. (E) It is like hearing the birds singing then realizing they are screaming at the top of their lungs “I, me, me, mine. Mine, mine, mine, stay away you shitheads, stay away”. (F) It is like realizing that the nuclear energy of the sun that sustains all life is the same nuclear energy that powered the bombs dropped on Japan in World War Two.

Think of the re-credited present world in light of the dialog above. This world is the awakened world. If the awakened world is worthwhile, then this world must be worthwhile. If this world is not worthwhile, then the awakened world cannot be worthwhile. If this world is worthwhile, then daily life is as it is even if we don't see all of it at once, and daily life is good even if we don't appreciate it all the time. It really can be that simple.

The idea that this world is the awakened world, this awakened world is alright, and so this world must be alright too, played a role in Zen. This attitude toward the world merges easily with the Taoist view of the world. Please keep all this in mind for the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

Optional: “Suffering is an illusion” and “Everything already is as it should be”.

The ideas in the slogans are fairly common. There are akin to “eternity in a moment” and “the universe in a grain of sand”. “Everything already is as it should be” is like the idea from above that we already are in heaven. I cannot here go into the ideas much more. Please see essays apart from this book. The idea-slogan that “suffering is an illusion” appears often in Mahayana and Hinduism, and it confuses people, so I say a few words. If this material annoys you, skip this section.

Within any one life, a person might suffer. But “the show must go on”; and so the system goes on. If we could see the system, then we would see that the system of many lives is joyous. The suffering of one life is needed to make the system fun to play, and to enhance the overall joy of the system, just as, for some people, rugby is more fun than golf, and rough sex is more enjoyable than nice sex. Suffering does not characterize the system as a whole. So, suffering is not really real.

If suffering is not real, then either Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha must have been confused, or he must have said the world is plagued by inevitable suffering only as an expedient half-truth to get people over a hurdle to where some people might see a bigger full truth. Mahayana chooses the second option. I don't think you can have this cake and eat it too but I leave that issue to Mahayanists.

Suffering is not real because it is only something that takes place within the context of the system and is useful primarily because it carries the system along. Nobody really suffers forever or dies forever, and whoever suffers now is likely to experience joy in a future life. Everything within the system has a place within the system and takes its place in the system. Everything contributes to the continuation and joy of the system, including suffering. Suffering is not what the world is about even when suffering contributes to what the world is about. Anything that does this cannot be true deep suffering but can be only transient apparent suffering. Real suffering is never to know that you are a part of the system and that your own suffering now contributes to the greater system. “Hold up. It only lasts for a while. You can get through it. Other sentient beings can learn by your example.”

Because suffering is only for a time and only on the surface, and everything matters in the system, then everything already is as it should be. We need not change anything, not even suffering. If we do act on a big component of the system such as suffering, then likely the system had already anticipated what we would do, and we only contributed to what had to be anyway. It is still meritorious to act against suffering because acting against suffering is as much a part of the system as enduring suffering. When we have to endure suffering, it can help to know it is not what the world is all about.

Suffering is only one part of the system, a part that the system has anticipated, and a part that plays its part to support the system. Yet the same is true of EVERYTHING in the system, including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, apple pie, mothers, Zen, preaching, caring for sentient beings, medical practice, cherry blossoms, and joy. There is no difference between them. That is one reason why Mahayanists insist the enlightened (awakened) and unenlightened (sleeping) worlds are the same. If suffering is not real, then all these other things are not real either. Yet Mahayana insists they are real. They are real because they are parts within the system and help carry it along. That is the definition of real in this world.

So suffering is real too. It is just as real as anything. Pain really hurts, at least for a while. Suffering over love or errant children really hurts, at least for a while. I have seen enough people on their death bed with cancer to know that is real. Suffering might not be as real as the whole system – but nothing within the system is. The joy that is characteristic of the system as a whole might outweigh any suffering within the system. But, still, given the rules of the system, suffering is real. It is not merely an illusion.

It can be useful to say “suffering is only an illusion” to some people to get them to see beyond the narrow confines of their life now to the big system. But teachers who use this expedient means should be careful not to set up bad discriminations between suffering and other real aspects of the world within the system. Once students see that suffering is an illusion, they must also be taught that all the rest of the world is an illusion too, and so all the world, including suffering, is equally illusory and equally real.

We would like to believe that everything we don't like is only an illusion or is much less important than everything we do like. We would like to believe that suffering is only an illusion while bravery, facing up to duty, love, loyalty, and the ability to overcome, are all really real. To think this way can point us in the right direction but it can also mislead. Try to see both at the same time.

The fact that we should not hold on to strong distinctions between suffering versus the good qualities of the world is a case of how we can go astray if we hold on to distinctions between things, between this and that, and especially between good and bad. This issue arises in Taoism and Zen. To anticipate, we need to overcome (1) aversion to distinctions as much as we need to overcome the ideas that (2) suffering is not real and is real and we need to overcome (3) holding on to distinctions. We have to see what to hold on to how and when, and what to let go of how and when.

As with much in Buddhism, you have to make up your own mind. Not even a bodhisattva can make up your mind for you.

A deistic view might go like this: The ultimate reality is God, and God does not suffer in the same way that humans suffer. God knows suffering because he knows it through us but he does not suffer as we do. Rather, God feels joy because, overall, his creation is good. True suffering for humans is not to know God; true suffering is not a broken nose or a disappointing date. Even so, within the context of what God created, given what it means to be human, humans do suffer, that suffering is real, and God knows it is real for us. If we trust God, God will reward us later, and that will far more than make up for any suffering we do now. God does not look down on us because our suffering is limited and small compared to his mind. We need to keep all perspectives in thinking about suffering. Sharing our experience in suffering and in overcoming suffering can help other people, and God wants that.

Dual Attitude: This World is all there is but there are also many Fantasy Worlds.

The contradictions in Mahayana show up in contradictory attitudes about reality, fantasy, and the world. On the one hand, this world is all there is, and it is just as it appears. On the other hand, this world is a giant fantasy, of which we see only a small part. If we were awake enough, we would see the fantasy, the true world, and see that our normal world is only a dim shadow of the deeper more fun fantasy. That is how we see eventually that suffering is only an illusion. Suffering is real in this world but not in the fantastic world of which this world is only the dim shadow. Which attitude wins depends on the writer and the audience.

Along with the dual attitude to this world comes another dual attitude about many worlds: Mahayana valued this world but Mahayana also spun out fantasies of extravagant paradises. This world is only a dim shadow of another fantastic and realer world. There are other shadow worlds. Some of those other shadow worlds surely are more interesting and better than our dim shadow world even if they are not ultimate reality either. Still, they would seem like paradise to us. Rather than aspire to final awakening, we can aspire to one of those other better worlds. In those other better worlds, we learn truer versions of Buddhist ideas and are more likely to learn spirituality. Each better world has its own patron bodhisattva. Mahayana was a giant fantasy world factory. This aspect of Mahayana can be much fun.

In theory, good teachers can use this aspect of Mahayana to teach spiritual lessons and to guide people to better belief and better action. That is part of what is included under “expedient means”. This does not happen as often as it should.

In practice, this trend toward other worlds and paradises turned into “millennial” movements. People use this world as a stepping stone to other better worlds. Teachers develop methods that people can use to go to other worlds, such as reciting sutras, chanting verses, sitting in certain kinds of meditation, eating or not eating foods, paying money, having sex, etc. People love this sort of thing, and Mahayana obliged. Kipling made fun of it in his novel “Kim” in the relation between the rich woman and the monk. Mahayana seems to be more prone to this fantasy fulfillment than other major religions except Hinduism. Christianity and Islam had their versions as well. I give a brief example below of a Mahayana version.

Another Kind Word: Everybody is a Valuable Person.

If all we are is a bundle of grasping tendencies, it is hard to feel good about ourselves. The Buddha did say that everybody is capable of working out his-her own salvation, and that idea helps us recover good feelings about ourselves, but it is not always enough. Mahayana said that we are all equal parts of a great system, and that idea does appeal to ordinary people. It makes them feel important. Mahayana supported this idea by saying we are all already the heroes of the system, bodhisattvas, even if we don't know it yet. Because the overall system is good, we are its heroes, and the awakened life is the same as ordinary life, we can pursue ordinary lives feeling justified and confident. These ideas too helped promote Mahayana. I don't think we are important because we are the hero-of-the-system in disguise, but the idea that people are important is a good idea, and I agree with it. It is worth looking at this idea in Mahayana for its own sake and because it played a part in later developments in Mahayana, in particular the development of Zen.

In trying to explain how everybody is capable and already saved, Mahayana had to provide a model for (1) individual minds, both as they are effective and as they are deluded, (2) the effective one general Mind of which every particular mind is a part, and (3) their union. Mahayana had to show how we think at several levels in several ways. In doing so, Mahayana anticipated modern analyses of the mind. It advanced the work already begun by the Buddha. Here I cannot go into the details of these Mahayana analyses of mind and Mind.

One of the most important sutras in Mahayana is the “Vimalakirti” Sutra. It is named after an awakened layman, a merchant, who knows far more than most monks and who kicks the spiritual pants off most of the Buddha’s best students. Vimalakirti is fabulously wealthy. He “owns the world” but is not owned by the world. Vimalakirti understands wordless direct transmission of the Buddhist Dharma. He knows that the regular world is also the divine world but that we are confused and do not know. Vimalakirti differs from other lay people in being quite intelligent but that is not why he is spiritually successful. Vimalakirti is successful because he knows he already is a Buddha-bodhisattva while ordinary people, including most monks, do not know. It is not clear why he knows about the world and about being a bodhisattva while other people do not know. Anyhow, his knowledge gives him power over the world, over magical spiritual beings, and over people. Vimalakirti can tap into knowledge to defeat the other students of the Buddha. Often, Vimalakirti defeats other students through his control of reality and illusion, and his ability to make seeming fantasy come true. It is an excellent example of fantasy worlds in Mahayana. The Vimalakirti Sutra is short and really fun to read.

The sutra is largely the story of Vimalakirti leading a group of advanced-but-not-quite-there-yet students of the Buddha on spiritual and fantastic adventures, and through tricks, until they “get it”. The sutra is a good example of the mixture of logic, stories, and fantasy.

A fully advanced disciple of the Buddha, Gatsyapa, is having trouble with other advanced disciples who know a lot and have spiritual power but don’t get the last important step(s) both moral and for waking up. The advanced-but-not-advanced-enough disciples don’t quite see yet how they are the great system, and so they are all other people, and so should be nice to all other people. Gatsyapa takes the not-advanced-enough students to Vimalakirti. Of course, they look down on him because he is not a monk, and, in fact, he is a merchant. They don’t know he is rich and powerful. Gatsyapa and Vimalakirti pose questions and tasks to the not-advanced-enough disciples in the form of a contest versus Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti defeats them always. More importantly, in defeating the not-so-advanced students, Vimalakirti teaches them and shows them compassion. He helps them in the only way that they would take help – expedient means – and gives them what they truly need most.

In several of the tasks, Vimalakirti shows his mastery of the great system, and his unity with it, by making the appearance of reality change. He causes flowers to rain down and jewels to sprout up. He changes the shape of being such as by making them big and small or by making humans into animals and vice versa. He causes beings to change gender.

In mixing supposed reality with fantastic events and imaginary worlds, Vimalakirti shows that Mind is the source of all reality; the Great Mind and our minds are one; and so we too can create reality according to our attitude toward reality. At the same time, Vimalakirti shows that the present reality is just as real, as

fantastic, and relevant as any made-up apparently fantastic reality. Vimalakirti both relativizes and affirms normal everyday life.

The sutra deliberately makes the point that women can excel too; I won't tell you how women do it; read the sutra and see if it supports modern feminism or not.

The excellence of Vimalakirti the layman, and the fact that he affirms the normal world, allows non-monks to have great hope in Mahayana and to find a place for themselves in Mahayana. I think the sutra is early in Mahayana, so the ideas and attitudes expressed in the Vimalakirti Sutra were part of the basic ideas and attitudes in Mahayana.

This sutra led rich people, aristocrats, soldiers, and peasants to adopt Mahayana. Mahayana wanted to make normal people the equal of monks because it was still fighting Theravada and it needed the support of the community. Mahayana succeeded in taking over through ideas such as are found in the Vimalakirti Sutra. That effect does not mean the Sutra is wrong or right, but it should lead us to look at the ideas with a grain of skepticism.

Despite all the good points of the sutra, it has some bad aspects, and, for me, the bad outweighs the good.

Mahayana suggests all we need is a new attitude. I do not like this stance. The Vimalakirti Sutra is a good example of why I don't like this stance. Vimalakirti might be clever but he is not (what I consider) a good person. He is manipulative, deceitful, and arrogant. He knows he is better than almost all the other students, and acts like it. He knows he is advanced and superior, and he enjoys it. He enjoys power. He manipulates the real world as a fantasy out of his own imagination, mostly to show off. He makes fabulous worlds of flowers and gems. He enjoys being able to bend the whole world. He enjoys his tricks and status. The Sutra officially makes the point that his tricks are all designed to bring the other students to full awakening but that is not the impression I get. The idea that his behavior is expedient means toward the enlightenment of inferior others seems like a rationalization for acting badly. Maybe strong people were supposed to act like that in India at the time but I still don't like it. If Vimalakirti represents the system of the world in Mahayana, I don't like that either. Don't get me wrong. The Sutra still is worth reading. But read it critically and not with devotion.

I think the attitude of Vimalakirti is typical of Mahayana adepts and powerful lay people, and it is also typical of adepts and powerful people under later Hinduism. The Sutra gives a good idea of the direction of Indian culture after the Buddha.

In Theravada, a person who is close to awakening is usually a monk. The fact that Vimalakirti was not a monk has always been important in Mahayana. Anybody can be a spiritual hero; even a rich powerful merchant can be a spiritual hero. Vimalakirti is a role model for people who want to succeed in this world and to be spiritual heroes too. The stress varies between how much stress is put on his spiritual prowess versus how much is put on his character as a good person.

Vimalakirti is saved and knows it. We don't see how Vimalakirti got to know that he is saved but the sutra makes it seem he realized his status as a hero fairly quickly. This situation leads to a few problems.

First, on the one hand, it takes a lot of time and effort to get saved while, on the other, it takes no time or effort but simply a realization. Second, Vimalakirti knew he was saved but most of the lay people who might use him as a role model don't know. They might use him as evidence they are saved but they don't know it or feel it in the same sure way Vimalakirti does. Lay people want assurance that they are saved even if they don't know it. Third, Vimalakirti manipulates the world with miracles and displays of spiritual prowess. The world that Vimalakirti lives in does not seem like the ordinary world that ordinary people live in. It does not seem as if the world is as it is and is not otherwise. Fourth, suppose we are all already saved. Vimalakirti is rich and powerful. Most people are not. In fact, many people are miserable. It is little consolation to know you are a bodhisattva if your children are hungry. What good does it do to know that secretly you are saved and a bodhisattva? What difference does it make?

Mahayana never solved these problems. These problems played roles in the metaphysical elaborations of Mahayana. Other religions also have problems, and their problems play a role in their metaphysics. Jesus and the Trinity in Christianity is a good example.

While trying to solve an insoluble problem, Mahayana did some good. It forced Buddhists to look at the quality of normal life. It forced Buddhists to accept that normal life can be quite good and that normal people can be intelligent and adept. It forced good Buddhists to give up pretensions. It forced good Buddhists to think about involvement in this world rather than simply escaping this world, and to think about what is good or bad about involvement in this world. It reinforced the idea that the bodhisattva loves each of us individually and works for the salvation of each of us individually.

I solve some of these problems by pushing them off on to God. There is no absolute success. We don't make it on our own although we can help ourselves. Finally God decides. I don't have to speculate on grades of people. All I have to do is assume nearly everybody has the ability to be good enough and to act well enough. My assumption is not fully true but is true enough. With the dilemma settled, I can focus on the quality of life and on getting people to see more and to act better. In effect, this is what most Buddhists do too but with more theological drama along the way. Sometimes the drama is entertaining and worthwhile but often it is annoying.

Good Result: Buddhism and Imagination.

Fantasy is not always bad. Usually fantasy is good. Mahayana opens up imagination. Theravada is not very imaginative. It can be dour. Theravada countries have imaginative religion but it is usually outside mainstream Buddhism. The people of Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Laos certainly do not lack imagination. Mahayana does not guarantee that Buddhism will be more imaginative but it does open the door, and it provides idea grist for the fantasy mill.

Wherever Mahayana goes, there goes Buddhism too. As with Christianity carrying along the message of Jesus, Mahayana carries along the core teachings of Buddhism: personal responsibility, a critical attitude toward the world, a critical attitude toward relations with the world (clinging), a critical attitude toward selves and their relations, respect for sentience, respect for life even when life is not worthwhile in a deep sense, respect for beauty, profound morality, empathy with people not like you, cause and effect, judging according to outcomes, analysis, not picking apart without cause, picking apart properly when useful, not bolstering without cause, and bolstering properly when useful. Buddhists, even Mahayanists riddled with

fantasy and ideology, tend to have a good attitude. While Buddhism officially declares life not worthwhile, Buddhism is one of the worthwhile things in life, and tends to make life worthwhile.

If you have an aptitude for Mahayana and Hinduism, then run with it. Imagine about many lives, systems of many lives, and the joy that goes with such systems. Imagine what it is to lose your self in order to make such a system, to lose your self in a system, and to find your self again. Imagine what it is like to really help somebody in a system. Imagine what it is like to succeed or fail in such a system. Imagine when hurt is real and when it is not. Create art about it, including painting, music, and poems. I ask two things: First, don't look down on other people as deficient in depth or imagination. Second, don't create religious pyramid schemes based on worldly success or misleading spiritual success, especially if the winners in those pyramid schemes look down on people in other religions as losers.

To really get across the idea of Mahayana imagination, I would have to tell Mahayana stories. I cannot retell a Mahayana story but I can give my short version of a story from the Lotus Sutra:

A rich man had six children. They all lived in a beautiful house in a beautiful estate. The man picked up his children after school to take them home, and often brought home their friends too. One day, he picked up the friends but did not find any of his children at school. Instead, they were all at home doing various activities that each of them liked personally such as playing computer games, watching movies on TV, cooking, playing guitar, surfing the Net, texting, and talking on the phone. Unfortunately, the house had caught fire, and the father could not run in to save the children. Instead, he called them on their cell phones to tell them the house was on fire and they should run out. But, like many children, they did not believe their father, and would not come out. Luckily their friends were still in the car. So, the father had the best friend of each child call the child, and tell the child something that would make the child come out of the burning house. One friend told a child that a great guitar wizard was playing an impromptu concert in the park, and they should go see it. One friend told a child that he just got the latest version of Xbox, and they should go to his house to play it. One friend told a child that a new Thai restaurant had just opened, and was giving lessons on how to make Tom Yam Gung (shrimp soup), so they should go learn. One friend told a child that the local artsy movie theater was showing the director's cut of "Blade Runner" that day, and they had to see it. All the children came out of the house, and all were saved. Although the phone calls are lies, they serve the greater truth of getting the children out of the burning house into the beautiful estate, where they are safe, know they are safe, and can go on to the other activities described in the phone calls when appropriate. This story is an example of the good use of "expedient means" of teaching that are suited to particular people in particular situations.

Mind of Dead Ashes.

Mahayana was right in some of its criticisms of Theravada. There is no point in reviewing all the disputes between the schools. One judgment merits repeating. When we pre-judge the world as "not worthwhile", we tend to reject it completely and blindly. When we see clinging as the root problem, we want to end clinging rather than manage clinging. Clinging is an intrinsic part of the mind. We cannot have a mind without clinging. So, to eliminate clinging, we are tempted to eliminate the mind altogether. We ask of meditation that it helps us to eliminate clinging by eliminating the mind. Mahayanists said of people who follow this path that they seek to turn the mind into a "heap of dead ashes". Trying to deaden the mind and body is the mistake that the young Siddhartha made when he first studied under ascetic masters.

Young Siddhartha had to get over this mistake before he could fully awaken. Clinging might be part of the mind but we cannot get rid of the mind while we are still alive. Somehow, we can manage to have a mind and yet not cling in ways that undermine waking up. We can manage clinging. Mahayanists said Theravada had returned to the error of trying to eliminate the mind so as to eliminate clinging, and so had subverted the progress the Buddha had made. To cling to the mistaken idea of a dead mind is still to cling, and so still to have the mind that you seek to kill. This is one of the sublime ideas that can surface in Mahayana.

From what I have seen, Mahayana meditation is just as rigorous as Theravada and just as likely to turn the mind into a heap of dead ashes. Japanese Zen meditation is extremely rigorous; sometimes ironic given its goal of spontaneity. Maybe the difference between good Buddhist meditation on the one hand, Theravada or Mahayana, versus sterile asceticism on the other hand, is the guidance of an adept master who knows how to train the mind and still preserve the mind. In this regard, I think both Theravada and Mahayana fair about equally. I think adept Buddhists in both schools know how to train the mind and still keep it lively. The difference is that Mahayana has a clear doctrine that helps to keep masters aware of the problem while Theravada masters have to re-learn the idea on their own. Mahayana masters have a doctrine that tells them about the mistake of clinging to a dead mind while Theravada masters simply get to know. I am not sure how much of a difference that makes in actual practice.

Bad Results: Spiritual Pyramid Scheme (again) that Supports Fantasies.

In the 1960s, a Mahayana monk came from Europe (likely Germany or Austria) to live on Koh Samui (Samui Island of Thailand) in the Gulf of Thailand, a short hop across the water from Temple of the Foggy Garden (Wat Suan Mohk) on the mainland in Thailand. He often visited Suan Mohk. In the large meeting hall, he painted images to illustrate Buddhism. I never met him, so I can't be sure he was a Mahayana monk, but the Theravada monks that I did meet and who met him said he was a Mahayana monk, his images are from the Chinese Mahayana tradition, and most Western monks I have met are Mahayanist. His painting is skilled. I enjoyed it, and learned from it. To sum up his vision in writing, he wrote in big letters in the painting hall: "What great joy to know there is no happiness in this world". That slogan captures a core idea in Mahayana. Mahayana is a way of having joy while pretending the world is full of suffering. It is a way of having your cake and eating it too. The quest for joy pushes aside the issue of suffering. Joy replaces happiness. If we get joy, we don't have to worry about happiness or suffering. If we can't work for happiness, we can work for joy. I think, if we seek joy like this, we have left the Buddha behind. This new path might be better than the original path of the original Buddha, but I think we need to be cautious about assuming so. The slogan quickly becomes double talk. Mahayana does express some great truths but at great danger.

The German monk was intelligent, sincere, and somewhat correct. I see what he aimed at. On lesser levels, his slogan is true, and it is an important lesson in life. If we quit trying to be super-rich, we can enjoy the considerable success we already do have. If we quit pining after the air-brushed version of a movie star, we could enjoy our present spouse and family. But this is not what the monk was after, and it is not what comes out. What comes out is something like "freedom is slavery" from the novel "1984" or the contradictory chatter of the Chesire Cat and Red Queen from "Alice in Wonderland" in which words mean what the cat wants them to mean. We have a contradiction, from which we can assert whatever we want. We can make "happiness" and "joy" mean what we want. Hucksters do that. In these cases, we

have to trust the good will of our teachers, and we have to read a lot of sutras to make sure we are not fooled and we get it right.

In Mahayana, the world is not invalidated by suffering. The world can be a source of joy. If the world is illusory, we live in illusion, but illusion is not something to worry about, illusion in itself does not cause suffering, we can enjoy illusion, and we can easily overcome illusion when finally we wish. There is nothing odd to realize, so there is no awakening except to know there is no awakening. The point is the journey, not the destination. Countless bodhisattvas work all the time unceasingly for uncountable eons to save us all, that is, to get us all to realize that we have already been saved and so don't need to be saved. We don't even have to do anything ourselves except to allow bodhisattvas to save us. We need only allow ourselves to become a Buddha. We can carry on doing whatever we want to do for as long as we want to do it because the whole game does on forever, and our brief time right now need not worry us. We are saved because we are caught up in illusion, not because we get out of illusion.

This is a spiritual pyramid scheme. There is no point other than getting other people to see the same as you do. Mahayana became a religion in which some people save some other people, so the other saved people can save more other people, and then the more other people can save even more other people, and so on. You feel good not from teaching people about the value of this world but about saving them so they can save others. Yet there is no point to the saving except to go save more people. There is no point except the continuation of mystic joy in the continuation of mystic joy. There is no intrinsic message, such as "this world is not worthwhile, it is beset with suffering and illusion". I am suspicious of pyramid schemes that have no goal other than self-continuation.

This paragraph won't make full sense until the chapter on Hinduism, but it fits here. In Mahayana, you do your duty in this life so other people can do their duty, other people do their duty so you can do your duty, and the world can go on. In future lives, other people might have the role that you do now, and you might have the role that they do now. You might be the bodhisattva now but they will be the bodhisattva later. The only salvation is that it all keeps going in the joy of knowing there is not necessarily happiness in this particular life but there is joy in the total system. In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas and Buddhas are much like avatars in Hinduism. They are like Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita, or like other avatars of the god Vishnu, the god who sustains the world. They are manifestations of one of the high gods, come down to Earth to save us and to keep us going in the self-sustaining, self-justifying joyful game that is existence. This conclusion is specifically against the teaching of the Buddha. It might be true, but, if so, then the person who believes it cannot be a traditional Buddhist. Movies about the Buddha tend to take this view. People who see movies about the Buddha ought to hold in mind that the Buddha insisted he was only human and never in any way a god or an avatar of a god.

In the chapter on Theravada, I said that particular activities in life might not make life worthwhile, but, somehow, the whole experience is worthwhile anyway. Life is worthwhile. This is not the same as saying there is joy in the whole system even if this particular life is not necessarily happy. The flavor of the two ideas is different, and the difference is important. Both Mahayana and I disagree with Theravada, and we both affirm this life, but we do so in different ways, and the different ways matter.

An annoying result of Mahayana is the development of fantasies about paradises. When people don't know exactly what it is they are saved to, and being saved so you can save other people doesn't make it

as a deep guide for this world, then people find goals in traditional kinds of salvation such as paradises. Bodhisattvas save us to paradise. As the basis for spiritual pyramid schemes, the idea “not happiness but joy” supports these fantasy kingdoms. It helps people to substitute magical formulas and gigantic housing developments in the sky for serious consideration of what this life is all about and how to live it well. Anytime we have an idea that supports bad misuse, we have to go back to the idea, look it over carefully, find where it went wrong, and correct the problem. We have to correct the problem not by adding layers of mysticism but by making the situation clearer. Here I don’t describe any particularly Mahayana paradises because it takes too long. The example below has to serve.

Fantasies about joyous religious success are found in all mass popular religion in state societies. It can be hard to tell if a fantasy kingdom owes more to bad Mahayana or to bad mass religion. It helps to see an example that is not explicitly Mahayana although I think it reveals the Mahayana spirit. My wife, Nitaya pointed out a sect like this in Thailand in the 1990s. Because Thailand is Theravada, the sect should not have had features of bad Mahayana; but it did. The sect was called “Thammagai” or “dharma body of the Buddha”. The phrase is from the orthodox scriptures but that is not relevant. The sect twisted the original meaning of the scriptures so as to support a pyramid scheme in which you could buy your way into levels of joyous Buddhist heaven. If you are not happy enough here, you can buy joy in the afterlives. Orthodox Theravada allows for heaven but heaven is not important in Theravada; it is merely a leftover idea from other times. In contrast, Thammagai stresses heaven. Thammagai heaven is divided into many levels, each with its own vision of the Buddha. You get to a particular level with a money donation appropriate to that level. The sect became wealthy. The central temple was imposing, like the central church in an American mega-church network. The sect was on its way to building other luxurious temples around Thailand. Then the governing council of Buddhism in Thailand reviewed Thammagai ideas and declared them not orthodox and not Buddhist. Thailand has freedom of religion, so Thammagai can continue in some form, but it cannot present itself as orthodox Theravada Buddhism. My wife and I were not able to study the sect enough to guess if it did more harm than good overall. My impression is that Thammagai gave lip service to good Buddhist conduct but was far more focused on the money donations of believers than on their behavior.

The Benefits of Being in a System, Both East and West.

For some decent Mahayana ideas in the West, I suggest the websites of Shambhala Press and Wisdom Press, especially books for self-help. The books by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the nun Pema Chodron are well-known and generally useful. Most books on all subjects are short and are written in graceful English.

Robert Thurman pioneered in presenting Tibetan Buddhism to the West. For here, we can take Tibetan Buddhism as Mahayana. As a youth with a growing interest in spirituality, Thurman writes of having the following ideas-and-feelings, and of having them validated by experiences:

- Thurman was not alone; he was part of something bigger than himself
- Something protected him
- Something guided him along, opening doors as needed, and preventing severe badness
- There were tasks for him to do to help the bigger-than-himself
- There was a plan for his life

- In serving the bigger-than-himself, he found the greatest fulfillment for himself as well
- The guiding hand was a combination of his particular karma and the greater dharma of all
- Doing all this was a source of great joy
- Tibetan Buddhism provided the best rationale for all this

These ideas-feelings are true of all major religions. For particular people that have them, the feelings-ideas are validated by experiences that reinforce their own religions; a Buddhist finds the right meditation technique where a Muslim finds the right Mosque and-or the right prayer, and both attribute that finding to forces that guide us on the right path. Where Mahayanists see karma or feel the hand of a bodhisattva in caring for them, Christians feel the guiding hand of God, Jesus, or Mary. I am not sure about Judaism as a formal religion but particular Jews do have these feelings-ideas and the feelings-ideas are in Jewish writings. Even hard-core materialists think science and morality are a bigger-than-me to which they contribute, and think that the scientific-and-moral community guides them to be a better person. Their community (scientific method practiced in a group of real people) corrects them when they are wrong, and keeps them on the right path to a greater whole.

Christians often have told me of the feeling that God guides them, helps them to find good things to do, keeps them out of trouble, gives them ways to serve, and gives them ever greater understanding. Many Christians believe God has a plan for each person. The greatest joy imaginable is finding God's plan for you and doing what God wants as part of that plan. That is the best way to worship God and to value his creation. The biggest difference with formal Christians versus Mahayana Buddhists is that Christians worship God rather than belong to a system; but that seems like not much of a difference to me when these feelings come into play.

I do not know Thurman. I cannot speak for Thurman. I guess he would not deny or belittle the feelings-ideas of any other people in any other religion. I doubt he would even say he was more accurate than other people or religions. He simply reports what works for him and what feels right to him. He acts from humility and from good-hearted useful religious relativism.

The fact that this mindset (stance) appears in all major religions does not mean either that it is true or false. It is not true just because it is common; the belief in ghosts is common but still false. Likewise, this stance is not false just because it is widespread and fills the needs of vulnerable human beings. This stance is neither true nor false just because the basis for it evolved. We have to judge what parts are true and what not.

I have already denied karma previously in the book, and I have denied in this chapter that bodhisattvas secretly guide us. I doubt God has a detailed secret plan with a goal for each of us. I doubt God interferes directly in the world to help individuals, nations, or religions, although he might intervene a little bit sometimes. Rather, God, through evolution, gave us enough natural abilities to enjoy the world, get along pretty well, and be good people. God set up the world with enough variety and opportunities so we each can make lives that are meaningful to us and serve God. I try not to mistake the richness of the world, and the cleverness that God-through-heredity gave me, for direct divine intervention in everything. I try to enjoy the results when I can, and to use the richness and opportunities to good ends.

The Mahayana vision in general is like Thurman's feelings-ideas. If you feel any of these feelings, similar to Thurman about being part of a big system, or even have ideas more in line with what I think of being a small player in God's carefully crafted world, there is nothing wrong with you, and you have nothing to be ashamed about. Think what might really be true and not true. Think what difference it makes to what you do or don't do. Would you do what you do anyway even if you were not guided by the hand of God or by the dharma? Would you act according to the right principles anyway? You can still find a role for God, dharma, or science even if you base your acts on right principles.

Mahayana and Good Institutions.

Like Theravada, Mahayana does not intrinsically give rise to good ideas and institutions such as respect for law, the Western value given individuals, teamwork, democracy, science, charity, schools, hospitals, social justice, and taking care of nature. Mahayana can understand their value when it sees them, and it can be interpreted to support the institutions once they are set up. Mahayana can lend itself to good government and society once they get going. Japan and Korea are examples. It is up to the people of particular countries to value proper institutions, set them up, and to find in Buddhism the right attitudes to keep good institutions going. I think that will happen in most Buddhist countries, even in China where Buddhism supposedly died out, and even in Burma (Myanmar) where socialist tyranny has tried to stamp out Buddhist rationality for many decades.

Mahayana, Bodhisattva, Formal Christianity, and Jesus.

This section is not a comprehensive comparison of formal Christianity with Mahayana. This section only makes a few points of comparison. Formal Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism are systems that eat the world. I do not explain here how. In this section, I mix items from formal orthodox theology, Christian and Mahayanist, with items of common belief. I do not pick silly items of common belief. I do not defend my choices here.

Either formal Christianity or Mahayana might be true despite being a system that eats the world. It is not likely both can be true but I don't argue here which might be most true. I am already on record declaring that the teachings of Jesus are the most important. People with good intentions who argue that "both are true" mean the points that the systems share in common are true, such as we should be good to each other and that God and the Dharma both care for us and guide us. You have to decide what the points are and how true they are. You have to decide if these true points make either Christianity or Mahayana as a system true, true enough, or more true than alternative systems.

Keep in mind these different views of Jesus:

(1) The idealized Jesus who is fully God, and who is perfect in all ways. This view of Jesus might be true. You have to decide.

(2) The human Jesus of official Christianity who had difficulties but overcame them because he was God and was effectively perfect. This Jesus is included in Jesus (1) unless otherwise stated.

(3) The real human Jesus from my point of view, who was human, made mistakes, sometimes erred, but still managed to convey great truths and start a great movement.

A large share of the Jesus that we think about was not the real historic Jesus but is the mythical idealized Jesus of a system that eats the world, like the bodhisattva. Formal Christianity holds that all these Jesus-es coincide exactly.

The fact that both Jesus and the Buddha were real persons does not bear on these issues. The fact that Jesus was real while bodhisattvas are largely made up might bear on these issues in another account but not here. The fact that Jesus might have been resurrected does not bear.

Above I said both Christians and Mahayanists feel they are guided by something bigger-than-me, and this common feeling makes the religions more similar than different. This feeling can be part of a system that eats the world by keeping people part of the beliefs. I cannot here go into detail how this effect happens in general or in each of Christianity and Mahayana.

In theory, Mahayana and Christianity differ in this: In Christianity, people can go to hell forever. Most people are not saved. Only a few people go to heaven to be with ideal Jesus. In Mahayana, everybody is saved eventually; everybody awakens eventually even if only to the fact that they have been saved-and-awakened-as-part-of-the-Dharma-system all along. Awakening feels good, even better than heaven. Some people might go to heaven or hell for a few lifetimes but eventually everybody awakens, and then heaven and hell are irrelevant.

In practice, there is less difference between the two religions. Nearly all Christians believe they and their families will go to heaven to be together and to be with ideal Jesus forever. Only really bad people go to hell such as Judas, Hitler, popes if you are Protestant, John Calvin if you are Roman Catholic, current (2016) politicians that we hate such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, people of ethnic groups that we hate, and people of religious groups that we hate. So, in effect, almost everybody is saved. Jesus did not come to save only formal Christians; Jesus came to save the world. Some Christians do believe in hell, some people do not believe in hell including some Christians, some Christians (and Muslims) in effect worship the Devil through fear of him although they think they worship God, and some Christians “spout fire and brimstone”. Likewise, some Mahayana teachers spout the horrors of being almost-forever a stupid un-awakened “hungry ghost” (“pret”), who clings to this and that, and never feels satisfied. But most people, in Christianity and Mahayana, do not much fear a bad fate personally or for their families. So, the theoretical horror is there and it is real for “them” but not for “us”. We all get perfectly saved even if we are not perfect.

I have said already what I think: many people are not saved even if they don't go to hell. Most people meet God and then vanish.

Both Mahayana and Christianity have elaborate systems and theologies.

Both religions need intermediaries to help people through the maze. Both have a divine hero that can transcend sin and-or karma to forgive people and get them to heaven. In both, the divine hero is not quite identical to utmost reality – utmost reality is God-the-Father in Christianity and Dharma-Buddha-Mind-

Void in Mahayana. But that small difference doesn't matter. People have more to do with the divine intermediary than with ultimate spiritual reality. In practice, I see little difference between idealized Jesus, a great bodhisattva in Mahayana such as Kwan Yim, and a great avatar in Hinduism such as Krishna. (I avoid the question of whether, as God, Jesus is identical to God-the-Father.)

Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism have an army of secondary helper figures such as saints; religious heroes; founders such as Paul, Peter, Wesley, and Luther; lesser avatars; and lesser bodhisattvas.

The most important way that people relate to the divine intermediary is worship or devotion. People pray to the divine mediator. People conduct ceremonies with and through the divine mediator. People seek a personal relation with the divine mediator.

The divine mediator is the ultimate principle manifested as physical presence. The divine mediator does not merely represent the ultimate reality through a mere a physical "spokes person" but actually is the highest reality in physical form. There would be no physical reality without the divine mediator. All things are made by and through him-her. It is no clearer how this happens in Mahayana than in Christianity but it is just as certain.

The mediator is so vague that we can project onto him-her whatever qualities and character we wish. He-she is everything to every person. He-she is loving, wrathful, kind, stern, indulgent, strict, a teacher, a punisher, a judge who sends us to hell, a teacher who leads us to heaven, a parent, sibling, child, lion, or lamb. He she can easily validate whatever ideas we have about religion and the world because we can project onto him-her whatever evidence we need to validate our ideas. We make him-her into us.

The mediator figure sacrifices him-herself for us. The mediator figure makes an ultimate sacrifice. Only that big of a sacrifice can save us, and that big of a sacrifice is sure to save us. In Christianity, Jesus lets himself be crucified, but Jesus sacrifices more than that. He endures stupidity, taunts, hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, vindictiveness, and all the badness hidden in human souls. The bodhisattva endures as much, and contrary to what Christians misunderstand, bodhisattvas do sacrifice their lives for us. Stories in the sutras feature bodhisattvas giving their lives so common people might have their lives and might progress spiritually. Bodhisattvas allow themselves to be eaten by tigers or fabulous beasts, bitten by snakes, and torn apart by nasty kings. More importantly, bodhisattvas deny themselves final release so they can stay down here in the ugly world with us sinners, thereby win us all, and thereby make this world the real heaven. They stay down here a very long time, much longer than Jesus did. This long painful residence among the many ignorant often vicious beings is at least as hard as dying on a cross.

The next point needs a prior point: The potential in Christianity for good deeds in themselves, for doing the right things for the right reasons, is undercut by what Christians actually do and why they do it. Christians theoretically have specific tasks as a result of believing in God and Jesus. Christians need to follow the points outlined in Chapters One and Two. Christians need to follow the Golden Rule, and to treat everybody as a near neighbor. Sometimes Christians teach, provide medical care, build dams, protect forests, carry out offices honestly, etc. but they do all as specific acts of true Christian caring. In fact, far too few Christians really do this even if Christians as a whole do this better than others. Rather than do what Jesus told us to do, most Christians simply worship Jesus. Christians think that worship can make up for not doing. Christians substitute worship for doing the right things for the right reasons just as

Christians accused Jews of substituting temple sacrifice for a right heart. Buddhists don't have the duty of compassion spelled out in specific acts and attitudes.

Because of the real behavior of Christians and Mahayanists, the religions tend to be pyramid schemes. Believers act so as to go to heaven. They espouse general good principles such as "love your neighbor" and "compassion" so as to go to heaven but they do not do the specific acts that make the ideals more than empty. When they do specific acts, the acts are merely means to heaven, not good things done for the right reasons, not ends in themselves. Believers recruit others people so as to make other people like themselves and to win points for heaven. In Mahayana and Christianity, you should go out and recruit. In Mahayana, you try to be a bodhisattva and to bring more people to enlightenment. In Christianity you bring more people to see that Jesus is God and to worship idealized Jesus. "Believe as we do, do as we do, go out and get others to believe the same and do the same, and you will be saved. Worship as we do and you will be saved." There is nothing in particular you have to do out of belief. In some Mahayana, people can go to heaven simply by chanting the name of a bodhisattva or chanting a verse from scripture. It helps you if you recruit others to chant. In Christianity, you go to heaven if you eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus, and only that way. It helps a lot if you get others to drink the blood and eat the body. Rather than think about what you really need to do or don't do, and rather than scare potential converts with the need to do more, you can simply worship earnestly and get other people to do the same.

A fun way to see the difference between doing for its own sake because it is good versus doing good to go to heaven is in the movie "This is the End" with Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen. Despite silliness, the movie is serious and well done. The fact that Jews use specifically Christian themes from Revelations to make the point does not matter.

Christians stress that Jesus was a real person. Bodhisattvas were not. In fact, idealized Jesus (1 and 2) hardly differs from a Mahayana bodhisattva. Even pseudo-human Jesus-(2) of official Christianity differs little from humanized bodhisattvas in stories, heroes who have to struggle with character faults, overcome their faults, and so carry themselves onward and carry humanity along. Although Jesus-(2) was a real person while most bodhisattvas were imaginary, still, in all, because real Jesus is assimilated to idealized Jesus, he did not differ from them much.

But in real life, Jesus (3) differed. Jesus was a great prophet but also had limitations and made mistakes. Despite limitations and mistake, Jesus conveyed truths. His limitations and mistakes are not a sign of greatness, as in Romanticism and the modern day cult of the flawed hero or anti-hero. His limitations and mistakes were not something to be overcome for the sake of greater advancement both from himself and humanity, as in Mahayana. We can gain insight and help from the teachings of Jesus but cannot expect to use him as an intermediary to make everything automatically all right with us and God. We have to work on that ourselves.

Mahayanists would see the pro-active compassion of Christianity, from the teachings of Jesus, as hurtful clinging and a mistake. I don't see it as a mistake or as clinging. It can be a mistake. It can be self-serving and can support zealotry if it is misused. But it need not be a mistake. When done with open eyes, empathy, sympathy, consideration for other religions, vigor, commitment, and without hurtful zeal, it is only what it is. When done in the spirit in which Jesus taught and the early Church taught, it is a great

good thing. This is what modern people all over the world in all religions work toward even if they don't know where it came from.

Moreover, it is hard to see Christian dedication to compassion and good works as a clingy mistake when that is precisely the vow of the bodhisattva. Certainly it was not a mistake for Jesus, and it can hardly be a mistake for great Christians such as apostles. It is not worth deciding if it is a mistake for Christians in general when it is the lifework of the bodhisattva and all Mahayanists who aspire to be a bodhisattva. So, effectively, there is little difference between the honest Christian who deeply wishes to help others and the honest Mahayanist who deeply wishes to help others. If it is not a mistake for the bodhisattva, then it cannot be a mistake for Jesus, Christians, and people in general. For Christians and Mahayanists, caring for others is not a mistake but the fulfillment of the way the world works.

Given the strong commitment to a hero at the center in both Mahayana and Christianity, the big difference between Mahayana and Christianity is in the vagueness of "compassion" in Mahayana versus specific-enough commands of Jesus. In Mahayana, you can get away with vague well-intentioned self-serving ideas of compassion. In formal Christianity, you can get away with simply worshipping Jesus (1) and (2). In following Jesus properly, you cannot. You must see in terms of the Golden Rule and you must act accordingly such as by giving to charity, helping neighbors, respecting "applies equally", and promoting rule of law. Christians try to get by with simple worship and a vague idea that they love their neighbors but that is not enough and they know it is not enough. While this distinction between Mahayana and following Jesus does not seem like much, in fact, it makes all the difference. This is why Mahayana does not foster good institutions on its own. I take up vague "compassion" versus the teachings of Jesus in the chapter on Hinduism so I don't go into it more here.

Thankfully, Mahayana, like Theravada, can accept and nurture good institutions when it sees them.

When faced with major religions that (a) have so much in common, and in which (b) believers can get by with worship and with vague feelings of loving neighbors, but (c) the religions are not exactly alike, as in (c1) orthodox Christianity's view of Jesus versus (c3) orthodox Mahayana's view of the bodhisattva, we tend to make a few typical mistakes.

(1) We tend to "write off" both the religions. Both cannot be literally true. So, both must be fully false. We dismiss them both as figments of the evolved imagination brought out under conditions of agrarian state societies and carried forward into our world. They are self-serving delusions. They are the "opium of the masses". They are tools of control by powerful people over the masses. We see priests as self-serving, out for the benefit of themselves and their extended families.

While it is perfectly natural (evolved) to dismiss similar-but-not-identical idea systems, especially when they arise under similar conditions, and when both cannot be fully true, to do so is absolutely wrong. We cannot use "nothing but" this way. We cannot dismiss out of hand. This attitude of dismissal is another layer of self-serving. People with this attitude often think they are smarter than everybody else, when, in fact, they are only half-clever. They take this attitude from the wishes to feel better than everybody else, and to feel justified, just as they accuse the priests.

(2) It is also wrong to say one religion is absolutely true while the other religion is absolutely false. To defend Christianity entirely and to condemn Mahayana entirely, or vice versa, is as wrong as to dismiss both out of hand. We do not have to fall into wishy-washy useless relativism but the attitude of “us versus them” is hurtful.

(3) Common features of the religions are not necessarily true because they are common or necessarily false because they are common. Sometimes the common points are wrong; sometimes they are wrong because they are common imaginary misleading wish fulfillment. Sometimes common points are correct because they come from wisdom. Communism and fascism both have many points in common but that does not make those points items of good government or bad government. We have to look at the points to decide their value for good government. If we hear two advertisements both claim they can save us on our car insurance, that fact does not mean one or both are necessarily lying and it does not mean both firms are bad to buy car insurance from. One has to be lying but the other might still be worth buying some insurance from. Some common points of fascism and democracy really are good for government in general such as the need to work together.

I find it hard to see how a Christian could understand the construction of the Mahayana bodhisattva and not wonder how Christians had constructed Jesus the Christ – and a good Christian should not look at the bodhisattva as merely a demonic imitation of the Christ. In the same way, a Mahayanist should look at what the Christians did to Jesus and wonder how Mahayanists construct bodhisattvas. What is true and useful about the common points and what is false or bad?

(4) Rather than focus on what is common, instead believers in one religion focus on the few distinct points and make those overly-important. Christian focus on Jesus as God while Mahayanists focus on the idea that we are all saved but don't know it. The distinct points might not be true regardless of the common ideas. Both sets of distinct points might be false. Even if some of the distinct points in one religion are true, they might not be important. Even if Jesus is God, what matters is what he wants us to do. Even if we are all saved in Mahayana, what matters is how we act as good people and good citizens right now, what kind of societies we build right now.

The better approach is careful assessment. In the past, many smart dedicated fairly honest people from two places came to similar conclusions, especially about compassion and about the specific acts that go along with being a good person. In the past and present, many smart dedicated fairly honest people followed them. Forget about all the bad stuff and self-serving stuff. What is correct about the ideals and ideas of the religions? How did they come to these ideas and ideals? What can we, now in our situations with our knowledge, fairly believe from what they offer? What can we, as aspiring good people, take from them? Mahayanists and Christians before us, as real flawed evolved people with real needs and active imaginations, acting in good faith, with good intentions, and not from bad intentions, made mistakes. What mistakes did they make? Can we avoid their mistakes? Can we avoid the mistakes and still have something plausibly real to hold on to? We will make mistakes too. Can we use their mistakes to avoid our own mistakes? In making this assessment, it is alright to adopt some supernatural.

I find it much easier to adopt the full teachings of Jesus, including specifics about attitude and acts, when I think of Jesus as Jesus (3) (only human) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). I find it easier to assess religions honestly, both the good and bad, when I think of Jesus (3) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). Thinking primarily

in terms of Jesus (1) and (2) blocks my mind and keeps me further from what Jesus wanted and from God. Having done my own assessment accordingly, I prefer the teachings of Jesus, combined with practicality and Western ideals, to any alternatives. But I have learned much from alternatives. I urge people in all religions, including Judaism, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zen, to look past their versions of (1) and (2), at least for a while. I am pretty sure Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and wise people in all religions would agree.

Not for Smart Weird People Only.

In my version of the teachings of Jesus, you don't have to be very smart or educated to get the basic ideas and to do what needs doing. You don't need an unusual character although it helps to be a little stubborn and helps to be a lot compassionate. Everybody can understand. Everybody can do to some extent. In the modern affluent world, we can do through giving and through volunteering even when our own immediate communities are wonderful safe clean little heavens. Neither being smart nor educated are necessarily assets or liabilities. They usually help, although sometimes they can cause problems in the short run. They have helped me. But they are not necessary. When we face God, he will not give us an IQ test, personality profile, catechism test, or ask for our resume. He will ask what we did with our talents to make the world better.

In practice, in formal Christianity, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism, and too often inadvertently in Taoism and Zen:

(1) You have to deal with a lot of difficult ideas. It helps to be really smart, clever, well educated, and have a monkish intellectual argumentative character. Sometimes it helps to have a mystic personality. It seems you cannot succeed unless you master and-or overcome the abstract ideas of dharma, karma, rebirth, no-self, mind only, etc. That is why people need many lives. Even when people do master those abstract ideas and develop the right personality, it is not entirely clear what you should do afterwards other than teach other people to master the same abstract ideas.

(2) You get joy from belonging to an amazingly complex convoluted beautiful system. The system is hard to understand. Not everybody can see the system or get the joy.

(3) It is theoretically possible to wake up directly without dogma but very people actually do this or can do this. If you want to get over dogma and deal directly with waking up, even that task is really hard and requires the right kind of person to succeed. It is not clear if it takes the right kind of person to do this as to succeed in a minefield of difficult ideas, as in point (1).

Contradicting me, Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen would insist that, at least in theory:

(1) You don't have to be smart or well-educated. (2) Anybody can see the great system and feel the joy of being in the great system. (3) Even simple-minded uneducated normal people can awaken. It is not hard to awaken. Mahayana rose was partly because it could explain how lay non-monks can succeed. To some extent, the movement in Hinduism called "bhakti", or "devotion", arose to address these issues, as we will see in a later chapter. Despite what they say, they are still wrong. In fact, they still wrestle with many difficult ideas, seek great joy in a system, and insist that only special people can succeed. Waking

up is hard to do. Even Zen masters think only special people can succeed, and they take more-than-a-little pride in being a special person who succeeds.

When we die and face God, likely few of us will get great praise. That is not the same as saying few of us have succeeded, most of us have failed, we need many lives to succeed, or God will give us many lives to help us succeed. What happens is what happens. Many of us will be satisfied with how we used our lives. All of us will feel we could have used our lives better, and all of us will feel acutely our failures. But that is not the same as saying we, in effect, failed because we did not have some great insight about a wonderful system. We can succeed enough even if we never succeed perfectly. I do not know how God deals with people who do succeed only just enough or how he deals with people who do not succeed enough.

It is a mistake to think people need to wrestle with complicated ideas to succeed. Nobody can master the complicated ideas of any of the great religions. You should not have to be a combination of Einstein and a Supreme Court Justice to succeed. Religion should not be this hard, convoluted, or indirect. We need clearer simpler ideas of what is going on and what to do. We can have clear simple ideas without fooling ourselves and without falling into misleading harmful clinging.

When Christianity, Islam, or Judaism insist that people believe particular difficult points of dogma so that people can be justified before they face God, those religions make a similar bad mistake. The idea of the Trinity is just strange, and there is no way to make it clear and believable. If we have to explain it to God when we die, we are all doomed. If we have to believe Mohammad was the greatest and last of the prophets, than most of us are doomed. There is no clear guidance about just what you can believe or not believe when you face God. I would rather people not believe foolishness. But I think it is better to stress good deeds with a well-intended heart than any points of dogma.

You should not have to be a strange religious genius or a mystic to succeed, that is, you should not have to break through all dogma mysteriously so as to act well and to succeed enough. Very few people are that kind of person. I think most of us will not get many lives so we can gradually transform into that kind of person. We have to act as best we can on the basis of the principles (dogmas) that we have now. As long as the principles are good, acting on that basis also is good enough. If, as we go along, we learn to overcome our dogmatic weights, then all the better.

I understand what religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism mean by waking up. On the simplest level, they mean seeing that we are not selfish mechanical bastards-bitches but sentient moral aesthetic beings who should have empathy and sympathy. We should understand “do unto others” and “applies equally”. Life is not simply what it appears to be. All religions teach this kind of waking up. When people wake up to that vision, then people feel joy as well as obligation. If that joy were what Buddhism and Hinduism were talking about, then I would have no problem telling people to seek the joy that comes of waking up. But Buddhism and Hinduism want more waking up and, with Mahayana and Hinduism, they want more joy. The more is unreasonable and causes problems.

I know people need rewards to act well. Yet, if you can understand a system and feel the radiating joy, then it seems you should also understand that seeking joy is not what it is all about, and you should not teach that idea to other people. If you seek joy, even in a good system, instead of doing good for its own

sake, then you act badly. You act according to Pascal's Wager (see chapter on codes) rather than act well. If you need to wrestle with abstract ideas or be a religious genius to see the system or feel the joy, then the problem is even worse.

On the one hand, we have following abstract difficult dogma, pursuing the strange joy of belonging to a huge system, or trying to wake up in a way that is very hard. Only unusual people can even think about doing any of this. On the other hand, we have a clear simple idea of what is going on and what you need to do. This way can bring the simple joys that are part of common human life and sometimes can lead to the joy of doing outstanding deeds and having great ideas. Everybody can do the basic part of this. It is not perfect success but it is success enough. If you have more than average ability, then use it. If you have only normal human ability, that is enough. To me, this difference between needing only what is already given to nearly all of us versus having to become superhuman is the biggest difference between following Jesus versus following any other teachings.

More on the False Joy of Systems and on Accepting Smallness.

The ideas to which I respond in this section are also in Hinduism.

From "Lord of the Rings" by Tolkien: Frodo offered the One Ring to Galadriel. Galadriel knew that she, likely alone on Earth, could use the One Ring to defeat Sauron, the great evil. She could be Queen of the world, and rule in apparent goodness. She refused. She said: "I diminish and remain Galadriel". She knew, if she ruled, all beings would love her, yet be slaves and live in fear. The Ring would change her and change the world even if all appeared well. She did not want to set herself up as the hero of her own system, a hero that must make a bad system despite good intentions, as must all would-be rulers of the world. She would not put the world in danger in the name of saving it. Better to risk freedom. Sam also carried the Ring for a while. Sam dreamed of being the world's great gardener, and of setting the whole world aright through sound gardening tenets writ large. Sam had the sense to know it was all a delusion of the Ring. Frodo could not throw the Ring into the fire because he came to believe he could be the hero of his system for the world – the circle of fire. It is dangerous to be the hero of your own world system even with all the good intentions in the world.

You can do a lot of good without being the hero of a great system. You can still work hard to make the world better and still work hard in a great cause. You can still fight evil. In seeking to be the hero of a great system, you will undercut your ability to do good and you will support a bad system.

The bodhisattva is the would-be hero of a great world system. The world system is made by Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva represents Mind and Emptiness. So, the bodhisattva is the hero of a world system that he-she makes. Because the bodhisattva is the role model for Mahayana, all Mahayanists, indirectly or directly, seek to be heroes of their own system that eats the world. The system is not overtly about power but neither would Galadriel's intend power at first. Certainly Vimalakirti takes much joy in demonstrating his power. The most efficient power is not control over bodies but control over the mind and over hopes, including the hope for salvation-and-success for you and your family.

Here are some silly examples from my life to show that I have some sense of the mysticism suitable for Mahayana, I am not simply defending God and Jesus because I grew up in a Christian nation, and I am

not simply reacting against something I have no feel for: I have: mind-melded with a bug; floated for a long time on sparkling waves; felt the illusion of time; and felt the endless variation of the world and endless interest of being. In Mahayana and Hinduism, after the present joys have been appreciated, more joys will come; what seem like troubles now are not really troubles but are only joys in disguise; more outright joys and joys-in-disguise will always come in endless variation.

I understand “not discriminating”. When we seek heaven, we imply hell. When we know that, we know it is better not to have either extreme. We make problems when we discriminate, such as we need ugliness to appreciate beauty or need badness to appreciate goodness. Splitting hairs leads to badness and suffering. I understand Emptiness; I know Emptiness is not simply nothing; and I know how we can think that all things flow out of Emptiness. I know we help to make reality. I know that a Mind lies behind it all, and that our minds are like the great Mind behind it all.

I understand: being part of something bigger than myself; the idea that I am a reflection of God; the idea that God sees the world through me; the idea of an original “Buddha Mind”; the idea that I might be the same as it; and the “Storehouse Memory” which holds all things in a vast puddle of indiscrimination, and from which all things flow.

I understand: how we can be both this particular me and the whole all at once; how the individuals does not lose his-her identity on being one with the whole; and how the whole does not get broken by dividing into particular individuals. I know how we can think of the individual, whole, Buddha Mind, Emptiness, and the Storehouse Consciousness as all the same thing.

I understand how suffering can seem more than it is, that a lot of suffering is temporary, and that the joy we feel often more than makes up for the suffering. I see how the joy that Sally feels seems as if it can make up for the suffering of Bob.

I understand the idea that I might, in a way, be God. The idea of being God goes well with the ideas that we are part of a system in which joy flows out endlessly and that we should not discriminate.

Yet I reject that we live in a system of endless joy and that really we are God, Emptiness, Dharma, or Mind. The world is not one whole homogenous indiscriminate pudding. We must discriminate “this from that”, part from whole, and creature from creator, to live at all and to live properly. I accept differences between good and bad, bad and evil, beautiful and ugly. I reject the idea that not discriminating can lead us to a system of joy in which we are the eyes of God and the heroes of the system.

I am sure most people who hold the bodhisattva ideal intend well and have a good character. To wish to save all people, even at great cost to yourself, reflects a good person with good intent. Any Christian who does not understand this kind of person and this goal should not call him-herself a Christian. Yet you can have a good character and high ideals and still be wrong.

This situation is like that of a “saint” in Christianity. Good people give up trying to be a saint. Rather than set out to be a saint, just do what you have to do, and don’t worry about sainthood. Whether you achieve sainthood is irrelevant. Sainthood is something other people think about. If you did what you could do, that is enough. There is nothing better. If what you could do saves some system, then fine; if it does not,

then fine too. When you work on your tasks, you will find the size that you are is the right size. Rather than trying to be the hero of your own endless joyful system, simply do what good you can right here right now. Diminish and remain yourself. You will do much more good that way.

The situation is like that of a brave soldier who is labeled a hero and given a medal. The soldier likely did not think of him-herself as a hero when acting, and usually does not like it now. He-she did not do it for a great system, to save the world, or to be the center of a great system, but usually to save friends nearby. The soldier endures a label because of the need for role models.

Saints, soldiers, and anybody, still can work hard to make the world better and still work in a good cause. Sometimes we have to work in a worldwide cause such as fighting evil, fighting fascism, figuring out capitalism, fighting poverty, or helping nature. But that does not make us heroes of our own great system anymore than Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt were heroes of their own great system and were bodhisattvas.

In the Indian tradition, in both Mahayana and Hinduism, a great person can either totally renounce the world or totally conquer it. I deny either extreme. To not renounce the world does not mean instead that you must try to conquer the whole world. To not conquer the world does not mean instead to renounce the world entirely. People who try to conquer the world often find themselves so at odds with reality that, in effect, they renounce the world. To renounce the world is too often an indirect way of trying to conquer it, as with the bodhisattva. The two poles can be the same thing in disguise. Instead, simply accept your place in the world and the limited good that you can do if you try hard to make the world better. That is my idea of the middle path in this situation.

The bodhisattva effectively conquers the world by first renouncing the world and then by delaying his-her own awakening (renouncing his-her renouncing) so as to save everybody. You cannot indirectly conquer the world by renouncing the world for yourself but conquering it for others. You cannot use other people as an excuse to conquer, not even if you are a good person with good intentions. All terrible tyrants think they are doing the world a great favor. (To avoid this mistake, this trap, and the badness that flows from it, you likely have to accept that not everybody is saved.)

(The Buddha thought life was not worthwhile ultimately; but his stance does not mean he renounced the world in the same sense as did the ascetics that he rejected or as a bodhisattva delays final awakening so as to save the world. I do not try to find the correct middle path between conquering and renouncing for the Buddha or people like him.) (As Indo-Europeans, the West carried the false dichotomy between conquering versus renouncing, including conquering indirectly through renouncing, into images such as Christian ascetics, Jesus' trial by Satan in the desert, and starving artists. Tolkien tried to work his way through this false dichotomy but did not always succeed.)

An easy good way to get out of this dichotomy is to stop thinking in terms of a system that eats the world (conquers and-or conquers by renouncing) and how to be its hero.

We think more clearly when not in a system that eats the world. Simple belief in God does not lead to a complicated, contradictory, confusing system that eats the world, as do Mahayana, Hinduism, formal Christianity, and some Islam. Only rare people can think well when befuddled by aids that are supposed

to make sense of Mahayana contradictions and when beguiled by paradises and get-saved-quick schemes. The people who can think clearly then do not usually conclude they are the hero of their own system. We need to accept objective reality, that joy and suffering are real. We are entitled to reject some things while embracing others. When we can think clearly, we more likely will act well and support the right institutions.

Why do you wish to face an endless joyous system instead of a personal God? Why do you wish to be part of an endless joyous system? Why do you wish to be the hero of an endless joyous system? It is selfish, prideful, and creepy to think of yourself as God in an endless joyous system or to think of yourself as God in any context. It is only a little less creepy to think of yourself as the hero of such a system. Even if we live in a system with a lot of joy in it, that fact does not mean the system is essentially joyous; the joy goes on forever; you go on forever joyful; you are God of the system; or that holiness, the joyous system, and you are identical. To think so is to raise you beyond what you should be. You raise yourself not in the good way of striving "to be all that you can be". You do not transcend your limited self in a good way. You raise yourself in the bad way of striving to be what you cannot be, perverting your nature, avoiding the goodness you could have made, and destroying the goodness you could have made.

To get a proper perspective, think of raising yourself to the status of God-or-hero in a system that is not joyous but is neutral, focused on power, or focused on righteousness. Dwelling on the system as joyous allows you to fool yourself about the system, your place in the system, and your true nature.

I see the affinity between the idea that God loves us and watches over us with the Mahayana ideas that we are always already saved and the world is Dharma's playground. But there is a difference between the feeling that I am a small, finite, creation of God versus the Mahayana feeling that I am a part of the system, and that each part of the system, including me, reflects the whole system. I can accept one role but not the other.

We are better off, and the world is better off, if we accept what we are, even if that means we are limited, we cannot be all, our finite limits are not an indirect way for God to be infinite, we will not suffuse in joy, we are not God, and we will not go on forever. God can work through you even if you are not infinite or not a spark of the infinite. We get more if we accept this than if we seek what corrupts us.

Don't "pretend let go" (don't let go in a pretend way). Don't "let go" of the finite individual person from the perspective of right now so you become a part of the great joyous system from the perspective of eternity. Don't accept small as a devious way to be the hero of a big system. Really let go. Really accept your smallness. Forget about system entirely. Forget about being God, hero, or saint in any way. Just accept being a limited you, and that is all. It is enough.

Don't let go because you think your sacrifice somehow indirectly does save the system. That is not letting go. That is another stronger stickier clinging. Sacrificing yourself that way does not indirectly save the world, as in the movie "Sucker Punch". In fact, this world, Planet Earth, the only relevant world for you and all humans, might not be savable now. It might end up an overpopulated slum stink. To pretend to be little here as an indirect way to save this planet will not save this planet. Diminishing yourself here, by trying to be a bodhisattva or in self-sacrifice to save this planet, will have no effect on the other millions of planets with sentient beings.

People who have seen an endless joyous system and believe in it have trouble accepting that others can have an equally clear powerful vision of a system yet not believe in it. People who have seen a personal single moral God have trouble accepting that others can see a personal single moral God yet can prefer an endless joyous system. I don't know how to get over these impasses without the sort of relativism that I find as distressing as playing the hero in an endless joyous system.

It can be alright to work hard to be an ordinary hero both because it feels good to be a hero and because heroes do help others. This is a lesson of decent capitalism and a theme in "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer". We are only human, and striving to be a merely human hero often enough led to success when we evolved our human nature. When we accept that we strive to be heroes as part of limited finite human nature, we are more likely to act well and do good than when we strive to be heroes of our own system. Also, some of us must fight evil.

Some professions seem to have built into them the desire to be a hero of your own big system, such as academia, politics, religion, and business. Some individual people have a hard time letting go. If you can't let go fully, try this: Don't stop trying to be a hero entirely. Don't stop building a system entirely. Remember that your system is not the only system. Force yourself to let go a little. Channel the energy of frustration at letting go a little into being a better person and doing a better job.

If you love to build systems that eat the world, then go ahead. Share your systems with other people who love to build systems that eat the world. Such comparison will help you see that your system is not the final word. Ponder inscrutable problems such as free will versus determinism, the Christian Trinity, does Jesus save everybody, how Jesus saves in a unique way, faith versus acts, and free will versus karma and Dharma ("Why did Bodhidharma go to China?").

Most people in Mahayana and Hinduism do not seek to be God and do not seek joy in a way that leads to much badness. Vimalakirti aside, as far as I can tell, awakened people do not act badly and do not act like vain gods. Mostly they act well. It seems they are infused with humility along with their achievement. I think their humility includes seeing "I am not God and I am not the center of a big system". That's what Siddhartha Gautama seemed to be saying. You should go to the original stories by enlightened people to make up your own mind.

What difference does it make? It makes a small difference yet a big difference. As long as people act well and create the right institutions then it does not matter much if they believe in a personal God and believe we are limited creatures or if they believe in a joyous Dharma system in which I am the hero and we are all infinite. God does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in Dharma but act well, and the Dharma does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in God but act well. Yet, as a matter of historical fact, people think more clearly, act better, and create the right institutions when they believe in a personal God and accept their own smallness.

I wish Mahayana and Hinduism could be recast in a more limited way. I think limited accounts of recast Mahayana and Hinduism can be found in the writings of Zen adepts. It is not my place to do the task of recasting. I think young Buddhists and Hindus are doing this.

The Buddha advised against clinging to the world and against clinging to bolstered images of your self and the world such as in Mahayana and Hinduism. I advise accepting the world as it is and not thinking you are the world or the hero of the world. Mahayana wishes well but misleads by making the world into a fantastic playground and by making each person the king of the playground. Is the Buddha's advice about limiting the self and not clinging the same as my advice? I think they are similar but not exactly the same. Just because the Buddha and I might be united against an overly-elaborate Mahayana does not mean we are the same. It does mean that I exercise my ability to figure out things for myself, to which stance the Buddha would approve. I do not compare myself to the Buddha or to any prophet. The fact that the Buddha and I do agree on some ideas is good.

Jesus as Bodhisattva.

It is easy enough to see that formal Christianity built Jesus much as Mahayana built the bodhisattva, so I don't go into details here. Here are two points. First, Jesus as role model affects Christianity as a formal system in much the same way that the bodhisattva as role model affects Mahayana. Second, we can use that insight to think about how true are Mahayana and Christianity.

In the first few chapters of the Gospel of John, John explains how Jesus made the world and explains that the world could be made only by Jesus. As the Word, Jesus works much like Emptiness or Mind. He is behind everything. Jesus saves the world. Jesus does not delay his own ascension until all of the world is saved but he does everything that he can to save those people who are willing. He did spend the time between his Death and Resurrection in Hell doing what he could there. You can be saved only by and through him. In all this Jesus is like a bodhisattva. Jesus and the bodhisattva become THE principle of the cosmos.

Christians want to be like Jesus but nobody (except deluded sad people) thinks he-she can be Jesus or be exactly the same as Jesus. In theory, Mahayanists can become a bodhisattva but in practice nobody thinks like this except a few monks and strong believers (they are not considered crazy as in Christianity). Instead, people want to be like a bodhisattva in that they are moral and spiritually advanced. To be a bodhisattva is an ideal goal and a guide, like the attitude that Christians take in works like "The Imitation of Christ". Like some Christians, such as Pentacostals among Protestants and Roman Catholics, some Mahayanists wish to be like a bodhisattva so as to have powers along with spiritual advancement. So, while in theory, differences persist between Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, in practice, Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, are much the same.

The nature of the bodhisattva, the nature of the system that eats the world of which the bodhisattva is the hero, and the nature of the relation of followers to the bodhisattva and the system, all affect Mahayana, Mahayanists, and how Mahayanists think and act. I don't explain in detail. In much the same way: the character of Jesus as divine super-hero mediator; Christianity as a system that eats the world of which Jesus is the hero; and relations between Christians, Jesus, and the system; all affect Christianity, Christians, and how Christians think and act. Christians and Mahayanists live in much the same world system, led by much the same kind of hero, and so they think and act alike. To an outsider, similarities are much bigger, and differences are much smaller, than to an insider. If you don't like how the Mahayana system and hero affect Mahayanists then you shouldn't like how Christianity and Jesus affect

Christians. If you like how Jesus and Christianity affect Christians then you should like how the bodhisattva and Mahayana affect Mahayanists.

Where an idea comes from does not matter as much as whether the idea is true and-or useful. The facts that Christianity and Mahayana are quite similar but have minor differences should be less important than whether each is true and useful, which is truer, and which more useful. Those issues you have to decide for yourself. You have to decide if Christianity or Mahayana is true(r), which is truer, and which is more useful. The same requirement holds for the other major world religions.

You can use the similarity of Christianity and Mahayana to argue that both are mere products of evolved human imagination under particular natural-socio-economic-historical conditions and so both are not very true and not very useful. They are mere delusions that the powerful use to control the weak. Or you can use their similarity to argue that evolved human imagination used under various conditions leads us to more-and-more approach real truth. Or you can use the same fact to argue that God so arranged things that human imagination would more-and-more approach real truth. You can offer interpretations yourself, and I wish you would.

Whatever the arguments, you have to think through them and decide yourself what is most true and most useful, and what that result implies for what you do and what institutions you build.

I think through these issues much better when I do NOT think of Jesus, the bodhisattva, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, or Mohammad as a semi-divine (or fully divine) hero of the world and hero of a system that eats the world. I think clearer when I do not think in terms of salvation as in formal Christianity and Mahayana. I think better when I do not think that Mind, Emptiness, Jesus, the Buddha, or a bodhisattva is the same as God, Mind, or Emptiness and so created (creates) the World. I suppress any system that eats the world - Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, or otherwise - to the extent that I can escape such systems after having lived most of my youth trapped in them.

I think through these issues much better when I think of all these people as real historical figures who are merely human, or as idealized figures (the bodhisattva and avatar) created by real people. I think better when I don't think in terms of rival gods or rival systems. I think better when I think of the heroes of religious systems that eat the world as made up for the needs of followers, priests, and rulers – even if the person was historically real and even if later I think the real person and the made-up person coincide in some ways.

Of course, the truth and usefulness of an idea should not be assessed by how followers, priests, and rulers use the idea. Take account of these factors so as to think through them and think past them. They are tools, not ends. “Nothing but” is not very useful even when it might be used to undermine power.

Think of the message first, then the person. Jesus had the Golden Rule, lived by it, and tried to make a society along its lines. What does Mahayana want you to wake up to? What message does the life and teaching of the bodhisattva convey? What does it call you to?

After you have thought through the issues in terms of “human only”, with maybe God, and in terms of the message, then you can think through the issues again with the possibility that Jesus or the bodhisattva are divine heroes of their own world system and of a thought system that eats the world.

When I have thought about how it might matter if Jesus or a bodhisattva were a divine mediator, I am led back to the idea of following Jesus the merely human person as distinct from formal Christianity in which Jesus is God and is a divine mediator. Then I compare following Jesus the merely human person with Christianity, Mahayana, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, or any religion.

The result of my thinking in these terms is this book. Thinking in these terms did not stop me from seeing God and accepting God, from accepting morality, and even from accepting some supernatural.

(Much the same logic applies to academic stances such as systems theory, theories of evolution, theories of adaptation, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, Marxism, etc.)

25 Background to China, and Confucius

This chapter and the next two form a group. This chapter gives background material and then describes and assesses Confucianism. The next chapters do the same for Taoism and Zen.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen are all stances from China. They are distinct but they are also similar because they are Chinese in the same way American Protestant sects are distinct but are also similar because they are American. I don't know enough about China to comment on this kind of distinction and similarity.

Confucianism is a noble way with high ideals fully comparable to Christianity. Yet Confucianism also shows what happens when we have high ideals but do not have a solid set of principles, analysis, rules, specific values, and specific institutions, such as developed in the West for governing, and as described in Chapters One and Two in this book. High ideals alone are not enough to make effective government, democracy, self-government, and beneficial capitalism.

The Romanized spelling of Chinese words has gone through several phases. I do what I can. "Tzu" is a title. Tzu means: "adult man who merits respect because he knows important ideas, does important acts, is an excellent teacher, an excellent example, and acts in accord with Heaven, nature, and virtue". I think it can be used for a woman. As a student, I learned that "tzu" is spoken like "dze" in the word "adze"; but now it is written "zi" and apparently spoken "zee" or "dzee" as in "knee". "Tao" means "way". The "t" is like "d" and the "ao" like "ow" as in "dowel", or "down". Written "c" and written "ch" are spoken like American "j", "z" jh", or "zh". "Ch" is not as in "change" but like "jh" in "jack". "Ching" is "important book". "Ching" is spoken "jhing" or "zhing". "Chan" comes out "jhan" or "zhan". "Lao" means "old man" and is spoken as in "loud". "Lao Tzu" is a personal title meaning "wise old man"; traditionally it refers to the reputed author of the important book the "Tao Te Ching" ("dow deh jhing"); see chapter on Taoism.

PART 1: Background

From about 700 BCE to 100 AD, China went through political ferment and religious invention, as at the same time in: Classical Greece; the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Jainism in India; and the rise and fall of Israel. Self-appointed wise people in China promoted stances and promised to cure all ills if rulers would listen to them above others. Some particular stances persisted and have influenced China ever since. This part of the chapter gives background to Chinese thought, describes two important stances but lesser than Confucianism, and describes Confucianism. This chapter sets the stage for two more big stances, each in its own chapter, Taoism and Ch'an (Zen). Confucius was one of those self-appointed advisors; like Socrates, Plato, and the Buddha, he had lasting value.

Most of that era in China is called the "Period of Warring States" or the "Period of the Three Kingdoms" because, at first, many small warring states fought for advantage, and, then later, three major kingdoms fought for control. The name "China" comes from the victor, "Chin" ("Qin"). The first Dynasty to rule all of China was the Han Dynasty from about 206 BCE (BC) to 220 CE (AD). Chinese called themselves "the

Han” for most of their history as Greeks called themselves “Hellas”. During the “Warring States” and “Three Kingdoms” period, banditry and warlords prevailed. Chinese martial arts movies often take that time as their setting, as cowboy movies take the American West of around 1870. The movies “Hero” with Jet Li and “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” get across the Chinese romantic idealization of the situation. “Hero” gets across Chinese ideas about national unity and strong central leadership.

Synopsis.

Confucius clearly knew key points of morality that the West also considers important such as the Golden Rule and the idea that individual people have dignity and integrity. However, he did not base his ideas of how to govern on those insights.

Confucius saw that a state could not run well on the basis alone of rules, inspiration, regard for the humanity of others, good will, or fear. The state needs something more, something that can tie together various human propensities. We will see in the chapter on Taoists that Taoists disagreed with Confucius and felt that life could be run on the basis of spontaneous action alone.

Confucius saw that rulers use laws, management skills, regard for others, and fear, as tools, but, in the end, what adept good rulers use is judgment. Westerners really think the same but look at judgment in a different context. We don’t want rulers with mere “book learning” or “street cunning” but leaders who know well the human heart and human situation, and can figure out the right thing to do in real situations.

According to Confucius, the ability to judge can be trained but it can be trained only in people of the right character. People with the right character pick it up quickly. People with the wrong character can’t pick it up at all.

Westerners also look for the right combination of character and judgment. Americans have made John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan into myths by believing this is exactly what they had. Americans looked to Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton for the same.

For Confucius and his followers, the task was to find people of the right potential character, train them to use good judgment, and put them in charge of the state. The task of philosophers such as Confucius was not to rule the state directly but to find people of the right character and train them.

Selection-and-training is done through correct education. A good program sorts people by their character and skill level, advances people of correct skill and character, and teaches them judgment, all at once. The best education program is not directly in law, administration, fear, regard for other people, or many of the skills that Westerners might hold useful. Rather, the correct education is in the classics of literature, religion, art, and history. This idea is not so different from what Greeks and Romans taught, and from what the English, French, and Germans taught until recently.

Part of the education program was teaching high regard for the family. Virtuous families could produce candidates of high character, who would, in turn, take care of their families and the state. Present rulers would take care of families in general as sources of future leaders. This attitude toward the family is like the present (2016) American near-worship of the family.

This approach to leadership neglected several aspects of the state that the West found important and that are important. Confucius understood the need for particular rules for some particular situations but he did not really see the key importance of the general rule of law. In his view, a leader with good character and judgment is above the law. His-her judgment-and-example is the law. So much power to the leader is good because, due to proper training, the leader almost cannot do wrong and must do right. The entire success of the state flows from the character of the leader. The state is entirely “top down”. Confucius did not develop ideas of institutions such as the American ideas of three parts of government, checks and balances, or American style bureaucracy. He did not know how to integrate technical experts, business people, and the military in governing. We would not expect, in his time, ideas of equality, democracy, or representation for the people, but there was no regular voice for the people at all. So, when the people had a grievance or need, they could not express it and they had to resort to extreme measures. There was nothing like the Western Christian Church apparatus, with priests and bishops, to serve as liaison between the people and the state. Government at each smaller level such as the province mimicked the central state, so a provincial governor was like a lesser emperor. Although Confucius valued individual people, he could not blend the idea of personal value into how the state works and how laws work. Full democracy is not possible in a Confucian-like state although some limited form of democracy might be.

The Confucian idea of leaders inadvertently supported the cult of the leader. When the leader is actually good most of the time, this cult can help him-her get things done, as with good kings in Europe. This is the idea of a King in “good King Frodo” and “good King Wenceslas”, and in the novel “Return of the King” by J.R.R. Tolkien. But the Confucian idea can also be bad as with the cult of Mao at his worst, North Korean leaders, and cults of the Emperor and Shogun in Japan. The cult of the leader in Confucianism is more extreme than most instances the Western idea of the Divine Right of Kings.

The important role of the family easily leads to a cult of the family, especially when the state does not work well, as often it did not under Confucianism. People fall back on the family and then the strong emphasis on the family prevents the people from making a better overall state. This is what the movie series “The Godfather” warns us against. It is what is happening in America with near-worship of the family as American government has floundered since the middle 1970s.

Particular Chinese scholars made great advances in astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and other scientific fields but there was no systematic training in these fields, no system of knowledge, and no process for selecting and advancing people of ability.

China did not overcome the bad aspects of Confucianism when Confucianism failed and the state faced hardship. Rather, the bad aspects of Confucianism got reinforced in ways that I can't describe in detail here. For example, when prolonged drought or banditry caused collapse, nothing better reformed. After a time, someone else took power, and the same ideas repeated. So, once a state-society-culture enters a Confucian pattern, it tends to stay there for a long time despite the fact that this way of governing is not adequate to many tasks.

When Americans think of character-plus-judgment, they think of leaders as the source of decisive action; they think of Kirk and Picard, Obiwan Kenobe, John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Master and Commander, and Batman. The Chinese also extol people of decisive judgment and action more than they like to admit

– think of Chinese action films – but that is not the ideal. The ideal leader is plugged directly into Heaven; that is why he (usually a man) has such a good potential character. After he learns, the ideal leader sometimes does command openly but more often he leads by example, suggestion, innuendo, hints, and vague allusions to past events and leaders. He pulls rather than pushes and guides rather than shows. Often he does this not by referring directly to the matter at hand but by referring to art or stories of the past. He is more like the ceremonial queens and kings of Europe and Japan now than like their prime ministers or like the old Shogun. This view of the ideal leader added to the failures of Confucianism, and added to intrigue in the palace and provinces.

This idea of the “ruler” stymies the idea of rule of law. The ideal ruler did not give any laws as Americans think of laws. His subordinates, such as the prime minister, gave commands, supposedly based on hints and examples from the ideal ruler but really based on needs of the subordinates. They took real power, based on the military, taxes, and appointments of their own people. Commands of subordinates could have force only while subordinates had power. When a subordinate is in power more than a few years, he becomes the real ruler of China, a province, or the military. China was often ruled by opportunists. When a ruler takes real power for him-herself, he-she often becomes a cruel tyrant as with the mother of the Emperor during the 1800s Ching (Qing) Dynasty. The Confucian view of ruler and ruling buffered the office and the ideal of highest heavenly ruler in case events turned bad – it was always the fault of the subordinate and never the fault of the ideal ruler - but also undermined the idea of law. There was no rule of law and system of law as in the West; and there could be no developed idea of those under this view of the ideal ruler and his-her relation to subordinates.

All societies have an ideal and a real. The real never lives up to the ideal, not in any Christian church, not in America, England, or China. Still, the ideal does affect the real. The relation of Chinese ideal to the Chinese reality reveals much about Chinese character and Confucianism but it is a long study in itself that I cannot take up here.

Some Early Assessment: Confucius and the Golden Rule.

Please see Chapter Two. As I mention below, Confucius understood the Golden Rule and expected that a well-educated person in China should act according to the Golden Rule as Confucius understood it. Unlike Confucius, the Chinese in general have not paid much attention to the Golden Rule. The thought of Confucians after Confucius on the Golden Rule easily supports social divisions and power politics.

Beforehand, we need to get clear about the Golden Rule and about its close cousin “make all rules as if you apply them equally to everybody”, or “applies equally”, from Immanuel Kant. The Golden Rule does not mean to treat everybody exactly equally regardless of age, gender, power, family status, government status, or social rule. Yet it does tend toward treating people equally regardless of situation. We have to find how to treat people as we wish to be treated, fairly equally, while accepting good social relations that include differences, and without reinforcing bad distinctions. We have to find how to treat everybody almost equally without cutting down all categories, especially useful ones. We have to find how to act in accord with useful social distinctions while still treating everyone as we wish to be treated, as a person like us, without always treating people exactly the same. The West has been lucky in being able to find this right balance often. China did not find this right balance even though Confucius clearly felt the sense of giving everybody respect and of not infringing on people’s innate dignity and humanity.

A teacher does not treat students the same way he-she treats other teachers, and students do not treat the teacher the same way they treat other students, and this is all correct. When we get to be teachers, we want to be treated as teachers should be treated, not as students are treated now. Jesus himself did not expect his disciples to treat him as they treated other disciples and as he treated them. Jesus did not treat his disciples as he treated God and as he expected God to treat him. We have to take relations and circumstances into account.

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean we use the Golden Rule as an excuse to reinforce bad unfair harmful relations and positions, such as a social order founded on fear. The Golden Rule has an inherent push to equality. It forces us to think of other persons as persons like us, and so to treat everybody on that basis. When we treat everybody on that basis, we tend to treat them equally with little regard to station. Jesus reinforced this tendency when he washed the feet of his followers, hung around with tax collectors and prostitutes, ate dinner with Roman soldiers, and respected poor people. Jesus pushed the Rule to its limits. Jesus pushed the limits of society by using the Golden Rule. (The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama did much the same.)

Taking relations and circumstances into account does not mean to respect every way that everybody wants to be treated and every social distinction. Some social relations and social positions are bad, and should not be treated with respect, even when we can imagine that we might be in those positions some day. When haughty people wish to be admired, we don't have to do that. When rich-and-powerful people wish to be obeyed, we might have to obey from fear but not because we act like we know how rich-and-powerful people wish to be treated and respect that as part of our common humanity.

This is why we stress the idea of "applies equally", "equality under the law", and "rule of law". "Applies equally" etc. are the institutional expressions of the fact that the Golden Rule is based on persons and it pushes toward equality. The West has been lucky in that we have been able to put the Golden Rule and its institutional expressions of "applies equally" etc. into our political life. Democracy would not have been possible without Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule, not even using only Greek ideas. It was only possible with Jesus' idea of the Golden Rule combined with Greek ideas about "applies equally" etc.

Confucius understood all this but not well, and his feeling did not spread among Confucians or to Chinese society. Confucius applied the rule within social categories and expected the rule to be used within social categories to reinforce social relations. The idea that he, Confucius, would wash the feet of students or consort with riff-raff would be abhorrent. He treated everyone politely and with respect but did not treat people equally and with deep respect as did Jesus. The idea that a true leader (Son of Heaven) would be treated like a peasant is silly. The idea that a peasant could expect the same reverence as a true leader is fit only for a puppet show. Confucius had a deep feel for respecting others as persons but he did not know how to apply that feeling in daily life and in statecraft. He could not institutionalize the Golden Rule. He could not see the inherent push toward equality. He could not see how the Golden Rule and the push toward equality imply "applies equally" etc., and how "applies equally" etc. must shape political institutions such as representative government, fair taxation, and democracy.

We cannot be harsh on Confucius if we look at our own practice. Although Western people know of the Golden Rule and "applies equally" they don't often live by them, and they don't often see the link between

them and our political institutions. Mostly, Westerners apply the Rule within situations to reinforce social roles. A bishop is a bishop, and God forbid that we should treat a bishop like a barber or a barber like a bishop. Trades people treat other trades people as they wish to be treated, and lords treat other lords as lords wish to be treated; but trades people don't treat trades people and lords equally as simple people, and lords don't treat lords and trades people equally as simple people. One foundation idea of our legal system, the jury, says people are to be judge by their "peers", and originally a "peer" meant someone of the same aristocratic class and-or same socio-economic class, it did mean simply a fellow American or fellow human. Americans pretend to treat all people equally, make a stink when a politician or rich person does not, gasp in heart-warming amazement when a movie star hobnobs with fans, and think the boss is hip for wearing jeans on Friday; but mostly Americans respect class, power, and wealth as much as everyone. We are not much better than Confucians. Americans are hypocrites, and so worse, because officially we know the Golden Rule in its full extended glory, know "applies equally", know better, and pretend we do better, when really we do not. We are lucky we had a better start in Jesus and the Greeks, and we have preserved enough of that heritage in our thinkers and institutions so we still actually can do better sometimes. (Just as followers of Jesus lapsed in applying the Golden Rule, so did followers of Siddhartha Gautama lapse in treating other people equally as children of the Dharma. It is a human hazard.)

Character, Discipline, Rules, and Principles.

What I say here is not limited to Chinese people but I don't have space to distinguish between what is typical of the Chinese as opposed to similar ideas among other people.

The Chinese respect people who can control themselves and have discipline. They look down on people who do not have self-control; people without self-control are not fully human (in the novel "Dune", only when the hero, Paul Atreides, passed tests of self-control was he thought fully human). More basically than meaning "fighting arts", "kung fu" means "beneficial practices" in the sense of "beneficial discipline". It is not unlike Arabic "jihad". There is no progress in society, family, state craft, business, martial arts, or religion, without first gaining discipline. Discipline should not be extreme, extremes are not productive and usually are harmful, but you must have discipline for a base. Once you have discipline, then you can, and likely will, achieve other goals. In his "kung fu" movies, Bruce Lee stressed the control that Chinese martial artists have in their technique compared to all other people and styles, and Lee used that control as evidence of general Chinese superiority. Lee was wrong about the lack of control in other arts but accurate in his statement of Chinese values. In Lee's defense, he made a strong case for China because he needed to bolster the Chinese sense of worth after a long period of decline.

People vary in how they internalize discipline and in the quality of any discipline that they internalize. The highest best discipline cannot be internalized through rules, as a soldier should internalize rules for acting while in town. The highest discipline is unified with virtue, ideals, principles, and attitudes. Particular rules have to flow out of virtue and basic principles. People who feel virtue-and-principles seek discipline and live by it. This Chinese idea is similar to the Greek and Roman ideas of *arête*, prudence, and virtue.

If people cannot see why they need discipline including virtue and principles, and do not internalize discipline including virtue and principles, they must have rules. But rules can work only as long as they are enforced, and rules cannot be enforced everywhere all the time forever. It takes resources to enforce

rules, both personal and economic. It is much better to internalize some discipline. Once discipline is internalized, you use resources to achieve other goals. People who have internal discipline rather than external rules will overcome people who need detailed external rules. Virtuous people will overcome rule-governed people in politics, war, and family life.

Some unusual people are born with a feel for virtue-principles and a propensity for internal discipline. They do not need rules but they understand the general need for rules and they can use rules. Some people are born with the ability to see virtue-principles and with a propensity for discipline, but they need rules for order and so that they can get along with other people who live by rules. They go quickly from ideals to particular rules and vice versa. Some people can learn virtue-principles and discipline by first learning rules and then seeing how rules require virtue-principles and discipline, and come from them. Some people who learn from rules can sense virtue-principles clearly while others only sense only dimly. People who feel virtue-principles clearly can rise beyond rules to live by virtue-principles alone but people who feel virtue-principles only dimly always still need rules. Some people never see virtue-principles and so have to live by rules always. Still, they understand that rules are for general good and rules represent connection to a higher order. Their discipline is only barely worthy of the name but they are still valuable in society. Some people follow rules only if compelled, either physically or through having to earn a living and raise a family. They have no true discipline. They are valuable only in an order that constrains them.

Among people who have to learn virtue-principles through rules, for some but not for all, once the virtue-principles are learned, then the rules can be taken with a grain of salt. This attitude does not imply laxity, overlooking rules, breaking rules, or excuses. It is not an excuse for bad acts but the other way around. People who know virtue-principles must behave better than people who merely follow rules. People who know virtue-principles have to exemplify principles and have to be able to show (explain) how rules follow from virtue-principles.

This vision of character and discipline is true not only among the Chinese but also among other peoples such as the Japanese. How it is distinct among the Chinese, I cannot say.

In case this description leads you to think of Chinese as robots, the Chinese have perhaps the best sense of humor I have ever seen, even if often "low". Western people do not know this side of Chinese. A good accessible example is the movie "Kung Fu Hustle". I also think the English, Germans, Japanese, and French have a big sense of humor, and they too admire discipline, virtue, and principles.

Heaven, Success, Power, and Virtue.

Chinese thinkers were not much concerned with paradise, hell, and salvation as in the Christian-Muslim tradition and in some versions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Chinese thinkers used "Heaven" much as Westerners used "the Heavens" to mean "the world and the intelligence that lies behind it" (French "sacre bleu" or "sacred blue" and German "Gott in Himmel" or "God in the Heavens"). As far as I know, Chinese thinkers did not start with an idea like Christian "salvation so as to live in Heaven" although they knew the idea from Middle Eastern and Indian thinkers. I take the Chinese idea of Heaven as close to my idea of God. The Chinese Heaven is less personal than my idea of God but more personal and less mechanical than a grand unified theory in physics or even than the dharma in Buddhism and Hinduism. Heaven is moral, has opinions, and acts on the world.

For Chinese thinkers, people had to be right with Heaven while on Earth. People had to work as Heaven works or do as an agent of Heaven would do while here on Earth. This is not the same as the Christian-Muslim idea of doing the Will of God. If the reader prefers to think in terms of “salvation”, then salvation in Chinese terms is being right with Heaven while still on Earth. If you are right with Heaven, everything else takes care of itself; automatically you receive the grace of Heaven. Living in the grace of Heaven here on Earth is salvation enough. Usually having the grace of Heaven implies other kinds of success, in particular economic and-or political success, but need not. For Taoists, the idea that being right with Heaven gives political success was wrong and harmful; see the chapter on Taoism. I do not know how the Chinese idea of being right with Heaven compares with traditional Jewish ideas about being right with God while still on Earth.

In the Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition, prophets not only are “right with God” but have power as a result; they are in touch with the Holy Spirit; and sometimes they can do miracles. Much the same can be said of Hindu holy people and avatars. The situation is fuzzier in China. People who know the way of Heaven are more effective than other people but this is not necessarily the result of power as in other traditions. It is more like technical ability, adept dancing, leading by example, or leading by suggestion. People who are in touch with Heaven know how the world really works, and get things done as a result. Especially they can get other people to go along, get along, and act well as Heaven wishes. This seems like power to common people just as our technology seems like magic to “stone age” people or extra-terrestrial technology would seem like magic to us. Heaven does not need to give extra power to people who know its ways, and so Heaven rarely does so. Still, in stories, it seems as if some people do have power from their relation with Heaven, much as in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim and Hindu traditions. Great sages and great rulers of China not only knew, they also seemed to have power from Heaven.

In China, a virtuous person is “right with Heaven” and anybody who is right with Heaven is a virtuous person. The idea of virtue is the central idea in being right with Heaven and the central idea in character, morality, conduct, right order as in the right order of the state. Virtue seems to have power, just as, in the Christian-Muslim and Hindu traditions, virtue has power. I am not sure about the relation of virtue and power in Jewish thought; some spiritual people such as Hasidim seemed to have power as a result of their virtue; prophets sometimes had power as a result of being in touch with God but not necessarily because of any virtue on their part; Pharisees might have felt they had more power (“sway” with God) as a result of their purity.

In China, virtuous power is not power in the sense of the ability to compel but in the sense of being able to get things done; people with virtue can get things done. People with great virtue can accomplish great things. Yet the story is not clear-cut. Some people who had great virtue were stymied by petty people and by circumstances. In the end, virtue is not like magic. Virtue is like knowing how to ride a bicycle. People with virtue are in touch with Heaven, and have the ability to get things done as a result.

People with virtue can display power through advanced technique. Virtue and technique go together. Suggestion and example are as much advanced technique as engineering or swordplay. It is not clear if the efficacy lies in virtue itself or if virtue gives technique which leads to efficacy. It probably does not matter as long as we keep in mind that people with virtue get things done, and, if a person wishes to get

things done, the best path is to cultivate virtue first. More virtue means better technique - not necessarily more "moves" but more effective, if fewer, moves.

Technique is taken as a sign of advanced virtue but not necessarily of good virtue. Somewhat like "the Force", virtue can be both good and bad. In kung fu movies, technique is a sign of both good and bad virtue. Good and bad masters both can have advanced virtue and advanced technique. Good masters have wit while bad masters have guile. Good virtue can confer wit but not guile; bad virtue always gives guile but not true wit. Good masters win not always through their technical prowess but as a result of wit, just as Superman often defeats his enemies not through his greater physical skill but through his greater wit. Goodness should ally with spiritual virtue, technique, and wit, to win in the end. This is the theme of a Chinese classic called "Three Heroes" about three virtuous and powerful heroes at the time China was forming, about the time of Jesus. It was made into a TV series. Although not originally one of the three heroes, the man who really defeated China's enemies and united China had little physical prowess but had great virtue and legendary wit, "Khong Beng". When Khong Beng misused his virtue and technique, he suffered a shorter life. Confucius expected goodness to win because of its close alliance with effective virtue; see below.

Some very few special beings, often human, but not always, such as dragons and big fish, were so "right with Heaven" that they lived a very long time, and did not worry about worldly problems such as food and military power (see the movie "Big Fish" and think of the great worms in "Dune"). Some humans could become immortal. This idea might be like the idea of salvation in other traditions. Immortals lived in this plane and had physical-but-ethereal bodies, but, even if they started as humans, they were not interested in human affairs and not much bound by physics. Chinese people ideally wished to become an immortal but few people thought they could achieve it, in contrast to Christian, Muslim, and some Hindu ideas of salvation. The idea of an immortal served as a reference for an ideal being, perhaps as Christians think about archangels such as Michael or Muslims think of Gabriel. The idea of an immortal plays little role in what I say here. Stories of interactions between immortals and humans can be fun, like Celtic stories of fairies and humans.

An ideal leader is "right with Heaven"; has natural discipline and virtue; knows principles; knows that other people need rules but is not bound by rules himself (rarely herself); leads by example and not by any use of force; never does anything bad; does not allow badness even as a tool to goodness; sees the correct people and puts them into office when official work is needed; teaches other people the discipline, virtue, principles, and rules proper to them and their station; and teaches through ritual, music, and traditional arts. People of lesser ability, including officials, fall into their appropriate positions with their appropriate abilities for virtue, discipline, principles, rules, and force. When the state has a true virtuous high leader, it hardly needs officials, soldiers, or police. It is naturally prosperous to the right extent but is not obsessed with wealth or money. Other states dare not attack it. There is little crime. This is not only the Confucian ideal but, in slightly different forms, the ideal of most Chinese, and the ideal in many places other than China and the Far East.

When a state does not have an ideal leader and so is not in full Heavenly grace, it must resort to other means, in particular to laws, dogma, and force. Such a state need not be bad as long as the other means are derived from traditional contact with Heaven and are taught through traditional ritual and arts. If the leaders have some discipline and virtue, see the connection of principles to rules, and learn through the

traditional arts, then the state can do fairly well. This was the goal of most dynasties in Chinese history. If a state does not have even this, then it must resort to laws, dogma, and brute force. Even here, there are grades of goodness and badness, but I don't go into them.

Legalists.

“Legalism” was one of the lesser means for hard times.

In times of social change and stress, people want order, much as conservative Muslims and Christians want social order in the face of modernization now. The “Legalists” were a school during the time of social change, about 500 to 200 BCE. As with Confucianism, they never go away, and arise again when people are exasperated and when times call for them. Legalists wanted social order. The term “legalist” is stuck in the literature on China but it is an unfortunate term because it carries the feeling of many little fussy rules pushed for their own sake, as in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and American legalism. Yet Chinese legalists wanted order and responsibility more than rules, and Chinese society has never been as legalistic as Western society. Chinese Legalists said human nature needs discipline so people could live together. Guiding principles and good wishes alone are not enough. The discipline has to be spelled out in a set of clear consistent systematic rules. The rules do not have to specify every small aspect of human behavior but they do have to make clear what is needed to get along and they have to make clear what will happen if people disobey. Once set up, rules have to be objectively enforced. Legalists offered both sets of rules in general and tailor-made for particular states.

Chinese Legalists were more like “law and order” advocates in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, or more like conservative Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams, than like the tendentious fussy legal codes that we see in TV shows such as “Law and Order”. I doubt they would let off a “bad guy” because of a technicality. Legalists took the same attitude toward human nature as did “law and order” advocates in the United States, especially the attitude that “law and order” advocates took toward the character of drug users, protesters, “hippies”, “social deviants”, and ethnic groups other than their own. Human nature has to be controlled. The state has to be powerful enough to control human nature and to preserve itself against onslaught by other states. Once human nature is controlled, and the state is secure, then you can talk about general welfare. Until human nature is under control and the state is secure, it makes no sense to talk about social goals, social justice, and being right with Heaven, because you can't achieve them and you simply waste time, resources, and people.

Rulers understood the need for discipline, and they quickly adopted terrible laws when that suited them. But rulers did not adopt the Legalist solution, and Legalism generally failed. Rulers prefer deciding according to particular situations so as to gain the most they can from particular situations. Rulers do not like being bound by rules, not even their own, and especially not by anybody else's, not even the laws of their respected and wise predecessors. Legalism returns whenever China experiences turmoil but it never lasts long.

As with rulers everywhere, rulers in China did not like applying the rules to themselves. “The rule of law even for rulers” has rarely been accepted outside the West and was not accepted in China. This is one of the differences between China and the West, and one reason why China did not evolve self-government and economic development as did the West.

Mo-ism.

“Mo-ism” was one of the lesser means for hard times.

“Mo Ti” was the name of a particular thinker, (family name “Mo”, personal name “Ti”) (about 500 BCE). “Mo-ism” is the school he founded, and “Mo-ists” (sometimes “Mohists”) are its followers. Mo-ism is called a philosophy of “universal love” but that short description goes way overboard. In contrast to Legalists, Mo-ists believed basic human nature is good. If one person appeals to the innate goodness and dignity of another person, the other person usually responds well unless the other person previously was warped. Even damaged people often respond to goodness. People change character in response to goodness. The normal response to goodness is enough on which to base government as long as state policies do not make people worse. The response to goodness can lead a state to excel if the rulers understand goodness-virtue and enact policies to encourage it. Goodness is the basic guiding principle out of which rules come. We don’t need detailed rules. State policies should encourage the better nature of people. When everybody feels secure in the good response of neighbors and in good state policies, then people are yet more likely to act well and the state is even more likely to succeed. Goodness creates a self-reinforcing situation. We cannot do away with the state but we can use the state to bring out the goodness in human nature, and then rely on that. Jesus intended his advice to end bad relations, to substitute good relations for bad relations, and thus to minimize our reliance on the secular state. People who act this way are like citizens of the Kingdom of God, and will help bring the Kingdom of God. For Mo-ists, people who act this way are living in accord with Heaven (God). Mo-ists are often compared to Christians.

Mo-ists were more like hopeful optimistic American liberals than like stereotyped (but not real) pie-in-the-sky pacifist-socialist-liberals who give all to anyone. Mo-ists did not think human nature was always all good, or that people never did anything bad. Mo-ists did not blame everything bad on “circumstances”. They did not excuse “victimization” and enabling. They insisted on shaping human nature through proper institutions, including family, education, the state, and local village relations. If people were not shaped that way properly, then it is no surprise if they turn out badly. If they were shaped that way properly, then overwhelmingly they will turn out well. This attitude should be completely familiar to Americans. When a person turns out badly, Americans always expect to find a troubled past, and they are unhappy if they do not find a trouble past because then badness cannot be explained and goodness cannot be taught. When a person turns out well, Americans hope the person has benefitted from good parents, schools, friends, and institutions such as the Scouts. “Behind every great man stands a great woman”.

The issue is whether human nature is good enough, and can be made good enough, without too much effort, and without horrible totalitarian regimes, to serve as the bases for good government. The answer of Mo-ists was “yes”. Legalists said “no”, except for a few exceptional people who know the principles, and make rules for everybody else. Confucians say “no” too but Confucians use other means other than laws to mold and constrain people.

Mo-ists differ from Jesus in that Jesus expected our nature to change in the Kingdom of Heaven, and he likely expected God to take a hand in helping our nature to change. Our nature was good enough on which to start the Kingdom and good enough to respond to the overtures of God and people who already

were good. Enough people already were good enough to begin the Kingdom of God, and enough more people would get good enough to sustain the Kingdom. Human nature could change enough to sustain the Kingdom of God. I think Mo-ists would say we have to continually work to make people good enough. Once we reach a certain level in which good people and a good state were nearly mutually reinforcing, the job would be easier, but we still have to keep at it. I am not sure these differences between Jesus and Mo-ists are very important. Both Jesus and Mo-ists had a strong positive hope for human nature, and for the society that could be built on inspired human nature.

I differ from Mo-ists and Jesus because I think we need firm institutions for most people so they can be good citizens of a good state. Once we have institutions in place for a long time, and the proper attitudes have become part of character, then we can usually rely on good learned national character. Mo-ism and Legalism cannot give us the good institutions. Human nature has goodness in it, and it is moldable, but it is not as innately good as Mo-ists thought, and it is not as easily moldable as Mo-ists thought. Institutions have to mold human character first, and then people with the right character can contribute to the further molding of people and the state. We can put people and the state into a self-supporting system, and that condition will make the job easier, but not as easy as Jesus or Mo-ists hoped.

Mutual support between good institutions, state, and character is not common, hard to make, precious, and too easily lost. Usually historical accident has to make institutions first, and then institutions mold human character to continue the institutions, and so on. This historical accident has happened only in a few places in the world: some nations in Western Europe, and sometimes in Japan, China, and India. In other nations, history pushed institutions and national character almost to be able to make a good state, but history did not pass the threshold. These nations passed the threshold when they met other nations that could help them: other parts of Europe, Korea, Thailand, the United States, and some parts of Latin America.

Whether Mo-ists were correct about human nature and the state in general, they did see a part of East and Southeast Asian character that Westerners overlook. Asians respond well to an appeal to human warmth and human need, or, among the Thai, when they “see the hearts of other people and respond with the water of their own hearts”. East and Southeast Asians understand a bad personal situation and are willing to help a person who is likely to help him-herself and to get better. They help a person who is down-and-out even if the other person cannot help him-herself and might not get better. They are more forgiving than Americans.

Although Asians can be generous personally and sporadically, they do not institutionalize feelings of warmth-and-humanity because they do not trust institutions; and they offer help only in brief episodes because they refuse to enable bad character. They do not support organized charities unless charities have a sterling record, and, even then, Asians contribute less than Americans. They do not give support long enough for individuals to change character; their giving is incident-by-incident. This difference in attitude toward institutions of charity shows a difference in attitude toward institutions in general. Asians “keep it in the family”. When presented with modern institutions for education, wealth, and the state, Asians can adopt the institutions even when they did not develop the institutions themselves. When Asians move into modern capitalism and do have wealth, usually their empathy is strong enough to serve as the basis for schools, medicine, hospitals, democracy, and labor unions, as long as the institutions do not undermine the success of their own family and do not contradict the state.

Contrary to what I just said, and under the influence of the West, modern Japan has developed a great attitude for giving, and has developed the institutions to go along. Their version of the "Peace Corps" is well known around the world. That change might happen in other developed countries of Asia unless the countries are locked into a system of highly competitive world capitalism in which people feel they cannot spare anything for charity.

PART 2: Confucius

Confucius (about 551 to about 479 BCE) lived about five hundred years after King David, about the same time as the Buddha, Socrates, and Plato, before Aristotle, and about five hundred years before Jesus. Confucius had a similar deep long effect on East Asia as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Jesus had on the West. He was more like Aristotle than Plato, with similar ideas of virtue and goodness. He was like Aristotle and the Buddha in seeking a middle way of reason and in distrusting mystic ideologies. The word "Confucius" likely is not a name. It might be a Western "scrunching" of a Chinese title, "Kung Fu Tzu". In this case, "kung fu" does not mean "fighting" or "beneficial practices" but "adept at getting things done the right way through virtue-principles and ties to Heaven". So "kung fu Tzu" means "respected adult man who has skill in getting things done properly with principles, virtue, and discipline". Confucius exemplified productive discipline in virtue-principles, especially for the state. He was not the ideal leader himself, and never said he was, but he knew what an ideal leader was like and could seek an ideal leader for the state. He could find people of lesser quality than the ideal but enough quality so the state could be governed by discipline, virtue-principles, and connection to heaven rather than by laws or dogmas.

Disclaimer: Scholarly explanations of Confucianism often focus on Chinese terms that mean "humanity", "humanism", and "grace". One key term is "Li" ("lee"). "Grace in humanity" is what makes us best as humans. I avoid this topic because we don't need it here. We can rely on intuition about good, graceful, and humanistic. You do need to know it if you read more.

Americans have an odd idea of Confucianism. They think it means silly empty ceremony, pretentious long-winded empty flattery, hypocrisy, prudishness, putting up a screen behind which to maneuver for advantage, clinging to institutions for the sake of institutions without regard to the good and harm that they do, and family worship. Confucianism can degenerate into that behavior, but that behavior is found in all societies, not just in East Asian societies, and it does not explain why Confucianism has had such a long strong appeal in Asia. Confucianism still is the dominant stance there, and so is the dominant stance in the largest single block of humans on Earth.

Confucius prevailed because he saw the important role of virtue and integrity in human life, and the role that virtuous integrated people could play in good government. He saw that upbringing could mold young people into more virtuous integrated adults with character, what I call "good citizens", and these people were needed for a good state and good life. He tied a good family life to a good state. He arranged ideas about discipline, virtue, character, government, principles, rules, types of people, family, and teaching through ritual and tradition. His way allows for flexibility in how particular regimes find their order and their style of governing.

Confucius held almost all the values that Americans hold high, and no values that Americans dislike. He believed in Heaven (God), family, honor, duty, service to your country, respect for other people, harmony in society, the Golden Rule, and affection toward other people. He disparaged any kind of cruelty. He did not allow badness in the name of goodness. He supported the military but did not extol the military. He was genuine, not fake. He held these values not only because they worked well in the state and suited a citizen but for themselves. He held these values not as would a martinet soldier, bureaucrat, politician, preacher, superficial teacher, or person who teaches them as part of a role. He held them because he believed in them. He held them as would a true soldier or citizen. With all this going for him, it is easy to overlook what he overlooked and easy to overlook where he came up short. Although he did come up short, we should not hold that much against him or against East Asia; and we should assess him as we would a good solid American.

Chinese Ideas in Confucian Terms.

Below I restate in terms of Confucian thought ideas that I first stated above as Chinese. My version is not exactly as you find in a Confucian text or Western account of Confucius. I give the gist of what he meant rather than follow specific accounts. I have read followers of Confucians such as Mencius and have read documents from the Confucian revivals in China, Japan, and Korea; I don't mention them here; their ideas are important in the history of Asian thought and politics but do not change the main ideas here.

“Skill” means “moral skill” or “virtue”; virtue includes the political skill that a good person would have in a decent political state. Virtue includes principles but I do not stress principles because Westerners tend to think of principles as rules such as the Golden Rule while the principles that go along with virtue come more from a feeling for integrity. The Golden Rule is a principle that goes along with virtue as long as we don't try to really make it into a rule and so argue about it. The more adept a person is, the more he-she has discipline, knows principles, and is able to use principles to guide the behavior of other people.

A Question for Perspective.

People know they should do what is best in general but often they can't do it. They can't stop from doing what is fun or what helps them show off. People know they should drive small fuel-efficient cars but they don't. Instead, Americans, at least, buy large “gas guzzlers”, especially SUVs. Americans have all kinds of excuses such as about safety, excuses that don't hold up. Really, what Americans want to do is show off. The same is true of cell phones and condos. In modern life, the Chinese are not so different. There is a gap between what people want to want versus what they really want and really do. (Social scientists might think about what is really the “general will” a la Rousseau.)

If people already know what they should want, and people officially subscribe to what they should want, but people won't do it, and instead do something else, how does the state get them to really want what they should want and really do that? If the state can't get people to really want what is good, how can the state at least get people to do what is good regardless of their mixed motives? This is not an idle issue. It is a key issue in modern life. Think of global climate change and the obesity epidemic.

“You can't legislate morality”. The state can try to force people but that doesn't usually work well. Often the enforcement causes more harm than the original bad behavior. Think of Prohibition and the “War on

Drugs” in America. In modern China, problems like this have included keeping track of people, keeping them where they should live and work, and keeping the number of children down to one or two. Mao tried truly drastic and sometimes horrible ways to change China, worse than American Prohibition and the War on Drugs, and Mao’s ways didn’t work.

The West and China have attacked this issue differently. The Chinese way, stated well by Confucius, is to provide a good example based on past events and past leaders. Among other attempted solutions, the West often does the same even if Westerners don’t think of it as Confucian. Confucius did not solve this question, and this question has always plagued China. In reading about Confucius, think of his ideas as attempts to solve this question.

Kinds of People.

Briefly, people come in five kinds:

(1) People with great virtue, discipline, and skill. Very few people are like this. These people lived mostly in the past. We can learn from them. To describe them and their actions is a chief goal of history. Great sages, great rulers, and “immortals” were of this kind. Confucius cared mostly about great rulers. He did not expect rulers of his time to be like great rulers of the past but he did expect that they could learn from great rulers of the past, enough to govern well now.

(2) People with enough skill to run the state if they are trained properly. Even these people are a small minority. Even people with natural potential have to develop their potential before they are able to run a state. Some people who might have potential ability to run a state do not develop the skill through proper training and so do not really have the skill even if they have the office. Confucius differs from other Chinese thinkers in how he trains these people. He trains by example and by participation in traditional culture, in particular ritual.

(3) People who can learn to run the state from the example of number (2) and under the control of people from number (2). This group includes most rulers, officials, soldiers, etc. These people should not be in control themselves. They should be under the control of people who have an internal natural sense of Heaven, virtue, and principles. When they are in the correct place, they can do much good. When they are not in the correct place, they do much bad.

(4) The vast majority of people. The common people are not intrinsically very good or bad. Usually they are good enough unless situations lead them to act badly. They can be made better through correct government. The common people do not have the ability to run a state on their own and cannot be taught to run a state. Like Plato and Aristotle, Confucius would not have supported Western style populist democracy. The common people can learn to follow people of ability. Without people of ability to follow, the common people cause minor mischief. The common people usually do not have the ability to choose a skillful person to run the state. Sometimes the common people can recognize a good leader or a bad leader once he-she is in office.

(5) People who are effectively bad. They might not be naturally wicked but they lack self discipline and they cannot learn to internalize discipline. They have to be controlled from the outside. Not many people

are so bad that they can't learn to be good enough. Any well-run state can find ways to deal with the few really bad people. Badly run states cannot control these people and they cause much harm.

Goodness alone is not enough for everybody. Laws are useful but laws alone are not enough. Rulers need to know the reason for laws, how laws work, and why laws work. They need to know principles on a deep level. Common people need to see that their rulers have confidence and laws, and that laws work.

If the rulers understand virtue including principles, then there is no need for specific laws. Example is enough. Success depends on the example, the situation, and the person.

Finding Good Rulers.

How do rulers come to the fore? How do rulers learn how to rule? What example do rulers learn from? How do rulers set an example for others to learn from? How do leaders learn virtue?

The best sources for rulers to learn virtue are history and ritual. When ritual encodes history, then ritual is the best teacher, and sometimes ritual is the only needed teacher. Present rulers learn from great rulers of the past. In particular present rulers learn from successful semi-mystical rulers of the past who relied primarily on ritual and example to govern, rather than through a proliferation of laws. Adept present rulers have a duty to train and to choose competent successors.

Ritual does not mean empty formalism. The category "ritual" includes what you do to make life work. Ritual must be based on virtue. Life only works properly when it is based on virtue. All ritual, including formal ritual, ultimately came from what we do to make life work according to virtue. This is the idea behind the Japanese tea ceremony. It is the idea behind good manners in Western society, and teachers of manners stress that good manners are ways to make life work well. Ritual is the idea behind being polite and of being considerate of neighbors. Decent people are predictable as a way to get along with neighbors, and ritual helps people to be predictable. Ritual is what people do at baseball games and football games. So ritual is often fun. People teach ritual to children without knowing it is ritual. Ritual is what people do on the Internet to make sure everybody gets along. Ritual is how to conduct a barbecue so that it works. Ritual is the rules for a knife fight or a gun fight. Ritual is what happens at the annual workplace holiday dinners. Ritual is how fathers teach children how to hunt. Without ritual there could be no military. Confucius considered music to be ritual. Confucius would want people to listen to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Bizet, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, Robert Johnson, Jimmy Rodgers, and the Beatles. Ritual does not stifle creativity any more than learning musical scales or how to maneuver on Facebook stifles creativity. Ritual represents the best in human character externalized and made obvious so that everybody can follow along.

Confucius used ritual as a means to an end, and did not use ritual as an end in itself. He saw the best behavior that people could aspire to. He saw the principles that govern a successful state and successful life. He saw that ritual embodied this. His idea of ritual was a merging of spiritual and material so that we become more spiritual and better, much like the Christian idea of a sacrament.

Confucian Character and Principles.

Confucius clearly stated the Golden Rule of “do unto others” as a high goal of human action and politics. The Golden Rule was a focal point of his teachings, at least until Confucianism became the state religion in China. Even then, the Golden Rule was not forgotten but it was not pursued. The outstanding movie “Ip Man” is about one Chinese man’s resistance during the Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s. The hero is a Confucian-Taoist gentleman. Against his will, he is forced to fight back against foreigners, and he is forced to organize the townspeople to fight back against bandits and foreigners. The movie makes a point of the Confucian use of the Golden Rule and for harmony among the Chinese; and of the Confucian basis for self-defense, especially in contrast to legalism and militarism. The movie is wrong about the Confucian roots of martial arts – the roots are more Taoist than Confucian. But the movie is right about the importance of Confucianism, the importance of the Golden Rule, and the role of Heaven-like grace in human relations. A good state was a state in which the rulers inspired people to act by the Golden Rule and to defend themselves, as did the hero. In a tyranny, and in chaos brought by tyranny, people forget the Golden Rule and need to be reminded by a Confucian.

Confucius was not a formalist “stick in the mud” or “stuffed shirt”. He had a sense of humor. He would fit in with similar rabbis, priests, monks, and even politicians. Confucius and Jesus would have gotten along well. They would have liked each other, as Jesus liked big-hearted Jewish rabbis of his time. Confucius would have thought Jesus was naïve and impetuous but on the right track.

Confucius wanted an education that built what the British and Americans call “character”. Before about 1950, if Confucius was in the West and trained future leaders, he would have given them a Classical education that insisted on understanding rather than rote learning. Besides standard thinkers of the Classical world such as Cicero, Confucius would include great writers before modern times, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and John Donne. Confucius would include accessible versions of science including evolution and the Big Bang. Confucius would have hoped great leaders were more than merely military men (and women); but he also would have known that military people need a good education too, and well-educated military people can render great service. He would approve of most of the life of Winston Churchill, and approve of the idea that “Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”.

In the modern world, to build the right character, Confucius would have young future leaders read all the “modern classics” such as you might find in the Penguin collection, including Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy. He would have young future leaders watch the great movies such as “Citizen Kane” and “African Queen”, and especially watch movies that show good and bad families such as “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Godfather”. He would enjoy Frank Capra. Confucius would have people join in the great rituals of secular religion such as the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Christmas. He would make sure people feel the lessons of ritual in modern life, and that leaders could use the lessons from literature and rituals to decide modern problems such as universal health care. He would assume that any leader who had this training would be in tune with Heaven, get help from Heaven, and have the virtue and power of Heaven.

Confucius represents the effective mean (center) between reason and emotion, innovation and tradition, rote and spontaneity, intuition and rules, force and example, intervention and letting go, leader and led, and state and individual. In this respect, he is like the shift from Plato to Aristotle. Confucius tried to find the most effective mean in the context of Chinese culture and society. That mean in that context did not

lead to the same institutions as Western democracy and capitalism but it did prepare the Chinese for capitalism and some democracy 2500 years later. It could serve as a base for greater democracy, as it has in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The Confucian attitude toward tradition, leadership, human nature, followership, and the state is not so different from the attitudes of moderate Republicans and “centrist” Democrats in the United States.

When Asians seek to return to a balance after change, or seek to find the best out of a present situation, they return to Confucius. What makes better sense than to return to virtuous character? We can look at Chinese history after World War Two as (1) a brief rising of Mo-ism (“Let a hundred flowers bloom”); (2) a longer period of Legalism with accusations, trials, the Red Guard, and forced labor; and (3) then a return to basic Confucianism as China successfully humanized the Party and modernized its economy. Growth of the Chinese economy since about 1985 is a Confucian success.

The Victory of Virtue and Goodness.

Confucius knew that virtue did not always win in each particular person but he hoped that virtue could win for the state and people as a whole. Like Socrates, Jesus, Tolstoy, and Gandhi, he thought goodness-virtue would win in the end. Somehow leaders would come to understand virtue-goodness, understand the correct principles that support virtue-goodness, and would act on correct principles to order the state. The leaders would serve as examples of virtue-goodness to immediate followers, who would administer the state as its officials. Leaders and their close followers the officials would serve as examples of virtue-goodness to the common people, who would follow them in building a good state. Confucius knew that officials had to use force. Even so, he did not want force as the main binder of the state – that is wasteful and is contrary to virtue and principles. He wanted people to act well because they understood acting well. Leaders and officials learned virtue through study of history, ritual, and art while common people learned how to act well through example from leaders and officials.

Despite having read Confucius several times, still I am not sure if he expected virtue-goodness to win just because it is good-and-virtuous, as did Gandhi and Jesus, and, likely, Socrates. I think so. If goodness-virtue won primarily because leaders used force to impose virtue-goodness, then that is not truest virtue-goodness. Truest virtue-goodness should win in the end, so it must be virtue-goodness-for-goodness'-sake alone. Virtue-goodness should use minimal force. Yet, at the same time, Confucius did know that too many people do not understand virtue-goodness-for-goodness'-sake so that the triumph of goodness is not assured without some force.

Western people should see easily the dilemma of our own leaders and officials. Officials want the people to follow goodness for its own sake, yet officials know we must use force, and that using force ultimately subverts goodness. Officials everywhere seek basic principles to instill in hearts so people will be good citizens without many detailed laws and without much force.

The State as the Kingdom of Heaven.

As much as Jesus, Confucius wanted a Kingdom of Heaven; and, like Jesus building the Kingdom of God first in Israel, Confucius would build the Kingdom of Heaven in China first. Confucius wanted a Kingdom in accord with the virtue of Heaven, sustained by Heavenly people, and a Kingdom that leads people to

change their nature to be more Heavenly. If we think of Western “Good” as “Heaven”, then all standard Western thinkers after Plato have wanted the same thing. It is not an odd desire. It is a noble and good-hearted vision when not forced on us, and when it can be generalized to include everybody regardless of nation. It is one of the most powerful ideas contributing to the rise of democracy.

How does the Chinese version of the Kingdom-of-Heaven-on-this-Earth differs from the Western version of the Kingdom of Heaven (God), and how realistic is the Chinese version? Through most of Chinese history, most Chinese did not have the ideal of a Kingdom of Heaven as did most Christians, at least in theory. When Chinese thought of a Kingdom of Heaven, it was limited to “China”; it did not include anybody in the world who went along with the same ideals and wished to be members. Even for the national image of a Kingdom of Heaven, and despite inspiring patriots, Chinese people in general did not work for the Kingdom of Heaven (ideal China) as did Christians. Chinese began to think more of working for the ideal China as the Kingdom of Heaven after the Communist revolution. That is one point of the movie “Hero”. I am not sure how much the image of a great China in accord with Heaven drives Chinese people now, and if that image is enough to overcome their need to provide for their family regardless of the state. Hopefully China is aiming for something grander than reviving glory and power, control of the Pacific shipping lanes, and dominating international capitalism.

Confucian American Presidents.

I think the original idea of democracy in America was more Confucian and less populist than the idea of democracy now. We wanted our leaders to be able to run the state, and we wanted our people to be able to select people who could select good leaders, but we did not expect the people directly to run the state, and in some cases, not even to directly select the leaders. The Electoral College is a Confucian idea while direct election of all officials is not. The original idea of an American President was more like the idea of a Confucian leader than like the populist near-demagogue leader of today. Americans still want a Confucian President. Americans want Presidents to be effective leaders but Americans also want them to lead more by moral example than force. This is why the American people get upset at sexual mistakes of politicians, and more upset by lies and cover up than by a few small moral indiscretions. Force is what the military uses when the President tells them. George Washington was a great Confucian President. In good moments, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Abraham Lincoln were Confucian Presidents except as events forced them use force or guile.

When moral example fails, then Americans revert to support for a populist demagogue. Because moral example never works well enough or long enough, people always turn to populist demagogues. Good compromise while upholding the virtue, ideals, and best interests of the country is a Confucian ideal. A minimal use of law, using existing laws to best advantage, and passing new laws seldom, are Confucian ideas. “You can’t legislate morality” is a Confucian idea when the phrase is not used as a slogan to cover racism and agendas.

In his first year in office, and by temperament, Barack Obama was a Confucian President. He tried to use moral argument and moral example to unite factions that had been separated for a long time by fighting and conniving. He was open to compromise. He referred to principles and precedent. In the end, he was undermined by Congressional leaders, mostly Republican but some Democrat, and the Tea Party, so he had to change tactics. That is what often happens to Confucians. Then they become Legalists, Mo-

ists, Maoists, or flounder. In America, most failed Confucians become nasty Legalists. The Republican Party began as Confucians and ended as Legalists obsessed with power. Liberals start as Mo-ists and end up as much obsessed with power as Republicans. Confucius sought to avoid all this. He correctly saw that Legalism is only a short run strategy, and, no matter how much it hurt your own career, for the best interests of the nation, ultimately virtue-goodness has to lead by example.

PART 3: Assessment.

Governing by Being in Touch with Heaven.

Confucians want the highest leaders not to lead through laws or force but through example. The highest leaders are in touch with Heaven. By being in touch with Heaven, they know what to do, and what they do succeeds. Ritual and the arts tie everybody together and teach everybody.

This ideal was known not only in China and among Confucians but, in slightly different forms, all over the world in many cultures-and-societies at many times. The Egyptians, Babylonians, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Mayans, Aztecs, Incas, Buddhists, Hindus, and Shinto followers in Japan, all had this idea of how leaders, states, and peoples should run. European kings from Charlemagne in 800 CE (AD) through the modern age had this ideal of the king and the state. Americans have this idea when they think of the President as a moral example and great statesperson. People like the idea of “charisma” (“mana” or “The Force”) flowing down from heaven to ethereal leaders to officials to the people. When this flow is correct, the country prospers. When this flow is wrong, the country struggles. Republicans and traditional religionists still think this way about America when they think of it as the “New Israel” and the example for all godly countries. I think traditional Christians would like to see this relation in which their Church plays a key role in advising the President. Billy Graham did play a role something like this. Even “godless liberals” think this way when they see America as the avatar of Liberty and when they want leaders to be truly moral by showing a few small blemishes but no large ones – a little “pot” or cocaine, a few Cuban cigars, a fortune teller, or a few girls on the Internet are good but bondage porn is horrible.

What makes the Chinese version distinct, if it is distinct? What makes the Chinese version different from the Western version? Why did the Western version lead to self-government, science, development and the best modern way of life while the Chinese version did not? To answer would require a lot space, and I am not sure I could give a good answer. Academics spend their careers on these questions.

Focusing on the ideal alone, China differed from most non-Western versions in adding virtue, principles, character, and morality to the idea that leaders connect to spiritual power. Leaders do not have power just because they connect to Heaven. They might not have power in the simple sense at all. Leaders have virtue, principles, and character because they connect to Heaven, and connect to Heaven because they have virtue, principles, and character. Chinese leaders have morality based on ideas like the Golden Rule because they connect to Heaven, and they connect to Heaven because they have morality. The only power that mattered was closely tied to morality, virtue, integrity, principles, and character. This was much like the Jewish, Greek, and Roman ideals.

A Brief Answer.

Unlike the West, China never developed a solid rationale based on theory and experience that linked the charisma of the state and high leaders to ideas of the state, the relation of people to the state, and how to administer power on all levels. China never had the ideas of citizenship and the state that I described in Chapter Two. China never had a logical scientific theory of social relations and the state. The ideas would not have to be phrased in Christian terms, and could have been developed in Confucian terms, but were not. You can't teach what you don't have. You can't use what you don't have as the basis for good leadership and the state.

The Confucian idea was simply that Heaven gave virtue, virtue gave leaders, leaders chose officials, officials used power when they had to, and people went along. China never had a developed analysis of divine order, the state, officials, power, and the people as we find in the West after Plato, Aristotle, and the absorption of Jewish thought. China never had anything like the informal British constitution or the formal American Constitution. China did not have a set framework of laws and a large stock of legal tradition. It had little "philosophy of law". It did not have, and could not have, the "rule of law" even for high officials. Officials always had to "wing it". For convenience, call this whole stock a "middle level" of ideas, analyses, principles, and institutions.

Without a middle level set of institutions for using power apart from particular leaders, China had to blow up the idea of the graceful heavenly leader beyond anything realistic and had to denigrate the daily use of power into mere expediency and conniving. Not in Confucius himself, but in writers after him, the proper response of a high leader to a crisis was to retire to the inner palace and hold a ceremony or play music. Without a regular constitution based on a solid logical theory of social and political affairs, China fell too often into confusion and warlords often took local regions. While governments rarely out-and-out failed, they also never out-and-out succeeded, and they never gave the general cohesion and prosperity that the best Western states could sometimes give. China never developed self-government, science, and capitalism.

Ideas of connecting to heaven, cultivating discipline, cultivating virtue, leading by example, and teaching by traditional arts, are good but they need to be supplemented by a coherent set of principles and rules based on sound principles and practicality. That is what China did not evolve and the West did.

Chinese Bureaucracy and Education.

China and the West shared the idea that leaders had to be moral and have character but differed in how morality and character came to reality in the state.

The Chinese were famous for their bureaucracy. The entire country was divided into areas about the size of an American county. The central government appointed at least one official to take charge of every unit, and kept garrisons of soldiers-police all over the land. The Chinese civil service did provide regular channels for the limited use of power, regularity within a regime, and continuity between regimes. Simply the fact of having regular officials kept regimes from falling apart. But Chinese bureaucracy did not give enough. Each official had to carve out his (rarely her) own niche, often by dealing with local criminals, and always without offending a higher official no matter how much the lower official was correct. As long as all the taxes demanded by the center were given, bandits did not cause too many complaints, and the military did not have to intervene to restore order often, the official was doing his job. This is the sort of

arrangement that people used to find regularly in the “Third World” despite what was formally written in the laws of a particular country, and still do find often enough. It is the order that prevails in the parts of Mexico and Columbia controlled by drug lords.

The bureaucracy was never really trained in the use of power and the administration of particular offices but instead was trained in mythical examples of ethereal past leaders who led by connection to heaven, ritual, and virtue alone. Chinese education did teach history and what can loosely be called “liberal arts” but not in the Western sense of liberal arts. Chinese education might more accurately compare to a long, elaborate, grueling “finishing school”. It was not even like a “prep” school. The Chinese felt that studying mythical classics instilled virtue and character, and that was enough. Students learned about mythical leaders but not much about real leaders and events. They learned calligraphy, ceremonies, and music. They did not have realistic studies of how the state works and how it fails. They did not have an analysis of the state, or an analytic comparison of several types of states. They did not have clear ideas of “what is this situation?”, “how did we get in this?”, “how does this situation compare to other situations?”, and “what might be the best move to get out of this situation into a better situation?” They did not know what to do in an office when they were appointed to that office. They did not learn about the ideas of Chinese analysts in the sense that Western school children learned the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Of course, the majority of training in any service in any country is done “on the job”. But, without the background that Western civil servants had, “on the job” in China did not mean to sift through ideas of previous people who were practical and theoretical (Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Burke, and Adams) for what worked best in today’s practical world but instead a crash course in conniving and survival.

Family First.

The role of the family has been a two-edged sword in Chinese history and in the failure of China to grow middle level effective institutions for government. Like education and the civil service, family provided continuity and a base level. On the other hand, it also provided a refuge when government did not work, resisted government for its own benefit, and so promoted government not working.

Since World War Two, America has seen the importance of family wax and wane several times. I have been most impressed by the waxing. Despite Conservative fears, almost all Americans consider family quite important. Look at movies about family starring liberal actors such as several done by Steve Martin. Soldiers list what is important in their lives as God, Family, and Country. Family is an integral part of grace coming down from heaven, into leaders, officials, and the common people. The family is a small version of grace coming into this world. Grace comes into parents, who teach children by example, and administer rules. The family is an important teacher of civic virtues. I know from personal experience that public schools, including universities, rarely work unless families have the right attitudes toward education and institutions, and families participate in education. Confucius would quickly understand all these ideas and approve of them. The family is the first teacher of Heaven and the most important. If the family fails to set an example of Heaven, then only a great sage leader could make up for family failure. Not even a great king or great President can make up for family failure.

I am not entirely sure why, but I found that Asians do not think American families are like this. I am not sure what Asians think American families are and I don’t repeat the mistakes here. I think the mistakes

have to do with how the modern world has changed families all over, not only in America, but the change happened first in America.

In any case, what matters is that Confucian and American ideas of the family are not so different that they cannot understand each other.

To some extent, in almost all state societies, family organization and state organization mirror each other. To me, a funny example occurs in Western weddings where the bride and groom dress up like imitations of aristocrats from the middle 1800s. The Chinese family was supposed to be a bit like the kingdom, at least in public. The eldest male was like an ethereal leader who led by virtue. Often his mother, wife, or eldest son was “the enforcer”. Children were not expected to have the ethereal virtue of the patriarch but were expected to show discipline and to internalize rules, like good civil servants. The family could be a “little kingdom” that ran along the lines of the big kingdom. The family was expected to teach Confucian views of the state and Confucian values. It was to teach its children ritual, music, painting, calligraphy, and the basics of mythical history. It was expected to teach good manners. Hopefully all this added up to the character and virtue needed for family success and state success.

When government is not well-ordered, does not often succeed well, and flounders often, people rely on the family instead. They fall back on the family. Eventually the family becomes not only first but first by a long way. Then the family does not play a role in the state as it does in the successful West. Families give little support to the state and all support themselves. When families give no support to the state and all support to themselves, then the state cannot succeed as it should. Then families give little support to the government, only to families, and so on.

When families do this, they do not operate “calmly”. They get entrenched and serious. Families operate according to dogmas of the family. They become little dogma machines. This is the caricature of the family that the West thinks is true of the Chinese family in general and was true when the family had to survive on its own.

The same thing happened in the West when the state was not reliable enough. Where the pattern got entrenched, it was as hard to get out of as in East Asia. The strong isolated family prevented the rise of a strong reliable state, and the lack of a strong reliable state supported the strong isolated family. Cases that come to my mind are Italy, southern France, Greece, and the Balkans.

Chinese people certainly had ideas of patriotism, and some Chinese sacrificed their lives for the nation. But Chinese in general did not have the idea of putting the state first sometimes. They did not have the idea of noble Greeks and Romans who sacrificed even their families. They did not have the idea of Jews who sacrificed family members for God, as when Jacob nearly sacrificed Isaac and King David had to accept the death of his children because they lived immorally. Without this idea, and with the constant failure of government, the Chinese fell back always on the family as little kingdom.

Confucianism makes it easy to entrench on the family this way because Confucius emphasized the role of family in ritual life and devotional life. I want to be clear: I don't think Confucius supported the stereotype idea of the family that we see in Western movies and TV, and which seems to prevail even among East Asians. I think Confucius' idea of the family was like the idea in Rome or Israel: strong families but with

the family in the context of Heaven and the state. If Heaven and the state are inseparable, and Heaven and the family are inseparable, then state and family are inseparable, and the family has to be seen in the context of the state. But when the state does not work well for hundreds of years, Confucian ideas of the family easily become the stereotype of “family first” that we see now. Once the pattern sets it, it is hard to escape. Confucian ideas have been used to support stereotyped ideas of the Chinese family for so long that those ideas of the family are now inseparable from Confucianism. This result is as if ideas of the family from media versions of the mafia, as in “The Godfather”, had been used so long in conjunction with the American Constitution and Christianity that they had become inseparable from the idea of Americans or Christianity.

An indication of the right balance between “family first” versus “loyalty to the state” comes in the fact that Americans actually pay a high rate of the taxes that they owe and do so voluntarily. Americans do cheat on their taxes and evade their taxes, and the American tax system is so screwed up that it promotes not complying; but still Americans pay their taxes more than any other major people. Perhaps the British and Germans are about as compliant, and they too have good ideas about the relation of family and state. In contrast, the Chinese, at least until Mao, paid taxes primarily at the point of a pike.

The original Confucian ideas of the family are not wrong any more than ideas of American soldiers about the family are wrong. Original Confucian ideas of the family are quite good, and Westerners are correct to praise moderate Confucian ideas of the family just as Americans praise English, French, and German moderate ideas of the family. Confucian ideas of the family are misused because they have been in the wrong context for 2500 years.

Once the family became the “little kingdom” while the state was relevant primarily as an irritant, this kind of autonomous family reinforced the drift of the school system and civil service not to produce institutions and officials for middle level power, officials who had ideas based in theory-from-experience on how to run the state, and carried out their offices well as offices. Families did not have an interest in promoting good scholarship and a good education system as in the Western countries such as France, England, and Germany. They had an interest in training their children for civil service posts that could provide another income and source of security. They did not care if their children did well or ill toward the job and the state as long as their children brought in revenue and kept moving up the career ladder. When the main goal is to get a government post for security, then it is best if the post is not assessed according to its contribution to a well run state in the Western sense, and it is best if the education system is mostly about ethereal ideas and mythical virtuous examples. It is better to train a child in etiquette that can be mastered and so lead to a position than in real administration.

The modern world is changing Confucian ideas of the family, and, I hope, returning them to what I think Confucius originally had in mind. What happens depends on the quality of government that prevails in East Asia. I think moderate Confucian ideas of the family can easily fuse with ideas of citizenship, the state, and self-government.

I admire how Americans, as with all people, love family. But I have seen the bad results of “family first” in America and elsewhere. Sometimes goodness and right are more important than family. Sometimes the nation is more important than family. Sometimes a family member does such wrong that we have to turn him-or-her over to authorities, not just to protect the reputation of the family, but because it is right and

better. I get nervous when Americans say “family first”, especially because populist democracy is failing and America is not dealing well with the world economy and world politics. “Family first” describes rich people and the class of rich people looking after themselves first even while their particular nations “go down the tubes”. That is not what we want. If we give up on the state, and start putting our eggs in the family basket, then we will make everything worse, and make a bad self-fulfilling prophecy. We have to find the right balance and hold it.

How to Find and Train Officials.

Much as in England, candidates for officials in the Confucian civil service were recruited from aristocratic or successful families. People who were obviously stupid or inferior did not last long in the training but that is not any assurance that the people who did last were intelligent and would be competent at their future jobs. Just as going to “prep” school or a similar other “good” school in the United States reinforces the chance that your children and grandchildren will go, and so forms a closed circle of privileged people, so it did in China as well. The people who succeed at getting into a school, and staying in a school, in this system are skilled mostly at making and using social connections. This way of recruitment-through-privileged-self-reinforcing-society excludes people of ability and it focuses on people who have a set of skills that does not serve the country best. The state can get along with this system and these people, and sometimes this system produces great people – that depends on the content of education once in the schools. But this system does not find all the able people that the state really needs and too often it offers to the state people of inferior ability. (For a while, the American system did better. The American system now suffers terribly because schools aim almost entirely at giving a piece of paper for a job rather than at education.)

Suppose we had the right principles, people of native ability were out there, and we had a fairly reliable way to find them. Now we have to consider how to train them. No matter how complete and profound, ritual alone is not an effective way to teach leaders. The expanded idea of ritual that I have described – something like deep participation in the proper culture – would help. It would not hurt. Many leaders could use a better sense of the rituals that really drive the psychology of modern people, rituals such as watching TV shows about young adults. But even watching reruns of “Friends” and “Seinfeld” will not make good leaders out of most politicians. Repeated participation in Labor Day, the Fourth of July, and Christmas, and repeated watching of “It’s A Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Story”, does not make politicians better. Watching movies of Shakespeare’s plays might make politicians interesting, at least briefly, but it would not make them better at the public good. If politicians read histories of Presidents, politicians would have more precedents by which to tell misleading stories, but, again, likely historical literacy would not cause a big change in government. Going to a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, monastery, meditation group, or the freethinkers’ atheist potluck dinner, does not seem to make much difference either.

Ritual is supposed to teach character. Character is then enough to get a leader in contact with Heaven and to make a student a good leader. Teaching prospective leaders character alone is not enough no matter how we teach character and what kind of character we teach. We also have to teach how states really work and how economies really work.

I am not sure how to find future leaders and train them well. I am not sure how to train most people to be good citizens. I am familiar with all the programs that America has used since I was a child. They are not bad programs, and they do a lot of good, but they don't seem to do the job. Having a college degree is not guarantee that a person had the native ability to be a good citizen, official, or leader, and, if he-she did have the ability, he-she was trained up to capacity. Here is not the place to offer my ideas of what kind of character and institutions we need to make America better, and how to find and train our officials and leaders.

Content of Training and the Content of Confucianism.

Suppose we can identify good candidates for leadership and citizenship, and have good methods for training them. Now the question is "What do we teach them?" The content of their education is just the content of our ideas about the state and its citizens.

Almost immediately the question arises about Heaven in the education of good citizens and prospective leaders. For most of Western history, and in Confucianism, this is not a question. Heaven has a definite place in the state and in teaching about the state. For now, though, forget about this question. I return to it later. Accept that we all know Heaven plays a role, and we don't want to bicker about the role. So we ignore the role of Heaven for now.

So now the question is "what do we teach about political life, the state, and how the state works?" Here I repeat what I said above: This is where Confucianism and the West differ most and where Confucianism fails. This is the single biggest point of this chapter. Confucianism had high ideals and a correct view of the importance of Heaven, a view with which nearly all Westerners would agree throughout all the history of China and the West. But Confucianism did not have a good body of analysis for:

- Various political situations, both of state societies and non-state societies.
- Types of states and how each type worked.
- Why one state type might be better than the others even if not perfect.
- How to sustain the good aspects of political life in particular conditions.
- How to go from one type of state to another.
- The role of law in the operation of states.
- The relation of the ruler and officials to the body of laws.
- The role of the people other than to follow example and to obey.

I am not saying that China did not have many political and legal precedents, Chinese officials were not diligent in using them, and Chinese officials were not adept at using them. I am not saying that Chinese thinkers were not analytic – they were rigorously and amazingly analytic. I am saying Chinese thinkers

did not develop the kind of analysis that we see in the West beginning in Plato and Aristotle and carrying onward.

Another way to put this is that the Chinese did not have a scientific logical analysis of social, civil, political, and state life, at least not by Western standards, and not enough to actually work. Social science, even in the West, even now, is not scientific by the standards of physics but it tries and it knows the need for proper categories and logic. It builds on a solid historical foundation of theory, analysis, and experience. Chinese understanding of the state was not like that.

The fact that Chinese analysis of political life was not systematic and scientific served the purposes of the ruling class and of the families that sent their children into the civil service. A non-scientific literary style of education that did not directly bear on practical and theoretical problems was fuzzy enough so that it did not endanger the power of the rulers and ruling families. It was fuzzy enough to be used by rulers and ruling families to keep their power. As far as I can tell, this kind of fuzzy education is typical where rulers and ruling families do not want the civil service to be too effective, as in Russia before the Revolution and in Latin America before modern times.

Example.

Imagine two kinds of gardeners. Both men love life and love gardens. Both want to nurture life in an orderly and beautiful way. Their ideals are similar and equally high.

One gardener studies gardens from picture books of old classical gardens. He recognizes all the plants and knows that some plants are more like each other some ways and less like each other in some ways. He knows that all poppies are more like each other than poppies are like roses. He knows that annual plants are more like each other than perennials. He conducts ad hoc experiments to see which plant grows best in sunlight or shade, with little water or more water, and next to this other plant or that other plant. He knows how to save some diseased plants. He knows how to use some plants to keep away animal pests, and he knows how to set some traps for animal pests. In letters, he shares information with some of the other gardeners in the nation.

The other gardener has the picture books but also has manuals of soil science, botany, animal sciences, weather, climate, and chemistry. He knows how plants work and why. He knows about plant diseases. He knows how to make plants and soil work well together. He knows what to do in case plants and soil don't get along. He knows that some plants exude nutrients from their roots, some plants exude poison, and some exude both. He knows how to arrange plants so they work well together and so that they don't hurt each other. If roses are to be the queen of the garden, he knows where to plant them and how to plant around them so that everything works out well. He has history books of past gardens including explanations of how they worked aesthetically and scientifically. His knowledge is not perfect. He might not know of modern Darwinism or quantum chemistry. But it is good enough so that almost all gardens can succeed indefinitely.

The first gardener sometimes creates gardens of exquisite beauty but he is not always sure why, and the gardens never last a long time. His gardens often have problems so that dead spots and bushy spots

mar even the most beautiful gardens. His gardens are susceptible to sudden blights that sometimes wipe out the whole garden. He has trouble starting over again after a disease.

The second gardener also sometimes creates gardens of exquisite beauty. But, even when his gardens are not exquisitely beautiful, they are often beautiful. Even if he does not create as many one-off gardens of unique beauty as the first gardener, he does create some, and his gardens give more satisfaction and lasting satisfaction. His gardens rarely fail. He knows how to get rid of diseases. His gardens do have bare spots and bushy spots but he can minimize them and make each one go away as it crops up. If the owner of the land wants to change from featuring roses to featuring daffodils, he can do that.

Here are more ways to think about it:

Imagine the mechanic who fixes cars by experience and feel only versus the mechanic who really knows cars, metals, materials, electricity, and breaks, and who fixes by both feel and knowledge.

Imagine a computer person who fixes computers through experience and feel only versus a computer person who has studied operating systems, programs, languages, interfaces, and hardware.

Confucius and Conservatives.

Edmund Burke, an English and Irish politician, 1729 to 1797, was father of the Conservative movement. Although intrigued by America and its independence, and said that English policy toward America was a serious mistake, he was appalled by the French Revolution and suspicious of capitalism, industrialism, and changes away from the traditional agrarian and aristocratic order. He did not support free enterprise and free market capitalism. He did not support the rising capitalists. He did support the aristocracy and its links to the mainstream Church, as long as the old order produced genuine responsible leaders. He did want progress. He was rational. I see him as a version of the Enlightenment. He saw a link between stable progressive society, traditional piety, and predictable order. Movement away from what works is likely to cause more harm than good. "If it aint broke, don't fix it." We can move forward if we do not cut our feet out from under us. Certain kinds of social order go well with human nature, while other kinds do not. It is up to responsible leaders to find those orders, to guide us to new such orders in time of change, to avoid bad orders, and to make it all make sense.

The modern American and British Conservative movement that began in the 1950s, gained momentum under Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher, and exploded with the Religious Right afterward, is NOT a continuation of Burke's ideas despite what its apologists claim. It departs from him toward irrationalism, dogma, and theocracy. It is closer to reactionary fundamentalism and to populist anti-democracy than to real Burke-like conservative ideas. It is closer to Mercantilism than to real free-market ideals, and only uses free-market ideals to rationalize its preferred state interventions. The modern American and British Conservative has to consider what it wishes to preserve, to conserve, and to change. It has to consider how it wishes to do that. It has not done this thinking well enough.

Confucius was like Edmund Burke but not like the modern American and British Conservative movement. He saw the links between piety, character, social order, ritual broadly defined, leadership, a cohesive state, and the progress that can be gained only by building on a cohesive state. Only some social orders

go along with human nature and Heaven, and we have to seek those orders. If we need to see Confucius in modern terms, think of him as a moderate Republican with leanings toward traditional piety, a trust in old wealth, and a wish to go into the future without losing what we have now. He would not be a staunch Right Wing Religious Conservative. He would not be a champion of the unbridled free market nor would he accept a business world that thrived only as the result of state support. He would not be a fascist. He would not be a Libertarian. He would approve of limited state programs.

Confucius believed in what a genuine “compassionate moderate conservative” would believe in America, including the role of Heaven in all aspects of life and the state. Confucius believed in the receptivity of human hearts and he stated the Golden Rule clearly. Contrary to stereotype, in accord with Jesus, he held virtue and service to the state more important than family. If family members erred, they should be corrected. Unlike Jesus, Confucius did not make the Golden Rule and “pay it forward” high-level goals, and did not see them as a key way whereby people could make themselves into proper citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was not committed in the same way to the same ideals as Jesus although he recognized them.

Religion, Confucius, Conservatives, and Liberals.

I find it hard to imagine Confucius without Heaven, grace, virtue, and Heavenly principles. Religion was an integral part of his ideas of social life and the state. That was typical all over the world until about the 1700s in the West (excluding some Buddhist and Hindu analyses). Yet, now, we live in modern plural states where we try to conduct the state without leaning on religion. So the position of Confucius leads us directly to questions of religion and state. I have already said what I want to say in Chapters One, Two, and this chapter, so I don't repeat other than comments below. If we accept that values originally came from religion, the best values for the modern state originally came from Western European Christianity, values still have to feel sacred, and look for the values that work, then we can accept the values without worrying too much about which religion they originally came from. All religions, agnostics, and atheists can accept the values and get on with the difficult business of running a state.

Conservatives say the combination of Christianity, family values, going to church, a classical education with Greek and Roman values, and study of the political traditions of Northwestern Europe, in particular England, can make potential leaders into real leaders. I said something like this might be the difference between Confucianism and the West, at least when coupled with correct institutions for the administration of power. In contrast to China, this is what the West did for a long time; and this did seem to work until modern capitalism and populist democracy broke down the tradition. I am not sure it would work now in America or China in its traditional form. I think the study of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, and etc. is still relevant but is not enough for the modern world. We need more now. I think we have good ideas to add to the tradition but we are slow to adopt them. Whatever we find, I hope it mixes with both Western and Confucian traditions to give the world what it needs.

Conservatives in the West say the West evolved middle level institutions because it has the Christian Church, and the Church taught not only religious ideas but also the Classical education of Greece and Rome. Greece was obsessed with understanding (analyzing) the right working institutions and Rome actually found them for its time. Religion, non-religious theory, and practicality combined and carried on, and were available when needed. To a large extent, this conservative observation is true. What is

important here is that the West had the additional institutions for regular middle-level government, and the attitudes that go along with regular good government, while China did not. It might be important that the Church carried those additional institutions for most of Western history; or it might not matter that the Church did the job as long as some institution did the job; maybe philosophical schools would have done the job as well if they had survived. I think it did matter that the Church did the job. Although the Church and Confucius both based their ideas on Heaven (God), the Church held ideas about administering power that are both effective and humane while Confucians did not. I do not speculate on why that happened. While I give the Church more credit than most liberals do, I do not give the Church as much credit as conservatives do. The Church preserved a secular tradition along with Christianity; it did not preserve a purely religious tradition. It was the secular ideas of Greece and Rome that kept the ship on even keel and going forward. If the Western tradition had been purely religious, it would have been like the Jews or Egyptians, and we would not have modern self-government, science, or capitalism. I do not here argue about the role of the Christian Church and how the Christian Church compares to the religious component in the ideas of Confucius.

Conservatives make parallel opposite mistakes about the interplay of religious and secular ideas and institutions.

Liberals say we should end all mention of religion. I disagree. We need not adopt a state religion but it is silly to forget three thousand years of history and to overlook the fact that people want their values to feel sacred and to be grounded in religion. We can adopt values from Northwestern European Christianity without adopting all its religion-and-culture to the exclusion of all others. We can easily learn from other religions and cultures, and value them for what is good in them. At some point, a sane person has to simply say "grow up" about this topic.

The mistake that liberals make about religion might not be so bad but it bleeds over into character. It is one thing to (try to) block off religion. It is another thing to block off character. Regardless of where it came from, or comes from now, we need people of a particular character as leaders and citizens. There is no other way. Liberals believe we can maintain the correct idea of character, and maintain people of good character, without reference to religion. This is likely not true. Confucius certainly knew it is not true. People want religion. They want ties between religion and character. To grow good character, we have to come to grips with the link between religion and character. Again, this does not mean we have to adopt a state religion. But, if religion helps us to build character, then we should not suppress all mention of religion. We should allow religion to build good character. We should allow all religions to build the best character they can, especially once they have adopted the values that I related in Chapter Two. If we deny any link between religion and the kind of good character that we need in the state, then we get religion the bad character that leads to terrorism.

As liberalism tried to separate religion and character, and tried to carry on with character building without religion, character has floundered. I am not saying modern people are all wicked now as a result of no God; but they are confused and do follow bad demagogues, politicians, and bad dogma; see the chapter on Romanticism. Modern people do not work on citizenship. If religion can help us bring people to good values, character, and citizenship, then that result is good, not bad. If lack of religion lets people lapse into bad character, then we should be slow about excluding all religion. As always, we should work on allowing religion proper scope in a state society without instituting a state religion.

The parallel opposite Conservative mistake is a horrible exaggeration of the Confucian error. They think forcing their own religion on a person gives him-her good character automatically absolutely necessarily without any exception. They think having the state adopt their religion automatically necessarily without exception leads to good citizens and a good state. Nothing else is needed or should be added. All else should be excluded. Any additions are potentially dangerous. The religion does not have to train people in social science (political science) or the long tradition of Western social-and-political thought; it only has to give people a particular God experience and has to make sure they go to the right church often. I don't have to explain how wrong this. This is religious fundamentalism of the kind that we deplore in Muslims and that leads to religious terrorism. I don't have to explain that naïve Conservatives actually do believe this even if they know enough not to say it aloud in so many words. Even if a particular religion were true and Godly it would not necessarily lead to good character unless it was supplemented with other values, and it would not necessarily lead to good citizens and a good state. This conservative mistake drives the backlash not only of liberals but all sensible people. Again, at some point, an adult has to say "enough". We need better.

A good religion coupled with the right education in the Western tradition of social-and-political analysis is likely to lead to good character and moderately competent citizens. It might even lead some people to work hard and become good leaders. I think Confucius would agree if he could have some time to study world history and look at the modern situation.

Religion alone can't do this. Can a good secular education in the Western tradition alone, without the religious component, do this? Conservatives fear it can, and so they stress the religious component and belittle the secular component – to the embarrassment of good reasonable thinking people. Since about after World War Two, America and Europe have been experimenting with a blend of religion and secular education. They have been teaching the secular component in public schools and teaching the religious component in the family and church (temple, mosque, synagogue, etc.). Americans and Europeans want family and church to teach religion but they can't say so in public. For a while, this experiment was going well.

Unfortunately, that result led liberals to denigrate religion altogether – again the parallel opposite sad error on which conservatives blame all the troubles of the world. Before we could find the right balance, the experiment was derailed by the speed of change in the modern world, by the stress of America and Europe entering the modern world economy and world politics quickly. In that situation, it is hard to find the right balance and the resulting fights hurt everybody. The public schools system stopped teaching traditional Western secular social-and-political ideas, categories, values, and institutions to instead give pieces of paper for jobs. The family stopped teaching religion except for some empty formalism; the quality of religion taught by churches etc. varied quite a bit but mostly was not good and not enough for modern people; or religion degenerated into zealous dogmatic causes as described in the chapter here on Romanticism here. The family and church cannot teach the Western tradition of values and analysis, for reasons I don't go into here. The failure of privately-taught religion led to conservative calls for religion in school; and, that led to expected backlash from liberals and thinking moderate people. All this is quite annoying.

It might seem we could easily find a sensible blend of religious and secular instruction that did not favor one religion but that was honest about the source of our values and ideas in Western Christianity and the Western secular tradition. We need not promote any one religion in school but we could teach about all religions. With the Internet for supplement, this task should be easy and fun. Unfortunately, we will not do this. I don't explain why.

We have not been very good at any of this and we really need to do better. I am not sure what advice Confucius would give on doing better.

A Last Word on Goodness Winning.

Goodness might win but goodness is not destined to win just because it is goodness. If goodness does win, rather than win because it is goodness, far more likely leaders will use force and leaders will appeal to emotions that go along with goodness but are not necessarily goodness, such as patriotism. So I see Confucius as I see Socrates, Jesus, and Gandhi. I hope they are right, but I doubt it. I think the best we can do is now far less than we could have done after World War One or World War Two, and even that will take a lot of work.

26 Taoism

PART 1: Introduction

Way.

Taoism is Chinese. In Chinese, “Tao” is pronounced “Dow” as in “wow” or “Dow Jones”. “Tao” means “way”. Boy Scouts is a “way” in this sense. “Do” (“doe”) is the Japanese pronunciation of “Tao”. Judo (“Ju Do”), Karate Do, and Jeet Kune Do are “ways”. Generically, “tao-ism” is “way-ism”. The ways of Legalists, Mo-ists, and Confucians are particular ways. Besides particular ways, Chinese also believed in one Way that was best, went with Heaven, underlay all things, and solved all natural problems. All specific ways are from the one Way. Even so, the one Way is simple and a unity. All Chinese schools saw themselves as best representing the one Way; Confucians and Mo-ists saw their ideas as best representing the one Way. Eventually, what is now called “Taoism” won as the accepted expression of the one Way. At the time of the founding Taoist writers, about 300 to 200 BCE, there was no school of Taoism; the founders did not think in terms of a school of Taoism; and they did not wish to be in a school of anything.

Chinese think the one Way solves all problems much as: Americans say “where there’s a will there’s a way”; engineers think there is a tinker to solve every problem; physicists intend to bring everything together under one mathematical umbrella; Muslims pray to Allah to show them a way to deal with their problems; scientists in particular fields, such as evolution, think there is a model that explains everything important, such as multi-level selection; and some anthropologists see culture as the one-best-and-only explanation for all behavior and social life.

Taoism always has come in three aspects: (1) political; (2) philosophical and religious; and (3) popular or “magical”. This chapter explains only political and religious Taoism. There were no divisions in Taoism until Confucianism won as the dominant political outlook after about 200 CE, then political Taoism was no longer relevant, and the strains split. Religious Taoism came to America after 1950. Americans largely ignore political Taoism. After about 1975, some Americans wanted to use “chi” for healing, sex, long life, beauty, acuity, and martial skill as in “Qi Gong”. All are magical Taoism. For many people, especially in China, magical Taoism is Taoism, and other aspects are sidelines. I know little about magical Taoism, and so ignore it here. See the Bibliography.

In a nutshell, Taoism says we can be alright with heaven and the Way, and cure all problems of the state, if we act naturally and spontaneously without dogma, guile, or pretense. If we do that, we are in accord with the Tao, and all that we need follows. Anything else, even if it sounds good, such as the Golden Rule, is a pretense, and harmful. This Taoist stance is false. People are not this good, and the world does not work like this. We have to use principles, laws, and everything else that I listed in Chapters One and Two.

Heaven and the Way have a close relation but I don't know what exactly. The Way might have made Heaven, Heaven made the Way, they created each other, or they are the same, but humans wrongly see them as distinct. One cannot "be around" without the other in the background. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God and his Spirit are both one and distinct. You cannot know of God without seeing that he set out a way for this world and for good living, and to seek his way. His way works. Other ways do not work. His way is goodness and virtue. If we follow the way of God, then eventually we will be right with God and know God. To submit to God is to follow his way; and to follow his way is to submit to him. I think the relation of Heaven and the Way is similar.

The Way, power, and virtue have a close relation too but I don't know it exactly either. People who know the Way are virtuous and have a kind of power, but not the virtue of Confucius or the power of soldiers. Some people who know the Way have power over nature, power to help other people, and martial power but that power belongs more to magical Taoism, so I do not dwell on it here. People who know the Way can get things done but not grand political things. Mostly they manage to get along with nature, get along with neighbors, make a living, find food, find wine, paint, write poetry, sing, have a good time, and make this life worthwhile.

In the chapter on Confucius, I pointed out the importance of discipline in Chinese thought. With its stress on spontaneity and freedom, Taoism can seem like the deliberate opposite of the Chinese idea in general and to Confucianism in particular. Confucians and Legalists certainly took it that way. Typical of Taoists, they did not. Discipline in the sense of Confucius or Legalism is beside the point and unreal, so there can be no opposite to Confucian discipline; all simple opposites are misleading, including discipline versus spontaneity; so Taoism does not oppose discipline. It transcends discipline. To people who are already in the Tao, discipline is irrelevant; and people already in the Tao can show all the moxie and character that Confucians wrongly think can come only from discipline. For people not already in the Tao, it takes discipline to get out of bad habits and to find the Tao; only then do we see them as free and spontaneous. Taoist martial arts, including "soft" arts such as Tai Chi Chuan and "hard" arts such as Karate, stress the need for discipline first, with the final goal of no technique and spontaneous action. Magical Taoism is full of strenuous discipline lasting decades. Taoists mocked external discipline, such as from Confucius. To mock external discipline, they talked as if discipline was irrelevant, and they were totally undisciplined. Too often, people who call themselves Taoists but are not really Taoists did flaunt supposed freedom as anti-discipline, but I think they are a side issue and not relevant to the main issues of discipline in Chinese thought and the Taoist attitude and freedom. As you read this chapter, see what you can make of these issues for yourself.

Basic Taoism is encoded in only three small texts: the "Tao Te Ching" ("Dow Deh Jhing") by Lao Tzu (now spelled "Laozi"; no dates); the works of Chuang Tzu (Juang Dze or Zhuangzi; about 369 to 286 BCE); and the works of Lieh Tzu (Lieh Dze or Liehzi; about 250 BCE). The first two are most important. "Lao Tzu" means "old master". Lao Tzu might not have been real. If he lived, his family name might have been "Li" while his personal names might have been "Erh" or "Tan". "The Chuang Tzu" refers to the work of the real person "Chuang Tzu" or "master Chuang". The Chuang Tzu consists of stories. It comes in two pieces, the "inner chapters" and "outer chapters". Only the inner chapters definitely are from Chuang Tzu. The Chuang Tzu is among the most fun pieces ever written in any culture on any topic. "The Lieh Tzu" refers to work attributed to "Lieh Tzu", also stories. They do not reach the depths of the Chuang Tzu but they are still fun and amazing, and the easiest way to learn Taoism. Traditionally, the Tao Te Ching

came first. More likely: stories were in the air before any documents were written; the Chuang Tzu came first; then the Tao Te Ching and the Lieh Tzu were assembled sometime after 250 BCE. The Tao Te Ching is one of the most amazing works in any literature. It consists of eighty-one small units that are like poems (or are). Like the Book of Isaiah in the Tanakh (Old Testament), the Tao Te Ching was written by more than one person but not many, perhaps two or three. "Ching" is "important book"; "Tao" is "Way"; and "Te" is "virtue that gets things done properly". So "Tao Te Ching" is usually translated "(Book about) The Way and Its Virtue" or "(Book about) The Way and Its Power-Ability-Efficacy". I do not justify points with citations from translations of any Taoist works because of copyright issues.

Not Bad Mysticism.

Taoism includes some ideas that are typically mystical, such as that all things arise from the Tao, subsist only through the Tao, and return to the Tao. Multiple is single; the single is multiple; and the single gives rise to the multiple without splitting. Death is an illusion or nothing to worry about. Boundaries are fuzzy. We are only "bits" of Tao and only appear separate from it. We are dreams within dreams. Morality and truth are relative. The Tao is a Force that runs through everything and gives Abundant Life. If you seek the Tao, you will find it, or, rather, it will find you, and everything will be fine after that.

Sometimes mystical ideas dominate. Sometimes mystical ideas "corrupt" Taoism in the same way that mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour corrupt Buddhism and Christianity. Mysticism is not essential to Taoism, and the best Taoism is done almost ignoring mysticism. So I avoid nearly all the mysticism to focus on what is relevant here.

I avoid the issue of whether Taoist mysticism is the same as other mysticism. It does differ in one way. In some mysticism, the obvious world is an illusion, and we wake up to something other than the obvious world and more real than the obvious world. In Taoism, the obvious world is the real world. The mystic world and the real world do not differ but most people do not feel their unity. Taoists wake up to: the grace, beauty, wonder, and fun of the real world; the connections between things in the real world; the fact that the real world is not full of distinct enduring things but is a series of transformations; and the weakness of the distinctions (discriminations, dogma, categories) that we take for granted. The world is as it is, and not otherwise. We wake up to better appreciate the real ordinary world and our small place in it. A person need not understand anything beyond the ordinary real full world to live correctly, and trying to do so is misleading. After Buddhism came to China, the Taoist idea that the obvious world is the real world mixed easily with the Mahayana idea that the world before awakening is the same as the world after awakening; together they helped make Zen.

Taoism cultivates an unusual attitude, and it is easy to misjudge the attitude as mystical. Taoism urges people to change their old attitude, and this change can be mistaken as a mystic conversion. Yet to see Taoism as "merely" mysticism stresses the bad parts in Taoism and overlooks the good parts of Taoism. It is better to think of Taoism as like the attitude that people have when they first realize global climate change is real, romance is real, or that sports, science, and art are fun.

Basic Taoist Stance.

As with Mahayanists about the same time in India, the Tao Te Ching in China begins by saying any way about which we can talk, even to name it, is not the one true Way. The one true Way cannot be named or described. Then the Tao Te Ching goes on talking about the one true Way. In the 1920s, in Austria and England, Ludwig Wittgenstein said deep truth could not be explained, only pointed at. His friend, Bertrand Russell, noted that Wittgenstein wrote a lot about what couldn't be written about. The "California Taoists" centered on Alan Watts in the 1950s and 1960s. They told people to get direct experience of Life rather than second-hand ideas - a 1950s American version of "Say 'Yes' to Life"; and extolled the drug LSD for giving direct access to Life beyond mere words. Then they took LSD, sat around the house, and chattered like squirrels about abstractions. Chinese religious-philosophical-political-literary Taoists were not verbose but they did write a fair amount about the Way despite their own warning not to; used wine instead of LSD; and were not as bad as Mahayanists or California Taoists.

Legalists said laws can tame human nature; Mo-ists said mutual regard can do the trick, especially if the state promotes mutual regard; and Confucius said ritual can teach leaders virtue, then leaders can guide followers. Laws, love, virtue, discipline, and ritual all give their own kind of power. Taoists had none of this. It is all wrong. Jews say "get right with God" through proper observance; Christians require you to believe in Jesus as God; Muslims require you to submit to God and accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets; I say to follow Jesus' message mixed with practicality and Western values; middle class Americans "say 'Yes' to Life"; Buddhists disdain ordinary painful life; Mahayanists give up ordinary happiness to feel the joy of a bigger-than-me system; Hindus participate in the ecstasy of a multi-life system governed by social-duty-as-Dharma. Taoists would have none of this either, not for governing or for personal action. All schemes are artificial impositions. None work. All are contrived, odd, unnatural, factually wrong, personally hurtful, and socially hurtful. All cause more harm than good. All use power when power is not warranted. All impose an inferior human construct on what is already present in nature and already superior to anything contrivable by humans.

From the start, Taoists mixed ideas about how to govern, how to get along in life, what life is all about, how life works, how the world works, and where it all came from. What we now call (1) political and (2) religious-and-philosophical Taoism were not distinct, and an early Taoist would not understand why we separate them. This chapter presents political and philosophical Taoism mostly together. Despite the modern American tendency to dwell on philosophical and mystical Taoism apart from politics, you can't know Taoism without learning about its ideas of (not) governing and the (non) state.

The best way to govern is not to govern at all. Get out of the way, and let people act naturally. The best way to act is by not deliberately acting at all. Just act without ideologies. An apt slogan in the Western literature on Taoism is "do without ado". The Chinese slogan for this idea is "wei wu wei" or "wu wei": "act not act", "act empty act", or "act by not acting". Bruce Lee used the idea in the movie "Enter the Dragon" by saying he "fights by not fighting"; that was how he tricked a nasty bad guy into getting stuck on a little boat behind the main boat.

Yet if you make even that much of a doctrine of this idea, if you declare for the doctrine of no doctrines, the dogma of no dogmas, then you have killed the idea already. You have to drop all doctrines entirely, including the doctrine of getting rid of doctrines.

Taoists avoid power, especially political power. They do not want power over other people. They do not want other people to have power over them. To have power is a burden and a curse. Taoists are adept at avoiding power. Taoists do not dwell on power one way or another; they do not obsess over avoiding it because that is the same as to obsess over having it; they simply avoid power when it gets in the way of the Way. The attitude that I learned toward institutions and power when I was young in Oregon is similar to the Taoist attitude. "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Chuang Tzu was offered the office of prime minister in one of the most powerful states in China, and turned it down. It would be better to be a long-lived turtle dragging its tail in the mud than to carry the burden of power and the state, and, besides, the state would be better off without any leader anyway.

Stop supporting all the institutions of the state, and so let them die on their own. We need no king, prime minister, president, congress, road building, dam building, taxes, military, courts, trials, police, policies, theories, civic centers, civic orchestras, state schools, stadiums, examinations, welfare, teachers, priests, lawyers, laws, religions, dogmas, etc. If you leave people alone to follow the Tao, they will work this out on their own, and do it better than any governor could do it for them.

Taoism seems like anti-legalism, rebellion, Romanticism, and anarchism, but it is not. Taoism is "apart from" legalism and anti-legalism or other such categories or dichotomies. It is "don't bother to think that way at all". It is not rebellious, romantic, above the law (antinomian), disorderly, or indecent. It is like the advice that I gave in trying to overcome Romanticism in the chapter on Romanticism. The best way is not to worry about thinking in particular terms or not thinking in particular terms but to think in your own terms and to simply let it happen.

Farmers go to market to exchange ducklings, piglets, onions, millet, and chestnuts. Who can tell them what to do? Why should anyone tell them? Let them do as they do. Economic analysis is dogma rooted in distinctions. Suppose an economist could give an accurate detailed analysis of their actions, showing that farmers efficiently use resources, and skillfully exchange, so as to maximize profit-and-satisfaction. So what? The reasons in the analysis are not necessarily why the farmers do what they do, even if their actions fit the economic analysis perfectly. Even if the reasons used in the analysis are, in fact, why the farmers do as they do, why should we have a state policy about what they do? Why should we let formal economic ideas of determine state policy? Maybe next time the farmers will act for different reasons. Let the farmers do as they do. Whether the end result turns out well or not well by some economic standard of general welfare is not relevant compared to their freedom to do as they will.

A man lives by a marshland where he makes a living by fishing and by gathering bird feathers from which he makes sculptures to sell. His work is beautiful. A passing government official feels sorry for him, sees the beauty of his work, and offers the man a pension if he will make art for the king. The man refuses. He prefers to live with birds and fishes. By what standards can we call him mistaken? Even if we could devise standards, why do our standards, or any standards, apply to him? Let him do as he does. It is better if the beauty of the work simply is there, for the man and his neighbors to enjoy, without attracting any attention.

The wind blows cold from the north today. Some people lack firewood while other people use the cold to preserve beets. Who is to say the wind is good or bad, or the state should have a wind policy? Trees grow without help from the state; a "tree policy" would not make them grow better unless a previous tree

policy had already screwed up the forest. Jesus said God knows about all individual birds and flowers, and we mere humans cannot make the birds and flowers better by worrying. We cannot make ourselves taller, make our hair grow, or changes its natural color, by worrying or by enacting a state policy. Taoists would appreciate William Blake's poem "Tiger, Tiger" ("Tyger, Tyger").

After he-she has learns the trade, a computer programmer, grocery store manager, or farmer, still thinks but does not think too much. He-she does what he-she has learned. A sheep dog does not herd sheep following a mathematical program even if a mathematician can devise a program that describes what the sheep dog does. Once children learn to play baseball, they just play. Most kids never see the rulebook. Most adept golfers tell you never to read a book. If you can't teach yourself, learn from a teacher. Fourth rate artists try to make art and think it is good – nearly all hip-hop, rock, pop, and country performers are like this. Third rate artists make art, know they make art, and don't care how good it is. Second rate artists suspect they make art but don't care that it is art or how good it is. I am not qualified to talk about first rate artists. Just by giving you this explanation, I have falsified what really goes on in art, and ruined art for you. In the movie "A Beautiful Mind", a sign that John Nash might go insane came when he followed pigeons around trying to devise an algorithm (formula) for their movements. Every once in a while, the rules for "Parliamentary Procedure" actually help a meeting but the vast majority of meeting time is carried on without a thought for the formal rules.

With discrimination, with too much thought, people interfere in nature, these people here interfere with those people there, and inevitably things get "screwed up". Neither Taoists nor I define "screwed up". We don't have to. "Screwed up" is easy to see; thousands of cases appear every day in all social groups and all countries; and you know it when you see it. If you don't want things to get screwed up, then don't interfere, don't follow dogma. Use your good natural sense and follow the Tao instead.

Another Way to Think About It: Simple Integrity.

I am not sure self-avowed modern Taoists would agree with this picture.

All people have contradictions, it is not possible to get rid of contradictions, and contradictions are not a big problem if we don't make them so. Contradictions can give us character. Contradictions need not cripple us. We can still be natural, open, lively, and spontaneous with some contradictions. Yin and Yang are contradictory but get along well.

Now imagine that, despite modest contradictions, you speak openly straight from the heart all the time. You never lie. You never have to lie. You never have to cover up. You never have to evade or allude. You never have to elaborate. You can get your point across directly. You are what you are. You are not ashamed of what you are. What you are is good enough. You have integrity. You are not pretentious or self-conscious about speaking plainly; you just do it. You are not preachy and do not make other people uneasy with your honesty. You are not aware that you do it and so could not possibly think it makes you better than anyone else.

In speaking honestly like this, you connect with nature and with other people who speak honestly. You find a community in nature and with other similar people. The lack of additional knots in your stomach and in your head sets free your abilities. You do not become superhuman but you do get a lot done and

become a useful person. You appreciate others, nature, yourself, and life more. You might appreciate booze and art more. You also avoid bad people and lying more.

You do not look down on normal people and make them uneasy. You are not a New Age role model or a tough guy Romantic rebel anti-hero. You enjoy shows about normal guys with flaws such as “Magnum P.I.”, “Friends”, and “Seinfeld”. You can enjoy real normal flawed people too.

Jesus was like this. Jesus had something like this in mind when he said “the truth will set you free” and when he advised people to speak simply and honestly so their speech was simple “yes” and “no”. Jesus’ idea of the Kingdom of God was like the community of such people and with nature. Some Christians are like this but most are not.

This sounds like 1960s psycho-babble but is not. Before the psycho-babble there were real ideas based on sound feelings. The psycho-babble is a mere echo of better ideas and feelings. We cannot dismiss this vision because it reminds us of twaddle.

Not many real humans can be like this. Contrary to misconceptions of people who want to be like this but are not, nature is not like this, as we will see below.

But that does not mean direct simple unguarded honesty is not a useful ideal and it does not mean that some people, in the right times and places, can be nearly like this. To act like this sometimes is a great relief. We should respect this as a good way to be human. This is one view of Taoism.

No Dogma.

This section is abstruse but not hard if you don’t come down solidly on one side of the issues. The ideas here are about as close to a philosophical debate as ran through Taoism and the ideas here were a central feature of Taoism.

Taoism shares the outlook described in this section with other “nice” mysticism such as Sufis, Mahayana, and Hinduism. In Mahayana, the issue of “no dogma no distinctions” is the core of several Buddhist aids; if you get the idea of “no dogma no distinctions” then you are enlightened; and you are not enlightened unless you get the idea. The idea of “no distinctions” can be misleading in Taoism as in Buddhism but does not seem to have been as much a diversion in Taoism as in Mahayana. I take up the topic of Taoist aids at the end of this chapter.

Power requires discriminating between “this versus that”, usually as “us versus them”. Discriminating between this and that is necessarily incorrect, misleading, and leads to abuse. There is no absolutely accurate absolutely reliable distinction. Thus power is rooted in necessarily misleading discrimination. Misleading discrimination between this and that is the root source of power and abuse. All discrimination between more powerful people and less powerful people requires discrimination between this person and that person, this privilege and that privilege, this wealth and that wealth, this right and that right, this duty and that duty, getting now for sure versus maybe getting later, and so on.

Laws are not possible without discrimination between acts, people, and situations, and without power. Because all power is abuse, all laws necessarily entail abuse, even when they mean to minimize abuse and discrimination.

Words require that we discriminate between this and that, and words often entail value judgments. We say “our town” meaning “OUR PLACE” and everything it does in the play “Our Town” rather than merely “the place in which we happen to live”. We say “the football game” meaning “THE important event of this week” rather than merely “a sporting event this weekend among other sporting and non-sporting events”. We do not say merely “we haven’t had pizza for dinner for a while” but say “let’s have PIZZA for dinner tonight”. We say “I am a follower of the Tao” with pride. Even if some discriminations are not harmful, and even if some are fun, still many discriminations are harmful. That is why Taoists are wary of words, and prefer direct intuition and direct action.

All discrimination between this and that entails a misuse of power even when the discrimination is not done directly as part of government, as, for example, when one person says that raising rice is better than raising millet, going to the beach is better than going to the desert, or we should go to this restaurant rather than that restaurant. All discrimination between this and that is an abuse of power even in regular life. Taoists did see the simple difference between an apple and a pear, between up and down, but were suspicious of going much farther than this, much farther than what is naturally obvious.

For convenience, I subsume all discrimination under the terms “dogma”, “doctrine”, or “ideology”. Power, abuse, and discrimination are nearly indistinguishable, one entails the others, and one cannot be found without the others. Every time I write “dogma”, “doctrine”, “ideology”, “power”, “rule”, or “law”, I imply a misleading discrimination although usually I don’t point out the discrimination. Taoists avoided dogma as they avoided power. This is one reason why the Tao Te Ching said what could be named was not the real name. This is why a doctrine of not having doctrines is a mistake, and why hating power is as much a trap as loving it. Do not dwell on dogma-discrimination. Do not fall into the trap to begin with.

To decide what is good or bad is to create dogma-discrimination and to abuse power. Taoists were leery of ideas of good and bad. Vexing as it can be not to promote good, and to put up with bad, if we promote good, or suppress bad, then eventually we fail at what we wish and we make things even worse. To stop making things worse, we have to stop thinking in terms of good and bad even when we retain some vestigial shadows of good and bad in our minds.

The idea of not deciding between good and bad is so annoying that most people reject it out of hand, and so reject Taoism. Taoists do not make it easier because they write flippantly, peevishly, and mockingly. Also, Taoists said people who live according to the Tao live better than others; and said a state that ran according to the Tao (that is, without any government) was better than states that ran according to other ideas; so it does seem as if Taoists had an idea of good a bad, better life and worse life, in mind. Rather than take a lot of space here to explain, I get back to these ideas later.

To think we differ from the Tao, and thus differ from other people, from birds, trees, mountains, or clouds, is another misleading necessarily false distinction. At most, we only temporarily differ from other things because the Tao that flows through us and them makes it seem that way now. The same Tao that makes us distinct flows through them too. The same Tao makes us both different and similar. We could not be

what we are without others of all kinds, and they could not be what they are without us. Some people can specialize in selling cars because others specialize in selling furniture; yet they are all in the market. In baseball, one person can play shortstop because another plays third base and another plays second; yet they are all on the same team and all in the same game. At the end of a football or baseball game in the US when I was young, children used to chant “Who Do We Appreciate?” showing how our team needs them and they need us to have any game at all. “Us and them” is a big misleading distinction. We can’t be as distinct as we might think we are if we all come from the Tao and seek it. To invoke Dylan Thomas again: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower, drives me.”

When we try to increase our family, security, wealth, position, power, or goodness, or decrease badness, we increase the necessarily artificial false wrong distinction between us and the Tao, us and others. We make things worse, eventually even for ourselves.

The distinctions between good and bad, and between self and Tao, are the two root distinctions that lead to all other distinctions, and thus to dogma, power, abuse, and deterioration. The distinction between self and Tao includes the distinction between self and other. We can only get things right with the Tao if we stop discriminating between self and Tao, and between good and bad.

Some Taoist stories and essays seem to say we should make no discriminations at all, as if we should live in a big ball of pudding. This is a mistake. The stories only seem to make that point to correct for the common error of too much dogma. Even after we merge with the Tao, we see differences between an apple and a peach, Bob and Jill, and me and Harry. The trick is to rest in useful distinctions suggested by the Tao, and no more. To think much about “right” and “wrong” is to make a wrong distinction. You have to let it happen. How we get to there, I do not explain.

Other stances and religions warn against making a distinction between the self versus other, self versus world, and good versus bad. These warnings are common in mystic traditions. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism stress the warnings. How the warnings are developed characterizes particular stances-and-religions. There is no value here in trying to clarify the various warnings and traditions. I point this topic out for people who go on to further reading.

To notice we discriminate is to discriminate. To disapprove of discriminating, or praise not discriminating, is to salt the wound. Taoism has to overcome this problem, which it does fairly well but not perfectly. Rather than try to explain how Taoism does this, and so add even more discriminations, I simply go on to describe Taoism.

The idea of “dogma” strongly implies “system”. When I write “dogma”, think also “system”. I don’t use the term “system” because Taoists did not systematically attack systems, they unsystematically attacked the silly dogmas and bad outcomes to which systematic dogmatic thinking leads. The version of Taoism that I give here does not imply any system. Taoists feel free to make assertions because they do not thereby fall into the trap of rabid anti-dogmatism; but that does not mean they imply a system. Other religions do imply a system when they make assertions. Magical Taoism indulged as much in system making as any other religion but that is not what I describe here. You have to read Taoist literature and then decide for yourself if Taoism did have dogma and did develop a system. Non-Taoists certainly look for dogma and

system when they read Taoist literature. These comments apply also to Zen except Zen had to struggle with the system that it inherited from Mahayana.

Sticky Useful Logical Point.

The issue here shows up in various versions in various places, and can be sticky, so it is best to state the issue clearly here even at the risk of interrupting the flow. This issue has a version at the level of thought, stated here, and versions for society, morality, and nature, stated later. Objections to the Taoist view can be made in terms of logic or fact.

On the one hand, to insist on no dogma is itself a dogma. Usually people don't realize when they lapse into this form of dogma. Taoists don't seem to realize when they have fallen into this dogma. This form of dogma can be as hurtful as obvious dogmas such as religious prejudice.

On the other hand, not to be strict about "no dogma" allows people to indulge in dogma. It gives license to offer prejudices as facts about human nature or the world. It permits schemes about how to govern, about society, and how to live.

You cannot insist it is better to avoid distinctions of better and worse. That is a contradiction because it depends on ideas of better and worse: "it is best to avoid 'best'". If you insist your ideas are the best for all time everywhere, then you are wrong, and very likely you use your ideas to gain power.

In these dilemmas, people usually seek a middle area, wider than a line, where sometimes they fall toward one side and sometimes they fall toward the other, and where different people are not always alike in where they fall.

When openly fighting rivals, Taoists clearly insisted on no dogma. They pushed the dogma of no dogma. They saw the damage done by alternatives such as lust for power, wealth, and order, and doctrines such as Legalism, Confucianism, and Mo-ism. They were determined to stop bad dogma and bad government even at the cost of lapsing into a dogmatic contradiction themselves. They will not allow even the tiniest crack for Confucians, Legalists, and Mo-ists.

In contrast, when telling stories, Taoists seem more often to go along with common sense, and to offer people the middle ground of mixing principles, practicality, and individual variation. The stories vary, and sometimes they also support the dogma of no dogma.

Offering the dogma of no dogma is a contradiction. From contradictions, we can assert any nonsense. You have to judge for yourself if Taoists do that. Non-Taoists also sense this contradiction, and use it to assert their dogmas, such as religious and political schemers; they also often offer nonsense. You have to be sensitive to that anti-Taoist abuse as well. You have to decide which abuse is worse.

The Thai have a saying that applies here, literally: "don't think (too) much" ("yaa khit maak [koen]"). This saying can be an excuse for "don't think at all, just indulge"; but it was not originally meant that way. It means what it says. Americans say, "don't over think". The trick is how much to think. For that there is no formula. The fact that there is no formula is the real message of Taoism on this issue, rather than

“don’t think at all”. “Don’t think at all” is dogmatic abuse of “don’t think too much”, of “no dogma”. We can think about the right amount if we practice and try, and even if we make mistakes.

Taoists happily distinguish between, and prefer one of: no dogma versus dogma; no distinction versus distinction; Tao and not-Tao; following the Tao and not following the Tao; the beauty of the Tao and the ugliness of the not-Tao; the beauty of nature and ugliness of not-nature; better society that follows the Tao versus worse society that follows dogma; good conditions that arise spontaneously versus contrived (social) relations that are bad; good that arises spontaneously versus conventional morality; and simple spontaneous versus action done according to some dogma. You should consider why these distinctions persist, if that is a problem, and if there is any hypocrisy.

Throughout the book I have said that simple acts of goodness and decency are better than acts done in the service of a system, and I have shown dislike of systems, especially metaphysics and theology. Taoism and I seem to agree on this. I also said we need principles, and here Taoism and I seem to part. While Taoism says we need no principles, in fact Taoists do act according to principles, and the principles seem similar to mine. Taoism and I differ in that I accept the need for principles while Taoism uses them but denies it does. To assess how much this difference matters would require going into Taoism more than I want to do here. I hope you get enough of an idea. I think the ledger is still in favor of Taoism despite this little fault.

These issues about dogma-and-no-dogma etc. are typical of relativism such as in Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and most mysticism. I pick on Taoism to “go after” these issues because they show up clearly in Taoism, Taoism fusses over them (discriminates between discrimination and non-discrimination), and because I like Taoism and so want it to be as clear and effective as possible. Taoism has value because of the contradictions and despite them. I do not point out where these issues show up in other places, but, if you can see that for yourself, it is useful.

Conforming and Yielding.

Taoists do not try to change their setting forcibly. If they live in a bad place, they leave. If they live in a good place, or in the usual mixed place, they conform. By conforming, they get along, and they induce other people to get along too.

To shock people out of the mistakes of Legalists, Confucians, and Mo-ists - that we need to manipulate our world, and might use force - Taoist stories present extreme cases of conforming. I don’t repeat any here. As a result, people misunderstand Taoists as spineless, without character, cowards, and wimps. This is false. Taoists are not assertive, and they would make bad CEOs if they were forced to be CEOs, but they are not putty. Taoist conforming is more like what a biologist calls “adaptation” or the saying “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”. When it is warm, take off your clothes. When it is cold, put on clothes and build a fire. When all you have to eat are apples and nuts, eat apples and nuts. If you can get rice wine, then drink it; otherwise, drink water. In a famous Zen saying, “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. Taoists conform to the needs of their own bodies and minds as well as their natural and social environments. Taoists do not look to assert their character or their “true you” onto the world, so it is not a hardship if they cannot. Yet individual Taoists do have a character that shows through. Taoists

lead by following. Taoists do not conform to bad ideas or to bad dogma. You have to read Taoism for yourself to decide for yourself about Taoist conforming.

One of the most important techniques for adaptation is yielding. Unless you have to, don't swim against the current. Try to arrange travel so that, when you are in the river, you go downstream. When you have to go upstream, try to walk on land. Sail a boat with the wind. Don't try to argue people out of stupid set opinions. Instead, calmly act in accord with the Tao, or leave. If you stay, bear what has to be borne until people see their error. Let people decide for themselves what they like. You do not make distinctions; you yield to the changes and categories that nature presents. Yielding is a way of getting over the idea that you need dogma. Unless you yield to nature first, you can't know what to use in place of bad dogma. Some stories show yielding as an indirect skilled cunning assertion, somewhat like passive aggression; but we should not see it that way. Yielding shows up in yin and yang (see below) and the martial arts. If somebody big and strong wants to hit you, don't try to stop his-her fist with force. Instead, get out of the way, or redirect his-her force with a small nudge from the side. Roll around a blow. Run away before a fight. Of course, if you yield all the time, you lose your character entirely. If you yield all the time, then you don't run away when that is best. You may not yield to bad dogma. In the long run, yielding always defeats assertion, just as water always wears down a rock. This point is so strong in Taoism that it is best to read about it directly in stories.

The Taoist sense of yielding and conforming is like the feeling in the old Quaker (Friends) song "Simple Gifts", quoted below. The "gift" is something given by the Tao. We can give it to ourselves or to other people when we act as agents of the Tao. The feeling is not exactly the same in Taoism as in the song but is close enough. Aaron Copland did a great version of the music.

In an interview, purposely using Taoist imagery, Bruce Lee said succeeding in martial arts is like being water. Although water is soft most of the time, it can push very hard, as in a flood; and the steady flow of water wears down continents. You conform to your opponent, yield when appropriate, and so win. When water is in a bottle, it looks like the bottle. When it is in a glass, it looks like the glass. When it is steam, it rises. When it is in a river, it flows. You do the same, and so overcome. You do not really win because nobody really wins a fight but at least you continue on.

As with yin and yang, yielding and conforming are linked to ideas about female and male, moon and sun, shade and light, and valley and mountain. Yielding is usually seen as feminine; conforming can be seen as feminine; notice the "valley" in the song "Simple Gifts". Traditionally, women certainly had the idea that yielding was typically feminine and always victorious. Yet neither tactic is necessarily feminine; to forcibly categorize is bad dogma. It depends on conditions and appropriate response. Gender identification, and parallels between aspects, I do not discuss. These aspects of Taoism draw starry-eyed magical mystics but they don't have to. Seeing by means of these aspects is one way of looking at how the world works, it need not be completely correct, but still it can be useful.

Simple Gifts

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight
When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed
To turn, to turn, will be our delight
And by turning, turning we come 'round right

Acting in Accord with the Tao, One.

When people act in accord with the Tao, they can know they do so or not know; it makes little difference. People who do not know are not necessarily better than people who do know; this would be a misleading distinction leading to bad dogma. In some cases, for a sage, it is useful not only to act in accord with the Tao but also to know you do, mostly so you can “tone down” a bit and make the Tao intelligible to other people. Trying, at the same time, to act in accord with the Tao and also to know you act in accord with the Tao, is dangerous because you act according to dogma. So, to learn to act in accord with the Tao, you likely have to turn off your usually obvious intellect for a long time. Then later it is up to you whether you know or not.

Here is my version of a story from the Lieh Tzu: One day, a group of rich, powerful, spoiled people were driving around looking for fun – maybe snobs and maybe “gangstas”. They saw a poor old man walking on the side of the road, and decided to tease him. They got him into the car and got him drunk. Then they said: if he jumped out of the car while it was going 60 miles per hour, they would give him enough money so he could pay the rent for a year. He did jump out, but miraculously, he landed easily on his feet and was unhurt. The rich people said he only survived because he was drunk and relaxed. So, they picked him up and tried again. They took him to the edge of a cliff, and said they would give him enough money to buy food and medical insurance if he would jump off. He did, floated down gently, and landed unhurt. They were astounded. They took him to a pier at the edge of a deep lake, told him there was a great pearl at the bottom, and he could have the pearl if he could dive down and get it. The old man did just that, and came up with a great pearl. Now the rich people knew the poor old man was really a Taoist adept, and they asked him how he did it. The old man replied, “Did what? I did nothing special. You asked me to get out from the car to walk, and I did. You asked me to take a long step down, and I did. You asked me to hold my breath for a while to seek a pearl, and I did.” The old man had no idea he did anything odd. That was why he could do it. The pearl that he found was the Tao, which, of course, was always with him anyway. From then on, the spoiled rich people respected their elders.

Most Taoists are not like this. Most know they are not common. Most seek the Tao, and they only find and follow the Tao after great conscious effort, which effort likely includes a long time avoiding pitfalls of the conscious mind. From now on, I assume most Taoists know they follow the Tao, they know the Tao is not the same as any other dogma, and they assert it is not a dogma.

Seeking and following the Tao is like seeking and becoming adept at any skill that requires performance such as archery, karate, dance, music, or hacking computers. It is like studying math hard and then acing test after test. It is like acting morally although you know you can't be perfect and you know God judges you when you die. When you do it, you are not fully aware you do it. If you try to be aware as you do it, likely you will screw up. You can be aware in hindsight. You do not need praise from others because you feel the intrinsic value of what you do. You like to share with other like-minded people when you can.

You cannot always explain it to other people or teach it. But you can do it, and some people can explain and teach it too.

Acting in Accord with the Tao, Two.

When people act in accord with the Tao, things turn out well. When people act in accord with the Tao, they also act in accord with Heaven. They make Heaven on Earth. This Heaven is not a dogmatic paradise as in Christianity, Islam, and some Buddhism and Hinduism; it is “merely” a Heavenly way to live, die, and carry on.

People who act in accord with the Tao feel they act freely and spontaneously; by all human standards, they do. As just explained, people who act in accord with the Tao are not always conscious that they do so. The standard image is a fish that is not aware of the water in which it swims.

People who act in accord with the Tao do not act in accord with any particular dogma. There is no dogma that can capture the Tao or explain the Tao. The dogma of goodness is not the same as the Tao. Every particular dogma betrays the Tao. Even the dogma of no dogma is an error.

It is not clear if animals can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao unless they have been corrupted by people. People definitely can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao. Why people have the ability to “screw up” is not clear. It is enough to know that we can act in accord or not in accord, and that we are much better off if we act in accord. There are no criteria for acting in accord with the Tao although there are some pretty good signs that we act out of accord with the Tao, such as following a dogma or causing strife.

When people act in accord with the Tao, they feel as if they act on their own but they also feel that the Tao cares about them, looks out for them, helps them do the right thing, helps them avoid badness, and helps them be themselves. The Tao does not solve all our problems for us. The Tao gives the ability to deal with most issues, but not all. The Tao provides opportunities for us if we look out for them.

This Taoist idea differs from the Buddhist idea that we have to work out our salvation on our own, and differs from another Buddhist idea that Buddhists can rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and community of Buddhists (“Sangha” or monks). This Taoist idea differs from the Mahayana and Hindu idea that we are part of a joyous system of many lives in which hardship is an illusion. This Taoist idea differs from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine that God helps out a lot, especially in time of need, and that God punishes transgressions harshly. The Taoist idea is similar to the Christian idea of “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you”; if you open yourself up to God, God and his world will make sure that you find a way and get what you need to walk the path. This Taoist idea is similar to “God helps those who help themselves”. This Taoist idea is similar to my idea about relations with God and Jesus. God through evolution gave us nearly all the abilities that we need to get by, and God planned the world with many opportunities. This Taoist idea is similar to “we have a friend in Jesus”. When a few followers of Jesus come together, Jesus is among them. Followers of Jesus are in a community if they wish. God does not interfere much to help us but might interfere a little bit to nudge us along. None of these ideas is clearly correct to the exclusion of the others. All the ideas suffer from contradictions, all are somewhat compatible, and yet none are fully compatible. I cannot sort it out. I am happy with the possibility that my

idea and the Taoist idea might be close. In a later chapter, we will see that Taoist ideas and Zen ideas about self and world also are similar.

There are no firm criteria for acting in accord with the Tao because there can be no firm criteria. To have any criteria would be to get stuck in discrimination and to lose mental freedom. To offer criteria for acting in accord with the Tao is a sure sign that you are not fully in accord with the Tao; you are trying to make a school of the Tao like the school of Confucianism – a serious error.

The Sufficient Person; and the World Is as It Is.

Taoist “greats”, such as Chuang Tzu, were unusual rare people. It might seem that Taoism can only be understood by really smart semi-mystical people. Yet the Taoists greats themselves argue that this is not so. Anyone can feel and follow the Tao. Taoists stories are full of ordinary people, even stupid people, who feel and follow the Tao, and thus are successful in their own ways. Other schools made a point of how smart their leaders and followers were, therefore all-the-better to advise the kings and run the state. Since Taoism did not offer policies and advice, and did not offer to help the rulers run the state, Taoism did not have to show how smart its leaders and followers were. The more that common people could feel and follow the Tao, the better were the arguments of Taoism.

I agree with Taoism. You don't have to be smart to get the idea of the Tao as long as you do not also expect the results to be as perfect as Taoists make out. It is not hard to get the idea that people do well when left alone as long as they don't have to deal with horrible situations. It is not hard to see that states make their own problems most of the time, dogmas often make problems worse, and we could get out of a lot of problems with enlightened educated common sense.

Of course, it takes a different person, and different work, to be a Taoist great. But that is another issue from following the Tao. It takes a great person such as Jesus to put together his ideas but it does not take a great person to understand them and to follow them in most situations. The Tao does not expect everybody to be like Chuang Tzu. You don't have to be like that to succeed fully in Taoism or following the teachings of Jesus.

A normal person could only follow the Tao if the world was not bizarre. The Taoist world is the world as it is of ordinary life combined with healthy imagination. Taoists did love imagination and fantasy, and they did see a lot of magic in the world, but their world was not the strange bizarre world of mysticism, of some Hinduism, and some Mahayana. It was the ordinary world in which people allowed their imaginations free rein and were not afraid. Taoists stories feature butchers, bakers, wood cutters, horse raisers, and other common people dealing with the normal world.

The Taoist view of the sufficient person and the normal world is much like Jesus' idea that we can all get the ideals of the Kingdom of God and can work toward them in this world. If there are demons, we don't have to fear them as long as we keep God in mind. I repeat his advice: “seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”. Theravada, the better versions of Mahayana, and Zen, all share this point of view too.

Taoist Nature.

Taoists largely identify the Tao with what Western people call “nature”, so acting in accord with the Tao is acting naturally. Nature does not have dogmas unless we consider errant humans with their dogmas as part of nature, and most Taoists did not think so. Animals act spontaneously in accord with their nature unless they are perverted by people. People could do so too if we would not pervert ourselves. Taoists really want to get along with nature. They want never to hurt nature. They want to be adopted by nature. In the Taoist view, and in the urban romanticized view, nature never screws up. If we follow nature, then we can never screw up either. Nature never poisons. Nature always offers a cure for any harm in it and for any poison that people concoct. Nature cures diseases and hearts. Nature is beautiful beyond any human art and beyond the ability of humans to imagine beauty until they see it in nature. Nature does not work by straight lines and consistent angles but indirectly through curves, cascades, and mists. Nature appears and disappears.

Taoist nature comes directly from Heaven. Nature always works well. The way nature works is the Tao, the Way. If we could get in touch with nature, and work with nature, then we would work well in accord with the Tao. Working well does not mean standard success in family, business, and politics. It means working by the standards of original nature. It means being reasonably healthy, prosperous, and happy. It does not mean being rich or powerful. Only in magical Taoism does it mean being immortal and sexually prodigious. We have to adopt the standards of original nature when we get in touch with nature and the Tao. We have to abandon human standards of success and failure. We have to submit to nature and the Tao.

It is not clear how nature can work so well so easily. It is not clear how nature gets us to work well too once we have given ourselves up to nature. That is part of the point. We should not seek to understand intellectually. We should simply act naturally and become natural. In this respect nature is the Tao and the Tao is nature.

Taoist Morality.

It is a little simplistic, but not too much, to say Taoists were staunch (dogmatic) moral relativists. It is more accurate to say they were staunch (dogmatic) moral non-discriminators. They did not condemn simple naïve common moral ideas such as friendship and “be kind and good to each other” as long as people did not make dogmas of the ideas. Lapsing into moral dogma is worse than not having explicit moral principles. Because people almost always did make dogmas of moral ideas, Taoists rejected all obvious moral principles as a way to defend against the worse evil of moral dogmas.

Taoists saw that most morality was mere convention, and never tired of skewering convention. They saw that other schools promoted morality as a tool to control people, often for the benefit of the people who declared morality. In China, families had to mourn long and hard when a member died, using standard ways of mourning for standard periods for particular relations. Anybody who did not was seen as like an animal. Taoists praise fathers who did not mourn for sons. Chuang Tzu did not mourn for his wife when she died even though he had made clear that he loved her a lot. The father did not mourn because he cherished the time he had with his son. Before he had a son, he did not mourn. Now that his son was gone, he reverted back to then. Chuang Tzu felt the same way about his wife. If anything, she was more with the Tao now, and better off than him, so why should he indulge in public display?

Moral rules arise because of needless distinctions. Other schools set up needless distinctions so they can evoke their morality as the cure for the problems caused by the needless distinction. If we erase the distinctions, we don't need the rules. Because we have property, we have to have rules against stealing, and have to enforce them, thus leading to badness. If people did not claim this and that, then we would have no stealing, no moral rules, and no need for punishment. Even if we only had less stuff, we would be better off.

It sounds appealing to say we should all strive for good. But we don't know what good is unless we have bad to contrast with the good. Once we have the idea of "good", then we necessarily also have the idea of "bad", then people will do bad, and people are more likely to do harm with bad than benefit with good. We are better off having neither good nor bad, and letting things turn out as they will. Don't strive to do good or to avoid bad. Simply take care of your own business and things will turn out well enough.

Maybe you should tell a man who has been stung by a scorpion of a doctor who can save his life; but maybe you should not tell a man who has been bitten by a big cobra that no doctor can save his life and that he has only six hours to live. There are no moral absolutes. Taoists used moral relativity to pick apart but they were not moral relativists either because that too is mere dogma.

Taoists tell stories in which the leader of a rival school is a character, and the Taoist hero easily defeats the rival leader. Usually the rival comes off like a fool. In one story, a local Taoist gets tired of Confucius teaching about Heaven, his version of the Tao, goodness, ritual, virtue, and order. So the Taoist takes Confucius to meet the leader of the worst bandit gang in China. The bandit leader is a ferocious giant man. When Confucius meets him, the bandit leader is eating a plate of human livers. The bandit leader laughs at Confucius. He tells Confucius he doesn't give a damn about virtue, goodness, ritual, or order; and that he does what he wants. If Confucius doesn't like it, the bandit leader will soon add Confucius' liver to the plate. Confucius runs like a goat. What the bandit leader does is what he does. As such, it is better than the virtue that Confucius preaches because it does less harm.

Taoist ideal behavior and ideal persons are like the decency that I described in the chapter on decency. Taoist morality is like the simple decent person who acts from the heart or does the decent thing because it is the decent thing without worrying too much.

The Taoist rejection of mere morality sounds like modern Western moral relativism but it is not. It is more like what I said in the chapter on Romanticism using Reason versus Passion as an example. We should not stress one much more than the other (for praise or blame), see them as simple complete opposites, try to merge them, and see them as superficially different aspects of one underlying greater whole. Take them as they are without thinking of either as absolute. Then you can be good without trying to be good and can avoid bad without trying to avoid bad. When you don't obsess over good and bad, they take care of themselves. Since Taoism has grown in the West, Western moral relativists have taken up the Taoist view to bolster their own position, but, again, we should not be confused. I think some Chinese also used the Taoist view to advance their own version of moral relativism and so advance their own selves, but I do not know enough to say more here. I don't know if Taoists did this on purpose.

Zen came after Taoism and borrowed from Taoism much of Zen's moral neutrality, tacit morality, ideas of decency, and ideal people. Think about these topics for further discussion toward the end of the chapter and keep them in mind for the chapter on Zen.

Sadly, in stressing moral non-discrimination, Taoists over-played their hand. They seemed to undercut all morality, even simply doing good. They made a dogma of (the anti-dogma of) no morality. They made a virtue of not being virtuous. They deliberately overlooked simple natural morality. They did advance as a dogma what we now call "moral relativism".

Because Taoist moral non-discrimination is like ideas about moral non-discrimination in other mysticism, including Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, the topic is important, and I return to it below.

Taoist Social Life.

The comments about politics apply also to social life. Social life can get screwed up in the same way as politics, and is cured in the same way. When social life is held together by conventions and morality, it is screwed up. When social life arises out of spontaneous interactions without thought for conventions or morality, it is like nature and the Tao. It is natural human life. It is not screwed up, and so beneficial. There is no crime, and no need for policies, ideologies, creeds, laws, codes, police, other officers, taxes, courts, soldiers, pensions, welfare, dams, forest management, and all the bad burdens of corrupt civilized life. When left alone, farmers get along. When left alone, particular professions, such as carpenters, lawyers, plumbers, surveyors, etc. know how to organize themselves and get along. Villagers get along. There is no need for state oversight or oversight by moral authorities such as preachers, priests, and the church. There is no need for politics. This stance put Taoism on the "idea map" in China. This is the stance for which, and out of which, Taoism originally developed.

Now That You Know the Tao.

Taoism is not primarily therapy. You can get the Tao, and get acting in accord with the Tao, fairly quickly, and then you just do it to the extent that you are able and that circumstances permit. When you do it, you live as the Tao intends you to live. You become a human person, maybe for the first time. You see the world, yourself, and other people clearly enough. You see that the world is as it is. What you do depends on you and the Tao. Very likely, you will give up almost all your previous useless hurtful strivings for silly goals. Unless your situation is odd and bad, you will enjoy your life, maybe for the first time. If you have problems, the Tao will help you deal with them. You might not be able to deal with everything but you can deal with most things. If you are miserable by nature or situation, and nothing else changes, then you will remain externally miserable despite following the Tao; see the chapters on Theravada and Zen.

PART 2: Taoist Ways of Life

Taoism, Dogma, and a System that Eats the World.

Most dogma implies a system that eats the world. Taoism denies all dogma. Taoism does recognize "the Tao" and Taoists do seek "the Tao". Taoists seek to act in accord with the Tao. All this comes close to dogma and a system that eats the world. You have to decide if Taoists are hypocritical. Magical Taoists

did seek to build a system that eats the world. Most Taoists used no dogma, non-discrimination, no good and bad, the I Ching, yin and yang, chi, and other aids described below. The best Taoists, and the Zen masters that followed, did not indulge in dogma, did not build much of a system, and did not build a system that eats the world. They escaped pitfalls because they understood that hating dogma is a kind of dogma too, humans need some dogma and system to live, and we can use a little dogma and system without building a system that eats the world.

Modern Western Taoists are caught on the horns of this dilemma. On the one hand, they know Taoist rejection of dogma and Taoist love of freedom. On the other hand, modern Western Taoists ceaselessly chase yin, yang, chi, and "The Tao", and they certainly yearn for a system that eats the world. They are the bane of martial arts classes. A bolstered metaphysical version of "The Tao" is the hole of the center of their wannabe system that eats the world. Modern Western Taoists are not far removed from magical Taoists although they know well enough to be intellectual, refined, and mystical about it. It makes sense to say you "seek the Tao" and to see the Tao in nature. It does not make sense to construct a mystical metaphysical system out of that. You have to find your own way out of this dilemma.

Taoist Appreciation for Life and People.

This aspect of Taoism is one of its best features. Two poor men sat drinking wine. It was impossible to tell how old they were because they were unkempt, smelly, and gnarled by life. Yet they were happy, and enjoyed what they had. One saw a twisted old bush by the side of the porch, and asked his friend what he would do if he were like that bush. The friend replied that he might be like that now, but did not know. If his arm was twisted, he would learn how to use that arm as it was; he might use it as a hook to catch rats. If his leg was twisted, he would learn to walk at an angle by the side of the road. A duck is not a robin, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. A tree at the beach is blown into fantastic shapes by the constant wind and so is not like a tree in a sheltered valley, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. However the poor old man was, that was how the Tao had made him, and it would be satisfying enough to go along with it.

Taoists love life. Life is worthwhile. They value life not only in the Confucian or Western senses. Life is. While alive, enjoy it. Whatever life brings can be enjoyable. If it is not enjoyable now, it might be so later. In the meantime, we have many aspects to our life that are worth living. You can sing even if you are not drunk. You can help the neighbor even if your apples have worms. This idea is not the same as "Say 'Yes' to Life". That is a misleading doctrine. This attitude is simply living. Note that this view of life is at odds with Buddhism.

Taoists value life, human life, individual people, and particular things. The Tao is in all. The Tao shapes all particular rivers, trees, mountains, turtles, and people differently. Each is unique. Each is valuable in its own way. This is not the value that a Confucian might find in a virtuous person or a Westerner finds in the individual. It is just that each of us is a manifestation of the Tao, has his-her time here, and has the potential joy of acting in accord with the Tao while here. We might as well do that. This is not the same as saying that each of us is a bit in the many-lives big-system Dharma, and we each should do our part in letting the Dharma feel joy through us. This is not the same as saying our social duty is our Dharma, as with Krishna and Arjuna. I am not sure of relations between Western ideas of individual value and Taoist ideas of individuals in the Tao.

Taoism and Usefulness.

People tend to think a long life, as a big animal, with lots of energy, strength, and power, is better than a short life as a small powerless animal. It is better to be a tiger than a squirrel. That is not necessarily true. It takes a lot of work and food to keep up a big animal. Hunters are always after big animals. Big animals cannot catch small animals. Small animals are not very valuable. If they avoid snares, they can live out their lives in fair comfort and fair joy. Small animals have many abilities too; they just don't have the same abilities that large animals have. To a bird, a cricket is small and a cat is big; but, to a cat, a bird is small and a dog is big. The cat chases the bird but the dog chases the cat; then a human chases the dog and the tiger chases the human. It is hard to say which life is better overall. If it is hard to say, then don't bother trying to say. Simply live out the life you have with the length of life, size, abilities, and strength that you have. This was a message of the classic movie "Blade Runner".

In previous chapters, I said people should make themselves useful. Usefulness and goodness go along together. Taoists would call my advice a doctrine, and take it with a lump of salt. We like usefulness but we should not confuse any particular characteristics with usefulness. We should not turn usefulness into a religious doctrine. We should recognize usefulness as it is and enjoy it as it is.

On the one hand, deliberate usefulness is to be avoided as a doctrine. A tree that is obviously useful is the first cut down. Trees with beautiful large long straight trunks are valuable to make chairs, tables, and houses, so woodcutters go after them first. Useful trees and useful people get used up by society. They do not live long. They do not beget other useful trees or people. It is better to have crooked, gnarled, knotty wood, to appear useless, to be spared by the woodcutter, and so to live a long time, give many blossoms, and advance the Tao.

On the other hand, useless trees get cut down early to make way for useful trees. Useful trees are loved and taken care of. A woodcutter first does not first go after big beautiful straight trees because those are valuable, and continue to grow in value. Those receive care until the right time to harvest them. People nurture an apple tree until it no longer bears fruit. The woodcutter goes after the twisted, gnarled, knotty trees for firewood first because they have no other purpose, and they will not be missed. A useless tree takes up space. Even if it has no use in itself, it is keeping away a useful tree, and so must be cut down.

Taoists took both these positions depending on what point they wished to make. Mostly they argued for uselessness because that went against dogma and went against conventional Chinese ideas. Chinese usually rigorously pursue utility.

More on Taoist Waking Up.

See above where Taoist waking up does not involve seeing that this world is an illusion and seeing that there is a better realer world apart from, and above, this world. Taoists wake up to the fact that this world and the Tao are the same. Taoists wake up to the confusion, interest, transformations, hardship, good and bad mixed together, and fun of this world. This world is as it is.

Waking up in Taoism is almost “just wake up” (see chapters on Issues and on Buddhism). You wake up to mental freedom, the Tao, and your relation to the Tao. The only official preconception is the Tao, and that is left so undefined that it is not much of an issue. There are few “Taoist aids” to get in the way as in most Buddhism and Hinduism, and no real Taoist system to get in the way as in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. The Tao is easy enough to “get” although not easy to live in consistently.

Waking up in Taoism is not exactly “just wake up” because Taoists do have some preconceived ideas of what morality, nature, human nature, good behavior, good society, and good results are like. You cannot wake up, do whatever you want, and be whatever you want, in whatever kind of world you make up to suit yourself. Taoists hide these preconceptions so it might seem as if you are quite free and you “just wake up” but that is not true. Still, the constraints of Taoism are so small, so in accord with decent human nature and with much of nature, that the constraints are not much of a burden, and you do come close to “just wake up”.

The Taoist Ideal Person.

Each religion uses its founder as the ideal person. It is easy to do this in Taoism because the founder, Lao Tzu, is basically mythical. If we knew more about him, I think Chuang Tzu would serve well as the Taoist ideal person.

Taoists adepts were women. I describe Taoist ideal people here mostly as men because they are what usually appear in the literature, but not always. I have not counted but I think women appear more often as adepts in Taoism than any other religion. Among its charms, Taoism has a low degree of sexism.

Taoism had five kinds of ideal person besides high-level adepts and magical adepts. None of the ideals saw him-herself as a Taoist, saw Taoism as a school, or saw Taoism as distinct from life. They simply acted true to character, and their character went with the Tao. Of Western literary characters, maybe Tom Bombadil from “Lord of the Rings” comes closest to a Taoist ideal. Bombadil married Goldberry, the River’s daughter. Power had no appeal to Bombadil, and power had no power over him. Bombadil could not undo all harm from badness but could undo some of the harm. Bombadil had power over the Ring in the sense that it had no power over him, he could see through it and its tricks, and could undo some of its harm. But he did not have power in the sense of the Ring, to impose his will, make others work for him, or make them into his image. Sadly, Bombadil was not in the movie versions. In LOTR, before Middle Earth was debased, among the good friends of Bombadil were the Ents, the tree herders. If Taoists had a society, it might be like Ents before Sauron (power, dogma, progress, stuff, agriculture, shopping malls) seduced and destroyed the Ent wives and so doomed the Ent way and Ent species. Taoists could be like pixies, sprites, fairies, or like Harvey the big rabbit Pookah (“Puck”) in the classic movie “Harvey”. Taoists were not always benign, friendly, or happy. They could be irascible, naughty, mischievous, or grumpy old people. If we allow that, another Tolkien character who could be a Taoist was Beorn the Skin Changer from “The Hobbit”.

The first Taoist ideal person was the perfect sage, for which Lao Tzu is the model. I say little about the sage because it is not useful here. You can read about him or her in Taoist literature. Enjoy the fantasy but don’t hold the sage as a model. Don’t try to be like a Taoist sage at first. I am not a sage, and I have never met anybody who is. People who say they are aren’t.

The second Taoist ideal person was the hermit in the wild, usually a man living as a recluse by a swamp or in the mountains. The hermit did not always live alone. Sometimes the hermit had friends, less often a wife, and sometimes even children. The Taoist hermit lived by fishing, gathering nuts, gathering firewood to sell, raising animals, crafts, and other non-destructive ways. Sometimes he-she just “lived of the land”. The hermits were not always sweet but they were never malicious. Sometimes a hermit developed his-her martial arts skills so as to repel bandits and to repel annoying representatives of other schools. Likely there really were such people in the wilds of China, and likely some of their martial arts skills are still seen today in the techniques of existing martial arts schools; Pa Kua (Bagua) might be a case.

The third Taoist person is a favorite of Western students: the poor drunken poet-painter-scholar. These artists often did see Taoism as a school, knew its ideas, and thought of themselves as Taoists. In China, most poets were painters, and vice versa. Poets tended to come from the failed literati and failed civil servants. Failure forced them to examine what is important about life and society. Failure forced them to live on the edge of nature where they could appreciate nature and see how human society was less than nature. Much of romantic Taoist ideas of nature come from them. Sometimes they did mistake political tenure or academic tenure for Taoist freedom. They are the source of some of China’s greatest poetry and painting. The real extent of their drinking is a subject of debate among critics and historians. I am pretty sure you can act like a Taoist poet-painter without becoming an alcoholic or without even drinking. Likely you will have to put up with poverty.

The fourth Taoist person lives in society, usually in a village, often on the edge of nature, usually as a quiet person pursuing a modest occupation such as a farmer, fisher, potter, smith, weaver, or painter. Everybody knows him-her and likes him-her. He-she rarely has anything to say at meetings or in the local pub. He-she does not push any doctrine or political position. Yet everyone can sense that what he-she follows is the correct path, that is, the Tao; and everybody goes along with his-her ideas even if, at the start of an issue, they advocate other positions. This person gets things done without getting things done. He-she asserts by allusion. Even Confucius would approve. When other people go along with the Tao as suggested by this person, they think it is their own idea, and do not remember where they got the idea. That does not matter because this person does not seek credit, wants not to get credit, and is fine when another person takes credit. Many cultures have a version of this person. This person is like the simple decent people that I admire. Sometimes in Western literature, this person is the quiet modest village priest. A good version is in the novel “The Warden” by Anthony Trollope; another more distant version is Father Brown, the small quiet detective of G.K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton. Taoists would take the fact that this person can be found in many cultures as evidence for the universal presence of the Tao and the universal validity of Taoism.

The fifth Taoist person is a craftsperson who is extremely adept without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she is adept and who loves his-her craft without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she loves the craft. This person is like the hermit or the village sage but usually lives in a town or at court. Even so, he-she is not of the town or court. He-she and the craft are one. He-she acts the craft naturally without thinking much. One of my favorite versions is the butcher (yes, Taoists did eat meat) who has not sharpened his knife in decades because he-she never hacks, saws, or chops the meat. He-she glides the knife through the natural joints and soft places while avoiding hard places, and so isolates the best meat. This way to act merges with ideas of yin and yang; see below. The third Taoist people, drunken

artists and writers, aspired to this grace but were rarely able to achieve it because they self-consciously tried. This fifth person is the ancestor of Chinese and Japanese warriors who are at one with their sword, spear, or bow, such as Zen archers. This fifth person is the ancestor of the character in the movie "The Seven Samurai" who was the best with weapons, and the basis for the James Coburn character "Fred" in the movie "The Magnificent Seven". This person is the basis for pilots who are at one with their planes but are not simply machines: Anikin Skywalker and Luke Skywalker.

I doubt you can be like this fifth person at every job. Jobs that inherently aggravate you and "suck your soul" cannot be turned to the Tao just because you are adept at them and get lost in them. "Mad Men", stock brokers, and serial killers don't follow the Tao.

The point of this fifth ideal is not to encourage losing yourself in a craft but to feel what it would be like to live your whole life this way, including morality. Rather than work at life, find out what makes life work, and then do that gracefully. Rather than work at moral decisions, find out how to help people get along and how to be useful. Then do so gracefully. Serve your apprenticeship at life and morality, and then serve life without thinking of life or morality.

Chinese people still recognize these personality types and value them, even if they don't know that the literary description of the types comes from Taoist artistes. Too often, Chinese know the types only as distorted stereotypes (dogma). They mix them with Confucian stereotypes, often in fun ways. Chinese people try to be like the stereotypes, against their own character. They adopt diffidence as the mark of a superior person and disdain openness as the mark of an inferior person even when they don't know why diffidence is supposedly the mark of a superior person and even when they really want to yell commands. It is funny to watch a Chinese boss who wants to yell at employees but instead tries to direct indirectly by hints because to yell is a mark of a spiritually low person. Eventually the boss breaks down, and then he-she screams louder than if he-she had just barked commands at first. Employees strain to pick up hints or wait resignedly for the storm to break. Sometimes it is fun to watch Asian students maneuver around a teacher so the teacher can seem to promulgate ideas by osmosis. Overt assertion of ideas by the students implies the teacher is not adept enough as an example and implies the students are not adept enough at sensing and imitating virtue. Sometimes the whole game is just sad. Husbands and wives go nearly crazy out-hinting each other without actually saying it; whoever says it out loud first is spiritually inferior and thus inferior in marriage. Watching all this, you begin to see how inferior Taoism and inferior Confucianism can merge, and how inferior Confucianism takes over.

Some Early Succinct Assessment.

At the start of this book, I said we should act well gracefully, like athletes or dancers after long training, for the sake of goodness itself, and without thinking that God will assess us. This idea is like the Taoist fifth ideal person, the spontaneous butcher, and this idea reflects ideas from the other ideal persons too. Act in accord with God but don't worry much about acting in accord with God. Don't let the idea that you must face God after death paralyze you in life. Make yourself useful without worrying about credit. Enjoy life. Don't get caught up in dogma and the crap of life. You can only act like this with some mental clarity, and acting like this helps you to find mental clarity. It takes practice.

There are some differences between me and Taoist ideals. I think nature, morality, and meekness do not fully coincide as they seem to do in Taoism. We need principles and practicality. Taoists have principles but they avoid stating them because of the dogma of no dogma. They allow ideals to emerge from stories where the ideals do not seem like ideals but seem entirely natural. Each Taoist ideal person is a bundle of implicit principles.

Sometimes we have to overcome nature with principles and sometimes we have to let practicality lead principles. Following the Tao does not automatically resolve these issues. Nature and the Tao are not exactly the same. The Golden Rule arose naturally in us through evolution but we do not follow it fully, and follow it alone, when we act naturally. We also act naturally when we are selfish. Stealing is natural but wrong; absolute honesty is morally correct but, if we did it, society would collapse. Explicit principles are necessary, in the same way that a bow and arrows are necessary to an archer, a knife to a butcher, or a stalking strategy to a wolf. Taoists think we achieve the implicit principles inherent in stories and ideal people while simply acting naturally while I think we have to work at principles. We have to work first to learn them, and then throughout life to sustain them. Principles do not always lead us to act meekly. We can't always merely hint; sometimes we have to say it straight out. Not saying it straight out is not a sign of a superior person; and saying it straight out is not a sign of an inferior person. Openly offering a plan to the village is not the same as perverting the world by imposing dogma. When Taoists act like an ideal person, they feel they have succeeded totally. I understand but disagree. Neither Taoist ideals nor mine always succeed in practical life, for example, the ideal that you should seek no credit. Normal natural people do not feel that Taoist success is enough even when they are not greedy or misled by dogma. Not everyone wants to be a hermit or a drunken poet-painter. I like to mix more practicality and practical success into my idea of success than does a Taoist. I wish I could make money writing, and I wish I could contribute as a scientist.

I am more like a Taoist than the average American and I am not much like a career-oriented academic, business person, professional, politician, networker, or firm employee. I am more like a Taoist who says "nature is enough" than a moralist who says "you all will go to hell unless you follow all my rules strictly with fear in your heart". When nature, morality, meekness, principles, practicality, and success do not all coincide, it is better to be openly honest about the situation and to work it out in that spirit. I return to the issues below. You have to decide for yourself what works and why.

It is easy to make fun of a stance that says we can get everything that we want, including a great society, and that we can all get along, by acting naturally and forgetting about dogma. To act naturally, be useful, and find a good society are not stupid wishes. Even if Taoism cannot work to cure all ills, and even if it does not work for everyone, it is still a reasonable stance for people who do not fit into conniving natural human life and who see the glory of nature and want to save some. That is part of its appeal. See what you can get out of Taoism to make your life, and all life, better.

Taoism and Mental Freedom.

Taoists sought what I call intellectual freedom, mental freedom, freedom to think as you will, freedom of the imagination, and mental clarity. I use "mental freedom" as a catch-all term. "Mental freedom" is the single most useful and important idea of Taoism for me. It figures again in the chapter on Zen.

Mental freedom does not mean freedom to do entirely as you wish. Nobody can do that. To think that way is to indulge in dogma about self, freedom, and will. Taoists can seem self-indulgent but really they are not. Mental freedom means not being bound by any dogmas so you are free to respond to situations as appropriate to the situation, appropriate to your own nature, and in accord with the Tao. Taoists varied on what they considered appropriate. Generally any theory about what is appropriate is automatically wrong even if superficially correct.

Mental freedom is far more important than any security. Life has little value apart from mental freedom. Only with full mental freedom can a person seek the Tao, find the Tao, and follow it. Mental freedom and the Tao are nearly the same. Only with mental freedom can one explore the riches within the Tao, such as yin and yang, nature, and Tai Chi Chuan. It is better to be a sick old hermit living by a swamp and free in the mind than to be the most powerful politician who cannot think straight. At best, political freedom is a means to mental freedom. Political freedom is valuable not so much in itself but as a means to mental freedom. Political tyranny is bad because it stops freedom of thought.

The Taoist idea of mental freedom is not the same as the Western idea, which is framed in political terms. The Taoist idea is more like freedom of imagination. Tyranny can kill true freedom but mental freedom does not result in democracy or any form of government. Political freedom does not guarantee mental freedom. It is unlikely that we need freedom in the Taoist sense to achieve a free democratic state. A Taoist would be deeply sad that Americans need a Bill of Rights to protect their freedoms. A Taoist would be deeply sad at using guns to protect freedom. A Taoist would be shocked by academic tenure, and would consider it a betrayal of freedom by a dogma about freedom.

Taoist ideas about nature, human nature, and goodness are too ideal to be put into social practice but Taoist ideas about individual freedom are not too ideal, at least for some people. A few gifted people can and should seek true Taoist mental freedom. Some few people can live free in that way – at least until society crushes them. If you think you are one of these people, likely you are not. The few people who can find true mental freedom should seek it despite their political and cultural milieu. They already seek it automatically, as part of their nature, as a calling from the Tao.

Political oppression can kill the possibility of any mental freedom. In the past, it was always possible to run away to the forest or swamp, and some Western Americans still try. That is not possible anymore. Freedom has to be found in at least some social context. Where there is society, in modern life there is politics. Where there is politics, it can be abused to kill all freedom. It would be nearly impossible to be a Taoist in a repressive regime, and perhaps in the modern politically correct world. One good reason to fight for political freedom is so that some people can still seek Taoist freedom.

Taoist mental freedom can be killed by mistakes about what is in accord with the Tao. Despite ample evidence to the contrary in the Chuang Tzu, Tao Te Ching, and Lieh Tzu, Chinese tend to think the best response to any situation, the response most in line with the Tao, is quiet superiority, aloof withdrawal, passive aggression, and manipulation by guilt and duty. I think this view is a Confucian misinterpretation. Taoists were not pushy but that is not the same as adopting a posture of non-pushy diffident superiority and passive aggression.

I almost used “mental clarity” instead of “mental freedom”. As a human being, you can only deal with the world, and find the Tao, if you can think clearly. To think clearly is not necessarily to think as a logician, mathematician, or good speaker. If you think clearly, and the Tao is true, then clear thinking should lead you to the Tao. However, I think Taoism is incorrect in some small ways, and so I decided not to use “mental clarity”. If Taoism is incorrect, and we think clearly, then we will not be lead inexorably to the Tao and only the Tao, although we should see the Tao along our journey. I still think mental clarity and Taoist mental freedom are very close.

The close relation of Taoist mental freedom with mental clarity points out the nearness of Taoism to other traditions that value mental freedom and mental clarity, including Buddhism, Zen, and Western ideas that stem from Socrates, Aristotle, Jesus, and Cynicism. Taoism is not far from the attitude of some scientists although the Tao is not the secret at the heart of the world for which science seeks. Taoism is not far from Jesus’ ideas of “simple ‘yes’ and simple ‘no’” with no dogmatic frills. Here I do not compare Taoist ideas of mental freedom with those other ideas. I invite you to do that.

PART 3: Agreeing and Disagreeing.

In this part, I both describe Taoism more and state how I disagree with Taoism. The point is to show that we need principles even at the risk of some dogma. Especially we need principles on which to base good institutions. That I do not fully agree with Taoism does not mean I disagree much. I am hard on Taoism because I love the Taoist outlook, Taoist heroes, and Taoist ideas such as yin and yang and chi. Taoism is worth learning and worth shaping to our lives.

Think about why Taoists dislike dogma. I revisited this chapter in October 2013 just after the American government shutdown, while the Obama-care website was a morass, and we were learning the extent to which our government had spied both on world leaders and its people. For many years, Americans have been afflicted with dogma rather than good government: Left, Right, no center (“the center will not hold”), bad laws, lawyers, stupid opinions on TV and radio, the American legal system, TV ads from lawyers, the Tea Party, Republican hypocrisy, PACs, interest groups, and political correctness. Common Americans are screaming for Congress to quit “standing on stupid principles” and, instead, just do its job. Taoists faced a similar political disaster, and reacted the same way. Just do your job. I revised this chapter in August 2014 as ISIS (ISIL) was killing everybody not like them in Syria and Iraq, to force people into their wrong perverted dogma about surrender to God (Islam).

Good Intuition.

The letter of the law is dogma, often good dogma, but sometimes bad dogma. The spirit of the law is hard to write down, rarely is bad dogma, and often is the only way to act well. When I advise that we mix the teachings of Jesus, that is principles, with practicality, I say that the letter of the law is not enough and that we need to use judgment. Judgment is not something that we can write down. It requires intuition. Even in Islam, the written Word of God cannot cover all cases, and people need guidance in particular cases to find the right path. Martial artists train hard and long in particular techniques. Yet, in a fight, martial artists often act in ways that are only barely based on techniques. They improvise. The highest art is effective improvisation. Western martial artists say we must learn techniques but then overcome

them. Eastern teachers say the same but I don't like to refer to Eastern teachers here because they have a long Taoist tradition.

How is it different to say that (1) ultimately we have to rely on judgment that can't be written down versus to say (2) we have to act simply and spontaneously, and, in so doing, follow the Tao? How is it not following the Tao when a good Christian person sets aside the law to get to the heart of a situation and so to guide wounded people toward healing?

People who want to fuse East and West say it is not different. That root of intuition and good judgment is the same in both. If we rely on that, then we don't have to worry much about dogma.

Why not just rely on intuition, assume intuition plugs us directly into the Tao, and go from there? Why not reduce all religions and dogmas to the intuition that brings us to the Tao and that comes from the Tao? I offer some cautions.

I happily admit that we have to get beyond rules and dogma to judgment and intuition. I like living in the realm of intuition. But the importance of intuition is not the crux of the issue. My admitting that intuition can trump rules does not invalidate the need for principles, nearly all the time.

We can't simply discard dogma (Law, techniques, training). We have to go through them. We have to have a background for our judgment. If we have never trained in martial arts, we cannot get into a match with an advanced black belt and expect to win by inspiration alone. We can't strap on a set of skates and win Olympic gold. We can't judge a landlord-tenant dispute without some ideas and practice. We have to have a set of principles. This is what Confucians understood and what Taoists refused to see because this simple truth upset the Taoist applecart.

Nature likely did give us all we need to learn to be good useful spontaneous intuitive people most of the time. But nature did not give us all that we need to succeed without learning. Nature gave us what we need to learn, not what we need to succeed without learning. Learning requires ideas and practice.

Even if nature did give us all that we need to learn, still nature did not give us all that we need to learn to succeed all the time in every case. Even with all that nature gave us, we fail sometimes. We do not have an infallible font of intuition in our hearts. There is no magic to plug into to make sure we succeed all the time easily and gracefully. Our failures are one way to learn; but sometimes we just fail whether we learn or not; and sometimes we fail and don't learn. To say the Tao guarantees success, even within its limited arena, only adds a layer of crippling dogma. The original Taoists saw fact this but modern students of the Tao do not always see it.

Intuition alone can lead to really bad results. People have done really bad things because they felt the Tao in their hearts or felt God in there. "Feeling from the heart" and inspiration do not guarantee truth, goodness, beauty, correctness, naturalness, or helpfulness.

It matters what principles we rely on, use as our background, and fall back on. To be extreme, it makes a difference if we fall back on Satan or Jesus, Fascism or Democracy, Marx or Smith, Lenin or Jefferson, Stalin or Washington. What we learn when we start, and learn along the way, make a difference in our

final judgment. We must base our initial training on the best principles we can find. If principles-along-the-way didn't matter, then there would not be hundreds of schools of martial arts, each claiming to be the best; and there would not be various interesting cultures.

Depending both on the principles and on judgment, the end result differs, and difference matters. Not all martial arts eventually look the same, even if they do look a lot alike at the end. Not all national styles of dancing look and feel the same even if they all are dancing. Not all religions are the same at the end. Not all mysticism is the same. If things don't turn out the same at the end, and where you start makes a difference, then we have to pay attention to the differences at the beginning and end.

We can appreciate the good results of other kinds of thinking, other religions, other principles, but, in the end, we see them in terms of our best principles. If that is where we will end up, we might as well begin there too.

It is fine to dismiss silly rules, rules for the sake of rules, arbitrary conventions, letter of the law over spirit of the law, and merely mechanical technique. It is fine to extol good judgment as inspiration. But it is not enough. When I said we have to mix Jesus, practicality, and Western values, I meant really mix them. They all have to be there to get mixed. If ideas are not there, we can't mix them with intuition. We can't just glance at Jesus, practicality, and Western values, discard them, and rely on our inner light from then on. Mixing them is hard work but it is needed work. Experience matters. This is what martial artists have to go through to get where they rise above mere techniques, what skaters go through to skate well, what good politicians go through, what good pastors go through, and what we all have to go through to rely on sound judgment and on inspiration.

Tao and Nature.

It is easy to see in Taoism "nature love" or even "nature worship" as among some Europeans, Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans. Taoists write that way and West Coast Americans take it that way. On the whole this view of Taoism is correct but to see Taoism as simple nature worship is a mistake. First, both Taoist and Western romantic versions of nature are wrong. Second, although similar, Taoists ideas and modern Western ideas of nature are not the same. American nature lovers who look to Taoism for support are wrong. Here I can show how both Taoist and modern ideas of nature are wrong but I don't have the space to explain how Taoist and modern ideas of nature differ.

People read into texts what they want to justify. We cannot read into Taoism current Western ideas about nature. Both Taoist and modern ideas about nature are inaccurate because they come from urban elites who do not live in nature. Farmers and hunters who make their living near nature don't think about nature the way Taoists and modern nature lovers think who make their living apart from nature. Nobody thinks about nature the way nature works itself, not even farmers and hunters. Biologists come closer than most Taoists or nature lovers but even they are guided by ideology. Everybody has "tainted" ideas of nature. That is not necessarily wrong. It is part of being human. We go on having imperfect ideas about nature, correcting them as we can, and acting as best we can. Still, we should not let any obviously inaccurate ideas serve as the basis for policy; people who cut up the forests of Colorado to make big houses should expect mud slides and forest fires. In effect, Taoists made their own romanticized ideas about nature into their own kind of dogma and policy just as modern nature lovers do.

I disagree with the Taoist and romantic view of nature. As a matter of obvious fact, nature does not work the way Taoists think it does or as modern nature lovers think it does. Nature does not work so well so easily. Nature does not take care of all its creatures. Nature does not always work for the best, and the results of nature are not always for the best. Sometimes nature “screws up”. Nature has useless pain, anguish, worry. Innocent creatures die. Ugly parasites and diseases live on. Not everything in nature is part of a great system; even where there is a system, not everything in nature is a useful part of a bigger good system; and even where we might call the system as a whole “good”, not everything in it is good. Not everything in nature is graceful and beautiful. Not everything in nature that appears ugly is really graceful or beautiful in its own way. Some things are just ugly. Taoists and modern nature lovers can have distorted ideas about nature only because they do not live in nature but they fantasize about it from cities, from working farms, from “genteel” farms such as on the old TV show “Green Acres”, or from a canoe while they float down an exciting but safe river.

When Taoism and nature are not the same, we have to figure out which is which, which we want to follow when, and why. We have to figure out why they differ, and what that means. The fact that Taoism is not simply nature means that Taoism has to rest on some human ideas, that is, principles. This situation is not bad as long as we accept it and get on with the tasks. All religions and philosophies are both natural in that they arise out of human proclivities and are non-natural in that they urge us to avoid some natural bad acts such as stealing and urge us to do some non-natural good acts such as give to the poor.

Taoism likely is on the right track when it tells us not to force nature much, to relax and go along with the sensibility that three billion years of evolution gave us. Taoism is more correct than dogmas that teach us to abandon ourselves to the “dark side” of greed and domination, try to impose rigid moral ideas, and try to totally conquer and subdue nature. Taoism only needs to be honest about its relation to nature and to human nature.

Just because Taoists and “tree huggers” wrongly romanticize nature does not mean they are all wrong; does not mean the state, big business, crass consumerism, and industrial farmers are all right; so we should demolish nature in our search for more junk and bigger houses. Nature might not be all-good but we can still abuse it, we need it, and we still undermine our future when we abuse it. If we do not take care of nature, nature will hurt us. We desperately need natural diversity and some balance of nature. If we abuse nature, we too will hurt in the long run. Global climate change is teaching us this lesson. Fires, floods, and mudslides are the icing on the cake. If we do take care of nature, nature might not take care of us like a loving abundant all-powerful mother, but we stand a better chance.

Despite distortion, Taoists saw nature more clearly than did officials, farmers, and hunters, who wanted only to chew up nature and get stuff. Taoists saw more clearly than business people and officials do now. Even with distortion, Taoist visions are among the most beautiful ever, and deserve appreciation. Nearly all Chinese and Japanese outdoor paintings are Taoist in spirit even if there is no official Taoist school of art. A great deal of Chinese poetry is Taoist.

Taoist admiration was part of Taoist desire to be part of a great whole in which everything is automatically all right all the time. We are all certainly part of nature because we are part of God’s creation but nature is not what Taoists make it out to be. That does not mean nature is really bad instead. Nature is what it

is. Usually we screw it up worse than it screws itself up. You can participate in God's creation but you don't necessarily do that by participating in a dogmatic Taoist view of nature. You do that by finding how you can help the most, in accord with your own nature, and then doing it. If you can participate in God's creation by joining nature and helping nature to the extent that you understand nature, I think that is great. Not everybody participates in that way.

Dogma and Human Nature.

In Taoism, we are supposed to act according to our nature. Our nature comes from the Tao. Nature is natural. Yet part of natural human nature is ideas. Ideas lead quickly to dogma. Ideas about right and wrong, distribution of wealth, dignity, freedom, rules, love, friendship, etc. are all natural to human nature. I don't deny that society plays a large role; I only say society could not play its role unless we came with a predisposition to ideas. It is not clear if ideas and dogma are part of the Tao. If you deny a natural ability to produce ideas and natural tendency to live by them, you seem to deny the Tao.

We do not only have a predisposition to good ideas. We also accept, and insist on, bad ideas. We do not have a predisposition to bad ideas. We have a predisposition to ideas, and some of those ideas turn out bad. We probably have a predisposition to sort out good from bad, but the line between good and bad is not always clear, and we are not very adept at sorting out good from bad. So we can accept bad dogma, get attached to it, promote it, and force it onto other people. That is part of our natural nature, also supposedly from the Tao.

Good ideas often turn out well. That is one reason we call them good. But good ideas can turn out badly too. Since the 1950s, Americans have insisted on rights, and much good has been gained this way. But Americans have insisted on rights without usually accepting the responsibilities that go along, and so the good idea of rights also has led to some very bad dogma. Bad ideas usually lead to bad results, but do sometimes lead to good results. I don't give examples because I don't want to help out people who insist on bad moral relativity. We are not good at sorting out good results from bad results, as in the growth of dependence on the state. None of this is unnatural. All is natural. All is part of our Tao as humans.

The trick is to sort out good ideas and good results from bad ideas and bad results, and the desire to do so is likely part of our natural (Tao) human nature. Taoism sometimes helps and sometimes does not.

When Taoism insists on no discriminations, it undercuts the natural needful useful desire to sort out good ideas and good results from bad. In those cases, Taoism is bad dogma.

Taoism originally offered its critiques of dogma to counteract good ideas that had gone awry, and against bad ideas too. That is a good use of the idea of "no dogma". But Taoism went beyond that to its own bad dogma. It got caught in the trap of its own bad dogma.

Just because Taoism made some mistakes does not mean it is all wrong, not useful, or more wrong than the alternatives. It does not mean we should have a huge dogmatic nasty state. Taoism was correct in its critique of dogmas and a big state. Taoism is essential. We need to keep its criticisms in mind when we flounder off into plausible but bad dogmas about human nature and the state. We need to use its central vision to find our mental freedom.

Acting Bad Naturally.

Taoists say people who act freely, without any dogma, act in accord with the Tao, and people who act in accord with the Tao act freely without any dogma. I think people who act freely do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao. They do not necessarily act badly or well, but they do not necessarily act in ways that Taoists would call in accord with the Tao. People who act freely and naturally can act badly in ways that a Taoist would have to say are not in accord with the Tao.

As an anthropologist, I researched firsthand the history of people colonizing new land along the coast of Thailand. When people colonize new land, they have many children, and their children have children. At first they get along with nature, then they use nature, and then they destroy it. In another instance of the natural abuse of nature, when boys walk among fruit trees, they use branches to pummel trees and fruit. They knock down fruit for no reason. People like to drink alcohol. When people drink, they act foolishly. People love to eat. Modern people routinely over eat. None of this behavior is unnatural, all of it is free, and none of it is necessarily immoral. I am sure it is not what a Taoist would call in accord with the Tao.

Even when people act in accord with the Tao, and do not act immorally, things do not always turn out as what a Taoist would call "in accord with the Tao". Interactions have a way of going oddly. Taoists often used woodcutting as an example of a typical Taoist way to make a living. Yet when enough people glean gently from the woods, they still destroy the woods. When only a few cars existed in the world, to tend a car skillfully and make it run well seems to me to act in accord with the Tao. Yet when many cars exist in the world, the same behavior results in a situation wildly out of accord with the Tao.

Now it gets worse. People act badly not because they have been corrupted by dogma or by other bad people but because all people have at least a little streak of badness and some people have a big streak. Some badness is natural and comes freely. Taoists prefer that people do not steal but people do steal, and stealing can make a difference in how we get along and in what we have to do to protect ourselves. The same is true of lying, aggression, and sexual aggression. Date rape is likely partly natural but that does not make it good or in accord with the Tao. Most people are not very bad. Most people are more good than bad. People don't have to be monsters from "slasher movies", or hungry zombies, for things to turn out worse than we can stand. People only have to be naturally bad and let nature take its course.

Taoists do not take into account natural free bad behavior and its results. Taoists have in mind natural free behavior that is also good and that leads to good results. Only this behavior would be "in accord with the Tao" although Taoists would not like to admit that.

Taoism and Society.

In Taoist society, when everybody acts freely and naturally, things turn out wonderfully. There is no crime and no need for officials. Rural romantics in all cultures believed this heaven would happen where people had not been corrupted by modern capitalist industrial Western life. People still lived like angels in Tahiti, the French countryside, or American backwoods. Native Americans were saints. This view of "natural society" in the West is like the view of "natural society" in Taoism, and both views are wrong and hurtful. When I first went to Thailand in 1981, I met a young Thai sociology professor, recently back from a major

American university. He declared categorically that there had never been any crime in all the thousands of villages over all Thai history before evil corrupt selfish Westerners intruded and brought crime: no stealing, lying, rape, seduction, murder, forgery of land documents, drugs, laziness, or anything bad. My mouth literally hung open speechless.

This Taoist Heaven-on-Earth does not happen for the reasons given above: people do not act in accord with the Tao; even if people do act in accord with the Tao, the end result is not necessarily what we want; and free natural behavior can be bad behavior that is not seem in accord with the Tao.

Human society turns out badly because free natural people are bad enough to make society bad. It only takes a few bad acts, or a few bad people, and there are always enough. People are naturally greedy, selfish, and want power, riches, and sex. Human society can turn out badly because following dogma is a part of natural human nature. Human society can turn out badly because people naturally follow good dogmas or people naturally follow bad dogmas. Human society does not turn out badly only because people are perverted by bad dogmas or by any dogmas-as-such. Society can turn out badly because the raw material, people, is not in accord with the Tao. Society can also turn out badly when people do act in accord with the Tao. Taoists wish we would act kindly when we act freely and naturally so that things will work out in society when we act in accord with the Tao. Taoists would like us to act badly when we act in accord with dogma so things always turn out badly when we do not act freely naturally in accord with the Tao.

In reality, people only get along well when they act freely and naturally in some conditions: they know each other, nobody has uncontrollable bad natural inclinations such as killing or raping, people can be held accountable, people exchange social services and goods, people do better when they exchange, people depend on each other to some extent, and people likely will depend on each other in the future. Usually you find these conditions in old rural villages and small towns and in old urban neighborhoods where people have similar incomes and where everybody makes enough to get along fairly well. These conditions are also found in idealized TV shows such as "Little House on the Prairie", "Friends", and "How I Met Your Mother".

Taoists wrongly thought these conditions would arise whenever people acted in accord with the Tao and did not have to endure the evils of civilization. Taoists thought these conditions prevailed automatically in the countryside among farmers, gatherers, and craftspeople. Ironically, Taoists could only have these wrong ideas about rural life because they came from cities and they had not really lived in the countryside except as exiles, usually drunken exiles. As anybody can tell you who has lived in the countryside as a resident, these conditions do not usually prevail. Even if, on the surface, conditions similar to these do prevail, country people are so bored that they gladly go to the excitement of the corrupt and evil city so as to be entertained.

These conditions usually only arise and persist when experienced people make good principles, make good institutions on the basis of those principles, and then get other people to live according to the good principles and institutions. It takes a lot of luck and a long history too. Hopefully the good principles and institutions are in accord with the natural tendency of people to make and follow dogma. When Taoists try to get rid of all dogma, but they smuggle in their ideas of good social life, they prevent good people from making the necessary principles and institutions.

Taoists are not entirely wrong. They can be deeply right. When conditions are right and the “live and let live” way works, and when the living situation is also interesting, it can be a good life. Civilization has its badness, and piling laws and officials on top of laws and officials does not usually make it all better. But we can’t get there by letting people do what they want. What have to think about what we want whether that is “in accord with the Tao” or not. We have to think about how to make the conditions so that people can mostly get along by doing what they want, and so people will perpetuate the conditions that let them get along by doing what they want while they get along by doing what they want.

More Taoist Social Dreams.

I have lived for long periods in a dozen places. In each place, people assured me that, there, everybody was free to live as he-she wished as long as he-she didn’t hurt anybody. People were free to “do their own thing”. Nowhere was this really true. People everywhere want you to act like them or to act as they wish you to act. They set up their way as the secret standard for the best way. If new people are serious about living there, becoming one with the place, and one with them, then new people should soon live like the long-term residents. If new people have to differ, but can live without harm, that is tolerable, but still not OK. That is better than living badly but it is still not up to the secret standard. Libertarians, hippies, Californians, Midwesterners, Easterners, Southerners, Thai, New Agers, PCers, Leftist radicals, feminists, gay activists, Buddhists, Taoists, and even old Oregonians, are all like this.

Taoist stories make it seem as if people are free to live as they wish but that is not true. Taoists have, in the back of their heads, an idea of a good life. Basically, the Taoist idea of the good social life is like a comfortable middle class American suburb, or neighborhood of old American self-sufficient working class, with a lot of nature nearby. Some societies work in accord with the Tao and some do not. Taoists would disapprove of an Amish county, or a religious commune with a lot of rules, even if the people were happy and everything worked out well for generations.

You have to judge whether this secret judgment makes Taoists hypocrites, and how much it undermines Taoism as a whole. I don’t think it undermines Taoism as a whole. I do think it makes Taoists as much human as all of us, including the tendency to make ourselves the universal standard and to use dogmas. I am also like this but I try to be honest about it.

I don’t think it is possible to run a society without dogmas, standards, and institutions. If so, then we have to think about what dogmas, standards, and institutions we want. We have to think how our ideas support our preferred way of life but give latitude to other people who are not like us as long as those others are not dangerous or immoral. Taoists have to think how to run Taoist society so as to preserve basic ideas of the Tao but still let other people live. These are old issues for free plural democracies, and the reader has heard them before. That doesn’t make them any less real even for Taoists.

Tacit Taoist Morality.

To completely shut down the mistakes of the Confucians, Legalists, Mo-ists, heavy-handed rulers of their times, and stultifying moral conventions, Taoists came down on the side of moral relativity or moral non-discrimination. In doing so, they again made the mistake of the dogma of no dogma. In fact, Taoists did

have a clear moral code, which they tacitly asserted. I like their tacit moral code but not their dogmatic anti-morality.

You cannot say “It is better not to judge better and worse”. That is a contradiction. You can say it is better to be flexible about better and worse.

When first meeting Taoism, Westerners sometimes think Taoists have no morality at all – an impression that might please Taoists. Taoists “picked apart” all codified dogmatic conventional morality and morality that came from ideologies. They showed how all usual morality was “bolstered” (“reified”) as part of bad system.

In fact, though, Taoists are neither amoral nor immoral. I have never read about or met a Taoist who did really act like the giant bandit in the story above. Taoists value mental freedom. They want to do as they wish and they are willing to allow other people to do as others wish. They do not “put their ideas on to” other people and they do not allow other people to impose ideas. They wish other people would follow the Tao (do well in life) and they hope other people wish them the same. In their own way, Taoists follow the Golden Rule. The difference is that Taoists are not proactive and they do not think they are obliged to make the world better or to “pay it forward”. Likely, in real practice, they would help people quite a bit and would “pay it forward”, but they also avoid any dogma that tells them they have to do so and tells them they are categorically better when they do it. You just do it.

If you pay attention to all of a Taoist story rather than only to the punch line that deflates moralist dogma, it is clear that Taoists have a morality much like the “good people” morality of all other religions. Despite tales of vicious bandits, Taoists are decent guys. They encourage each other, console each other, and help each other with wine if nothing else. Taoist ideas of acting in accord with the Tao, accord between heaven and the Tao, and realizing Heaven by acting in accord with the Tao, are all versions of goodness even if Taoists don’t want to call it that and they refuse to measure it in any way. So Taoists do have a morality even if it is hard to pin down. Just because Taoists see that most morality is bolstered as part of a system, and moral dogma often leads to badness, does not mean Taoists don’t have a moral vision of their own. Their morality goes along with the Golden Rule and their morality leads to something like the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why Taoism is secretly so appealing; people can be moral but claim they are above morality. It allows Westerners to be moral while espousing moral relativism. We should see Taoist apparent “anti-morality” in light of this real background morality.

Mystic strains in other religions also stress moral non-discrimination, the conventional nature of morality, and the harm done by adhering to convention and dogma. As with Taoists, I think most mystics are nice guys, wouldn’t harm a fly, and would help other people. Mystics in all religions were well-known for giving themselves up to harm instead of harming another being or allowing another being to come to harm, and for actively helping other beings. Even the Buddha felt compassion and taught. The idea here is not to do away with all discriminations and so to dwell in a land without any morality at all. The idea is to trust your instincts (Luke’s “feelings”) and your training to do the right thing without too much anguish when the time comes. Trust yourself not to fall prey to dogmas, even moral dogmas. We are easily misled by moral sounding arguments and by high-sounding principles. We need to be able to back off those so as to see clearly and then do the right thing as we see it in those circumstances. Practice stepping back and keeping an open mind. Practice seeing all sides of the question. Practice putting on the shoes of other

people, even people you don't like. Practice finding your basic principles and applying them correctly in various situations.

If you stress no-dogma and non-discrimination in morality to the point that you are amoral or immoral, then you have gone too far. You have created your own dogma and convention, based on morality, as anti-morality, as surely as any conniving preacher or politician.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for how to find the right middle path between moral dogma versus anti-dogma. The fact that there are no hard-and-fast rules but we can often find our way with practice, is likely the real meaning behind the slogans of "no moral discrimination" and "moral relativity". In other chapters, when I write about moral relativity and non-discrimination in other religions, keep in mind these comments based on Taoism. To borrow and paraphrase from Donovan Leitch and Zen:

First there is a mountain
Then there is no mountain
Then there is

First there is a kindness
Then there is no kindness
Then there is

Contradiction Inherent in "No Dogma", Again.

On the one hand, to argue against other schools, Taoists insist that the person who acts in accord with the Tao is happiest, most successful in his-her own way, and creates the best society. Taoist society is best. Taoist society is best by any reasonable standards that can be suggested by rival schools.

On the other hand, Taoists insist no measurable standards, and no other formal standards, can be used to assess personal behavior or society. There can be no measure of personal success, personal best behavior, or best society. People act according to the Tao. Automatically what results is best in its own way; but we can't compare it with other results, we can't measure it, and we shouldn't have to measure it. If we try to measure it, we impose dogma and ruin it. If we say the wealthiest society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society that we try to make wealthy to make best. If we say the most powerful society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society in which we create a large army so as to make it powerful. America and China are learning that lesson now. This situation is like the difference between quality and quantity. We are after quality. We can feel quality. We can feel when we act according to quality. To impose quantity, or to impose any standards so as to capture quality, inevitably corrupts and destroys quality. In Hinduism and Buddhism, to impose quantity in a mistaken effort to capture quality is to follow maya-samsara (delimited seductive illusory channeling world) instead of seeking the direct success and satisfaction of enlightenment.

You can't have it both ways – no dogmas yet best by standards - and Taoists struggled with the problem. Not only to defeat rivals but to appeal to lay people, Taoists did say that following the Tao led to the best society by implied shared standards such as secure, happy, and moderately wealthy. Yet when rivals used the same standards to show Taoism could not succeed, Taoists instead insisted that no standards

could apply and that Taoism was the way of no standards. This Taoist stance is like Bruce Lee's "fighting without fighting" or "acting without acting".

From a contradiction, you can argue for any nonsense. Taoism can only overlook that its view of human action and society is unrealistic and unrealizable because it rests on this contradiction between success-according-to-standards versus no dogmas. This contradiction allows people to read into Taoism any silly notions of what a spiritually successful person is like and what a good society is like. It allows modern Taoists to think they can forge a spiritually successful mini-society in any urban Taoist center.

For me, the main poison fruit of this contradiction is that it blinds Taoism to the fact that it uses principles of morality. Taoism must use principles of morality. Taoism can pretend that it does not need principles of morality when it does need them and does use them. Taoism would be better off accepting this fact and coming to grips with what principles are in accord with its idea of the Tao, good human action, and a good society. Taoism would perform a great service if it could show us how to use principles of morality without also falling into bad dogmas.

Taoism and Libertarianism.

In this section, these ideas from the chapter on atheism are useful:

-Anything that we make very important, above most of the world, we really make super natural, even if it is also in this world. Not only God is super natural. People who believe deeply in morality, love, wealth, power, souls, democracy, or free will really make those things super natural.

-Whenever we make something super natural, we imply metaphysics to go along with it even if we don't elaborate the metaphysics. If we think souls are really important, we have to explain the place of souls in the world, the relation of souls to each other, the relation of souls to choice, and their relation to aspects of the world such as power.

-To allow any super natural and metaphysics at all is to allow a lot. If you say you can hold something special, then other people have the right to hold things special too. Then we have to decide between different sets of super-natural-with-metaphysics. If a person says souls, love, free will, and morality are special then another person can say power and wealth are special, and we have to decide.

According to Taoism, we should act freely and naturally in accord with the Tao both because that is what we should do and because, by acting that way, we lead to the best society. Yet people acting freely and naturally do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao and do not necessarily achieve the best society. Making dogmas is part of human nature yet making dogmas is acting not in accord with the Tao. Normal natural people want credit for ideas and work. Acting freely in accord with the Tao can achieve social goodness. Yet even people acting freely in accord with the Tao do not necessarily achieve good society. No fulfilling society is made entirely of irascible hermits, drunken poets, and unerring butchers. When faced with bad neighbors or with a bad state, it is better to move away, keep mental freedom, and find the Tao elsewhere than to stay, practice what little of the Tao that you can, assume your good example will change society, and so eventually to lose the Tao and lose yourself. So, is Taoism about persons acting freely in accord with the Tao regardless of results for society (religious Taoism), about acting freely

regardless of the Tao (political freedom), or about finding the best society (political Taoism)? It can help to see these issues in a modern arena.

In Oregon where I grew up, people felt strongly we should let people do as people wished as long as they did not hurt other people, society, or nature. When I learned of Libertarianism, it reminded me of Oregon, but not quite. When I tried to explain Taoism to Libertarians, they thought they saw early Libertarians, early kindred spirits. Taoism and Libertarianism both promote free individual action and oppose dogmas of control but they are not the same. To show how they differ helps to explain both.

I do not describe Libertarians other than that they are strong advocates of individual free action, the free market, and private enterprise, and they are strong critics of the state. Like Taoists, they want to reduce the state to nothing. They want private free enterprise to build roads, build dams, run the police, fight fires, and take care of national defense. They want no public oversight of food safety, the environment, or anything. They see all policy as dogma; and all dogma is bad.

Libertarians give two justifications. The two justifications are not fully compatible but most Libertarians don't see the conflicts. They mix up the ideas. Both justifications involve hidden reliance on something above nature, that is, on the super natural. In relying on the super natural, the justifications necessarily imply metaphysics. Libertarians usually take the justifications so much for granted that they don't see these implications.

The first justification is like political Taoism. To achieve the greatest public good and best society, rely on private enterprise and free capitalist market and rely on them only. Private enterprise in a free capitalist market always leads to the greatest general good. Only private enterprise in a free capitalist market leads to the greatest general good. Private enterprise in a capitalist market always does better than any alternative, especially better than state action. The free capitalist market is THE institution that always allows the action of private people to outdo the state and to find the greatest good, and is the only such institution. The free market is the Libertarian institutional equivalent to Taoist non-institutional Virtue that leads to good society. How Libertarians define "better", "best", and "greatest good" does not matter here. I do not explain how Libertarians support their conclusions but they do give some good arguments.

The second justification is like religious Taoism. Libertarians assert the absolute value of autonomous free individuals, and Libertarians deny any standards higher than autonomous free individuals. The free individual is the highest entity in the world and ultimate standard for everything in the world. Everything is compared to the free autonomous individual to assess the value of that thing. Free individuals make their own goodness in the world. Anything that undermines the freedom of free individuals is bad. People are autonomous adults who always know their own minds and always can decide what is best. The world might be hard but it is not so hard that the average person can't handle it. Consenting adults should be free to do as they want regardless of results for the social whole. Contending adults can "work it out" or fight it out if they have to. Regardless of outcome, free people should act freely. If the outcome is the best in general (greatest general good), then so much the better. But even if the outcome is not the best that can be imagined, or the best that might practically be achieved by other means, still free people should act freely. If somehow the capitalist market did not serve as the vehicle for free people to act freely, then free people should rise above even the market to act freely.

The state should never be above the free individual. Because the state almost necessarily seeks to be above the free individual, free people almost always need to avoid the state. The average person does not need a state bureaucrat to hold his-her hand. Any aid from the state demeans people. State aid causes more damage through demeaning free people than state aid leads to any gain through wealth, security, or power. No gain from the state, however large, is worth any loss of freedom, however small. Not even the welfare of your family is worth state intervention.

If the free actions of free individuals, that is, private enterprise, on the free capitalist market, ever did not lead to the greatest social good, then the two justifications would conflict, and Libertarians would have to choose. Libertarians insist the two principles never conflict and always support each other. Libertarians never have to choose. Libertarians can have their cake and eat it too.

Here we have to dip our toes into the real world. As a matter of empirical fact, the real capitalist market does not automatically magically produce a great world. I don't go through its faults. Some Libertarians know this, and so they argue instead that the market is the best realistic alternative, better than state plans and business mercantilism. On the whole, they are right, but not entirely right. It is not worth assessing the arguments from various sides in detail. What matters: First, regardless of how well the market works, making the market that important makes it super natural. Arguments about how well it works are not directly relevant to its status as super natural. Second, Libertarians make autonomous free individuals so important as to be super natural. Third, the super naturalism gets stronger when you put together ideas about the market and individuals. Fourth, the market still has some faults, and some of the faults undercut links between the market and the importance of autonomous free individuals. Fifth, some faults erode the value of individuals and the status of people as autonomous always-competent almost-angel super natural agents; they hurt the human soul.

To prepare for the idea that the market and humans in Libertarianism are super natural, and how they are bound together in the super natural, it helps to look closer at how Libertarians see them. Libertarians find in the free market the compromise institution – between bad chaos and hyper-order - that allows them to achieve individual free action and the greater good at the same time. Free people working through the market act more in accord with human nature and the human soul than when they give up any freedom to let the state help them. The free market always allows people to act freely in accord with their nature as important souls. The free market is the only way in which people can be free and assert individuality. When individuals are free and assert their true nature, they naturally automatically build a free market. Free individuals use the market that they have built to achieve all their material, personal, institutional, and social goals, and to guard their status as free souls. The free market that free people build to serve them always leads to the greatest overall welfare. The free market that free people build to serve them always achieves goals better than the state ever could. The free market that free people build always guards free people better than the state ever could. The free market is the one and only institution of and for autonomous free people.

(Economics has a long tradition about relations between individual action and the greater social good. Libertarians know of this tradition and are a part of it. I have to ignore the tradition here.)

The market to a Libertarian is like the God-given Church to Christians, Law to the religions of Yahweh-Allah, Democracy to Americans, and laws to Chinese Legalists. It plays this role as an institution. As a

way apart from an institution, the market is like morality to moral atheists, “regard” to Mo-ists, and, as just stated, like free action in accord with the Tao to Taoists. The market is so important that it is not only natural but super natural too. Critics of Libertarianism say Libertarians worship the market, not a real market but an unrealizable idealized market. Even if the market often does work well, the idea that it always works best is not an empirical scientific idea but a super natural dogma, and this dogma, like all dogmas, comes with metaphysics. The market “comes off” not as a merely human institution but as the one God-given best institution of the world, a super natural institution that serves to protect super natural freedom and to give the greatest manna to people. Arguments over how the market out-does rivals are not so much science-based-on-facts as rationalizations for ideas that Libertarians hold for other reasons. In fairness, I stress that everybody offers rationalizations for ideas held for other reasons.

Likewise, the Libertarian idea of a person cannot be based on any scientific experiment but must rest on an ideal autonomous sufficient free-willed agent. In essence, people are souls and souls are the most important thing in the world, above the rest of the world. This view is a dogma. It makes persons super natural. The idea that people are free autonomous agents and the most important thing in the world is a metaphysical ideal. Libertarians don’t see this. A Libertarian might like the view of a person as an ultimate autonomous free agent, as the most important thing in the world; that view might be preferable to alternative dogmas such as “make the individual serve the good of the whole” and “we want the state to watch over us”; and non-Libertarians might go along; but the idea is still a dogma about the super natural and it still entails metaphysics. Most people who value the individual, Libertarians or otherwise, don’t see that their opinion entails the super natural and metaphysics. They take this stance so much for granted that they see it as entirely natural.

When mixed, the two justifications reinforce each other and bolster worship of the market. The market is the one institution that best serves super natural souls. As such, it too is super natural. The market is the best balance of life-giving chaos versus death-dealing hyper-order. The state is the enemy of souls; the state is Satan. The market is the champion of souls against the state as Satan. The market is the institutionalized good order that results after God defeats bad chaos and institutes his order; the market is the good order that remains on the free chaotic side of the hyper-order of the Golden Calf, Egypt, Syria, or Babylon; the market is the chaos that God tamed and made creative; and it is the natural spontaneous compromise institution that continues God’s work in previously subduing bad chaos. It is very hard to assess this view in any scientific terms, and almost impossible to go against it with other ideas. Once inside, the Libertarian view is a system that eats the world. When Libertarians, and other social critics, argue, they argue not so much about facts but assert super natural metaphysical systems.

The Libertarian claim might sound silly when I put it like this, but, still, it is a worthwhile claim. The free market often works well. Not only Libertarians see people as priceless souls and see the market as a great institution that serves freedom, happiness, and prosperity. The Libertarian view deserves respect. Libertarians only need to be honest about the issues.

Because the Libertarian view of the market and of persons is super natural, the Libertarian view opens the door to the super natural and metaphysics in general, such as, ironically, glorification of the state and of religions. Libertarianism arose in the 1920s, about the same time that strong fascism arose, another dogma with metaphysics. They arose together as opposing mirrors images. When I knew Libertarians, I was surprised by how many were staunchly religious church members. Deep respect for the soul, and

concern about how individuals and society fit, leads naturally to religion. If you can see the market as the institution between bad chaos and the bad nanny state, the one institution that channels good chaos and preserves souls, then you can see the Church that way too – in fact, likely the Church came first as a model and set the stage for the market much later.

Now empirical facts are relevant again. In some ways, the market does not serve free souls, such as in promoting debt slavery and stratification. Free action by autonomous important souls on a free market does not always lead to the best imaginable social result, does not always lead to the best practical social result, and undercuts free souls. If the market leads to debt slavery and stratification, and debt slavery and stratification undermine what it means to be a soul, and what it means to be a soul in a good society, then the first justification and the second justification don't go together. In that case, Libertarians have to choose. Too often, they choose the market and continue to pretend that the two justifications still do go together because they, personally, are well off. Most wealthy people do likewise. Unlike Libertarians, some Christian churches chose souls and a good society, and have urged that the market be regulated so that it does really serve souls and a good society.

The fact that the super natural market and the super natural soul do not always go together, and that we must choose between them sometimes, shows that sometimes we have to choose between sets of ideas about the super natural (metaphysics). It is possible to defend one set of super-natural-and-metaphysical views against another set, and I try to do this balancing act with my ideas in this book, but Libertarians do not. In contrast, like most dogmatists, Libertarians simply insist their super natural and their metaphysics are correct while others are wrong. If the Libertarian view were nonsense, this issue would not matter. But their view does make sense, and so it deserves to be argued, and defended, at a depth that accepts the super natural basis. What are the real relations between evolved souls, souls, the free capitalist market, the greater good, nature, and the state? What does it really mean to say that the free market fails sometimes? What does it really mean to say that the free market is the best alternative even if it is not perfect?

(Ludwig von Mises understood both justifications clearly but mixed them up anyway. I am not sure which he thought most important. Because he so often began with free individuals, I think they were more basic to him. I am not sure if he fully saw the implications of either point or of mixing them up. He saw some implications of seeing people as “free souls”. I think he saw that the ideas were super natural and that they implied metaphysics but he remained quiet. Other Libertarians, such as Hayek, also understood the ideas but were less clear than von Mises. Many Libertarians don't see these ideas at all and-or don't see the implications. I don't know about Murray Rothbard.)

Taoism also wants to have its cake and eat it too. Taoism wants both good society and free people following the Tao, and wants them tied together. This does not always work. To see how this plays out in Taoism, and how Taoism implies the super natural, it is useful to imagine what a Taoist might say about Libertarianism.

To a Taoist, the market is an unwarranted bad imposition between Taoist individuals, the Tao, and good society. Taoists want a direct link between free individuals following the Tao and good society, a direct link between the Tao and good society. Taoists do not share the Western view, and of other Chinese,

that needs institutions, such as ritual or the market, to make a good society. Their view is like people who believe in God and Jesus but are really uneasy about any formal church.

To a Taoist, the market is like a state policy no matter how free it is. The market is an obvious dogma with bad implications. Think back to the example above of farmers going to market to exchange piglets and ducklings. The free market is as bad as Confucian ritual, Confucian goodness, Mo-ist regard, or Legalist laws. It doesn't matter if the market delivers good better than the state or alternatives. "Better" is not relevant. If the free market does give more general welfare than alternatives such as state programs, then fine, but this result is not worth worrying about, and not worth making a theory to convince people. There is no point making standards of comparison, or arguments, to prove the free market serves the greater good better than Legalism, Confucianism, Socialism, Fascism, or the Business Mercantilism of the American Republican Party.

A Taoist would disagree with Libertarians in trusting the market, private enterprise, and business firms. The market is not the only way by which people can act freely, and it is hardly the best way. A Taoist would disagree with trusting wealth even if that wealth was made solely through private action. Ultimately you can trust only the Tao. Wealth, market, business firms, and private enterprise capitalism are artificial constructs as much as the state. They have dogmas, metaphysics, and officials. Libertarians worship them just as bureaucrats, dependent minorities, dependent business firms, and Confucians, worship the state. Free exchange is fine, but that is not the ultimate means or ultimate goal, and that is not what we have in real capitalism anyway. If Libertarianism means effectively worshipping capitalism, then no Taoist could go along. Relying on the market instead of the Tao is wrong and dangerous even if the market works well, perhaps especially if it works well.

Although Taoists "eliminate the middleman (person)" by getting rid of institutions such as the free market, that position still does not settle the choice between better society (political Taoism) and free individuals following the Tao (religious Taoism). To get at that issue, it helps to see how Taoists would respond to the Libertarian view of individuals.

Taoists value free people following the Tao but do so in Taoist terms rather than Western or Chinese political-economic terms. What matters is a person following the Tao. Nothing can be more important than that. Nothing can get in the way of that. Everything has to be subordinate to that. Everything has to follow from that.

Unlike Libertarians, Taoists would reject the second justification, the idea of a free person, if it rested on an idea of people as politically or morally free, or rested on any idea of people as metaphysical agents. People need freedom but the kind of freedom we need is freedom to go along with the Tao. This freedom is not metaphysical, political, economic, social, or moral. Taoists know that bad politics, bad economics, and bad metaphysics can destroy the practical freedom that people need to follow the Tao but that does not mean good politics, good economics, or any politics or economics, is the same as Taoist freedom. To think of the situation in any terms other than going along with the Tao turns the situation into dogma and destroys all freedom.

Taoists would reject the idea of people as ultimately free moral agents and as the most important thing in the world. That is not how Taoists think of souls. People are bits of the Tao. The Tao is most important.

We are important because we are part of the Tao. We are free to the extent that we follow the Tao. It is misleading vain dogma to make ourselves too important. State dogma is less important than individuals seeking the Tao but that fact still does not make human individuals ultimate.

Taoists would accept the importance of persons if it means merely that acting freely in accord with your own nature is acting in accord with the Tao, and acting in accord with the Tao always is best. We cannot measure “best” or impose any standards on “best”. People are important because, unlike most things in the world, they can act in accord with the Tao through body, art, craft, and intellect. People are important because it is a great tragedy for anything not to act in accord with the Tao and a great tragedy for people not to act in accord with the Tao; yet people are strangely prone not to act in accord with the Tao; and so people especially have to seek the Tao. People are important because it is wonderful when any creature of the Tao returns to the Tao after having been lost; “I once was lost but now am found”; and people are one of the few creatures that can get lost and then find itself again.

None of this makes people super natural in the sense of Libertarian or Christian souls. Whether it makes people super natural in other ways, I briefly touch on below, and you should think about throughout the chapter.

I don't know how much Taoists would agree with the Libertarian version of the person in contrast to other versions such as from Jefferson or radical feminism. Taoism sees that state intervention must demean a person and so thwart the ultimate energy of the world, the Tao. Any gain from state intervention is less than the loss from not following the Tao – even though we don't try to measure the gains and losses or try to impose any dogma-standards.

Does the Taoist view of persons and of the Tao settle all conflict between good society and free persons pursuing the Tao? I think it doesn't. Again, facts have to intrude. Although no real society ever ran on Taoist terms, to a Taoist, it is obvious that all alternatives to Taoism are worse than following the Way only, and obvious that, if people did follow the Way only, they would have a good society. It is a historical accident that we live in bad times in which no society is based only on following the Tao. If we lived in the great times of the mythical past, we could simply see the Tao at work in good society. The link of good society with the Tao is an obvious fact, as, to Libertarians the link of the market to free people and good society is an obvious fact; but with the Tao it is true while with the market it is not; so there can be no conflict between good society and free persons following the Tao as there is between a real capitalist market and free souls.

To me, all this is simply not true. It is like saying society would be great if it ran on Christian principles. No real society can run on simple Christian principles or simply according to the Tao. As a matter of fact, there is no necessary coincidence between good society and individual free people seeking the Tao. I think Taoists knew this in their hearts too. As with Libertarians, if Taoist society is not perfect, the next step would be to argue whether the Tao is better than alternatives such as Confucianism, Legalism, or the free market. Taoists certainly did argue that issue, but I don't need to review it here, and we already know they concluded Taoism is best.

If free people following the Tao, and good society, are not always the same, which is most important? Like Libertarians, Taoists would hate to make this choice, but, like Libertarians, if I did force them, they

would say that free people following the Tao are basic. If Taoist good society is ever realized, it will come from them, they will not come from it. Because Taoists are not committed to the market, wealth, power, ritual, or any institution, unlike Libertarians, Taoists can bring individually free people following the Tao directly to the fore. Taoist stories are full of Taoists living just fine on the edges of society or apart from society. Individual Taoists even live apart when in the middle of society, like Western philosophers and rebel rockers. The idea of uniting society and the Tao remains a dream-like ideal but the individual free Taoist living according to the Tao was a life that real people felt they could really live.

Does the Taoist idea of a person require the super natural and some metaphysics? It does, at least in that it also requires the Tao, Heaven, Virtue, mental clarity, free action in accord with the Tao, and the idea of a best society. I argue in this chapter that Taoists have ideas of morality, persons, and politics that Taoists teach through stories and ideal persons. As far as I am concerned, that amounts to holding the super natural, offering metaphysics, and building a system that eats the world. As with Libertarians, the value of individual free people seeking the Tao cannot be stressed enough. This ideal cannot be a simple natural idea, like the idea of a tree or a thunderstorm, any more than can Plato's ideal of the Good. Although Taoists refused to describe in detail a society living according to the Tao, it is clear that they saw it as a heaven-like society, very important, and so, according to my view, super natural. Society was as super natural to them as the market is to Libertarians although in different ways.

What does the fact that Taoists raise individuals, the Tao, and Taoist society, to the super natural say about their metaphysics? That question is too much to go into here and I don't have to go into it much. Taoists denied they had metaphysics; "the way that can be named is not the One Way"; metaphysics is too much like bad dogma; so for me to be clear on the topic would require me to go through Taoist texts and argue with them about points. I don't want to do that. Take this chapter as a whole as a critique of Taoist metaphysics.

If we accept that Taoists, like Libertarians, had ideas of the super natural and had metaphysics, then the question is whether Taoist super natural and Taoist metaphysics are better or worse than other versions. I don't go into this question directly here. As practice in making these assessments, I ask you to make up your own mind whether Libertarianism or Taoism is better, and why. In answer to the question of overall best, I merely assert that my ideas about the issues (Jesus, practicality, Western values) are better than either the Libertarian or Taoist versions, and I offer this whole book as my argument.

State Policies Again; No More Running Away Again.

States can't run on the basis of Taoism. People are good but not good enough. States have no choice but to develop policies. Policies have to be based on principles. Principles have to be based on ideas about good, bad, nature, human nature, and society. Whatever states do on the basis of policies and principles, they cause some damage. We hope the harm is much less than the benefit. We need ways to measure the benefit and harm. Taoism can serve as a good needed warning about plausible do-gooder schemes, but it can't do much more than that in a real government.

Taoists readily accepted that you cannot live according to the Tao anywhere. If you live in a corrupt state, society, or natural environment, it is hard. So Taoists seek situations where they can be free. The Taoist response to nearly all government, and to any society gone wrong, was to run away. Taoists moved.

They moved to another village, moved farms away from a village, or moved to swamps, forests, and mountains. As my wife often reminds me, Lao Tzu's mother told him repeatedly to move away from bad neighbors. Finally, Lao Tzu left China for the barbarian Western deserts because China was too corrupt. People in the West where I grew up dreamed of doing the same.

Running away might have worked when the world was sparsely populated and humanity was only a bad cold in nature's nose but now the world is overrun. We have infected the whole body. There is no place to go. We can't run away anymore. Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona are filled up. Either we accept the horrible effects of too many people seeking too much stuff or we make a stand. Taoism does not prepare us for either alternative, and so Taoism does not prepare us for the modern world. I do not know what Taoists would make of this situation.

What Made Sense Once Now No Longer Makes Sense; Taoism and Modern Democracy.

Taoists knew the difference between good government and bad, otherwise they would not have offered the idea (dogma) that the best government is that which governs least or governs not at all.

Taoist attitudes made sense a long time ago when the world did not change much and when government was not democratic. They do not make sense now. Taoism never had to encounter continuous change, progress, and modern democracy.

For thousands of years, for the average Joe or Jane in a state - farmers just getting by - there was no difference between one lord and another, one king and another, one regime and another, one dynasty and another, or the old regime here versus a new conqueror from there. You paid taxes to all of them, served in their armies, did your forced labor, and got little in return except maybe management of the irrigation system and somebody to carry out the ceremonies on time. Sometimes government was good and sometimes bad, but you couldn't do much about it, and you had to endure either way. Government was something some powerful person somewhere else did to you; it was not "of the people, by the people, for the people". For decades, centuries, and even millennia, nothing changed. Sometimes there were more people, sometimes less. One town rose while another fell. You got married, your children got married, and their children got married. Slowly people ate nature. Sometimes there was a drought, flood, blight, fire, plague, war, or even a good harvest. Nearly all the time, there were just as many people as the land could possibly support. Farmers worked to make the land and the crops yield more. But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as they were before. Once in a while somebody introduced an innovation such as a new plow (curved plow in Europe) or a new crop (rice for millet in China). But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as before. Nothing really changed. Nothing really got better.

In this context, it made sense not to worry about government, not to care about power, and to run away if things go badly. There was no feeling that "government is us" and we have a responsibility to make sure things turn out well. Although nature was slowly disappearing, there was still enough wildness left to run away into. It made sense to be a Taoist "little guy" or a Taoist recluse.

The modern world differs. The modern world changes radically within decades. We need to deal with change. Sometimes modern life even gets better. There is a difference between governments. The

United States was not the Soviet Union or Fascist Germany. Capitalism is not the same as socialism. Democracy is not either Fascism or “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. India, China, Brazil, the United States, and France are not the same. Too little nature is left to run away into. Most countries now are democracies in which the people are responsible for what happens. You are the government. What each average Joe or Jane does makes a difference. You as a citizen are personally responsible. You can’t run away from yourself. Now, it does not make sense to run away, and you can’t run away anyhow, not only because you can’t run away from yourself but because there is nowhere to go anymore. Now it makes sense to consider power, who has it, and what they do with it. Now it makes sense to work and to serve. “Stand in the place where you are”. In this context, it is not clear what a good Taoist should do, and I get no clear message from modern Taoists. Because Taoists know the difference between good government versus bad, it seems, in a democracy, they should be willing to speak up and help. I choose to found the state on good principles and to work for the best.

“Hipsters” who live in the city rather than the country, get a job that doesn’t “mess with their heads”, do what they can, enjoy life, enjoy art, and romanticize nature, seem a bit like Taoists. They “run away” by being a small part of a big city and by cultivating relations with other like-minded people. In the 1950s and 1960s, some of them thought of themselves as Taoists or like Taoists, especially White people who listened to the blues and progressive rock-and-roll. This type seems to live on in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, and might be coming back in other large metropolitan areas. The TV comedy “Two Broke Girls” depends on hipsters. I don’t mind these people too much but I don’t think they are the modern equivalent of a Taoist. I am not sure how a person could be a traditional Taoist in a modern city or even the modern countryside. I leave them to sort it out for themselves.

From a bigger longer perspective, we might someday go back onto a stage on which Taoism makes sense. In the long run, current technological change, progress, and democracy might not make much difference. In 10,000 years, maybe what we think of as “the modern world” will appear as a mere blip. In that case, Taoist running away and Taoist refusal to serve in government might make sense. But I do not have the luxury of that perspective, and I don’t think modern Taoists do either. In 10,000 years, if people are still people, the current world was just a blip, and personal involvement makes no sense, then Taoism can rise again to counsel detachment, if that is still possible then – unlikely. Until then, modern people, even modern people with Taoist feelings, need something besides running away.

Another Annoying Allusion to Modern Epics.

At Rivendell, after the danger of the Ring was clear but before the Fellowship, Frodo asked Gandalf why they couldn’t just give the Ring to Tom Bombadil to guard because Bombadil seemed to have power over the Ring. Gandalf explained that Bombadil didn’t really have power over the Ring; Bombadil did not care about power; so the Ring had no power over him. Not caring about power, Bombadil would not see why anyone would want the Ring, and so would not guard it anymore than he guarded anything else. Most likely, Bombadil would simply forget the Ring somewhere because he would have no reason to keep track of it. Besides, Bombadil could keep some evil at bay for a while but not all evil forever. Evil would find where the Ring was, and take the Ring even against Bombadil. The world cannot run by Taoist charm. Like it or not, real normal people have to deal with temptation, power, and force. They have to meet force with force without succumbing to the temptation of power. They have to face all evil outside and inside.

They have to create and sustain a social order that is as just as they can manage. They cannot rely on wishful magic no matter how charming or how effective in the short range.

Tao and Not Tao.

Even in Taoism, we can bump into traditional “heavy” questions. Heaven and the Tao created everything, including people. How did things get screwed up? Where did bad ideas come from? How did people go wrong? In Western terms, where did evil come from? Is not having dogmas and having dogmas both of the Tao? Do both equally follow the Tao? If both not having bad dogmas and having bad dogmas are of the Tao, then what is there to get back to, and why should we try getting back to it?

Taoism does not answer these questions. It does not seem to recognize them. To dwell on these issues is to dwell on bad dogma. These are “questions not conducive to awakening” that the Buddha refused to answer. Simply accept life, and then respond by getting back to the Tao. “Get back to where you once belonged”. “Stand in the place where you live”.

These same questions appeared in Mahayana. A Mahayana solution might focus on the non-difference between awakened versus asleep. If there is no difference, then why bother to “get back” to something that is no different than where you are now? The similarity in these issues is one reason why Taoism and Mahayana could merge to form Zen.

PART 4: More Assessment

Christian Charity and Good Institutions.

Taoists would not necessarily object to “Christian charity” as long as a person did it because a person did it, because it was in the nature of that person to do it, that person did not do it primarily because it was an external preached virtue, and the charity did not enable bad behavior. This Taoist stance runs into some problems. Still, Taoists are on the right track with getting people to act well. I don’t like the hypocrisy that often hides in Christianity, and I think it would be better for people with impure motives just to be selfish rather than to use charity as the means for self-gratification. Yet it is impossible to reach purity of motive, and impossible to separate preached virtue from the virtue we come to see for ourselves. Sometimes we have to settle for a mixture of motives, and a dollop of dogma and hypocrisy. Let people do goodness as they will and don’t worry about it.

As a result of their attitude about goodness and good acts, Taoism can’t develop ideas from the teachings of Jesus and the West such as “do unto others”, “applies equally”, work hard for a better world, “pay it forward”, the rule of Law, and the Kingdom of God. A Taoist might act in accord with those ways because he-she personally acts in accord with those ways, or because he-she tacitly holds those principles; but that personal bent is not the basis for good general social relations. Taoism can’t develop the basis for Western institutions such as charities, schools, hospitals, democracy, and rule of law. Taoists mostly are easy enough to get along with but that congeniality is not the basis for good citizenship. Taoism can’t serve as the rationale for adopting and keeping up such large institutions if they develop elsewhere, such as from Christianity. Because I love both Taoism and good institutions, this conclusion makes me sad, but it is unavoidable. Western Taoists overlook this implication. Individually, Western Taoists seem to be

about as good citizens as everybody else, perhaps contradicting what they should know of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. I don't know if Taoism can be interpreted to support good ideas and institutions if those are already in place, as, for example, if Taoists somehow took over the United States.

More on Taoism and Evolved Human Nature.

Unlike Buddhists and Zen followers, Taoists do not have to avoid normal life. As long as life is not too far corrupted from the Tao, Taoists can be normal people. Taoists marry, have children, and sometimes live in villages. Taoists do not need to repress human feelings to achieve freedom. Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with natural human nature, which means evolved human nature. In practice, it is not clear that the Taoist life is compatible with all of evolved human nature. Taoist freedom is not compatible with the bad part of human nature.

Not many people can be Taoists. Not many people can be free as Taoists need. So Taoism has to be a religion of the spiritual elite. In Buddhism and Hinduism, you can find a rationale for the fact that only a majority of the people can awaken at any one time, but not in Taoism.

I am not sure if a religion of the spiritual elite is compatible with the ideas that the Tao made the world and that nature, with all its flaws, is one with the Tao.

Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with the fact that humans see the world not as it simply is but see the world through natural evolved biases such as thinking we are more beautiful and more important than we really are. Ideally, Taoists can accept "flaws" such as physical deformity. But I am not sure they would be happy that they can't see the natural world exactly as it is. Taoists think they are more in touch with nature than anybody else. Taoists think they are so in touch with the Tao that they are at one with the Tao, that is, with nature. Being at one with the Tao hardly goes along with the fact that we don't see nature accurately and we fool ourselves. Taoists might accept that they can see clearly enough to follow the Tao even if Taoists do not mirror nature or the Tao exactly.

Evolution produces recurrent types including sweethearts, bullies, "Boy Scouts", con artists, compulsive liars, compulsive truth tellers, habitual thieves, and artists. Apparently evolution produced a recurrent Taoist type among other human types. A Taoist personality likely is natural for some people but not all people. Not all people can be Taoists. To me, Taoists resemble hunter-gatherers (foragers) that are still living now, and might resemble our evolutionary ancestors. Yet the Taoist type has been in the minority, at least for the last few thousand years, and probably always. I am not sure what it implies for human nature and natural nature that some people have the temperament to be Taoists but most people do not. These facts do not mean the Taoist type is unnatural, necessarily better, or necessarily worse. It does mean we should not see all Taoists as purely natural, as the embodiment of the purely natural, or as the ideal of natural nature and human nature. These facts imply that other human types might be as natural and "real" as the Taoist type. Other human types might also successfully follow the Tao, even without knowing it and without following any Taoist stereotype (dogma).

Non-Discrimination Again.

Taoists might have been idealistic dreamers but they were not idiots. They could tell a duck from a robin and an apple from a poison berry. They whined when all they had to eat was rice. They ate well when they could. They could tell sober from drunk, and got drunk because they liked it. Non-discrimination cannot mean one big ball of pudding with all the tastes mixed up.

We use distinctions and categories to live. We avoid tigers and eat rabbits. Life could not happen, and the Tao could not flow, without distinctions. The co-existence, and mutual dependence, of being and emptiness means the co-existence and mutual dependence of distinctions.

When we are in a dilemma in which both horns (no discrimination versus dogma) are not acceptable, most people naturally seek a reasonable fuzzy middle. Most people do pretty well there. They are happy to let other people do well there too even if other people are not in the same exact point of the broad middle, that is, if other people take slightly different attitudes toward non-discrimination and dogma. Some people spank their children and some people use only “time outs”; some people smoke marijuana and some don’t. In practice, that is what normal Taoists do. In ideology, that option is not open. Taoists are caught in the dogma of no dogma. This might be one reason why Taoists give up on the dogma of no dogma.

It is useful to guess what might have happened in our evolutionary past. In the past, evolution decided where the range fell between rigid rules versus no rules. Evolution allowed variation between people; in fact, evolution likely produced recurrent variation and so encouraged variation. Evolution gave us tools for drawing lines between rules versus no-rules in particular cases, and for moving the lines when the situation changed. Both poles were likely unsuccessful except in limited circumstances, and so not very common. This view goes along with reasonable Taoism. Taoists have to decide if it is compatible with dogmatic Taoism that denies all distinctions.

If we have to live with some distinctions, then it is more honest and better to admit it. I know why Taoists condemn dogma but I cannot live without distinctions. If we have to have distinctions, then it is better to be honest about it and to seek the best among the distinctions. If Taoists prefer one morality to another, and one society to another, then it is best to say so and say why. If Taoists prefer less dogma to more dogma, it is better to say so, say why, and explain which dogma is better and which worse.

“All you gotta do is act naturally”.

The idea that people only need to act naturally to act in accord with the Tao is much like the idea that we can act in accord with the Tao without also considering goodness and principles, and is wrong for the same reasons. It seems we don’t need to dwell on the argument over acting naturally. Still, these days, people are more likely to argue the issue in terms of acting naturally than acting in accord with principles of goodness – romantic ideas of nature and of acting naturally are in vogue – so I want to go through the issue again briefly.

It makes sense to say there is a natural way for a bear to behave, true to its nature, true to its “true self”, and to see that some ways in which people make bears act are not natural. Many ways in which people lead bears to act not naturally are immoral on the part of people. A bear in a “dog and bear” fight is not acting naturally, and the people who stage all animal fights commit serious immorality. A bear dancing for

peanuts is not natural, and the people who make it do so act immorally. A bear in a zoo is not natural but living in a zoo might be better than going extinct, and so people who keep a bear in a zoo might be acting morally; many zoos are well run and many zoos are the last hope of endangered species on Earth.

Some of the same can be said for people but the question is not so easy. People have a natural nature but our natural nature is much harder to pin down than that of a bear. Part of our natural nature is that it alters to suit situations and to express our imaginations. Imitating other people usually is natural. Some things we do are natural without being good or bad such as taking a walk in the woods. Some things are unnatural without necessarily being good or bad such as working on computers. Some things are bad without being unnatural, some things are both unnatural and bad, some things are natural and good, and some things are unnatural and good. It is natural for people to eat but not natural to eat fried salted meat at every meal. It is natural for people to go barefoot. It is also natural for people to wear some shoes, especially in cold climates, but not natural to wear six-inch high heels. It is natural for people to wear clothes, even sexy clothes, but not natural to wear heavy gold chains and skin-tight fake-leather skirts. You can decide which of these acts is also bad. It is natural for people to connive but hurtful gossip is bad. Some acts that do not often occur in nature can be useful and moral such as: teaching a child to read, and curing pneumonia.

Some human activities that Taoists look down on are both not natural and bad. Courtly intrigue usually is both unnatural and bad – I wrote this section during the shutdown of the U.S. government in fall of 2013. Spawning hundreds of appealing but misleading dogmas from politics and religion is not natural and it is usually bad. Wearing elaborate clothing is not natural. Being carried in sedan chairs is not natural. Taxes are not natural, and, in the United States as I wrote, the tax system was quite bad, although some kind of giving to the group in general and to our superiors might be natural.

Taoists adepts are not natural in a stereotyped Western sense, and not even in their own idealized sense. It is not natural to live alone in a hut by a swamp, even if all particular activities that you do there are fully natural such as fishing and weaving baskets. People were bred to be in company, as vexing as that often is. Rice wine and rice whisky are not natural. Writing poetry that depends on decades of training and on one thousand years of history for allusions is not natural. Writing itself is not natural. Writing gives us an “external memory” that directly facilitates the creation and promulgation of dogmas. Despite Chinese and Western romanticizing farmers, growing rice is not natural but is the end product of thousands of years of distorting nature and human nature. In fact, Taoists preferred millet and they feared rice cultivation for its baleful effects on human nature and the Tao, but not even millet growing is entirely natural. You have to decide if these acts are good despite being unnatural, or at least are better than the common alternatives.

It is worth thinking about what is natural for humans, what is not natural, what is good, and what is bad; but relying on Taoist mental freedom and relying on any ideology, including Taoist ideology, to settle the question, is bad. I like mint chocolate chip ice cream, and doctors can be useful. It is silly when people criticize either as not natural. I dislike people who make themselves sick from bad food and no exercise, and it is perfectly correct to criticize them as not natural and bad because, by nature, people should get the exercise equivalent of about five miles of walking per day. Kitchen gardens are not unnatural but they are almost natural and they are usually good. The modern method of raising animals densely packed in cages or ponds is not natural. If it is immoral, it is also bad. It leads to meat that does not taste as good. If it gives meat that is not good for us, it is bad. If it does not lead to distress for animals, leads to more

meat for more people, leads to meat that is not unhealthy and does not taste bad, and does not distort the ecology to provide animal feed, then it is good. I dislike most political and religious dogma, even beautiful examples such as Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism; and it is correct to criticize such dogma as not natural and bad although politics and religion are natural human activities. I really dislike people who walk around “plugged in” all the time but cell phones can be handy. Rice wine and rice whisky are a toss-up. Millet tastes much better than rice, and, I think, is better for you, but you can’t feed many people with millet. With nearly seven billion people, the world cannot return to what is natural even if we could agree on it. We likely can’t even return to what is entirely good even if we could agree. Even if we can’t settle all these cases, we can see that distinct ideas of good and natural are relevant, we can see the principles, and we can argue usefully.

In thinking about nature and human life, Taoists were on a better track than most people in Chinese, or any civilized, society of their time. I agree with striving to “act more naturally”. We can learn much from Taoist criticism of non-natural life and non-natural human life, and their criticism of bad non-natural human social life. But we can’t take them as simple correct good moral natural in-accord-with-the-Tao never-dogmatic role models. The Taoists did not have a lock on acting naturally or even on acting in accord with the Tao. We have to consider what is good in their message and then work out our own version for ourselves in our time.

Ideas, Principles, Clear Thinking, and Taoism.

Having ideas is usually good. Being able to think well and to evaluate ideas is even better, and is almost always good. Lapsing into dogma, living by dogma, and forcing other people into your dogma world, is almost always bad. People evolved not only to have ideas but to live in their dogma worlds and to force other people to live there too. We did not evolve to be able to think through ideas and to evaluate them well. I don’t know why. I was born in 1949. Except for some brief graceful periods in which moderation and good thinking prevailed, the United States has been driven by bad dogma my entire life. I take that as evidence enough.

Taoism can help us undo dogma and return to thinking well and assessing ideas. Taoism alone can’t do this, but it is a powerful tool, and it can work with other tools. Taoism is clear, simple, not usually harmful, values mental freedom, fights bad ideas, values nature, wants to get along with nature, wants people to get along, and is not crazier than most ideological and religious alternatives. What is wrong with that? As long as we see that Taoism is not the one-and-only-whole answer, it deserves serious study.

Chuang Tzu and Achilles.

Chuang Tzu urged acting simply out of your nature, in accord with the Tao, without regard to dogma. Achilles acted simply out of his nature, in accord with a common decency that seems to pervade the world, when he let Priam bury the body of Priam’s dead son Hector. Is Achilles a Taoist? I think not. Anybody can see the similarities but a big difference remains. Ironically, Chuang Tzu was driven by the dogma of no dogma, and by the dogma of acting in accord with the Tao, so Chuang Tzu did not act simply out of his nature in accord with the Tao. As far as I can tell, no Taoist succeeds at simply acting out of his-her nature, in accord with the Tao, as long as he-she tries to do that – not even warriors who think they have achieved perfect spontaneity, perfect “baby mind”. Think about the needs for dogma and

for no dogma. We need ideas, some ideas. We do not need rigid dogma and ideological blinders. We need modest guidance through which we can work. We do not always succeed but we can try. Chuang Tzu offered those but he had to hide the offer. You cannot succeed if you have to hide it. I openly offer old standards: the ideals of Jesus mixed with rationality, practicality, and some Western values. Those ideas are not far from the simple insight on which Achilles acted. They can be guidelines and need not be prisons.

You are Not a Taoist Adept Just Because.

Taoism went through a fad in the 1960s and 1970s, and apparently the fad lives on in places like Seattle and Oregon. I like that. Taoism is charming. However, current fascination with “chi” and “yin and yang” results in simplistic bad mistakes about Taoism; and current mistaken fascination supports misleading magical Taoism in a modern guise. The current practice of Tai Chi in America is seriously distorted by misunderstanding of “chi” and of “yin and yang”. New Age looks for validation to overly simplistic semi-magical Taoism. Not everybody is a Taoist adept just because he-she has the following traits. There is nothing wrong with these traits, and I admire many, but valuing them is not the same as being a Taoist adept. You have to decide for yourself what it takes to really find the Tao and to live in accord with the Tao. You have to decide if the Tao is “all natural”, and if “all natural” is the Tao.

- Have read a few books about Taoism
- Have read a few books about China
- Have read a few books about Zen
- Have read a lot of books on any topic
- Love nature
- Work to conserve nature
- Dislike authority, especially formal authority
- Want to be your own boss
- Willing to walk away from a job to show your independence
- Disdain formal institutions
- Disdain markers of success such as awards, ceremonies, and prizes
- Lack ambition
- Lack ambition through formal institutions
- Have a pet or have multiple pets
- Study a Taoist martial art such as Tai Chi Chuan, Pa Kua, or Hsing I
- Study any martial art
- Study Taoist meditation or any meditation
- Eat whole foods, natural foods, organic foods, vegetarian, or vegan
- Eat a “cave man” diet
- Live on the fringes of society
- Live in the woods
- Worship nature
- Ride a bicycle and-or walk
- Drive a motorcycle
- Drive an “alternative” vehicle such as an electric car
- Listen to the blues

- Listen to alternative rock
- Listen to “New Age” music such as “The Tao of the Glockenspiel”
- Are a “cool” person in an otherwise un-cool institution

PART 5: Some Other Taoist Ideas

Just because a religion is not completely correct does not mean it does not have much to offer. Just because an idea is not completely correct does not mean it is not useful. An imperfect idea can be very useful when applied properly – ask any good scientist, mathematician, or engineer. We just have to avoid making ideas into metaphysics. The ideas below are useful and are integral to Taoism. Unfortunately, they are most common in magical Taoism, as in fads that have to do with “channeling” chi. I mentioned yielding and conforming above so I do not repeat them here. I mentioned “no dogma no distinctions” too but I have to add some comments here.

Yin and Yang.

The idea of yin and yang is like the common idea that forces turn into their opposites. Too much love is like hate; too much genius is like madness; etc. Briefly, yin and yang represent yielding and assertion, female and male, shadow and light, valley and mountain, center and periphery, falling and rising, rain and mist, and the waning and waxing of the moon. In the I Ching, broken lines represent yin while solid lines represent yang. I don’t describe here how these ideas all fit together. For example, when a person is most assertive (yang), his-her forcefulness usually means he-she has issues behind the scenes, and is vulnerable (yin). Only strong people can afford to be gentle and conciliatory. In battle, a careless charge usually results in disaster, and too much defense leads to never-ending problems and eventual defeat. In martial arts, an aggressive move such as a punch always leaves you “open” in some way, and can lead to over-commitment. To defeat an opponent, it often helps to gently stick to him-her, give way to his-her movements, and wait for his-her assertiveness to leave an opening.

Yin and yang do not simply represent good and bad, or bad and good. Too much, or too little, of either, can be harmful but that is not necessarily the same as moral badness. Too much, or too little, of either, can lead to moral bad but need not. Moral bad does not come only from an excess or deficit. I think the Chinese think that moral bad is not likely to arise if people are practically satisfied. A balance of yin and yang usually leads to practical satisfaction, and so can head off moral problems. A balance is practically good, and is morally good as just described, but is not necessarily inherently morally good.

Yin and yang gain the benefits, and suffer from the faults, of any binary oppositional way to look at the world even when the idea of yin and yang allows that one turns into the other, and so escape somewhat from the faults of a strict “black and white” view. Much as a Taoist would dislike the idea, yin and yang are like light and dark, and good and evil, from Manichaeism. Not everything can be expressed in terms of yin and yang, or a mixture. What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes an oak leaf from an elm leaf, or an oak from a pine? What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes men from women, or male from female? The ideas of yin and yang can be useful in martial arts, but, if any martial artist works only with those and nothing else, he-she will face defeat soon. Things do not always turn into their opposites. After the explosion of a fusion (hydrogen nuclear) bomb, presumably massively yang, what remains is ruin and sadness; hopefully those are not massively yin. Not all yin passivity,

yielding, and help turn into passive aggression and so turn into yang. Love and hate, and good and evil, are not simple opposites that turn into each other. What all has to be mixed with yin and yang, and how to mix, is a subject beyond the topic of this section.

The I Ching.

In Chinese thought, creation from nothing was not very interesting because, if it happened, it happened a long time ago and is not relevant now. More important are the changes (transformations) that happen to stuff after it is created, as part of the real lived world now.

The I Ching (“ee jing”, “ee ching”, “ee qing”, or “yee etc.”) is the “Book of Changes”. Imagine that a line symbol can be divided into two alternatives such as whole or broken, dashed or dotted, or red or green. Imagine a sequence that can be formed from three lines: “trigrams”. Order makes a difference. The lines arranged in a particular order in a trigram are not the same as the lines arranged in a different order: trigram red-blue-red is not the same as trigram red-red-blue. Imagine two trigrams in a set, to make a total of six lines: “hexagrams”. The trigrams are arranged in a particular order in a hexagram, and the order matters (a hexagram composed of trigrams AB is not the same as one composed of trigrams BA). Sixty-four hexagrams can be made this way. The I Ching uses whole lines (dashes) or broken lines (dots) to make the figures instead of colors but the result is the same. It is like Morse code or any binary coding of signs. In the I Ching, the figures are made by horizontally stacking the lines on each other in a particular order. Usually the hexagrams are vertical but a horizontal example might be “:I I:I”.

The I Ching uses both relations within figures and relations between figures to explain change, situations, events, and almost anything. A change in the real world can be seen in the pattern in each figure and in the relation between figures. The figures represent principles of stasis and change that can apply to many situations rather than explanations for specific circumstances such as birth, war, or rice growing. The same figure might represent the dynamics of a war or of a birthday party. The relation between two figures might represent the same kind of change that occurs when rain falls hard and in a housing bust. The figures are somewhat like Tarot cards in this respect. The changes are linked to changes in yin and yang. Some conditions represent balanced yin and yang, some represent unbalanced yin and yang, and some show yin and yang in transition.

The I Ching represents one of the oldest of Chinese ideas, and the text of the I Ching is one of the oldest of Chinese texts. The basis for it is at least 3500 years old (some passages of the Tanakh might be 3000 years old; some Egyptian and Sumerian documents are over 4500 years old; and some writing from India is at least 3200 years old). All schools of thought in China claim a relation to the I Ching. Martial arts claim it as their original textbook.

Both being useful and being useless can lead to success and failure. A useless tree is not cut down to use as timber but it is cut down to make room for useful trees such as apples. Individual apple trees are only nurtured as long as they bear as much fruit as another individual tree that might be planted in their stead. What matters is not intrinsic useful or useless but useful and useless in context. Contexts differ. That differing is a kind of change. Taoism wants us to look at context so it also wants us to look at change. The I Ching prepared Chinese thinkers for Taoists ideas of relativism and context. Taoist ideas of relativism and context gave a way to interpret the I Ching's old traditional focus on change. A lot of rain

is just a lot of rain. A lot of rain after a drought is something else. This relation between the I Ching and Taoism helps both. This idea is my way of looking at one relation between Taoism and the I Ching. I did not originate this idea. I don't know how well established this idea is in scholarship on China.

Chi or “Ch’i”.

“Chi” (sometimes written “ch’i”, now officially written “qi”) is like the Force from the “Star Wars” movies. Chinese “chi” is the same as Japanese “ki”. The version of chi in “Star Wars”, the Force, was modeled on Japanese ideas of Chinese ideas. The original idea for chi likely was “breath”, but not like the common breath of ordinary hurried confused life. Chi is similar to the Indian-Hindu “prana”; Jewish “spirit”; Roman and Western “pneuma”, thus “spirit”; and Thai “khwan”. Sometimes in Chinese thought, the Earth was a giant bellows between Heaven and something else; and, I think, sometimes heaven was a giant bellows; and Chi was the breath that went through the bellows to infuse all life. Yang was (led to) thickened chi while yin was (led to) rarefied chi. Rarefied chi is still effective.

Chi flows and transforms. In Western terms, it is like “energy”. Chi is energy that can be used for many purposes. Chi moves through the human body, through natural bodies such as lakes and mountains, through places such as canyons, and events such as storms. Chi can be stored, briefly, in the body. It might tend to collect naturally in some bodies, places in the human body, places, or events. Generally, the more chi, the better, which, usually means healthier, longer-lived, more efficacious, more successful, usually sexier, and less vulnerable to attack and decline. You can have too much chi, either in particular organs or generally. A state (nation) can have chi through its leaders. It is not clear if a state can have chi on its own apart from its leaders at any given time. Now, most people know of chi through martial arts. Martial artists are said to “project” their chi in their blows and blocks. In the movie “Karate Kid” (“Kung Fu Kid”) with Jackie Chan (Chun Lom), the boy apprentice learns to project chi so as to be able to push a grown man across a room and over backwards.

Unlike the Force in the Star Wars movies, there is no inherent light side and dark side to chi. Usually chi is beneficial. Chi can be used for bad ends but that practice is not common and it is not generally feared. Accumulations and deficits of chi can result in bad outcomes but this is not the same as the good and bad sides of chi. In this respect, chi is like yin and yang.

Chi can be “out of balance” like yin and yang can be out of balance. There can be too much chi or too little chi in a particular place in the body, such as the heart, kidneys, or brain. In that case, a person feels ill and might act badly. The person would have to consult a specialist to make sure the right amount of chi is in the right place, restore chi balance, and restore proper flow of chi. For a long time in China, the idea of chi has been the basis for much of magical Taoism, including idea systems that are widespread, such as “Chi Gong” (Qi Gong) and perhaps modern Fulang Gong.

Explain Everything.

Changes, yin and yang, chi, yielding, and conforming, are the basis for a set of ideas that can explain nearly anything. It is one of the most comprehensive, beautiful, and effective of such “explain everything” idea systems, probably second only to the Indian system of karma, reincarnation, dharma, etc. I have already said I am uneasy around such systems, and try to avoid them when I can. Although I appreciate

its beauty, I feel the same way with the Chinese system of ideas. I have found the ideas of yin and yang useful in the martial arts, and found the idea of chi is a bit useful in them even if likely not true. We can use ideas that we know are not fully true, and that are even dangerous, as long as we keep in mind the risks that we take, and we “back off” and evaluate often.

Taoist Ideas as Taoist Aids.

Buddhism has aids that are supposed to help you awaken. If you master “Buddha Mind”, “conditioned origination”, or “non self”, then you are supposed to be fully awakened. You can only fully awaken if you master “Buddha Mind” etc. I believe these aids mislead.

The Taoist ideas presented here can be like the misleading Buddhist aids but shouldn't be. For example, some people I have met think, if they master yin and yang, they have found the Way, and they can only find the Way if they master yin and yang; if they haven't mastered yin and yang, they haven't found the Way. This kind of thinking is a mistake similar to what some Buddhists do.

Not too many traditional Taoists abuse Taoist ideas this way except with the idea of non-discrimination. In the Chuang Tzu and the Lieh Tzu are several stories that say “If you want to master the Way, you have to float in a soup of non-discrimination; and, if you don't float in a soup of non-discrimination, you cannot find the Way”. I can't quote or paraphrase the stories here. If you think you have mastered “no dogma” because you think you are floating in soup, and you think you have found the Tao because you think you have mastered “no dogma”, then you have abused the Taoist ideas and made the same mistake as some Buddhists. Modern people that I have met, and who know a little Taoism, have only vague notions of “no dogma” that usually amount to “If you believe in something that I don't like, then you are practicing bad discrimination, and I can tell you to stop. When you stop, you have to believe what I say. Your morality is discriminatory dogma while my morality is the natural Tao, so I am right and you are wrong.” They don't seem adept on the subject of “no dogma non-discrimination”. Regardless of what modern people do, in the traditional Taoist literature, the idea of non-discrimination seems to be a misused aid. If so, that is an error, and people who are interested in Taoism should avoid it. Find your own happy medium solution to this issue.

Yin and yang, changes, chi, yielding, conforming, and non-discrimination are tools that help you get along. Usually they are more helpful than hurtful but are hurtful if misused. They need not be entirely true to be useful. They need not apply fully in all cases and might not apply at all in some. Sometimes other ideas are more useful and truer. I could not explain quantum mechanics or Relativity by using yin and yang while ignoring the ideas of Einstein. In martial arts, not every fighting situation can be best analyzed using yin and yang, although many can be seen that way. If you find these ideas useful, then use them. If you find other ideas more useful, use those. Yield, conform, adapt, play with categories, and thrive. I don't know if this tactic brings you to the Way, and that possibility is not very important to me.

27 Ch'an and Zen

Americans think of Zen primarily as a Japanese version of Buddhism. It is that, yet Zen came from a type of Chinese Mahayana. The word "Zen" is the Japanese version of a Chinese word now spelled in English "Ch'an" or "Chan". "Ch'an" comes from Sanskrit "dhyana", or "meditation", so it refers to schools in which meditating and doing are important. The Chinese spoke "Ch'an" like "jan" or "zan" so Japanese "Zen" is not far off. Ch'an grew in China after about 500 CE (AD). It moved to Japan about 1000 CE. It dwindled in China after about 1300, so most of what we read about now is Japanese Zen.

Zen was a fad in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, and has been again periodically after. Much crap has been written featuring Zen including the famous novel "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac. Be cautious. At first, avoid modern material, even by "modern masters" such as D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) and by heartfelt students such as Phillip Kapleau. Go to original Ch'an and Zen adepts. A lot of good material has been translated well into English, and most is short.

Ch'an-Zen is a blend of Taoism and Buddhism. Which prevails is not clear. I think Taoism usually wins despite the fact that Zen uses Mahayana terms. Rather than a Taoist living with his-her family in a hut by a bog, imagine he-she lives in a monastery celibate. Rather than catching fish, he-she tends a garden, goes "begging" in villages where he-she will be fed decently, and accepts support from patrons. Rather than fall into a system of many lives, he-she uses this life to settle issues and to win mental freedom. The Taoism in Ch'an-Zen took some of the Mahayana out of Buddhism. The Buddhism in Ch'an-Zen kept most Ch'an-Zen adepts from excesses of Taoist nature worship, drink, drunken poetry, and magic. How Japanese Zen differs from Chinese Ch'an is a topic for scholars and is not an issue here. What I say applies to both Ch'an and Zen. I don't care about schools within Ch'an or Zen.

In a nutshell, you can think of Zen as Taoism, cluttered at first by Mahayana categories, which Zen then throws off. Zen also says to act spontaneously without dogma, pretense, guile, or too much thought. Zen does not say such action will solve political problems but it does say you will see them in a new light and not worry as much. As with Taoism, most people cannot act as Zen advises, and we certainly could not base a society on the hope that people do act as Zen advises. Zen knows this, and does not advise basing society on Zen. Who can get it, does get it. If this nutshell summary satisfies you, then you can skip the rest of the chapter. But Zen is fun; its blend of Taoism, simple Buddhism, and Mahayana is fun. It is fun to go along as Zen throws off clutter. So I hope you do read on.

The idea of "no dogma, free action" was deep in Taoism before Buddhism came to China. Arguments by Taoists against Mo-ists, Legalists, and Confucians improved the idea. During its formation, Ch'an did not take part in political fights as much as Taoism had, Ch'an did not need "no dogma" in the political sense, and Ch'an did not develop "no dogma" that way. Taoists live ordinary life without dogma, enjoy ordinary life, and value it. Mahayana comes with the idea that ordinary life is the same as awakened life. So Ch'an took "no dogma" and the value of life from Taoism, and merged those with Mahayana ideas of "cannot be said in words" and "ordinary life is the same as awakened life". Ch'an and Zen are largely about how to live clearly, openly, plainly, naturally, and well without dogma. Ch'an-Zen students were

nearly all Buddhist monks, although lay people did practice Zen. Ch'an-Zen masters take whatever personality suits their particular mental freedom.

Almost every assessment that applies to Taoism also applies to Zen. Zen does not have fully accurate ideas of nature and human nature although Zen's ideas are beautiful. Zen scorns rote morality yet has strong tacit morality. Zen scorns discrimination yet Zen masters obviously discriminate between this and that skillfully. Zen adeptly plays the dogma of no dogma. Zen masters rebuke elaborate theology yet yearn to fully feel they are at one with the Great Mind that is both seamlessly whole and makes particular individuals. Zen cannot serve as the basis for a modern democracy or any state. Zen ideas can be modified to go along with ideas for a state that come from other sources, such as Confucianism and Western political philosophy. Zen can go well with the teachings of Jesus except Zen is leery of being proactive and of involvement in politics. Zen would tacitly approve of "pay it forward" and the Golden Rule although Zen would condemn them if stated as explicit dogma. Few people can succeed in Zen but it is still worth learning from Zen.

From now on, I use "Zen" for Zen and Ch'an both unless I need to separate them. I use the English terms "master" and "adept" as synonyms; neither English term refers to a Buddhist term such as "arahant", "ryshi", or bodhisattva. I could illustrate all the points here with quotes from original Zen texts but I cannot do that because of copyright. Thus my writing is too theoretical, for which I apologize.

Quick Anticipation.

Recall the Mahayana ideas that ordinary life is valuable and there is little difference between ordinary life and awakened life. Ordinary life and awakened life come from Emptiness and-or Mind. Recall the Taoist ideas of spontaneous action from the heart, this kind of action comes from the Tao, and it leads us back to the Tao.

If ordinary life is valuable and awakened, then all its episodes are valuable and indicate awakening. What size is an episode? It can range from a whole epic, to one story in the Lotus Sutra, to one particular act-and-or-thought. For Zen, it is useful to focus on a particular act-and-or-thought. Each particular act etc. is valuable, can show awakening, and can lead to awakening – like the properly chosen notes in a well-written piece of classical music or well-played piece of jazz. This Mahayana stance leads to the same attitude as a Taoist adept who is spontaneous, accepts each act, feels each act comes from the Tao, and feels each act leads back to the Tao. Distilling valuable life into particular acts, simple episodes, merges Taoism and Mahayana into Ch'an-Zen. Ch'an-Zen does not break life into bits. It points out that valuable life permeates all acts, and so we can begin there and rest there.

The role of episodes comes out in Taoist story about a butcher who never sharpens his knives because he never needs to. He makes each cut at the joints, in between resistance, in emptiness. Each cut freely follows what nature (the animal body) gives him. He needs no more; that is enough. Because each single cut follows nature, the whole process of cutting a big animal is one continuous move. Because each single cut follows nature through hollows, the knife never encounters any resistance, so never gets dull, and so never needs sharpening. The butcher has been using the same knives for decades without ever thinking of a whetstone. In putting together many small movements through the void, the butcher also lives a craft and a life.

The emphasis on spontaneity even in small acts, especially in them, the belief that “local spontaneity” is effective, and the belief that local spontaneity is enough, influenced the marital culture and martial arts of China, Japan, and Korea. I think a similar feeling from Theravada also influenced the martial culture of Thailand but I do not dwell on that point here. Swordsmen, and other martial artists such as Tai Chi or karate adepts, are like the butcher in that they use the emptiness that is given them when it is given them, and that is enough. They are not like other common butchers who hack at their target. Living life in this way leads to one whole way of life. Unfortunately, to make this case for Ch’an-Zen and martial culture requires a long digression that I cannot take here. Many authors have mentioned the connections; I cite a few in the Bibliography.

One downside of seeing life this way is the mistake that everything is all right in itself, everything is part of a plan (Mind), and nothing is misplaced, including badness and evil. Everything already is as it should be; nothing needs adjustment; it is up to us to accept it; and up to us to play our part in the grand scheme. Hinduism comes to a similar stance. For more on this error in Zen, see below in this chapter.

Another issue is relations between each episode, the flow of episodes, and the whole. In the story of the butcher, this issue does not come out but it is in the background. Martial artists strive to excel at many techniques, find the link between techniques, find flow between acts, merge all this in one craft and one life, and, if possible, act spontaneously not bound by any particular style. Bruce Lee was obsessed with “no style”. Martial artists don’t often succeed. This issue is something like the argument over faith versus works in Christianity. By using particular techniques, Zen adepts shock students into getting beyond all particular techniques so do not rely on any particular technique or style but so they can use any technique from any style correctly. I can’t go into this issue here other than a brief mention below of the practices of Zen teachers. I introduce the issue because you will meet it in other places.

Zen and Mahayana.

I explained Taoism with as little mysticism as I could. I got away with that approach because Taoism did not come with historical baggage and because Taoism avoided dogma. I explain Zen also with minimal mysticism but Zen presents a problem because Zen does come with the elaborate historical baggage of Mahayana, and Zen has to accept Buddhist sutras (scriptures) including their mysticism and metaphysics. The best way out is to do as many Zen masters do: ignore the Mahayana baggage. What is important about Zen can stand on its own without reference to Mahayana. What is important about Zen on its own is what I focus on.

Some Zen masters do simply ignore the Mahayana heritage. Some Zen masters demand that students avoid the sutras, stop thinking about Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and stop thinking about mystic ideas because all these ideas are confusing and trap us. Some masters advise to kill the Buddha if you meet him because “Buddha” is a conventional category that blocks understanding of the true message of the Buddha. But some Zen masters do refer to the Mahayana heritage. Some masters refer to aids such as Emptiness and Mind, and some masters refer to specific sutras in which those aids are featured. Some masters advise long hard study of sutras and aids. Some sutras are closely associated with the tradition of direct non-verbal transmission that is key to all Zen, such as the Lankavatara Sutra, Heart Sutra, and Diamond Sutra. Although some masters use Mahayana terms, I still think what is important in Zen does

not depend on those, and we are better off not referring to those here. Sometimes it is useful to refer to a Mahayana idea. I do that without implying that all of Mahayana is correct.

I do not explain why some masters frame their awakening in terms of Buddhist aids other than to say that people in all traditions think of awakening in terms of their traditions. This issue would only matter if Zen and Mahayana gave total full direct access to God ("bigger than me"), yet neither Zen nor Mahayana do that anymore than any approach does, so I do not have to deal with this dispute. Zen is partial truth with its own big value but limited value. I only have to give what is important in useful terms. I do not compare awakening in Christianity, Hinduism, Theravada, Mahayana, and Zen.

Despite disparaging mysticism and Mahayana, Zen does have its own modest mystical vision. I describe it below. I do not explain how Zen's vision is similar to, or differs from, Mahayana mysticism.

Three ideas from Mahayana are important in Zen. First, each individual person counts, and each person comes with the ability to reach awakening by him-herself. Second, the world is as it is and not otherwise. The world after awakening is much as it was before. Awakening is not about awakening from a delusion or awakening to a fantasy. Awakening is about seeing clearly and simply. This life right now is important. Even if this life is embedded in a grand joyous system of many lives, we have to use this life right now. Third, awakening occurs through direct transmission so words are not as important as doing. Just doing is a way of being awake. If you can learn to just do, then you are awake. I believe these ideas are also in Taoism, and it is the Taoist version of these ideas that influenced Zen.

When a person has all this, he-she is mentally free. As with Taoism, for Zen I use "mental freedom" to refer to what is important. The Zen version of mental freedom is the biggest topic of this chapter.

Zen has some long-standing controversies which I don't care about and don't write about, such as: rapid versus gradual awakening, Northern versus Southern, Rinzai versus Soto, emptiness or mind, meditation versus wisdom, words versus no words, private awakening versus the social duties of the bodhisattva, how much we can associate with secular (political) powers, etc. You can find material on these issues in the works in the Bibliography.

Comparison Shopping.

Mahayana features: awakening, the awakened life is identical to the non-awakened life, a joyous system of many lives, a central essential rationale to the system such as Buddha Mind or the Unborn, the identity of the self with central essential rationale of the system, the illusion of suffering, the reality of suffering when we deviate from the system, non-verbal transmission, a lot of writing and other verbiage, verbal games, other games, following the Dharma (system and its rationale) once awakened, non-duality (non-discrimination), especially non-duality of good and evil, pyramid schemes, the bodhisattva, and a good imagination. In theory, the world is as it is and is not otherwise but Mahayana writers love magic, magical powers, tricks, and illusions. Mahayanists follow a bodhisattva so they can live in a paradise with him or her. The world is more like a giant amusement park than an American suburb.

Taoism features: the Tao as the central rationale, trying to follow the Tao and become one with the Tao, people who are at one with the Tao act spontaneously, the Tao flows through everybody and everything

even when they are screwed up, people who do not follow the Tao screw up and cause pain for self and others, non-discrimination, especially non-duality of good and evil, non-verbal understanding, moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Taoism has nothing like the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. There are no other-worldly paradises. Taoism does not appeal to rich or powerful people, or to warriors. The world is as it is. If you are sensitive to the Tao, the world is much more fun than if you are obsessed with wealth and power, but the world is not full of tricks and illusions. Magical Taoism does feature long life, paradises, great magicians, etc. but that is not at issue here.

Zen features: waking up to something bigger than yourself, the identity of true me with the bigger-than-me, awakened people act spontaneously, non-discrimination, non-duality of good and evil, awakened people and non-awakened people are really the same, but non-awakened people can cause suffering through clinging to wrong ideas, suffering is primarily in the mind, non-verbal transmission, verbal games (koans), other games (hitting students, shouting), moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Zen does not stress the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. Zen does appeal to rich and powerful people and to warriors because it can be used to rationalize the world is as it is. After you have awakened, the world is a much more congenial place, but it is less full of magic, power, tricks, and illusions. If there are any paradises, they are not relevant.

A Mahayana joyous system of many lives is not like the Tao, or like living in the Tao, even when the Tao is “unborn and undying”, and even when you can merge with the Tao. I am not sure if the idea of Tao, in Taoism, acts like the “absorbent center”, such as the bodhisattva or the Buddha Mind, of the Mahayana ideological system of many lives that eats the world. I am comfortable with the Tao but not with the long Mahayana parade of candidates for the essential central absorbent spirit of its joyous system.

In theory, as Mahayanists, Zen adepts accept a joyous system of many lives including its metaphysics, absorbent hole in the center (bodhisattva and-or Emptiness and-or Buddha Mind), and its ability to eat the world. In practice, Zen adepts seem hardly concerned with any of that, and seem far more concerned with waking up now in this life. Most Zen adepts obviously accept a “bigger-than-me” and they feel an identity with it. They do not merge into it as with stereotyped mystics and they do not take part in it as a Mahayanist does, as a person in a greater system of many lives. To refer to the “bigger-than-me”, Zen adepts use a “rationale” when they teach including standard Mahayana terms-aids such as Nothingness, the Unborn, Buddha Mind, etc. In Mahayana, this central rationale acts like the core of a system that eats the world but in Zen it does not. Zen masters do not usually see the central rationale as the core of a system of many lives. Instead, for the “bigger-than-me” and the central rationale, Zen adepts have in mind something more like the Tao than what Mahayanists had in mind.

As part of waking up now in this life, Zen and Taoism stress non-dogma and the spontaneous freedom of awakened people and-or of people who have found the Tao; Mahayana does not. Mahayana points out magical powers of awakened people; Zen avoids magic. In Zen, a person does not wake up to the reality of suffering or to the joyous magical system of many lives but to a congenial world as it is. The Zen world is like the world of a Taoist. A Zen master is happy to teach but he-she does not rely on awakening other people for his-her identity, as does a Mahayana bodhisattva. A Zen master is not a savior to the masses, and a Zen master does not derive satisfaction from apparently awakening thousands of people. Even so,

a Zen master is not a solitary self-savior as in some versions of Theravada Buddhism but seeks to merge with the One Whole that is behind everything.

More Mahayana Hangover: Contradictions and System.

Mahayana faces contradictions: This life is not worthwhile but this life is worthwhile; Nirvana differs from ordinary life but the two are the same; a person has to wake up but what he-she wakes up to is that he-she has been saved (awake) all the time but didn't know it; we are particular and general at the same time; and avoid discrimination but do good and avoid evil. Mahayana resolves contradictions by putting them in the context of a joyous system of many lives with a bodhisattva as a spiritual guide. The system allows great joy in the system to make up for this life officially not being worthwhile. They system "eats the world" by explaining everything.

Zen resolves Mahayana contradictions mostly by ignoring them. Some masters use issues as training aids but do not try to resolve them in the standard sense; see Bibliography. Even when masters write a lot about these issues, in the end, mostly they ignore them. Not many Zen adepts worry exactly how this life and the awakened life are the same, about duality, non-duality, or the unity of particular and general. Masters might force students into impasses over these issues so students stop thinking in these terms but they do not expect students to solve these issues intellectually. This is part of the fun. Sometimes masters hit their students to force their students out of thinking in terms of these issues. I cannot take space to show how Zen masters do all this; books on Zen are full of examples.

By overcoming contradictions, Zen masters can focus on this life right now. By focusing on this life right now, Zen undercuts a system of many lives and so undercuts Mahayana. Zen undercuts the Mahayana system that eats the world. To worry if this life is worthwhile is to trap yourself in ideology. To seek the deep suffering of life is to trap yourself in ideology. Whether this life is worthwhile does not matter if your mind is not free. Once your mind is free, then you can decide worthwhile-ness and suffering. Whether we are embedded in a larger system is not important. Whether the joyous system solves mystical and metaphysical issues is not important. What matters is this life right now. If we can wake up to this life right now then we can decide about a system of many lives. This life right now is a chance to wake up and win mental freedom. We wake up to the fact that we already have the tools that we need to cope and to get along if we quit relying on ideology. If we can't cope, then dying is a better option than lapsing into ideology. We can use ideology, but we should not get trapped in it.

Mental Freedom is Not.

Mental (spiritual) freedom is the core of Zen. If you find mental freedom, you will be enlightened. To be enlightened means to find the mental freedom that is already inside you just because you yearn for it and you are a part of the Dharma (Tao, nature, Heaven). Imagine Taoism stripped of all concern for the state, making a living, getting along in a village, poetry, painting, drinking, and even love of nature; then imagine all Taoist energy focused on mental freedom; that is like Zen. I do not describe mental freedom more. In this section, I say what it is not. Below I suggest what it might be like.

Mental freedom is most important. Without it, you really can't have much else that is important or lasting. With it, you don't care about most silly things, and you can enjoy what you do have.

Americans think of mental freedom in external terms such as freedom from political doctrine, artistic frameworks such as hip-hop or country music, or from media brainwashing. If you can see through the right wing power structure, the left wing conspiracy, or institutionalized religion, then you are mentally free. Those external dogmas are of little concern to Zen, and, regardless of Zen, it is not true anyway that getting on top of those dogmas makes you free. Any external dogma like those would have fallen by the wayside a long time ago for a Zen student. The only external ideas that still plague a Zen student come from the religion itself such as yearning to be a bodhisattva or trying to figure out Emptiness and Buddha Mind. More important than getting rid of any particular external dogma, even one as important as Buddha Mind, is learning to get rid of relying on any kind of dogma at all. That is another issue.

Zen freedom is not political freedom. As with Taoists, Zen adepts know that Zen cannot flourish, and might not survive, during harsh political oppression. Zen needs some political freedom. But that does not mean political freedom is the same as Zen freedom anymore than political freedom is the same as artistic success or commercial success. Zen can get by even when people are not free in the Western democratic sense; China has never been free that way and Japan has only been free that way since after World War Two. I don't know if having a few free Zen masters in a state, and openly teaching Zen, could contribute to political freedom in general but I would not be surprised.

Zen should not be confused with psychoanalysis or any kind of therapy. Some therapies do aim to get you to where you can make up your own mind, and Zen does that too, but otherwise they are not similar. I do not explain why; you can find out by reading. This point is important because the people who first introduced Eastern religion to the West, such as D.T. Suzuki and Carl Jung, did compare Zen to therapy, and, I think, left a bad legacy of confusion.

All other concerns must fall to mental freedom. You can have nothing that interferes: spouse, children, politics, government post, teaching post, dogma, theory, explanation, success, concern with goodness, concern for nature, concern for other people, enlightenment, or the Buddha.

You may have human emotions but you have to let them go if they get in the way. Negative emotions tend to linger and get in the way, so eventually you have to get rid of them. You cannot linger in envy, greed, anger, revenge, jealousy, etc.

If anything interferes, no matter how innocuous or human, it must be cut out. If it does not interfere, you can leave it develop by itself, reach maturity, and go away by itself. If you enjoy success as a scholar, orator, meditation teacher, martial artist, motivational speaker, writer of dharma books, or interpreter of the sutras, and that tempts you, as it probably will, then stop it right now. Zen adepts cannot seek any success or fame. If you have to gouge out your own eyes, then you are better off blind. Jesus knew the importance of soul freedom when he advised sinners to cut off a hand rather than to let a hand lead them astray. Jesus said people would have to treat their families as already-dead if they wished full spiritual success. Socrates had a small spirit that forcibly stopped him if Socrates veered toward error such as seeking pay for his teaching; so Socrates lived poor and harassed much of his life. If the Buddhist scriptures lead you astray, then burn them; the Buddha had no sutras (scriptures). If a teacher leads you astray, leave that teacher just as the Buddha left his. The idea of enlightenment is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop thinking about enlightenment, and stop seeking enlightenment. The ideal of the

Buddha and-or bodhisattva is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop trying to be like a Buddha or bodhisattva. If you have to live alone away from people all your life, do that. If you forget to eat, then starve. If you have to lie to eat, then starve to death instead because even a small lie sets up a huge long-term block to mental freedom.

Zen adepts are not cut off from all normal life. Anti-normal is a temptation too. They walk the middle path of the Buddha. A Zen adept can enjoy an ice cream cone, movie, boat ride, puppet show, or long walk. A Zen adept could be a scientist seeking truths as long as he-she did not actively pursue a career and did not care about success. A Zen adept could interpret sutras (scriptures) as long as he-she expected to be wrong sometimes.

A Zen adept does not envy anybody success in family, business, politics, religion, or life; more precisely, a Zen adept does not hold on to the envy for enough time to count as feeling envy. Usually, when we meet a successful person, we envy them a little bit, even if we are quite successful, and, in fact especially when we are quite successful. Even if the person is a good friend, and we are much more happy than envious, we still envy him-her. That is part of biological comparative competition. It is human nature. Even if we are rich, we envy a lotto winner. If we are a famous scholar, we envy the graduate student who just published her first paper. If we make millions of dollars a year catching passes in football, we envy the baseball pitcher who threw a no-hitter. The painter envies the poet. The middle aged mother envies the new mother. Zen adepts feel no envy at all. They can look a new father in the eye and congratulate him with all their heart. They can look a Christian preacher in the eye and congratulate her with all their heart on her successful telethon.

Mental freedom implies some consistency. It is hard to be free if you are inconsistent. If you envied one minute and did not envy the next, you would not be free. Consistency brings in issues which complicate the story needlessly, so I overlook it.

In the literature on Zen, writers say Zen masters strive for spontaneity. "Spontaneity" is probably as good a way to describe the goal as "mental freedom", but, to an American, spontaneity implies emoting without hang-ups, rebellion, TV talk shows, Jedi masters, doing without effort, doing without thinking, or upwelling creativity of the Spirit. It implies that a master never studies or deliberates. None of this is true. Study and deliberation are part of human nature, and Zen masters did have to think things through. The point is not to get lost in distractions and ideologies.

To an American, the term "mental freedom" implies lawlessness, romantic rebels, people who do wrong as a way to free themselves, magic, people who do not stop to think, people who think outside the laws of physics, and selfishness. All this is wrong. But I don't know of a better term. As long as we get rid of the bad implied ideologies, the term "mental freedom" works.

"Trust your feelings, Luke". "Search your feelings, Luke". That is not right either. To follow dogma is to allow our intellects to mislead us but the cure is not to throw out all ideas and to follow only our feelings instead. Feelings can work like dogma. Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, intellect and feelings are not simply opposed. If we trust only our feelings, we might "ooh" and "aah" at puppies or we might wring their necks. If we trust only our feelings, we might help the neighbor child or might smack it for crying. Feelings run the gamut. We can trust our feelings as long as we have been well trained in both

trusting our feelings and not trusting our feelings. We can trust our feelings as long as we also trust our intellects. Trusting his feelings is what turned Anikin into Darth Vader. Air Force pilots are trained NOT to trust their feelings but to trust the instruments. A good shooter combines a thorough knowledge of the weapon, the situation, and a feel for when to pull the trigger. Marriages work when spouses combine feelings and intellect. Americans romanticize their feelings, and so they want to see Zen as validating romanticized feelings, but that is not so. Zen masters trust their mental freedom, which includes some feelings and some intellect.

In Zen, as other religions, adepts sometimes get to where they know absolutely that they will do no harm, they know they will not explode in anger or simmer in hate, and are sure they will help appropriately. If you wish to call this condition "being filled with compassion" that is fine. You do not get to this point by simply trusting feelings; I offer no advice on how you do get there. After you reach this point, you can trust your feelings. Even at this point, I don't think you can trust your feelings alone to awaken you. I am not sure what all you trust your feelings for after you reach this point.

Mental freedom does not solve all problems. Mental freedom does not pay the rent and it does not solve problems in the Middle East. Mental freedom does not cure cancer. Mental freedom is not the same as perfect health in mind and body. Mental freedom usually does reduce mental conflict, and a reduction in conflict usually leads to better overall health; but mental freedom does not by itself cure cancer, arthritis, or alienation. Recall what one patriarch said, to paraphrase: "Before I awoke, I was miserable. I hated myself and everybody, my body ached, and the world looked like crap. After I awoke, I am still miserable. People are still assholes, and the world still looks like crap."

Mental freedom does not necessarily mean you are "tapped into" the bigger-than-me, are identical to the bigger-than-me, have merged with the bigger-than-me, and have full direct contact with the bigger-than-me. I take up the relation between mental freedom and the bigger-than-me in a section below. I do not think any mystic vision or religion has a clear full direct view of God, and so I do not think Zen does either. I don't hold this limited access against Zen. Disputes about which mystic vision has the best contact with God are not useful. Some Zen adepts accept that they cannot have full direct access to the bigger-than-me, and see that accepting this fact brings them closer to the bigger-than-me as long as they don't expect it to bring them full direct access via the "back door" of non-expectation. I agree with this Zen acceptance of our limitations and of the results.

Mental freedom does not mean you can answer all questions about past, present, and future, physics, biology, law, and politics. It does not turn you into a psychic. Even if mental freedom does mean you are in touch with the bigger-than-me, it still does not turn you into a psychic.

Mental freedom does not mean you know the meaning of life in general, your life in particular, and the life of anybody in particular. It does not make you better than anybody. It does not mean you can tell people what to do. You still have to work at being a good person and helping out. Even if mental freedom does tie you into the bigger-than-me, mental freedom does not mean you deserve to control the world.

Mental freedom means not acting like any character out of fiction or pop culture. You cannot act like a character in Seinfeld, Star Wars, the Bible, the Koran, a Sutra, the Mahabharata, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Dr. Zhivago, Pride and Prejudice, Shakespeare, reality TV, or media-generated fantasy about

heroic Republicans or Democrats. You are not a character. If you do act like a character except briefly for fun (actors excepted), then you are not awake. Instead, try acting like yourself honestly, including useful roles and codes. Fantasies can work like dogma. You have to commit to fantasies as with dogma, keeping up fantasy requires keeping up some dogma, and dogma is usually based in unrealism like a fantasy. Part of accepting the world is learning good fantasy from bad dogma-fantasy.

Mental Freedom is Similar to.

I am not an enlightened Buddhist so I cannot describe mental freedom as Buddhist enlightenment. All I can do is relay my ideas of what might be going on based on my experiences and reading.

Mental freedom appears when we combine our natural abilities with reasonable training and then act out what we have learned. Acting includes thinking. We have to act without worrying too much about what we do. Mental freedom is like what happens when our training bring us to a new level of performance, we know we have achieved something different, we are not likely to fall back (we might), and we know it does not matter if there are other levels.

Mental freedom occurs when you can tell a good discrimination from a bad discrimination, and when you see that most of the time you don't have to.

Mental freedom is like what athletes do once they have been well trained and are ready. You have to do. You can't think too much. The time for thinking and training is past. Even if somebody beats you in a competition, you have done your best, and have proven yourself. In Japan, soldiers studied Zen as a way to act without thinking once they had been trained. Mental freedom is like good driving by a good driver, over familiar roads at first, and then over unfamiliar roads.

Mental freedom is like riding a bicycle. You have to try for a while before you get it. Training is important. Then suddenly you just get it. After you just get it, you don't ever quite forget. If you don't do it for a while, then you are not smooth. To do it again smoothly, you might have to practice, but you should be able to get back to adept level pretty well. To stay good at it, you have to practice a little bit continuously. But, if the bicycle becomes part of your life, then you should have no trouble getting the practice that you need naturally as part of daily life. After you are adept at the bicycle, there is no specific purpose to the bicycle; it is just a part of your life.

Mental freedom is like seeing one day that you can deal with nearly all the problems that will come up in your normal life. You can't deal with all of them. The problems that you can't deal with don't matter, not even if they kill you. You just go from problem to problem, coping pretty well.

Imagine you are an adult hunter-gatherer from 30,000 years ago out hunting. You are mature enough, and have been trained over a lifetime. You know what you are doing, and you do it. You do have to worry about snakes and even some big predators such as lions, hyenas, and leopards; but you don't have to worry too much. So far, all your life, you have gotten enough game. If a snake or predator gets you, or you come home empty-handed, then so be it, that is part of life. Imagine you are out gathering. You know where the fruits, vegetables, and nuts usually are. You know when a snake is likely to be around or when a predator might be waiting for you or your children. So far, you have managed to bring

home enough food to feed your family for years, and to avoid death, so you just do what you have to do without worrying too much about it.

You are in a citizens' meeting over a civic issue such as property tax. You have heard all kinds of facts, theories, ideas, opinions, and bullshit, and you are tired of it. Gradually at first, then suddenly, you realize you can sift through all this crap, think for yourself, and come to the best conclusion. You need not be an expert. You are not perfect. But you can do it. Not only can you do it in this case, but, with practice, you see that you will be able to do it in every case, with other issues such as bonds for new sewers, guards in schools, traffic cameras, and the whole city as a smoke free zone. You gain confidence. As you gain confidence, you become even better at it. Confidence and performance feed on themselves. You learn to trust your native natural mind. You see that everybody could learn to trust their native natural mind but that very few people ever will learn to do it. Most people who think they can do it never really learn to do it, as any civic meeting or any news channel shows clearly.

Mental freedom is like shopping in a farmers' market, large grocery store, mall, or big department store. You have been through this before. You know what you like. You are ready to pick up a bargain if you see one, and ready to switch from your usual brand to another brand if the price on your brand has gone up too much. If somebody beats you to a sale item, so be it. If the store is out of something you wanted, so be it.

Mental freedom is like waking up one morning, remembering you have to go to work, but it is OK. Mental freedom is like working in a job you like. You can have mental freedom even in a job as long as you are willing to give up advancement, raises, and competition with co-workers. You focus on doing the job well. If you never advance, and even if someone steals an idea from you, you live with it. Of course, you advance or get a raise, and you might out-perform fellows, but those are not concerns. You just do what you do well, come up with ideas when you can, and enjoy it too.

In the Classical World of Greece and Rome, Cynics were not "cynical" as we think of it today. Cynics doubted conventional morality and conventional ideas. Cynics wandered around, usually they were quite poor, and they taught people how to think well and act freely. They taught people how to be free. Some people think of Jesus as a Jewish Cynic. Stoics accepted what came their way, endured as much as they could, and worked as they could for integrity, dignity, morality, and political improvement. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius ("Golden One") was a Stoic. Stoics taught much the same ideas as Cynics but Stoics accepted their places in social life and their duties. I don't know if Taoist freedom, Zen freedom, Cynic freedom, and Stoic freedom are similar or how they might differ.

Mental freedom is not exactly like these examples, or exactly like any examples, because, in all these cases, there is a clear goal in mind: kicking a field goal, scoring high in gymnastics, breaking a big run, winning an account, eating well within a tight budget, not getting eaten by a leopard, etc. Mental freedom has no particular clear goal in mind. It cannot be measured, scored, or verified. It is more "subjective" even than a judged event like gymnastics. Mental freedom can take in all the example goals, and many other goals, without being any particular goal. That distinction makes many differences but it would take too long to explain here and might not be explainable. It is like a swimmer trying to explain swimming to somebody who had never done it, but even more so.

If you substitute any particular goal for mental freedom, then you have erred. You have erred even when the goal is especially laudable such as “do unto others” and “work hard to make the world better”, or when the activity is highly valued such as martial arts. An advanced black belt is not mental freedom.

Few people speak the truth consistently. Among the few, nearly all speak the truth not mostly because it is the truth but mostly because they want to prevail. A very few people speak the truth because they want to be right, that is, in line with truth. On my good days, I aspire to this. Even fewer people speak the truth because it is true and for no other reason. Among a very rare few, the truth speaks through them without their having to consider if it is truth. Zen people aspire to be among the last group but, as long as they aspire, it is hard to do.

So how do you know if you have mental freedom? That is a good question, a question that figures large in Zen, but which I cannot take up here. The easy answer is: you just know it, almost anybody else who has achieved mental freedom can see it in you too, and you can see it in them.

Zen uses examples from the natural world to show mental freedom, such as clouds drifting, birds flying, water flowing, turtles crawling through the mud, or mountains looming. These examples don't work well in the modern world because modern people see nature through a veil of false romantic glamour, if they have ever seen it at all outside the TV screen. Even in the time of classical Japanese Zen before about 1820, these examples had become so clichéd that masters used them to show what to avoid.

Amazingly, some Zen adepts seem really to achieve mental freedom. There is no point trying to describe what they are like. I have never met someone like this so I have to relate what I know from reading and from my imagination. I can't imagine what it is like not to dwell in envy and spite. When you are like this, you can see the world as it really is as much as any evolved sentient being can see the world as it really is. You just do. You can understand dogmas without succumbing to them. You can accept the accidents of the world. You can accept aging and dying and injustice. You can learn to be useful in ways that are consistent with your nature.

Mental freedom in Zen might be like Western ideas of acting honestly, not being phony, and being true to your true self as long as your true self is not bad. Similarities between the two ideas are one driving force behind outbreaks of Zen popularity in the West. I am not sure about relations between the ideas because I can't get far enough away from my American ideas to judge well.

You are Enough, and the World Is As It Is.

The Christian version of the Zen ideas above and below might be “Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened for you”. Most answers are there if you simply accept them.

Probably the most famous story in Zen is about the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch, Hui Neng. According to the story, Hui Neng was a poor illiterate boy who was taken to the monastery because he showed much talent, rather like Jesus at the Temple when Jesus was twelve years old. Hui Neng's job was to clean up, and he was never considered a real monk. When Hui Neng was a young man, the abbot (Patriarch) was dying, and sought an heir to lead this monastery and all of Ch'an, someone who saw the truth (Dharma) directly. In the usual way in Ch'an, the abbot held a poetry contest to find his heir. Everybody expected

the brilliant protégé of the abbot, Shen Hsiu, to win the contest. The protégé entered a poem which said that inside everybody is a mirror that reflects the world without bias, anybody can awaken if they polish their mirror diligently, but they have to keep polishing even after awakening. Hui Neng anonymously posted a poem saying the mirror already was clear enough by nature, and there was no need to polish it ever; all we have to do is find the mirror and look into it, or, more accurately, just let the mirror reflect back through us. The abbot found out who posted the poem, and, because the abbot feared reprisal against Hui Neng, the abbot gave leadership to Hui Neng secretly. The temple hierarchy didn't understand Hui Neng. They were so upset that Hui Neng had to flee and hide for several years before returning to lead what became a great school of Ch'an. Shen Hsiu founded his own school, which, with the school of Hui Neng, became the two great schools of Zen. In fact, there are two great schools which divide roughly along these lines but it is unlikely that Hui Neng ever had to flee for his life.

The standard Mahayana reading of Shen Hsiu's poem is that, deep down, we already are awakened. We already are at one with the world. But we need the expedient means of Mahayana, including help from the Dharma, Buddha, monks, and bodhisattvas, to know we are at one with the world and see correctly. We must polish. Hui Neng was not denying that we are one with the world and we already are awake. Hui Neng was not saying we need do nothing or that effort is pointless and misleading; if so, he would not be Patriarch of a school that stresses hard meditation and free action. Hui Neng warns against getting caught up in dogmas, distinctions, yourself, and the interface between yourself and the world. That is polishing. While polishing removes a few big scratches it also makes thousands of little scratches that it cannot remove. Once we begin to polish, we have to polish endlessly. Instead, simply accept that you are enough as you are. Let the mirror work on its own. If you polish it, you get in its way. If you stop, it reflects on its own without any extra help.

The following "take" on the story supports Hui Neng: As in Taoism, a Ch'an-Zen adept is already at one with the world when he-she follows the Tao (Dharma) because the Tao created the world and runs the world. To understand the Tao is to understand that the world is as the world is and that you already are a part of it. What the Tao does with you, the Tao does with you. To polish your mirror is to fall back on dogma. It is gilding the lily. It is mistrusting the Tao, and trying to impose your ideas on the Tao. It is screwing up what was already fine.

The fact that there is a mirror does not mean there are no distinctions. Distinctions are endemic to the mirror and the world. They are natural. If you don't fight them, they do not mislead. In trying to remove a little dust, don't also try to polish away what is natural. Fall back on your original nature rather than try to make your nature out of ceaseless polishing.

Regardless of polishing or not polishing, both stories agree that, deep inside us, we correspond to the most real world, and the most real world corresponds to us. For this correspondence to hold up, there cannot be a big difference between what is most real about us and what is most real about the world. We must be able to see the world as it is. We ourselves are part of the world as it is. The mirror is simple. It is not a funhouse mirror, powerful microscope, or kaleidoscope. Once we see this, nothing else matters. Whether the world is fantastic as a movie or plain as a cup of tea does not matter because the world is as it is, we are as we are, and we can see the world as it is.

Maybe the most often quoted saying from Zen is “eat when hungry, sleep when sleepy”. In a monastery where many people had to coordinate their lives including food and sleep, students had to hear lessons from teachers, monks had to serve the local people, and high ranking monks had to receive important visitors, in fact, people could not “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. The saying arose because students wanted their teachers to give them magic formulas for how to run their lives and how to awaken, including when to eat, what to eat, when to sleep, how to sleep, when to meditate, how to meditate, what books to read, etc. I have found in teaching that people still want the same magic. You can see the craving for magic formulas every ten minutes on TV. The saying “eat sleep” does not deny regularity and does not sanction total self-indulgence but it does deny magical regimens. It reinforces the idea that we have what it takes to awaken already inside us because we are in accord with the world, and we should rely on ourselves and the world rather than rely on magic dogma formulas.

Students asked masters question such as “Where is the great Storehouse Mind from which all things come and all things go?” Masters might respond, “The peach tree sleeps in winter and blooms in the spring”. Students asked, “Does the Great Buddha Mind know right from wrong?” Adepts might answer, “The bird eats worms while the squirrel eats nuts” or “water and ice”. The point is not to stop thinking entirely. The point is to not get lost in dogma but to accept that the world is as it is, learn to live in it, and accept that it gives you most answers. The answers of the masters “do not follow” the logic of the student questions and are “out of the box”. This tactic forces students to think well. Asking questions based on ideas such as “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” imposes bad discriminations that, ironically, ideas like “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” were intended to get rid of. You cannot get rid of bad ideas by using them. You have to rely on the world as it is, and get rid of them that way. Learn to see the world as it is rather than the world cloaked in dogma. This too is Taoism.

To me, the idea of always polishing the mirror also suggests the system of many lives. Not polishing is to reject the idea of needing many lives. That we do not need to polish the mirror suggests this one life right now is enough, and we need not worry about the system of many lives. Focus on what is here right now.

Zen Modest Mysticism.

Zen disdains mysticism and metaphysics but Zen offers its own modest mystic vision. Zen mysticism is a version of its basic message, and is familiar: (1) The world, with you in it, is one. The world is both seamlessly whole and gives rise to all various individuals, at once. You are both you and the “bigger than me” at the same time. Sometimes, following Mahayana, Zen calls the one world “Emptiness”, “Void”, or “Mind”. (2) You and the world correspond. Because the world and you are the same, you can “get” the world. (3) The world is as it is and is not otherwise. The world is not bizarre, threatening, or evil. Often the world is interesting. (4) Just as you are, you have enough native ability to cope with the world most of the time. You can figure it out. The world will help.

You might think these ideas are not mystical, are self-evident, and necessarily true; but they are not. To believe in them is to have a mystic vision of the world, selves, and being in the world. Zen mysticism is a minor vision compared to most other elaborate mystic visions but it is a mystic vision anyhow because it is not verifiable except by direct feeling. It is not verifiable by experiment even though an accumulation of experiences can give it great weight. I think it is as true as other partial visions.

This modest mystic vision is a far cry from most Mahayana elaborate visions. This modest vision goes along with the vision that I suggested is common in many religions, is common to people who have strong experiences, and might be at the heart of the Mahayana jump from the original Buddhist ideas: We are all connected to the bigger-than-me (there is a correspondence), we are all connected to each other (our minds are alike and mirror the bigger-than-me), and life is all OK most of the time (we have enough ability to cope most of the time). Even if this vision was at the heart of the Mahayana feeling, Mahayana always went past this vision to elaborate alluring visions and systems.

The Zen ideas of “the world as it is” and “we can ‘get’ the world” go along well with modern science. I do not say Zen and modern science are the same or that one can displace the other. Modern science also sees a correspondence between the world and the minds of naturally evolved selves. Neither expects the correspondence to be exact. Both expect it to be close enough. Scientists express amazement at how well mathematics can model the world, and how people can continually come up with new and better ideas about the world. We can understand the world because we are of the world too. Zen forces us to “think outside the box” so we can overcome dogmatic habits so we can simply see. After we overcome dogmatic limits, then we go back to living in the ordinary world of common experience. Commentators say Zen masters force us to think “irrationally”. I think “irrationally” is a poor choice of words but let it stand. Science does value reason and rationality highly, and is suspicious of irrational mumbo jumbo, but science also encourages people to “think outside the box” so people can have ideas that later can be tested in rational reasonable ways. It encourages imagination that can later be tested. It encourages speculation that then goes back to the ordinary real world. That is not much different from Zen. See below for more.

Mahayana faced two contradictions: “life is not worthwhile yet life is part of a joyous system of many lives” and “ordinary life and awakened life differ yet are the same”. Mahayana reconciles these contradictions in the idea of “heaven on Earth”: badness and ugliness can be absorbed into a greater sense of beauty-rightness-and-joy. This life has some ugliness and badness but ultimately this life is amazingly beautiful, especially when we see this one particular life is only one particular life in a system of many lives. Really, everything is alright with this world after all. Everything always has been just as it should be, and is now just as it should be. As part of Mahayana, Zen inherited these contradictions, and it often resolves them in the same way, in a feeling of “heaven on Earth”. We will see that resolution just below. I believe this is a wrong resolution.

Mahayana spins big systems. Mahayana excuses its systems as expedient means for teaching people who have not yet awakened to their identity with the One. But, in fact, Mahayana dwells in big alluring systems both before and after. Zen differs from Mahayana in the extent to which it sees a system. Zen seems to want to get rid of system entirely, and, instead, just have people be and act. Zen sometimes succeeds but not often enough.

In its early history, Zen relied on the Mahayana idea of “Emptiness” or “Void”. Later, it relied on “Mind”. Any difference between “Emptiness” and “Mind” is not relevant here. These ideas refer to the one great system of which we are all a part, seamlessly whole and particular at the same time, moral and more-than-moral, and “heaven on Earth”. In Mahayana, this one whole is always a system.

Here issues get complicated. Even original Zen masters did three things with these terms. How they used the terms is not always clear, not even with the great masters.

First, Zen masters used the terms much as non-Zen Mahayana did, including the idea of an elaborate alluring system, including other ideas that go along with it such as dharmakaya, eons, storehouse mind, etc.

Second, Zen masters used the terms to mean their particular vision, which is simpler and more direct than most other Mahayana. They used the terms to refer to the mystic vision that I described above. When Zen masters used the terms this way, they disparaged and-or explained away other Mahayana, and they did not imply a system. They disparaged other Mahayana.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen differed from other Mahayana in how it meant these terms. They try to find ways in which the Zen sense corresponds to the standard Mahayana sense. They explain away Zen disdain for other Mahayana. I do not dispute the point here. I merely assert my opinion.

Third, Zen masters used the terms to mean something even simpler and more direct, something that is not really in the terms "Void" and "Mind". They used the terms to try to get past the terms to something even better. This vision carried little sense of system, and did not necessarily imply the idea of "heaven on Earth". It is similar to the idea I have about God and his relation to the world, although I do not stress that point here.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen ever meant anything other than the well-known Zen ideas associated with "Void" and "Mind" (second sense), and that these Zen ideas were exactly the same at heart as standard Mahayana ideas (first sense). Again I differ, do not dispute, and merely assert.

To the extent this chapter refers to modest Zen mysticism, I have in mind two and three. I try to explain how Zen masters felt about the world as Void and Mind, and how they felt about the world as something else, simpler, and better. Even when I try to get across that "something else", even when the Zen view and mine largely coincide, I do not simply endorse the Zen view. Zen and I also disagree. I try to convey the disagreements as well. I disagree with Zen for the same reasons I disagree with Taoism.

Clarifying all this is hard because Zen masters themselves were confused and unclear. Zen masters are notorious for being hard to understand, but that is not what I have in mind here. I do understand them when they are clear in their own minds. But they are not always clear in their own minds or their writings. They waiver between the three stances. They are trapped in the terms. Sometimes they try to explain away differences between Zen and Mahayana, sometimes they insist on differences. When they insist on differences, it is not always clear if they are making point two or three. To assert that Zen masters might be confused even in their own minds is great blasphemy in Zen circles. It will be taken as great pride on my part. I can only assert what I think is true.

Zen masters were clear that Mahayana ideas of "Void" and "Mind" are misleading traps, and did urge students to go beyond those dogmas to direct experience of the "Void" and "Mind"; but, too often, I think

Zen masters themselves lapsed back into the dogmatic trap entailed in the terms. Too often, even great masters failed and even they got mired in the terms “Void” and “Mind”, even Hui Neng, Ma Tzu, Huang Po, Hui Hai, and Lin Chi. Even in their lapses, I still sense dimly something better than “Void” or “Mind”. Reading even great Zen masters, I get tired of constant references to “Void” and “Mind”, the dogma of identity of self and mind, and dogma of the identity of whole and part. I feel relief when, briefly, masters take their own advice to go beyond their ideas to something more direct and simpler than wondrous Mind and more direct and simpler than wrestling with false dichotomies of whole and part, subject and object. Think for yourself. Then they lapse again.

I don't know how the Zen idea of Mind differs from ideas of Mind in other traditions. It would be fun to compare the Zen idea with the Greek idea of Nous and its descendants, and to compare the Zen idea with my childhood idea of “a mind behind it all”. I don't know how Buddhist ideas of Mind differ from Tao or Heaven. I don't know if various ideas of mind come from the same mystic feeling, are basically the same, and only appear to differ because they developed in different traditions. These questions are too far afield. I do know that different traditions draw different conclusions although they share a seemingly similar idea of Mind. My idea of mind does not lead me to think we are all part of the mind, the bigger-than-me is the same as me, we are all intimately the same, subject and object are the same, we always vastly overstress differences between particulars, we always vastly overstress principles of morality to the point of blind dogma, it is all really alright, there is no Great Risk to the world, and this world always really is Heaven on Earth. I am not sure what differences these issues make as long as we act well, especially because I am sure any idea of mind (Mind) is only partially accurate.

I advise you to read the works of Zen masters directly – they are not hard – to look for these issues, and to make up your own mind about how the masters fare, what you think, and what to do. You don't have to share a vision of “Void”, “Mind”, “heaven on Earth”, or of something simpler and truer, to get what is important in Zen, to get acting in this reality right now, acting with your best evolved abilities, unimpeded by dogma. As with assessing Mahayana, if you share the vision of “heaven on Earth” somewhat but not fully, if you can see persistent beauty despite ugliness and badness, then use your sensitivity to better assess Zen. If you do not share the sense of “Heaven on Earth” at all, then assess in any terms that make sense to you and are fair to everybody.

A Modern Zen Story.

Misunderstanding the story of Hui Neng, and misunderstanding modest Zen mysticism, lead to error. Here, I tell, and then contradict, a cherished story of modern Zen in Japan. Because I am not an adept, and Japanese Zen cherishes this story, I might be wrong. D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) was a leading explainer of Zen to the West, and is a hero in Japan. He, among others, told this story. A young woman is mortally ill with a few years to live. She uses them studying Zen. On her deathbed, with a few hours to live, she awakens. As part of awakening, she sees that the world is exactly as it should be, and nothing is wrong, including herself and her illness. The world is beautiful. She is no longer miserable. She dies in peace. This feeling is common when people review their lives, in Zen and in all religions: “I wouldn't change a thing, not even my stupid mistakes”.

Her feeling is similar to the feeling of “heaven on Earth”, of a world in which beauty assimilates ugliness and badness. Although the feeling can be graceful, the feeling is wrong if it implies any of this: we can

overlook all the evil of the world; all details of the world are necessary; her illness was necessary, likely so she could awaken; her particular illness was necessary as part of the beauty that overcomes evil; all good and bad is necessary; suffering is good; good and evil require each other; good and evil are in balance; good and evil need each other; nothing can be changed; everything returns to what it was; the system is what counts; I am part of the system; as I die, I return to the system; I never really had left the system to which I return; and it is a mistake to make the world better such as by curing my illness.

I think standard Mahayanists make many of these mistakes. These mistakes negate the Big Risk of the world. These mistakes diminish her life right here right now and diminish all life right here right now. As far as I can tell, this is the mistaken sense that Suzuki and modern Zen interpreters offer both East and West. If we want to see her in a better light, a Taoist might say she is like the twisted men sitting at the café or she is like a gnarled tree. She sees that she has to make do with what she has and that what she has is good enough for her situation. Although she makes the best of her situation, still there are other people who are not in accord with the Tao, and the Tao does not prevail in the world. I do not think that is the intent of the story as it is usually told. I think original Zen is more in line with the Taoist version, and in line with what I see, but that original Zen has been covered over by Mahayana metaphysics again, even by good-hearted smart modern scholars such as Suzuki.

The ideas that you should rely on yourself, and that there is a correspondence between yourself and the world, lead again to the mistaken idea of "Trust your feelings, Luke". They lead to the mistaken belief that human emotions, human imagination, and the world as it is are exactly the same, that is, they lead us to believe in the fantasies that we make up. They lead us to believe in a Force of the world because there is a power in our imagination. They lead us to a wrong view of "heaven on Earth" in which we are tempted to overlook strong evil. Just because the world is as it is, and we can live in it if we want to, does not mean we can be self-indulgent and ridiculous. "The world is as it is" means you need to eat regularly and you need a warm place in winter.

Ikkyu.

Ikkyu (1394 to 1481 CE) was a Japanese Zen master. Due to his history and character, he was soaked in the ideas that awakened life and normal life do not differ, and we are all capable of awakening in this life; and he acted on the ideas. To me, he seems more like a seeking indulgent Taoist than an austere Zen master, and he seems like an adept poet-painter caught in the wrong profession. He spent most of his life in the "Bohemian" sections of Japan (the "floating world"), including brothels, when Japan was in turmoil and when the Bohemian sub-society was booming. His friends were painters and writers. He loved the wooden flute. He indulged emotions. He had a mistress and a child; the mistress was a blind "folk" singer much like an American blind blues singer. He did this not because it was trendy or as an ideological expression of Zen freedom but for love of her; he was like "Siddhartha" of the Herman Hesse novel. Ikkyu is not typical of Zen but he is not right or wrong just because he is not typical. I do not offer him as a role model for Zen but he is worth knowing about. His poems are short, and, once you get the allusions, good. Likely Ikkyu helped create the style of short Japanese poems that Americans like, such as haiku. His artistic style contributed to the artistic view that later led to the great prints of the "floating world" in the 1700s and 1800s such as of Hokusai and Hiroshige.

After Ikkyu died, the Japanese made up stories about him as a “wonder kid”, like Jesus at the Temple, or as a Trickster confounding enemies and doing miracles. Now, the Japanese see him as a beloved rascal. That view is not right but it is not far off and it shows how images of prophets get remade to suit the needs of the people. The Japanese did an animated series about a boy monk named “Ikkyu”. That Ikkyu solved puzzles and mysteries, like a mix of Martin Gardner and Sherlock Holmes. The series was a hit all over Asia, it is a lot of fun, and it is well worth watching if you can find it dubbed in English (I saw it dubbed in Thai, and it is dubbed in many languages).

More on Dogma: Mental Freedom and Categories of Thinking.

Like Taoists, and coming from an explicit Buddhist tradition of non-duality, Zen adepts said discrimination is bad and so, with some irony, we should avoid distinctions, especially of good and bad. Like Taoists, Zen adepts were not idiots about non-discrimination. They stressed non-discrimination because that was the mistake that people make more often than too much mixing and blending of categories or too much spontaneity.

Discrimination depends on mental categories. Mental freedom is not giving up all categories. To commit to not using any categories at all is to commit to a dogma (category), and so is a trap. It is to burn your mind out for no good end. It is to go against human nature, and thus to go against natural nature. As with most traps, the best strategy is to avoid it. If you fall into the trap, then just step out. Don't go along. People evolved the ability both to make the traps and to step out of them.

If you want to learn archery, you start with a bow, arrow, and target. Those are distinct. You cannot blend them in any glib way although you can merge them in a better way through practice. You have to practice. Practice is not the same as sleeping. When I think of food, I see the grocery store and farmers' market in my mind's eye. When I think of food, I see fruit. So even to eat, I need categories of stores and of food. Some people see a deer blind and meat. There is no art without a medium, and no art without categories. The great artists of the “floating world” painted specific scenes, often in specific places, they knew how to use wood blocks as a medium, and knew the difference between a prostitute and the men who came to her. It usually helps to have categories more than it hurts. Categories are useful tools. If we got rid of all categories, we would sit like puddles of slime, and we would starve.

The trick, of course, is to use categories without becoming lost in our categories. When I go to market, I pick apples from the bin without using any complex algorithms; I do use rules of thumb. In the 1970s and 1980s, when I saw how state policies of both the Left and Right fail, I changed my ideas accordingly. The need not to get lost in dogmas is not news nor is the idea confined to Zen. The idea is, or should be, part of any good training in any discipline from picking fruit to martial arts to global statesmanship. Evolution gave us the ability to use categories, make categories, and re-make categories; we can improve ability with training; and we should.

Don't think usually of dogma and not-dogma, discrimination and non-discrimination; don't discriminate about dogma and discrimination. Think in terms of dogma and not-dogma when it is useful. Instead of non-discrimination, learn to use your mind adeptly. That is all.

Zen adepts think more clearly, and suffer fewer traps, than normal people. This comparison implies that a Zen adept could be free of all traps, could be totally consistent, and could think with absolute clarity on all issues. As long as we are finite humans who have to think with finite minds using categories, then we necessarily live in some traps. I don't think Zen aimed to be free of all mistakes and all illusions. That is a dogma and a mistake itself. If the awakened life and ordinary life are the same, then the awakened life has to have some mistakes in it too. Ikkyu saw this. Zen did aim at a certain plateau, on which you are free enough, and from which you are not likely to fall too far back, but which is not entirely without limits or mistakes. Reaching that plateau is the same as waking up. Ikkyu might not have seen this. Right away people ask: "How free is free enough?" "What mistakes can I make and still be awakened?" "Can I carry on my normal life and still be free enough of mistakes?" Because I am not a Zen adept, I can only guess. To ask such questions shows that you are still far from free enough. You cannot live a normal life and still expect to be free enough. At the least, you have to live like a Taoist character or Buddhist monk.

Words, Words, Words.

Officially in Mahayana, the message cannot be conveyed in words, but Mahayanists still wrote a lot. Zen adepts did not usually suffer from this Mahayana problem. Usually they wrote little and they did not like too many words. All this leads to a common silly Western mistake about Zen: Zen has nothing to do with words, words are necessarily misleading discrimination, all words are irrelevant, all words are necessarily a betrayal, and we must stop talking. Moreover, the intellect is like words, it is an enemy, and we should not use the intellect at all. Some Zen masters, such as Dogen, did write quite a bit, and were usually lucid and helpful in what they did write; and all Zen masters could think well.

Zen masters have nothing against words or the intellect as long as they are used properly. When words and the intellect are used properly, they make fine tools. They can bring us up to awakening even if they cannot make us awaken. They are part of human nature like eating, drinking, and smelling flowers. You cannot write poetry without words even when the point of the words is to get us beyond words. It is hard to smell and appreciate flowers if you can't recognize one. Words cannot capture the One but they can help us get to the point where we can see for ourselves. To react against words is to fall into the dogma of hating dogmas, and is as much a mistake as embracing dogmas. If you can't make your peace with words then you are not likely to achieve mental freedom and awaken.

Now that we don't have to mindlessly fear categories and words (discrimination), we can use them to develop a proper attitude and to gain insight into mental freedom.

Imagine some villagers talking about where to build a rural cabin and how to build it.

Most people prattle. They don't know what they are talking about but they talk anyway. They say too much, assert unfounded opinions, assert many false points, but never get to the heart of issues. I think Mahayanists would not stress that the lives of these people are really awakened. They might be part of the joyous system, and might be awakened somewhere deep down, but I hope Mahayanists would not argue that their prattle was the wise talk of a Buddha or bodhisattva.

Some people theorize too much. They talk a lot about magical location, water flow, clouds, wind, will of God, harmony, and conflict. Again, I think Mahayanists don't want to stress that the lives of these people are really awakened on any obvious level.

These first two groups are the monkeys in Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Books".

A few people know the subject. They say what needs to be done in plain simple words. They explain to the extent that they have a basis for explanation and to the extent other people need them to explain. If they can convey ideas by referring to concrete situations, they do. They bring in only as much theory as needed and as people can understand without getting more confused. If they need to explain the north wind to make people build thick walls, they do. They don't offer a theory of quantum gravity to use a plumb line, and they don't care that two plumb lines are never exactly parallel. They don't repeat often, not even to make people listen. If you leave them alone, they do what needs doing.

I don't have to stress that Zen is like the last group. If you are hungry, and you have an apple, eat it. If you have to go pick the apple first, then go pick it. If you have to use science to figure out where apples might be growing, use science. If you have to explain to hungry people what an apple is, where the apple trees are, and which apples are ripe, then explain to them.

It sounds easy to do this but it is not. It is very hard. Only a few rare and wonderful people ever master the art of plain simple speaking or writing. Jesus and Chuang Tzu were masters of the art. Even Zen masters who clearly knew what was what sometimes could not explain themselves, and resorted to other means such as shouting, striking, walking away, and riddles. Here it is not relevant whether "it" can be explained or not.

Zen masters knew the sutras thoroughly. Zen students were expected to study the scriptures. When Zen masters said to study the scriptures or to ignore the scriptures, they had the above points in mind. The scriptures can be useful tools to be taken up and put down as needed, or can trap students in Buddhist aids. Students and teachers have to make sure of proper use.

Buddhism, Zen, and Doing Good.

Zen has all the same problems with goodness that Taoism had – Taoists said the Tao was beyond good and bad but tacitly expected conventional goodness in following the Tao - although Zen does not usually extend its ideas of goodness into politics. In Zen the problem might be a little less embarrassing because Zen inherited the Buddhist idea that goodness is in the basic nature of the world. Zen still preached that discriminations of good and bad are misleading yet still expected goodness to result from people doing what they will. Zen wants goodness to result from people not thinking about goodness and not trying to do good. Zen has no answer to the fact that goodness does not always blossom when people simply do what they will.

I think the following story takes place sometime around 800 CE (AD) in China. The character "Po Chu-I" might be the famous poet "Bai Chi-I".

BEGIN STORY

Po Chu-I asked Master Bird Nest (Niao K'o): "What is the core meaning of Buddhism?"

Bird Nest answered: "Do no evil, do much good".

Po Chu-I said: "But a three-year old child understands that."

Bird Nest said: "A three-year old child can say it but many eighty-year old people cannot do it".

In commenting on this story, Master Ryozen said: "If not for this one phrase from Bird Nest, our followers would get stuck in wrong dogmas such as:

- From the Beginning, not one thing
- Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil
- Good and evil are not two
- True and false are the same"

END STORY

This exchange bothered Ikkyu a lot. It goes dead against standard (dogmatic) Mahayana and Zen ideas of non-discrimination, non-duality, no morality, and unity in one great Mind. If the essence of Buddhism is "do good, avoid evil" then Buddhism is no different than naïve common do-gooder religion with mundane distinctions of good and bad, that is, Buddhism basically does not differ from what I (Mike Polioudakis) follow. Then why is Buddhism supposed to be about suffering, ending suffering, cause-and-effect, mind, emptiness, etc. To do good and to avoid evil, we have to discriminate between them, accept distinctions between general and particular, and accept self and other. Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen all say we should not practice discrimination, especially not between good and evil. If we allow in these discriminations, it seems we allow in all discriminations and dogmas. If we allow this discrimination and all discriminations, then what is the point of the Tao or of Zen?

This is why Buddhism is inherently moral despite making a show of not following simplistic conventional morality. This is why you have to learn to manage ideas, not to avoid ideas altogether. The real world is made of distinctions such as "good" and "bad". They are real and important. To think they are unreal and unimportant is as much a bad distinction and a trap as to think they are clear and gigantic. To strongly assert either end of the dilemma is to remain trapped in both ends of the dilemma. This is why Obiwan Kenobe said "Only Sith believe in absolutes". Without the comment by Bird Nest, Zen would be trapped in the dilemma by denying the reality of morality and other useful distinctions. This is why Zen stresses "the world as it is" and "every particular person is valuable and capable". This is why hating dogma is as bad as following dogma.

From this exchange and commentary, it would be easy for me to argue that Buddhism and all religions are merely variations on what I believe. Besides being selfish, that outlook is just as much a mistake as over-stressing differences. Even if "do good, avoid evil" is the essence of Buddhism, and that essence is pretty much what I believe, there is much to practiced Buddhism that is not in the formula, including the ideas that life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, and the self is not a simple soul-stuff. You have to

decide for yourself how much is really in Buddhism, how much is added on by smart people, how much is added on by common people, and what is true regardless of why it is there. You have to decide not just for Buddhism but for all religions, including what I profess. To decide, you have to come to grips with Bird Nest, Ryoken, Ikkyu, good, bad, concepts, words, and doing.

Zen Self and the Greater Joyous System.

Before briefly getting to this subject, I revert back to one of the enigmas in Mahayana. The self and the bigger-than-me are both distinct and the same. Before awakening, usually we do not feel the sameness. After awakening, we feel both sameness and distinction. Which we stress when we are awake depends on the situation and on what mood we are in. Just because a Mahayana or Zen adept extols the joyous system does not mean he-she does not feel the self. Just because an adept talks about how much he-she likes to drink sake and play Go does not mean he-she does not feel the system. I do not resolve this issue. It is a non-issue, and can mislead. It takes up too much mental energy of Buddhists. I think the Zen idea of the self and its changes is different than the Mahayana idea but here I can only sketch the differences. I make this point so people think for themselves better and people do not get “hung up” on either Mahayana or Zen terms about the self and its changes.

Some Zen masters, such as the Japanese Hakuin, do have a great experience of their self as strongly “in tune” with the essence at the core of a joyous system such as the Unborn or the Buddha Mind. Even Zen masters who do not have a grand experience of union still feel that they and the bigger-than-me are the same even if different, and are different even if the same, such as the Japanese Dogen or Ryokan. This attitude of having both self and bigger-than-me can be part of Mahayana theology that nirvana (awakened world) and samsara (asleep world) are one. When people make contact with the bigger-than-me, then their self changes, or, at least, the idea of their self changes. They see more truly the relation between self and bigger-than-me, and see more truly the status of the self as not-self, bundle of features, Buddha, bodhisattva, or whatever.

Feeling a relation between the self and the bigger-than-me, feeling change in ideas about them, or feeling a change in their relations, does not have to be exactly what Mahayana tells us even when Zen adepts use Mahayana terms to talk about it. Mystics outside Mahayana have a similar experience, and they do not explain it in Mahayana terms. People talk in the terms of their tradition even if those terms are not exactly the same as their vision. People outside Mahayana who have a “Grand Canyon” experience do not usually explain in Mahayana terms. Because I think all mystical experiences are only partial contact at best, I do not have to accept the Zen explanation that uses Mahayana terms. This is another instance of society, culture, history etc. conditioning what people think even about tremendous experiences. All I have to accept is that Zen adepts have an important experience that involves feeling close connection between the self and bigger-than-me, and that this changes ideas of the self, and of relations between the self and bigger-than-me. Then I take out of that what I think is most true and most useful. That is what I do with all mystic experiences.

Many Zen masters, including Lin Chi (Chinese) and Hakuin (Japanese), reported great healing of doubts, and great healing of a formerly sad self, to go along with meeting the bigger-than-me. Even masters who did not need much healing still felt a better sense of self and fewer doubts, such as Dogen and Ryokan. The change of self and healing of self when in contact with the bigger-than-me is true in other traditions

such as Sufism, as with the poet Rumi, and in Christianity, as when Martin Luther felt close to God. I do not have to explain why. It is just true, and that is fine. The fact that it is true still does not mean we have to accept the metaphysical terms that people themselves use to explain change of self and improvement of self. It is best if we do not impose the metaphysical terms of our tradition but just accept that this happens. If you like to speculate on metaphysics, again, go ahead, but don't expect to be exactly right and don't force other people to follow you.

The Mahayana feeling of self and bigger-than-me is: I am part of a joyous system of many lives. I am the system. I control the world. I want to be a bodhisattva. I am a bodhisattva. Out of my great compassion, I will help other lesser beings. Good for me.

The Zen feeling is: Don't worry about systems. Big deal if I am a bodhisattva or a Buddha. The system got along without me knowing about it before, and it will get along fine with me knowing about it now. Do what comes naturally for me and is most useful in general. Help out other seekers in a way that does not hurt their integrity.

People who have contact with the bigger-than-me usually report strong feelings of compassion and caring for all other beings and for nature. This is true regardless of their original religion, culture, society, history, etc. This is true even when the original culture etc. might not be very "sweet" such as Theravada, Islam, Mahayana, or market worship capitalism. The fact that the feeling of compassion bridges religions etc. does not necessarily make it truer or falsier, and does not necessarily mean that the person who had the feeling was in full contact with the bigger-than-me. I take the feeling as truer than usual human narrow self-interest and I take it as evidence of partial contact if it also gives rise to compassion. If you have this experience, and you love people more as a result, then you were closer to God. What you do with this experience in the real world, and over the long run, is another story.

Sometimes people go into Zen so they can have great feelings, change the self, find the bigger-than-me, unite with the bigger-than-me, heal the self, or have robust health and a long life. I am not sure if people go into Zen so they can feel greater compassion. I would rather people go into Zen because it is useful and fun in itself, like riding a bicycle, and accept those other effects as beneficial side effects; but people are not like that, and going into Zen for such motives is not bad (even if it might impede progress), so I don't say anything against doing that. People seek the Tao, seek Rumi's "companion", or go into Tai Chi Chuan, for the same reasons. If anyone is sick, and changing the self through contact with the bigger-than-me helps him-her find healing, then I am genuinely glad.

Zen Games.

Zen stresses practice as part of meditation. Zen ideally avoids useless disputation but Zen has a lot of disputation too as part of practice. This is part of using words adeptly.

Much has been written about Zen "games" such as koans, tricks, verbal battles, and physical shocks like a shout or a slap to the side of the head. Such "games" are an instance of Mahayana direct teaching, especially teaching that defies words even when it uses words. Such games are a good holdover from Mahayana. The games are an instance of expedient means wherein skillful teachers adjust techniques for particular students. Saying much about these "games" only prolongs confusion, so short is better.

The point of the games is to shake up people so that people achieve mental freedom. There is no other point. If a person can reach mental freedom without games, then the person does not need games, games would not do any good, and games might do some harm.

The Japanese term “koan” (“cone” or “ko-an”, from Chinese “kung-an” or “gong-an”) originally meant a public verbal dispute, especially a court case. In the West, it now means an absurd riddle, such as the sound of one hand clapping. A koan is more. It is how a teacher helps free the mind of a student by giving him-her a mental issue, often an issue that cannot be solved in the terms given. Westerners have called it inducing a mental “cramp” so you stop doing the bad things that lead to stress in the first place. It is the Zen way of forcing the young James T. Kirk into an impossible battle simulation, so he must go beyond the boundaries. When he learns to do that, then he can escape similar situations in the future. Koans have a feel of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”. The best way is to read them. Several fun anthologies are available. You can find a few examples on the Internet for free. Don’t get hung up on koans. Some Zen masters, such as Bankei, did not like them and seldom used them.

To get you started, here is a classic koan. You have to respond right away or the master might hit you. You need background. This background is tedious, and the tedium is part of the point. Bodhidharma was a monk from South India who lived about 500 CE (AD). He went to China to teach Buddhism. He is the founder of Ch’an. On the one hand, in Buddhism, the truth will out, including dharma (dogma). Dharma controls all, the world works according to dharma, and some sentient beings must become aware of the dharma even if other sentient beings stay ignorant. If people in China were destined to know the dharma, then people in China would have learned the dharma whether Bodhidharma went there or not. While it might be a person’s karma to be a monk, it seems odd to say it is a person’s karma to go to China. Not China, nor Bodhidharma, nor the Dharma, gained by Bodhidharma going to China. On the other hand, if Bodhidharma had not gone to China, you can say that China would not have gotten Ch’an. In Buddhism, everything happens by cause-and-effect. Nothing happens without a cause, that is, without a reason, including travels to distant lands. If we say anything just happens by itself without a cause, then we deny cause-and-effect, deny karma and dharma, allow for independent origination, deny dependent origination, allow for the self-subsistence of the self-determined soul self, and so deny Buddhism. China and the world benefitted because Bodhidharma went to China. If Bodhidharma had a reason for going to China, then the meaning of his life and of all lives was tied to it. If Bodhidharma did not have a reason for going to China, then we have to re-assess our attitude toward meaning and life. If we are all already saved, we are all already bodhisattvas, if ordinary life is the same as the awakened life, then it makes no difference if somebody tells us that. If somebody has to tell us that, then there must be a difference.

The koan: Why did Bodhidharma go to China?

For a Taoist, this is a silly question. For a Buddhist, this is a serious question. For a Zen adept, this is an opportunity to get past simplistic misleading discrimination while pondering issues. This koan is roughly the analog of the Western riddles of free will versus determination, why we have prophets who help us but they don’t save us, or why God would allow his joyous creation to get so screwed up. All the jargon that led up to the koan is only a taste of the metaphysical baggage that the average monk carries in his-her head, that impedes mental freedom, and would have to be dealt with. You could try screaming, “I don’t give a damn why Bodhidharma went to China but I am glad that he did” or “I wish that blue-eyed devil had stayed home”.

Zen Sweetness.

Zen masters were not known for being sweet, and were known for being hardnosed and cranky. Yet they often were sweet in deep ways that mattered. They cared about their students and they cared about the common people. They cared in ways that a simplistic Buddhist or diffident Asian might consider too much or consider clinging. Zen masters could yell at an ignorant selfish person who was trying to distort true ideas, but more often they yelled at students as a way to get them to improve. They worked on students not only to get them to mental freedom but to make them better people in many ways, such as to make them more responsible, less compulsive, stop stealing, not drink too much, and care for other people too. Zen masters did this not only by yelling at them, hitting them, and disputing with them but also by setting a personal direct example, giving chores, telling stories, and even helping animals. Zen masters wanted people to get along. Zen masters taught people to be honest, responsible, and caring. They taught people in authority not to misuse their authority, to be aware of subordinates, and to use authority for general public good. Zen masters were like the “tough but fair” coach of sports myth. Regardless of the source of sweetness, and regardless of whether it is orthodox, this sweetness is a credit to Zen and it enhances the idea of mental freedom.

Modern Western Buddhists focus on Zen sweetness as much as on the idea of mental freedom, without realizing how important Buddhist sweetness is and without giving it the right context. Westerners call it “being mindful”, that is, what used to be called “caring” and “good manners”. Westerners refer to cases where great Buddhists of the past showed sweetness. I simply praise modern Western Buddhists for their concern for human kindness.

Awakening, Clear Thinking, Plain Speaking, and Bigger-than-Me.

Nearly all Zen adepts tied clear thinking and plain speaking, that is, awakening, to a feeling of a bigger-than-me. They could not think and speak clearly until they felt the bigger-than-me. When they felt the bigger-than-me, then they automatically thought and spoke clearly. I can make a case that a few Zen adepts did not have to refer to the bigger-than-me but so many adepts obviously did refer to the bigger-than-me that there is no use arguing about the record one way or the other.

Zen adepts often referred to bigger-than-me by a term inherited from Mahayana, such as Nothingness, Buddha Mind, Unborn, or Storehouse Consciousness. I think this was more a matter of convenience than evidence that Mahayana mystic visions and metaphysics are correct. When I read what the masters said and did, it does not seem to me that they had in mind Mahayana ideas even when they used Mahayana terms. If anything, they had in mind more something like the Tao, and just as often used the term “Tao” as any term from Mahayana.

Is it possible to separate clear thinking and plain speaking from any feeling of the bigger-than-me? This is the atheist ideal. It is not the ideal in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism even when adepts make clear that what they feel is not the same as any historical standard idea in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism. Among atheists that I have read and spoken with, only David Hume in the 1700s in England came close to this ideal. All modern atheists seem, to me, to yearn for the bigger-than-me but to exclude any stereotyped idea of God. Even Hume felt morality quite strongly. Feeling morality forces an atheist into contact with

the bigger-than-me, or with modest metaphysics, as I explained in the chapter on atheism. All modern atheists feel the bigger-than-me and metaphysics of morality.

In my own thinking, I find it almost impossible to separate clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me. Clear thinking and plain speaking are what God wants me to do, and, when I feel most in touch with God, then that is what I do naturally. Sometimes I try to separate them. I can do it as an exercise in my head but not convincingly from my heart. I understand that evolution likely made it hard for me to do. If I do succeed, I will write about it in another venue.

Does the fact that evolution likely made close ties between clear thinking, plain speaking, and a feeling of the bigger-than-me mean that the bigger-than-me is only a delusion? No, it does not.

Does the close tie between clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me prove that the bigger-than-me exists or that the bigger-than-me is necessarily like my idea of God, the Judeo-Christian-Muslim idea of God, the Tao, the Mahayana joyous system, the Hindu joyous system, or any idea in Zen? Not, it does not prove any of those ideas. If we take for granted the bigger-than-me, then we have to decide the relation between the bigger-than-me, clear thinking, and plain speaking. Looking at how the Zen masters and Taoist masters dealt with these issues is a great place to start because they are likely the most free of confounding problems of dogma, mysticism, and metaphysics. Jesus was pretty free of side issues as well and is also a good place to start too.

Waking Up in Zen.

Waking up in Zen is much like waking up in Taoism. You awaken when you find your mental freedom; if you find mental freedom, then you are awake. I can't say much more about it than I said above. I do not compare waking up in Zen to waking up in other forms of Buddhism or to Hinduism.

Talking about waking up in Zen is annoying because of the Mahayana baggage that Zen carries. As said above, some Zen masters do refer to Buddhist aids such as Mind, Emptiness, Storehouse Memory, the bodhisattva, and the great joyous system, when they talk of waking up. However, some masters insist you not refer to aids at all, and that you avoid them altogether. Waking up to become a bodhisattva is nothing at all. Waking up to the great joyous system is nothing different than waking up to fix breakfast. It is best if you read the original masters and decide for yourself.

Good Government.

Zen was not born out of political conflict. Unlike some Taoism such as of Lao Tzu, Zen does not offer a political theory. Zen is like the Chuang Tzu form of Taoism that was not political. Zen does not expect to change the state or to change the hearts of people. Zen accepts that only a few people can achieve Zen insight. So few people achieve Zen insight that it will make no difference to the workaday practical world. In this, Zen is like the Buddha and like Theravada Buddhism. Zen cannot serve as the basis for political institutions that I think important such as democracy. Zen would not disdain good institutions, and would not oppose them. To the extent Zen adepts could approve of any institutions without fear of hurting their freedom, Zen adepts would see the goodness in political freedom, democracy, charity, education, and paying it forward. But I could not, and would not, seek their endorsement.

Although Zen was not born in an atmosphere of political seeking, did not endorse any particular theory of government as Taoism and Confucius did, and feared getting entangled in politics as much as getting entangled in dogma, Zen adepts still had moral sense, and still scolded bad politicians. Immorality blocks awakening, the Buddha had sympathy and empathy, Buddhists should try to lessen suffering, and bad politics is immorality that leads to suffering. So, when a fiscal policy led to hunger, high taxes, and war, a Zen master might scold the politicians that carried out the policy, and call for better policies. Zen masters did not like ostentatious display that sucked money away from the people and that forced the people into stealing and prostitution. Zen adepts did like moderation in courtly life that allowed for lower taxes, did not tempt young women into becoming concubines, and allowed the common people to be comfortable enough to be moral. The Zen masters Bankei and Hakuin were blunt and colorful in addressing officials about these matters.

Human Nature.

Everything I said about the Tao applies to Zen. Everything that disqualifies you from being a Taoist adept also disqualifies you from being a Zen adept.

Although Zen, modern biology, and me, all stress our natural capability, Zen and modern evolution do not have the same view of human nature. Zen does not have the same view that most people hold of human nature even apart from ideas from evolution.

As noble as Zen might be, Zen is not in line with the nature of most humans. It is not human to be able to give up all dreams of success and to erase all envy. This discrepancy between Zen and normal human nature does not make Zen bad but it should give pause to people who romanticize Zen or who praise Zen as the cure for all that ails us. Zen is not encoded in any genes, but, like all major stances, the ability for Zen is built on inherited capacities. I do not go into what those capacities might be. Zen is an extension of our abilities in ways that are not usually done and that seem to subvert us. Zen seems like a self-negation of human nature.

Other human activities take us beyond the bounds of our original evolved "design specifications". Almost all performance sports, such as swimming, take people outside what our original evolution intended for our bodies. Mathematics takes people outside what our original evolution intended for our minds. Hard martial arts such as karate certainly exceed our design specifications. Golf exceeds what we might have expected while hunting and gathering. Movies and theater are outside the drama that was enacted around ancient campfires. Whether this is good or bad depends. Zen differs from most of these other activities because it negates a core part of our potential even while extending other parts of our potential. Other activities do not usually negate our core potential and might be ways of reaching our core potential. Most athletes and scholars do fairly well in the mate-and-family market. Even Taoist adepts had families. Zen monks do not.

Sometimes we need people who go outside the bounds to show us what is out there even if we do not go outside the bounds ourselves. These extraordinary people do not necessarily negate human nature even when they seem to do so. They enhance human life through their sacrifice. Great artists can be like this,

such as Seurat and Beethoven. Whether Zen adepts are people who reveal our full nature by negating important parts of it, you have to make up your own mind.

Although Zen negates some key aspects of human character, such as envy, it does not leave the mind a "heap of dead ashes". Mahayanists accused Theravada monks of seeking not real enlightenment but to make themselves a heap of dead ashes; by its goals and rigor, Zen seems to do that; but it is not so. Zen adepts were lively interesting people. By removing commitment to dogma and by removing bad feelings such as envy, Zen adepts made themselves great people in other ways.

If we romanticize Zen, then Zen adepts still gain much from their self-sacrifice but we throw away what they might have done for us. Romanticizing Zen wastes it. People are much more at risk of falling into a romantic delusion about Zen than of pursuing it so far that they negate their humanity. That is a different problem. The cure for that problem is not specific to Zen but is a part of general human silliness.

Buddhism developed an elaborate theory of human nature to explain not-awakening and awakening. As a branch of Buddhism, Zen has access to those sutras. But Zen does not use it much. Zen is not about explaining human nature or developing human nature. Zen accepts the ability for Zen in human nature, and goes from there.

Humans evolved with the propensity to deceive other people, a considerable tendency to self-deception, biases in how we see the world, and some inconsistency. Zen mental freedom implies not being limited in those ways. Even if a Zen adept does not achieve perfect mental freedom, Zen implies that an adept rises above deception, self-deception, biases, and inconsistency. Again, to rise above those tendencies is to negate a big part of our humanity. Natural selection would have made sure that people who could rise above those tendencies in the past did not succeed and did not leave children to carry on their odd freedom – always recall that Zen adepts are celibate. In that case, could any real humans actually free themselves of these limitations? Does it make sense to even consider that success in Zen is possible? I can't say. I doubt people can reach total freedom from evolved limitations-biases but I think people can achieve enough freedom to make Zen practice worthwhile and for some people to succeed. Apparently people can lose envy, and, if they can lose envy, they can do almost anything.

Worthwhile Life Again.

Taoists consider the world worthwhile. When not plagued by the state, Taoists consider the world a lot of fun. This life, right now, as it is, is worthwhile and fun. In Christian terms, life is good. Zen, as Buddhism, should not have this attitude, but, in fact, Zen adepts do seem to have this attitude. They seem to enjoy life. In their eyes, life is worthwhile, not only because it gives you a chance to awaken, but because it is worthwhile in itself. If you take seriously the idea that there is no difference between the awakened life and the sleeping life, that suffering is only an illusion, then you can enjoy this life. The Zen attitude does not seem to come out of such an intellectual approach but is a more immediate enjoyment of this life right now – as befits non-dogmatic Zen. Zen adepts are more like Taoists in this way than like Buddhists. In Taoism and Zen, this life matters right now, not the system of many lives or the Tao of long ago and far away and everywhere every time. This coincidence of Tao and Zen enjoyment of life does not mean that the Tao is the same as the Buddha Mind, the Unborn, or any of the other metaphysical ideas at the heart

essence of Mahayana many-life systems. Of course, because I am not a Zen or Taoist adept, I could be wrong on these issues, and I welcome the reader to seek for him-herself.

Zen Not Hokey; Not only Life but Zen Can Be Worthwhile.

Zen and Tao adepts try to be fearsome but often they appear more hokey or nerdy. Tao adepts get drunk and write poetry. Zen adepts say they can bring you to awaken if you let them starve you, beat you, yell at you, torment you with puzzles, force you to sit in cramped positions for hours, and make you do their laundry and cook their food. In the end, what reward do you get? Trees look like trees, and flowers smell like flowers; the world is as it is. You can't take that to the bank, and you can't even use it to amuse your friends. You don't learn to use a sword to kill enemies, as in the movies "Kill Bill". It isn't just that Zen is impractical, it seems silly too. Because Zen seems so hokey, we have to ask if Zen is worthwhile.

Suppose Zen monks are extraordinary people who build on human potential to push past what ordinary people could achieve or would want to achieve. Zen achieves but only by negating part of what is most important to being human. Zen is not for ordinary people. Then how is Zen useful for ordinary people? Can ordinary people learn from it? Can they learn enough to make Zen a commendable human activity? We can learn from great pianists even though we cannot play like them. The issue with Zen is different. We can appreciate almost fully what a pianist does even if we could not do it ourselves. Playing great piano does not negate core aspects of human nature even if to achieve it requires sacrifice. We cannot appreciate what a Zen adept does unless we commit to Zen. We have to be willing to erase some core aspects of our human nature even if we do not succeed. There is only so much we can learn from Zen unless we commit to it, and few people do that, or should do that.

So, should normal people spend time on Zen? The answer, of course, depends on the person. All in all, a study of Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen is good for many people. Study as much as you can to the point where you know you are not getting any more out of it, then quit. Keep an open mind toward people who get further along than you are. Don't disparage it.

I don't recommend Zen or meditation as therapy, weight loss, mind expansion, cancer cure, tension relief, or for any other immediate practical benefit. Zen can have those benefits, but I have found that light low-impact exercise, such as swimming or walking, has more long-term benefit, and is easier. Do some Zen because it is interesting. Take it as far as you like it. Don't make more of it than it is. It is only hokey if you make more of it than it is, if you turn it into something you see on TV or in recreation courses.

I have the same comments for Taoism, although I recommend that you stay away from ideas about chi, flow of chi, yin and yang, etc. until you are familiar with good solid basic simple Taoism. You cannot drink your way to the Tao.

Yoga originally was a way of meditation but now is taught as a health exercise. If we do Zen or Taoism without intending to awaken but for the good effects along the way, don't we reduce Zen and Taoism as modern yoga has been reduced? Yes. That is a danger. The difference is that you should be aware of what you are doing and of your limited goals from the beginning, and you should respect people who strive for more even if you do not understand them.

As Time Goes By.

Until about 1700 CE (AD), the world was like this: You got up early in the morning to work hard all day long. The vast majority of people made a living working the ground. Mostly the air and water were clean. The aristocrats rule over peasants arbitrarily. Sometimes there was war. Sometimes the ruling class changed. Sometimes there was disease, flood, famine, fire, or even a bountiful harvest. You had about ten kids. Your parents died, your friends died, sometimes you children died, and then you died. You got what you could out of life, which could be a lot or little. Nothing really changed.

In the world before 1750, traditional religions make sense. It makes sense, as in Buddhism and some Hinduism, to step outside the world to let it go by. It makes sense, in Taoism and some Christianity, to step outside the main flow of politics and conniving to enjoy the world as much as you can. It makes sense, as in the Kingdom of God of Jesus, to work to build a distinct just world of well-intentioned people within the bigger political world. It makes sense, as in Islam, to work for a real Kingdom of God in the bigger political world.

Then about 1750, the world began to change, and kept on changing, faster and faster. I don't go through the changes. Here are a few: Democracy arose. Capitalism arose. The air and water got dirty. We had a mechanical revolution, chemical revolution, electrical revolution, and atomic revolution. We are still having revolutions in biology, artificial intelligence, and micro devices. The new world demands that we participate in a way that the average peasant never dreamed of.

In this new world of change and participation, stepping outside the world, as in Buddhism, Taoism, or some Hinduism, does not make as much sense. Trying to change over the world unilaterally, as in some Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, does not make much sense either. It makes more sense to change the world as much as you can to conform to good principles. You have to find the best principles to live by.

Only if you give up entirely even on the modern world of change and participation does it make sense to step outside the world to watch it go by. Nowadays, few even of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians really want to do that.

Even if the traditional religions don't make sense as originally intended, still, they were built by smart people on solid experience with human nature and the real world, and contain many valuable lessons. We might not be able to follow them as originally intended but we can still learn from them, and apply what we learn to make the new world as good as possible.

You have to decide if the traditional religions make sense in the modern world. You have to decide what to take from them for the modern world.

No Relativism.

If no one path gets us to full complete contact with the bigger-than-me, and all paths get us some contact, then it seems I have drifted into relativism. Maybe I have drifted into relativism to some extent but I don't like the idea that I have drifted into relativism, and I argue against that.

Precisely because no path gets us full direct contact with God (bigger-than-me), it is easier to argue that some paths are better than others. If all paths led to full direct contact, then all would have to be equally good even if they seemed different. That is not so.

Not surprisingly, I still think following the teachings of Jesus, mixed with practicality and Western values, is the best path, and is basic, although I do not disparage other paths. Unless you are in a monastery, or you live quietly somewhere, even while you are doing Taoism or Zen, you still have to work to make a better world and you still have to be a good citizen of a pluralistic modern democracy. You have to try to be decent. At first while you are working for at finding the Tao or waking up, you can ignore the teachings of Jesus and ignore being a good citizen. At first, you might have to shut out distractions until you are adept enough to relax and assess. After then, if you choose to follow Taoism or Zen while not working to make the world better and while not being a good citizen, then you diminish the other path and yourself. Sooner or later, in the modern world, you have to see that you have to do Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism in the context of the modern world, and, to do that, you have to face the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. You do not have to accept that Jesus was the one and only God, although I invite you to think about it.

It is not necessary that the best path be one that almost everybody can follow but I think any path that almost everybody can follow is more likely to be better than other paths, and more likely to be basic to other paths. While in theory, almost everybody can understand, follow, and succeed in Theravada, Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen, in fact, that is not so. Usually only a minority of smart people can do well in those religions and fully succeed, unless we allow that simplistic devotional worship primarily in your own self-interest is full success. Those religions account for the fact that not everybody can follow them by use of ideas such as karma and dharma but that response is not very satisfying. So they are not good candidates for a basic path that everybody can follow. Maybe everybody could be a fundamentalist idiot, but I hope that is not an acceptable alternative. Not everybody wants to be a Jew, nor should they have to be a Jew to be acceptable to God. The same is true of Islam. I don't think people should have to accept Jesus as the one and only God to be acceptable to God - as long as they act well. Everybody might be able to act well along the lines originally imagined by Mohammad but not along the lines that real practiced Islam has turned out. The same is true of most real practiced Christianity. In contrast, the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and basic Western values are easy to understand, and everybody can follow them to some extent. God does not expect perfect success. If, from that base, you want to do more, such as mystic discipline, and you want to try another path, for a while or for a long time, such as Zen, mainstream Islam, of Sufism, then I see no reason why you can't do that. If your heart tells you to go on, or to turn around, then do so. Never lose sight of the basic values of Jesus, practicality, and Western good government.

Think of it this way: You have become enlightened through some form of Buddhism or you have come to know and follow the Tao. Now what exactly are you going to do, stand around and spit at polliwogs? Get drunk every night and write poetry? Read abstruse sutras? Watch too much TV? Complain about how bad everyone else's Zen is and how they are all frauds screwing the masses? If you follow the Tao, the official answer is that the Tao will lead you. If you follow Buddhism, including Zen, the official answer is that you play out your last karma, and that last bit of karma will lead you. Both those answers are glib and lead to a boring life. That is not what the Buddha did. Either Buddhist or Taoist, if you are an adept, you are now able to discriminate correctly, and you are unlikely to be led astray by dogma. You might as

well use your talent and energy to help people, make the world a better place, promote the rule of law (“applies equally to everybody”), and be a good citizen of a modern government. In his time and place, that is what the Buddha did. Or, you can do science and art. If you find yourself getting trapped by life and clinging, then you are able to back off. The Buddha did not get misled when he went back into society somewhat. Maybe doing this is what the Buddha meant by taking awakening back into society and back into the marketplace.

True, helping society is not what the Taoist Chuang Tzu did; in fact, he refused the leadership of a large state in non-democratic China. We don’t all have to be exactly like Chuang Tzu; to imitate him slavishly is to fall into dogma. I would like to try talking Chuang Tzu into helping out a little bit in the different context of a modern pluralistic democracy and in a world where nature desperately needs help. When nature dies, the Tao likely will die too.

Optional Theological Indulgence.

In this section, I return to ideas of mind or Mind.

In the play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder, a character shows off his erudition to his fellow rural “townies” by addressing a posted letter something like: “John Doe, This Number, This Street, This Town, This State, United States of America, North America, Planet Earth, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, Mind of God”. In some official Christian theology, the universe exists in the mind of God. In Classical philosophy, all of Western philosophy until the 1700s, and most Western philosophy even after, the world was evidence of a mind at work. The play “Our Town” is worth reading, and movies of it are worth watching.

I have a similar attitude as Wilder although I hope I am not quite as pretentious as his character. The world is evidence of a mind at work. The mind is moral. We do well when we go along with the mind, including when we follow its moral principles.

Buddhism, to some extent Taoism, and Zen, all have a similar attitude. The world is evidence of a mind at work, the mind is moral, and we have to follow its morality. The world is Buddha Mind. The world is also Emptiness, but it is not too hard to merge the ideas of Mind and Emptiness.

Then what is the difference? In the Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Western tradition that I follow, we have to actively live out the moral principles. In my version, we have to follow the teachings of Jesus. We have to be proactive. We have to actively follow the Golden Rule and actively work hard to make the world a better place. Simply thinking of the world as the realization of a moral mind at work does not lead us to embrace Jesus’ moral principles. The people in “Our Town” would have felt this tacit assumption without Wilder needing to make it explicit, and they lived it in the play.

In stressing the need for action, the Judaic-Christian-Islamic-Western tradition too often gets caught up in zealotry. People feel they need to justify and save themselves, and turn to self-serving zealotry to do so. They end up doing more harm than good.

The East somewhat escapes the curses of justification and zealotry by not requiring that people live out the moral principles that I have described. People do not actively have to work hard to make the world a

better place along the lines of Jesus' morality and Western political ideals. The East has its zealots but the role of religion might be different than in the West and in Islam. Yet, in not stressing these principles, the East never built the kinds of people and institutions that I value.

On one side, Theravada avoids active morality. Mahayana also does that, gets caught up in the joyous system of many lives, and puts its trust in the golden bodhisattva too. In contrast, Zen ignores the joyous system of many lives and does not rely on the bodhisattva. In Zen, people should be moral on their own. It is tempting to see in Zen a useful compromise between the West and East. Because Zen people are so adept at using dogma without getting caught up in dogma, Zen people can be moral along the lines of the best principles while not feeling the need for justification and not becoming zealots. We can have the best of both worlds.

Traditionally Zen did not see itself this way. I don't know how modern Zen adepts think when faced with the need to engage a single world in economic, ecological, and political distress. As far as I can tell, the people who gave Zen to the West, especially D.T. Suzuki, did not think of Zen this way, perhaps because the world then was not one, did not share similar problems of economy and ecology, and problems then seemed amenable to science. The generations of Westerners who took up Zen after them might have seen Zen this way, as a base for limited moral action. I have in mind the Beat generation, Alan Watts, and the people that I met on the West Coast in the 1960s and 1970s. I have not reviewed the work of recent Zen writers to make a case either way. If recent Zen writers did not think that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for moral action, they were well-intended but wrong. If they thought that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for limited moral action, then I would have to know more about their ideas of limited moral action.

As far as I understand Zen, it can't be used as an appropriate base for moral action in the modern world way, and Zen alone can't serve as the basis for the kind of moral action that we need, for all the reasons listed above. Zen clearly stresses Mind as the basis for the world, it avoids the inaction offered by faith in the bodhisattva, and it clearly expects high moral standards; but it cannot alone serve as the basis for the principles, people, and institutions that I have argued for. Those ideas have to be added to the idea of mind that prevails in Zen, at least as Zen is now understood.

I don't know if, in the long run, the Zen stance of mind and morality is a good thing or a bad thing. When the world gets worse, and as the world changes in response to bio-technology and artificial intelligence, it might be that the stance of Taoism and Zen is more useful than the stance of simple the "gung ho moral principles" and "make the world better" that I take. I don't know what that will imply for the mind of God and the teachings of Jesus.

28 Relativism, Hierarchy, and Encompassing

This chapter prepares for the next chapter about Hinduism. A major theme in Hinduism is relativism, the idea that all religions are valid in their own limited way, or “all paths lead to God”. This idea is wrong although well intended. This idea does not come up naturally in most religions but does come up naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism comes in a big system of ideas focused on the idea of the Dharma. Coming in a big system sets the tone for Hinduism. I use the term “system” for a group of people or a group of ideas. The term “system” is not exactly right, and it has a bad reputation from its use during the 1950s through 1980s, but the alternative is a lot of technical terms for different groups of ideas or people; so “system” is the best choice.

PART 1: Relativism

“Relativism” is the idea that what appears true from one point of view is not as true from another point of view; and what appears false from one point of view has much truth from another point of view. “Moral relativism” is the idea that what is good from one point of view might be bad, or not as good, from another point of view; and what appears bad or not-so-good from one point of view might appear good from another point of view. Relativism looks at true, false, good, bad, practical, and impractical with context and point of view in mind. An economic project that might be bad for a neighborhood might be good for the city as a whole.

Is it less morally bad for a poor mother with hungry children to steal than for a financier to embezzle? Is it alright for a woman to seduce a teenage boy but bad for a man to seduce a teenage girl? Many people who allow relativism for some subjects, such as art and economics, do not allow moral relativism. They insist on universal simple moral principles. They do not always follow their own advice in real life practical matters.

Relativism does not arise from lack of human ability. It is unlikely that any evolved finite sentient-moral being could consistently apply simple principles. The world is not perfectly ordered into better and best, more practical and most practical. What is better or more practical really does vary by situation. At the same time, there really are general principles that we want to apply. It is best to try simple and universal at first; use relativism sparingly in particular cases when we have to; and then return quickly to simple-and-universal when we are done with exceptions.

Sources of Confusion.

I am not sure if the world would be better off if we could decide all questions of “better than” but we can’t. The following issues contribute to not being able to decide. The issues are thoroughly mixed up in practice. Mostly I ignore these issues but I have to state them here to get them out of the way properly.

First, often it is impossible to completely rank items with the information available. Joe prefers apples to oranges, prefers oranges to bananas, but prefers bananas to apples. The Detroit Tigers baseball team

beats the New York Yankees, who beat the Boston Red Sox, who beat the Detroit Tigers. Sometimes this issue can be clarified with repetitions, as when the baseball teams play each other many times and the Tigers get the majority of wins over both the Yankees and the Red Sox.

Second, some preferences are entirely subjective, and no comparisons can be made between people. Frank prefers apples to oranges while Bonny prefers oranges to apples. Tim likes brown shoes while Bob likes black shoes. We can't decide whose preference is best although sometimes we can find patterns for groups. Seventy-five percent of people prefer black shoes to brown shoes but that does not mean Tim is wrong to like brown shoes, 25% of the people are wrong to like brown shoes, or black shoes are somehow better than brown shoes.

Many things have a "kind-of" ranking but not an absolute ranking. Most people would agree that the movie "Gone with the Wind" is better than the movie "Sharknado" but not everybody can agree that "Gone with the Wind" is better or worse than "The Godfather, Part One". "Kind-of" rankings are evident in art and religion. When people argue about rankings in art and religion, usually it is hard to figure out what kind of argument they are asserting other than they usually assert something like "that is what I like, and what I like is best in all situations".

Hierarchical (Superior and Inferior) and Encompasses (Includes).

Something is superior to another thing when the first thing is morally better, practically better, or in some way metaphysically better, at least for the situations at hand. A modern gasoline powered car is superior to a horse drawn wagon, at least for getting around a modern city. The Golden Rule is superior to "instant and total retaliatory vengeance for every perceived insult". When we say democracy is superior to kingship, we mean not only practically but morally and metaphysically. When we say a sports car such as a Porsche is superior to a common sedan such as a Camry, we don't mean just practically – in fact a sedan is better practically – we mean practically in some ways and better in other intangible ways that more than make up for any practical deficiencies; essentially we mean metaphysically. When we say a Cadillac is superior to a Chevrolet we mean practically, socially, for prestige, morally, and metaphysically. It is just the case that human minds tend to think with mixed senses like this. We can separate out the senses, but we tend rather to mix them at first.

Something "encompasses", "subsumes", or "includes" another thing when the first thing has all the relevant features of the second thing, in as much quantity, and-or in as-good-or-better quality. We say that a luxury car, such as a Cadillac or Lexus, encompasses a regular sedan such as a Chevrolet or Camry. The luxury car has all the features of the sedan, and better. A dominating championship sports team encompasses other mediocre teams. A Super Bowl winning team has all the features needed to win and has most of them better than other teams have them. Other teams might have one particular feature better than that particular feature on the championship team – another team might have the best kicker – but the championship team has that feature well enough and is better all around at the other features too. A really good gangster movie such as "The Godfather, Parts One and Two" encompasses mediocre gangster movies. It has all the good features that they do, and it has them all better. A good landscape painting has all the features of a mediocre landscape painting, and it has them all better and better arranged. A well-designed well-ordered well-decorated well-run home has all the features of a sloppy home and it has them better.

Usually Superiority and Encompassing go together. When thing A encompasses thing B, thing A is superior to thing B; and when thing A is superior it encompasses thing B. All the examples above show how the two ideas usually come together. When the French say their cooking is superior to that of other nations, they also imply that French cooking encompasses the techniques of other styles, or could easily encompass them by extension of the techniques it already has. The Chinese think the same of their cooking. When we say a democracy encompasses other forms of government, we mean it incorporates them, changes them, transcends them, and is superior to them.

Relativism sometimes contradicts superiority and encompassing. Relativism says we cannot have a neat hierarchy of superior and inferior, encompassing and encompassed. I leave you to figure out counter-examples to the examples above. If both the French and Chinese believe their cooking is superior and encompasses the cooking of all other nations, can both be right? Perhaps there are two best, and those are superior to, and encompass, the cooking of all others but neither is superior to, and encompasses, the cooking of its main rival. We will see this situation among religions.

Agree to Disagree; Tacit Value Judgments.

When people face issues for which they can't objectively decide best, highest, and most encompassing, they agree to disagree. I like Camry and you like Accord, so I buy a Camry and you buy an Accord, and we have fun arguing who got the best deal. You like the Giants and I like the Patriots, and we have fun arguing about which is the best team until they meet in the Super Bowl – and even then we can continue the argument by saying the game did not decide. I like Star Trek while you like Star Wars, and we have fun arguing.

This is not what people have in their hearts. Even while people agree to disagree they do not give up on the secret conviction that they are correct and their opponents wrong. They think their favorite is best, highest, and encompasses all rivals. Anybody who disagrees with them is wrong, mentally deficient, morally deficient, and metaphysically deficient. Anybody who disagrees is inferior and encompassed. "The Godfather" is the best gangster movie, and the best all around movie, and that is the end of it no matter what you say. Benz makes the best cars. Democracy is the best form of government. We see this kind of thinking too among religious believers.

Because what people feel differs from what they say, people fall into self-contradiction and hypocrisy. This result leads us to the difference between good relativism and bad relativism.

Good Relativism and Bad Relativism.

Good relativism happens when people argue about the best movie or best athlete of all time, cannot agree, agree to disagree, know what is in everybody else's heart, and then don't fight over the secrets in their hearts. People appreciate all the movies and athletes even if they don't agree on rank. People do not denigrate any movie or athlete even if they feel the movie or athlete is overrated. Even if overrated, the movie or athlete is still worthwhile, and still has something qualitatively distinct to contribute.

Bad relativism happens when people agree to disagree, secretly believe their choice is best, superior, and encompasses alternatives, look down on others, and secretly fight. Bad relativism occurs when people use relativism to backwardly assert that they are really better and superior.

Whether relativism is good or bad depends on the situation. If people can fight while still pretending to agree to disagree, then relativism is more of a cover for fighting than it is good disagreement. Usually people can't fight when they are under an authority. One dominant member of a group allows other members to disagree as long as it doesn't make much of a difference and does not discomfort the dominant member and the group. The boss allows workers to have their opinion on which movie is the greatest unless the workplace happens to be a movie studio. The boss won't let each worker have an opinion on which is the best sales plan.

Bad relativism can happen when one agent (person or group) really is better than the others but does not come right out to say it and accept the consequences. Sometimes the one better agent does this so the other members can "save face" and so the group can keep the peace, but it is still an odd situation, and it can still go bad. Sometimes the one better agent does it so as to exert power over the others while still keeping up appearances. Bad relativism is like one unusually pretty child saying to all the other children, "oh, we are all just as pretty in our own way". It is like one very good athlete saying to the other children, "oh we are all just as good athletes in our own way, some at golf, some at baseball, and some at table tennis". It sounds good, but it is a cover for being the best, and it is a way of asserting you are the best while asserting there is no best. Only a really confident girl or boy could say this, and they could only be confident if it were not really true.

The one better agent is really using the language of equality and relativism to assert the opposite: the one agent is better, superior, and encompasses the others. It is as if the pretty child said, "Yes, you all have some prettiness but really your prettiness is only a reflection of my prettiness, which is perfect". Or the athletic child said, "Yes you all have some skills but really your skills are only variations of my skill, which is all-around and perfect". Relativism often denies one thing while it asserts that same thing, as in the slogan from "Animal Farm": "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others". Read the book or see the excellent early animated version.

To assert something while at the same time denying that thing is a form of nonsense. From nonsense, we can derive anything. We have to be careful not to derive silly ideas from nonsense.

Problems with relativism are not obvious or easy. It is not too hard to show that (A) asserting something can deny it at the same time; but it is harder to show how (B) one member of a group (one religion) while asserting something good about the group really tacitly asserts superiority and encompassing, so that the one better agent subsumes all the other members of the group as inferior versions. To see this, we need long examples.

Examples of Bad Relativism.

Honest anthropologists run into the problem of bad relativism and self-contradiction with the doctrine of cultural relativism. The slogan "cultural relativism" asserts several ideas, not all compatible, and not all true. Here, it means all cultures look at the world a bit differently, and each is just as right in its own way.

We should respect other people and listen to them. We should not impose our way. We should allow other people to carry on with their way unless we have compelling reasons to intervene. It is like the "Prime Directive" in Star Trek. This idea is a step forward from the common bad attitude of "we are right, they are wrong, they are a danger to us, we must prevail, so let's get them". In this respect, cultural relativism is a good idea.

The idea flounders when it meets a culture that does not share the idea, is bad toward other cultures, and pursues bad ways. These are the Borg in Star Trek TNG. The common example used in anthropology is the Nazis. We cannot be broadminded about Nazis. Non-anthropologists correctly refer to militant Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. "PC" anthropologists are not supposed to use those examples but apparently it is alright to point out how even mainstream Christianity is narrow-minded and selfish. I refuse to allow relativism to excuse any culture that mistreats women and children. I cannot accept child slavery and sex slavery. I cannot accept the abuse of democracy. I do have some cultural and moral absolutes. Nearly everybody does even if they refuse to admit it openly. We all hope to reach a middle ground where we can reject all bad practices and allow only non-harmful practices. We have not done that yet. We cannot do it as long as we insist on PC cultural relativism.

A group that proclaims cultural relativism without thinking through the issues does the same thing that the pretty child or athletic child did above, and does the same thing that a religion does when it proclaims "all paths lead to God". It says that all cultures are equal at the same time that it tacitly asserts that it is better than cultures that do not officially declare for cultural relativism. It is better, and cultures are not equal, just because it asserts that no culture is better and all cultures are equal. It means well, but it is caught in a logical trap, and there is no easy way out. In asserting that all cultures are equal, it indirectly asserts it is superior, and therefore denies that all cultures are equal. This hypocrisy always bothered me about anthropology and political correctness.

This example is easier for PC people to swallow. A serious form of this problem with relativism arises with a simplistic ideology of the free market ("market worship"). In this ideology, a person should be free to make any deal that he-she wishes, without state oversight, even if the deal seems stupid to us, and even if the deal is obviously hurtful to the person. A person can agree to a loan from a loan shark at 10% interest per day. This idea of making a deal depends on a vision of people as autonomous and free. I like this vision of people. Yet, in a world with this freedom, may a person sell him-herself into slavery, or is it possible for a person sell him-herself into slavery? To freely sell yourself into slavery is to negate your freedom. Once a person is a slave, a slave cannot make any deals he-she wishes, and so that being is no longer a person. If "yes", if a person can sell him-herself, then a free person can make him-herself un-free and so make him-herself not a person. If "no", if a free person cannot sell him-herself, then freedom has limits, personhood has limits, and likely people need the state to defend personhood. This issue might seem like intellectual silliness because people nowadays don't sell themselves into obvious slavery. But people nowadays do sell themselves into debt slavery and do sell their children into real slavery. Because most Americans have never seen children sold, omit selling children. Still, people sell themselves indirectly through debt slavery, especially credit card slavery, but including debt for furniture, cars, gadgets, student loans, weddings, houses, vacations, and showing off. Do not fool yourself. Debt slavery is as much slavery as outright selling yourself and your children, and it is just as bad. Debt slavery can be worse because debtors fool themselves that they are free persons who have choice even while really they are un-free slave second-rate-persons with no choice. Much of the rhetoric

of “choice” in the modern world is really meant to deceive people about choice and to make them into slaves while still wrongly feeling free; slogans promoting choice really mean to allow self-deception, undermine choice, and create slavery. This problem paralyzes Congress and allows financiers to hurt the entire economy.

In many classrooms, and in many “good will” institutions such as Scouts, fraternities, sororities, churches, and political associations, one small clique comes up with most of the ideas, and comes up with plans in which everyone fits in. While it appears as if everyone is equal, equally valued, does an equal share, and contributes equally to public benefit, everyone knows that is not true. The clique that comes up with the plan and runs the plan really is “first among equals”. The clique subsumes the other people and makes them reflections of its greater ability. “Queen Bees” depend on this effect. Although the planner clique might be full of good well-meaning people, everybody else always suspects the planners and holds a little grudge because everybody else knows the not-so-secret implications. This result is so common that now it is even a standard theme on sit-coms and “reality” TV shows.

A Good Religious Case.

My brother-in-law is an adept, intelligent, educated, sensitive Buddhist. Because Buddhism does not have bolstered versions of self, and it uses the illusions of everyday life (picks apart) to make points, Buddhism leads easily to relativism. The fundamental truths of Buddhism are called “Dharma”. One day, my brother-in-law said that nearly all truths were relative to human ways of life. Particular truths were true in certain times and situations. He had in mind what anthropologists call “cultural relativism”. There is no absolute right-and-wrong, and no absolute better culture or religion. This good-hearted outlook is part of Buddhist Dharma. I asked him if he thought the Dharma also was relative. He looked dismayed. A day later, he told me he did not think the Dharma is relatively true but is absolutely true, and so there must be at least some absolute truth beyond human minds. The real question is what we make of it.

Self-Contradiction.

Suppose my brother-in-law had continued to assert there are only relative truths. Even the Dharma is relative. Even the idea that tells him all ideas are relative is relative. What about the idea that all ideas are relative? Is the idea that all ideas are relative itself relative? If it is, then in some cases it must be false (or else it would be absolute and not relative), and so there must be some ideas that are not relative. If it is true of all ideas, then it is not relative, and then it is a case of at least one idea that is not relative. This dilemma is an instance of a class of problems called “the liar’s paradox”, illustrated by the example in which a person says of him-herself “I am a liar”. Nearly all relativism is plagued by this problem. How important the problem is depends on the issue. Usually humans have the ability to laugh off the problem and to see what is important about the particular issue. That ability might be one talent that distinguishes us from machines, at least so far.

People too often tacitly contradict themselves when they assert relativism. People assert relativism when they really don’t mean it, when they really believe their view is better; and this stance is a contradiction. We can feel these contradictions even when we can’t always point them out and explain them. We are leery of people who assert relativism because we feel these contradictions.

Suppose a group of co-workers gets together to decide who is the best co-worker. A co-worker can vote for him-herself if he-she likes. About a fifth of workers do vote for themselves but about four-fifths vote for another co-worker who they really believe is best. One co-worker publicly declares, "I think we are all equally good co-workers. Nobody is best. I can't decide who to vote for. If I have to vote, then I vote against myself because I know my own faults". Nobody really believes this. Everybody thinks this is self-serving crap. By asserting that nobody is best, the person really asserts that he is best because he is so broadminded, fair, and generous. The person negates what he asserts, a version of the liar's paradox. In asserting relativism, and tacitly asserting that he is best because he is so generous, he also asserts that he encompasses the lesser views of smaller-minded co-workers, and that he is superior. He asserts that he is better, superior, and encompasses others. In so doing, he contradicts himself again. Other people feel this ploy even when they can't spell it out.

The same is true for most of the cases of bad relativism described above. When the pretty child says, "we are all pretty", he-she really says, "I am prettiest; I am better, superior, and encompass all you other plain children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When the athletic child says, "We all have sports that we are good in", he-she really means, "I am the all around better athlete and could beat any of you in any sport; I am better, superior, and encompass you other mediocre children". He-she contradicts him-herself. When one culture insists on cultural relativism, it really says, "Because I am so tolerant and open minded, I am really better than all you other cultures that insist your way is best. I am better, superior, and encompass you smaller-minded cultures". The supposedly broad-minded culture contradicts itself. When PC people insist on the same generous relativistic values, they do the same thing.

In the case of the office workers, it is just a fact that some co-workers are better than others. Yet once the first person has declared that nobody is a better worker than anybody else, everybody else has to go along or else they will seem narrow minded and selfish. They have to go along even when they know it isn't true. This trap adds to the bad feelings in such cases. This trap springs in all the other cases too, such as the pretty child, athletic child, cultural relativism, and PC, and adds to our consternation in those cases as well.

Of course, it is possible to say "everybody is just as good as everybody else", "we're all pretty", "be fair to other cultures", and "all paths lead to God", and to really mean them. Some people really do have good simple hearts and really do say these things out of the true goodness of their simple hearts. Some people might know what they say is false, and might even know that they are better than others, but want to keep the peace and keep good relations. That is a good motive even when it deals in falsehoods and is self-contradictory. We have to develop a sense of when people are sincere or not sincere about such things. Evolution likely gave us the basic tools for this job.

"All Paths Lead to God".

The idea "all paths lead to God" is religious relativism. It says no one religion is better than all others, all religions have major truth, each religion has some truths that it expresses best, we should not denigrate any religion, and we should learn about other religions. It is hard to argue with that intention.

People mean "all paths lead to God" in three ways. In the first, people say one religion is better for some things, some issues, some people, in some situations while another religion is better for other things, on

other issues, for other people, in other situations. Buddhists often told me that Christianity was better for social issues while Buddhism was better for personal salvation. A variation is: the religion into which people are born is good for them while other religions are good for the other people who are born into those religions: Protestantism is good-and-true for born Protestants while Roman Catholicism is good-and-true for born Roman Catholics.

The second kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way, each has strengths and weaknesses, each finally gets to God, and no single religion is clearly the truest and best. In either case, because no one religion is best, you might as well stick with the one you are born with unless you want to convert. For this chapter, you can take “all paths lead to God” either way but keep both in mind.

The third kind of relativism says that all religions are good-and-true in their own way but our religion is best. More particularly, all religions except Hinduism are merely good-and-true in their own way but Hinduism is best and encompasses other religions. Other religions are lesser versions of Hinduism. Other religions are not bad as far as they go but they are not Hinduism. I defer this topic until the next chapter. For now, focus on the first two kinds of religious relativism.

The idea “all paths lead to God” is factually wrong. It is only possibly true when limited to traditional “high” religions such as the ones described in this book. Even then, it is only possibly true when we insist those religions stick to the best moral principles. That is what many people really mean when they say “all paths lead to God”: all religions can get us to act well when they teach their best ideas. Most people don’t think “all paths” is true of belief in ghosts, demons, the devil, spirits of dead flowers, enchanted frogs, zombies, and other superstitions. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions such as voodoo even when voodoo does little harm, or true of variants of Hinduism that practice violence such as Thugs and worshippers of bad Kali. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that claim you get to heaven by chanting the name of a deity over and over. Most people would not like “all paths” to be true of religions that say you go to heaven by suicide bombing or by killing innocent children in a shopping mall. We don’t want it to be true of religions that say girls should not go to school.

If we want “all paths lead to God” to apply only to religions when religions uphold best moral principles, then why don’t we just say, “following the best moral principles leads all people to God”? In fact, that is what I have been saying throughout the book. I don’t dwell on it again here.

The idea of “all paths lead to God” is like the cases of relativism from above, in particular the cases of bad relativism. The religion that first says “all paths” claims the “moral high ground”. Even while appearing to say all religions are the same, in fact, it says it is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions because it sees that “all paths lead to God” while other religions do not. It contradicts itself. It asserts its superiority while pretending to assert equality. The religion that proclaims “all paths” is the pretty religion among other plain religions. It is hypocritical. I have the same uneasy feeling about “all paths” that I do about cultural relativism and political correctness. I would much rather we are honest about differences and that we focus on the best general moral principles. I would much rather we see how all religions can be interpreted to lead to the values that serve the modern democratic pluralistic world.

Most people want “all paths” to be true in that sense and to lead to good things too. To appreciate what people want with “all paths”, we have to see the alternative. Unless we are careful, the alternative is religious intolerance, which quickly leads to ethnic, political, social, economic, and gender intolerance. People use religion as an excuse to look down on others, oppress them, take advantage of them, and hurt them. If it is a choice between mildly hypocritical “all paths lead to God” versus intolerance and badness, then we should choose mild hypocrisy every time. Who knows, maybe by indulging in mild hypocrisy, we take advantage of tolerance and peace to actually learn about each other. Maybe we learn the good points of each other’s different beliefs. Maybe we learn the best moral principles and we begin to live by those. If we can actually live by the best moral principles then the details of belief don’t matter that much. That is how I promote the idea of “all paths”.

In dwelling on differences in religious beliefs, I hope I have not promoted intolerance but instead gotten people beyond differences to the best moral principles.

Many people want “all paths” to be true in another sense. This sense is a little self-serving but it also does little harm, and so I don’t mind much. People vary in their basic character, their basic “true you”; usually a particular character does little harm; often a particular character adds to the diversity and fun of life; and we want to encourage the expression of individual character in all ways rather than discourage it in any particular way. Different people want to pray, chant, give alms, meditate, do Tai Chi, sing in the choir, practice random acts of kindness, teach small children religious lessons, work in the community center, practice mindfulness, wear particular items of clothing, etc. They don’t want to think they have to give up these practices, take up meditation, or eat only a “kosher” diet or “hallal” diet. They want to think God enjoys the traditions of their ancestors, and to think the traditions of their ancestors lead them closer to God. They want to think that these various practices all have a value, and that no practice has much more value than any other. This is all fine with me. Most of these practices have value to society and they help people think about goodness. No practice actually takes a person directly to God, but nothing does that, the practices do little harm, and they do some good.

Most people use the common practices of their religion to justify their search for success. They have a family altar, give to certain charities, support a church, read particular scriptures, and ask for guidance in their business. People don’t want to think their practices are not crucial to their success, don’t like to think the practices of other religions are more likely to support success, and don’t like to think they have to switch. (People do switch during times of religious change, but that is another issue.) The idea of “all paths” does not really support the quest for success but espousing the idea at least prevents eroding your hope that your religious practices are alright in the eyes of God.

Some gifted people interpret “all paths” in the following way. We will see that Hinduism interprets it this way. People have different temperaments. Some people approach God through heart while others go through the mind. Some people can approach God through the intellect, some through moral actions, some through community action, some through devotion and worship, and some through meditation and yoga. There is no reason to believe any of these approaches is better than any other. All can lead a person to good moral principles and a correct view of nature and human life.

Some Specific Objections to “All Paths Lead to God”.

If it is worth putting up with the hypocrisy of “all paths lead to God” to gain tolerance and peace, and to allow human diversity, then why do I make such a big deal about the idea? Why do I pick on Hinduism as an example of what makes me uneasy?

First, people need to be clear about what they are doing. People need to see the whole situation around religious relativism. The slogan “all paths” gives an excuse not to think.

Second, the idea of religious relativism annoys me. It is factually not true, and I would rather people face up to facts first before deciding they have to make an end run around the facts. The self-contradiction and hypocrisy in the idea bother me in the same way that they bother me about cultural relativism and political correctness.

Third, the idea allows people to be complacent about their religion and about bad practices. Not all points of all religions are great. Some points really are bad. We need to search our religion for the deep best moral principles. If necessary, we need to push our religion to be more faithful to those moral principles. If we find bad ideas, bad principles, bad interpretations, bad acts, and lies, we need to be sure those are not part of our religion. We need to get after the bad people.

Fourth, once the idea of “all paths” got “into the air”, then all religions had to take it up or else sink back to militancy. It is like the co-workers above. Religions have to say it even when they don’t believe it and would rather go after domination. Suppose one truth modest religion says in contrast, “Wait, we are not all equal and alike. Some things in my religion are not very good just as some things in your religion are not very good. Let’s sort this out.” That religion gets branded falsely as a reactionary militant bad guy seeking domination when that religion is in fact the most reasonable. This is one of the bad result of the hypocrisy and self-contradiction latent in the idea.

Fifth, I don’t like the result that religions that proclaim “all paths lead to God” tacitly assert they are better, superior, and encompass other religions. If you want to assert you are better, superior, and encompass other religions, then do so openly, and do so on solid grounds. The idea of “all paths lead to God” is not enough to make this claim.

Relativism and Not Knowing God Fully.

People cannot know God fully and completely, not even mystics, not through intellect, emotions, intuition, or devotion. The prophets do not give a full picture of God. If we could know God fully now, we would not need to meet him after we die. Even after death, I doubt that meeting him is all about knowing him fully. Thus all religions are only approximations. How does this belief differ from “all paths lead to God”? How is this belief not faulty relativism?

This belief differs in all the ways described above. Even if we can’t know God fully, we do have good enough principles of moral action. We know what to do. That is a good enough start. We don’t need to know in other ways. We are not prevented from using our imaginations.

While no single path knows God fully, still, some paths are better than others, and some attitudes are better than others. Any path that emphasizes the best moral principles is better than any other path that

does not. Any path that consistently accepts truth, especially scientific truth, is better than any other path that does not. Any path that leads to honest, decent, interesting, useful people is better than any other path that does not. Any path that is leery of “all paths lead to God”, and does not use it to tacitly assert its own superiority, is better than any path that falls into line behind “all paths” and uses it to assert its own superiority.

My belief is a weak form of relativism, weak enough so I don't worry about it. Other relativism is strong enough to worry about.

PART 2: Systems, Especially Systems of Ideas.

Some idea systems are small, and are aimed mostly at situations that occur in a limited world, often daily, such as the shop manuals for a mechanic or textbooks on how to program apps for smart phones. Some idea systems are big, and aim to cover as much of life as they can such as the legal code for the United States. Mostly this difference between big and small is intrinsic and marks the character of a system. It is hard to extend a shop manual to encompass all of American life, and it is hard to make an app to cover all aspects of life although app writers appear aiming at that goal. A lawyer can specialize in “family law” or “business law” but all kinds of law eventually have to fit together into a total system of law under some general principles.

Big systems tend to be “idea systems that eat the world”, that is, they explain everything in their terms and they explain away what they cannot explain in their terms. Small systems do not. Big systems and “systems that eat the world” do not exactly coincide but I can't go into differences here. For here, take all big systems as idea systems that eat the world.

Recall that true science is not a system that eats the world. True science is open to testing in ways that big systems that eat the world avoid. From convenience, daily science often is a self-validating big system that eats the world, but scientists know the difference, and know how to get out of that rut into true science when they need to. I do not deal more with science here.

The famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz said all cultures are idea systems that offer a total way of life to their people, and that the ideas are encoded in symbols, rituals, art, religion, etc. “If you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way, from your first drawn breath to your last dying day”. In my terms, a culture would be a big system that eats the world. After him, anthropologists tended to see in religion the core code for culture. If you are a Thai Buddhist, you are a true Thai; you can only be a true Thai if you are a Thai Buddhist. I don't think Geertz' idea can be always true. Some cultures are intrinsically less comprehensive than other cultures. The “small” cultures get along well in their world but they can't take in the whole world and especially they can't take in the whole modern world. They do not offer big idea systems that eat the whole world and that would appeal to people of other cultures. Beautiful as it is, a culture on New Guinea is less likely to take in the whole world and to appeal to a Chinese person than Chinese culture aims to take in the whole world and might appeal to a non-Chinese. The culture of a small radical Protestant church might be beautiful and good for its people as long as they stick to the limits of their world but it is not as big as the culture of Roman Catholicism and likely appeals to fewer people. Wonderful as they are, Italian cooking is not French and Thai cooking is not Chinese. This idea is not politically correct but it is true just the same. Anthropologists sometimes mislead themselves by treating every culture as if it

were one of the great comprehensive cultures of the world, and treating great comprehensive cultures of the world as if they were another tribe. For this book, assume that a big system is bigger, aims to be total and closed, and aims to take in the whole world.

Life in a Big System.

Life in a big system differs from life in a small system. Not all small systems are the same and not all big systems are the same, but big systems do have some features in common, and do share some common feelings.

To get across the feel of life in a big system, I compare small systems to small businesses such as “mom and pop” groceries in a big city, small farmers, and professional people such as dentists while I compare big systems to large business firms (“corporations”), universities, and whole professions such as “the law”. Any anthropologist who reads this would “cry foul” but I can’t describe a real large system so I have to use what I can. I don’t think the problems are so big that they invalidate the comparison. I deal in idealized abstracts here. To avoid lawsuits, I do not use real names, and I avoid allusions to real firms. So don’t read anything into this.

A small grocery store does not stock everything, and the owners don’t have to know everything about all the items they stock. A large department store with a supermarket has to stock a much greater variety and the buyers for the chain have to know a lot about the produce, grains, dairy products, fruit, clothes, and shoes that they buy. So you might think an employee in a big store would have a broader outlook than in a small store; but this is not so. Each employee in a small store might not know everything about every product but he-she knows something about a lot of products. Employees in a big chain only know about their specialty. A shoe clerk knows about shoes, not about rice. Managers don’t know everything about shoes and rice, they know about the people who know about shoes and rice. Paradoxically, people in big systems often have a smaller scope than people in small systems even though the big system tries to encompass everything. Farmers brag they have to know plumbing, carpentry, electricity, mechanics, computers, air conditioning, biology, and all skills. People in big systems are specialists while people in small systems are generalists.

Contrast the watch counter at a big chain super store with a store that sells watches. To the employee in the big store, watches are merely items. They differ in price and in details but they have little character. Any item outside the watch counter has no character. To an employee in a watch store, each watch is distinct, and some watches are works of art. Watches have character.

Employees in large chains sometimes recognize repeat customers but they rarely get to know them and the customers rarely get to know the employees. For a small store, personal relations are often the key to success. Even if the small store can’t give regular customers much of a discount, still the employees get to know the customers, and the customers get to know the employees. In a small system, relations are between persons. In a big system, relations are between kinds. In the army, all officers are officers while all enlisted people are enlisted people. For the most part, all majors are majors and all sergeants are sergeants. On a football team, it matters a lot who plays quarterback. In a big store, relations are between customer and check-out clerk; stocker and night manager; day manager and retail clerk; check-out clerk and stocker; producer clerk and dairy clerk; and etc. Relations in a big system are like the

feeling that students have at football games. The students of one school see the students of the other school only as “them” and as rivals. Relations in a small system are like the feeling that students have when they meet other students as fellow engineers at a convention or like fellow competitors in a chess tournament.

The most important relations in a big system are variations of power. Who ranks above and below, who has seniority, and who has any ownership, are the key distinctions. There is a “chain of command”. It is a good idea to keep power relations in mind and never to break the chain of command. In a little system, while power is important, personal relations are added to the formal chain of command. A fun example of this is in the TV show “Pawn Stars” on the History Channel.

It is not possible for an employee in a big department store, university, law firm, or corporation, to know everybody. Instead, people focus on techniques that help their personal success. Their personal circle shrinks within the big circle of the system. They get to know a small clique. The members of the clique mutually support each other. The members of the clique think of other cliques as their natural enemies even when the cliques are in the same store, school, or firm. The natural unit of social life in a big system is the clique. Nobody outside the clique is “one of us”. Small towns are cliquish too but life there can be a bit better than in an institution. Small farmers are natural competitors but they compete indirectly so they are also natural friends. Farmers get to know other farmers. They share information, friends, and even share help in hard times. They can learn to trust each other and treat each other as persons. Any other farmer, or any resident of the associate local town, can be “one of us”.

Cliques in big systems treat other people badly and don’t seem to care much. I have seen professors in a clique scuttle the good work of a person outside the clique for no reason other than he-she was not “one of us” and might get money that we might want but didn’t have yet. Cliques rationalize this behavior by saying the system will take care of all people so they personally don’t have to take care of other people. If Joe doesn’t get the money we want, then Joe will get some other money when we don’t want that other money. If I stop Susie from a promotion now, Susie will get a promotion later. If we get Ted demoted in our section, he can move to another section. This kind of behavior, and the self-deceptive rationalization, is meat for all the lawyer shows on TV. People in small systems might treat other people badly but they can’t fool themselves that the system will make up for what they do or that they are blameless. In small systems, even moderate competitors tend not to treat each other badly and tend to help out as long as they don’t hurt themselves. A clock store that sells Citizen but not Rolex might really send a customer to a nearby Rolex store. A wheat farmer will tell a corn farmer of a disease to watch out for. If you don’t help a neighbor douse a fire, you have nobody to blame but yourself.

Big systems, the parts in big systems, and the cliques in big systems, feel superior to small systems and feel they can encompass small systems even when the small systems show superiority in some aspects. A supermarket is bigger than a “mom and pop” grocery store, and encompasses it because the big store stocks every item in the mom and pop store, often at a lower price. Chain stores encompass local stores by setting up franchises, or turning local stores into franchises. A law firm that specializes in family law can beat and encompass the local “general practice” lawyer.

Big systems make small actors and small systems relative in the same way that they encompass them. The work of a big construction firm becomes the backdrop against which you hire plumbers, electricians,

cement men (people). You evaluate the small contractors in reference to the big construction firm. You evaluate the local doctor by reference to the clinic or hospital in the big city. More exactly, you evaluate the work of the local doctor by reference to the clique of specialist doctors at the big teaching hospital across the state. You evaluate ideas about salvation from the local preacher by reference to doctrines from Thomas, Luther, or Calvin. You evaluate the teaching of the local community college professor by the ideas of the clique at the big university somewhere.

Small systems are not all wonderful. As anybody knows who has lived in a village or small town, the lack of privacy is maddening. Big systems have their good points, including privacy, variety, and the comfort needed to get something done. People can be happier in cities than small towns. Big systems offer a sense of security and comfort. They give some people a clear world.

It is not the case that all big systems are totalitarian nightmares made up of horrible selfish people like the robot of market-worship capitalism while all small systems are like "The Andy Griffith Show". It is more a case of how to draw the line between "us" and "them", and how to act across the line sometimes. People in small systems can learn to draw the line more widely and can learn to be nicer across the line. That is what Jesus and other teachers wanted to show: draw the line more widely as you would with people in a small town. You should act nicely to many other people as the residents in one small town act toward the residents in another town, even when the two towns play each other in football. Sometimes people in big systems can learn to draw the line widely because they are safe in their clique and because they are more used to strangers, but not often.

Hierarchy, Policy, and Actual Behavior.

In almost all enduring human groups, people depend on each other. Often they depend on each other because one person does one small part of a whole job while another person does another small part of a whole job, and they need each other's small jobs to do the whole job. They use what economists call "division of labor" and they are what old anthropologists called "functionally differentiated and mutually dependent". In a hunting party, some people "herd" the deer while other people wait to shoot the deer. In a garment factory, some people cut large pieces of cloth stacked in many layers while other people sew the pieces together.

In a big system, an important division is between management and everybody else. Management almost always has more power, and the chain of command goes from workers up through layers of managers to a top level of a few people. Usually this arrangement is good because it is not possible to run most big organizations democratically. Even worker-owned firms need managers. Managers get paid more, for reasons I don't go into. There is a strong line between workers and managers. Although workers are different, and some workers see themselves as more important than others, the line between managers and workers is always bigger than any line between workers.

All organizations have to balance realities: the organization as a whole has to go on if anybody is to gain from the organization; everybody needs everybody else; but management has more power and gets paid more; and the line between workers and managers is the biggest line. If the people in an organization accept that the organization is made up of other persons like themselves, then the organization also has

to put that fact in the balance. Usually “common humanity” goes in the balance on the side of “everybody needs everybody else”.

Organizations find their own balance in many ways. Almost always the ways include some hypocrisy because all the facts can't be perfectly reconciled. People learn to live with that. In modern business firms, and other large modern organizations such as schools, the balance gets expressed in a policy with a formal policy statement. Rarely can organizations live up to the policy. Instead, organizations develop a pattern of balances of real behavior that the people in it can live with. Not everybody is equally happy with the pattern of real behavior, and it is rarely perfectly fair, but people still live with it. So there is a gap between formal policy and real lived policy. Idealists might lament this reality of the human situation but we have dealt with it for a long time, and the ability to deal with it is likely part of our evolved nature.

I have noticed we can divide these situations into roughly two kinds. The kinds are similar to the division between big systems and small systems but not exactly. It is not worth going into the details here.

In the first kind, the organization has a general policy, usually an idealistic statement about how we all depend on each other. The policy is beautiful but vague, so people in the system don't have to live up to it, and, in fact, don't live up to it. Higher people use the vagueness to keep power while excusing what they do and while giving lower people tokens to mollify them. Management uses the vagueness to maintain its position while asserting the policy symbolically. Management says: “we are all in it together”; sacrifices are recognized and appreciated; a person is better off in the firm than out of the firm despite any inequalities; the firm must have some inequalities; when the firm benefits, the people at the top benefit more but everybody benefits some; and “a rising tide floats all boats”. The ideology is much like the national ideology of induced economic growth. When things are going fairly well, this situation can result in a good feeling, as with big business firms in America in the 1950s and with some tech companies from the 1990s through today (look up “good places to work” on the Internet). When things are going poorly, people feel exploited but locked into the system, and fear leaving the system even when they are exploited, much like workers in a “one factor town” and much like the American middle class has felt since about 2000. The more that managers talk about freedom, choice, and working together, the less people believe them. People pretend they are all equal, and because they pretend, they are far from equal, likely far less equal than if they didn't pretend.

In the second kind, people accept differences but try hard to work across them. People take the policy to heart even when they know it is not fully realistic. People offer specific acts and relations to keep the situation better, to help people feel more like people, yet that do not undercut the ability of the system to keep going, and do not undercut everybody's benefit. In business, people offer specific acts and relations to help workers and managers to get along without undercutting the ability of the firm to make a profit and so without undercutting everybody's job. They look only for modest levels of benefits, and they work to reduce health care costs. When the firm profits, they expect all to benefit too, and to benefit fairly; they do not expect the owners to take all the increase. Because people accept that they are not equal, they achieve more real equality than if they pretend they are. This situation irks somebody committed to strong democracy and equality, and it sounds like an excuse for petty fascism, but it is still true. It helps to read Anthony Trollope's short good novel “The Warden”.

We see the first kind in political correctness. We see it among leaders of Black and Hispanic rights. We see it in schools which adopt high-sounding policies about racial equality and students having a future but which graduate few students and which give little real education even to students who do graduate. We see it in America since about 1980 with rising income disparity and no sense of national commitment by rich people. We see it in big business firms that call everybody by a nice sounding name to make them feel as if they are a part of the firm when really they are just an employee, terms such as “sales associate” and “repair technician”. These firms hire as many part-time “temporary” employees without benefits as they can so as to avoid any real commitment, and they give skimpy benefits when they do give benefits. They do not match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They brag about how many employees advance up the ranks while overlooking how many quit, how many employees they have in total, and how many do not advance up the ranks. They make up ranks to advance in, such as “first and second assistant floor manager”, like some martial arts schools make up many colored belts with different steps in each color.

We see the second kind in firms that hire and train employees so as to keep them, have full time long-term employees, give as good benefits as they can consistent with survival of the firm, and keep safe pleasant working conditions. They match employee contributions to retirement and charities. They listen to workers. They adopt employee suggestions. Employees listen to managers and trust them. People know the firm has a leader, and the leader sometimes has to “kick ass”, but people respect that and value it. They handle conflicts with face-to-face meetings in conditions designed to give everybody a say. We see this pattern also sometimes in small schools or “pilot” schools. Keeping an organization like this was the point of the movie, xxxxxxx, starring Chris Farley and David Spade.

We see this same difference between, one the one hand, religions with good policy statements about how everybody is valuable under God or the Dharma but which do little specifically, and in which privileged people are able to interpret policy to maintain their privilege, versus, on the other hand, religions that encourage people to go out and do specific things to make life better.

Rule of Law and Other Good Institutions.

To have the rule of law, we cannot treat everybody as a distinct individual and we cannot respect all their personal connections and status. We have to treat people as persons but not as any particular kinds of persons. We have to treat people as the same. This sounds like the big business firm with the beautiful but deadly policy, yet it is not. We should not confuse the platitudes of equality-within-an-institution with the rule of law in a democracy. On the other hand, we also have to respect natural kinds of persons such as “child”, “parent”, and “old”. We have to accept that differences in nature and differences in wealth and power can lead to injustice, and call out for redress. If not, the rule of law has little practical benefit. So we have to find a balance between “people are all the same” versus “people are different”. In finding the balance, we run into all the problems from above. We have to not use platitudes to make ourselves feel good while overlooking specific problems. In redressing any grievances, we have to not give any group too much power, and so undercut the ability of the system to help everybody. This is the balance that the West has sought, starting from its roots in the teachings of Jesus and in Greek thinking. Only if a culture-society finds this balance can it develop good institutions. The rule of law begins with the idea of similar persons, and it depends on this balance with different persons.

Two Kinds of Religion.

All major religions except Taoism and Zen developed big ideological systems that eat the world. (Some versions of magical Taoism developed big ideological systems that eat the world and Zen inherited such systems from Mahayana.) The most organized big system for Christianity likely is "Thomism", the thought of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, in Roman Catholicism; but it is not the only one. Protestant Existentialism amounts to such as system. The Christian system of God, the Trinity, Jesus as the Emanation of God, archangels, the Devil, angels, eternal souls with almost total free will, Justification, etc. amounts to a big ideological system that can easily be borrowed when theologians want to build their own rigorous system. Christians built it as a combination of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism. Marxism developed a wonderful system which fairly closely goes along with the Christian system. Islam developed big systems also by borrowing from Classical philosophy. Judaism developed the Talmud(s) because it needed to regulate life to survive. Judaism also borrowed from Classical philosophy and, I think, Gnosticism. Mahayana and Hinduism are good examples of big idea systems that eat the world. Hinduism is likely the best, fullest, and most beautiful example.

Major religions develop big systems that eat the world because they have to compete with other religions, they want to convert and hold people, and being able to explain everything makes believers feel powerful. Likely the biggest reason religions develop big idea systems that eat the world is because it goes along with, and directly serves, the state. Once people accept a big system that eats the world, they find it hard to think in other terms and to leave the system. Judaism began to develop such as system after Israel rose in power under David and Solomon. Christianity developed systems after it became the semi-official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. Islam developed big idea systems after it became the official religion of governments around Baghdad, Alexandria, and Tehran. I do not explain how states and big idea systems that eat the world go together. Religions that did not develop big idea systems would be at a competitive disadvantage.

Although all major religions developed big idea systems that eat the world, not all major religions began that way. The deistic religions in the Judaic tradition, including Christianity and Islam, did not begin with a big idea system but with small clear ideas about a single moral God. Theravada began in a context of big systems but gave them up for a small clear idea about life not being worthwhile. Taoism never needed or developed a big system. For the most part, Zen got rid of big systems.

Mahayana and Hinduism began in big systems and then solidified the systems. Big systems, and the way of life in big systems, are intrinsic to Mahayana and Hinduism, and natural to them.

Sometimes people in big systems rebel against the system and form small systems within the big system, at least for a while. I do not go into whether this is the same as a clique. Something like this happened with Protestantism within Roman Catholicism until Protestantism developed its own big systems. This is the feeling that the "Mad Max" movies tried to convey, as when groups called themselves "tribes". Small-within-big also happens in Hinduism but Hinduism is able to make revolts relative and so to neutralize and absorb them.

Americans where I grew up intrinsically distrust big systems for all the reasons above. They also distrust small tight societies but I am not sure if their distrust of small societies equals their dislike for big systems.

Americans dismiss big systems as “bureaucracy”, “government”, and “church”. Their dismissal is ironic, and all-the-more warranted, because America has among the biggest bureaucracies and government structures in the world. Maybe American dislike of big systems is one reason why we are attracted to Taoism, Zen, and, sometimes, to Buddhism.

Among all major religions, Christianity seems best able to maintain the behavior typical of small systems while in the middle of a big system. Christians were taught to treat their neighbors in all contexts much the way good citizens in villages treat their neighbors, and Christians have preserved the ability despite the growth of large systems. They can extend the line, and work across the line, better than can believers in other religions, most of the time. Christians have the attitude of the small system generalist. They tend to see other people as people and not as mere roles; at the same time, they respect duty and do not let personal relations overcome duty. I am not saying Christians are perfect and do not suffer from the faults of both small and large systems. I am only saying Christians were able to overcome faults well enough often enough to build good institutions.

This distinction of Christianity might be why Jesus still appeals to Americans even though they do not like big systems. They see in the lived value system of Jesus the values that they like even if Americans are wary of values that were added to Christianity when it became a big institution serving the state. Taoists, followers of Zen, and some Buddhists in the West seem to strive to set up and keep this “small system” feeling in their temples and communities. That is one reason why they appeal to Americans. It can be fun to go to a Taoist, Zen, or Buddhist “school”. To me, it seems Taoists, Zen followers, and Buddhists are blending Christian ideas with Taoist, Zen, and Buddhist ideas; and that is a good thing.

29 Hinduism: Not “All Paths Lead to God”

Here I would like to quote the Beatles from their “Maharishi” “Hindu” phase but may not. Listen to songs such as “Fool on the Hill” and “Within You, Without You”. Listen to “Penny Lane”, particularly the verse about the nurse who feels as if she’s in a play.

PART 1: Introduction

First Words.

This chapter is not as long as it seems. A lot of material is optional and is marked as such.

Hinduism is beautiful. It fosters huge imagination and feels like a grand adventure. It has profound ideas such as we are all alike and we should feel compassion for everyone. Yet Hinduism also is a big system; eats the world; combines moral relativism, class society, and traditionalism; uses bad relativism (“all paths lead to God”); asserts it is superior to other religions; encompasses other religions; sees most people as tokens in a game rather than as persons; and subverts its own ideals. Indian society is cut into rigid classes, has a gap between rich and poor, and is sexist. Indian culture and Hinduism foster people who are legalistic, argumentative, haughty, superior, and pushy. In the past, Hinduism served Indian society well. Now, it needs to be re-thought to remain viable in the pluralistic democracy and capitalism of the present and future.

I am uneasy with Hinduism. It uses a beautiful vision to support ideas, acts, and relations that I don’t like. Hinduism is like Romanticism, and Romanticism already has too much bad influence. Americans already have an attitude that enables faults similar to those of Hindu Indian society. Ideologies like Hinduism appeal to Americans. Americans likely won’t adopt Hinduism but Americans could adopt a doctrine like Hinduism and so overlook Jesus and Western values. To do justice to issues, this chapter is long. To get a feel for how a belief system like Hinduism can merge with Western culture, read: Herman Hesse: “Steppenwolf”, “The Glass Bead Game”, “Siddhartha”, and “Narcissus and Goldmund”; Aldus Huxley’s “Brave New World”; and stories by Jorge Luis Borges.

Disclaimers.

This chapter assesses what a thoughtful Hindu might believe, not widespread popular religion. Much of what I say also applies to: Mahayana, Romanticism, Gnosticism, Descent, Emanation, levels of reality, God sleeping, the world as a dream, dreams within dreams, and good and evil need each other; but I can’t go into those topics. For Arjuna, Krishna, and the Bhagavad Gita, see the chapter here on Codes. The term “system” is used loosely and does not refer to Western formal ideas from after about 1930. See the chapters on Issues for more about systems that eat the world.

I omit aspects of Hinduism that Hindus might consider important, such as the stages of life, the Code of Manu, purity, ascetics, world renunciation, world conquering, and Hindu deities. I do not discuss the roots of ideas except for brief mention of some documents such as the Vedas and Upanishads. For some of this material, see the Bibliography.

If all French Roman Catholics converted to Hinduism, they would still act like French Roman Catholics for generations. If all Indian Hindus converted to Lutheranism, they would still act like Indian Hindus for generations. Religion is not only some beliefs, acts, and attitudes. Religion is more a product of culture than of dogma, and it shapes culture. Hinduism is more an aspect of Indian culture than the product of dogma. Here I can only describe ideas and attitudes. I can't settle relations of culture to religion.

Contrary to what Americans think, Indian culture is closer to Russian culture than Chinese or Arab culture. Indian culture is one branch in Indo-European culture, which includes American culture. Most features of Hinduism are true of other Indo-European cultures. I can't definitely separate Hinduism from other Indo-European cultures. Other groups in South Asia share a version of Indo-European culture that is related to Indian culture but the people are not Hindu, such as in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Some groups in South Asia are not Indo-European but did contribute to Indian culture and Hinduism, such as Bengalis and Dravidians. I can't sort out all this either.

I do not describe Hinduism so much as an ideological system that is like Hinduism. I use American pop culture to describe Hinduism. What I do is like using "Bollywood" (the Indian film industry) to explain the MSNBC or FOX view of American politics. Even so, I think I don't distort too much.

Just as I can't untangle culture and religion, so I can't see Hinduism apart from the fact that it is a big system etc. I report on what I know from my reading and from having known Hindus.

Young Hindus will change Hinduism as it goes around the world.

People live in both ideal and real systems at the same time: the ideal American Constitution versus the bizarre political reality that Americans have lived in since about 1980; or ideal Christianity versus the real lived Christianity of a particular community church. The real system is most important but we have to get at it from the ideal. For many reasons, people insist wrongly that, in their case, the ideal is the real. To overcome their objections requires mountains of evidence. This book is not that kind. I mix the ideal and real, using the ideal to catch glimpses of the real, and without justifying what I say.

Every criticism of Hinduism also can be aimed at all major religions except maybe for Taoism, Zen, and simple moral teachings such as of Jesus. I don't point out where we also should criticize other religions except in a few places. Why I pick on Hinduism should be clear. I consistently defend the teachings of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. I stress Western ideas of the person against Hindu ideas of Dharma, karma, and system.

Hindus argue about whether the world is all-one, dual, plural, dual in single, single in dual, plural in single, or plural in dual. The dominant philosophical trend in Hinduism for centuries has been "Advaita Vedanta" ("non-dualism after the Vedas"). It says the world is not dual (not "subject and object", "this and that", or "me and you"), the world is single but shows as dual (mind and body) or plural (mind, body, process, self,

other, quality, quantity, etc.) to most humans. Other schools offer alternatives. These issues are not relevant to most Hindus, including intellectuals. I don't address them here. What I have to say does not require a stance on these issues.

India is a big diverse place, many Hindus now live outside India, and Hinduism is a big diverse religion. For more on India and Hinduism, see the Internet.

Although Americans live in a big bureaucratic society, still we see ourselves as individualistic crusaders against the system and for cosmic freedom, and we have biases as a result. We used to think we were all John Wayne or James Dean and now we think we are all Frodo, Neo, Luke Skywalker or Trinity. I do not escape the biases of my culture and society but what I say here is more true than false even so.

I repeat not to harangue you into agreeing but because I want people to be clear about my intended meaning. Please be patient.

Synopsis of Hinduism.

Hinduism is like a well-thought-out long-running version of Western Romanticism in which God plays by forgetting himself so as to dream the world. Reality is a dream to God but real to us. The dream of God is the only reality there is; it sets the rules to live by; and we need to accept the situation. God dreams a system in which people have many lives and the system as a whole is joyous even if some particular lives are hard. The core idea is "Dharma". "Dharma" can refer to God as origin, God in action, sacredness, the power of sacredness, the big system, rules in general, rules for one element such as an occupation (warrior) or gender (proper behavior for men or women), rules for society as a whole, and rules for any particular individual because of his-her position society and the Dharma system. "Dharma" can mean "the identity, logic, basic character, and operation of a distinct thing" as in "the Dharma of farming". Hindus called Christianity "the Dharma of Christians" or "the Dharma of Westerners".

The Dharma system is a big system and a system that eats the world. It is relativistic, and uses hierarchy (superior and inferior) and encompassing. It uses a "hole in the center", the vagueness in the idea of Dharma. The Dharma system uses "everything in its place" to rationalize roles. People in a Dharma system have attitudes typical of people in big systems that eat the world etc. The vagueness of the idea of "Dharma" allows some people to interpret so as to control the system and control behavior. The big system of Dharma and traditional Indian Hindu stratified society mutually support each other; that mutual support is part of the control.

The elements in the Dharma system include individual persons; groups made by gender, age, socio-economic class, occupation, ethnicity, and religion; whole societies; and "callings" such as holy person or priest. A combination of class-occupation-ethnicity is a "Varna" ("color") or "caste" as in the light-skinned warrior-and-ruler caste. The socio-economic-class-caste-occupation groups are ranked. Each person has a self. Each person also has a social-personal Dharma such as priest, scholar, rebel, man, woman, wife, householder, husband, child, elder, student, teacher, holy person, etc. The self Dharma and the social-personal Dharma of a person should be the same. Social-personal Dharma ties a person to the Dharma of society. The Dharma of society ties society and people to the big system of Dharma. Society mirrors the big Dharma system and society supports the big Dharma system.

People are not so much persons as they are players in the big Dharma system. People respond to each other as roles in the big Dharma system. Acts of goodness and badness are done toward other roles in the big Dharma system rather than directly toward other particular persons.

Nearly all elements are hierarchical and support each other. Higher is better and encompasses lower. The highest two elements are Hindu holy persons who know the Dharma as well as any human can, and Hindu traditional stratified society. Intellectually, a holy person encompasses everything while socially Hindu society encompasses all relations. Despite superficially seeming apart, in their way, holy people have a place in society even if not in the middle of it.

The one-and-only society closest to the Dharma is Indian Hindu traditional stratified society. All social-economic-class-occupation-caste groups ("castes") arrange by higher and lower. Lower castes support upper castes. Upper castes guide lower castes and guide the whole system. Lower castes cannot fully know upper castes. Upper castes can fully know lower castes. What lower do castes know is a distorted lesser reflection of the greater deeper better knowing of upper castes. Every person must do his-her part, including that each person should believe what is right for his-her caste, so as to keep the whole mutually beneficial system going, both society and the big Dharma system of the world. Every person has a role. Upper castes have a duty to guide lower castes, and the lower castes have a duty to obey. Every person has the ability to know the duties (Dharma) of his-her position.

Hindu society makes all social groups relative by finding them a place in this system, including non-Hindu groups and religions. Any social, ethnic, religious, or occupation group can belong, if the group causes little trouble, and it can keep up relations with other Hindu groups. Even groups that do not fully know the Dharma can find a secure satisfying place. Eventually every group and its ideas is modified, absorbed, and becomes Hindu in its way. If Christian computer nerds lived in India, and formed their own society, eventually they would be a caste in practice, even if they did not know it and did not accept it. Their children would know it and accept it.

Hinduism goes along with this kind of society because this kind is the most realistic arrangement given human nature and human social nature, that is, human Dharma; and because the Dharma made humans on Earth. No other kind of society blends human individuality and desire for success with needs for other people and for proper order. This society is the essential expression of Dharma on Earth. This society enacts Hinduism and Hinduism explains this kind of society.

Who you are, what you do, and how you live are a service to the system; but do not mistake your role for full truth. Only some Hindu holy people are fully aware of God playing and of the many forms he-she takes in play.

One ideal of Hinduism is to understand the whole system but few people can achieve the ideal. That is as it should be. The complete system, with its joy, depends on the persistence of many people who don't fully understand. The people who don't fully understand are the part of God that is still asleep and still at play. They are as much God as the people who are awake.

Rather than see the full system, the vast majority of people find spiritual success in devotion (bhakti) to a particular aspect of the system such as a god (Vishnu), avatar (Krishna), or a principle (non-violent good action, or “ahimsa”). Devotion can unite you with the system as well as can knowing. You can play out your role in the family-social-spiritual system by devotion. Devotion leads you to right conduct and spiritual success. The idea that devotion was a fully legitimate way to participate in the system likely was the key idea that brought Hinduism together and led to victory over other religious ideas, in particular over Buddhism. I think some Hindus see Christianity and Islam in terms of devotion.

Once you get the idea of the system, you can dispense with the idea that God created it; you can think entirely in terms of the Dharma making itself and making the system together all at once. The Dharma system is something that works as it does, and sustains itself, for its own reasons, like the self-creating universe of some physics and some atheism. If you want to keep the idea of God, and think there is a relation between God and the Dharma, that thinking is alright too.

Hinduism can encompass all other systems; no other system can encompass it. Hinduism explains itself, other religions cannot fully explain themselves, and Hinduism always explains other religions better than they can explain themselves. Hinduism is the big dream while other religions are sub-dreams within it. The only true full outlook is Hinduism. All religions are sub-plots in the big plot of Dharma playing - even when they do not know it or deny it. Other religions have interesting valuable insights. All their insights can be understood as an aspect of Hinduism even when Hindus did not think of the idea first. Non-Hindu religions are like lower classes (castes) while Hinduism is like the one highest class (caste). Non-Hindu religions sometimes are admirable as a warrior (Islam), ruler (Confucius), or teacher (Jesus) is admirable; but other religions are never like Hindu holy people, who know the full system and always rank above warriors, rulers, and teachers. People in other religions are less aware than Hindus-in-general even when a Hindu is not a holy person. Hinduism is to other religions as Hindu holy people are to other good natured but mere commoners. Most other religions can be seen as kinds of devotion to particular gods (Yahweh or Allah) or to particular ideals (Chinese humanism). Religious relativism arises naturally in Hinduism. Hinduism can say naturally “all paths lead to God” because other religions are minor variations of it and all lead back to it. Other religions are not false but not full either. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses other religions.

To a Westerner yearning for adventure, Hinduism makes sense of the feeling that what matters is not the destination but the road. The idea of a destination is just another method to make the road interesting and important, and to keep us going when we might get temporarily discouraged. “The road goes ever on and on”. Hinduism is not like “and miles to go before I sleep” because it is the “miles to go” that matters rather than the “I sleep”; the “miles to go” never ends; Hinduism is already the “I sleep (and dream)” if we only knew it; and, if we did know it, we would never want it to end.

Hinduism might be the most complete and successful ever religious “system that eats the world”.

Synopsis of My Assessment.

Although Hinduism tells us that we are all alike and we should feel compassion toward all sentient beings, Hinduism does not produce people who act like that. Hinduism does not develop the ideas that people are all persons and we should work hard to make the world better. Hinduism does not develop the ideas

of persons and a better world that are latent in the ideas of likeness and compassion. Instead, Hinduism uses the idea of Dharma to develop a system in which a person fulfills his-her role in the system and uses the system to his-her advantage. By relying on a Dharma system instead of persons and a better world, Hinduism undermines compassion and “we are all alike”. It enables conniving, striving, class, relativism, secret disdain for other religions, etc.

My view: Act according to simple decency, goodness, the Golden Rule, and “applies equally” first without regard to any system. Treat everybody as a person regardless of social status, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, etc. Work hard to make a better world. If you act on this basis first, without regard to system, then you are alright as a human, you will help others, and do little harm; and, if there is a system, you will do well enough too. If you try to act in accord with a system first, likely you will forget simple decency, betray your humanity, hurt people, hurt nature, rationalize bad behavior, and do badly in the system. If you act without regard to a system, and there is a system, you might miss out on glory, wealth, or power that comes by knowing the system, but, so what? If you try to please the system, you will hurt yourself and decent people. “What does it profit a person if he-she gains the whole world but loses his-her soul?” This assessment seems like my version of Pascal’s Wager (see chapter on codes) applied to Hinduism but it is more than that. Unlike Pascal, I do not offer this scenario to trick you through personal gain into believing what I want. You can gain more by putting the system first. I believe in simple good people and simple good acts, and do not believe in system. I want you to act well and to help others. On that basis, you can build good institutions that do not suffer too much from the evils of a system.

My view is American. The criticisms I give of Hinduism are not new. They have been given so often they are now trite. The only difference is how I say them. Even so, my criticism is not invalid or worthless. It is still accurate and might have some value.

I disagree with Hinduism. I disagree with its version of Indo-European culture. I disagree with its mythical cosmic metaphysical Dharma system. I disagree that we must do our Dharma duty or the whole system falls apart. I disagree with using imagination and adventure to keep people engaged. We are not part of an adventure within an adventure, and so on. The road is interesting but there is a point to life besides going on-and-on down the road. The point is good action and good thought now. The point is doing the right thing for the right reasons. The point is connecting with others.

Other religious stances fail and fall into hypocrisy despite good ideals as when Christians fail to live up to the Golden Rule. Hinduism fails for that reason and, in addition, because it does not rest on an intuitive but correct view of persons but instead it rests on an abstraction, Dharma, and its ideals are abstract, such as Compassion; even high minded abstractions indirectly encourage the worst faults of big systems that eat the world and are relativistic. Abstraction, even high ideals, enables bad behavior. Religious stances need enough specificity to stay grounded even if they are idealistic, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

I agree with the mix of Judaism with Indo-European culture that resulted in following Jesus and in Christianity. I agree with the mix of Jesus’ teachings, practicality, and Western values. Rather than an impersonal Dharma system, I see a personal God. Rather than other roles in the big Dharma system, I see particular individual persons. Rather than a hierarchical society made by the Dharma and for the Dharma, I see institutions made by tradition and by people, that should serve us all. We are all selves

too. We are what God made us and are only what God made us: "I am what I am and that's all that I am". "Made by God" differs from our karma identity or how Dharma makes us. We are not merely our Dharma. We are not in a Dharma system. We do not have to support the Dharma system.

Dharma can be a useful idea, like chi, Tao, yin, yang, Li, the Force, Destiny, calling, mission, justification, grace, or Spirit; but Dharma is not the supreme idea. We do not live in relativism, superior and inferior, hierarchy, encompassing, and encompassed.

The Dharma system should promote some specific good acts, seeing people as persons, compassion, sympathy, responsibility, and good institutions. Instead, it promotes bad traditionalism, making excuses, rationalization, separation, vying for position, hierarchy, selfishness, bad relativism, cliques, using other people as things, arrogance, legalism, argumentative character, bad institutions, social injustice, and bad attitudes toward other religions. It supports high ranking people using other people, and it supports high ranking people getting other people to go along by saying we all need to play a part. It did not support the development of good institutions such as rule of law, "applies equally", schools, hospitals, science, and social mobility. Hinduism does have good features, and I do mention them.

Other religions are not encompassed by Hinduism as lesser versions. The teachings of Jesus are not a lesser included version of Hinduism any more than Hinduism is a lesser included version of the ideas of Jesus, Mahayana, or Taoism. I reject Hinduism as Taoists and Confucians rejected Mahayana, Islam and Christianity rejected Gnosticism, and Judaism and Islam reject Christian polytheism. Hindu ideas add to the world stock of ideas but, more so, Hinduism decreases overall interesting diversity by jamming everyone into a single system with itself at the top.

Do not think about any system, and do not find yourself primarily by finding a place in a system. Follow the suggestions given above. Enjoy this world now. After you are comfortable with all the suggestions above, you can think about a system if you feel you still need one.

When Hinduism has ideas that are wrong, true, good, or bad then Hinduism is false, true, good, or bad. When Hinduism promotes good people, principles, acts, and institutions, it is good. When it does not promote them, it is not enough. When Hinduism thwarts them, or promotes bad ones, Hinduism is bad. The same is so for all religions.

Think how Hindu ideas, especially Dharma, might be re-interpreted so as not to support a big ideological system, stratified society, bad relativism, and rationalization. Does a major religion need a big system to eat the world? Does a big system necessarily support bad relativism and stratified unfair society? Think how Hindu ideas can be re-interpreted to support good people and good institutions in the modern world of pluralistic democracy. How does Hinduism have to acknowledge Jesus' teachings and Western values to succeed at re-interpretation? These questions apply to all religions.

All religions suffer from arrogance and the same faults as Hinduism. Many Christian churches and large institutions are as stratified and as stultifying to persons as Hinduism and traditional Indian society. The difference is that Hinduism institutionalizes and validates this arrangement.

As far as I can see, young Hindus are adapting well to a single world, and are easing up on the features of the caste and belief system that I don't like. They are assimilating widespread middle class values based on the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and Western ideas. They take occupations in which they use their sharp minds, skills in argument, and desire for learning, such as doctor and politician. When they do, they promote Western values for the most part, without looking down too much on the people that they serve. Even Hindus who come from successful families adopt a variety of roles and occupations that require humility and require assimilating widespread middle class values. I would not advise young Hindus to take as a role model the character Kumar from the movies "Harold and Kumar" (you could do much worse), but, from those movies, we see that young Hindus are using Hindu imagination to enter society in many ways, without looking down on other people. I hope young Hindus keep the sharp minds and wonderful imagination of Hinduism.

In an episode of the TV show "The Big Bang Theory" from early 2015, Raj, a Hindu, expressed the ideal of good Hinduism beautifully. Raj is an astrophysicist (star scientist). He was anxious about a probe that he had helped send into space. He and his friend Howard, a Jew, drove to a Hindu Temple. Raj said going there made him feel better because it gave him better context for his own life. He felt that a greater something – call it Dharma, mind, consciousness, or God – was working through the world to the ultimate good ends of the greater something. It works through us, and uses us, to achieve its good ends. We do the work of the spirit in our work. It made Raj feel good to be part of that. Howard was impressed and said he felt likewise. These feelings are typical of some high-minded Hinduism. If Hinduism stopped there, and worked out the implications of these feelings for relations with other persons and with nature, then I would appreciate it more. But Hinduism went on to interpret those feelings as part of a system-and-society that also subverted those feelings. As modern Hindus go away from the original society and system to a new bigger world and hopefully better society, they still carry those noble feelings with them. I hope they can reinterpret the feelings to do the feelings full justice, can find how young Hindus must include persons and nature, and can teach us what they find. Below I describe how Hinduism subverted its beauty away from the vision of Raj.

Useful Images.

If a huge Christian church, with internal diversity and hierarchy, such as the Roman Catholic Church, had no central leadership, that church would be like Hinduism. If all the Christian churches of Europe and the Americas, including all centralized hierarchical Churches, felt they were one church in spirit, and gave up central leadership, that would be like Hinduism. If Protestantism saw itself as one movement and formed a big informal league without one strong authority, that would be like Hinduism. If Hinduism evolved a clear strong central leadership, Hinduism would be like a large diverse single Christian church such as Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Vishnu-Krishna is like Jesus; and Christian saints, especially Mary, are like Hindu avatars. People who convert to Roman Catholicism from another Christian smaller Church, such as Presbyterians, are like Hindus who have worshipped only Shiva all their lives but now see the full range, depth, and beauty of Hinduism as a whole. I am not surprised that smart Westerners convert to an intellectual version of Hinduism, or Hindu immigrants such as ex-Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, can convert to a large Christian church such as Roman Catholicism.

Hinduism and Romanticism.

This section gives a made-up response of a Hindu to a Romantic. As far as I know, no real person other than me said this. Still, I think the remarks fairly represent Romanticism and Hinduism.

In Romanticism, the Spirit takes various dominant forms in different eras and through different societies. In the old Middle East, it was Jewish ethical monotheism. In the Classical age, the dominant Spirit was Greek Rationalism first and then Roman Order. As a strongly relativistic system, Romanticism seems to encompass Hinduism. Hinduism is merely one form that the Spirit takes in one part of the world for one time, albeit an important form for a long time in a big part of the world.

In the Hindu view, the Romantic view is backwards. First, the Spirit is not the Dharma. Dharma is bigger than Spirit. The Spirit is too personal and human-like. It is too much small individual people writ large, too much like an individual dream of being big and cosmic. It is a holdover of pre-Christian and Christian ideas about a spirits; it is almost still animism. Some people have to think like this but good thinkers get over it. The Dharma is not impersonal in the way that a rock is impersonal and is less than an animal. The Dharma is impersonal because it includes everything personal and is more-than-merely-personal as well. It includes the Spirit. It is super-personal and super-rational. What the Dharma is, you learn from living it and from Hindu holy people.

Second, the Dharma does show up in various forms in different times and places, and can assert itself most in one dominant form; but, deep down, the Dharma is always one; it shows up in all things, not just in one form; you can find it everywhere if you know how to look; and the Dharma makes sure Hindu holy people can find it because being found out is part of its basic character and part of its graceful plan for all sentient beings. If the Dharma were not one thing, it could not show up in variations in different places; there would be nothing similar to see behind appearances; there would be only distinct places, eras, and societies. You could not compare and could not see the Dharma shining through. It would be like seeing only Fords, Hondas, Toyotas, or GMs without seeing cars. You could not tell what a car was, and so you could not say which was the best car at the time.

Third, even while the Dharma is universal, the Dharma also is particular and it endures as particular. The one Dharma has one best representative, gives people an anchor to hold, and gives one view by which to see others. The fact that the Dharma presents itself as one is how the West could come up with the idea that Western Romanticism is the Culmination; but the Western idea of its Romanticism as Culmination is a mistaken view of the correct bigger idea that the Dharma has one best representative. This mistake is a typical Western misunderstanding of Dharma. If you know how to look, the Dharma culminates all the time everywhere. To help us understand this, the Dharma gives us one true best form of itself. The one true best form of Dharma, the true Culmination, is Hinduism, both in religious-intellectual-spiritual form and in social form as Indian Hindu society. Other forms are lesser versions of Hinduism. Hindus know this because only Hinduism has the idea of Dharma instead of "Spirit"; only Hinduism naturally developed the idea of many paths to the one Dharma; only Hinduism accepts human nature, human social nature, and human society as the Dharma created it; and only Hinduism did this long ago. Hinduism adopted the one form of society suited to the continuing realization of the one Dharma among sentient beings.

Evidence for Western confusion about the Dharma and the Spirit is the development out of Romanticism of bad social, culture, and political forms such as European fascism of the late 1800s through the middle 1900s, Communism in all its styles, Western nature worship, and Western leftist political movements in

the 1960s and afterwards. Even American and British rightist movements are a bad form of Romanticism and nationalism that could be avoided if Westerners properly understood the Dharma. Even the Western romantic view of Hinduism and India in the 1960s shows that Westerners cannot understand Hinduism as long as they see it from the outside as a form of Romanticism. While Hindu society is not perfect, it can avoid such catastrophes by taking the Dharma as its foundation.

Romantics insist Hindus wrongly claim they know the core of being and it is the Dharma. That is true only for them in their time. Hindu supposed superiority through encompassing others is only an over-extended deluded continuation of what the Spirit did for a limited time in India long ago.

Romanticism does have one leg up on Hinduism, at least for self-promoting people. Whatever your own group, you can say your group is the current most important form of the Spirit. You can justify what your group does and your participation. Whether Hindu Brahman, American Lefty, Christian Rightist, Muslim fundamentalist, Jewish zealot, or academic with a cause, then your group is the spearhead of the Spirit, everything your group does is right, and everything you personally do is right. You and your group are the best right now.

PART 2: Some Basic Hindu Ideas.

Some Useful Dates.

“CE” means “Common Era”, which began in “1” AD, so “CE” is equivalent to “AD”. “BCE” means “Before the Common Era” and is equivalent to “BC”.

From before 2000 BCE to perhaps 800 BCE, an advanced agrarian-and-urban civilization, equivalent to Babylon, flourished in the Indus Valley, what is now Pakistan and eastern India. Its cities were “Mohenjo-Daro” and “Harappa”, so it is called the “Harappa(n)” or “Indus Valley” civilization. This civilization was made by people who were native to the Indus valley before Indo-Europeans; it was not Indo-European; it was not “Bharat”. I do not know its relation to other cultural groups in South Asia.

By 2000 BCE, likely earlier, and until about 500 BCE, people speaking Indo-European languages moved from the west to the east, into what are now Iran, Pakistan, and India. Their original home is not clear but might have been from around the Black Sea. They were cattle herding people, with horses, and they likely knew wheat cultivation. These people invaded the Indus Valley civilization. It is not clear if these people contributed to the decline of that civilization or if it was already in decline. As these people moved into the Indus valley, they took up ideas from the Indus Valley civilization but I do not guess which motifs in South Asian culture were from the natives and which from Indo-European invaders.

The invading Indo-European peoples used in their rituals “liturgical words” that were called “Vedas”. The Vedas are like chants, as in a formal Christian liturgy. For a long time, the Vedas were memorized only and deliberately were not written. Later the Vedas were written; I am not sure when but I think before 1 CE. All “orthodox” Hindus consider the Vedas the foundation documents of the religion even if other later texts and ideas supersede the Vedas.

The Ganges River Valley is east of the Indus Valley. It is lower, swampier, humid, and does not support wheat farming or horse raising but does support rice farming. Rice farming supports centralized state societies - kingdoms. As the Indo-Europeans moved into the Ganges valley, they began rice farming and let off horse rearing and wheat farming. They developed stratified societies based on rice farming. Some of the societies became large kingdoms. That is the context in which Hinduism formed and solidified.

Bangladesh is yet further east while the arid Deccan Plateau is further south. I do not consider the cases of Bangladesh and the Deccan.

After 1000 BCE, a set of ideas about life was present from Italy to India; see below and see chapters on Buddhism.

About 500 BCE, Buddhism arose, largely in response to those ideas.

About the same time that Buddhism arose, the ideas in the Upanishads were current; see below.

About 200 BCE, the Upanishads were written down.

Between 200 BCE and 200 CE, poets contributed to the epics the "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata". By about 200 CE, the poems were written down.

By no later than 200 CE, the main ideas of Hinduism arose.

After 200 CE, ideas of Hinduism were formalized in a long series of written documents called "Shastras" and "Puranas". The documents do not all agree but they are largely compatible.

By no later than 500 CE, bhakti (devotion) became a strong trend in Hinduism. It might have arisen in the areas of Bangladesh or of Southern India but quickly spread throughout India.

Likely by 500 CE, certainly by 1000 CE, Hinduism as it is now was well-defined.

Some Basic Texts and Ideas.

A set of ideas was found from (what are now) Italy through India by about 800 BCE, including karma and many lives. See the chapters on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Hinduism, as a version of these ideas, was evident from about the time of Jesus. Hinduism distinct from Mahayana, and competing with Mahayana, was evident from before 500 CE (AD). Complete Hinduism was evident after the rise of ideas about "bhakti" ("devotion" or "worship"; see below) after 500 CE.

The idea of "Dharma" developed in India and is common to Buddhism and Hinduism. Originally Dharma meant something like "ritual efficacy" but it came to mean the system of the world and how it works. The world is like an ongoing successful ritual by the Dharma for the Dharma.

The idea of "Dharma", especially "personal Dharma" and "social Dharma", came to mean doing your role in life and society as a priest does his-her role in ritual. Each kind of person (farmer, priest, ruler, warrior,

doctor, mechanic, yogi, ascetic, etc.) sustained the whole society and the whole society supported each kind of person in it. When you do your duty, you make society, family, and the whole system efficacious. You got your appointed role by karma and reincarnation.

Hinduism accepts that ordinary life is misleading, and might be an illusion or delusion. We need to wake up from ordinary life, and waking up is a big theme in Hinduism. The technical term is “moksha”. Unlike Theravada but like Mahayana, Hinduism stresses that the system of many lives is worthwhile, and can be quite joyous, even if any particular life is hard. You need to see past the details, including the details of the one illusory life you now live, to see the system in full glory. Once you see that, you can put ordinary life into the proper context, and it is not quite an illusion.

Hinduism officially begins with instructions for ritual, and explanations of ritual, called the “Vedas”, which are also about gods, relations to nature, relations to the gods through ritual, and social relations. At first they were only memorized and recited. They received “standardized” form between about 2000 BCE and 1000 BCE. Later they were written but I am not sure when. Seekers and scholars still read them but I do not consider them here because they are not used anymore in practiced Hinduism.

The Upanishads originally were oral essays about spiritual life apart from the rituals. The ideas in them were current at the time of the Buddha, about 500 BCE. They were written down from about 300 BCE to about 200 BCE. The term “Upanishad” means “private teachings given apart, in the forest, (out of normal society)”. The ideas in the Upanishads are not unique but they are well said there and they have been important in Hinduism. Different ideas were developed in different Upanishads but I summarize the ideas as if they come from one source. All educated Hindus revere the Upanishads but it is not clear how much Hindus actually read the Upanishads; like the “Federalist Papers” in the United States.

The most famous saying from the Upanishads is “you are that”, which means we are all quite similar, and should treat each other accordingly. It means “there through the grace of God do go I; and here through the grace of God do go you; we are not really different”. The Upanishads do not quite say we are all a spark of God and so really we are the same person, but that idea is close to the feeling of “you are that”. They do not say we are all manifestations of God and so really we are all God in disguise but that view is latent in “you are that”. Later Hinduism developed the feeling into the idea that we are all sparks from one God and-or we are all God in disguise. We are all pieces of God. We literally are all the same thing. We differ only in minor externals. (The physicist John Wheeler once teased his student Richard Feynman that all apparently distinct electrons are really the same one electron; that idea is close to the feeling in the Upanishads.) Originally the idea meant that all humans are similar but was extended to the idea that all sentient beings are similar, then all animals including all sentient beings, all life, and then all the world. Eventually these views of the Upanishads reinforced the big Dharma system in which particular lives might be hard but the whole system is joyous.

The right way to express “we are the same” is compassion. Compassion is a big policy in the big system of Hinduism. The forms that compassion takes are discussed below. In Christian terms, the blend of “you are that” with compassion is: “love your neighbor as yourself” and act accordingly. We are all equal children of God.

At the time of the Upanishads, as in Theravada Buddhism, having many lives and being subject to karma was not necessarily a good thing, and could be a bad thing. Being born over and over again to a harsh world where you were deluded, and where society forces you to commit immoral acts for its sake, was bad. In trying to deal with the situation, the Upanishads began to systematize many lives and karma. In making a system out of many lives and karma, they paved the way for later interpretations of the system as a good thing. I am not sure how particular writers of particular Upanishads felt about the system.

The Upanishads feared the ability of normal life to “suck you in” and put you to sleep, so the Upanishads advised avoiding normal life. The name “Upanishads” not only means “discussions in the forest” but implied a life apart from normal life. Exactly what the Upanishads recommended by “being apart” varied by particular Upanishad. “Being apart” was interpreted later to suit ideas that belong more to times after than to the Upanishads. “Being apart” could mean renouncing the world, being a forest ascetic (ryshi), and conquering the world through your spirit. It could mean waiting until after you have had a family, in old age, before going into the forest. It could mean being an awakened person in the middle of sleeping people. It could mean renouncing the fruits (karma) of your involvement in the world even if you accepted that you had to act in the world. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly. It could mean going about your social obligations aloofly and without much concern for people other than to whom you are directly obliged. The latter interpretations eventually prevailed for most Hindus.

Buddhism, and maybe Siddhartha Gautama himself, developed the idea of the self as a bundle partly to forestall mistaken interpretations of the Upanishad idea that selves are quite similar, are eternal, and are ultimately the same as the system itself (each self is a version of God). I am not sure that the Upanishads promoted these mistaken ideas of self, but later interpreters did, so it is still worth seeing what the fuss was about. If all selves are identical (or nearly identical), it is possible to see all selves as eternal “stuff”, nearly-identical bits of eternal God, or, really, as small local versions of God. In that case, selves have to be part of a big eternal joyous system in which life is worthwhile. Otherwise, the different life situations of selves don’t make sense. Yet the Buddha argued that life is not worthwhile. If life is not worthwhile, then we cannot be in a big eternal joyous system and selves cannot be a minor version of the big eternal system. Selves cannot be simple eternal things, largely identical. The best way to shock yourself out of seeing selves, and yourself, as simple eternal things is to see the self as a bundle; which it really is. If the self is a bundle, then it hardly makes sense to think of life as deeply worthwhile in the same way that life might be worthwhile if the self were an eternal part of an eternal joyous system. So we have no eternal self, no self as part of God, no identity of different selves, no eternal joyous system, and life is not worthwhile. Get over yourself, and get used to it. The Buddhist view of the self does not undermine the idea of compassion, and, in fact, I think, supports it.

Hinduism stressed the alternative that the Buddha rejected. If you do want to think of selves as eternal simple things quite similar to each other, much as Christians and Muslims think of the soul, then you are led toward three things. First, selves are so similar that they are identical. Second, if they are identical, they are really local versions of one God. We are all God, but don’t know it until we wake up. Third, to make sense of the variety of the world, we have to see (nearly) identical selves as part of one eternal joyous system. You don’t have to know all this to participate in the system. If you want an eternal joyous system with selves as parts, then you have to think of the self as a simple eternal thing that is identical to God (the system) or nearly identical. Westerners tend to this option when they read the Upanishads or about Hinduism. It is the option that, I think, invaded Mahayana, but which Mahayana did not develop as

well as Hinduism did. Eventually this option allowed Mahayana to defeat Theravada, and Hinduism to defeat Mahayana.

The Upanishads are mystical in that they say: how we see this obvious life is not accurate, and a big system might be behind all obvious life. But the Upanishads are not “airy fairy”. They are not hard to read, and they make sense. They can support “airy fairy” conjectures but that way lies as much in the reader as in the texts.

Hinduism Goes Many Steps Further.

“It’s all in the game of love”

In the chapter on Codes of this book, in the section on the Bhagavad Gita, I already mentioned the ideas described in this section. The best way to make these points would require quoting major parts of Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which I can’t do here. To get across the ideas, I use Western popular epic drama, especially what appears often on TV. Mahayana takes many of the same steps but not as fully or adeptly as Hinduism. Earlier points help with later points but you can accept a later without an earlier. Each point can be accepted or denied by itself but they do tend to come in a set. The point about devotion (“bhakti”) is supported by previous points but can stand on its own. Few Hindus could state all these points without prompting but many could state them with prompting. See chapter on Mahayana for the dialog between two advanced Mahayanists.

(1) Not only heroes (including heroines) are important but so are all the “little” people. They are needed mostly to move the plot forward but they often have key roles. They are not only sidekicks. In “Lord of the Rings”, Gandalf is not the main character. He is not the Lord of the Rings. The two real combatants for Lord are Frodo and Sauron. Sam is “only” a sidekick yet where would the story be without Sam? Tolkien makes this point about the importance of little people with the character “Gollum” (Smeagol) when Gandalf tells Frodo that Gollum deserved to die but it was good that the elves did not kill Gollum because Gollum might yet have some important unforeseen role to play. He did. Gandalf is the ultimate helper character to both Frodo and Aragorn. Read LOTR or see the first part of the “Hobbit” movie trilogy, “An Unexpected Journey” for an eloquent speech by Gandalf on the importance of little people.

With all their greatness, do Peter, Paul, John, and Mary compare to Jesus? Yet where would Christianity be without Peter, Paul, John, and Mary? Where would Roman Catholicism be without the small army of good Popes who have led it for two thousand years?

Where would the Lone Ranger be without Tonto, Dr. Evil be without Number Two and all the henchmen, and Bond without the “Bond girls”? Where would warriors be without their charioteers and armor makers? Not only do we need Luke, Vader, and the Emperor, we also need Obiwan Kenobe, Yoda, Hans Solo, Leia, R2D2, Count Dookoo, Grievous, Commander Cody, the bounty hunter and his son, many clones, and a host of characters to kick-start adventure such as Jar Jar Binks. Besides needing the Joker, Batman also needed Alfred, Police Commissioner Gordon, Robin, and many villains. Peter Pan needs Tinker Bell, Captain Hook, Wendy, and some Lost Boys. Where would we be without poets to retell all adventure in a way to make it interesting, as in Scott’s novel “Waverley”? The animated movie, “Rango”,

shows how a literal host of characters literally supports the hero, and how the “legendary” hero (Rango) and a “legendary” villain (Snake) respect each other.

Even in ordinary life, where would anybody be without farmers to grow food and merchants to distribute food, without the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker? Where would we be without busybodies and gossips to stir things up on so-called “reality” TV? Now we can see all people not just as accidentally there but as necessary parts of the whole system of joyous Dharma and many lives. They might not play as large a part as the heroes and villains but their part is important. In Hinduism, people of all ranks and all abilities can feel they are part of something important and joyful even if they do not feel it fully now in this life. God falls asleep to continually dream the world, the whole world with all its small players; and his creation is good.

The importance of little people goes beyond their roles in a story. Hinduism says through its stories that all the various kinds of people are needed in society too. Even if you are not a big glamorous person, still your role is essential to the integrity and continuity of society, just as modern society needs farmers, butchers, bakers, computer programmers, and advertisers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when the old cow herding society of India had been completely taken over by wheat and rice farmers, and society was organized into a structure with kings, aristocracy, priests, farmers, merchants, crafts people, and workers. Hinduism was brought together as a religion when Hindu society became like Medieval Europe. People needed an ideology, a rationale, for this new society, the people in it, and their relations. Hinduism and its epics provided this rationale, and did so by making people feel good about the whole thing. When Hinduism first did this job, around the time of Jesus, likely it was a powerful good integrating force for a powerful vibrant new way of life. This sense of belonging to a good society by doing our jobs well is just what Americans, and most of the modern world, now lacks. For a Western version of what Hinduism makes of the idea of little guys supporting society, read “Brave New World” by Aldus Huxley, especially the passages where various castes explain how they are the true foundations of society while other castes only think they are.

(2) Not only are minor characters needed for a good story and good society but so are bad guys. It is easy to see that drama is based on conflict, and usually there is no conflict without a bad guy – think of Iago in “Othello” by Shakespeare. But the Hindu idea is stronger than that. Bad guys and good guys are tied together, often are mirror images, often bring out each other’s character, and often are not completely good or bad. Hinduism has good guys that are a bit bad, and bad guys that are a lot good, not unlike modern Western, especially American, fiction with anti-heroes and flawed heroes. Bollywood movies are as much “white hat versus black hat” as TV shows such as “Walker, Texas Ranger” but Hindu literature and Hindu feel for character are more like good film noir such as “The Maltese Falcon”.

Sith need Jedi; Jedi need Sith; the Chosen One will unite the light side and dark side of the Force, at least for a while until we start again. We could not have had Theodore Roosevelt breaking up the big trusts without McKinley kissing up to the big trusts; we could not have had Ronald Reagan without the chaos of the 1970s; and we would not have Barack Obama without the errors and collapses of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Where would Batman be without the Joker, and the Joker without Batman? They mutually made each other and continue to need each other. Where is Superman without Lex Luthor, or Spiderman without Doc Oc? Where were modern TV detectives without their arch-enemy serial killer

crazy counterparts? A wonderful recent example of mutual determination of the hero and would-be villain is the animated movie “Puss in Boots” (Puss and Egg).

In the Mahabharata (“Great Poem about India [Bharat]”), the epic poem of which the Bhagavad Gita is a small part, the good guys are the Five Brothers while the bad guys are their cousins. The good guys are not thoroughly good while the bad guys are not thoroughly bad. All the good guys have some serious character flaws, which is how the whole problem began. The bad guys have some great traits, which is how they get genuine heroes to join their side. The Five Brothers are a bit better than the Americans were during the Cold War while the bad cousins are no worse than the Russians. The good brothers are like the “A Team” while their bad cousins are like Two Face Harvey Dent or the Sandman in “Batman” and “Spiderman”. The Five Brothers are like the brothers in the movies “The Sons of Katie Elder” with John Wayne or “Four Brothers” with Mark Wahlberg. Both sides are needed to make a good story, keep action moving, and reach the proper moral conclusion. In part, this portrayal of good guys and bad guys reflects the Indian ability to assess human nature accurately. It also shows the Hindu attitude toward good guys and bad guys, and their relations, in the joyous system of many lives.

For good to feel truly good, for good to be as good as can be, goodness has to contrast with badness; just as to fully appreciate beauty we have to see the contrast with ugly and with plain. For good guys to be fully good, to reach the full potential of past karma, to reach the full potential of their Dharma as good guys, and to support the entire joyous Dharma system of many lives, they need bad guys as their foils. Likewise, bad guys can be truly bad only when they despoil innocent good people such as children or despoil innocent animals.

(3) The mutual dependence of little people and big people, of good guys and bad guys, makes sense in a Dharma system of many lives. We can only see how people could be so good, or so bad, if we see their present goodness or badness as an accumulation over lives. People cannot be so bad as to slaughter whole villages if they have not built to such badness over many lives. People cannot be so good as to offer themselves to be ravaged by bandits, so as to save a village, if they have not built to such goodness over many lives. The Dharma system helps to explain the extremes of goodness and badness while extremes of goodness and badness lend evidence to the Dharma system.

Goodness, badness, and the Dharma system support each other in another way, more important in the long run. Except for a few people at the height of the Dharma system, few of us are overwhelmingly good or bad. Most of us are a mix in this life, and have been a mix in past lives. Most of us will be more overall good in some lives and more overall bad in other lives. Good people need bad people; bad people need good people. For some of us to be good in this life, we need other people to be bad in this life. For some people to be bad in this life, it helps if other people are good in this life. If the system is to remain in balance, if we are good in this life while others are bad in the next life, then we can expect that we will be bad in other lives while they are good in other lives. We need each other, as good and bad, not only in this drama right here right now but for the whole drama to keep going. This is what Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, or at least what Krishna implied.

If you find yourself in a bad role, and you don’t play your role, then you not only betray yourself and your personal Dharma, you thwart the current roles and future roles of many other people and you endanger the whole system. The same is true if you are in a good role, or a mixed role, and you don’t live up to

your character. You must play out what role you have been given for the sake of yourself and others, for now and all the future.

(4) This step might be two half steps. (A) Most people have felt that everything really is just as it should be, even bad stuff. Nothing is wrong. Everything is right. (B) Everything contributes in its own way. If we took away anything, the whole world would suffer and might not come out alright. Another way to say this is “everything is beautiful in its own way”, and, in fact, “everything is ugly in its own way too”. Nothing is really only ugly and nothing is so beautiful that it is incomparable. All is connected, so all share in the great beauty of the whole system.

We should not be too quick to judge anything is useless or bad; we should not be too quick to judge at all. A weed is a flower for which nobody has yet discovered a use. A flower is a weed that is easy to grow.

In the West, this feeling contributes to the idea that, in nature, everything plays a role and everything is needed, including mosquitoes, malaria, bacteria, fungus, and disease. “It takes all kinds to make a world”. This is the same feeling as that God has a plan, and everything and event has a place in God’s plan including you and your obnoxious neighbor and the fight you just had.

Hinduism makes sense of this feeling. If you think you have a good life now, and your bravery is needed, while some peasant has a bad life, and his crops are not needed, likely you are wrong. Even if you can argue your point, you are not thinking long term. You and the peasant will exchange lives someday, and his life now is needed to sustain yours then.

This feeling played a role in Mahayana and some Zen. I described it in the chapter on Zen but did not explain how it fit into a system. In Hinduism, it more obviously fits into a system.

One of my big steps in spirituality was to realize that this attitude is not true. It is generally true, and it is useful as a support for tolerance; but it is not true in all cases. Some bad things are just bad and we can do without them. We don’t need slavers and rapists. Some good things are more useful than other things, and we do right to extol them. We do right to praise people who help neighbors in a hurricane. It is not clear to me how this view goes along with the Hindu innate strong sense of morality. See below.

(5) If everything is needed in its own way, and everything is beautiful in its own way, then we should let everything play out in its own way. Even if a thing, act, belief, or person seems to do some harm, as long as the harm is not catastrophic, then let it go on to its natural end. Live and let live. Live and let die. Die and let live. Let everybody listen to the kind of music he-she likes, Bach, Mozart, kitsch, or sexist racist crap – as long as they don’t hurt people. Let people worship whatever gods they like. Let people follow holidays and perform ceremonies as they like. Let people use what drugs they like. This attitude leads to the plethora of festivals and gods that we see in India.

In practice, Hinduism is not as tolerant as this statement sounds. Some things undermine the Dharma system itself, such as, sometimes, Islam, Christianity, and naïve materialistic determinism. Those cannot be tolerated. Those must be controlled. Even the worship of some Hindu gods, such as Kali Durga (bad mother) cannot be allowed in full but must be controlled so they do no great harm. Thugs might be allowed in theory but they cannot be allowed in fact. This is the same dilemma faced by democracies in

which we want to allow fully free speech but cannot allow people to yell “fire” in a theater when there is no fire and cannot allow people to advocate violent un-democratic overthrow of our democracy. Democracy protects one set of values while Hinduism protects organized Indian society and the Dharma system.

(6) What matters is not the ending, not winning or losing, but the game. A well-played game is better than a game won badly. What matters is not the destination but the journey. Every moment, every place, in all ways, we have already arrived. In the movie version of the novel “Kim” we literally see this when the searching old monk sees his magic river in a dried up old stream bed in the dry high hills.

(7) Everybody is saved all the time but most of us just don’t know it. It might be better to be saved and to know it than to be saved and not know, but that is not necessarily so and certainly not clear. If you know it, you surrender to the game with gusto. If you surrender to the game with gusto, then you don’t need to know if you are saved or not.

(8) We should say “Yes” to the Dharma and its game. In Western terms, we should say “Yes” to LIFE and its game. I (Mike Polioudakis) say “enjoy life as much as you can” but, I think, Hindus mean more than this when they say “Yes” to Dharma and Westerners mean more when they say “Yes” to LIFE. Hindus mean to surrender to the Dharma LIFE game much as Muslims surrender to Allah and Christians give themselves to Jesus. Devote yourself.

(9) Everyday life is not much different than life after you are awake. It is still the same life. You still do the same things. You are kinder and gentler. You are not as driven. You help more than you hurt unless it is your Dharma duty to hurt righteously, as with Arjuna. You still eat and sleep, marry, and have children.

(10) Illusion fills everyday life for people who are not aware. After you are aware, the illusion is still there but you are master of the illusion, as was Vimalakirti in Mahayana and as Kim was in his training to be a spy. You can use illusion to help you or others. You do not let it drag you into bad clingy situations.

(11) We should allow people to believe and do as they wish as long as they don’t hurt people. To allow people in this way is part of surrender to the Dharma game. It is part of the diversity and fascination of the Dharma. It leads to different kinds of social groups, different religions, and different societies. Of course, without necessarily knowing it, just as not all people know they are saved, so groups and their ways of life are part of Dharma’s variety. They are part of the Dharma game whether they know it or not, and likely especially if they don’t know it.

(12) The Dharma game encourages a wide variety of social ways of life but not every social life is equally valid or expresses the Dharma best. Traditional Hindu society takes account of the Dharma game and it takes account of basic facts about humans as (evolved) sentient beings between the gods and animals. People are not all the same. They have different capacities. Often their capacities are inherited. Men and women should be matched to each other. Children should be taught the ways of a good society. Society needs specific stations. The stations should help each other; they should be complementary. At the same time, not all stations are equal in ability or power. Some stations are for governing and some are for carrying out tasks. Traditional Hindu society accepts channels of the Dharma and flows through them, so it is the best society. Other societies have their merits, but they can be seen as variations on

Hindu society just as other religions can be seen as variations on knowing the Dharma and other ways of life can be seen as variations on the Dharma game.

(13) Nobody except a few very unusual and wise Hindu holy people see the whole Dharma system and the place of various beings in it. The best most people can do is to know their role and to carry out their role as the Dharma appointed it. (The best people can do is carry out God's Will as they know it.) This view is just restating the lesson of the Bhagavad Gita.

(14) If you cannot expect people to act on the basis of full understanding, different people have different roles, and different people see differently, then what is reasonable to expect? When is it reasonable to say that a person "does God's work"? When is it reasonable to say that a person goes against God or does not do God's work? People do as they are taught. We hope that people get good teachers. We should not rush to judgment. We should give people the benefit of the doubt. As long as people carry out their role in society, worship as they were taught, do little harm, do some good, and do more good than harm, then we should not judge. Jesus taught us not to rush to judgment. In fact, people might be doing God's work even if we cannot see so and even if what they do is different than what we do. Allow every Hindu to worship his-her particular deities as he-she sees fit, as long as he-she does no obvious harm. What harm can come of letting people worship God each in his-her own way? Isn't this the accord that Protestants and Roman Catholics extend toward each other? Isn't this the accord that the many Protestants extend toward each other? Isn't this what the Constitution of the United States of America insists upon as a high right? We should never say a person goes against God's Will unless that person does harm. If we follow this "live and let live" idea then all of us will get along much better and society will work much better.

This view is one large basis for the idea that "all paths lead to God". It is not easy to reconcile this view with the idea that Hinduism is best after all. Hindus reconcile this view with Hindu superiority by saying that Hinduism develops this view naturally while other religions have to be taught this view, often by a Hindu. The religion which develops this view naturally is best even when it teaches that all paths do lead to God. Roman Catholics take much the same view toward Protestants, and large Protestant divisions take much the same view toward every religion but their own.

This contradiction is not confined to Hinduism or even to religion. It lies at the heart of democracy. What does a republican democracy do with people in it who disbelieve in democracy and want to overthrow the republic to institute their idea of a religious or ideological totalitarian state? Do they have an equal right to their opinion? Do unjust thugs have an equal right to due process of law?

(15) All of this leads to a combination of moral relativity and social determinism, which I, as a Westerner, find distressing. This subsection describes the moral relativity while sections below describe how it is embedded in social relations. "Moral relativity" includes moral ambiguity.

Contrary to modern religious confusion, moral relativity was not invented in 1776 (American Revolution), 1789 (French Revolution), 1848 (Paris socialism), 1890 (Gilded age), 1917 (Bolsheviks), 1920 (jazz age), 1932 (Roosevelt and the New Deal), 1954 (rock and roll), or 1980 (hip-hop or rap). People have always known of it and used it to their gain. It has always confused us and led some of us astray. The relevant questions are what roles it plays in this life now, and why it plays those roles at a particular time and

place. I can't tell if the kind of moral relativity that developed with Hinduism is similar to what the West has now, and if the role of moral relativity is similar. I can't tell if the West now is growing the kind of moral relativity and social relations that Hinduism set up about 500 CE (AD). It might help to read how John Milton depicts Lucifer (Satan) in "Paradise Lost", as a confused super-hero. If you can find episodes, it might help to look at the TV show "Lucifer" from 2016.

Think of life as a Dharma drama. Small characters in life can be both good and bad. Big characters can be both good and bad. Bad characters are needed for good characters to develop their full goodness. No matter how bad it seems, it always turns out well in the end. It would not turn out as good as it could possibly get if it did not get really bad along the way. Good (God) can turn evil into even better good. Good (God) could not turn evil into the best good if evil was not really evil first. Everyone is a mix of both good and bad. Even the worst bad guy has a good side. Good needs bad. Good needs bad to turn out as good as good could be. Good and bad depend on each other. To be bad really is to advance good. There is no absolute bad because good always subsumes bad and good needs bad. You do what you have to do given who you are. If you don't do what you have to do given who you are, then you are not being better or worse, you are being stubborn and selfish. Even if you are bad by nature, you are being even worse and more selfish if you refuse to do the bad that you are by nature. You hinder the normal relations that need to go on so that everybody else can do his-her job and the whole drama can move on toward the perfect ending, and then do it all over again. Everyone has a place that includes both good and bad, and everyone should act out his-her place as indicated in his-her character.

To have real fun and to feel fully alive, we must have real risk. God (Dharma) is immune to real risk. For God to have something like real risk, God must first fool himself. God fools himself by falling asleep. When asleep, he dreams he is real particular human beings who are susceptible to (pretend) real risk and so can feel fully alive. Human beings are a way in which God fools himself so as to have fun. Bad guys are part of falling asleep, (pretend) real risk, and having fun. Without bad guys as obstacles, there would be no fun. Without bad guys, we can't fool ourselves into thinking we are in true jeopardy so we can get the full feeling of being alive. God is both good guys and bad guys, both good and bad.

Badness is not really bad. Badness is an indirect way of contributing good. The system is able to turn badness into greater good. You really do good when you do bad. You can do bad with the consolation that you really are doing good. The system needs someone to do bad. Bad guys provide the turmoil out of which new creation and new goodness arise. Good and bad make each other, and so make each other better. So, if you feel like doing bad because it is part of your character, or just because feel like doing bad right now, go ahead. It is your Dharma.

By this point, we have full-fledged moral relativism including a lot of ambiguity.

How much bad is too much? How much bad can be mixed in with good before the good turns bad? Do we have to suspect some characters who want to good or all characters who want to do good? We can't answer these questions if we accept the point of view given above.

(16) Somewhat as in Mahayana, in Hinduism, almost all people should be making spiritual progress. You should work to be a better Hindu, a better player in the Dharma game. You should work to understand the Dharma system. People are assessed not only by how well they carry out their obvious current role

now but also by how well the progress toward greater understanding and compassion. Of course, only holy people fully succeed, but that does not mean you should not work and it does not mean you cannot be assessed also by your progress. This attitude allows Hindus to make sense of the greater insight that most of us have as we get older, and the fact that some of us progress faster than others.

If we take the idea of spiritual progress seriously, it means that, someday, all Hindus will understand the Dharma game. In that case, will the game end? In some versions of Hinduism, as in Mahayana, it does. But in most workaday versions, it does not. There seems to be no end to the supply of un-enlightened people, and no end to the progress that most people need to make just to carry out their current role let alone to get more adept at the system as a whole. So, in practice, people don't worry about everybody reaching enlightenment and the system ending but do take spiritual progress as evidence of a system.

If everybody should be making steady progress, albeit slowly, where do all the un-enlightened people come from, and what is their role? As far as I know, there is no clear answer as to where they all come from because there doesn't have to be. The Dharma at play can produce an infinite supply of not-fully-awake players to keep the Dharma game going.

Their role depends on their place in the Dharma system. Usually, their place is to support other players in the Dharma system. Sometimes other players support them. In particular, people who are making only slow progress (or none) provide a means for other people, who are making clear fast progress, to show their spiritual advance by doing good deeds, helping others, helping society, and so helping the Dharma game along. As heroes need small people, as heroes and villains need each other, so fast learners need slow learners so fast learners can put into practice what they have learned.

In acting primarily to let fast learners show their advanced Dharma level, are slow learners still fully persons? Can we still really think of "you are that" between fast learners and slow learners? Ideally in Hinduism, slow learners are still persons and everybody is still the same. In practice, and so in another deeper form of theory, slow learners are not fully persons. They become mere tokens in the Dharma game. They are means to the ends of other better persons. The ideal theory allows us to overlook this demotion. You can treat "other people" as mere means to ends and still feel good about it. See below where I discuss the movie "Groundhog Day".

(17) By the time of Jesus, Hindus had developed the idea of "bhakti" or "devotion"; see below. Few people can understand the full Dharma system, and the gap made many people feel lost, just as earlier many people felt lost when Brahmins controlled the ritual and cosmological system. Bhakti states that anyone can be fully in contact with the system, fully realized, and successful. All you need do is devote yourself to one large coherent part of the system. You need to make sure you devote yourself along moral lines and act morally; I do not consider odd devotion such as Thugs. I think most people become devoted to a god such as Vishnu, one of the forms of a god, avatars of a god such as Krishna. Some people devote themselves to a calling such as education. Bhakti is the religious feeling that people have when they cannot know the depth of ideas such as Dharma and Salvation-through-Grace yet they still feel religious, want to belong, and want to feel "plugged in". It is similar to Christian devotion toward Mary, the saints, and Jesus. Bhakti is what monks and nuns do who pray constantly. It is what Christians do when they perform the liturgy and make offerings of all kinds. Bhakti likely is the single most important way in which Hinduism overcame rivals such as Mahayana Buddhism.

Although devotion is the way by which most people are in the Hindu system, and bhakti plays a huge role in practicing Hinduism, it does not add much to the ideas given above, for example, to Dharma and its implications. So for now I overlook the practical importance of bhakti. I take it up again at the end of the chapter when I assess Hinduism more.

(18) In the view accumulated so far, what does another religion such as Christianity, or an ideology such as democracy, look like? Hinduism is like the Army Rangers while other religions and ideologies are like the Boy Scouts. Other religions and ideologies are for children while Hinduism is for adults. Sometimes other religions and ideologies are for children who are impetuous, petulant, “in a mood”, and stuck on one idea while Hinduism is for adults who have gained from their own experience and from the wisdom of many wise people and who can nobly graciously assess the whole. Other religions and ideologies are serious and to be taken seriously in their world, but are a mere reflection of something better in Hinduism; and adults in the big world should seek something better. Hinduism sees other religions and ideologies much the same way that large Christian Churches see other churches, in particular see small Protestant sects, and more particularly how the Roman Catholic Church sees the many Protestant Churches large and small. Other idea systems are only approximations to Hinduism. They do not come up to the mark because they were made by people who did not appreciate the Dharma. Another religion or ideology is the product of people who might be fast learners in their own societies but are slow learners compared to Hindu holy people. (Smart people in other societies might have had the native talent to be a holy person in Hinduism but had the bad luck to be born elsewhere.)

For example, Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Some early Church members took that idea to mean there were no social distinctions at all - rich and poor are alike - a logical implication within the early movement but a wrong strategic move anyhow. Other members had to correct them and had to place compassion in the context of social order – even though there is no basis for placing compassion in the social order if we follow the strict logic of Jesus’ teachings and there is much basis for crossing proper social lines. While a Christian might love his-her neighbor as him-herself, he-she had better not treat the neighbor as him-herself, and had better not expect such treatment even from other Christians. This tension in Christianity was never fully resolved. This mistake comes easily in Christianity and other non-Hindu systems because they do not base compassion (love your neighbor) on correct ideas of “distinct and same within Dharma”. Hinduism already did this, and so Hinduism did not need the corrections of early Christianity, and Hinduism does not lead to mistakes about social order and proper behavior.

Islam means that we have to submit to God and to the Will of God. This view is correct when it means to accept the reality of the Dharma system. Islam is a version of bhakti (devotion). However, submission to Allah is not up to the mark if it means to accept arbitrary commands from an unknowable deity, especially as those commands are conveyed and interpreted by people. The Dharma system has reliable knowable logical regularities. Nobody need accept the ideas of other people just because other people claim they speak for God or even just because the ideas are written in a book. Study the Dharma.

Western democracy tries to institutionalize, in a political way, the idea that we are all the same (“you are that”) by pretending we are all equal in rights, power, abilities, and responsibilities. It pretends that all cultural, social, gender, ethnic, religious, and occupational groups can quickly learn self-government and can fully succeed at self-government. It mistakes a spiritual truth for a political principle. This mistake

promotes an unworkable bad system in which the masses are easily misled by rich and powerful people and-or the masses lead the whole nation astray. For us to see that we are similar, and to know what to do because we are similar, first we must see that we differ, and must see that differences persist even after we know we are similar. We have to understand that both similarity and difference are important, and have to place both in a single social-political system. We need a political system that respects both similarities and differences, and puts each in its own proper arena. Hinduism does that but Western style democracy does not.

Fascism is the parallel mistake to democracy, where power is used as a substitute for compassion, and where the idea of “you are that” is completely overlooked rather than overstressed. Fascism does not care much about similarity but it pretends a lot of compassion. It builds institutions in which, ideally, able people should extend compassion so as to knit together the entire social order but in fact fascism gives power to wealthy people so their power and the whole social order are one power. Precisely because Hinduism accepts both similarities and differences, it can provide real compassion and the one set of true institutions based on real compassion.

Many Christians believe God can turn everything bad into something even better. God is good and God is stronger than evil, so God must overcome all evil in the end. God even overcomes all evil as we go along, as when God-as-Jesus came into the world to lead us to salvation even before the end of the world. A bad illness can bring people together, make us value each other more, and make us value life more. In fact, though: nothing necessarily in Christianity leads to the belief that God can turn all evil into something even better as we go along, and pure Christianity is pessimistic about how the world turns out until the bitter end – read the Book of Revelations. In Christianity, the world is fallen, and that means evil wins most of the time until the end. In contrast, for example from the movie “Marigold Hotel”, Hindus say, “it is not over until the happy ending”. The Dharma does lead good to win even as we go along. The Dharma does turn evil into something even better. This Hindu idea includes the Christian idea that God can turn bad into better. This happy result is a necessary part of Hinduism. No matter how bad it is now, that is all part of a bigger plan in which everything turns out for the best. For example, the struggles for independence and self-government in India made the long oppression of the “British Raj” into something even better than if there had been no British conquerors. World War Two was horrible but did lead to the United Nations, one world economy, the spread of democratic ideals, and freedom and comfort for billions of people in the world. Global climate change might lead people to see that we must act soon. In the Mahabharata, the victory of the good brothers over their bad (in context) cousins led to greater good even at the cost of great carnage. As long as the wheel of Dharma turns, it produces good that necessarily overcomes bad. Behind every black cloud there really is a silver lining. It is the Dharma.

The information that follows won't make full sense until the material below on avatars, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but it is well to mention some of the information here: Except perhaps for Buddhism, no other religion can account for the holy people, heroes (including heroines), gods, and avatars of Hinduism, at least in a good way. In contrast, Hinduism can account for ALL the religious people, and many religious fantasy figures, in ALL other religions. Hinduism can do this gracefully without straining its basic ideas. ALL figures in ALL religions are manifestations of the Dharma. ALL serve the Dharma, each in his-her own way, suitable for the time, place, and people. There is nothing odd in this, nothing to be surprised at. This result is part of the Dharma turning all situations to goodness. It is part of the ultimate happy ending that happens all the time. For example, most positive religious figures are best seen as manifestations

(avatars) of Vishnu, a god who sustains the world and keeps goodness obviously in control. Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohammad are Vishnu at work making the world better, safer, and saner. When other religions claim that their figure is a god, that claim does not offend Hindus, and makes much sense. Jesus is both a great yogi (holy person) because he was human and a great god because he did the work of God. In Hinduism, there is nothing odd about that status at all, and even to be expected if we rely on the Dharma. Even bad people who seem to make the world worse for a while really only make the world better in the long run. They shake up the world so that agents of goodness can make it better. Bad figures include Napoleon, Hitler, Tamurlane, Stalin, and Mao. They are manifestations of Shiva. Creative people such as David, Michelangelo, Leonard Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, and the Beatles are manifestations of Brahma, especially when they are also a little amoral and adventurous (not immoral).

To put this Hindu view in perspective, most other religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, see the figures of other religions as demons out to conquer the world and-or subvert it for humans, they think of other religions as evil ideologies out to enslave souls to evil demons, and they necessarily see all other religions as exclusive rivals – you either believe us or them. In comparison, the Hindu idea is a breath of fresh air and a ray of cleansing sunlight. For the non-Hindu, all other religions are a great evil to be fought at all cost while for the Hindu other religions are gateways to a greater truth and are to be nurtured until people find the greater truth. Other religions naturally teach hate amid love, as we can see in radical Christians and Muslims in the year 2016 while Hinduism naturally teaches open tolerance. This Hindu view is a strong force behind “all paths lead to God”.

Again, the following information makes more sense in light of the seven paths explained below but it is well to mention the ideas here: Most religions offer only one real path to only one real kind of salvation. In Christianity, you must accept Jesus as God. In Islam, you must accept Allah as the one and only God and accept Mohammad as the greatest, last, and most authoritative prophet. In Taoism, you need to find the Way and act accordingly. In Confucianism, you must make Heaven your model so you can be a model to others. In theory, in Hinduism, there is only one salvation and that is to see the Dharma system fully. In practice, and in accord with theory better understood, there are four official paths and seven unofficial paths. The four official paths are: (1) withdrawal, contemplation, and yoga; (2) intellect; (3) moral action; and (4) devotion (bhakti) to a god or avatar. ALL the salvation plans of ALL other religions can be seen in terms of these plans of Hinduism. NO other religion gives all four (seven) plans equal weight as does Hinduism. ALL other religions stress only one or two plans, usually devotion and small moral acts. Even when another religion sees that other plans are part of the natural “spiritual” life of some people, it gives those other ways weight only as they lead to devotion, as when Christian monks meditate to better worship Jesus and Sufis meditate to better worship Allah. ALL other religions and ideologies can be seen as incomplete and frustrating approximations to the full spiritual options of Hinduism. A Hindu who practices one way does not look down on Hindus who practice any other way. A Hindu who practices one way does not want to look down on other religions and ideologies that practice other ways, and is surprised when they look down on him-her.

Hinduism promotes “live and let live”, accepts that people need not have full knowledge of dogma to be religiously valid, accepts that people can differ and still be religiously valid, and accepts that people can approach religion in many ways. When combined with the Hindu ability to explain a huge variety of religious figures as servants of the Dharma, we can understand why Hinduism fosters amazing variety,

even open contradiction, without anxiety. Hinduism has a hundred thousand compatible sects. If you can find a way to get along, then you can find a way to God and the Dharma.

Pretty much any slogan or any feature of any religion can be found in an idea, attitude, social relation, or ceremony of Hinduism. Christian sacraments can be subsumed as Dharma acting on people to change them more in accord with the Dharma.

Because Hinduism can look at all other religions and ideologies this way, Hinduism can see them all as lesser versions of itself. It can encompass them and make them relative.

Because Hinduism can encompass and make relative all other ways of thought, Hinduism can look down on other ways as I described in the chapter on Relativism. It can say that other ways do lead to a god but other ways are inferior paths to a lesser god. Hinduism can encompass other ways in its ideas of society and human social life, including the aspects that I dislike.

The ideal, when stated as above, is appealing. When stated to bring out Hindu smug self-superiority, is not appealing and is usually annoying. The actual practice is far short of the ideal, and it is even more annoying. All religions are annoying in practice but not all religions have the tools for understanding that Hinduism has and yet still abuse them. When we see such big gaps between good ideal, bad ideal, and actual practice, then we have to suspect the founding ideas, that is, the impersonal Dharma system. So, I deny the impersonal Dharma system. I prefer the personal Judeo-Christian-Western system even with its faults and its gap between ideal and real. I work not to let it lapse into its own stupid errors, such as blaming other religions and religious figures on demonic cunning.

The antidote is to not accept the starting point of the impersonal Dharma system. Insist on some moral relations and personal relations, and insist they are not relative as described above. Find a clear set of principles about specific actions and relations, such as the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, equality under the law, and decency without prudery.

While resisting the impersonal Dharma system, don't fall back into narrow-minded bigotry. Keep the open-minded tolerance that the best Hinduism preaches even if practiced Hinduism does not follow it.

(19) Above I said the idea of “you are that” (“we are the same”) from the Upanishads can be pushed to the idea that we are all sparks of God, and even that we are God himself (Dharma itself). I am God and you are God. We are both God because we are all the same, and we are both the same because we are all God. If we all play a part in the drama, then we are the drama, and are all equally the drama. In terms that start from the Gospel of John and go beyond the Gospel: Jesus is the Child of God and is God; and so we are God too only we might not know it yet; that reason is why we can all become Children of God through Jesus; we borrow his knowledge of this truth.

In the 1950s through 1970s, some Westerners pushed this idea to silliness. This idea fueled the claim of religious charlatans. Although Alan Watts was part of a movement called “California Taoism”, in fact, to me, his ideas were more Hindu than Taoist. He wrote that Westerners, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all appalled at a claim of “I am God”, but, to an enlightened person such as Watts or a Hindu, the idea is almost trivial. To a Hindu, we are all part of the Dharma game, and, at heart, are all the core of the

Dharma expressing itself temporarily in a particularity. It is about time we realized it and we started acting accordingly.

While this idea is an implication of Hinduism, I don't think smart Hindus make much of it. Smart Hindus who do get it don't push it the same way that confused Westerners and religious charlatans do. If you really know it and feel it, you don't make a point of it.

I don't agree with it. At the same time, I don't think other all people who feel it are crazy although some might be. It comes naturally with the "Grand Canyon" feeling of something bigger than me of which I am a part. We have to keep in mind that we are still only a part even when we do sense the bigger than me and do sense that it sometimes works through us. I do think some people who say "I am God" are selfish connivers. Some Westerners overstress the idea of "I am God" to use against Hinduism by saying that Hinduism is self-delusional self-indulgent self-idolatry. I don't agree with their extreme reaction either. The idea "I am God" is easily abused by non-Hindus, it does not play a big part in Hinduism, and it is not needed for other points here, so I don't go into it further.

Other Ways to Look at the Whole System.

A handy way to look at this system is through gender. Like good guys and bad guys, heroes and helpers, we have two basic genders of women and men. They need each other. By splitting, the world (Dharma) can play a never-ending drama about getting back together again. By getting together occasionally, the genders create more men and women to repeat. The new men and women are not exactly like the old. The new are similar enough to keep things going but different enough to keep it interesting. The new create more new, and so on, for a long time. Each generation thinks it invented the whole game. To a more enlightened person, the world splits not into two genders only but several genders. Most genders are needed in their own way. All gender interactions are always interesting even if annoying too often. Gender is only one of the many ways in which the system diversifies and unites at the same time.

The varieties of gender can blur the lines of gender – although in "rom coms" the basic fact of two distinct mutually-needed and mutually-attractive genders is never at risk despite blurring. We also have genders that are not best seen as varieties of a major gender, or due to blending, and are best seen in their own right. We have metrosexual men, tomboy women, dandies, girls who like softball, girls who study martial arts, men who bake, etc. All these are needed for the full richness of the story.

In the 1920s, vampires, zombies, and werewolves were bad. Beginning with Lon Chaney for the original werewolf movie, by the early 2000s, they all gradually developed a mixed character, and many are good. They stimulate good guys to be better, do good deeds themselves, the better ones fight the worse ones, and they all provide plot movement. In the 1950s, all space aliens were horrible. By the time of the movie "ET", they were good. In the 1960s and through the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" and the first "Terminator" movie, all super machines were also super bad. By the time of "2010", the sequel to "2001", through all the sequels to the "Terminator" movies, and through movies like "Johnny Seven" and "Chappie", most machines had become friends. In the 1950s cowboy movies, there were "white hats" versus "black hats", and never the twain shall meet. By the 1970s, good guys were often worse than bad guys. In the 1930s, gangsters were bad while cops were good. By the 1970s, too many cops were corrupt. In the 1950s, everybody wanted a high-paid secure job in the modern business corporations that

were shaping the world of the future. By the 1990s, corporations were behind the corruption of government at the highest level and they were the spear point ripping apart the heart of nature; yet people still want jobs with them. What happened to all these creatures and people over a hundred years in America is what happened to bad guys and good guys in Hindu literature and ideology. Good guys need bad guys, and vice versa. In all good guys, there is a bit of bad, just as in all bad guys there is a bit of good.

In Christian terms: God has a plan. God has a plan for everybody and everything, no matter how big or small. We all play a part in God's plan. Everything that happens is a result of God's plan. It all works out well in the end because of God's plan. God foresaw everything and made allowances for it, including the bad results of free will. God foresaw the revolt of the Devil, and arranged so everything would turn out all right anyway. God turns evil into greater good, such as the killing of Jesus. That is one meaning of the Resurrection. We all do best when we go along with God's plan for us and for the world. Even when we go against God's plan in the short run, we cannot do so in the long run. We can take great joy in God's plan and in whatever small role we play in God's plan.

In terms of "Star Wars": the Light and Dark side of the Force came from one source and are destined to be reunited. What looks like separation of the two sides of the Force is really only a temporary situation, and the temporary division leads to a greater and happier reunification in the end. The Force has a plan. Quigon Jinn and Obiwan Kenobe thought Anikin Skywalker was the One who would reunite the force, and they were correct, but indirectly. It was necessary first that Anikin Skywalker first go over to the Dark side of the Force so his son, Luke, could reunite the two sides of the Force in an even greater, stronger, and longer way. Even small creatures such as "droids" serve the greater plan and can be crucial to the plan, as when R2D2 delivered Leia's message to Obiwan. Even apparent bad serves the greater good. Even when the Emperor thought he was carrying out his own amazing plan, really the Emperor was carrying out the deeper and more subtle plan of the Force.

In terms of "Lord of the Rings": God foresaw the revolt of Morgoth (the Devil) against him; foresaw the revolt of the Elves against Morgoth and, indirectly, against God; and foresaw that Sauron would return to Middle Earth to carry on the war. God has a plan. Even the littlest creatures such as Hobbits and Gollum play a big role in the overall plan. Even the smallest events, such as the chance finding of a plain ring, play a big role in the overall plan. God can turn evil against itself and for good. The making of the Ring was not the triumph of evil but the final undoing of evil. What looks like evil might be good in disguise, as when Strider the Ranger turns out to be Aragorn the King. Sometimes the worm turns as when the Ents finally rise up to destroy Saruman and his evil Orc army. The real story is not any one story in the saga but the fact that the story goes on forever: "the road goes ever on and on", and "not all who wander are lost". We all have a home in God's plan just as Sam had a home in the Shire, and we do what we do as part of God's plan just as Sam did it all for home in the Shire.

In terms of Mahayana: Good and evil are real but also illusions. They support each other. We should not come down too strong on one side or the other. Everyday life and enlightenment are the same, they only look different. Enlightened people and un-enlightened people are the same, they only look different. All enlightened people are also un-enlightened. All un-enlightened people are also enlightened; they just don't know it yet. They will in the end. When they do know it, they will return to the everyday world to keep the system going. A bodhisattva will come repeatedly to remind us and to save us by getting us to

accept the system and our role in the system. You might be him-her. The system supports, comforts, and guides you. What matters is the great system and that we accept our role in it. That is what enlightenment really means. What looks like the normal world is really a burning house of desperation while what looks like a burning house is really the normal world of plan and home. Both are the same, and both lead equally back to joy in the system. The system has a plan.

Hinduism can subsume and make relative all these views. None of these views can subsume and make relative Hinduism.

Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty.

See Part 3. Bhakti (devotion) and the Hindu view of social life were two reasons why Hinduism replaced Mahayana Buddhism in India. All societies hold ideas about human nature, social life, human-nonhuman relations, the universe, and the supernatural. The issue here is not just that there is a relation. The issue is how the two shape each other into a particularly Hindu style.

The Dharma plays by becoming many qualitatively different things. If the Dharma was many copies of exactly the same thing, no matter how all are beautiful, adept, and wonderful; even if the Dharma world was millions of the same thing; then there could be no game, no drama, no advance, and no fun. If every ant were exactly the same, there could be no colony and no ant life. A beach is fun only partly because it has trillions of sand grains all nearly exactly alike. If a beach did not also have water, sun, surf, fish, cliffs, boats, and even sometimes some humans showing off, seagulls, and vendors, it would not be a beach we could enjoy. If every flower were a rose, there might as well not be flowers. If every plant in a forest were the same plant, really there could be no forest. If there were no inherited differences between very similar organisms in a species, there could be no evolution. If there were no sex or genders, life would be more boring. If beings did not differ, we could not feel the bridge between us, we could not feel “you are that”. Great compassion between beings would make little sense.

All different things might be equally God (Dharma) or might be equally “sparks of God (Dharma)” yet, still, within the game, and for the game, they are not the same; they differ. The game within which they differ is, for us, reality. It is the only relevant reality, as long as we recall that it comes from the Dharma.

The Dharma reality game has rules. Rules, reality, and difference-in-similarity imply each other. Reality comes from the rules of the Dharma dream game. There is no relevant reality apart from the rules of the game. Rules are needed because things differ. If things did not differ, we would need no rules and could not have useful rules. When things differ, we must have rules for interaction. Whenever we have rules, we also must have differences, reality, and a game.

It is good to see commonality (“you are that”) but equally good and equally needed to respect differences (“great compassion”). You must do both. You must see both ways. You are both one and different. Both ways are equally important and equally valid. To stress one or the other is to fall into one of the doctrinal disputes of Hinduism, and I avoid doing so. To stress that we need to see both also is to fall into a view but this view is benign enough for this book and does not require me to take sides in any of the endless debates of Hinduism.

For the Dharma to play an ongoing drama game, things must differ yet relate. In relating, things are not always equal; difference and relating imply some inequality; inequality is part of difference; inequality is part of relating; inequality is good. At any time, some things have to be more important than others. We can't all be Arjuna or Krishna. Some things have to be higher while others are lower. If every character in a play were the hero (heroine), even if they were all somewhat different heroes but still heroes, then there could be no play. If every character were the good woman, even if all were good women but each with her own good character (like a really perky clean version of "Little Women"), there could be no play. The cast of characters need at least as much diversity as the sisters in "Pride and Prejudice" and their different lovers.

"Different" necessarily includes "more adept" and "less adept". If all the characters in "Romeo and Juliet" were as adept at running the city, and running their families, as the Prince, then there would be no family conflict and no play. If every tough in the Montague and Capulet families were an equally good fighter, then there could be no fights. If every police officer were as adept as Sherlock Holmes, there would be no mysteries for Holmes to solve.

Diversity also implies "better and worse" in the moral sense, as noted above about moral relativity.

Multi-celled organisms work because not every cell is exactly alike although all carry the same DNA. Multi-celled organisms work because cells differ and they interact to support each other. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts even if the whole needs all the parts. The parts need to be part of the whole. The parts have to help each other. Until recently, biologists liked to think of ecosystems in the same way, and this view is still largely true.

The terms for variation and functional mutual dependence in organisms, societies, and ecosystems are "functional integration" or "organic solidarity". These types of organization differ from the "mechanical integration" or "mechanical solidarity" of a stack of wood. Organic functional integration is more interesting and more fun.

Diversity, and "better and worse", in morality and in abilities, are natural because they are needed in a Dharma system. Diversity, and "better and worse", in both senses, are a natural part of Dharma life.

Among animals and people, those who have greater than average ability are naturally less common than those of average ability. Animals and people who have lesser ability likely are less common than those with average ability too but they are less of an issue. Animal societies work best when they channel their members of particular ability, and-or greater ability, into tasks that need the ability, and when the societies have just the right tasks into which they can channel the kinds of abilities that recur often. Ant colonies work best when workers work, soldiers fight, and drones impregnate queens. The queen in a bee colony can make many eggs, some of different kinds, and there is a need for a bee that can make many eggs, and only one bee of that kind, so the queen fits the task and the task fits the queen.

Abilities tend to be inherited. The fit is not perfect, but, generally, animals and people of high intelligence tend to produce smart children while animals and people of modest intelligence tend to produce average children and animals and people of low intelligence tend to produce children of low intelligence. Musical parents tend to have musical children, as in the Bach family. Being a police officer tends to run in families

as in the TV show “Blue Bloods” although this tendency is as much due to situation as to genes. If Arjuna had children, we would expect them to be smart, good-looking, and good at war. The fact of inherited ability does not go with the modern politically correct “all children are above average” (Lake Wobegone) but it is true and it is part of the natural Dharma game.

What kind of society best goes along with Dharma naturalness and would support Dharma-ness over the longest time?

To see, it is easiest first to rule out some societies that do not serve this role well although they might play a role in a bigger Dharma game as inferior reflections of best Dharma society, as encompassed lesser versions of the best Dharma society. We do not want societies in which:

- There is no gender or sex and-or no recognition of distinct gender and sex, and their roles.
- Gender is rigidly split into two and only two.
- Everybody could do everybody else’s job equally well.
- Every job made just the same difference so that every plumber made just as much of a difference as the mayor of the city.
- Everybody could learn the job of everybody else.
- Everybody has the same power.
- Radical populist democracy prevails.
- Everybody has the right opinion about religion.
- The opinion of everybody counts equally in religion, politics, economics, etc.
- The opinion of only one person or one group counts.
- Rigid stratification prevails without any change over time.

We want ONE society in which:

- People recognize, accept, and enjoy natural differences (differences given by the Dharma).
- Natural differences include differences in ability and in moral stature.
- Different roles, and different people, mutually support each other.
- People naturally tend toward the roles that suit their natural abilities.
- Society takes account of natural abilities by providing tasks for the natural abilities.
- There are fewer tasks that require great ability and many tasks that require average ability.
- Ability is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.
- People accept that characteristics and abilities are largely inherited.
- Social place is very largely inherited but not entirely inherited.

The only society that fulfills our needs is Hindu traditional stratified society. Hindu society is the only truly Dharma-based society. It is the only society that accords with Dharma-based (evolved) human nature.

All other societies are lesser variations of Hindu traditional society, and other societies make some of the mistakes listed above. All other societies can be encompassed in Hindu traditional society.

In Hinduism, everybody has a place in the cosmic system. There is room for everybody, everybody plays a role, and everybody is needed. As Jesus said, "My father's house has many rooms". In the early days of Hindu religion and Indian society, this thought likely was a comfort.

But this thought necessarily also has "flip sides" that are discomfoting. If you have a place, you must keep that place. If you do not keep your place, the system falls apart. You are now responsible not only for your own little role but for the entire system. Dereliction of role is not only a betrayal of self but of every particular player and the whole as well. You have to find your role and carry out its duties fully. Once you have found your role, that role is your role; you may not change roles. That role is you. You are your role. You become your role and not anything else. You find your spiritual cosmic place by your role in society and, with few exceptions, in no other way.

This way of thinking helps rich and powerful people excuse their position and excuse what they do in their position such as exploit the poor. They have a cosmic duty to act that way. They have a cosmic duty to act rich and powerful. This way of thinking is a way to keep poor and weak people in place by stressing that they deserve their place and their place is needed, no matter how humble or painful. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of women. Women and poor people have a cosmic and social duty to act like women and poor people. Downtrodden pained people have a cosmic and social duty to take what the rich give them, and to act like downtrodden subservient people. This way of thinking reinforces the subordination of non-Hindus, non-Indians, and other relations.

It might seem as if seeing cosmic duty in terms of social station would foster stable good relations both between socio-economic-cosmic classes and among members of each class, but this is not usually so. What happens in real life is that people who have an advantage use the system to keep and-or augment their advantage and to keep down rivals. Their intrinsic ability does not matter. What matters is that they have a privileged position from which they can maneuver to keep privilege. Privilege takes the place of native ability. People with privileged station make sure subordinates stay subordinate. People accept a place not so much because they feel that is the place Dharma gives them but because that is a secure base from which to connive to be richer, more powerful, have more powerful families, and get more sex, or because it is secure. In using their station as a base from which to connive, people indirectly reinforce the whole system and, at the same time, make it a bad system. When people find themselves in a bad system, they use their place as a base from which to connive etc. It is self-reinforcing. In a system like this, people develop personalities that go along with the system, like the nasty people that developed in Nazi Germany, Russia and its colonies under Stalin, and China under the worst times of Mao. They are much like the system and the type of people ("the establishment") that have been a favorite whipping boy of American literature at least since "The Scarlet Letter"; yet they are still real and still bad. And so the bad system perpetuates itself in a bad way.

Westerners romanticize the Hindu ideal of diversity, everybody has a role, everybody is needed, and everybody helps everybody else, and Westerners make it seem fun, by taking for granted more freedom than is allowed for them personally in the real system, and by seeing their personal role not as a social role but as a cosmic hero who bursts all boundaries and re-defines everything as it should be. They see play rather than a rigid unfair system that fosters bad feelings. Westerners are wrong.

Whether, overall, this way of thinking leads to more good than bad depends on history, economics, social relations, and other forces that go along with it such as degree of personal choice. Since the population of India got dense, and certainly since India moved into industrialized capitalism, this way of thinking does more harm than good. Whether this thinking can be interpreted to help people in the modern world is one of the tasks for young Hindus. To appreciate this situation, it helps to look at how the train of thought was interpreted in Indian Hindu society, as in Part 3.

We went from pleasing ideas about diversity and mutual help to scary ideas about tight roles in a system. It is hard to start down this path without going all the way to that end, a “slippery slope”. Try to think how you would keep the best parts while dumping the worst parts. It is easier to keep the best parts if we think in terms of persons and a personal God rather than in terms of roles and Dharma. I find it very hard to stop along this path if I start from impersonal Dharma and roles in a Dharma system.

In America, we say we are all equal but we know we are not really all equal, we praise the idea of wealth according to merit yet we fiercely fight any inheritance tax, and we know we could not have diversity and mutual help if we really were all equal. We try to use “equality under the law” to balance ideal equality with ideal diversity and mutual help. In reality, we do not succeed well. In Hinduism, everyone accepts difference and so should mutually help but in fact difference leads to entrenched inequality and only token mutual help. Hindus accept diversity that feeds the system but not some important natural diversity such as homosexuality and non-traditional roles for women. In totalitarian systems such as Stalinism, in contrast to Hinduism, everybody should be treated the same but in fact are treated differently – the end result too is entrenched inequality. How can we see similarity, difference, equality, inequality, diversity, individual effort and reward, mutual help, and compassion so as to develop a good working realistic system? How do we avoid hypocrisy serving a bad system? While the current Western solutions are far from ideal, and far from what I can imagine as a real workable practical system, still they are better than alternatives in India, China, Africa, and to most of the rest of the world.

Young Hindus in modern democracies are in a bind. Modern plural democracy is not compatible with the ideas of Hindu traditional society given above. Yet young Hindus are learning to live in modern plural democracies. To merge Hinduism with modern diverse semi-populist democracy would require rejecting and losing many of the ideas given above. Most core ideas of Hinduism and a Dharma society can be made compatible with ideas of modern plural democracies but to explain how here would take too much space. Besides, young Hindus should solve this problem for themselves. Please see my other essays apart from this book.

Culture, Society, Religion, and Concordance.

Usually people are happiest when these aspects of life all line up: (1) our culture apart from our religion, that is, what we think (believe) in general apart from religion; (2) society, that is, the groups in our society and how they relate to each other; and (3) religion. Desire for harmony is true not only of Hinduism and Indian society but of almost all societies. Individuals seek social concordance as individuals and as part of societies. Even thugs, punks, rebels, and Satanists want the world to line up with their view, if only so they know what to be mad at and what to covet.

How, then, are Hinduism, Indian society, and Indian culture distinct? That is what this chapter is about. I can't explain any more succinctly than through this whole chapter.

I can say a few things briefly. Hunter-gatherer-foragers do not expect, and do not seek, the degree of concordance sought in Hinduism. (Except maybe for the Australian indigenous people (aborigines), who were not originally hunter-gatherer-foragers, in my opinion.) I doubt that an evolved basis to seek and expect Hindu-style concordance is a big part of our nature. We did evolve the desire to expect, and to seek, some concordance, but not nearly to the extent imagined in Hinduism.

Except for a few tribal societies, tribal societies do not seek or expect such concordance. Except for some brief times and places in European, Chinese, and Japanese feudalism, most peasant societies didn't do so. This desire for tremendous concordance makes the Hindu system odd and strident.

The most interesting way to see the concordance is how Hinduism is able to turn most ideas and most other thought systems into parts of itself, and-or into versions of itself. Again, how Hinduism does this is the subject of the whole chapter and cannot be summarized any better in this section.

Americans naturally, and correctly, resist strong concordance, at least in myth, as when the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in the original TV show overthrew computer-based societies. Yet Americans overdo the case the other way, and we extol false chaos while actually being about as conformist as most other cultures-and-societies. This hypocrisy makes it hard for Americans to be objective and fair about how Hinduism does the job, and this hypocrisy would lengthen my task of explaining.

I had a hard time in graduate school because, at that time, anthropologists emphasized the concordance between culture, society, and religion. They apparently assumed that we could explain all if we could get at one. Usually anthropologists fixed on religion as a symbol system and used religion to explain culture and society. This view would please Hindus. It is not a true view of how human nature, culture, society, and religion work, or of how the basis for them evolved.

Societies and-or religions, other than Hinduism, that try to force concordance on human life, also worry me. Puritans were not nearly the prudes that modern myth makes them out but I still fear falling into such a society. Academia, with modern political correctness, seems that way to me. The great failed collective systems of the world, such as Russian and Chinese Communism, are also examples, and they failed for good reasons rooted in human nature. When a large Christian church – I will not name any, and there are more than one – tries to organize all life and politics, I fear it too.

We do need some order and some correspondence in human life. It is worth thinking about what kinds, and how much, and where to draw the lines.

“You Are That”, Compassion, the Upanishads, and Hinduism.

The Upanishads teach that we are all “in” each other, we are all connected. The proper response to this insight is compassion for other beings, especially sentient beings. Who would hurt even a bird when we know that, to a large extent, we are that bird? This feeling has the same root as the idea from Judaism, and Jesus, that the second of the two supreme bases for the Law is to love neighbors as ourselves. (The

first basis of Jewish Law is to love God, as he loves us.) The same feeling lies behind the Golden Rule and behind Kant's idea that all rules apply equally to everyone including ourselves and others. Achilles feels it when he sees Priam as a father and he gives Priam what is needed and right. We see ourselves as persons and see others as persons too; when we do, we can act only in accord with our feeling that we are alike. Of course, not all these views are exactly the same, and differences can be important. I do not disentangle any differences here.

In the numbered points above, when I began picturing Hinduism by showing the importance of all the little people and even the villains, I seemed to follow a logical extension of the Upanishads. When I continued by showing how bad guys and good guys depend on each other, I seemed to continue the logic and to move toward the inherent social endpoint. We can see the link from the Upanishads to Hinduism in this way but I think this way is wrong.

A change occurred between the Upanishads and Hinduism. The change is one possible development of the Upanishads but not the only possible development and, I think, not the best. The same change could be done in the teachings of Jews and Jesus if their teachings were taken along the direction of the points above. Their teachings did not go that way because of Jewish character and because Judaism merged with Greek and Latin thought in Christianity. Some versions of Christianity, such as Gnosticism, did try to take the feelings that way, but, luckily, formal Christianity defeated them.

The change in Hinduism comes when thinkers embed "you are that" and "compassion" within a Dharma system and social system. In the full-blown system, we don't feel the link to others and the compassion that the Upanishads and Jewish teachers wanted. We don't feel like one fully sentient person connected to a lot of other similar beings, some of which are partly sentient such as dogs, and some of which are also fully sentient such as humans. We don't feel person to person. We don't feel that the importance of life arises out of what we do on the basis of God's love for us and our love for others.

Instead, importance in Hinduism arises because I, you, he, she, it, them, and everything, are parts of a system. We are persons only in the system. Our identity as persons depends on our role in the system. Our sense that we are all the same arises because we are all roles-parts in the system. Our feeling that we should love each comes because we and others are parts of the system. To love others is to love the system and to love the system is to love others. There is no love of others apart from love of the system. In my view, to love the system is not the same as to love God or your neighbors. This difference in going from the Upanishads to Hinduism is similar to the difference between loving someone because he-she is a person versus loving someone because he-she is a citizen of your town. It is the difference between loving your country because it is good (or you wish it was a good country) versus loving it because it is your own country, right or wrong. It is like loving Big Brother in the novel "1984".

Of course, in real life apart from formal religions, many real Hindu people do feel the togetherness and compassion taught by the Upanishads, Jews, Jesus, and Homer. The difference is that one feeling makes sense in the context of simple human action (Upanishads, etc.) while the other feeling (Hinduism) does not.

When Hindus feel this feeling, they can refer back to the Upanishads to make sense of it and justify it, at least in the way that Hinduism interprets the Upanishads. In giving an approved context to this feeling,

they reinforce Hinduism and the change from the Upanishads to Hinduism even if they don't know they do so. They convert the feeling of togetherness and compassion to Hinduism even when, in fact, Hinduism does not make sense of the feeling in its original Upanishad form. Hindus who feel connection and compassion in the original sense of the Upanishads have a feeling apart from a Hindu Dharma system even if, after, they make sense of it in terms of a Hindu Dharma system. Hinduism pre-empts the feeling to serve its system. This is what Hinduism, and other systems that eat the world, do. Christianity does this when a well-dressed person on the street flips a dollar into the hat of a homeless person and the well-dressed person thinks he-she loves his-her neighbor as him-herself. (Please don't stop giving money to poor people on the street or anywhere.) The shift to Hinduism is much like what happens in the novel "Animal Farm". The ideas "You are that" and "Compassion" become slogans much as "We are all equal – but some are more equal than others".

Humans have a hard time acting on the basis of "you are that", "compassion", "love your neighbor", "you are like your neighbor", and "applies equally". People have a hard time simply treating other people as persons like themselves and treating nature as full of beings similar to themselves. People have a hard time acting in simple decency as did Achilles. I doubt any real society could run on this basis. People prefer roles and social systems; and societies have to have roles and systems. That is one reason why, after Achilles gave Priam the body of Hector, Achilles led the Greeks in funeral games to honor his dead friend Patroclus. Society restored itself, hopefully better now that Achilles has felt simple decency. Christianity developed roles and social systems out of Jesus' simple teachings. Hinduism developed roles and social systems that could refer back to insights from the Upanishads. Hinduism did a good job. Hinduism satisfies the great majority of Hindus. Hinduism meets human needs, including the need to recall "you are that" and "compassion" from time to time. Yet just because Hinduism is one very effective way to make a human system using versions of "you are that" and "compassion" does not mean it is the way I prefer or think best. In its success, Hinduism undermined "you are that" and "compassion".

Ideally in Judaism and Christianity, people should feel connected to other people and feel compassion for them not only because we are similar as people but despite that we differ in age, gender, wealth, power, social station, etc. People should feel connected and compassion because of the differences, not only despite the differences. We cannot simply ignore differences but we can overcome them often enough to see common personhood. We feel both similarity and difference, and sometimes we can overcome difference. Sometimes we revel in difference when we can see both commonality and difference at the same time. In practice, Christians are not able to bridge differences to feel love for all neighbors. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian ideal, Hindus do not feel connection or compassion despite differences or because of differences. Differences are acceptable walls. Differences are an indirect way to other kinds of connection through the Dharma system because they give us roles in the Dharma system. While a Hindu might feel something for a peasant or a beggar, he-she feels it because that thing is a peasant or beggar playing a role in the Dharma system and not because that thing is a person like him-herself who happens to be in different conditions.

I am not sure how the writers of the Upanishads wanted us to feel connection and compassion when we are distinct in situation. The Upanishads were mystical lessons for people who lived in the forest apart from society. Normal differences were not relevant. A Christian would read the Upanishads to say we should overcome differences to see our commonness underneath. A Hindu would read the Upanishads as pertaining only to a mystic link in the deeper Dharma system, irrelevant to social differences, and so as

really supporting differences because differences are natural in the Dharma system and the Upanishads support the Dharma system. It is worth reading the Upanishads to decide for yourself.

I don't know if a full Dharma system can be re-interpreted to re-capture the feeling of the Upanishads, Jewish teachers, Jesus, and Homer. I doubt it. I think we have to get beyond impersonal Dharma to an idea of God as a person too. We will see, as adept caring young Hindus move around the world.

PART 3: More on Embedding Cosmic Duty in Indian-Hindu Society.

See above about Hindu society in the section "Cosmic Place Becomes Social Duty".

Entrenched Rank, and Relativism.

Hinduism is pervaded by a sense of higher and lower that is hard to get across to Americans. The Hindu feel for rank is like the gender system in the Romance languages where every noun is either masculine or feminine regardless of common sense; Americans don't get that either; I struggle with it. In Hinduism, of two people or groups, one always is higher and the other lower: occupations, genders, classes, castes, siblings, families, callings, schools, skills, etc. Of two women, one is higher and the other lower. Of two doctors, one is higher and the other lower. Of two cities, one is higher and the other lower, like rivalries between two high schools in America in athletics.

The bare roots of ranking are fixed. Men always outrank women, within castes. Age outranks youth. Major caste categories are always ranked in the same order: holy people, priests, rulers and soldiers, peasants, merchants, and then others that I don't go into.

Rank and system go together. Anything has some a character in itself and gets some character from its relations to everything else. Each individual robin is the common worm-hunting friendly neighborhood bird but what it fully is, what it eats, who it fights, when it leaves for the south, and when it returns to the north, all depend also on where it lives and if its neighbors are jays, cardinals, other robins, or hawks. A yellow star is a yellow star but we don't fully understand stars unless we also know about red stars, blue stars, neutron stars, super novae ("novas"), galaxies, planets, and interstellar dust. The character of a whole house changes when a new baby comes or a parent dies. Who the child becomes depends on who it grows up with.

Rank is an important way that anything finds a place in a system and makes the system. Households, schools, and communities in which children outrank parents, teachers, and adults are far different from those in which parents, teachers, and adults outrank children. Cities are usually better to live in when neighborhoods are divided by socio-economic level and work type, such as middle class from upper class. Much as Americans hate to admit it, cities usually are better to live in when some ethnic groups form their own neighborhoods, as when Italians and Jews have neighborhoods. Ecosystems in which people are the top predator differ from those in which tigers, elephants, and king cobras are. Ecosystems in which people are the top herbivore (farmers) differ from those in which elephants are. Every year, popularity rankings drastically change network programming, usually for the better.

In Hinduism, rank carries over somewhat. Holy people rank higher than military people who rank higher than peasants, so holy people rank higher than peasants even though peasants feed and support holy people and when holy people depend on peasants.

Although the general idea of rank is clear, specifics can be complicated. Context and relativity support the system even when situations get fuzzy. A family can rank high within its caste but low compared to families in higher castes. Families focus on arenas in which they rank highly.

Rank does not always transfer perfectly. Rank does not always extend neatly across groups. Where comparisons might cause a problem, they are adeptly avoided. Family A is highest rank in city A while family B is highest rank in city B. When the two families do business, they avoid arguing about which is highest overall. In old India, warriors ranked above doctors while now doctors rank highly. Modern police officers are like the old warrior aristocracy. Now doctors rank above most officers but not necessarily above high ranking officers. So doctors and high ranking police officers avoid pushing questions of comparative rank. Still, the idea of rank remains.

As all over the world, power, wealth, prestige, and history can confute ideal ranks, while context and relativity help to preserve the ideal of ranking. All professional men are above all professional women. Yet a professional woman might be above a man merchant unless the merchant were rich and powerful, and his family had a long history.

Rank is not like an idealized chicken linear pecking order, and it is not necessarily the stuffy rigid horrible oppressive system of nasty higher-eats-lower that Americans dislike. Rank is more like the concern of a bride that everybody sits in the right place for all ceremonies. Rank is as much about peace and order as about asserting dominance. You don't want people who squabble to sit next to each other; and you do want people to sit next to each other so they have a good time, enjoy events, and the whole wedding is a success. Business firms need rank to run well.

In the Hindu view, the idea of rank, coupled with relativity, is a good compromise between the need for individual expression and the need for group life. Rank-with-relativism is the right blend of individuality and useful tradition that old-fashioned conservatives such as Edmund Burke praised. It is what Aristotle had in mind when he said people are "political (city) animals" and he supported aristocratic government. Hindu religion and Indian society take account both of individual differences and the fact that abilities are inherited. Hindu religion and Indian society allow people to go along with the history of their group yet to find themselves within the context of their group. In all societies, most group relations arose out of good practical use. Indian Hindu society allows good group relations to persist, and allows an individual to find him-herself in the context of historically good group relations. Indian Hindu society is natural. As natural society, it is the best expression of the Dharma on Earth.

I do not like Hindu, Asian, European, American, and other formal systems of rank but my dislike is due as much to how I grew up as to anything intrinsic in ranking or anti-ranking. American dislike of rank often is hypocritical. American attitude toward rank pretends an individual is what he-she is without consideration for what is around. The Hindu attitude goes to the other extreme but the Hindu attitude likely is more in tune with evolved human nature than is my egalitarianism. I find most people, even Americans, can get happy with the idea of rank and with how rank plays out. Americans love housekeepers.

Different Indo-European societies stress rank or equality, relativism or absolutism, and individual (part) or system (whole), and do so in different ways in different times in their history under different conditions. I don't know if Indo-European culture is unusual among world cultures. Why ranking, relativism, equality, absolutism, individual, or system wins in a particular case is not clear to me. How they all relate to each other is not always clear.

Why Dharma.

During the time of the Vedas, some Indian thinkers noticed that rituals worked on their own. A ritual did not work because a god made the ritual work. In fact, rituals compelled the gods somewhat. You acted out a ritual to invoke the god of luck because the ritual had power to make the god of luck work for you; likewise with gods of health, wealth, success, etc. Otherwise, why bother with a difficult ritual? Rituals had their own power. This is the basic idea of ritual efficacy. It is like magic.

Thus technique has its own power without necessarily needing the will of a god behind the technique. The world works through technique. If you understand the technique, you know how the world works. If you can get along with the technique, you can get along with the world and you can use the technique to do better. The technique of the world, how it works, is Dharma.

At the time, the Indian idea of technique was an advance on the idea of the will of the gods. It is like the idea of science in ancient Greece or like Tao, chi, yin, yang, and Li ("humanism") in China.

As the idea of technique developed into the idea of Dharma, it mixed in with ideas of rank and relativism, and became integral to ideas of how society works. To know rank and relativism, especially in a social context, was to know how the world works and so to know how to get along well with the world, especially the social world. Ideas of Dharma and society became mixed early in the development of the idea of the Dharma, and they have stayed mixed since.

The same thing did not happen in India as in the Greek development of science. China had ideas similar to technique (Dharma) and science in "Tao" ("way", chi, and yin and yang) and "Li" ("humanism"). I don't know why similar ideas went in different directions in the different cultures.

The Dharma is impersonal. It is not a personal god even though it leads to individual deities and leads to the creation of individual selves in human beings. The idea of Dharma establishes an impersonal force at the heart of Hindu ideas about how the world works, humans work, and society works. So Hinduism has to stress system. A solid system is based on a structured society that makes a place for the individual and keeps the individual in his-her place. This view differs from the Judaic-Christian-Muslim view of a personal God, and, I think, differs from the Taoist-Zen idea of the Tao and nature. I return to the effects of this difference later after I have said more about the Hindu system.

The idea of Dharma has a duality-and-vagueness that both allows people to feel subject to the system and prompts them to maneuver in the system. It is like Christian issues with faith and works, or salvation through grace alone versus what we contribute. It is like Christian and Muslim issues with the Will of God, or modern problems with free will (including legal responsibility) versus strict causality (determinism). On

the one hand, we have to be responsible for our own salvation and our submission to God; not even God can do this for us. On the other, we can only be saved by God's grace; ultimately we cannot earn our salvation, and, really, can do little toward it. In reverse order: On the one hand, only God can send us to heaven. On the other, we feel we can compel the Will of God if only we believe, believe strongly enough, follow all his rules, pray enough times a day, act well enough, Justify ourselves, Justify ourselves with a crusade, know the correct dogma well enough, or kill enough of God's enemies.

With Dharma, on the one hand we are subject to our inherited Dharma, and must find a place within the social-cosmic Dharma system. On the other hand, we can make our own Dharma-karma and we can improve our lot in this life and the next. If we can make our situation better in the next life, then we can also make our situation better in this life. We might not be able to change our station much unless we are a great king or a Buddhist, but we can maneuver within our situation to be better off and make our family members better off. We can hand off the benefits of our maneuvering to descendants. If we do better by maneuvering, that is the result of both our personal efforts and our past karma-Dharma, so even quite a bit of maneuvering and selfishness ultimately reinforces the system.

Such vague and contradictory ideas are the "meat and potatoes" of systems that eat the world, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist.

Actors in the Dharma Social System.

Here is the logical place to write how the Dharma system sees individuals not as person but as roles in a big system, and how people see themselves within the Dharma system. I cannot do this task fairly here. I would have to compare Hinduism with other big systems, and that would take up much too much space. Instead, I give a few comments and examples.

You can learn about Indian society and Hinduism from classic texts such as the Mahabharata but they tell more about idealized Hindu life at the time of Jesus than about how Hinduism turned out as an enduring system. At the end of the chapter, I offer a discussion of the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell to show how even a well-meaning best use of a system like Hinduism, with a strong emphasis on treating people well, still can lead us to overlook people as individual persons. A fairly good way to learn about Indian society and Hindu culture is to read Indian writers even when they were not born in India, such as V.S. Naipaul. You can learn from Westerners who lived in India such as Rudyard Kipling or E.M. Forster but they tend to romanticize India even when they describe the harshness of life there. If you are adept at looking back into movies to get at their presuppositions, you can get a lot from watching Bollywood, but it takes patience. I know nothing of other sources such as Indian television. You can learn from reading anthropological work on India but it takes a while to see through the conventions of that work as well so I offer none of it in the Bibliography.

The gist of my assessment: In Hinduism, people are not individuals but roles. People do not treat each other as individual persons with intrinsic value but as "stuff" in the stratified social Dharma system. Perversely, confinement frees people to be selfish as long as they fulfill the letter of their role. As long as people do not compromise their karma fate in the Dharma system, people feel free to use other people for their benefit. People do have a duty to carry out their role to other roles in the Dharma system, as a servant must serve a master and a master look after his-her subjects, but that is not the same as treating

people as persons even when the interaction is nice in particular cases. People are good at subverting duty even when the original intention was founded on good principles and the duties spelled out so as to promote humanity. This is like the proverbial nasty bureaucrat, such as a teacher, who uses the power of his-her position to “lord it over” the people who come under his-her sway, and proves that he-she has the power by hurting his-her subjects even without cause. Any system based primarily on roles alone, without also a big allowance for individual persons, is bound to fall regardless of the other good principles on which it was founded. People have to feel and internalize the idea of a person so that they avoid corrupting a system based on roles alone.

Even systems based on the idea of individual persons and the Golden Rule can fall when they lapse back into mere roles. I grew up in a big Greek Orthodox Church, and have seen other big Churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Buddhist, and Muslim. There is a common way that big people in churches treat small people, and it has little to do with the teachings of Jesus and everything to do with the reality of human nature in a big system. American academia is supposed to be about equal individuals working for the benefit of all, about persons meeting persons, collegiality; yet it is not that. Hypocrisy in the West makes inequality in the middle of supposed equality worse. In some ways, Hindu churches are better than Christian and Muslim churches because they accept inequality and make the best of it that they can. But even that is not good enough, and, over the long run, it is not better than Christian and Muslim churches.

Krishna and Arjuna Again.

Return again to the classic story of Krishna and Arjuna from the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna starts out feeling bad for all the people who will die as a result of the great battle looming. He feels especially bad for the little people, farmers and merchants, who will be killed without knowing what the war is about and without feeling that participating in a great battle leads to glory. Krishna tells Arjuna, basically, to look out for his place in the Dharma system and to let them look out for theirs. You have to do what you have to do, and let the chips fall where they might, including on the heads of the little people. Krishna rationalizes and he dresses up his rationalization by saying the Dharma system ultimately benefits them, if not in this life then in future lives. If Arjuna does not do his part, he hurts the little people more in the long run than if he does his part now and some of them suffer now. It is not hard to use this view to convince yourself of what you want to do, and to convince yourself of anything that works to your benefit. But it is a rationalization. I am not saying we should never go to war, but we have to think along the lines that worry Arjuna at the start of the poem. We cannot accept Krishna’s answer no matter how beautiful, cosmic, mythic, and useful for talking ourselves into something. We have to think better and do better. We might still end up in battle but we have to have better reasons than this, and have to consider the little people as persons more than Krishna really does.

Mohandas Gandhi.

The great Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi offers a surprising instance of how the stratified rigid Dharma system enters the minds even of people that we thought escaped it. I do not explain who Gandhi was; see the excellent movie about him starring Ben Kingsley. As with many “baby boomers”, for me, Gandhi is a hero. Martin Luther King took him as a role model, the biggest role model after Jesus. Gandhi did much that was right, into which I cannot go here. He did one thing wrong. (As I say elsewhere, “Maha

atma” means “great soul”, and it is a title rather than a name. “Gandhi” is a fairly common Indian family name, and it means something like “grocer” or “shopkeeper”.)

Gandhi usually fought non-violently against the caste (“Varna” or “color”) system of India. He met with members of the lowest group in India, the “outcastes”, when to do so could result in total ostracism for him and his family for life. He insisted that members of all castes, including lower castes and outcastes, should join equally in Indian democracy. So it seems he should fight for the abolition of all caste. Yet he did not. In fact, toward the end of his life, he urged people to follow most of the traditional caste rules, including that a child should take the occupation of his-her parents. In particular, a son should follow the occupation of his father, and a daughter should follow the occupation of her mother; the son of a baker should bake, and the daughter of a homemaker should care for a home. He urged his wife to act a traditional role. So that we don't misjudge Gandhi harshly, I speculate on his motives, although I cannot say I am clear about his motives.

(1) Gandhi correctly saw that modernization would upset society, and that Indian society needed stability to grow and to compete on the world stage. Sticking to the caste system could provide the stability that India needed until India could figure out how to change gracefully. (2) Gandhi knew India needed well-educated clear-thinking objective leaders who knew the issues. Some people like that might come from the lower castes, but not many. Most of those men – and they would be mostly men – would come from the upper castes. Upper caste people must take up their duties as upper caste members to guide the country well. They could not be allowed to abandon their duty to the nation and to the other castes. Upper caste members could be expected to do their duty well, and to put the country ahead of their own gain, only if other caste members did likewise. (3) Gandhi deeply felt the power of goodness. Goodness had to win because it was goodness and not through force. The power of goodness was part of the power of Dharma. Only if Dharma reigned could goodness defeat evil through intrinsic goodness alone. Social order is part of Dharma. The caste system is part of social order. To uphold caste is to uphold Dharma and to prepare for the victory of goodness. To upturn caste is to upturn the social order, deny the salience of Dharma, and undermine the path of goodness to eventual victory. Dharma filled Gandhi's heart and mind, as a good Hindu.

The links between the self, social duty, the greater stratified society, and the big Dharma system are at the core identity of Hinduism. Gandhi showed he was a true Hindu in the full sense. Even Gandhi could not accept Hinduism apart from this context.

I understand the reasoning but I cannot agree. This thinking allows Indians to excuse rape, oppression of women, and class oppression. It stops good institutions. The fight for goodness should not depend on a total social order and on the caste system. It should not depend on a stratified society. If Dharma is to be a useful idea in the future, Hindus have to think of Dharma in other terms. Hindus cannot support caste, bad traditional roles, and bad social ranking no matter how much they can rationalize in terms of Dharma. If the link between Dharma and social stratification is an intrinsic part of Hindu ideas, then Hindu ideas of Dharma and goodness are not viable in modern life and have to be rejected. Not even Gandhi can make such thinking acceptable. Modern Hindus have to re-think Dharma, goodness, and social relations in a way that is acceptable to modern life and modern values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have to do the same with some of their ideas such as the Will of God.

Example of Ideal Personhood: Yudhisthira at the Gates of Heaven.

Here I use an example from literature to say that Hindus don't, and cannot, live up to their ideals. If they don't live up to their ideals, then what they really do is maneuver within the system. Hindu literature is a good place to read about Hindu ideals but not to find what Hindus really do. For that, you have to refer to history and social science.

Reminder: "Mahabharata" means "Great Story of 'Bharat' [India]". The heroes of the Mahabharata were the Five Brothers. They had to fight the villains, their cousins. The story of Arjuna and Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita is one small part of the Mahabharata. Eventually, after many long hard struggles, the Five Brothers won. The leader of the Brothers was named "Yudhisthira" ("You-DEES-thee-ruh"), which means roughly "victorious in battle" (it might also be related to the root for "justice"). Yudhisthira was Arjuna's older brother and his leader. Yudhisthira was grand but not perfect – he had a serious gambling problem - and he was partly to blame for the war.

Yudhisthira had adventures after the war, and then it came time to die. He hoped he would go to heaven after death, so he took along his faithful dog. When he and the dog got to the gates, the guardian, what looked like an angel, would not let in the dog. The guardian said heaven did not allow dogs. Yudhisthira could choose to go to heaven without his dog or to hell with his dog. Yudhisthira did not want any heaven that did not allow dogs, so he chose hell. While in hell, Yudhisthira was surprised to find members of his close family, and was not-so-surprised to find his cousins, his former enemies. Yudhisthira could get them all out, and up to heaven, if he wanted to, if he forgave them. Yudhisthira was happy to do so, and they all went to heaven. Yudhisthira learned that, earlier, the supposed guardian of heaven was really a devil trying to trick Yudhisthira, and the gate then was not the gate to heaven but the gate to hell. Any place that kept out sentient beings, including dogs, could not be true heaven. Any place that practiced exclusion on the basis of superior and inferior was hell. Any place that gave free rein to selfishness had to be hell. If Yudhisthira chose heaven without the dog, it meant he was not truly selfless, and so did not deserve the highest heaven. The highest heaven is the chance to forgive your enemies and for you all to continue on in life.

This story shows how the ideal system works in Hinduism and shows Hinduism's goodness and appeal. Compassion and forgiveness are important and always lead to good results. In the right context, people see other people as persons. In fact, people even see other sentient beings (dogs) as persons. The view of goodness is much the same as what Sartre offers in "No Exit" through showing us what happens when we don't hold this view.

The story of the man (or woman) taking his dog to heaven likely is more widespread and older in Indo-European culture than the Mahabharata. The idea was the basis for an episode of the TV series "The Twilight Zone", set in the Appalachian Mountains, starring Buddy Ebsen. A mountaineer chose his dog over false heaven, and then went to real heaven as a result. In the episode, the story was not about keeping the whole system going, or saving an extended family. It was about the simple decent act of a man to his friend, a dog. In the West, that is all, and it is enough. This is the core contrast of my beliefs versus Hinduism. I don't know if the writer(s) of the "Twilight Zone" episode were influenced by the Mahabharata.

Recall that Yudhisthira was not spotless; he had a serious gambling problem; his cousins took advantage of his serious gambling problem; and that is what started the war. None of the five brothers was spotless; each had his own vices that cause problems. As official enemies, the cousins had to have flaws greater than the Five Brothers, including standard greed, lust, lying, envy, and desire for power. But good guys share those flaws too, to a lesser extent, and the cousins had good qualities too including the qualities of the upper class: bravery, generosity, and loyalty to proven comrades.

As with Arjuna's act of going to war, Yudhisthira's acts of choosing his dog over heaven, and choosing to forgive his family and cousins, are in a system. Yudhisthira's gambling symbolizes the never-ending play of forms in nature, the variety of Dharma's dreaming. Yudhisthira's gambling problem symbolizes both the pretend real risk of the apparent world and the irrational commitment that we make to the world when we live in it as normal humans and are not fully awake. We think we play dice with our lives and souls but really we don't. The fact that Yudhisthira's gambling problem eventually leads to a good end symbolizes that the risk is only apparently real on one level, and that, at a deeper level, it turns out alright. Really, it is all play; serious deep play, but play. Everybody is related and linked, good cousins and bad, people and dogs. Nobody is entirely good or bad. Good and bad depend on each other. By interacting in the right ways, good and bad keep the whole joyous system going and so serve everybody. Everybody does his-her Dharma duty. The idea of Dharma can serve all needs and all other ideas. Compassion is the natural expression of Dharma. We are all saved in the long run even if only a few are saved now. We all have good lives in the run even if only some of us have good lives right now. By choosing connection and compassion, Yudhisthira saves family, friends, enemies, himself, and the system. With compassion, all good beings go to heaven and bring bad beings to heaven too. Heaven is not a steady state but is the continuing playful system even with its apparent good and apparent bad.

Raj, Preeya, and Leonard.

Recall the TV show "Big Bang Theory" in which one character is Raj, a young Hindu physicist. One of Raj's best friends is Leonard, a star of the show. Raj has a younger sister, Preeya, who just graduated from law school and is now a lawyer with an Indian firm that builds cars. The father of Raj and Preeya is a doctor in India. The family of Raj and Preeya is wealthy and upper caste. Preeya and Leonard had been having an on-again-off-again affair before Preeya moved back to India. Leonard tried to keep up a long distance affair. Preeya seemed to go along until she finally admitted that she had sex with an old boyfriend, and the affair ended. Raj's father and mother did not mind that Raj had sex with local women in America but they did not want Raj to marry an American or anybody but a high class Indian Hindu. While the parents likely knew of Preeya's dalliances in America and India, nobody ever spoke of her behavior in front of the parents.

Preeya and Raj are contrasts. Raj is like an ideal Hindu, including even a sexually ambivalent sensuous personality. He is kind, sweet, thoughtful, and usually considers the feelings of other people before his own. He puts up with bad behavior from other people. He is a social facilitator, and goes out of his way to consider the personal needs of other people and to make them feel welcome.

Preeya is a real Hindu. Preeya plays around with the power that she has as an educated woman with a profession and a job. Preeya maneuvers within her sexual, social, and job positions to get what she can. She does not want to hurt people but doesn't mind hurting people. The affair with Leonard had hurt Raj,

not because Leonard was a White American but because Raj objected to any man violating the supposed purity of his sister. Yet, while Preeya was in America, she got what she could from the local people even if it hurt her brother. Raj's objections were silly but that does not explain how brusquely Preeya handled Raj. Preeya knew all along she would not stay with Leonard but strung Leonard along because Leonard was easy to be with and he was the kind of person that a woman could string along to suit her needs. When it "got down to brass tacks" back in India, Preeya solidified relations that she needed there, until Leonard was a liability, then Preeya dumped Leonard and settled into her destined high class position and eventual marriage to an Indian Hindu. Preeya is good at using the system and using people.

When talking to educated or high class Hindu Indians, I have found their character oscillates between Raj, Preeya, and the parents, without being quite sure what to do.

Sad Example One.

The next two examples are a bit unfair, for which I apologize. Yet they are useful and not so inaccurate as to be false. I know that all other countries show these same bad behaviors.

As I was first writing this chapter, India was trying to prosecute a case against six men who gang raped a woman in a bus, beat up her boyfriend, and threw them both off the bus – while everyone else on the bus pretended nothing was happening. The woman died two weeks later. I don't know what happened to her boyfriend. At least a dozen such cases occur in India every year. This case was prosecuted only because of publicity and because the woman died in the public eye. Usually the police and society blame the victim, the woman. Even here where it is clear that the rapists are guilty and the woman did nothing wrong, spiritual and community leaders blamed her. They said: if she had adhered to traditional values by not getting educated, not working, not wearing dresses, and not using public transportation, she would have been safe. One guru said she would not have been raped if she had stressed to her attackers that she was a woman, weaker, and thus in need of their help; any real Hindu would have helped her then rather than hurt her. Other Hindus on the bus knew she was a woman but did nothing. Traditionalists say, "Rape never happened in traditional India, and it still does not happen in rural Bharat (idealized old India) where village counsels control women's lives. Rape only happens in cities in India (not Bharat) where modern life has corrupted true Hinduism." Of course, this case should not represent all of India, and stupid people from all religions have said the same when women were abused in their societies. Yet this situation is too easy to rationalize under simple relativistic Hinduism.

Sad Example Two.

As I revised this chapter, a woman associate of the diplomatic staff of India in New York was arrested for mistreating her Indian maid and for misfiling a visa. The diplomat said she paid her maid at least \$10 per hour and limited the maid's work hours, but, in fact, the diplomat paid her maid only about \$1 per hour and she forced the maid to work at least 60 hours per week with no days off. Not all diplomats get full immunity, and this one did not. When arrested, the diplomat was detained at an American police office. The police followed procedure, and did nothing wrong. The diplomat was not "strip searched" but, when Indian media reported the affair, the media said she was. Small riots broke out around India because of the supposed mistreatment of the diplomat and the reported strip search. As far as I could tell, no Indian media tried to find the truth of the case or arrest. As far as I could tell, no Indian media showed interest in

the welfare of the maid although she was exploited even by Indian standards, and she was exploited far worse than the diplomat. Compassion does not extend to foreigners or to lower class-caste people. The idea that people are persons (“you are that”) does not extend to lower class-caste people or women. This view goes against the spirit of the Upanishads but this view is allowed by the vagueness in the idea of Dharma and this view is required by the link between Dharma and stratified society.

PART 4: Some Implications of Hindu Ideas.

Waking Up and the System.

People who wake up in Hinduism are not necessarily “out of the system” as in Theravada Buddhism. Awakened people represent the world most aware of itself. People who wake up are part of the greater system, and are as needed for the system as sleeping people. Awakened people are like the small part of our brains that is conscious while asleep people are like the big part of our brains that is unconscious. Awakened people are more adept, often smarter, and often morally better, but are not categorically better than other people. Truly awakened people know this. That is why they know “you are that” and stress compassion. Awakened people teach sleeping people what the sleeping people need to know to carry out their role in the world well, as when Krishna teaches Arjuna.

You do not have to fully wake up to have a worthwhile life. Even people who only partially wake up, even full sleepers, can have a worthwhile life if they carry out their personal-social Dharma, if they are true to their role. You can support the joyous system even if you do not know it fully. Sleeping people might not be blissfully happy but they are usually moderately happy and fairly satisfied. Even if you do not fully feel the great system of joyous Dharma, you can partially feel the joy, and even that small amount of joy is still a great joy. Truly awakened people teach these facts to sleeping people as part of their social-personal Dharma as the mind of the system.

Looking at truly awakened people as the self-awareness of the system, looking at other people as asleep but still leading worthwhile lives, and looking at everybody as necessary parts of a total joyous Dharma stem, reinforces rationalization in the Dharma system, and reinforces the control that high caste people have over the system and over lower caste people.

I am not sure how people act and feel after they have fully awakened because, as far as I know, I have never met any such people. I have met people who claimed to be fully awakened but I doubt it. I might have met people who are fully awakened but had the good sense not to make a point of it.

Among people who accept the Hindu view, and among other people who accept a system of many lives, including Westerners, I have seen this attitude: They know they should feel charity, sympathy, empathy, compassion, and connection to all other life; but they don't really. They secretly feel better than others, and they struggle to generate some compassion. They try to “fake it”. Whether a person has awakened yet or not, it is a sign of superiority to be born in a culture, religion, social class, or nation that teaches true ideas and that prepares its members to wake up. They feel sorry for people who are not born in a religion etc. with correct ideas, and they look down on all the other ignorant underprivileged people. People who are born in another religion etc. have no chance of waking up. People who have no real chance of waking up are not interesting. For people in a superior religion to show much compassion to others can

be dangerous. People who know true ideas and are partially awake should maintain a correct haughty distance from others. They know a powerful secret and they should guard the secret so others do not learn distorted versions of the secret and thus dilute and pollute the secret. I have seen the same haughty bad attitude among Christians who start from a base of “love thy neighbor” and “Christian duty”, and among Muslims who start with the Will of a Compassionate and Great Allah.

Mahayana suffers from a clash between standard Buddhist dogma that life is not worthwhile versus the opposed idea that life is worthwhile as long as it is lived in the system. In theory, Hinduism might suffer from the same conflict but the conflict does not seem to have haunted Hinduism as it did Mahayana. In Hinduism, this conflict is the concern only of really smart people and really holy people. Ordinary people are content to live in the system and to take instruction from holy people, especially after the rise of the helper ideas described below. This attitude serves Hinduism as a system and helps Hinduism rationalize roles and serve society. This change might be one reason why Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India.

Everybody is Saved.

From the viewpoint of particular lives, not everybody does well and not everybody is saved. But that is a limited view. From the viewpoint of the whole system, where it does not matter if everybody eventually knows the whole system, everybody does well and everybody is saved. One possibility is that everybody lives long enough until he-she finds salvation, either by seeing the system as a whole or by finding the right devotion. Another more useful possibility is that you are saved even if you don't know it, and even if you never find the right devotion, but it is easier to think of people being saved in terms of knowing and devotion. You are saved because, as part of the system, you are the whole system. In Christian terms, people already have Grace whether they know it or not but if they know it, or feel it through devotion to Jesus or Mary, then they Grace is even more so.

This Hindu idea of salvation is similar to the Universalist idea of salvation in the Unitarian-Universalist Church and similar to some ideas in Mahayana. You are reborn until you get it right. You are reborn until you wake up, see how valuable everything is, see how beautiful everything is, become a useful person, stop hurting others, and “get with it”. This idea appeals to many Westerners and to many thoughtful kind people from all over.

I disagree with this idea in the Hindu, Universalist, or Mahayana forms. It is just not true that everybody wakes up sooner or later. It is just not true that everybody is reborn until he-she gets it right. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn in my own progress was that some people are just not saved. That does not mean that they are damned, but they are not saved.

In my view, there is no cosmic system so it makes no sense to ask if people are still integral to the system if they are not saved. It makes no sense to ask if saved people disappear from the system or are above the system. It makes no sense to ask if not-saved people keep it all going, and whether the system would disappear if everyone woke up at once. This is not my way of making everybody feel welcome. Some people do understand more than other people but that little additional knowledge does not automatically save them and it does not automatically damn the others. I applaud early Hindus for trying to make all people feel welcome by saying all people will be saved eventually, or saying all people are saved already but do not know it. But I disagree with the idea and results. It is better to accept that none of us knows all

the truth, almost all of us know enough to do a decent job, and we should just do what we can. My way of making people feel welcome is to say that most of us get a tolerable shot at life, and God is pretty good about the situation when he assesses us at the end.

Other Religions as Players in the Drama.

See point 18 above. Not everybody has to be awake and know he-she is awake to be a valuable player. People can be spiritual successes although they are not consciously awake. You only need to carry out your role (social-personal Dharma) properly. Even high-ranking Hindus other than holy people do not fully know the Dharma. Krishna had to explain the Dharma to Arjuna. The ideas of normal people are incomplete. The ideas of Hindu holy people encompass the ideas of other people.

Religions outside Hinduism are like the fully sleeping people and not-fully-awake people in Hinduism. Religions other than Hinduism do not need to see the full truth to be useful and to be largely true. Other religions lead people mostly to act well. When believers in other religions act well, they serve the Dharma regardless of what they believe. Sometimes people in other religions act badly despite the religion and sometimes they act badly because of the religion such as when they persecute people or destroy the art of other religions. Even in this case, the people might serve the Dharma system indirectly. They might spur Hindus to greater compassion or to develop arguments against bad beliefs. Just as Hindu holy people know all people are saved already simply by being in the big Dharma system, even if other people don't know it consciously, so Hindus in general know other religions serve the Dharma even if other religions don't know it. In serving Dharma, other religions are aspects of Hinduism. The dogmas of non-Hindu religions are only an approach to Hindu ideas. Hinduism encompasses the ideas of other religions. Hinduism is better, superior, and encompasses all other religions.

In Hinduism, everybody will get saved or is already saved even if they don't know it yet. I don't know if some Hindus consider other religions in the same light but I think so. Eventually other religions will come to see the truth of Hinduism and come to see that Hindu Dharma encompasses their ideas, and so will convert to Hinduism. That does not mean they will convert over entirely to Hinduism but only reinterpret their ideas in Hindu terms and come to accept Hindu analyses. For example, Hindus see Jesus as a great teacher, like a yogi, and perhaps an avatar of Vishnu like Krishna. To see Jesus that way hardly makes him less a son of God and less God than in Hindu eyes than he is in Christian eyes (Jesus cannot be the one and only begotten son of God in Hinduism). To see him that way would make him more acceptable to most people in the world and so more effective. When Christians come to see Jesus that way then they will in effect become Hindus, and Hinduism will encompass Christianity. In the long run, this subsuming is inevitable.

Dharma and Old Indian Society.

The ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion are all vague. The vagueness serves Hinduism. But too much vagueness can be a bad thing. If Hindu mythical bad guys are also good, then why aren't revolting peasants and Muslim conquerors also good? The ideas need enough context so the system is stable enough to eat the world, and so the people who benefit from the system are secure. That is what traditional stratified Indian society did. By merging traditional Indian stratified society and the Dharma system, Indian thinkers came up with the right mix for their time of security and vagueness. If you grow

rice and give a proper share to the lords, then society keeps going and the whole world keeps going. If you don't sweep the streets well, and you don't marry the boy that your parents picked for you, then your family is disgraced, your caste is disgraced, all Indian society tumbles down, and the entire cosmos with all its joy comes to an end.

When the merger first arose around 500 CE, India was not the nation we see now of overpopulation with extreme rich and poor. India was about like the Roman Empire or Chinese Empire. Being a peasant, soldier, or merchant was not so bad. It was easy to accept that your role was given by your karma and social-personal Dharma in the system. Of course, now the situation is much different, and Indians have to rethink social relations and their economic system. The close ties between Dharma, "you are that", compassion, and Indian traditional stratified society have to break down. Young Hindus likely will salvage Dharma, "you are that", and compassion in some form acceptable in the modern world.

Heaven on Earth.

"Heaven on Earth" is the idea that this world is actually heaven but we just don't see it until we have our eyes opened. The apparent badness and ugliness of this world are assimilated to a greater beauty-and-rightness. What appear as mistakes are really helpful indirect ways to make the world more beautiful and more right. The obvious bad and ugly things of the world, such as disease and crime, are not here simply to contrast with the obvious good and beautiful things so we can better appreciate the obvious good and beautiful, but are really beautiful and good in their own ways once we see the whole rightly. It is easier to support a feeling for "heaven on Earth" in the context of a system of many lives. The two support each other. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" is part of the joy of a big system of many lives.

Without giving evidence, I said the mysticism in Mahayana shares this view. I think the same is true of Hinduism, and I also do not offer evidence for my opinion because that would take us too far off track. Hindus can feel this world is really the best world, is really alright. With that feeling, Hindus can pursue their apparent destiny in this world with vigor. For Hindus that find this feeling, it is one of the rewards of Hinduism. Of course, most Hindus don't find this feeling, any more than most Hindus fully wake up. But the idea is there, and the feeling is available for some Hindus.

I also said the feeling of "heaven on Earth" is not fully true no matter how true it seems to people who have the feeling. The feeling of "heaven on Earth" undermines the Real Risk of life, and I think the risk of life is real, not just pretending, and not just a game. The fact that the feeling is not true undermines to some extent both Mahayana and Hinduism. I don't say how much it undermines them, in particular I don't claim that it invalidates them. That is an assessment you have to make.

Regardless of what you think about "heaven on Earth", if you have ever had a feeling for the goodness-and-rightness of this world as it is with all its faults, use your feeling to better assess ideal Hinduism. Use it to understand the goals of the ideal system, how other people fit in, and, in the Hindu view, how bad and good persist in the real world. In its ideal form, apart from its real form, Hinduism appeals to a large good part of human nature.

Raj's Beautiful Idea Again.

Recall that Raj, from the TV show “Big Bang Theory”, said the Spirit (God, Dharma) works its will in the world through us. Here, we are the instruments by which Dharma does good. This idea is beautiful and I would agree with it if it were properly interpreted. I now take this beautiful idea and turn it into something ugly. I use a pseudo-Christian tone but the view easily could be put in a Hindu tone.

The Spirit cannot work its will equally through all of us. It might be that some badness serves the ends of the Spirit but not all badness is needed and not all badness works the will of the Spirit. It cannot be true that all child molesters and war criminals work the will of the Spirit. So we have to choose some people as more likely to be working the will of the Spirit and some people as not working the will of the Spirit or even as fighting the will of the Spirit.

A good society goes along with the will of the Spirit. A good society promotes those people who do the work of the Spirit and hinders those people who oppose the will of the Spirit. A good society has to be organized so it reflects the will of the Spirit and thwarts what is against the Spirit. A good society has to recognize that some people are more of the Spirit than other people. A good society has to make sure that people acting on their socially-given natures promote the will of the Spirit. A good society has to make sure that people who do some kinds of bad actually indirectly support the good society and the will of the Spirit. A good society has to accept that it will cultivate bad feelings in some people and has to turn those bad feelings into the service of the Spirit.

The best society to do all this, and serve the Spirit, is stratified society in which people get their character from their society, and their character serves their station, society, and the Spirit. Other societies might approximate what the Spirit wants but only Hindu society fully achieves it.

It is not hard here to recognize the rationale of Hindu society and the rationale used by a lot of societies in justifying themselves, people within them fixated on power, the bad acts of leaders, and predations on other societies. Bad Western nations and bad Eastern nations have used similar lines of reasoning too. The difference might be that this line of reasoning is endemic to Hinduism and turns a beautiful vision like that of Raj into a bad vision similar to fascism at its worst.

We might not see that this tendency is common not only in Hinduism but arises even when we think we accord people the most freedom from determination by a system. One of the common rationales for an unbridled capitalist market is the market automatically turns the greed of capitalists into the greater good of consumers and the whole society, no matter how much bad the capitalists seem to do along the way. The bad capitalists are really the good heroes of society who secretly do the will of the Spirit as the Spirit manages to turn even apparent badness into secret goodness.

No society automatically does the will of the Spirit and automatically instills in most of its people the traits that promote the will of the Spirit. We do not automatically do the work of the Spirit. Not all of us are the way the Spirit does its work in this world. We have to think in other terms to have the best society we can in the real world. It is good to try to do the work of the Spirit. It is good to dedicate yourself to doing the work of the Spirit. But you should never think you, your society, or your religion, has a lock on that.

PART 5: Helper Ideas.

The ideas described in this part are more important in practiced Hinduism than the abstract ideas from above, but, ultimately, these ideas depend on the ideas above. These ideas are what most Westerners learn about Hinduism. I say nothing about sacred cows.

The ideas here are among the most effective tools by which Hinduism is a big system that eats the world, is superior, and encompasses other systems. Hinduism uses these ideas to explain everything. These ideas allow the idea of Dharma to be a vague policy and they allow rationalizing. These ideas are how higher Hindus convince other people that we are all in one joyous system together, everybody has to do his-her duty, everybody has to sacrifice, and we all benefit from the system. These ideas are how the ideas of Dharma, "you are that", and compassion become just definite enough to combine with traditional Indian Hindu society and to solidify a big system.

Various Gods.

Like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, and pre-Muslim Arabs, the Hindus always had many gods. The idea of one system came later, and the many gods were fit into the system as best as could be done. The Hindu gods coalesce, merge, and split in bewildering ways. I do not sort it out. There are always gods with which a person can identify, to which a person can devote him-herself, and that can serve as the patron deity of particular groups.

At first, all the various gods were not considered aspects of the one main god. That idea developed after intellectuals, such as the writers of the Upanishads, unified the religious system. At first, individual people were not considered aspects of one basic god, as being a manifestation of the one basic god, as having a little bit of the basic god in them, or as being full-blown god. Those ideas also came afterwards, in all of their alternative forms.

Three Main Gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

For people who like to think of one system, it is confusing to have many gods. Hindus eventually settled on three main gods as the most important aspects of the one main god-system. These three gods taken together are, in effect, the one main god. Each represents an aspect of how the Dharma mostly works, as the three persons of the Christian Trinity represent how God works. The three aspects can be applied to almost any phenomenon, including non-human life, human social life, and physics. With these ideas-and-gods, Hindus can offer a valid explanation for almost any social group, religious system, and social-historical event.

The three gods are an outstanding example of raising someone to a cosmic principle, whether that one is a real person such as Jesus or an imagined deity such as a bodhisattva or god. This tendency is a trait of Hinduism, almost forced on Hinduism by having an abstraction such as Dharma at its core. That is why Hinduism lives so well with many gods.

Brahma the Creator.

"Brahma" the god is not the same as a "Brahmin" or a "Brahman"; I am not sure of the relation between the three words and the things they designate.

Things happen. Suddenly, something new arrives. Something changes. Change is “in the wind”. Somebody invents something. We are waiting for “the next big thing”. Brahma is the force behind all this, the force of innovation. Brahma is a never-ending bottomless fountain of change. Americans think all change is good but Brahma is more like nature; Brahma is amoral. Brahma just causes new things to appear. New things can be good or bad, and they can be good or bad depending on who uses them. Brahma is like evolution when a new group of species arises, multiplies, changes constantly, and takes over the world. Brahma is like the power behind the radiation of the flowering plants, mammals, and of made-up realities in computer minds. In case you are misled by the Romanticized idea of creativity to think he is all beautiful and you forget that Hinduism is relativistic, Brahma makes all the weapons that Shiva and Vishnu use.

Vishnu the Sustainer.

The world would be confusing if it changed at a furious pace constantly. Without some stability, there would be no morality, no joy, and no point to it all. Some situations have to last a while so denizens can “get their bearings” and make something of the situation. Historical-social-cultural-political-economic eras have to last long enough, and be steady enough, so sentient beings can assess the world, find morality, and act appropriately. People in Hinduism understand “Dharma” as doing your duty as a human, social being, parent, child, and citizen. All these duties sustain the world. The biggest manifestation of Dharma is to sustain the world. The world has to be steady enough long enough so that people can do their duty and make the world go on enjoying itself. Dharma and continuity depend on each other. Vishnu is the force behind all this. Vishnu puts to good use what Brahma creates. Vishnu guides sentient beings. Vishnu makes sure people find their way in the swamp of Brahma’s creativity. In practice, Vishnu is the friendliest god and usually the most important god. If Americans were Hindus, Superman, Abe Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt would be avatars of Vishnu. If Republicans were Hindus, Ronald Reagan would be an avatar of Vishnu.

Shiva the Changer.

“I am Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds”

The line is from the Bhagavad Gita. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the project to create the atomic bomb in America, famously quoted it when the first bomb went off.

The usual title of Shiva is “The Destroyer” but I think that title misrepresents Shiva. Shiva is the disorder that allows creativity and allows new order to arise. All things must pass. All good things come to an end. Even all bad things come to an end. The rain falling on the mountain eventually wears down even the highest mountain. If people did not die, the world would have filled up with hungry zombies long ago. If bacteria did not eat corpses, the world would have filled up with corpses long ago, and there would be no fertilizer for new plants, trees, and people. Shiva brings change. Shiva opens the spaces for Brahma to fill with new creation. Shiva often is the first user of new creation. Shiva makes change by ending old forms. Destruction of old forms is an important ingredient in change. Shiva brings about change by rearranging things, as when the mountain erodes to become the new plain, the rain falls to become new flowers, and the mind gets rid of garbage to see true new ideas. Shiva is the headache before a creative

burst. Shiva brings weapons to warriors and to holy people on a crusade. We can see Shiva in all the toys both of Batman and his enemies. Physics teaches us that the total amount of matter-energy in the world cannot change but can only re-arrange into new forms. Shiva does not destroy absolutely. Shiva less often destroys old forms as rearranges old forms to allow new forms. Shiva increases the joy of the world by allowing for the creation of new forms. Shiva allows the multiple diverse world to go on in joy.

As you will see, one main way to God in Hinduism is through asceticism or renouncing the normal world. Asceticism and renouncing the world usually go together but don't have to. This way is like the path of a monk in the West. Shiva is the patron both of people who renounce the world and of ascetics. Shiva is usually the patron of yogis both male and female. I cannot spend much space on this aspect of Shiva and on the topics of renouncing and asceticism because they are too big. Also, for most Hindus, these paths remain as ideals but are not very important except as some Hindus adopt mild ascetic practices in the same way Westerners now adopt mild yoga. A person who renounces the world successfully is said to "conquer" the world.

Brahma and Vishnu have sinister aspects as well as their usually joyous comforting aspects but the bad faces of these gods are usually well in the background and come out only on special occasions. Much more than Brahma or Vishnu, Shiva is sinister and marauding. Shiva uses weapons that Brahma dreams up, and Shiva does real damage with them. Asceticism can give a person great powers, and the powers do not always come out in good ways. To renounce the world, essentially you have to defeat the world, and defeating the world spiritually is symbolized by literally beating the world. The bad guys in the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" likely are Shiva devotees. The good guy villagers and local holy man also are devotees of Shiva, so aspects of Shiva usually are mixed. When Westerners learn about Hinduism, they can be fascinated with sinister aspects but they do not usually pursue them. To work our way through them would take a lot of space. Although Shiva sometimes apparently does evil and he apparently destroys large parts of the world, in the end, the evil leads to even better good, and this world returns or another takes its place. Shiva reminds us the system is greater than its apparent parts, and is really joyous even in destruction.

Asceticism and renouncing the world can go together in a different way than the stereotype sweet good forest-dwelling holy person. When asceticism and renouncing the world do not go together as they should, effectively they do not really go together at all; instead, power uses asceticism in its service so as to conquer the world. A person, demon, or god studies ascetic technique to gain power to conquer the world. Hindu versions of this alternative are too ornate to relate here, and Westerners usually have few examples for reference to make the task simple, not even from Indian "Bollywood" movies. Some villains in Bollywood movies do develop special powers through asceticism. Hindu myths and stories are full of people who take this path. The opponents of good guys in classic Hindu stories, including demons and misguided gods, usually study asceticism to gain power. These bad guys usually are devoted to Shiva. Westerners might have seen a parallel related example in a different venue. The Mahayana Buddhist version of asceticism-for-power can be found in Chinese movies in which a kung fu master retreats to the forest to develop a bizarre form of kung fu so as to defeat enemies and conquer the kingdom. Western comic book super villains are a version of the same idea as when Lex Luthor uses his time in prison to perfect a plot to develop some horrible weapon to defeat Superman and take over the world. In all traditions, West and East, the bad guy always fails because, after all, the world is intrinsically moral and good conquers all just because it is good. See the Bibliography for more.

Westerners now think of modest bad guys, some gangsters, and hard kick-ass avengers as the chaos of the world that brings down the older order so that the new order can arise. We glamorize and romanticize our bad boys and bad girls. We are wrong; but we do it anyway. The movies about the “Avengers” and “Shield” groups are more than enough evidence. About one-third of the movies starring Mark Wahlberg are on these themes. When we do that, we are much like Hindus who worship and admire Shiva in all his variations.

All Three Mutually Together.

Despite the famous line from Shiva, in fact Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva do not really destroy and remake whole worlds. They destroy particular worlds, or particular eras, within the greater system that itself remains through all changes. They never destroy the whole system of many worlds. There is only one system and there has ever been only one. Shiva sometimes lays waste to this Earth for a while, but this Earth comes back with the help of Brahma and Vishnu. Brahma never creates entirely new systems because he is within the one forever system that created him. The worst Brahma ever does is to create amazing new weapons for Shiva and Vishnu with which they battle to stalemate. The battle to stalemate does the destroying and is all the fun. In this way, Vishnu represents the main spirit behind it all because the system as a whole always is sustained.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva represent the total mutual dependence of parts that keeps the system going. They are a small model of Hindu society except that Hindu society is stratified while the three main gods are supposedly equal. Even then, most Hindus seem to prefer Vishnu. Think of any movie starring Mark Wahlberg in which he uses a lot of weapons to get vengeance and tear down an evil system so a good system can grow and be preserved. In creating mayhem, Wahlberg is like Shiva while in helping a new better world to grow, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Ted”, Wahlberg is like Vishnu. In “Blue Bloods” the various members of the Reagan family take on various aspects of the three gods with Donnie Wahlberg most often like Shiva and Frank most often like Vishnu.

Brahma is like the appearance of life out of the primordial ooze of Earth. Shiva is like the tremendous destruction of life during the half-a-dozen times that life nearly died off on Earth. When the destruction was caused by a physical event such as the meteor that ended the great dinosaurs, a great ice age, or the release of oxygen from the spread of plants, Shiva is the physical cause. Shiva is the competition, natural selection, and “survival of (only) the fittest” that allow evolution. Brahma is like the flowering of life that takes place after great destructions. Brahma is like plants slowly adapting to mud and air for the first time, and like mud fish slowly crawling out of the water, from pond to pond,. Shiva is the first plants flooding the Earth with oxygen – then a caustic poison. Brahma is animals using the sudden availability of oxygen to proliferate. Brahma is the many types of life and many individuals in each type. Brahma is the huge proliferation of forms in nature. Vishnu is like the long winnowing out of the best forms and the long periods of particular lifestyles after a flowering. Vishnu is the “equilibrium” between “punctuations”. Vishnu is the long reign of bacteria, flowering plants, trilobites, dinosaurs, birds, ants, and cockroaches. Vishnu is the solid base of a particular lifestyle that allows variation and the development of higher forms. Vishnu is the long reign of mammals that allowed the development of sloths, monkeys, elephants, horses, tigers, and whales. Vishnu gave the ape base from which humans evolved. If we see God making the universe, the Earth, and the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings through the Big Bang, natural

selection, and cataclysms, then we see God as a mix of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and we see God as working through them. We see God as the Dharma working through Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Well-educated Hindus sometimes see the “godhead” this way.

As all this, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva also are a logic-like contradiction from which you can derive sense, nonsense, and any relativism. They are an indicator of the powerful relativism at the heart of Hinduism.

Rebel, Rebel, Creative Chaos.

We can get a sense of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva from American ideas of rebels after about 1880 and especially after 1950 and the rise of rock and roll. Right or wrong, Americans feel something is amiss with this world now, and we need to change. The changers are rebels, and, as such, are instruments of Shiva. To make change, they use art and especially they use new art forms such as rock and roll and hip-hop. They get their tools from Brahma. Yet the ultimate goal of rebels is not to end all order. Rebels want to overturn bad old order and to replace it with good new order. The good new order is based on the same morals that have always prevailed and that run through all life and the universe – but modified to suit the times. As such, rebels are instruments of Vishnu.

Thanks to American culture, Romanticism, and the media, the whole world now sees chaos as creative and sees true creativity as coming only from chaos. Without disorder, we can have no better future order. Rebels, the mass people as a whole, the populace, the lower classes, fringes of society, underbelly of society, entrepreneurs, investment bankers, inventors, risk takers, ethnic groups that are not dominant in a society such as Blacks in America or Kurds in Iraq, political refugees, oppressed tribal groups in Africa, victims of the supposed war on Islam, victims of the supposed war on Christianity and Christmas, and artists, are all human instruments of creative chaos. Good social order can only come from them, and certainly will come from them if we turn them loose. Shiva is creative chaos. In our times, the face of Shiva is creative chaos. He is the instrument of beneficial change. He is the face of outcast creators and they are the face of Shiva. Together, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the faces of the Romantic Spirit when the Spirit is both creative order and creative disorder, its own force forward and its own resistance, and its own art and its resistant medium. Together they are the advance of the Spirit, self-resistance of the Spirit to its own advance, and the Spirit overcoming its own self-resistance.

When we look at things this way, we are blind to the real work that must be done. I return to these topics in essays apart from this book. This use of Hindu-like ideas helps explain why they appeal.

Avatar.

Today, an “avatar” is a character that we assume in a computer game, or is the name of a hit movie, but originally the Hindu idea “avatar” meant an identity that a god took, usually on Earth, for a purpose. The avatar embodied one aspect of the total person of the god, and the avatar took care of the god’s business here. The term “avatar” means “passing over, into, or through” as a god passes from one realm (Heaven) to another (Earth) or from one state (incorporeal) to another (corporeal). A famous Buddhist sutra is the “Lankavatara” Sutra or “Lanka Avatar-a sutra”: “Lanka” is a great mountain, a backbone of the world;

here it means the island of “Sri Lanka” or “Ceylon”; and the sutra is about how Buddha Mind passes down through Sri Lanka; how Buddha Mind makes the world and makes itself known.

In the Mahabharata, Krishna has come to tell Arjuna to “man up” and do his duty by going to war against his cousins. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. If Arjuna did not do his duty, the victory of enemy cousins would have been a triumph of bad over good, and it would have upset the world order. For the world order to continue, heroes like Arjuna must do their duty. By doing your duty, you affirm that the world runs according to the Dharma, and runs best by going along with the Dharma. By getting Arjuna to do his duty, Krishna-Vishnu sustains the world.

In our modern capitalist world, if Brahma had an avatar, it might be great inventors such Nikola Tesla and the people who developed the silicon chip. Shiva’s avatar might be great marketers, such as Steve Jobs, who get us to discard old things in favor of new things. Thomas Edison would be an avatar of both. If Vishnu had an avatar now, it might be Superman or Abe Lincoln. Some Hindus think of the Buddha and Jesus as avatars of Vishnu; Buddhists and Christians don’t like that.

In the movie “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom”, shortly after Jones and friends arrive in a grief-stricken Indian village, an old man tells Jones that Shiva has sent Jones to destroy the bad guys and to save the village from evil. Jones insists that Shiva did not send him. The old man insists Shiva did send Jones even if Jones doesn’t know it. Jones can be an avatar of Shiva even if he doesn’t know it. In my understanding, more likely Jones would be an avatar of Vishnu. Sometimes in particular local traditions, the gods switch roles and take on each other’s roles. That does not change the idea framework behind the system of gods.

All other Hindu gods can be seen as versions or avatars of one of the “Big Three” although I don’t think most Hindus think of “their” god mostly in these terms, and I don’t think most Hindus seek one complete non-contradictory system that assigns all secondary and minor gods as versions of one, and one only, of the Big Three. The idea that all gods can be aspects of the Big Three is an instance of encompassing and of how encompassing depends on a little vagueness.

In the Hindu big system that encompasses small local Indian systems, the major gods of local groups and of various castes are avatars. Sometimes they are not avatars directly of Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva but are avatars of other gods such as the clever monkey god Hanuman or the lucky bird god Garuda. I have seen Hindu depictions of Jesus and the Buddha as yogis and as avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know how Jesus rates as an avatar compared to the Buddha or Krishna. I don’t know if other great figures such as Mohammad and Confucius are also depicted as avatars; if so, they also likely would be avatars of Vishnu. I don’t know if Karl Marx (in a good way) or Adolph Hitler (in a bad way) would be avatars of Shiva. Atom bombs are weapons that Brahma provides to avatars of both Vishnu and Shiva.

The Avatar as Agent of the System.

In the chapter on Mahayana, I compared Jesus in Christianity, the Mahayana bodhisattva, and the Hindu avatar. I pick up the comparison again here. Common to all is that people in states need a mediator figure between the highest divine with ordinary life here on this world. The mediator is both divine and human. The mediator helps people succeed in this life and in spirituality, and makes them feel better.

In Christianity, Jesus understands human life because he was human. Jesus came here to save people, that is, to get them to heaven. He loves each person individually and helps each person individually. He has a plan for each person individually. In original formal Christianity, when Jesus had done his job long enough, the world ended. In popular Christianity now, the world does not end; people just keep going to heaven or hell; and Christians don't think much about a change in the system.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas ideally began as real human beings but that does not much matter now, and most bodhisattvas are purely mythical beings. Still, they know human life, and they love each person individually. They hear complaints about life on Earth, and often help out, such as by granting health and wealth. Their ultimate task is to awaken each person. In theory, people awaken to a joyous system of many lives, but the system is less important than that people simply awaken. In theory, if everyone really did wake up, the system would end, but that end does not seem to be much to fear in Mahayana. The system keeps going on, and bodhisattvas keep helping people individually. To awake is to be saved and to succeed spiritually.

In Hinduism, the avatar appears human but likely is not human as we understand it, and not human as was Jesus, the Buddha, or a historic bodhisattva. An avatar might have a human history, but that is more a story to make the entrance of a god into the world more interesting and more plausible; Hinduism is full of bright stories of the early life of Krishna as a child and young man. The task of the avatar is to help along the joyous system of many lives. The task of the avatar is not to awaken any person or to save any person in the Christian sense or Mahayana sense. To help along the system, usually the avatar gets people to do what they have to do as part of the system (or to not do what they should not do). Krishna explains a lot about the system to Arjuna but that is mostly to get Arjuna to do what he has to do; Krishna does not try to enlighten Arjuna in the sense that a bodhisattva tries to enlighten. Enlightenment would be relevant only if it helped the system, and enlightenment usually does not help the system except for special holy people who count little. When a Hindu person does his-her duty, then the whole system benefits and all the beings in the system benefit. To do what you have to do is as good as being awake and as good as being saved in the Christian sense. To do what you have to do for the system is success both in terms of common life and in terms of being a secret actor in a grand system. The fact that the avatar is most concerned with getting people to support the system does not mean the avatar does not feel compassion for the system and for individual people, and does not help people with their needs; the true avatar often gives great comfort.

In Mahayana, the bodhisattva changes human lives; the bodhisattva saves people almost in the Christian sense. In Hinduism, the avatar helps people with particular tasks and problems but the avatar does not usually save people in the Mahayana sense or Christian sense. The avatar saves the system. Krishna helped Arjuna with Arjuna's problem over going to battle but Krishna did not have to save Arjuna's soul in order to help him with that problem. Krishna did help Arjuna to a partial awakening (partial saving) but only enough to get Arjuna to fight with a full heart and so save the system. The Mahayana bodhisattva is like the hero in the TV show "Quantum Leap" who really did save lives and souls. The Hindu avatar is like the President of the United States who has to care for the country as a whole even if he-she has to send some soldiers to die and even if he-she has to accept some damage to nature or some damage to an industry.

Because Shiva is called “The Destroyer”, it might seem as if an avatar of Shiva does not perpetuate the system but instead brings it down. In fact, this is not true. This is why I prefer to think of Shiva as “The Transformer”. Shiva and his avatars keep the system going. Shiva keeps the wheel of Dharma turning. If the system did not change, it would get stale and uninteresting, and end. Shiva and his avatars keep the system interesting by shaking things up. Shiva and his avatars are the “bad boys” who actually make things work. No matter how much damage Shiva does or his avatar does, the system always reforms, and keeps going. The system reforms and it keeps going because of the damage that Shiva does rather than despite him.

So far, it seems Christianity and Mahayana are warm personal religions which value each individual while Hinduism is a mind-crunching totalitarian system led by avatars who act like North Korean commissars. In fact, Christianity often is systematic and totalitarian, and official Jesus is a ferocious champion of a rigid system rather than a loving friend. I think, for most Hindus, the avatar is a loving friend who guides them through the complexities of life and of religious ideas rather than an Inquisitor who makes them do what the system says, as did Krishna for Arjuna. “You’ve got a friend in Krishna”. Still, there is a difference, and this difference makes a difference.

If avatars were only stern cosmic spiritual teachers like Krishna to Arjuna, Hindus would get bored with Hinduism. That is what Shiva is for, and that is what bad guys are for – to relieve the boredom of pretty goodness. Even good guy avatars have many varied personalities, and they help Hindus with many kinds of problems. Avatars are risqué sexual adventurers more like Indiana Jones than his father. The adventures of Krishna alone fill volumes, and Krishna wears more disguises than Sherlock Holmes. In one appearance, Krishna is a young man who tends dozens of semi-divine girl cowherds while they tend cows. Krishna invents lots of games for fun, including sexual games. The stories of young Krishna are like stories of young Buddha or young Jesus but more fun, risqué, and rebellious. If you want to feel the adventurous spirit of Hinduism rather than suffer through argument such as you find in this chapter, read stories about Krishna and other avatars, and stories about the gods.

Seven Major Paths to God and to Success.

Ultimate religious success (moksha) in Hinduism is seeing that this world as ordinarily lived is not the real world or the best world, seeing how this world is a projection of the best world (pure Dharma), and seeing how this world is really good when taken as an expression of the true Dharma. You see the same world but in a new better way with a new better attitude. Ultimate religious success is not needed for most people, and only a few achieve it. After ultimate realization, for the few people who do achieve it, life can consist of living beside the daily world as a yogi, monk, hermit, or holy person, nowadays in an urban apartment, rather than living in the world such as by being a parent, teacher, or theologian. It is not clear if people like Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi are closer to a holy person living-in-but-beside-the-world or closer a normal person living within the world.

Hinduism teaches four large paths to success. I prefer to think of the seven numbered paths below. The original four are (A) 1 Intellect-Mind-Wisdom, (B) 2 Action, (C) 4 Asceticism-Yoga-Renunciation, and (D) 6 Devotion. 3 and 5 below are mixes, chiefly of 2 with tinges of the others. Because most people do not reach full awakening, the paths are also ways to spiritual growth and to modest spiritual success rather than only paths to full realization. You do not fail if you do not achieve full realization, and, in fact, you

gain much by any steps along any path. That is how most people understand the paths. Most people adopt a modified version of the paths as a way to feel spiritually successful now and as a way to mix spiritual success with worldly success. Most people mix a modified version of the paths with normal family life and with their occupations.

These paths were the original paths in the idea behind the slogan “all paths lead to god”. Hinduism sees other religions as manifestations of one-or-more of the paths in an intellectual-cultural context other than Hinduism. By extending the idea of these paths to other religions, Hindus can say “all paths lead to god” and thereby include all other religions as well. Hinduism can make other religions aspects of Hinduism.

(1) Intellect-Mind-Wisdom: A smart person, or observant person, can use his-her intellect to understand the world. This does not mean you sit on your porch until you figure out the world from first principles. Usually it means you read the great Hindu texts and study with good teachers. You use your intellect-mind to gain wisdom. You need wisdom go guide your intellect-mind and need your intellect-mind to see how wisdom works in the world and in your life. To a Westerner, “mind” tends to mean “rational thought” somewhat along the lines of logic; but in Buddhism and Hinduism, mind is more than that. The nearest equivalent to what Westerner’s think of as mind might be intellect. Mind guides intellect just as wisdom guides mind. When wisdom guides mind-intellect, the three almost fuse. When wisdom does not guide mind and mind does not guide intellect, the three can become enemies of each other and of the sanity and health of a person. People far from the Dharma suffer mental problems.

(2) Action, Moral Action, as Saint: A person can live morally and perform moral acts. Saints teach about the Dharma system in many ways, by words and example. In Hinduism, all sentient being share affinity. Hinduism requires devout people to care about other beings, give alms, help other beings both in bodily need and in their spiritual quest, and to sacrifice yourself if need be.

(3) Action as Moral Duty, as with Arjuna: A person has to perform his-her duty as part of his-her karma in the whole system of Dharma. In theory, this kind of action is a variation of the moral action of item (2) but the categories differ because a person who does his-her duty might have to perform acts that seem unkind. That was the dilemma of Arjuna in the Mahabharata. If all acts done in accord with your karma actually sustain the world and help perpetuate the system of Dharma, even if on the surface the acts seem unkind and immoral, then really they are kind and moral. This too is part of the relativism of Hinduism. Sometimes this relativism is truly dangerous. If the acts are really kind and moral, then there is no sin in doing them, and categories two and three merge.

(4) Yoga and other Asceticism: A person can advance through yoga and other similar practices. A person can practice yoga and other asceticism while not living apart from society but usually it is hard to really “get into” yoga and similar practices if a person lives a normal life otherwise. Therefore yoga often goes together with some renunciation (see below).

(5) Action through Compassion: A person can advance spiritually through great compassion for people, other sentient beings, animals, and nature. This is a particular manifestation of path (2), moral action, in which morality is manifested as compassion. Or, path (2) is a particular manifestation of this path (5) in which morality originates from compassion. Christians call this “the path of love”.

(6) Devotion: A person can advance through devotion (bhakti) aimed at a deity, avatar, or even a great human person. Devotion and worship hardly differ. The idea that devotion was a path to god equal to other paths likely began as early as ideas about the other paths but was not accepted by Hindu thinkers until about 500 CE. Literary works such as the Bhagavad Gita were important in gaining acceptance for bhakti because, in the Gita, Arjuna and his brothers are devoted to Krishna-Vishnu. As far as I can tell, devotion-bhakti is now by far the path that most Hindus follow, just as simple worship of Jesus, Mary, and the saints is by far the most common relation that Christians have to their gods.

(7) Renunciation: A person can advance by denying nearly all aspects of the normal life and living apart from normal society. Such a person does not necessarily condemn normal society, at least for other normal people. In my reading, in fact, such people seem to appreciate normal society for normal people. Such people live apart so they are not distracted and so they can concentrate on getting in touch directly with the great Dharma system. In traditional Hindu understanding, these people lived in the forest. Now, not much forest is left, so these people live in other ways, sometimes in cities or in places set aside for spiritual study and spiritual life. These people often combine their seeking with asceticism and yoga, but, strictly speaking, they need not.

You do not have to be adept in all paths to reach God well enough. You only have to be accomplished in one path to reach God well enough. There is nothing wrong with being skillful in more than one path. The paths do not exclude each other, and, in fact, help each other. Intellectuals like to believe they are also adept at yoga and have great moral sensitivity. Yogis like to think they are mentally acute, can see all that a mere intellectual can see, and can see things that mere intellectuals cannot. Gods and avatars were depicted as skilled in multiple paths. In the past, intellectuals and yogis often studied together. All seekers valued the forest dwelling monk and his-her insights.

If it was necessary to be skilled in all paths to reach God, then nearly all people would be excluded, and Hinduism would have died. For Hinduism to remain appealing, it had to develop the ideas that a person need be skilled in only one path, and a person needs to be only moderately skilled without necessarily being a master. The idea of many paths greatly aids relativism. Hinduism did not develop many paths so that it could be relativistic and expand. Hinduism developed the idea of several paths first, and, because of the idea, then became relativistic and expanded. The two come together closely.

More on Bhakti.

This section does not consider incorrect variations on bhakti that sanction criminal acts, such as the Thug movement in India.

Focusing on Dharma alone can be impersonal. Most people can't relate to Dharma alone any more than they can relate to gravity. Bhakti puts person back into Dharma, and into Hinduism. Whether it succeeds at making Hinduism personal without also making it merely devotion, I think not, but you have to decide for yourself, and you have to decide the same question for other religions too.

See earlier chapters on common ideas and mistaken ideas. Especially Christian Protestants tend to think of "devotion" as simple emotion-based idolatry to local idols such as "Baal", fat laughing Buddha figures, blue-skinned Krishna, or the Virgin Mary; but that view is simplistic and unfair. "Bhakti" is a version of the

personal relation that all evolved sentient persons can feel toward spirits as persons. It is a natural relation because it is rooted in evolved feelings. Sometimes bhakti is only idol worship in that devotees take idol-gods for granted; must worship their gods; and expect to be repaid for worship. Most Christians have the same attitude toward Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. Most Muslims have the same attitude toward Allah. Some even worship Mohammad in this sense even when they insist on not using the word “worship” with Mohammad. Changing the name from “Krishna” to “Jesus” or vice versa does not change the character of the relation.

On a higher level, bhakti is like the personal relation that Christians have toward Mary and the saints. It gives people comfort to know that somebody like them, but more powerful, knows of them individually, takes interest in them, and will help them. In return, they are happy to feel devoted. This relation is just as much worship and devotion as bhakti.

Bhakti can be like what some Protestants feel when they have a “personal relation with Jesus”. They can pray to Jesus. Jesus listens. Jesus helps them see correctly. Jesus helps them out of jams. Jesus makes sure they go to heaven when they die. They feel an indescribable sense of peace, security, and surety. They know Jesus is not interested in such token gifts as incense or sweets, although they would be happy to offer them as symbols. They know Jesus is interested in their service, in the devotion of their minds, bodies, energy, attention, and time. Jesus has selected us in particular to carry out his activity on Earth, and even has selected us in particular to be a “little Jesus” in the sense that we are like a finger on his hand doing his work. People are happy to offer that. Hindus feel this same way just as honestly and just as fully toward Krishna, Shiva, or even Ganesh.

Hindus who know some theology say bhakti unites the devotee with the god, never in any bad way, but as a way for a finite human to “tap into” the ultimate, the only way that is available to most finite humans. Devotion helps us transcend ourselves to see where we came from, what we really are, how we are tied to other sentient beings and to all creation, and, hopefully, where we are going. We accept that we are part of God’s activity, and so God accepts us as a participant in his activity, including his good acts and his joy. Rather than devotion being pretentious, emotional, or a dodge to avoid intellectual effort, rather than an emotional indulgence, devotion is a way to know our own personal real place and real worth in relation to everything else. The world is god’s projection. By accepting god, we accept our place in the projection of god. We become the vehicle for god to carry out his-her identity and activity fully. In being the vehicle for the god to become him-herself fully, we also become god. We unite with god in a way the both loses our identity in the god and preserves us as an individual. There can be no higher realization.

Bhakti is like the union that Christian and Muslim saints feel with God. It is not necessary that most people who follow the bhakti path feel as much or as deeply as famous mystics. They do not have to feel they have access to the whole truth and the whole god. They only need to feel that they have access, and their access is enough to guide them.

It is not fully accurate but still useful to frame bhakti in terms of an argument within Christianity and Islam. In the famous conflict between works and faith, bhakti is on the side of faith. Bhakti is trusting that God will respond to faith, and that faith alone is enough for God. Bhakti realistically accepts there is nothing a real finite human can do to make him-herself worthy of God and the whole Dharma system. Still, thanks

to the merciful joy of God (the Dharma system), a normal person can succeed. There is little difference between a devoted Hindu and a devoted worshipper of Yahweh-God-Allah.

In my view, faith must combine with works, and must combine with the correct works. The correct works are based on the ideals of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. While some Christians, Muslims, and Hindus also advocate the need to combine faith and works, it is not clear to me that they actually carry out the combination of faith and works, let alone the combination of faith and correct works. Most Christians seek the minimum they can to get into the heaven of their imagination; I don't think most Muslims differ. I do not see any stress in Hindu bhakti on combining faith and works. More importantly, I do not see in Hindu bhakti any consistent recognizing of the correct works. Devotion is enough. Before you jump to condemn Hinduism, I point out there is no real difference between people who see the need to combine faith and correct works (most Christians, some Muslims and Jews) but don't actually do it (almost everybody) versus people who think devotion alone is enough (Hindus, and some Christians and Muslims). Both groups don't do enough of what needs to be done.

More than any other aspect of Hinduism, bhakti allowed Hinduism to triumph over Mahayana and other rivals to Hinduism. You did not have to try to be a bodhisattva or any other spiritual hero. You did not have to do great deeds. You did not have to starve yourself in the forest. You did not have to deal with the problems of whether this life is worthwhile or illusory. You did not have to deal with the annoying "aids" such as Buddha Mind or Storehouse mind. You just have to trust God and do what the right people tell you to do. Everybody can do that, and that is what most people want to do. Later Mahayana devotion to a particular bodhisattva was a similar development in a different place (Tibet and the Far East) but it did not come in time to save Buddhism in India, and the "flavor" of the devotion in it differs.

If devotion was all, Hinduism would differ little from most common religion. Hindu theorists had the sense to accept all six (four) paths along with bhakti, and to make sure that all paths were given equal status. Everybody fits in. There is no rift between intellectuals, mystics, ascetics, rulers, do-gooders, activists, and common people. Everybody gets an equal shot. Hindus can ignore the annoying arguments among intellectuals and mystics. If that is how those people want to get to heaven, then let them try. Hindus can do a bit of good, such as by giving alms or supporting the temple, without worrying about saints who let themselves be eaten by tigers. Mystics can have ecstasy without worrying about leaving out or putting down common people. Zealots can crusade, confident they succeed even if the common people are lazy and amoral. The combination of paths, with bhakti as the biggest and central path, is far more powerful than any particular path alone. No other religion besides Hinduism has managed the mix as graceful or as successfully. That does not mean it is true; you have to decide; but it is something to think about as you wonder what to do with the diverse kinds of people and with human limitations.

Bhakti presents an interesting challenge to evolutionary theory. Bhakti is widespread enough so that it seems to be a part of human nature. What is the evolved basis for bhakti? Could a feeling of bhakti have been sustained in our evolutionary history? What would be the benefits and costs of a feeling of bhakti? Even if full-blown bhakti was not present in our evolutionary past, but only develops after we settled down into agriculture and states, still the basis for it must have been laid in our evolutionary past.

Atman.

“Atman” is the soul-self. It is not exactly like the Christian-Muslim soul-self but it is not nearly as different as Christians, Muslims, and Hindus might think. It is like the philosophical idea of the self that developed in Greek philosophy, especially like the idea of the soul that developed in Roman times in Neo-Platonism and that serves as the model of the soul-self in Christianity. It is something like a combination of the “true you” in modern America, the soul-self in Christianity, the self of social-personal Dharma, and the self of social role. This idea is related to, but distinct from, the idea of the self in Theravada Buddhism; see that chapter. The Hindu self is a strong entity as long as it is part of the Dharma system and it does its social and cosmic duties. Then, the atman is as strong and as eternal as the system. The atman is not eternal in the sense the soul is necessarily eternal in Christianity and Islam where God promised eternity whether in heaven or hell. This Hindu idea of the atman is descended from the idea of the self in the Upanishads, although likely through many ancestors rather than only the Upanishads.

The Buddha argued against strong ideas of the self including the Muslim-Christian idea, the common idea held by many people regardless of religion, the idea in the Upanishads, and what later became the Hindu idea of the self.

“Maha” means “great” and is cognate with English “major”. “Mahatma” is from “maha” plus “atman”. It means “great soul”. It is an honorific way to address someone as in the name-plus-title “Mohandas ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi”.

Many Gods.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, and irreligious Westerners look down on Hinduism for having many gods, which they consider idols. This view of Hinduism is superficially correct but a bit hypocritical even if we set aside that the Christian Trinity is polytheistic. Hindu gods are much like Christian angels and saints, especially Mary. Hindu gods and Christians saints are a major way by which the religions raise heroes to cosmic principles. Christians worship Mary and the saints, and act toward angels, as if they were gods. Each saint, Mary, and each angel, has a specialty, special powers, and special clientele. Even Protestants revere founders more than is appropriate for mere humans. The “Reformed Church” attitude toward John Calvin frightens me. The Marxist attitude toward Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao was idolatry pure-and-simple. The Jewish attitude toward Abraham, Moses, and David is much more than I expect toward mere humans. Despite denials, Muslims basically worship Mohammad much as Christians worship Jesus. I do not dwell on Muslim Jinns (genies) and similar spirits. Muslim attitudes toward the early patriarchs, especially the Sunni and Shiite attitudes toward founders, are not less idolatrous than Hindu worship of gods. Muslims think of archangels as gods, especially Gabriel. American boys used to idolize sports heroes before being a selfish lout became part of the necessary persona of an athlete. I don’t even go into the subject of media stars. It seems part of human nature to deify important people and to look for good relations with friendly spirits. Buddhists accept this tendency as natural, and only hope to avoid the bad effects.

Hindus theoretically can recognize many gods but in practice don’t. In practice, each person has a few important household deities, and a few important deities for their larger clan, village, or occupation (metal workers, computer programmers). A few avatars and deities are common, such as Krishna, the monkey god (Hanuman), Phoenix or Eagle (Garuda), and elephant head (Ganesh). These deities are somewhat like archangels. They are more powerful than the average deity, have distinct personalities and abilities,

and everybody recognizes them in addition to his-her own deities. Thus the real “deity count” for Hindus likely does not exceed the count for many Christians and some Muslims.

Using deities can be a useful way to organize your thinking and social world. It is like seeing the world in terms of the players in a video game or the characters in an epic. Hindus believe in deities as much for the usefulness of the deity in organizing life as because Hindus hold the deity to be a transcendent god for all time and in all places. To understand how this attitude works requires going into the kind of details that I can't go into here.

Protestants accuse Roman Catholics of worshipping Mary and the saints while Roman Catholics counter that they do not worship Mary and the saints as they worship God including Jesus. Roman Catholics revere Mary and the saints, and they ask for intercession from Mary and the saints. I don't go into the details of the doctrine of intercession other than to say it is reasonable if we recall that human nature leads us to ask for help and if we think of God as the big busy patriarch of a clan who listens only to the appeals of his wife and children, and to the appeals of others that are passed on by his wife and children. While clever erudite priests might be able to explain the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession and skirt the issue of worshipping Mary and the saints, most lay people are not that clever, and, by all obvious standards, most lay people and lay Roman Catholics do worship Mary and the saints. “If it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck...”

Many Hindus find their attitude toward gods much like the Roman Catholic attitude toward Mary and the saints. An educated Hindu says Hindus do not worship all the little gods as they worship the Big Three. Hindus do not even worship the Big Three in the same sense they respect the One for which the Big Three stand, that is, the Dharma. Rather, little gods are merely aspects of the Big Three. A Hindu does not worship little gods so much as ask for help in dealing with the Big Three and the Big System of which we are all part. Not-fully-educated Hindus who do not know the Dharma system and the Big Three in effect worship small gods but that is not so bad and not such a big price to pay. Fully educated Hindus don't have to follow them anymore than smart Roman Catholic priests have to follow common people. The alternative is to fight human nature. I suspect Protestants tacitly ask for help from their founders and heroes in the same way. All this is variation on the doctrine of veneration-and-intercession. I find it hard to accuse Hindus of craven multiple idolatry when I don't want to accuse Roman Catholics of the same based on ideas of veneration-and-intercession and I don't want to accuse Protestants in their respect for spiritual heroes. If we say Hindus worship many little gods then, by the same standards, we have to say Roman Catholics do so too, and we have to suspect Protestants. If we want to absolve Roman Catholics and Protestants, we have to be open-minded about Hindus. I don't know how to get people to stop wrongly worshipping Mary, saints, little gods, and heroes without fighting a battle against human nature that would take more than it gave.

Modern Samsara, Maia, and Moksha.

Modern Hindus continue to hold vague notions that the obvious present world is not all there is, it is not satisfying, and there is a deeper spiritual reality to which we need to wake up. They hold ideas that are related to the ideas in the terms Samsara, Maia (Maya), and Moksha. I doubt most Hindus take these ideas really seriously or really understand what they mean but educated Hindus do.

Most Hindus have the same attitude that many diffident Buddhists and some Christians have: We know something that you don't know and that makes us better than you. We are not quite sure what it is that we know, but we know it is important, and know you can't get it. "Awakening" is awakening to the fact that we are smart Hindus; it is not awakening to any particular universal spiritual truth. Most Hindus that know of the traditional role of samsara, maia, and moksha in Hinduism are fairly well educated, so their attitude shows up more in how they relate to lower class and lower middle class members of their own Hindu-Indian society than in how they relate to people of other religions.

The historical development of Hinduism minimized the importance of samsara, maia, and moksha. It replaced moksha with bhakti (devotion). It seems traditional people who think the world is a dangerous illusion (samsara and maia) would have little place, and that the traditional idea of moksha (awakening) as release would not make sense as an important goal. Yet some Hindus do see the world as samsara and maia, and do seek moksha. These are the stereotyped Hindu "holy people". Some of them live in cities and hold regular jobs now. I do not know much about them. I do not know how they think of awakening. I do not know how they feel about other religions and about modern democratic capitalist life in comparison to traditional Hindu life. I do not know how the two strains of Hinduism see each other.

Subtle Point.

Hinduism is powerful partly because it explains itself and so more easily encompasses other religions. Turn Hindu relativism back on Hinduism. Doing so is another version of asking if the Dharma is relative or absolute. On the one hand, if the Dharma is absolute, then something absolute is outside the regular Dharma system of Hinduism because Hinduism is only one manifestation of the Dharma even if it is the best manifestation for humans. If something absolute is outside the Dharma system of Hinduism, then maybe other religions actually know this absolute better than Hinduism. On the other hand, if Dharma is relative, then it is not fully true. If Dharma is not fully true, then Hinduism is not fully true and other religions might be truer. If Non-Hindu religions are lesser versions of God playing by forgetting himself, then what if Hinduism too is God forgetting himself? In that case, Hinduism doesn't get it all exactly right either. No system of ideas can get it exactly right although some systems come closer than others. Not even the Hindu high holy people can get it exactly. In a different book, this point would be a good place to launch imagination.

PART 6: Hindu Appeal.

Here I show the appeal of Hinduism to a Westerner. Not all these ideas are bad. Most are good, at least in their own ways. That is part of the point. The ideas become bad when out of context, Romanticized, or taken in context as part of a full-blown system that eats the world.

Although we are all part of one single total system, the situation of each person is explained by his-her past and present behavior. Everybody is responsible for him-herself.

People are mutually dependent. Events are mutually dependent. There is no high without low. High people should not simply benefit from lower people; high people should guide lower people and improve them. It is a system based on idealized "noblesse oblige".

There is a place for everybody. Everybody can find a place. In theory, nobody is left out.

The system takes care of you. You feel safe, warm, and wanted. The system answers your questions as when Jesus said "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you". The system loves you as when Christians think God and Jesus love us all. The system comforts you and takes care of you as in Robert Thurman's experiences with the Mahayana great system.

You don't have to be a complete spiritual success to be enough of a success. As long as you do your job then you contribute, and you can advance in later lives. It is like the American ideal of working for a large business corporation but in this case a spiritual corporation. You can be spiritually successful as a plumber, banker, world leader, community organizer, piano teacher, or whatever, as long as you do your Dharma sincerely and fully. You don't have to worry about being a saint. Of course, you can still be a saint if you are so inclined.

Nobody is irretrievable bad. You can be forgiven whatever you do. Eventually everybody is saved.

Even if you don't understand all Hindu ideas and aids, and your religion is not high Hinduism, it doesn't matter. You can continue following the religion of your ancestors (or your chosen religion) and still be a valued part of the whole spiritual system.

The highest spiritual success consists of doing the Dharma, which is pretty close to doing good. The highest spiritual success does not consist of rules, laws, righteousness, or self-justification. Hinduism is an intrinsically moral system based on goodness.

Life is a constant game of hide-and-seek. Life is a constant game. Even when one version of the game might be painful, the game overall is fun. The joyous game goes on forever without boredom.

Life has enough risk and pain to be interesting but not so much that you ever really fail.

You can "say 'yes' to LIFE" with a whole heart. You can throw yourself into LIFE without feeling guilty. If you want, you can gamble and have sex, play the stock market, have a homosexual fling (or heterosexual fling in case you are gay), or be a gangster.

It is always darkest before the dawn but the dawn inevitably comes. Good wins out. Evil is defeated. The world comes right again. The King returns. The postman always comes. The victory of good comes from unexpected places and characters, often not from the high and mighty but from the small and weak. Even the wisest people cannot foresee this cleverness of the God-and-the-Dharma.

Hinduism is logical. Hindus are adept at analysis and at laying out arguments. Hinduism can mesh with modern science and math. Hinduism appeals to intellectuals, who can use its tools to explain everything, and use its tools to show how everything is an aspect of the whole system. It is like "Thomism" in Roman Catholicism or like any comprehensive system. It can even take in seemingly different systems such as the "natural language" school.

Hinduism has a place not only for logical scientific people but for people of almost all tempers including artists, mystics, monks, and yogis. It is like large comprehensive Christian Churches such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. If you are prepared to (pretend to) ignore your social duty (Dharma), then Hinduism even has a place for adventurers, rascals, and bad guys.

When you do your social duty, family duty, and professional duty, you also do a religious duty. You help yourself and help the whole world at the same time. When you are who you are, you also do a religious service. As long as can you ignore your tremendous social duty, even if you are a rascal or bad guy, you also do a religious service.

When you individually succeed in your profession, or at your job, you also succeed in the Dharma and you help the whole world at the same time. It is like the feeling that market-worship capitalists want to cultivate in business people and in workers. When you are a pretty successful woman or a handsome successful man, you are also a good Hindu.

Hinduism captures the feeling of the sayings “the destination is the journey” and “the road goes ever on and on”. There is no intrinsic goal. We make up goals. The goal is what happens right now again and again in constant variation. Hinduism captures the best sense of the idea of living fully in the now, in the present moment.

God has a great thing going on. He finds himself, loses himself, finds himself, loses himself, and so on over and over. He plays wonderful amazing games. He plays out each game to the end, and then begins again. He is trillions of different people all at the same time. He loves the world and himself. It would be wonderful to be like God. Guess what? Good news! You are like God. In fact, you are God. You just have to realize it. Now you can do whatever you wish. Enjoy yourself.

The world is a dream but the dream is important. Dream away.

It is easy to let loose your imagination. Hinduism is full of amazing literature, visual art, and music. It is a font of ideas.

Many people really do feel love for the world. They would like to love the world but feel that the command to love the world from Christianity is self-contradictory and silly. Christian love is supposed to change the world but it doesn't. In Hinduism, love doesn't have to change the world. It is alright to feel love for other humans and for nature even if humans don't love you back and nature sends mosquitoes. Love is not a quixotic self-sacrifice but a part of your personality and a good habit. Superior people feel love without expecting it from other people or the world. You can feel love and feel good about it.

On the one hand, moral absolutes don't work. It takes a lot of work to be moral and to get other people to act as they should. On the other hand, moral relativism often is a tool for bad people. We need a system so we can be relativistic without feeling we are dupes or we add to the badness of the world. Hinduism lets us play around with morality while feeling not that we are doing anything bad but that we are helping the world to get along.

Human life is a great tedium of constant practical and moral issues. They are never fully solved. They never end. When Americans beat the Fascists and so thought they made the world safe for decency forever, Communism and the Cold War arose. When the Cold War ended, religious terrorists arose. When Putin replaced Yeltsin, Russia acted like an imperial power again. Americans thought we had made much progress against racism; then, after about 2013, Blacks showed how much more we had to do; and some Whites showed how much more Blacks still had to do. Financial institutions never stop finding ways to screw up the financial system and so undercut basic needs such as housing. We went from prosperity to huge national debt. Hackers are always able to get around any fix. When we thought nuclear war between the super powers was over, China started hacker attacks instead.

In Hinduism, fussing is an opportunity rather than tedium, a positive rather than a negative. Humans are moral animals. They love moral issues. They love moral disputes. They love figuring out what to do and implementing solutions. If they did not have moral issues, they would go crazy. The Dharma arranged it all so that we never run out of moral issues of about the right size to keep us always engaged and always feeling as if we are inching forward. Whether we really are inching forward does not matter as much as we feel we have to keep struggling. Even if we make real progress, we will not run out of problems and steps forward. This is a great boon to humans. No other religion shows how this all makes sense in the context of a system.

Never-ending moral issues at the right level for humans is what it means to be part of a never-ending story in which God (the Dharma) forgets himself to have fun.

If you are smart enough to see through all this business of never-ending moral issues, it doesn't matter. You can continue to work on moral issues or you can shrug them off. Either way, you contribute to the Dharma system.

Once you see that Hinduism allows for many paths within it and it encompasses other religions, then you can practice relativism – what I see as bad relativism. You can feel smug about your superior knowledge and stance, and still feel good toward other lesser people and other lesser religions. You can allow that Christianity is one path to the same God although poor Christians do not see the situation clearly as you do from your great Hindu height. Although Christians are still wandering a bit lost with blurred vision, still, the Dharma in its great compassion leads them back to itself as God. In fact, morally, Christians might even be a bit better than you are, so your intellectual insight and their simple morality all even out. As Hinduism promised, it all works out in the end. I have met Western Hindus who act like this, convert and born.

Some Westerners feel they connect with God. Hinduism gives them an explanation in that they are an important valued part of God, guaranteed. Some Westerners do not feel they have a close tie to God in any Western religion while in Hinduism they can find that. You do not have to be a saint to be a part of God and an important part of God. Some Westerners feel important to God. In Hinduism, these people can feel good about actually being God. If you have trouble figuring out your exact connection to God, Hinduism tells you that you are God, and so explains it to you and makes you feel important too. People can feel they are God without feeling guilty that they are God, without feeling that they fall into the sin of pride, and without feeling insane. It explains their feeling of centrality, without stress.

Some literature that Christians consider Christian, especially recent fantasy and science fiction, seems to me more like Hinduism than like the simple teachings of Jesus. Christians do not expect this literature to follow rigid dogmatic lines but they do expect this literature to promote the spirit of Christianity. It seems to me the spirit is more Hindu than Christian even when the authors were Christian. This is an example of the power of culture, here Indo-European culture. I do not say it is bad literature; it is good literature. All the fiction of C.S. Lewis, in particular the Narnia series, and the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, including “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings”, seem more like Hinduism than the simple teachings of Jesus. The mutual development of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum is more Hindu than Christian. Gandalf is an avatar of Vishnu in everything but explicit name. Boromir and Faramir are like Hindu brothers from the epic Mahabharata. The feeling that you are doing work of God when you think you are doing your own work, when you don’t even know about the work of God, and especially if you are a little person only doing your small bit, is more Hindu than Christian. Even the Christian classic “Pilgrim’s Progress” is more about growing into the Dharma, finding your Dharma role, and purging confusion, than about simply acting well along the lines of Jesus’ teachings. The Christian literature does retain the idea of clear (absolute) evil and clear good. Sauron, the Ice Queen, and Orcs are bad; and that is that. Aslan is absolutely good Jesus; and that is that. But the absolute good and bad are only vague extremes between which a lot of Hindu-like mixing happens; and the absolute good and bad depend on each other in a way that is not really Christian but is acceptable in Hinduism. The little mouse “Reepacheep” in the Narnia books is less like a Christian saint than like the monkey god Hanuman. So much recent non-Christian science fiction seems like Hinduism that I don’t even go into the topic.

Westerners get infatuated with Hinduism because Westerners don’t see how Hinduism takes over your “true you” in personal-social Dharma, and how personal-social Dharma serves Hindu Indian stratified society in the big system of Dharma. Westerners don’t see problems. Westerners see a charming world where everybody can do what he-she wants and feel good about it yet there is a big cozy system with a place for everybody. The world is a big adventure that seems serious at the time but is not really serious. It is Peter Pan grown up but still Pan. The situation is like a Medieval Fair with rogues, wizards, wenches, bards, honor, duty, and crazy holy people but without the tight social Dharma (rigid Feudal system), starving peasants, bad sanitation, sexism, ageism, lack of schools or hospitals, and without the need personally to reinforce stratified Hindu society and the big system of Dharma. Hinduism is a theme park, like the Disney World of religions, while other religions are like particular rides in the theme park. To some modern Hindus, it seems this way too now. In reality, it is not.

PART 7: Further Assessment.

Most assessment was done above. This part picks out aspects of Hinduism that are relevant to it as a big idea system that eats the world, is relativistic, and feels superior to other ideas even when granting them credit. The points reinforce my idea that adhering closely to any system thwarts acting simply according to the teachings of Jesus, decency, and Western values. We can build institutions on the teachings of Jesus and the West well enough without falling into a bad system. The ideas also show my appreciation for some good aspects of Hinduism. I repeat that I say nothing new and many points have been offered so often they are trite.

I know that Christians and other non-Hindus can be obnoxious. I know that many Hindus are wonderful people. I know that Hindus have a sense of personhood and that non-Hindus treat people as things even

when non-Hindus have a clear dogma of personhood in their religion, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These facts are only partly the issue here. All of us live in a big political and ideological system, of which religion is a part. So the real issue is what leads some systems to stress persons and build good institutions while other systems lead people to treat other people as things and keep them from building good institutions. What leads some people in some systems to mutual respect, acting good for the sake of goodness, rule of law, equality under law, schools, hospitals, voluntary local sports, love of learning, and the Scouts while other systems with great ideas and great books do not build good institutions? What leads some systems to find the right balance of authority and creativity while others become rigid or diffuse? There is no easy answer. All I do is to offer a few observations.

Briefly, to repeat from the start of the chapter, the West had ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world both from Jesus and from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Hinduism had “you are that” and great compassion. While fine in their own ways, “you are that” and compassion did not lead to ideas of persons and of working hard to build a better world, and so could not lead to building good institutions. Instead, they combined with the idea of Dharma to form a system that led to social involution, relativism, conniving, and the other bad features I have already listed too often. To get out of this trap, Hindus need to reinvent Dharma to stress ideas from Jesus and the West, that is, to stress persons, working hard to make the whole world better (not just your family, caste, city, etc.), and building the good institutions that go along.

We should not do good (act well) so as to please God to be saved and get into heaven. We should do good because it is good. That pleases God. To do good as it should be done, we need to see other people as persons. We need to offer and receive respect. We cannot do good as it should be done unless we see other people as persons and act rightly. Christians undermine the teachings of Jesus, and undermine good, when they do good to get in good with God, get saved, and go to heaven. In Hinduism, people should see that they are like other people and other people are like them, “you are that” from the Upanishads. The response to seeing that others are like us is great compassion. Hindus should do good because it is good and they see other people as persons. As with Christians, Hindus do not live up to the ideal. They do good not because it is good and other people are persons but as a way to earn karma-Dharma points, to have a better life now, and a better life in the future. That is the Hindu equivalent of getting saved and going to heaven. Hindus act well so as to support the Dharma system and themselves in the Dharma system.

It might seem that the two second-rate responses are about equally bad but that is not the case. While most Christians are mired in confusion about doing good, getting saved, and going to heaven, at least sometimes some Christians do leap over the barrier, manage to see other people as persons, and do good on that basis. They do this because they have the teachings of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the example of Jesus. Some Christians know they should do good because it is good, and see that Jesus taught them how to do good in that light. Even when the mass of Christians do not do good on that basis, but do good to be saved and go to heaven, the mass of Christians are still guided by the few who do make the leap and tell others what to do. Christianity has managed to support Western civilization on this meager base. In contrast, Hindus do not make this leap often enough to build a similar civilization. They do not manage to get over the Dharma system often enough to see people as persons. Although both Christianity and Hinduism are Indo-European civilizations that stress persons and compassion, only one managed to build the best practical civilization. The differences were the teachings of the Bible, the

teachings of Jesus, and the example of the real person Jesus. I say these ideas many times in this part of the chapter.

At the root of Hinduism are the abstractions “Dharma” and “general compassion”. Hinduism is both too abstract and too detailed – a fault typical of big relativistic systems that eat the world large state agencies, big business firms, the American legal system, and the Indian legal system. Hindu abstractions are lovely but they enable the worst faults of a big system that eats the world and is relativistic in bad ways. They allow people too easily to treat each other not as persons but as ciphers in a game. Abstraction, even with high ideals, enables bad acts. The abstractions of high Hinduism paradoxically encourage people to cling to tiny details of stratified sexist caste-and-or-class life. The abstractions paradoxically drive ever-expanding tiny details of particular worship such as many gods, avatars, rituals, temples, and particular beliefs. The abstractions leave too much space for, and encourage, conniving in your Dharma position for power, wealth, prestige, sex, glory, success, and other goals that the idealistic abstractions formally warn against. Abstractions make a great playground for religious virtuosos but confuse normal people. For high ideals to succeed, they must be specific enough while still remaining ideals, such as the Golden Rule, the idea that we are all persons, “applies equally”, and rule of law.

In the right situation, Hinduism is a better alternative than rigid religions that lead people to act badly and to oppress others, even when the non-Hindu religion officially teaches compassion and good acts. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are too often bad in practice. Likely Hinduism was a terrific idea and terrific advance when it first formed in India in the centuries around the time of Jesus. Hinduism would be a good alternative to the rigid religion of America before about 1950, the “religion” of the racist classist Religious Right in America now, the “religion” of the racist classist Black in America now, or bad Muslim fundamentalism. In Hindu society of the 1800s and 1900s, Hinduism was about the same as those bad religions are in their times. Hinduism seems like a better general option only to a befuddled desperate seeking unrealistic Westerner who does not see Hinduism clearly and sees only idealized adventurous dreaming of God. Hinduism is never a better general option than following Jesus if we hear Jesus with an open mind, figure out what he really taught, mix his ideas with practicality and Western values, and then act in accord.

“I am Krishna-Vishnu-Godhead” versus “I am not Jesus”.

Here is a simple brief way to think about the situation according to how Hindus and the followers of Jesus think of people (persons) and their place in the world (the system):

If I think of me as a person among other persons, all of whom will meet God, then I tend to act according to the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and rule of law, and to build good institutions. If I think of me as trying to excel in Dharma standing, and think of other people as cogs in the big Dharma system, I tend to treat them as an ATM machine and I do not build good institutions. When Christians think along similar lines as do stereotyped Hindus, when Christians do good to get to heaven and encourage other people to do the same, they act likewise and do not to build good institutions either.

Although Alan Watts styled himself a Taoist, he was more a Hindu. Watts noted that, if a Westerner were to say “I am God”, he-she would be shunned, burned, put in a home, ridiculed, or ignored. We need to see the God in us to love our neighbors as God loves us. By blocking natural insight that we are God-

Jesus, we also cannot see ourselves in others, see others in us, and love them as we love ourselves. By not being able to see ourselves as Jesus, we fail as Christians. Yet when a Hindu says "I am God", no Hindu gets upset. Wise Hindus say: "Good. Congratulations. I am glad your eyes are finally open. Now you can see where you come from, where you are going, and your duties along the way. I am glad you can join our band. Now do your Dharma job". By seeing that each Hindu is part of God, and so is God, each Hindu can act up to the ideals that Christians should work for. As a shock tactic against wrong rigid uptight moralistic do-good-to-go-to heaven Christianity, Watts makes sense. He does not make sense if instead we talk with any moderate person who does not need urgent rescue but rather simply needs a good way to think about who he-she is, what the world is like, and what to do.

A Hindu can see himself as Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, one of the three high gods, the divine hero of the Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata. Hindus do not only emulate or learn from Krishna-Vishnu, they can become just like Krishna or become the actual Krishna-Vishnu. Especially through bhakti (devotion), but not only through bhakti, a Hindu does not only emulate, he becomes Krishna-Vishnu. In fact, usually he-she merges with a lesser god rather than one of the three highest gods such as Krishna-Vishnu, but the feeling is the same. (Feeling you merge with a deity goes along with traditional Hindu gender ideas and pronouns; the sexism is not in me; similar sexism was found in all major religions until recently.)

A Western person could not see him-herself as God, and a Christian could not see him-herself as God or Jesus. The ideas should be unthinkable. Both ideas are wrong and lead to bad results. It is against this idolatry, with its bad results, that Jews and Muslims warn Christians; and it is a good reason why Jews and Muslims don't like to make Jesus into God.

The difference between being able to see yourself as Krishna-Vishnu versus not being able to imagine yourself as God-or-Jesus, might not seem big but it is big enough to be qualitative. It is not a matter of degree but of kind. It makes a difference. When you do see yourself as God, the result is not mostly good as Watts thought.

To get a feel for the difference and its results, think of those Christians who are sure they have a personal relation with Jesus, are saved, see how it all works, see what to do, see what all other people should do, have the right to tell others what to do, feel others cannot be saved unless others are the same as they are, feel they deserve their high position, and feel others should accept their position. Imagine such a person who is rich, in the upper class, or an entrenched government official. Imagine how he-she can use the feeling to rationalize power, wealth, and the system. Imagine how he-she and the whole family look down on everybody else, especially not-our-sect-group and not-Christian. Imagine what happens when this person gets power, as with Cromwell in England or Communists in Russia (listen to "Oliver's Army" by Elvis Costello and see the movie "Doctor Zhivago").

Such exalted people can evade real issues of morality, society, and ecology while forcing other people to face the world for them - one privilege of a god. In effect, Krishna does that to Arjuna. Recall science fiction stories about people who get god-like powers and then act like demons. Recall smug people from your life. Recall bureaucrats and professors who think they are the system. Even when smug powerful people are gracious and help the downtrodden, they condescend and put up with inferiors more than they reach out to human persons. Their acts are not "I am like others" and "compassion". In Hinduism, this

holier-than-thou feeling and its bad results is raised to a qualitative higher level. That is how the feeling of being a god in disguise affects people and reinforces the system.

Even when any particular Hindu does not feel that he-she has merged with a god, the attitude pervades Hinduism and shapes ideas of who you are, personal relations, group relations, and the system. You can take on the attitude of a god anytime, and persist in it. You can act “high and mighty” to anyone below you in rank or in power. You identify with others as it suits your Dharma role, that is, your convenience. You feel for others only as expedient.

In Hindu mythology, often demons are beings that take the power(s) of a god, often by stealing, and act badly. Think of Magneto’s disdain toward mere humans or Jean’s fury. People who think they are the system do not often become Professor Xavier. Hindus feel the tendency of their system to make demons of people that aspire to more; and Hindus warn against the tendency. But the tendency cannot be ended as long as people can merge with god. In their mythology, Christians say that the key fault of the Devil is, in his pride, to think he is God. They try to stop that train too, but Christians can never fully succeed as long as human nature is what it is.

Most Westerners know something is wrong with this wish to become god even if they cannot say what, and even if, supposedly, it leads to seeing yourself in others and compassion. For Christians who do fall into this mistake, hopefully friends and fellows straighten them out. At least Christians have clear doctrine and clear tradition to help them tell smug over-godly people to “clean up you act”.

Most Hindus who identify with their god do not become full-on demons anymore than most Christians who have a relation with Jesus lord over their fellows. That is not the issue. The issue is the mindset and the system that is led to by the different potentials to feel like god, or not feel like god.

I dislike the idea of feeling that you are god, even the good god of a good system, both because it is wrong and leads to bad results personally and in a system. It is inaccurate. It feels wrong. It is a wrongheaded if powerful way to think.

If you are not god, then what are you? What does that mean for thinking, doing, and relating?

If you let yourself be merely human, you will be better off and your fellows will be better off. As a mere human, you have to deal with real moral issues, real problems, and stinky people. You cannot assume godlike above-it-all-ness while others do the work. You might even become more god-like by being more merely human but that is not the reason you should do so.

Because I do not worry whether Jesus was (is) God, I have to accept that it is theoretically possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus, without thinking of him-herself as God. This case does not matter much to me and it is not important in what I say here. It is only possible for a person to think of him-herself as like Jesus if he-she does not think Jesus is God. A person cannot think of him-herself as God; and that is what matters. I discourage people from thinking they are equal to, or better than, Jesus. To feel the message of this section, try thinking of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus; or think why you cannot, and wish not, to think of yourself as like Jesus, fully equal to Jesus, or better than Jesus.

Jews cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims cannot feel as if they are God. Muslims feel they cannot be Mohammad because he is so holy, that is, in the same way that Christians feel they cannot be Jesus. The relation of Christians to Jesus and Muslims to Mohammad raises problems along the lines described above but I do not go into them here.

Mahayanists do not feel as if they can become one with any particular bodhisattva but they do feel they could become a bodhisattva in their own right. They can return to Dharma, Mind, or Emptiness, and can act from that matrix for the good of all. What result that view leads to, I don't take up here. Theravada Buddhists can use religion to justify pride, power, and aloof disdain but not in the same way as a Hindu who identifies directly with a god. While Taoists feel they can merge with the Tao, their idea does not seem to lead to the same overbearing personality and bad system as in Hinduism, some Christianity, and some Islam. I do not go into why the difference for Taoists. They have faults. Zen is like Taoism and Theravada. In true Zen, the idea that, "I am a Buddha, a bodhisattva", leads not to vanity but to junking the whole system and to appreciating everyday life.

(A) The Golden Rule and "Applies Equally" versus (B) Great Compassion.

According to Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, including Jesus, the two greatest points of Jewish Law, on which all other commands rest, are: (1) (1A) Love God, which implies (1B) knowing that God loves you; and (2) Love your neighbor. If you can: (2A) love your neighbor as you wish God to love you, (2B) love your neighbor as you wish to love god, and (2C) love your neighbor as if he-she were yourself. The Golden Rule is another way to say this. This Jewish idea seems to differ little from the ideas in the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Hinduism about compassion and about being the same as the other. Yet the West, based on Jesus' Jewish ideas, developed good institutions while India did not.

In theory, compassion sounds much like "love your neighbor" and the Golden Rule but practice does not work out that way. It seems I should contrast compassion with "love your neighbor" but workable practice is more along the lines of the Golden Rule than "love your neighbor". So I contrast compassion with the Golden Rule. A feeling of diffuse compassion lets us treat people as tokens in a game, as a way to make us feel spiritually successful while, in contrast, the Golden Rule leads us to think of people as persons and to act as they need rather than do what makes us feel successful. "Love your neighbor" either leads people to freeze because they can't live up to it, and so don't help others and do harm themselves; or it leads to treating people as tokens to prove our worthiness through love, much as does compassion.

It might be odd to think of it this way, but the idea of great compassion does not require that the object of our love be a person or even like a person. Of course, being people, we tend to think of it that way but it doesn't have to be that way. We can love a person without thinking of him-her as a person. These days, when people love animals, they tend to think of them as almost-human, but, in fact, they are not, and we can love them even if they are not. Many people in the past did that. We can love nature, the cosmos, ideas, ideals, and art but do not have to think of it as a person. We can support the arts without thinking of the artists as persons and without thinking that art is made by persons for persons. Many do-gooders, and many conservatives, love society, love a nation, or love a social group, without really feeling it is made up of persons and should serve persons. If they claim to love humanity, they love it in this abstract way rather than as persons. This is what Charles Schulz meant when he had Lucy say something like "I

love humanity, its people I hate". This is the way that great compassion tends to play out in places where it comes along with ideas of Dharma.

Christians make this mistake when they feel compassion in a cause or toward a group but do not see that the cause and the group are made of persons and do not see that their simple broad diffuse compassion might not be the best response for them or us – especially when expressed through a state program or in a crusade such as against abortion or for political correctness. We slip into a bad version of this attitude with “Oh, look at that poor unwed pregnant girl not of our ethnic group, religion, or socio-economic class”, “We have to do something about all these poor kids”, “Farm families are the bedrock of our past and the farming way of life must go on”, or “Small business is the bedrock of our capitalist spirit and we have to help them in their fight against big bad corporations”.

In contrast to Hinduism, hopefully in the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition, and in the Muslim tradition, we are told not just to love some abstractions or groups, not just to show compassion generally, but to love all particular individual real persons (people). We are told to love them even when they are not nice. Of course, real people have limits to how much we can love. If only for the sake of families and society, at some point it is wrong to love a bad person. But at least we have the ideal of person-to-person relations. Again, this is the point of the classic book by Martin Buber “I and Thou”.

I am not saying it is bad to love something that is not a person. I think it is good to love nature, art, some groups, some ideas, your dog, and your cat. But we have to remember the importance of persons too. Do not reduce people to non-persons so you can love them or when you love them.

I am not saying we should never think of people in terms of groups, never work through agencies such as churches or the United Way, and never use the state as an instrument of compassion and welfare. We have to do all this. But every so often we need to engage a real individual person out of the group and we have to think of the group as made up of individual persons.

As real limited human creatures, we need guidance for the idea of loving real flawed persons. While still an ideal, the “Golden Rule” gives guidance that is better than vague love. If we act toward other people (persons) as we want them to act to us as a person, then we have pretty good ideas what to do. The Golden Rule suggests institutional guidelines such as giving charity and accepting charity. Likewise, the idea “applies equally” is an excellent guide for how to put in practice the Golden Rule and “love your neighbor”. “Applies equally” gives strong guidelines for building good institutions such as the rule of law, fairness, and sportsmanship.

I am not saying we should not feel compassion, and even feel diffuse compassion. I am saying we have to be more specific through the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. We have to be more specific if we get trapped in the ideal of loving everybody as we love ourselves when we just can’t do, and we have to be more specific so we don’t use compassion as a means to personal justification and success. Sometimes it helps to think not of loving everybody as we love ourselves or as God loves us but love everybody as if he-she were our brother, sister, good parent, or great teacher.

A lot of people feel big diffuse compassion sometimes and a few people feel intense compassion in big long doses. In those cases, go with it. Let the compassion infuse your life and make you a better person.

Likely, then, you do not feel compassion as a roundabout selfish means to justification and success. Use the energy that you get during your “high” to power being a better person when you get back to acting in the normal world. Then, likely you will find that you use your energy along the lines of the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

In versions of meditation, including yoga, and in versions of some systems of thought, Hindus seek to go beyond simple compassion and even deep compassion. Compassion can impede full understanding of the Dharma. This view is rooted in the common experience of the need to get beyond a “bleeding heart” to have a clear head and to do greater good. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God can be stern, and God does not let compassion get in the way of chastising his people and making them better. “Going beyond simple compassion” does not mean no morality. Even a Hindu who is beyond simple compassion still has to act morally. Only schools of Hinduism that are aberrant act amorally or immorally. Westerners often know of Chakras. Compassion is rooted in one chakra, the heart chakra, which is about midway on the line of ascent. A seeker must get above the midway heart chakra to higher levels and higher chakras. I do not describe them. While true of esoteric ways, this view about getting beyond compassion is not true of most Hinduism and most Hindus would only dimly get it even if most have heard of it. This way of thinking does not change my view about compassion anymore than similar thinking in the West changes my assessment of Hinduism, such as in the Neo-Conservative school. I get this view about compassion. Still, I do not go along with this view nor do I think that getting beyond compassion gets us out of the need for principles. While rooted in the need for a clear head, this view goes too far and it can be misleading. I suspect all schools that claim to lead above compassion without giving us guidelines, principles, for good acts and good relations once we get there, and without telling us how to rightly mix superiority with proper empathy, sympathy, compassion, and principles. Compassion is part of us, or should be, and it has to be guided by principles such as the Golden Rule even if sometimes we are also objective or stern. Even if a person is above compassion, he-she still needs to act, and needs some principles on which to act. This result leads back to Jesus and the Golden Rule. Even a stern God follows some rules most of the time – or should.

“You are That”; and “We are All Sparks of One God”.

In theory, it seems the idea that we are all the same deep down would ignite good feelings of connection to each other and compassion for each other. When we see ourselves as all sparks off the same God, as all really God himself at play through us, it seems we would be good to each other, at least so we can be good to ourselves. In practice, the idea that we are all similar often produces bad feelings. Whether good or bad win depends on context. I think bad feelings win out in systems like Hinduism despite the ideal of Compassion.

Here are three ways in which sentient beings are the same or different. The ways are not usually fully achieved in real life but they are thinkable and they affect how a system works out.

(1) Each person is qualitatively different, so different that it is hard to imagine what other persons are like and hard to communicate with them. Everybody is “on his-her own”. Everybody tries to shape the world to suit what he-she thinks is important and what he-she likes. Even when many individuals are good, or mean well, the situation turns out badly. It becomes a contest of wills. Recall meetings where everyone talks past everyone else. Because people cannot relate, each individual finds it hard to assess his-her

own desires and to limit his-her own desires to what makes sense. Even when individuals start out well, they often turn bad out of frustration and out of unlimited desire. This is what Sartre had in mind when he described Hell as “other people” in “No Exit”, and how C.S. Lewis described Hell in “The Great Divorce”. This is how theologians paint Hell, as ultimate isolation from other persons and God. This is why Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus, and Jesus too, said the two greatest commandments, on which all others rest, are “love God” and “love others as yourself”. This is what the writers of the Upanishads tried to prevent when they urged people to see others as like themselves and to feel compassion for others. This is how critics of economic individualism see economics, capitalism, and Darwinism, not only as ways to analyze human life but as ways to promote this hellish version of human life. Anti-abortion activists, pro-life groups, see widespread abortion as an inevitable result of this stance and as clear evidence that this stance prevails in society.

(2) This option is the happy middle. This option makes more sense if you read option (3) first. Both similarity and difference matter. Every person differs but still we are all essentially equal and each of us is valuable in his-her way. Equality is not sameness nor is sameness equality. Not everybody is equally valuable except maybe in the eyes of God. Equality is more important than value. People respect both the difference and sameness of everybody. Seeing the commonality of each person allows each person to develop his-her own way and promotes beneficial manageable diversity, that is, difference. Accepting difference allows us to see beside (beyond, behind) the difference to what makes us equal. Unlike God, people are not necessarily good judges of what makes us valuable and equal. We value wealth, power, artistic ability, prowess in sports, appearance, and trendiness more than decency and a good heart. The middle position reminds us that we are not good judges, to think both of common equality and particular distinction, and to think more deeply about human value and natural value.

(3) Every person might be different but that doesn't matter. Everyone is the same. Everyone is equally a spark of the one God, equally the Dharma at play with itself. Sameness totally dominates difference and individuality. A strong personification of this attitude is Agent (Mr.) Smith in the movie trilogy “The Matrix”, who could make everyone exactly like him no matter what they began as and how powerful they were. It is a theme of the Chaplin movie “Modern Times” where everyone is a cog in the machine. People might be different cogs, they might have distinct duties, they might all need each other, and some people might have command functions while other people might be only simple cogs. Still, neither the differences nor mutual dependence matter because all are still only cogs. We are all in the Great Communion. We might have different roles but still we are all part of the same society. Aldus Huxley satirized this view in “Brave New World”. Some anthropologists have (had) this view of society.

Most people know the idea that things turn into their opposites when pursued quite strongly, as Justice becomes Tyranny. Usually the idea is surrounded with Romantic and metaphysical claptrap. Forget all that because you need a clear head to assess when things really do turn into opposites: Attitude (3) tends to turn into attitude (1) and vice versa. When all we see is similarity with no individuality, then we treat everyone as a creepy little aberration, and treat them not as the same but as totally different from us. We make them different, anyway we can. We do not feel connected to them and feel compassion for them but instead try to assert our individuality, our specialness, and our will. In situations where attitude (1) prevails, as with equally powerful politicians, business people, professionals, artists, fashion setters, householders, or people who insist on their rights without also accepting their responsibilities, what people see is not the distinctiveness of the others, what makes them special and successful in their little

realms. People see only that there are other powerful beings out there, each all vying to assert his-her will. Everybody is reduced from unique to merely the same hunger for assertion and power. Everybody is the same now, and that leads not to compassion but to competition.

To prevent the collapse of (3) into (1) and vice versa, do not rest on abstracts such as we are all the same, all sparks of God, and should feel great compassion for each other. Instead, use more concrete guidelines about what a person is and how we should act toward others. We need the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, the rule of law, and the idea of a citizen with both responsibilities and rights. We need to merge those with experience and practicality. We need to put those into concrete form with good institutions such as schools, hospitals, charities, and research. Even then, we still make mistakes, but we are less likely to err, more likely to see both similarity and difference, and to bridge difference with proper compassion.

Equality under the law does not mean everybody has the same ability and all should achieve the same wealth, fame, power, romantic success, and family success. It does not mean we are all smart enough to succeed in modern capitalism. It means we all get treated fairly and honestly by officials and citizens, according to procedures that are set down and are available for all people to understand. Each person is the same under the law but all persons are not the same, and we expect people to differ, or there would be no need for the law at all. Yet through all the differences, there is a common personhood on which we can base the law and a society. We are neither so different that we cannot have any law at all nor so similar that we don't need law. We are different enough to need law and similar enough to make law and to make it work. “Applies equally” works the same way, and we can see “equality under the law” as a variation of “applies equally”.

The Golden Rule works the same way. If we really were all the same, and it was easy to see so, we would not need the Golden Rule but could rest on simple compassion. The Golden Rule says that there are others and they are NOT exactly the same as us or we would not have to think about how to treat them. We have to treat them well despite real differences. When we do think about how to treat them, we treat them as we wish to be treated, not just with simple great compassion.

Westerners do have problems with attitudes (3) and (1), and the collapse. The problem is a malingering threat in our societies, and we fear it. Lately we have been more worried about the idea that everyone is the same (3) than that everyone is absolutely qualitatively different (1). The fear of ultimate sameness is the “Communist Specter”. It is a theme of episodes of the old “Star Trek” TV show, often run by overly-parental computers. In the comic TV show of 2016, “People of Earth”, aliens abduct humans and they try to soothe humans by telling us how special each is; but one woman knows such patter is only twisting the human psyche to cover abuse, and she “calls” the aliens on their “bullshit”. Americans want a level playing field, equal opportunity. What they often get instead is politicians and interest groups, including business firms and wealthy people, using the system to get their version of a good outcome. While we dream of “equal under the law” what we usually get is a huge rationale for special privilege and adept conniving. Fittingly, other societies see America as plagued by attitude (1), economic individualism and radical insistence on rights over responsibility in society and to nature.

Hindus tolerate enormous diversity in practice, in details of belief about the Dharma, and in what serves the Dharma. The variety and diversity of Hindu sects is legendary. “Indiana Jones and the Temple of

Doom” is an unfair parody of Hindu diversity, but the movie means well, gives the average American a small sense of Hindu diversity, and shows the importance of family and community despite the religious ideologies. Imagine every saint and famous historical religious figure with his-her own cult and dedicated temples. Despite the diversity, Indian society does cohere. Hindus seemingly connect with each other through the idea that we are all sparks of the Dharma (God). This situation seems to validate the idea that seeing the core of commonality allows more individuality and allows individuals to bridge the gaps between them. Hindus seem to make attitude (3) work (we are all the same), and work well enough so that attitude (1) (deep distinction) is not a threat. Indians seem to merge attitudes (1) and (3) in a way that overcomes the threat of becoming the same bad thing.

But that is not what really happens in Indian and Hindu society. Rather, Hindu society often really is full of contention, Hindus are argumentative, and the society holds together as much through authority as common good will. The movie of Gandhi’s starring Ben Kingsley life give a good sense of the conflict in Indian society despite high ideals. The war between Hindus (Indians) and Muslims (Pakistanis and to some extent Bangladeshis) is better seen as a conflict between South Indians with the same general outlook than as a conflict between Hinduism and Islam.

One good analogy for a Westerner is Protestantism. For someone raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church, “Protestants” here includes Roman Catholics but, for here, take it in the sense of Protestants versus Roman Catholics. Protestants stress their equality and their right to interpret the Bible as they see fit. Everyone is equal before God and can have a direct relation to God that does not depend on any particular historical Church. They refuse to accept the authority of any established church, in particular the Roman Catholic Church, despite the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has historical continuity from Jesus. Despite all having almost the same Bible, they still find thousands of different interpretations. They often agree on well over 90% of what it means yet still split into factions over interpretation of as little as one verse or one practice, for instance over Baptism and the Eucharist. Commonality of text breeds not unity and compassion but diversity, disagreement, and enmity. As Christians, Protestants should love each other and help each other. Yet their stress on equality of standing produces thousands, or tens of thousands, of sects, many of which are so distinct they cannot talk to each other. Within each church, Protestants are notoriously authoritarian and accept little deviation – so much for individual self-determination through one standard text and direct personal relation to God. To someone outside the Protestant movement, the community seems not made up of the qualitatively distinct non-commensurate entities they say but made up of many nearly-identical highly-argumentative competitive robots that split hairs just to have something to fight about and to use to distance themselves from other people and God. The Protestant mix of attitudes (1) and (3) too often leads to badness. Protestants drove the slave trade and they found easy Biblical rationales. Particular Protestant groups often cohere through authority and, in bad irony, state-sponsored churches such as in England, Germany, and Scandinavia. When Calvinism prevailed, it was a bully among Protestant equals, taking over the state and using it as an instrument of superiority, as in Switzerland, Colonial America, and during the time of the Revolution in England. Contrary to misconception (fueled by a beautiful but wrong book by Max Weber), capitalism does not thrive under pure Protestantism but in societies with a blend of peoples and ideas. Pure Protestantism stifles Capitalism. When Protestant societies do succeed, as in the United States in its first 150 years, it is not through extreme individualism or extreme sameness but because they take seriously the Golden Rule and applies equally, their concrete realization in the rule of law, and in other institutions such as schools and hospitals. They also have neighbors who differ in belief and way of life and with whom they

have to trade and talk, that is, they have to cross borders between differences. America would not have been America without both Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

That is what Hinduism lacks. Imagine Protestant pseudo-individualism combined with strong coherence within each church-and-sect, and without “applies equally” and rule of law. That is the kind of coherence that prevails under Hinduism when attitudes (1) and (3) dominate.

I revised parts of this chapter during the 2016 election season, and I saw that American political parties might provide more familiar examples than Protestantism. Both parties have an ideal rationale for why the members are in the party, that is, both parties have an ideal for why their members are the same and should feel great compassion for each other, for Americans in general, and for Americans regardless of political affiliation. In fact, in both parties, nobody believes that rationale. Instead, both parties have half-a-dozen major special-interest groups, each group vies to take over, and each group secretly disdains the others no matter what each group says: white working class, white medium-sized business, other middle-sized business, rich people, the Religious Right, the Religious Left, Blacks, Hispanics, Women, and eco-activists. Every group says: “we love America and we have the one-and-only way to save America” but no group sees beyond its own problems to bigger issues and solutions. Love for America seems a lot like love for self. Each group acts like isolated captives of Hell according to Sartre and Lewis. No society ever was free of interest groups, and it is natural that subgroups seek power. It also use to be natural in working democracy that interest groups would seek the greater interests of the country and compromise with other groups to work toward those. That is the middle position described above. Since at least Reagan, and likely since the early 1970s, that middle position has dwindled to nothing, and America has slid down the road to the Hell of high slogans and low cunning.

(When Buddhists see clearly, the middle position above is an example of what they mean by “the middle path”. Few real Buddhists see this clearly, and most use “middle path” only as a slogan. Still, it is worth pointing out that Buddhists can see the middle and see how it can save us from suffering.)

(The three options above interact with ideas of hyper-order, order, and no order, of reduction and holism, and of individual-and-society. Hopefully, I go into these relations in other writing.)

Marxist Parallels.

Recall the famous dictum from the rules of “Animal Farm” as interpreted by the ruling pigs: We are all equal but some are more equal than others.

How do systems built on great ideals, such as compassion, fail? Without implying Hinduism is just like Marxism, Marxism is a useful comparison. I could as well find parallels in right wing movements such as Reagan-ism, “compassionate conservatives”, “contract with America”, or “a rising tide floats all boats”.

Marxism too taught compassion in ideals such as “From each according to ability; to each according to need”. That was the Marxist version of “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule, and it superseded “love your neighbor” and the Golden Rule. The system was the means by which people showed abilities and received needs; people related through the system. This maxim implies that people should relate as persons even if they do it through the medium of the social system. Yet Marxism got caught in deep harsh

hurtful debilitating contradictions that prevented Marxist systems from treating people as person and from mediating between persons.

On the one hand, the great mover of the world is history. History makes empires and breaks empires. It leads to changes from one dominant form of this era to another dominant form of the next era, as when the large agrarian mercantile states of Europe fell to capitalism. History will lead communism to replace capitalism. (Marxism was influenced by Romanticism.) On the other hand, people make history. People are the actors in history. If particular individual people don't see what is going on, see what needs to be done, and do it, nothing gets done. The right things don't get done. On the one hand, people are mere pawns and cogs. On the other hand, people are what it is all about and are the main movers of progress both material and spiritual.

Marxism never resolved these conflicts. In practice, what happened is that all the little people became mere pawns, things, abstractions, to be used as system and leaders demanded. They lost personhood. On the other hand, the leaders, in theory, retained their personhood. And the Party became the biggest person of all with the biggest will and biggest role. People related as persons only through the medium of the Party, if they related at all. The leaders of the Party, and the Party, had no trouble suppressing the personhood and lives of the people when that served their ends. They had no trouble rationalizing what they did as actions needed to build history and build something better, as the road to realizing the ideal of "from each according to ability; to each according to need". Of course, they failed, and instead they got Stalinism.

Although in theory the leaders retained their personhood, in fact what they retained was power while they lost their personhood, that is, in old-fashioned terms appropriate to Christian slave masters, they traded their souls for power. This is what happens in a system of slaves-and-masters. While the masters retain power, in denying personhood to slaves, in the end they lose their personhood as well. In case you think this disease is only one of Whites on Blacks, Black leaders and Black thugs lose their souls as well when they lie to their people, and continue the slavery of their people, through half truths. George Orwell deftly criticized all this in "Animal Farm".

All this is what happens in big systems that eat the world and have vague ideas at their core such as Dharma, inevitable history, dialectic, and diffuse compassion. It happens even in systems with better ideas of persons. It need not happen; but, to stop it, we have to keep in mind lessons from history and we have to hold better ideals.

Diffuse Vagueness, Right Balance, Overly Rigid System.

When Americans think of a system gone wrong, we think of fascism and Stalinism. We think of a strong, centralized, hierarchical, rigid, highly ordered system with one leader. When we think of free persons, we think of free persons naturally opposed to such systems, fighting them, and defeating them. We define our personhood in relation to such systems as their opposite. We see Captain Kirk defeating Klingons, Luke Skywalker defeating Darth Sidious the Emperor, and Frodo defeating Sauron. We think that rigid and free are the only two categories, and they must be opposed. There is no better middle. Americans think all chaos is creative and only chaos can be creative. Only total freedom, that is, anarchy, can lead to right ideas of the person and society. If I criticize a system for disorder and not having some important

right ideas such as personhood and rule of law, Americans think I am secretly a fascist. When I say that vagueness is not necessarily freedom and does not guard the free person, Americans don't get it. When I say vagueness can lead to chaos, and out of this chaos comes not freedom but oppression, Americans think I am a rightist calling for a strong military leader. When I say Hinduism goes wrong and is elaborate because it relies on vague ideas such as Dharma and because it is diffuse, Americans don't get it. How can a system that is not hyper-ordered also not promote personhood and freedom? How can it lead to too much elaboration and to hierarchy?

Think of American Protestantism and politics again. I don't repeat the descriptions.

The founders of the United States knew the need for balance between system vs. anarchy, and knew that persons thrive best in that balance rather than in anarchy or deep structure. They knew that anarchy leads to the destruction of the free person, and the French Revolution proved them correct. They sought better balance in selected leaders, selected councils, and a strong legal framework (rule of law) much as the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Protestant churches did in the past – although the Orthodox Churches did not succeed well. These are not secret conservative ideas but open American, Western, and liberal ideas.

The West has the tools to find the right balance of system versus freedom, order versus chaos, person versus demon, etc. We don't usually find it but sometimes we do. When we do, we need to try hard to hang on to the balance. Despite its high ideals, Hinduism does not have the right tools, and the result is much as we find in American Protestantism with its high but diffuse ideas.

Impersonal Dharma versus Personal God.

Dharma is an impersonal order while God is personal. Karma is an automatic system of reward based on accounting while an interview with God is a merciful assessment and it helps more than hurts. Hinduism works well as a system that eats the world and supports structured society because Dharma is a vague impersonal idea that can be interpreted to meet both the needs of rulers and yearnings of ruled. Some good points of Hinduism arise because it is an impersonal system that includes both good and bad: "the rain falls equally on the just and the unjust", and, in some cases, that is a good thing. Yet the bad things of Hinduism come through its impersonal system-hood, and the bad outweigh the good.

Sometimes educated Christians say a personal God is unlikely to be misused as Hinduism is misused. A personal God would not stand for mixing good and evil, and bad relativism, even if a personal god would show as much mercy as justice. If this were strictly true, we could easily decide on one big point between Hinduism versus theistic religions - but it is not always true. It is certainly possible to interpret a personal god to rationalize bad deeds and bolster a structured unfair society. Christians and Muslims have a clear sad record for doing that. You are not automatically a bad person because your religion centers on the Dharma or a good person because your religion centers on a personal God.

Still, there is a difference, it makes a difference, and it is worth speculating.

A personal God does not let us get away with much self-deception and self-serving rationalization. A personal God forces us to think of other people as persons rather than as items in the cosmic system and

as the potential source of spiritual goodness points for our own advancement. Their good points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system; their good points are just part of their personality. Their bad points are not part of their role in the cosmic Dharma system either; their bad points are just part of their personality; and sometime their bad points have no redeeming value. Compassion to real full mixed persons is real compassion rather than an indirect way to serve ourselves. Living with real persons, we have to take seriously the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, and “pay it forward” even if we don’t follow them well and even if we disagree with them. Martin Buber made all these points clearly in his classic book “I and Thou”. This personal view is a basic implication of Jewish ethical monotheism.

God’s Plan and the System.

I am sure God had something in mind when he made the world. I doubt he had in mind what people think of as “a plan” and I doubt he had in mind anything like the Mahayana or Hindu systems. No matter how comforting it might be, I doubt God has a detailed plan for everybody and that everybody has a key role to play in making the world come out alright. In the chapters on issues, I said God made the world so that it is diverse and interesting, and so most people can find what they need. God made the world so people could try to do the right thing for the right reasons and so people could see if they are up to the tasks of self-government and acting as steward for a planet. We have not done well so far.

The facts that (1) this world follows physical laws, (2) the obvious order in the world, (3) this planet and likely many others give rise to life and intelligent life, and (4) three billion years of biological evolution, (in theology, all aspects of the “argument from design”) give people the impression of a strong detailed plan or a system. While there might be a plan, the plan might not be what we think it is. When we learn our way around the forest, city, business we carry out, firm for which we work, school to which we go, or evolutionary theory, we feel we are in a planned system, it is all for the best, and we have a distinct role to play; but that is not usually true. We can make it truer if we make a place for ourselves. So, in the world in which we live, everybody has a place. Everything works out alright in the end even if some of us suffer deep pain along the way. Goodness overcomes evil. The great risk of the world seems obvious in daily life but it is not so in the great plan cosmic system because the cosmic system subsumes risk into a long range insurance policy. Existence is joy.

In fact, things might not work out alright in the end. Contrary to the “Marigold Hotel” movies about ideal romanticized Hinduism, sometimes it really is the end even though it is not all alright. I am sure some planets that evolved intelligent life went down the tubes, and this planet is in grave danger of doing that. Not everybody has a key role to play. Not every orc is an undiscovered Frodo; not even every hobbit is Frodo; and not every armchair political analyst is Winston Churchill. It might be that evil wins in the end. Not all evil can be turned to greater good; in fact, the definition of evil is that it cannot be exactly reversed and made good. If we want things to turn out well, we have to work hard to make it so. Even then, we have no guarantee. Yet we have to try anyway. The great risk of the world is real. The great risk of your life is real. You might fail. Some people will fail. Likely you will vanish after you talk to God after you die. In the meantime, there is a lot to do. You can keep busy and feel useful. You can get to know a lot about the world if you put your mind to it. You can have fun. You can make the world more interesting. You can use your life dreaming if that suits you. Life is a gift, life is worthwhile, and life is often a joy. But life is not a cosmic joy, and it is not a guaranteed joy for everybody.

I like it better the way I see it. I like being not big but still important, working hard, getting satisfaction from what evolution made for me, what I make for myself, what I get from others, and what I make with others. I hate that it might not work out well but I can stand that. I know not everybody thinks as I do, and many people seek a system because they need the comfort of something to watch over them. That is why Jesus and Krishna turned into God. Make up your own mind.

Explaining Everything Dramatically.

Hindus have deified beginning (Brahma), middle (Vishnu), and end-or-transition (Shiva). In deifying these principles, Hindus incorporate them into the vague Dharma system. Almost everything has a beginning, middle, and end. So these ideas, and these deities, explain almost everything. Whatever happens, you can think of it in these terms. You can incorporate everything into the Hindu Dharma system. In this way, and with many of the ideas described above, Hinduism is like Chi, Yin-and-Yang, matter-and-energy, and mind and matter, which also explain everything. Once you think that way, it is hard to think otherwise.

Most things that can explain everything really explain nothing. If everything has a beginning, middle, and end (transition), then what does it explain to say that a particular thing has a beginning, middle, and end, or to personify and dramatize the fact? We need more.

All these things had a beginning, middle, and end, even if, for some of them, we don't see the end yet: the cosmos, the sun, the Earth, oceans, trilobites, birds, dinosaurs, storms, humans, TV, movies, print newspapers, the Red Spot on Jupiter, capitalism, Indian society, and Hinduism. The trick is not to point out the beginning, middle, and end, but to say how each particular thing had its own beginning, middle, and end, and how each differs from the others. The trick is to explain not in terms like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva but to explain in terms familiar from science and philosophy – which I don't go into here. We need to get into specifics in a way that systems like Dharma with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva don't allow. We need to get beyond the idea that ideas that explain everything are good ideas. Ideas that explain more are usually good ideas (not always) but rarely so with ideas that explain everything.

The advantage of ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva is that they are dramatic. They are a lot of fun. I find science fun but not everybody does, and I understand. People need something more dramatic than science. Sometimes drama and fun open our minds, help us to assimilate better, and even help us to come up with better explanations in more scientific terms. The “thought experiments” (“gedanken”) of Albert Einstein exemplify the good use of imagination to stimulate solid logical science. If you want to use ideas like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva for fun without necessarily committing yourself to their objective existence and the system of which they are apart, then go ahead.

Indians, like my Greek ancestors, always were gifted enthusiastic analysts. They do not rest on simple ideas like Brahma (beginning), Vishnu (middle), and Shiva (end) but also give analyses based on other more concrete ideas. They do tend to return to some basic ideas such as Dharma. Hindus pioneered in analysis of the mind, society, and political society. Much of their specific analytics work can be found in the “shastras”. Hindus have written hundreds of long detailed texts of explanation, with which I am only barely familiar. In Thailand, which borrowed from India, modern Western-based sciences are called by a term particular to the science plus the suffix “shastra” (“saht”). Mathematics is called “khanit + shastra” or “khanit-saht”; economics is called “seta+saht” (“seta: wealth” + saht: study”). Magic is “saya” (“sleeping”)

+ saht (I thank my wife, Nitaya, for pointing out this case). Magic is delusory; it puts us to sleep; it adds to the stickiness of the world. The logic that comes out in shastras is like the logic that Westerners develop for particular topics and which we glorify with the suffix “ology”, as in “sociology” and “anthropology”, or the suffix “ics”, as in “physics” and “linguistics”.

Until recently, Hindus did not have an alternative to Dharma-based ideas to rest explanations on, and so did not make progress in science and explanation as Westerners did. In the end, shastras seem limited by reasoning based on ideas such as Dharma. Since finding Western science and logic, Hindus have proven adept at moving beyond Dharma based personified ideas such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to more scientific style explanation, and have distinguished themselves. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least four South Asian Nobel Prize winners – I do not list them here. This is about the same relation that Western science has to the Jewish, Christian, and pagan ideas that gave it birth. It is what I expect to see more of.

Vague Contradictions at the Center.

Logicians argue that we can assert any nonsense if we start from a contradiction. Vagueness can play the same role as a contradiction, and allow us to assert any nonsense as if it were sense. Vagueness often generates contradictions. Vagueness plays a big role in big system and systems that eat the world. People get lost in contradictions, vagueness, and nonsense yet think they are in the middle of something important.

Having lived through the silliness of American politics and the American “culture wars” since the 1960s, I cannot claim that Westerners are much less prone than Hindus to vagueness, contradictions, nonsense, and all that follows. I can say: Hopefully educated experienced people now do not rest too much on vagueness, contradiction, and nonsense. Experienced people learn to see through political posturing to important realities below such as responsibility, freedom, and “live and let live”.

A critic can say our ideals are vague but I think that is wrong. Our ideals include personhood, freedom, justice, rule of law, etc. It is wrong to say those are the same kind of vagueness as, for example, “vital force”, “spiritual progress”, or Dharma. A critic might say I rely too much on vague ideas such as “God” in this book, but I do not here defend myself; hopefully the book already did defend my use.

Of vague ideas which support contradictions and nonsense, “Dharma” is likely the strongest and most successful. Everything is a product of the Dharma, even apparently opposed things such as good and bad, creating and destroying, and aristocratic freedom with lower caste slavery. Those are contradictions from which any nonsense flows. Even if the idea of Dharma does not give rise to flat-out contradictions, it supports animistic non-scientific thinking such as personifying.

Used properly, Dharma can be a beautiful idea, such as the Greek idea of the logic (“logos”) of a thing. But the idea of Dharma has not been used properly by modern Western analytic sometimes-scientific standards throughout most of its history. When Hindus think well now, they do not use ideas such as Dharma but use ideas that, these days, are usually taken from the West.

Both “Dharma” and “logic” mean how a thing works but the feel is different. Using Dharma is like using ideas from Aristotle or Medieval Europe but with more of a “hold” on the mind.

Imagine a Hindu and a Western social scientist seeking to figure out how Indian society works (here I mean a social scientist with a scientific bent, not an anthropologist overwhelmed in culture). At the level of villages, society is supposed to be egalitarian and governed by a village council. Society is definitely not egalitarian even in the villages, but that is a fact to be considered later. Yet at the state level, society is supposed to be NOT egalitarian. It is supposed to be stratified. In both cases, the Hindu says it is the Dharma of the social unit that leads it to be that way. It is the Dharma of villages to be egalitarian, and it is the Dharma of the state to put all these egalitarian villages in a stratified whole. That is as far as the Hindu needs to go. This (lack of) understanding is a contradiction – it is both Dharma to be equal and Dharma to be unequal - that allows the Hindu to rationalize all kinds of silly things about Indian rural life and Indian stratified court life such as that women should be equally subjugated and subjugated the same ways in both places despite the need to earn a living in one place and the need to intrigue in the other.

In contrast, the Western social scientist would try to find out how egalitarian or stratified things really were where. If there is stratification, what kind of stratification is there? Who benefits and who loses? How does the whole thing endure if somebody consistently loses? What are the winnings and what do the winners do with their winnings? What are alternatives? Would alternatives quickly lead to stratification again in a few generations if we magically made villages and the state start over as egalitarian systems? What are people’s motives both given from their desire to have a family and make a living, and from their culture? I have read enough to know that Western social scientists can come up with romanticized nonsense too but at least they don’t stop there. The group of colleagues works through alternatives until they get to something deeper than “Dharma”. With that something deeper, hopefully they can get away from romanticized nonsense.

Try the same thing with a bicycle. Bicycles should not stand up. A Hindu responds that it is the Dharma of bicycles to stand up, at least when moving. A Western scientist looks for broader comparisons and other types of explanation. What things stand up when still yet fall when moving? What things stand up when moving yet fall when still? How fast do they have to move? What is the distribution of weight on the things that fall or stand up?

When we combine this Western scientific outlook with Western ideas of the person and with Jesus’ ideas of the person and personal relations, we get good Western civilization. Resting on the Dharma, so far, Hindus have not been able to get that.

Again: Creative Chaos, Rebels, and Moderate Good Order.

From the second chapter on issues, from the chapter on Romanticism, and from comments above, recall American ideas about rebels, chaos, hyper order, and good order. I briefly re-frame these ideas in Hindu terms below. The re-frame is fun, but, if we look hard, we find that it adds nothing, and it helps lead us down the garden path of silly modern political myths. To get on a better track we need to return to the Western ideas that I have been promoting.

Unlike the past, modern Americans fear hyper order more than chaos. They even fear moderate order more than chaos. Americans fear that moderate order almost inevitably gets corrupted into hyper order, that is, fascism. Americans think chaos is creative and good. All chaos is creative. All creativity needs some chaos. The only source of goodness is creativity. So goodness needs chaos and comes from chaos. To get to goodness, we need chaos. To get to goodness, we must oppose hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels are natural enemies of hyper order and even moderate order. Rebels oppose bad hyper order and bad moderate order. Rebels create chaos. From chaos, artists arise to help create moderate good order. Better to be a rebel who opposes hyper order and even moderate order than to be a sheep who accepts moderate order, accepts rationalizations for all order, and so paves the way for bad hyper order. Better to live wild and free. Out of the wild and free people comes art and all goodness for all other people.

In Hindu terms, sometimes particular societies go bad (greater Hindu society based on Dharma cannot go bad; when particular societies within greater Hindu society go bad, contact with the greater Hindu society leads them to return to their correct Dharma path, as I am about to describe. Ultimately all societies, even in the West, East, and Islam, are particular societies within the greater Hindu society.). To change, old bad society must first end. That is the job of Shiva. Modern political rebels are Shiva doing his good job of shaking things up, overturning, destroying old bad order, and paving the way for the new good order. Brahma supplies Shiva his weapons. Brahma supplies many weapons, and, out of that array, Shiva is always able to choose the best weapons for the job. In the modern world, the best weapons for creative constructive disorder are rock and roll; drugs; sex; art; movies; TV; media including the Internet; conflict about ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc.; political causes based on those conflicts; and even conniving right wing dirty tricksters such as people I cannot name for fear of being sued. The chaos of the 1960s through 2016 was the work of Shiva – in a good cause, even if we don't see it now.

As those forces do their job, Brahma also supplies weapons (tools) to Vishnu, who will build a new better moderate order and then safeguard it. Some of the same tools that serve Shiva also serve Vishnu: art, artists, political awareness, civic groups, etc. Especially artists and sensitive politicians will help Shiva build a better world. As I wrote this, America had swung much more toward social acceptance and some solidarity than it showed in the 1980s and 1990s. Gay people (homosexuals) were allowed to marry and to adopt children. Women were forging ahead in politics and some areas of business even if they still lagged in wages. Racism was talked about openly. At least three states had allowed limited marijuana use. If all this leads to a general consensus and the building of good institutions on that consensus, then Vishnu will have done his work.

Fine, but so what? Using this logic, we can explain everything, including a return to 1950s conservative family life, if that is how America turns out, and what America settles into. Using this logic, if it happens, we could explain White Power taking over America. If Vladimir Putin restores the Russian Empire and make it even stronger despite all the challenges of the 1980s through early 2000s, we can use this logic to explain that. Using this logic, we can explain the rise of militant Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism. If ISIS (ISIL) restores the Caliphate, takes over the Middle East, oppresses all Muslims, oppresses women, and wages war on Christians all around the world, we can use this same logic to explain that as well, especially from the view of ISIS who would consider that outcome great.

How do we explain that Americans are beginning to accept gay people and marijuana but are still uneasy about abortion? How do we explain that class fear lingers even when Americans are more comfortable around gay people? Is the persistence of capitalism despite some unfairness the work of Vishnu?

When we contrast scenarios, and get into the specifics of particular scenarios, the Hindu categories won't do. Everything goes through destruction, change, innovation, and stasis, and so alluding to destruction, change, innovation, and stasis explains nothing. We need better. When we use better, we mostly use the style of thinking and categories that the West has developed.

Dharma in the Modern World.

When Hindus reinterpret Dharma for the modern world, I think the new Dharma will come to look much like Western science combined with ideas about people as persons. The patterns that we find in the physical world will be amenable to explanation by science rather than Dharma. The formation, life, and death of stars will be less about Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than physics. The invention and spread of bio-technology will have less to do with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva than about applying genetics and chemistry. Whether capitalism is fair, and whether it can serve as the basis for a plural democracy in the modern world, will have less to do with the Dharma of capitalism, bankers, and workers, and more to do with patterns of interacting self-interest from evolved persons. "You are that" will have less to do with giving alms to a beggar sometimes and will have more to do with working personally in charities, figuring out how to run the welfare system well, and treating other ethnic groups as humans. Hindus will have to act as good citizens in modern plural democracies, which means they have to participate in education, charity, and personal action. They have to pay it forward, follow the Golden rule, follow "applies equally", and have to see other citizens as persons rather than as Dharma points.

Not Simply Idolatry.

To a believer in God, especially in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, it is easy to make out the Hindu Dharma system as idolatry, and commitment to the system as idolatrous worship. This is wrong. While commitment to an impersonal Dharma system might be a mistake, it is not idolatry as Christians think of idolatry. Commitment to the traditional Hindu system is more like commitment to an elaborate theological system such as in Islam, Christianity, and Mahayana. Commitment to the Dharma is like commitment to Roman Catholic Thomism or Protestant Existentialist Humanism. Commitment to a Hindu god or avatar is more like commitment to a Christian saint or to Mary than demon worship. Worship of the free market with wildly wrong ideas of persons and business firms, or commitment to political correctness with its wildly wrong view of human nature, are as much idolatry as commitment to the Dharma system and as much idolatry as commitment to Mary or a saint.

Rather than think in terms of idolatry, it is better to think in these terms: What difference does it make if I put commitment to the teachings of Jesus, and put my action, in the context of a system, versus if I just accept and act? What mistakes does putting myself in the context of a system lead me to? What do I really add to my commitment and my acts if I put them in the context of a system?

People do need some context to act. Normal people cannot simply act. They are not Zen and Taoist masters. How much context, and what kind of context, do I need? How can I get the appropriate kind-

and-level of context without leading to big errors, without leading to a bad relativistic system that eats the world? I think that is what the teachings and Western values do well.

Duty.

The following poem is by Richard Lovelace. I use American spelling. I love this poem.

“To Lucasta, Going to the Wars”

“Tell me not (sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,
To war and arms I fly.

True; a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (dear) so much,
Lov’d I not honor more.”

As a matter of temper, I see in terms of duty, and I over-stress duty. It is a duty to make the world better, follow the Golden Rule, strictly follow “applies equally to everybody”, be decent, treat people as persons, and love your neighbor. Immanuel Kant first stated the idea of “applies equally to everybody” in terms of duty, and that appealed to me when I read it.

In Hinduism, the world is a big adventure dream of Dharma, reality is not as it simply seems, and you can see your role in the system as playing, yet still Hinduism sees affairs largely in terms of duty. Your social role (personal-social Dharma) is needed for the entire social and cosmic system to work. You owe duty to your parents, family, caste, socio-economic class, and race. You owe duty to other sentient beings who are trying to play out their karma heritage and their current Dharma. Mostly you owe a duty to the entire Dharma system.

Despite sharing a common stress on duty, I cannot take on the Hindu view. The Hindu sense of duty has a different feel than my sense of duty or the typical Western sense of duty. The Hindu view differs from how I think Jesus felt about duty and how followers of Jesus see things. The most apparent difference is that Hindus do not usually do kind acts except out of a sense of duty while followers of Jesus do kind acts out of both a sense of duty and for other reasons.

The cosmic order will not end if people don’t do their duty. God will be unhappy, and this little damp rock Earth might turn into a crap hole, but God will go on, and other planets have their chance. You personally are not responsible for the cosmic order. You have a duty but you do not carry the big burden of the

world. In Hinduism, the cosmic order falls apart if you neglect duty. You do not merely disappoint the gods, you deprive every person of his-her Dharma rights, and you stop the entire wheel of Dharma from turning. This burden keeps Hindus focused on duty rather than on other motives.

Followers of Jesus institutionalize their sense of duty and their connection to people and animals through charities such as Red Cross and World Wildlife Fund, through schools, projects, etc. Hindus do not. To the extent that Hindus act on duty to people below them at all, they give alms.

Hindus feel an official duty toward people beneath them in station but they do not act on it much and they do not institutionalize it. Their sense of a cosmic system does not lead them to extend the same sense of duty they feel toward fellow caste members to everybody; rather, it leads to the opposite. Hindus do not set up charities for the poor except under the lead of Christians. They do not set up institutions to try to get people out of poverty and keep them out. In fairness, for the last thousand years, there have been so many poor people, and poor people have reproduced so fast, that it is unlikely any institution could have done the job. But Hindus did not feel it part of their duty to try.

In Hinduism, duty is something that you carry out as something inherent in you and your station. Duty is not something that you do from a sense of others as people and their situation.

Both followers of Jesus and Hindus feel duty toward kinds of people such as mothers, police officers, and children, and feel duty toward animals. Hindus sometimes do feel duty toward a person because of who he or she might be regardless of his-her position, such as Jane who happens to be your sister. Followers of Jesus feel this kind of duty more than Hindus. Hindus feel duty to people mostly because they too are members of the system of Dharma. Followers of Jesus feel duty to people and animals because they are people and because they are living persons.

I feel duty to an ideal such as “friendship” as in the Chandler novel “The Long Goodbye”, to justice, love, freedom, and compassion. My sense of duty is to an ideal rather than to a cosmic system. Some ideas command attention and duty on their own. Hindus would recognize these ideas but, as in their attitude toward other people and other religions, would put them in the context of the cosmic system, as Krishna placed bravery, loyalty, and compassion in the context of a cosmic system.

Besides duty to ideas, I feel duty toward real individual persons rather than about social-cosmic roles. I do my duty for Nit, Dino, Imad, Else, Ginnie, John, Emily, Chris, Bruce, Norm, Wayne, Donn, and other people. When I act toward people I do not know, I imagine them as individuals, like people I do know, to the extent I can. This is why I can extend the sense of duty beyond immediate family to include friends, people in the neighborhood, people in the city, and everybody. I am sure Hindus feel this sense of duty-about-real-people toward family and toward people they know well but they do not seem able to extend it beyond that limit. Beyond that limit, the objects of duty again are players in the cosmic system.

Acting Well Not from a Sense of Duty.

Both Hindus and I make a basic mistake when we make duty the major basis of actions. Rather than duty, I should think in terms of acting toward other people (and animals) for two better reasons. First, they are people (and animals), and that is how you act toward them. They really are like me. They really

do have hearts and minds, and I should act toward them in a way suited to that fact. Second, giving, justice, caring, sharing, helping, guiding, educating, healing, giving clothing to, etc. are right and good in themselves. You do not do them out of duty; you do them out of themselves. You do not even to them because they are good; you do them out of themselves. Of course, you have to not contradict goodness when you do them out of themselves, but you should not always have to place helping or educating in the context of cosmic goodness to do it. People should not even act well because it is God's command. It should just be something people do.

Hindus do recognize these virtues and do understand their value in themselves. Yet Hindus do not often act on these virtues apart from a sense of cosmic duty or sense of what is going on in the cosmic system. Kindness is part of the Dharma; educating is part of the Dharma; and healing is part of the Dharma. We Hindus do it because it is our role in the Dharma not because it is right and good in itself and the receiver of the benefit is another person like ourselves.

For people like me who have trouble acting apart from duty or cosmic system, we just have to accept our limitations and we have to get along that way as best we can. If you are lucky enough to be able to just do well without thinking about duty or the cosmic system, then carry on.

Behaving Rather than Believing.

I care less about what people believe than what they do. Hindus allow people to know mere partial truth, and even some false ideas, as long as people act according to their station and carry out their duties. Again, superficially these attitudes resemble but they differ where it counts.

Hindus want people to do their social duty to sustain the system. I want people to act following the ideas of Jesus. I do not insist they have the same ideas that I do but I want them to act as if they knew the ideas. They can act according to the Golden Rule without being able to state it and without knowing that Jesus made it common. I am not sure how acting as if you know ideas is different than knowing the ideas; and I don't argue about that issue here. The ideas that I want people to act as if they knew do not require a person to follow a strict social code, and sometimes the ideas lead a person to go against the social code.

Suppose Harry was brought up to know all the rules of correct behavior for a soldier although he does not know why soldiers have these rules. David never learned about being a soldier but did learn honor and duty, and he could apply the ideas in different situations so as to act correctly in those situations. When David is drafted, he acts like a better soldier than Harry even though he does not have the same ideas as Harry.

I don't care if people say they are Hindus, Jews, or Christians as long as they act according to the Golden Rule, "applies equally", and the ideals of good citizenship in a modern Western plural democracy. This is not the same as saying they are doing their duty although they have only imperfect partial knowledge of the system. I do not make people relative to the system when I allow that they can act well even if they do not publicly share my religious ideas.

Alms and Compassion.

Giving alms is a sacrament in Hinduism. Hindus should give alms out of compassion. Giving should get across the Hindu idea of universal connection. Yet when a Hindu gives alms, the giving benefits the giver at least as much as the receiver. Givers get “spiritual points” that help them to be reborn in a better life, higher life, or to have opportunities for spiritual growth opened to them. In fact, people give alms for the benefit they get more than they give alms to benefit the receiver or because giving alms is good in itself. The giver of alms acts as an agent in a system rather than as one person giving to another person as the only way the first person can help the second person right now. This is not compassion.

Followers of Jesus should not worry about getting “spiritual points” for helping other people or for doing their duty toward other people. They should do it because they can “see the heart” of the other person, and know that what they do helps the other person, as with the Good Samaritan helping the victim of robbers. Christians do say the giver benefits more than the receiver but they don’t have in mind spiritual points. Givers increase their sense of being like other people. They become aware of what truly helps and what does not. If all that a giver gets is a sense of do-gooder accomplishment, and maybe scoring some points with God, then that has to do but it is less than what is available.

You can give out of duty but you can’t real feel compassion out of duty. Giving can be done as a duty but giving is better when it is done because the other person needs help and can use help, without thinking even that it is a good thing to do but because you just do it as one person to the next.

In Hinduism, at very best, other people are like the other people in the movie “Groundhog Day”; you help them but they have no chance of reaching high levels of spirituality. They are not full persons. At usual best, other people are the object by which you give to get spiritual brownie points. You don’t bother to find out what they really need and what might make their lives really better because they are not persons in the same way that you and your clique are. More commonly, they are just other people to whom you owe a systematic duty, which you carry out for your own benefit.

I do not discourage people from giving alms. I want people to give alms both directly to needy people and through charities. Don’t let an imperfect heart stop you. Nobody is perfect. Institutional charities are one of the great achievements of Christians. You should write checks to charities (or give a card number) even if you don’t know any real persons that will be helped and even if you give from duty from a sense of duty. If you live in a town where nobody really needs personal help then all you realistically can do is give through charities, and that is a lot. Think about what you would do in a personal situation. That might be all you can do sometimes. Even that is better than toting up spiritual points.

Saving Everybody.

Although Unitarian-Universalists and Hindus both believe everybody eventually will be saved, even the Devil, the end attitude differs between them. Unitarian-Universalists come out of the Western Christian tradition and they tend to be kind-hearted Liberals who want good for all creatures great and small. They treat everybody well. They want to save the Devil out of sympathy for the Devil. I am not sure how many of them have been the victims of real evil.

In contrast, Hindus want to save everybody to make sure they are saved and to make sure the system works well. Saving the Devil is a way to make sure everybody is saved and so they are saved. I do not get the sense in Hindu literature that Hindus really have much compassion for bad guys, not even for the misguided cousins of the five hero brothers in the Mahabharata. Bad guys get saved because they are the unwitting tools of moving the plot forward (“turning the Wheel of Dharma”) and so should be rewarded for the service they perform. If anybody ever were truly beyond redemption then the hope of the system would fail and the system would end.

I have said I don’t believe everybody will be saved or deserves it. We don’t all live many lives so that we all eventually become saints. Part of being a person is the chance that you won’t become a saint, or even the chance that you will be bad. People can just fail. We should be proud of the people who do succeed in seeing beyond themselves even in little ways. We cannot rely on a system to save us. As a person, we can count on some help from some other persons. Get used to all this.

People sometimes become better people because they have to deal with badness. Badness offers good people a chance to act well and advance goodness. I don’t know if good people need bad people so as to become good and act well but I doubt it. If good people do need bad people, then it seems God should ultimately rescue bad people as a reward for their unwitting sacrifice and service to goodness. I can see this logic but I don’t agree with it. It is like arguing that God should reward malaria because it gives good people a chance to take care of each other. Bad people can simply be lost.

Adventure, Fun, and Games.

Hinduism is not a “Peter Pan” religion for most Hindus who have to deal with social class, making a living, government, sexism, prejudice at home and abroad, and the other realities of life. Hinduism does feed into mistaken ideas about life being an adventure for people who have the luxury to look at life that way, or need the excuse of looking at life that way, including Hindus and Westerners. This life is an adventure, this life is one of many adventures, even death is an adventure, and the whole circle is a ball of joy. The more adventure I have, the better off everybody is. Hinduism suffers from the same potential for abuse as other systems of many lives and other ideas of life as a game. This is why the Upanishads and early texts in Hinduism stressed stopping it all, getting off the wheel.

When westerners discover Hindu ideas about life as an adventure, they often use the Hindu ideas as an excuse to go off on tangents of self-indulgence. That happened in the 1950s and after, and it then fueled the reaction against Eastern religions and in support of stern unhappy fundamentalism.

The cure for this disease is not to stress how serious life is, how much we have to suffer, how we need to sacrifice everything for the sake of others, how much depends on us personally, our duty to God, life is not worthwhile, or getting off the wheel entirely. The cure is not to say that this life ultimately is a game of adventure, and part of the adventure is being lost in the supposed seriousness of this life, so we can play it out that way if it adds to the fun.

The cure is simply to deal with the current situation as best you can and to let any big games worry about themselves. Dealing with the current situation as best you can includes seeing other people as persons, making moral decisions, being useful, working hard to make the world better, and being a good citizen. It

includes enjoying life, having fun, and, yes, some adventure and games. World War Two was won by a big team. If you personally alone need to carry the Ring to the Lake of Fire, God will let you know. If you have fun chasing Sasquatch, and you don't need any rationalizations, then do it. Again, we have to find the right balance between empty games with bearing a "really real" world on our shoulders.

More against Making Jesus and His Teachings Relative.

Christianity has been used to ratify many kinds of social organization from small churches on the margins of the Roman Empire to the entire hierarchy of the Roman Empire and the European states that followed. It has been used to justify slavery in the United States. So it is hard to say that Christianity condemns the Hindu Indian state and easy to say Christianity could approve of the Hindu Indian state. The teachings of Jesus do not necessarily condemn stratified Hindu Indian society any more than they supported Imperial Rome. So Hindus can say Jesus supports the Dharma even if he does not specifically support stratified Hindu Indian society.

Suppose Christians insist Jesus would not support a stratified unfair state such as the traditional Hindu Indian state. Hindus still can make Jesus relative. Christianity has supported many kinds of states. Now it is used to ratify a modern plural democracy. Modern plural democracy is the foremost representative of the Dharma now on Earth, at this point of human history. So Jesus supports the Dharma as it appears in modern democracies. Rightly interpreted, Hinduism also supports modern democracies as the current best representatives of the Dharma. Christianity is not so flexible that it usually sees Jesus in this way, as helping the best state available in a historical period. Hinduism can see both Hinduism and Jesus this way. So, again, Jesus is a hero of the Dharma and Hinduism can encompass Jesus and Christianity.

Although Hinduism might be able to make Jesus relative in these ways, I hope it does not, and I think to do so is wrong. While Jesus was sent by God, that does not make him representative of the Dharma, an avatar. The idea that Jesus is an avatar is similar to a mistake that formal Christians make when they see Jesus as God in some way. Rather than think Jesus is important because he represents the Dharma or he is God, think of the content of his teachings, and assess the content of his teachings as the content is relevant to conditions of people at times in human history, including under different kinds of state. Even if Jesus is God or the Dharma, to see him that way while neglecting to act on his teachings is to betray his teachings and to betray him as Dharma or God. Forget about the big Dharma system and the Christian theological system both.

The teachings of Jesus should not be used to ratify any kind of state, good or bad. I hope I did not do that with Western plural democracy. I support Western plural democracy because it goes with the best moral and political values. Jesus' teachings also go with those values and so support modern plural democracies. Jesus' teaching provides values that can be used in many situations, and so can be used in a variety of states. That does not mean they can be used to ratify any kind of state. They can be used to convince people to support a kind of state when they coincide with the values of that state, as they do mostly with modern plural democracies. As I have said before, no state is the New Israel and is thus the embodiment of God and of all correct living on Earth. Not even modern democracy is so perfect as to be considered a type of New Israel. Modern plural democracy happens to be the best we have now, and we can give good reasons why it is best. Modern plural democracy and Jesus' long-running teachings go well together. That does not make Jesus representative of the Dharma now on Earth.

Avatars and Prophets; Jesus is not an Avatar, Holy Person, Yogi, or Guru.

A prophet is a real person, who lived and died, and who had ideas. Some ideas were correct. Correct ideas took us a step forward in how we see God, our relation to God, each other, and nature. Sometimes prophets did not have new ideas so much as they implemented good ideas of previous prophets, such as did Moses, Joshua, and Mohammad. Prophets erred, in both their personal lives and as prophets. Not all their ideas were good steps forward nor did all their acts lead people rightly. The new ideas of a later prophet could override the old ideas of an earlier prophet. I don't know exactly how prophets are "from" God, and I don't worry much. We have to take the entire stock of prophets, sift it, and make guidelines. We may, and should, accept advice from church and authorities.

In contrast, an avatar has a direct link with a god, and, within the scope of his-her work, is infallible and unstoppable. An avatar is the "coming across and down" of a god into this world in the form of a person. The apparent person is not really an ordinary person but is really a god. Usually an avatar is a character in literature such as Krishna. Sometimes an avatar is a real flesh-and-blood person but then his-her role as avatar is based on such a strong idealization that the real person disappears and only the god-avatar remains, as with leaders of sects or schools. An avatar is a cosmic idea-force embodied rather than a real person. Even if an avatar took flesh as a real historical person, an avatar is an idea-force in the flesh rather than a real person. Sometimes an avatar resolves problems merely by his-her presence, awing people into submission and correct behavior. Christianity has similar characters in its idealized saints, especially saints with a knack, such as George, Christopher, and Santa Claus. As far as I can tell, for many Christians, Mary Mother of Jesus is an avatar of femininity and Grace. I don't know of any recent real historical person who is considered an avatar although Mohandas Gandhi might be taken as one, and Hindus likely do see some real holy people and national leaders as avatars.

An avatar can be from (of) a good god, as Krishna is an avatar of the good god Vishnu. An avatar can be from a god of disorder such as Shiva. Even if from a disorderly god, an avatar ultimately serves Dharma and so serves good. An avatar can be from a demon-like force such as with avatars of Kalima-Kali Durga (awful fearsome female deity) but, again, ultimately the avatar serves the Dharma and thus goodness. In the American elections of 2016, idealized Donald Trump was an avatar to many Americans – from both heaven and hell.

A real person can be an avatar without knowing that he-she is such, without knowing that he-she is doing the work of a god, and even without intending good or intending to stir up the world. Gandhi might have been an avatar of Vishnu or Shiva without knowing or even while denying it. This idea of doing the work of a god without knowing is a fun literary device, common in "sword and sorcery" stories and comic books. It goes along with the idea that the cosmic is doing its work (playing) through us. Still, I reject it. You can serve God, even greatly, without being an avatar.

Although an avatar sounds better than a prophet, and although we like heroes and villains bigger than life, I prefer prophet to avatar. I dislike avatars. They lead us away from the beautiful but often hard reality that God gave us. At least since Shakespeare, Westerners have preferred heroes (including women) flawed so as to show how the hero connects to reality; the trend has gotten stronger since 1890 with Sherlock Holmes, anti-heroes, and their descendants; and my view is biased by the trend. But I can

discount the trend and still honestly prefer prophets to avatars. I would rather sort through the flaws and mistakes of prophets to take to heart the truth that they offer than be overcome by an avatar with his-her logic and presence. We make ourselves less when we follow the awesome presence of the avatar than when we think about what a prophet says, and do what is right accordingly. I distrust religions that rely on avatars, and whose systems seem like giant avatars.

When Christians see Jesus as the Word made Flesh, as God come to Earth, as Salvation incarnate, Love incarnate, Prince of Peace, the only path to Justification, embodiment of any idea, answer to all questions simply through his being, then they make Jesus into a mere avatar, no matter how good and wonderful Jesus as God-Word made flesh seems. Christians diminish Jesus into an avatar. In diminishing Jesus that way, Christians also diminish his message and diminish the religion. To see Jesus this way opens the door to a Hindu interpretation of Jesus as avatar. When Hindus do that with Jesus, they also diminish Jesus and diminish following Jesus.

I do not reject Jesus as avatar because Jesus was real and most avatars are made up. Gandhi was real yet it is easy enough to make him into an avatar. I reject Jesus as avatar because the idea is false and it leads us to think and act incorrectly. We focus on devotion to Jesus rather than doing what he wants. If we think of Jesus as avatar we easily overlook really acting according to the Golden Rule, working hard to make the world better, and really seeing other people as persons.

I am sorry I can't give an exact citation for the following image. Hindus sometimes portray Jesus as they do holy people, yogis, gurus, and holy-people-as-avatars. Jesus sits cross-legged, floating in the sky, a halo around his head, with beaded necklace, his hands spread in standard Hindu gestures of blessing, dispensing compassion and grace, flowers and rainbows spraying about, Jesus beaming down on us all. When Hindus see this image, they do not see the points below. They do not see anything definite about Jesus that leads us to think of people as persons rather than as the mere recipients of compassion and workers for the Dharma. Hindus do not see what would lead to specific acts of making the world better and to building institutions. They do not see what leads to active do-good churches in the West. They see only an insipid wise man who tells us to be vaguely good in a way that supports Dharma and society. Seeing Jesus that way avoids what is important about him and his message. Far too many Christians do the same who simply worship Jesus as God. Hindus do not see:

- Jesus struggling to apply the Will of God to specific human situations
- Jesus struggling to understand the Jewish Law in terms of "Love God" and "Love your neighbor as you do yourself"
- Jesus thinking about how far to apply the Golden Rule, who to include and who to overlook
- Jesus thinking what ideas and acts are appropriate to persons as God sees us
- Jesus wondering how to get the Kingdom of God actually moving
- Jesus wondering how to set up the Kingdom of God, what institutions to support, so the Kingdom will last a long time
- Jesus trying to get a band of ragtag followers to act as if they were saints
- Jesus trying not to get killed by the authorities yet knowing there is a good chance he will
- Jesus confused as to why God does not lend him more vigorous support
- Jesus fearing he has to die to get his message across
- Jesus dancing at weddings, having fun, and enjoying life

- Jesus drinking wine
- Jesus with a temper, sometimes a bad temper
- Jesus annoyed at being pestered by people, especially to solve all their problems
- Jesus having an unrealistic view of the Temple, how the Temple works, and the role of money changers
- Jesus finally getting murdered by the authorities

That Jesus was murdered, was murdered by the authorities, was murdered on a cross like a bad criminal, and, in standard Christian belief, rose from death, and went to heaven in glory, are not as important to me as his message, so I do not elaborate here on what difference those make for Hinduism. I do stress that Hinduism simply avoids the issues, as far as I can tell. To a standard Christian, these issues are central. These facts about Jesus are what save us. Standard Hinduism so far, cannot deal with these aspects of Jesus and his life, no matter how much it exalts Jesus as avatar or holy person. Hinduism cannot explain how these facts save people. Without dealing with these issues, Hinduism cannot explain the appeal of Jesus to most people and the historical success of Christianity. I leave standard Christians and standard Hindus to argue this topic in more detail.

For the same reasons that I reject Jesus as avatar, I dislike the idea of Jesus as God, even the God-Man of orthodox traditional Christianity. Orthodox Christianity turns Jesus into an avatar even though orthodox Christianity does not have the term and it recognizes only one avatar. Jesus is to orthodox Christianity much as Krishna is to those particular Hindus who, in practice, take Krishna as the one and only avatar that matters and so the one and only real avatar. Orthodox Christianity is misleading even when it says that Jesus is both God and human. Because this chapter is about Hinduism, I do not dwell here on this misleading Christian view of Jesus as avatar of Yahweh. I invite Christians to think of the ways in which they doubt the Hindu idea of avatar and then turn those doubts onto the Christian idea of Jesus. The fact that Jesus was a real historical person is irrelevant for this issue. I ask Muslims to do the same with Mohammad. Muslims make Mohammad an avatar even if they insist he is only human and they don't officially have the idea of an avatar – a mistake against which they warn other religions.

All Paths Lead to What God?

If all paths lead to God, we should expect them to lead to the same God and, eventually, to get there. We should expect the God of all religions to be the same, and should expect all seekers eventually to find this one God. These claims are not true. I don't see how the Christian God, or the God that sent Jesus, can be made out as the Dharma, or as an aspect of the Dharma, at least not without going against the basic intuition of the God behind Jesus, the basic sense of God from the Jews. Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Hindus might all be good people and do wonderful things, and might all make spiritual progress, but I don't think they all reach the same God. This mystic ideal is not true. If, at some level, everyone were playing the same game although everyone appeared to be playing a different game, then we should expect the games to go to the same end and to have the same feel. Eventually we expect everyone to reach the goal and to see they have reached the same goal. But they don't.

I do not condemn other religions, say they have no truth, say traditional orthodox Christianity has all the truth and the only truth, or claim what I have written is all the truth and the only truth. I accept that every vision is only partial and almost every vision has some element of truth and goodness (see the opening episode of the TV show "The Good Place"). I say: (1) Not every religion and every vision is contained

within Hinduism. (2) Regardless of where we start, we all have to come to grips with the message of Jesus and the West about persons, the Golden Rule, applies equally, rule of law, and good institutions. (3) What a given religion lacks can be important. Hinduism lacks ideas about persons etc. People have to go beyond Hindu relativism and have to deny that Hinduism contains all other religions and visions. The same is true of other religions. I am not a strident relativist. (4) The idea that all religions are a path to God yet all religions are contained within Hinduism is a strong way in which Hinduism makes all other religions to itself and eats the world. I don't like that.

Even if God is not the same, Hindus can say the basic moral teachings of all big religions are the same. This claim is close to true, and I am glad of it. If the basic moral teachings are the same, and they lead people to act in the same good ways, then, in that sense, they lead to the same God. If you want to take the claim in that way, then it might be true; but I don't see how this claim leads to the Dharma, Allah, the Christian God, the Heaven of the Chinese, or the Tao. It doesn't lead to any one particular God that we can identify as the God of any particular religion. It doesn't lead to any one God that we can identify as the God of all religions. The claim that all religions promote a similar morality does not support the further claim that the God to which all religions lead is the Hindu Dharma. All this claim says is that people want to act well and sometimes they use different self-illusions about God (Dharma) to act well. It does not say that the illusions are the same.

All religions are only partial views of God. As long as religions follow the best moral principles, all of them can take us toward God but no one religion can take us all the way. Likely not even a mix of all religions can take us all the way. In this sense, all religions are paths to God and no one path is clearly better than any other path. Yet, still, the Hindu claim of religious relativity cannot hold. Even though all religions are only partial paths, they are not equally good; and, even if they lead toward the same God, they do not all lead to the same God. Straight across a river at the widest deepest point gets you to the other side but it is not as good as going down the bank a little to the ford. Floating downstream never gets to the other side. If all trips down the river end in a swamp, then you never get to the ocean. If all religions are only partial paths then, by its own logic, the Hindu Dharma path cannot claim to be the best path, claim to encompass all other paths to the same goal, and claim that one goal is the Hindu Dharma in various disguises.

If the Hindu path is not the best, then what else do we need? If the Jesus path is not the best, then what else do we need? In the case of the Jesus path, the "what else" is not what Hinduism gives us. In the case of Hinduism, the "what else" is what Jesus and the West give us. Think about this for a while to see how much relativism, and what kind of relativism, survives.

As long as the basic feel for the God (Heaven, Dharma, Tao) of religions is different, then the religions are not all paths to the same God even when different religions support the same morality. How much difference it makes that the Gods of the different religions are not the same, I don't know.

The God of the Dharma game is not the God of Jesus, and etc. All I can do in this situation is hold to my intuition of what the God is like who lies behind this universe, evolution, sentience, morality, the various prophets, especially Jesus, good government, science, and modern times. That God is not the Dharma. Allow me to repeat that I don't much care what other people think of God as long as they act according to the teaching of Jesus combined with practicality and the best Western values.

I understand that: Different people have different skills and serve God in different ways. It is hard to say one way is absolutely better than another. People should do what suits them because they are likely to do the most good that way. Nobody sees God entirely. Nobody serves God perfectly. We need a lot of different people. "It takes all kinds to make a world". Some religions suit some people better than other religions, and some people are not at home in a particular religion. Religions do well to make a home for all sincere people who do good. Hinduism, some versions of Mahayana, large Christian churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, and Islam before about 1700, were among the churches that do best at accommodating the diversity of people and guiding them to serve God well.

None of this about individual people changes what I said above. The issue of personal differences is distinct from issues of: (1) All religions are paths to God and equally good paths to God. (2) Hinduism subsumes all other religions and swallows them, so, really, being the one-and-only true path to God. We can accept personal differences and still not think Hinduism handles that issue best and so automatically is the biggest broadest best path to God among other lesser paths.

Suppose a Hindu looks at Christianity like this: Jesus is an avatar. Jesus told people that they are alike, and we should all feel compassion toward each other. Jesus did not want people to overturn the system. He wanted people to do their social duty honestly. If people must choose between harming others versus allowing others to harm them, people should allow others to harm them. That is what dying willingly on the cross means. When people see such an example, they are more likely to see how they are alike and how they should feel compassion. When they do that, the social order gets along much better, the social order follows the path of what it means to be human, and most individuals follow what it means to be human - the Dharma path of humans and human society. Jesus saved people by showing us that we are alike and should feel compassion for each other, even to the point of death: "few people love each other so much that they will die for others". Salvation is getting on the right Dharma path, whether you know it or not, and Jesus showed us how to do so in a way that most people can feel. Many Christians teach this view of Jesus and his message although they do not put in the part about the Dharma path because they don't know that yet. Most sermons in church and lectures by Christian authority figures pretty much boil down to "be good" in this way. The life and message of Jesus is the same as the message of Hinduism, and Christianity is one of the purest branches within Hinduism. Christianity reinforces Hinduism.

This is how one religion eats other religions and eats the world. I could do the same for Hinduism with Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Mahayana, Theravada, Zen, and Confucianism.

How to Get Out of Hindu Relativism.

I have already said that moral relativism is useful if done carefully ("judge not lest you be judged") but is prone to misuse and so is dangerous. Hinduism goes too far with moral relativism. I don't say much more than to re-assert this assessment.

The only way to strongly distinguish Jesus from a Hindu avatar would be to show that (1) Jesus does not support the Dharma system because Jesus goes against the system somehow, (2) Jesus does not care about any system so that we don't need a system, (3) Jesus demands something of us that the Dharma system does not, or (4) the Dharma system leads to acts, person, or institutions that are objectionable.

This is hard to do. It is hard to find cases where Jesus goes against the Dharma system because that is like finding cases where Jesus goes against slogans about goodness and God. It is hard to find cases where Jesus doesn't care because that is like saying Jesus doesn't care about goodness and God. Even where Jesus cares more about the Kingdom of God than he does about Israel or Rome in his time, he still does care about the Kingdom of God, and that is close enough to the idealized Dharma system.

The real problems with seeing Jesus as an avatar of the Dharma system are (3) and (4): that Jesus asks of us what the Dharma system does not and the Dharma system leads to results that we don't like and he would not like. We have to accept the reality of the Dharma system as well as the platitudes. Briefly, the teachings of Jesus support Jewish values, Western values, and proactive "doing good" while the Dharma system does not. The teachings of Jesus support the acts, people, and institutions that I want while the Dharma system does not. The Dharma system leads to acts, people, and institutions that I don't want such as rationalization, exploitation, and social injustice. The Dharma system gets in the way of being a good person in the sense of Jesus' teachings. In the Kingdom of God, people do not have castes and mistreat beggars, and they do set up schools and other good institutions. If we see Jesus as an avatar, we lose focus on his proactive teachings and we fall back into rationalization.

This difference might be enough for a follower of Jesus to argue against using relativism to make Jesus an avatar but might not be enough for a Hindu. Hindus might still be able to make Jesus relative to the Dharma system if they adopt modern Western-like values into a Dharma system. Christians might have to put up with Hindu-izing Jesus in the modern world.

The Hindu Dharma system gets in the way of acting according to the teachings of Jesus not only because it is Hindu and a Dharma system but because it is a system, a big system, a system that eats the world, has a hole in the center, allows rationalizing roles, and uses relativism, superiority, and encompassing. Other religions that are similar systems get in the way as well. Even Taoism and Zen get in the way when they fall back on their versions of dogma. It is natural and can be useful to work with systems. It gives people comfort to find their meaning in the context of a system. Even so, I advise that you stop to put aside systems for a while. Get used to the idea of simply acting in accord with the teachings of Jesus without worrying about justifying yourself in the context of a system. The most system-like attitude you should use at first is to try to please God and to treat people decently. When you have sorted that out, if you do, then, if you still need it, you can find your selfness in a system. If you find yourself in a Dharma system, tell the world how that works out.

Systems, Me, and God.

I just don't feel as if I am in a system. If I am in a system, it is not relativistic in the bad sense; not based on a hole in the middle, rationalizing roles, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing; does not support any traditional stratified society or any bad society; and does not consist of adventures within adventures. If I am in a system, it is God's system, not mine and not the Dharma's. I don't want to take over God's system. I don't want to be the star. I don't want to milk the system for my own gain. I can imagine God sending teachers without thinking of them as avatars of a system. I have a duty to do the right thing, not toward the system. I have a pretty good idea what I am supposed to do, and what I do is the same if I am in a system or not. I am more likely to make mistakes if I think I am in a system.

Some Last Words.

I don't know if the idea of Dharma can be developed without system, hierarchy, relativism, superiority, encompassing, and traditional stratified society. I don't know if any of these ideas-and-social relations are independent, if they all need each other, if some need some of the others, or the whole set has to come together. This is what modern Hindus have to think out. I think they can develop the idea of Dharma without the other bad ideas; but they have to be careful. I would be surprised if Hindu imagination was not up to the task. I wish them luck.

PART 8: Systems and Persons: The Movie "Groundhog Day".

This part of the chapter is optional. I mentioned the movie "Groundhog Day" in other chapters. It stars Bill Murray and Andie McDowell. The movie is a fun way to contrast Hinduism with Christianity. It shows how Hinduism (and systems like Hinduism) shapes ideas. As you read this picture of "Groundhog Day", think of what Hinduism would do with movies such as "The Breakfast Club" and novels such as "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn".

"Groundhog Day" is a "chick flick" "rom com" (romantic comedy aimed at women). It also features motifs from Hinduism, or from any system based on Dharma and on many lives. All art, movies, and chick flicks have conventions. So do Hinduism, Christianity, and Western culture. The movie mixes conventions so that it is not possible to say for sure where an important theme comes from. For example, the Bill Murray character changes for the better over the movie. This change in male lead is typical of "chick flicks" such as "Knocked Up", and "You've Got Mail", and is important in major religions – Moses, the Buddha, Arjuna, Paul, and Mohammad. All I do is point out motifs and guess what produces what.

You should decide what produces what. The real issues are not what force drives what romantic ideal but how characters are persons, how characters change, what change implies for them as persons, and what being a person implies for relations to other persons. The real issues are about people. You should look through conventions to decide if Hinduism or the teachings of Jesus most likely leads us to correct and good ideas about persons.

The movie uses the motifs from Hinduism to reinforce conventions of modern love, especially to present an ideal man. The ideal seems to come from Hinduism, as a logical growth from Hindu premises. But that conclusion is misleading. The ideal romantic man is a mishmash of ideas, mostly from the chick flick genre and Western Christianity. The ideal is tacked on to motifs borrowed from Hinduism as a way to tell a story to reinforce chick flick ideals. I describe the borrowed Hindu motifs, how they build a base for the romantic ideal, and how the ideal does not depend on the motifs.

Murray's character "wakes up", literally, symbolically, and spiritually. The same dramatic change for the better that happens to him cannot happen to all people at once in a Hindu system because, if it did, the system would vanish. For Murray to wake up, other people have to remain "asleep". As you read this, think how to make a similar movie if all the people in it went through the same changes as Murray and woke up. What does it imply if some of the people have to stay asleep so the main character can wake up? Thinking about this might help the sorting out.

Here I write as if people really believe myths, motifs, and conventions: “Romantic love saves us”. I know that often the myths are not true and that most Americans don’t believe them. Still, Americans often act as if they believe. They hold out for true romantic love even when, on another level, they know it isn’t true. Please willingly suspend disbelief about what people believe.

Just because the movie mixes motifs of East, West, and “rom com”, does not mean it is bad, silly, or a “fluff piece”. The movie is good, not just in its genre but as a movie of any genre. If it weren’t good, I wouldn’t use it. I like the ideal person that the movie builds to. I like that we can see this ideal as resting on Hindu roots, as one flower from the best of Hinduism. Only by using a positive view of Hinduism in a good movie can I show fairly how Hinduism is misleading.

I use terms like “selfless” without implying anything, in particular without implying that we can overcome our evolved tendency to self-interest. When you see “selfless”, you can substitute a phrase such as “based on an ability to empathize with others, and ability to act to further their welfare, even at some cost to your short-term welfare; abilities which might have led to your long-term welfare under conditions that were common in our evolutionary history”. Sometimes everyday language is easiest.

Peculiar disclaimer: I use the term “person” to mean a human sentient being. I do not imply anything about non-human animals. I make this point because originally the word “person” came from “persona”, which is a mask used in the drama of Greece and Rome for a role or character. Here I use “person” to contrast with a mere role.

The Story.

Bill Murray and Andie McDowell are part of a big city news crew that goes to a rural town to do a “fluff piece” on a groundhog festival. Murray’s character starts as a selfish cad with unrealistic ideas of his own importance. Murray considers the assignment far beneath him. McDowell is the typical charming sweet talented sensitive helpful pretty romantic comedy heroine, and stays so. Murray likes McDowell but he shows it by being rude to her and by trying to have casual sex with her. A freak winter storm blocks all traffic in or out, trapping the whole crew in the town. Murray and McDowell stay in separate rooms at a local bed-and-breakfast.

The next morning, Murray wakes up and finds that this day repeats the day before. It is still Groundhog Day. It is the same day. Every night, Murray goes to bed hoping the day has passed, and every morning he wakes up to the same day. The same day repeats and the same events repeat. The same people are in the same places doing the same things and they say the same words.

At first, Murray takes advantage of the situation to have adventures, steal, lie, seduce, assert dominance, be nasty, indulge his senses, and pay back old grudges. After a while, the adventures and nastiness get boring. Then he gets desperate and bored. He kills himself but, each time after he dies, he wakes up again in the same bed on the same morning, and the whole ordeal starts all over again.

Then, rather than seeking adventures, payback, or indulgence, he begins to live in the situation and to make the most of the situation this time each time. He begins to do good things. Murray helps out old

ladies with flat tires, gives money to bums, tries to save the life of a bum, buys insurance from a pushy salesman, warns women of men who mistreat them, plays the piano at parties, sings, and acts politely toward McDowell. He begins with small acts but as he gets more adept at being good, and as being good becomes part of his self, he does bigger good acts. Murray loses himself in helping other people and in making the town a better place, a better world. The skills (karma) that he learns in one “day” (one life) of “Groundhog Day” carry over into the next day (life), so he has many days (lifetimes) to accumulate skills (karma) by which to help others (more karma). He learns to dance, play piano, talk to people, entertain them, educate them, help them with what they need, and provide them therapy.

Murray learns all about the true you of McDowell, and they fall in love. He shows he is really in love by not taking sexual advantage when he has a chance. Murray loses himself in love instead of selfishness. Naturally (karmically, Dharmically), Murray wakes up next morning and it really is the next day. He is no longer stuck. He has gone on. His literal waking up is the same as symbolic waking up. He is free. The days stop repeating. He goes on to a “brand new day”, “the first day of the rest of his life” with the woman he loves and who loves him.

By the time Murray wakes up, he has been transformed into almost an ideal man. He is cooked instead of raw (the image comes from Thai culture rather than from Claude Levi-Strauss). You have to decide by what standards he is an ideal man. I list most of his new good qualities below. Murray does not lose his former “badness”. He is still full of life and full of emotion. He still likes sex. He still has a good sense of humor. He still enjoys naughtiness as long as it is not really hurtful. He is still not bound strictly by rules, but he does appreciate rules, and now he is bound by caring. Murray now knows how to channel energy and “joy in living” better both for other people around him and for himself.

Murray is “saved”. His selfless love for the townspeople and selfless romantic love for McDowell save Murray. “Saved” not too strong a word for what happens in chick flicks, and Murray’s shift is so profound that it qualifies for “saved” in Hinduism. Murray does not accept Jesus but he does act as Jesus taught, and he acts as a good Christian should, so “saved” is not too strong a word for a sensible Christian view of Murray. If Murray does not deserve to go to heaven, who does? If Murray is not likely to get the Grace of God, who is? The movie does not have to say exactly what “saved” means, and how a saved person acts for the rest of his-her life, for the movie to show that Murray is saved.

A Central Problem as a Handy Image for Religion-Based Movie Criticism.

Despite how strongly Jesus, Immanuel Kant, and Western Christianity teach us that we should treat all people as persons all the time in all cases, we just can’t. Sometimes people are bad and then we have to control them. Sometimes we deal with people under conditions in which we are supposed not to act as if we were simply persons but according to other rules, and, if we did act person-to-person or sibling-to-sibling in those cases, society would fall apart. We do not treat a judge as if he-she was our sibling and he-she cannot treat us that way. We really can’t treat the postal carrier as a sibling. Not only must we refuse to treat all job applicants as if they were our siblings, when our siblings apply for the job, we have to treat our siblings as if they were not our siblings. This does not mean we can’t see a person behind the role and can’t be nice along with being officious but it does mean we have to rely on the role first. Mostly, though, treating people as persons like our own siblings (ourselves) all the time is too much trouble and society would fall apart if we tried.

Different groups and different art forms have their own ways of dealing with this issue. Usually societies create subgroups that the members of the society treat differently. How many subgroups there are, how big each subgroup is, and how we treat each subgroup, varies with religion, culture, society, historical period, economic system, etc.

Chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the problem in a similar way. Each has a very small group at the top within which people treat each other closely. With Hinduism, it is the parents and their children while with chick flicks it is the girlfriend and boyfriend. Beneath that group is the family in Hinduism and the family-and-or-entourage-of-friends in chick flicks. All the rest of society is not people but roles. The similar way in which chick flicks and Hinduism deal with the issue of who is a real person and who is merely a role allows "Groundhog Day" to use Hindu motifs to support the chick flick world, and to make it seem as if the ideal hero comes out of Hindu-like experiences.

Western Christianity says ideally that we should treat everyone like ourselves, as a full person, but in fact Western societies set up a pyramid. We treat people at the top as full persons almost like ourselves, with each descending subgroup treated less like persons and more like roles. At the top is a small subgroup within which to be fully sibling-like such as the members of the same family or church; in America, then come friends; then people mostly sibling-like such as close neighbors and parents with their children in the same school; officers of all kinds; fellow workers; general neighbors; nice people in public places such as restaurants; people in general on the street; and so on.

Chick flicks acknowledge the Western Christian ideal, and use the ideal as a test of the hero, but do not structure their final romantic society on that basis. Hinduism sees something like the ideal, as shown in their adages "you are that" and "great compassion", but societies based on Hinduism pretty much ignore it in practice for most people not in the inner circle.

To be precise, both chick flicks and Hinduism do not see the people in the small bubble at the top as full human persons but they do see them as special kinds of roles that approach what I see as a full human person. If we exclude most of humanity from full personhood, then we find it hard to give real personhood to the privileged few in our inner circle. We have to practice it with everybody even if we do not succeed. Western Christianity carries the ideal of full human person even if Western Christians do not often live up to the ideal, and Western Christianity encourages practicing it with everybody.

"Groundhog Day" as Chick Flick Rom Com Love Story.

This section covers only a few conventions. This section does not try to resolve any contradictions in the conventions or between the conventions and human nature.

The heroine is wonderful mostly as she is although she might have developed some bad habits. Even in movies where the heroine has to change, such as "Clueless", "What Happens in Vegas", "Friends with Benefits", "Valentine's Day", "Bridesmaids", and "Bad Teacher", the heroine only discovers her true nature that had not yet shown itself. She doesn't really change much.

The hero has to change. He is good at heart or he wouldn't be worth changing; but he does have to change.

The hero changes by seeing the value of the heroine and a few of her closest friends or family. The hero comes to accept most people as they are but especially he accepts the heroine and her entourage. The hero comes to see people somewhat as persons, valuable in themselves. He comes to see the heroine as especially valuable.

It is not entirely clear what distinguishes the heroine from other women, but, she is distinct, and better. She is better than her primary sidekick. The heroine often contrasts with other women in the film so we can see that she is better.

As part of his change, the hero comes to see other people as persons and so valuable. He stops acting toward them as mere instruments of his own satisfaction and begins treating them as valuable in their own right. If the hero did not see people in general this way, he could not learn to see the heroine both as valuable in herself and as better than other people.

The chick flick genre solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to the bonded couple; after that the entourages of both members come close; sometimes the family also comes close; and then it really doesn't matter much.

Although the hero sees the value of other people, he does not act toward all other people equally. If he did, he would not see the heroine as special and would not fall in love with her. The hero cuts his ties to any bad guy former friends (selfish guys); he treats people in general pretty well; he treats the heroine's entourage better; and he treats the heroine best of all. While paid work is important so that the hero can give his share to the couple's treasure chest and can show his general responsibility, paid work cannot interfere in his relation to the heroine. The heroine is at the top of the hierarchy as a person in a bubble all her own; then comes her entourage and family who are treated as full persons; then the general public are treated pretty much as role players but nice; and last comes the rejected selfish male world.

“Groundhog Day” as Hinduism.

Even if the average viewer could not explicitly connect themes in the movie to themes in Hinduism and Christianity, he-she can implicitly feel the link to some idea systems. The background idea systems are clear enough. This section describes how themes in the movie are like themes in Hinduism.

Repeating the same day over and over is like repeating lifetimes. We can choose to use lifetimes to do nothing, feel awful, or get better. Murray did all three. If we have enough lifetimes, eventually we choose to get better. Once we choose to get better, the choice should stick for all the lifetimes after, even if we backslide in some lives. Once we accept the path of getting better, we are on it from then on.

Murray is able to carry over what he does in one day (lifetime) to other days even if the other characters in the movie could not. Carrying over is what allows Murray to progress. Carrying over is like karma. Karma works whether people are consciously aware of it, as was Murray, or not.

At first, Murray has adventures, especially self-indulgent adventures. When indulgence is not enough, Murray tries acting bad. Murray is like God deciding to lose himself in the world so as to find himself through the world. The most obvious sign of losing yourself in a world, being asleep in a world, is selfish seeking after success in the narrow obvious terms of this kind of world: sex, wealth, power, cunning, and nastiness. Even if you did succeed in those terms, it would not be enough. Adventure for its own sake, badness, and indulgence get horribly boring, the boredom for which there is no cure on its own terms.

After deciding to get better, by having many lifetimes and carrying over, Murray does get progressively better. He does not just get to be a better piano player or better mechanic; he gets to be a better sentient being; a better person. Improvement is what the whole process is about. Ideally, constant improvement might lead to enlightenment, where a Hindu sees what the whole system is about and sees the place of all kinds of people in it. But constant improvement need not lead to that. Constant improvement is a goal in itself and has value in itself.

Originally in the precursor ideas to Buddhism and Hinduism, many lives was a curse, not a blessing. The cycle of many lives was called "the wheel of Dharma" and it had the feeling of a wheel on which we are tortured (crucified), not exalted. Mahayana and Hinduism spread by making many lives an opportunity both to get better ourselves and to contribute to others. To make many lives an opportunity, we have to see it that way. At first, for Murray, many days (many lives) is a curse; but then, when he wakes up a bit, it is an opportunity. The more he uses many days, the more it becomes a blessing. That is part of the benefit of accumulation.

Murray must lose himself first before he gets better. In particular, Murray does not treat himself as a full person and so cannot see any other persons. That is when Murray acts badly. This motif is common in most "pilgrim" stories but that does not mean it is not part of the overall Hindu fell. See more on this motif below.

Hinduism solves the problem of who to be most personal with by restricting it to me-and-the-Dharma. We engage other people only as they are roles in the self-reinforcing Dharma system and we expect them to do the same with us. Personal in the Western Christian sense is not relevant. We might be personal with some people but that has little to do with role relations. In traditional Indian society, the closest Dharma relation was parents and children. They formed the a little bubble at the top. Husband and wife were not closest. Eventually, as they became parents themselves, a husband and wife might form their own little bubble at the top of their own pyramid. Other people come in far below and are mostly Dharma roles. That resolution is not acceptable in chick flicks, so they invert the order, and adjust the Dharma system accordingly. The hero still shows his general moral worth by being nice to almost all other people but he cannot be as nice to people in general as he is to the heroine. She is in the place the hero once had with his parents. The parents and entourage are now in the secondary place. And, of course, everyone else is still in roles below. With these minor adjustments, Hinduism and chick flicks can coincide fairly well.

When Murray begins to wake up, the appropriate feeling for other people is compassion. While we can't stop other feelings, especially bad feelings toward bad people, bad feelings are not best either for Murray or other people. We don't have to act on bad feelings. When we feel compassion, we should act on it. Murray does feel compassion and is able to overcome other bad feelings.

Murray does several kinds of acts out of general compassion but I do not list them all here; see below. Only some kinds of acts from general compassion are important in Hinduism even if all the acts might come from general compassion, those that support the bubble at the top and support the total Dharma system. What counts is doing your Dharma duty as your new Dharma self. What counts in your acts towards others is how you help them realize their Dharma role and carry out their role. In ideal conditions, you might help people wake up but none of the town people are near to waking up so that ideal does not apply here. Murray does do the kind of acts that are important in Hinduism but he also does other acts that are important for chick flicks and for Western Christianity.

While the form of this movie is like Hinduism, the content is still “chick flick”. Despite Murray’s many lives and karma, Murray does little that a Hindu might see as promoting the Dharma system or Dharma social world. Murray does get people to stop doing bad things but he does nothing like what Krishna did for Arjuna and the other brothers. Murray focuses attention on the heroine. He treats all other people nicely but they come in far below.

Helping other people does also help society generally. Even if we don’t help other people directly, by helping good social interaction, we do help other people. In Hindu thought, ordered society is always good, so, if we help ordered society, we help people too. Murray does this when he helps parties to work well as when he entertains at parties.

Helping other people helps yourself. In particular helping other people helps you to wake up, and helping other people to wake up helps you even more. In Hinduism, it is hard to tell the difference between an act done for the sake of another and an act done so that you make progress. Overall, the feeling is of doing good deeds for your own spiritual progress rather than for others. The attitude of helping, and confusion over who you are really helping, contributes to the motives of the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar.

Before anybody can fully wake up, he-she has to feel diffuse compassion to everybody regardless of the person’s station in life and moral status, and regardless of whether the feeling really helps them or really helps you. Only after feeling this can a person realize how much he-she is a person, and how much he-she is like that other person. This is the Hindu “you are that (him-her)”.

This fully waking up toward other people is the first culmination of the movie, as waking up of some kind appropriate to your Dharma role now is the culmination of Hinduism.

In the movie, after Murray wakes up, then, and only then, can he have a satisfying romantic relation with McDowell. This fully waking up, focused on the heroine, is the final and real culmination of the movie.

“Groundhog Day” from Western Christian Values.

By “Western Christian” I mean values that Western Christians hold about people, relations, society, etc. as part of the combined heritage of Jesus, the Church, and Western values. I do not separate sources of values here.

Christians can say that many days is not the same as many lives and that remembering what you learn is not the same as karma. Many days can be the many chances that God gives us even when we screw up continually and when we don't deserve it. Remembering is just remembering, especially when it is in the service of spiritual progress. Waking up is waking up to God's love and to the love we can have for other people, not necessarily waking up to our role in a Dharma system. I don't argue much which view is best. I think, deliberately in this movie, "many days" and "remember over days" are more like Hindu many lives and karma.

In Western Christianity, appropriate actions based on compassion can be many, and Murray does all of them. First, Murray helps other people in bodily ways, as by giving them food, keeping them from getting run over by cars, or feeding people. Second, Murray keeps people from hurting themselves, as when he keeps women from staying with abusive boyfriends. Third, Murray keeps people from hurting others as when he stops bad men from preying on women. Fourth, Murray helps people achieve what is important to them as individuals, sometimes because it is important in their jobs or in their current situations. For example, he buys insurance from a pushy salesman and he warns the workers in a bar of future events. Helping people in all these ways does not really help people to wake up but it is important to them and it can help them relax enough to think about better things.

Fifth, Murray helps people to see other people as people. Not everybody can fully see everybody else fully as a person, so we have to adjust how we help people wake up that way, and we cannot expect too much. But we can nudge people along. Murray does some of this latter task but he does not do much of this latter task, and this lack is important below.

In theory, Hindus would not expect to do much of this. Hindu aid from one person to another sometimes comes in time of need such as famine; and, apart from acute need, aid usually comes to help a person along a spiritual path; but it rarely comes just as help from one person to another. I can see a Hindu buying insurance to get rid of a pushy sales person, intending all the while never to pay any premiums, just as Hindus give a beggar a penny to get rid of him-her. But I can't see Hindus buying insurance to help a person succeed as a seller because that is important to the person. I can see Hindus giving a bum a dollar but not taking care of him when he is sick and dying, or trying to save his life with curbside CPR. A Hindu might think it sad that men use women but I doubt a Hindu would do much to stop particular cases unless the women were kin. Hindus do not see people as people in the way that makes giving help to people generally compelling. Hindus cannot build institutions on that basis.

I know these judgments sound harsh but that is the point. Westerners have made into habits and have institutionalized views and expectations that other people might see sometimes but do not make a habit of seeing and do not act on often. I know that most Christians don't live up to these ideals and that many Hindus act according to these ideals even though the ideals are not explicitly taught in the religion. That is not the point either. Even when Hindus act out of general humanity, they limit their action to members of the same village, caste, neighborhood, or socio-economic class. They do not see "neighbor" as almost everybody. So the point is just that one religion, Western Christianity, fosters pro-active and re-active help from one person to another, and builds institutions on that basis, while the other, Hinduism, does not.

Western views of people have found their way into genres such as chick flick but have not transformed those genres. Except for point five, Western Christianity and chick flicks have about the same general

expectations of good guys such as Murray. Chick flicks have taken much of their general expectations from Western Christianity. To argue these points, I would have to contrast chick flicks in the West with chick flicks from “Bollywood”, and I can’t do that. If Hindu heroes in chick flicks act on points one through four, they limit their actions to close family members and do not act toward the public, based on seeing other people as persons, as Murray did in “Groundhog Day”.

Despite taking some ideals from Western Christianity, chick flicks still differ from it. The difference shows up in point five. Western values expect us to help other people not just by tending needs and wants but by helping them be better persons. This is part of being a person ourselves and of seeing other people as persons. Western values do not expect us to save people or to wake them up. Treat people decently, let them know why you are treating them decently, hope they wake up a little, and that they shift over to treating people decently as a result. If they don’t wake up a little, we don’t stop helping them. But we try to help them see what it means to be a person and to treat other people as persons. We do not expect to fully succeed and we do not expect to transcend roles but we expect to hold the ideal of person-to-person contact even so.

Chick flicks cannot try to extend personal relations to everybody as in the Western Christian ideal. Chick flicks cannot even hold this value as an unreachable ideal as in Western Christianity. Chick flicks have to focus on the relation between ideal man and ideal woman, and have to see all other characters as mere characters or roles – as in Hinduism.

Chick flicks want the hero to wake up to the heroine-as-a-person, help her (devote himself to her), and maybe wake up to some of her friends-as-persons to a lesser extent, but chick flicks don’t care much about other people generally. By learning to feel love, love saves the man hero and saves his relation to the woman, but it does not save much more than that and it does not have to extend beyond that. Chick flicks take acts from one to four as evidence of a new man who can feel in the way that is needed to wake up enough for romantic love with the heroine. To wake up enough for romantic love, sensitivity such as in points one to four might be needed but diffuse respect of all people as persons, point five, is not. Chick flicks are closer to the Hindu point of view. I am not saying women, or any watchers of chick flicks, are like Hindus. I am saying that we tend to fall back into a restricted point of view when we do not expect more of ourselves and when we are part of a system.

A Note on Human Character.

Only after Murray has wallowed in self-indulgent adventure, badness, and boredom long enough does he “break on through to the other side” to live in the current situation and to seek goodness. Most of us need to do some wallowing in naughtiness, hopefully without hurting anybody irreparably. We can do most of this wallowing in our imagination and by watching what happens to other people. We do not need to go to the extremes of Murray to get past the allure of badness. Once past the allure of badness, we do not need to achieve the sweet great goodness of Murray. If we think we have to be a saint when we give up the allure of badness, we never give up the allure because we can’t be saints. Only when we see that all we need is be normally good people who genuinely try hard, and that we can do this, do we give up the allure of badness.

When Murray gives up self-indulgent adventure and badness, and when he takes up goodness, he goes “whole hog”. He stops doing anything naughty, does only good, does much good, and does sweet good. He is amazingly considerate. It takes many days, that is, many lifetimes, to learn this. This result is not realistic and it is not meant to be realistic. The movie exaggerates to make a point. In real life, nobody is that sweet, nobody wants to be that sweet, and nobody wants to be around a person like that. The movie made Murray super sweet to make a good point but we should not be overwhelmed by the good point into the mistake of not trying.

Other People and Self Success Again.

Because of the importance of seeing other people as persons, it is worth looking again at conventions in movies, particularly how movies don't fully meet Western Christian ideals.

Murray goes farther toward seeing himself and other people as people than most characters in movies and father than most “chick flicks”. Murray goes farther than most real living people do and farther even than most dedicated Christians do. The change in him is not sappy but inspiring. If Hinduism and real practiced Christianity really led people to become like Murray, I could heartily endorse both. If Murray was not a good model for this change then the following point would not be strong:

Despite the change, other characters in the movie are not full people as I would like them to be and as Jesus taught us to see people. The other characters are still primarily vehicles for Murray's spiritual and romantic success rather than full persons in their own right. Everything still centers on Murray. Even when Murray comes to see them much more as persons, and we see them as persons through Murray's eyes, that is not enough. The more that he comes to see them as persons, the more “you are that”, the more they are mere vehicles, and so fall short of being full persons. It is a paradox that we can easily miss. This flaw is typical of “chick flicks” and of religions, including formal Christianity, but especially religions like Hinduism. The point is not to try to be perfect but to keep the problem in mind and to try to do better. At that, Murray does succeed well.

When the movie begins, the everyday people are annoyances to be avoided, and have no personhood or humanity at all. As the movie goes along, Murray treats them better and he sees them as persons. This is all-well-and-good but something else is going on socially, and this social change should worry us about what personhood really means. Not only people get better but society gets better. Parties are happier; the workplace is happier; people do their jobs better; the people that Murray helps carry out their social roles and work roles better; bums are not a threat; and we all get along. We begin to see the characters in their social roles. We begin to see a better society as the proper result of better persons, and to see people as subordinate to their role in helping society do better. Murray himself takes on that role. He is good because he makes society better not primarily because he treats people as people. We begin to see society and the people in society as a sing-along around the piano. Everything gets better and better for people and society. Everything turns out alright for everyone and society in the end. It is not the end until it does turn out alright for everyone and society. I don't want to fall back on the other extreme cliché of modern fake-rebel Romantic myth that all society is bankrupt and the only real people are outlaws. I don't want to replace “Groundhog Day” with French New Wave such as “Breathless”. I do point out how easy it is to think of good people in social terms rather than as simply persons. This is what Hinduism

necessarily does, necessarily grounding it in a metaphysical context. This is what makes “The Breakfast Club” and “Huckleberry Finn” good antidotes to Hinduism.

In almost all drama, supporting characters are not supposed to be as much persons as are the leads; an exception might be movies such as “The Misfits” and “Bus Stop”. But in this movie that limit should not hold. The point of this movie is that the lead character comes to see other characters as persons, even to his detriment. So other characters need to be believable as persons. If the movie wants us to take the change in Murray seriously then the filmmakers should show other people in the movie as more “realized” persons; but they don’t. The conventions of drama are partly to blame but not fully.

The issue does not arise because of bad writing or bad acting. The movie is well written and nobody could have acted the role better than Murray. He does an excellent job showing change, of showing a growing feeling for other people, of showing that the character resigns himself to doing good without reward, showing the limits on the new feeling, and a slight uneasiness.

If I wanted to be unfair to Hinduism, I could blame the adopted Hindu motifs for the fact that other minor characters are not developed much as persons. There might be some truth to this assessment but adopted Hindu motifs are not the major roadblock.

The major roadblock is that chick flicks and romantic comedies don’t see any characters other than the leads as really persons. Sometimes the leads aren’t even very realistic. Sometimes the friends of the leads are interesting as in “Knocked Up” but they still don’t become very human.

In chick flicks, typically the hero changes for the better but the heroine doesn’t change much because she is already wonderful. Even in “Clueless”, where the heroine is the one who changes, her change is more to realize the good person she always was than to change at a deep level. The same is true of “Friends with Benefits”. In the movie “What Happens in Vegas”, both the hero and heroine change quite a bit but the hero still changes more.

None of this might matter much except that real people get ideas about life from art, and act on the basis of those ideas, and so make mistakes. I don’t expect much art to be realistic; I expect it to be unrealistic somewhat so as to get across ideas. But we do have to notice when conventions, even fun conventions, lead us astray.

We can see the same effects in religion. An ideal of the Upanishads is “you are that”, which implies that all people are full persons, whether hero, heroine, or supporting player, and whether fully awakened or not. The reality of Hinduism is not like that. In much of Hindu literature, the only near-persons are the hero and-or the person who fully wakes up. Other people might be quite nice or might be quite bad, but they are characters that move the plot rather than real people. Except maybe for Arjuna and Yudhisthira in the Mahabharata, all characters in Hindu “big” literature are not persons, they are stereotypes who represent cosmic ideas. They seem less human than even supporting characters in epics of the West such as the Iliad, Odyssey, and Death of Arthur. In Hindu literature, the hero treats other people nicely, even bad guys, but other people are there to serve the spiritual advancement of the hero. To do that, they need not be fully developed people. In real life, what matters are you, your family, and social duty. Other people don’t have to be full people to do their social duty, and, in fact, the system works better if

they are not. When the hero or heroine learns to treat other people well, the lesson is part of a total experience in which the hero or heroine progresses spiritually. Spiritual advancement necessarily gives rewards. The reward sometimes is enlightenment but more often are a good marriage, status, and worldly success. The hero and heroine reap the rewards, not necessarily the supporting cast, although the supporting cast usually benefits from the general glow of the spiritual-worldly advancement of the hero or heroine. To me, chick flicks seem like Bollywood.

When Jesus teaches and acts, almost everyone is a person. By helping other people, Jesus does not gain material goods or power, and he does not advance spiritually. He does not help other people as a way to get to heaven. According to Jesus, you do not use other people for spiritual progress. You do not think of your service to people as a way to awaken, get better, or go to heaven. It is not the way to get to heaven. It is not a technique of spiritual advancement. Acting well toward other people as people is part of doing unto others, treating everybody the same, making the world better, being decent, and being a good citizen in the Kingdom of God. Working out this ideal in real life might force you to change for the better, and that change can be an interesting story in itself, but that is not why you do it. You are not the hero of the world, and other people are not your supporting cast. Of course, this is hard to do, but the ideal is clear, and perfection is not required.

Contrary to the teachings of Jesus, in most practiced Christianity, and even in preached Christianity, a person treats other people well so the original person can go to heaven. Other people are means to an end even when, as part of the means, we treat other people as if they were persons. Christians have trouble reconciling the ideals of family love, romantic love, friendship, and patriotism to this strategy of being loving so as to get to heaven, but, still, Christians focus on the strategy of using other people so as to get to heaven, and that strategy is what they teach their children. In some Christianity, people ascend a spiritual ladder to get better and better, at the top of which is God's approval and heaven. In these versions, other people are the means by which the hero ascends the ladder. Learning to treat other people well, as full persons, is part of the ascent, but it is only part of the ascent, and it is not the main goal. What matters is the ascent. We see this attitude in classics such as "Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Imitation of Christ". C.S. Lewis leans heavily on it in his writings. Although well-intended, I consider all this Christian attitude to be a mistake. It is found in other religions as well, such as Hinduism and East Asian (Mahayana) Buddhism.

As with Hindus, in real life, Christians, and other followers of Jesus, do not successfully treat everyone as a full person. It is just too hard. They do what they can. They catch glimpses of other people as full persons. They hope what they do is good enough in itself, or is good enough to make God like them or to go to heaven. Even in the classic "A Christmas Story" by Dickens, Scrooge learns to feel for other people only because the future scares him silly. I have met Hindus in the United States who have just as much sense of other people as persons as do any Christians.

Although Hindus and Christians are similar in high ideals and lowly real life, they do differ in the middle, where it counts a lot. Hindus tend to get caught up in a system that lets them see themselves as the hero in a drama, and lets them treat other people as minor characters or treat other people badly. Christians know they should not do that, and try not to do that, even if they fail often.

What Happens in the movie "Groundhog Day".

What happens in the movie “Groundhog Day”? The movie was a chick flick made in a Judeo-Christian country but deliberately adopting some Hindu motifs so as to tell the story in a more interesting way. The Hindu motifs give a better sense of what it takes to improve than do most chick flicks, in which the change comes almost by magic. The Hindu motifs make sense of the chick flick convention that the man has changed much for the better and the better man is now focused on his beloved; he does not squander his newfound goodness on the public in general. He has an all-around better personality, he is good when it is reasonable, he is extra good to her friends, and he is still a lot of fun, but he is not a selfless saint to everyone. While he sees that all people are persons, he doesn’t treat them as full persons like he does his beloved and her friends. The Hindu motifs lead up to this ideal man well but the ideal man does not depend on them.

It is hard to decide if chick flick conventions, Western Christian ideas, or Hindu ideas win. Murray does learn to be deeply nice to other people, and does see glimpses of their humanity. That approaches the ideal in the teachings of Jesus. When Murray does an ultimate selfless act, and so wins McDowell, that pattern is like getting to heaven through a selfless act, and so is like the teachings of Christianity.

The point is not to decide whether chick flick conventions, the teachings of Jesus, Christianity, the ideals of the Upanishads, or practiced Hinduism, dominate, but: First, see how these ideas can work through a piece of art and can find a place in our minds. Use art to see what has been put into your head and to figure out what you want to stay in your head. Second, when you act within any system, especially one which rewards right acts, then consequences follow for the actors and society. You have to pay attention to the realities of the system, of how it affects people and relations. Third, this result with systems is true of Hinduism too. If you place finding yourself and finding true love within the context of a system of many lives, karma, Dharma, and tight social relations, results follow. You cannot have any kind of people, acts, and relations in this system. You have to have the right kind of people, acts, and relations, ones that go along with this system, and ones that the system promotes. We can use art to think about this question too. Fourth, it is still important to see other people as persons and to treat them as persons as best we can. Do use them merely as vehicles to perpetrate the Golden Rule or to make yourself feel better. Do what they need. At the same time, we can’t be perfect at this. We think of ourselves first, even spiritually, and that is that. But we can try hard. That is all God asks. Trying hard this way is a way of being perfect enough.

Optional Notes on Chick Flick Conventions.

(1) Apparently some men are permanently scarred by looking at too much porn and then hoping to find that impossible porn ideal among real women and real acts, even when men know they personally do not measure up to fantasies. Likewise, women might be scarred by chick flicks into seeking the impossible ideal man, and assuming they can “get” him, even when they know they personally don’t measure up. They overlook reality; they overlook what is more matched to them personally. Replacing the real with the ideal, then longing for the ideal when we know we can’t measure up, is a problem with all mythic conventions, especially in religion.

(2) Watching “Groundhog Day” or any chick flick might give insight on why women try to change men and why they think they can.

(3) In the movies, romantic love saves people and saves communities just as strongly as just as surely as God's love saves people in Christianity. In movies, romantic love takes the place of love and salvation in Christianity. Westerners have replaced Christian love and salvation with romantic love and salvation.

(4) That exchange might not be a good bargain.

(5) Romantic love as salvation, instead of salvation from religion, is one of the ideas that are going around the world with modern life.

(6) It might be worthwhile trying to figure out why this idea is part of modern life and why it has spread. To do that, we have to figure out why people want to be saved.

Reprise: People in Hinduism and other Similar Systems.

Even if other people are not going to wake up, and so are not as important as heroes such as Murray and McDowell, still, all those other people are there, so Hinduism needs to explain them in a way that makes them less than full persons but does not force us to notice that they are mere token characters.

First, in Hinduism, "everybody will have his-her day". Ideally, eventually, in a Dharma system, everybody takes his-her turn as hero (heroine), at playing the character of Murray, at being Arjuna. Second, not everybody can have his-her day all at once. If everybody woke up at once, the system would end, and we don't want that. Third, after you individually wake up, you can help other people wake up. Fourth, everybody needs everybody else; even awakening or awakened people need sleepers; so everybody is valuable as they are. Fifth, there is really no difference between awakened and sleeping people. We are all connected. Even awake people are part of the system that includes sleeping people. All these five points are how relativism arises naturally.

The teachings of Jesus do not need to provide for the "other people" in these ways or any other ways.

So, in Hinduism, other people are a problem at one level but on another level they are part of the solution. In a Dharma system, the job never runs out. People always need help. They need help because they don't see each other as persons but see each other as things. They need help because they are asleep. If ever they all wake up, the whole Dharma system ends. But they are asleep, see each other as things, and need help; and this is fine too. It perpetuates the Dharma system, and having the Dharma system is better than not having the Dharma system even when we can only maintain the Dharma system because most people are asleep, see others as things, and need help. The fun is not in ending the task but in doing the task. The fun is not the destination but the journey. The journey is the point. What seems to be the problem of not being able to fully appreciate other people, what seems to be the problem that other people are not fully persons, is really part of the solution of continuing on joyfully forever. God loses himself in the world. God loses himself in persons-who-really-are-not-persons. If people did not see the world as not-persons, the world would not be so much fun. The situation is really joy in disguise. This is the sense we get of Murray and his relation to other people at the end of the movie. What happened to Murray can happen to any in his turn, especially if a woman nudges him along.

This answer in Hinduism is a pyramid scheme. A few people at the top (think they) benefit when they wake up just because most other people stay asleep. Yet it is alright that other people do not benefit in the same way because really they support the system and the system is fun. By selling the system, everybody expects to be at the top someday. Even people that are low in the system expect to be at the top someday if they sell the system enough. That is how “all paths” arises naturally and why the idea of “all paths” is not satisfying.

When we see other people not as full persons but as sleepers who are part of the solution that keeps the whole system going, then we fall back even further into treating other people as spiritual “brownie” points even when we treat them well. We fall further back into thinking of our self even when we treat them well. Thinking of other people as part of the system is only a disguise for thinking of our selves. This is not a solution to the problem of other people; it worsens the problem. In thinking their sleep is our waking up, and we can succeed by giving them standard help, we fall further into sleep ourselves. We want them asleep, so we can help them, so we can help our self, really regardless of them. We don’t want them to fully succeed. We are selfish so we can score points. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises in the practice of Christianity when Christians want other people to be bad off so Christians can help them and so justify themselves. This fake solution to the problem of others arises when Christians act well toward other people so they can help them and so help really help themselves. This fake solution arises naturally in Christianity when people think of heaven, salvation, or justification rather than simply acting well. This fake solution does not arise in the ideas or practice of Jesus. This fake solution to the problem of other people arises naturally in Dharma systems, and it comes naturally along with relativism, superiority, and encompassing.

“Other people as a problem” diminishes if we stop thinking in terms of sleeping, fully waking up, spiritual success, selfless love as success, and romantic love as selfless love and success. Stop thinking in terms of a Dharma system or anything like it. Stop thinking in terms of heaven, or in terms of chick flick motifs. Stop thinking of saving yourself and going to heaven by doing good deeds or by inviting God’s grace. Just be useful. Just be decent. Do the best you can as hard as you can. Use what you have efficiently. See people as persons as best you can. If you do a few selfless deeds in your whole life, count yourself lucky. If you wake up a little, enjoy it while it lasts. Don’t demand of others that they be selfless to achieve spiritual success or even to achieve romantic success. You can more easily treat other people as persons if you don’t demand of yourself that you be selfless, purely loving, and a spiritual success. Don’t demand it of other people either; and don’t demand they be asleep, lost, and need your help.

PART 9: Some History and Social Science.

This part is optional. It explains more about relativism in Hindu society and the origin of relativism. It clarifies why relativism is an intrinsic natural part of Hinduism, and how relativism works with the ideas of system, superiority, hierarchy, and encompassing. In explaining for Hinduism, I hope it helps explain relativism anywhere.

Some History.

Hinduism did not begin as a relativistic religion. It began with a dominant ethnic group openly asserting their superiority. The dominant ethnic group in India is closely related to people in Iran, and less closely

related to people in Russia. They are the “Indo” part of “Indo-European”. Until a few decades ago, the Indo-Europeans were also called “Aryans”; now that term is not useful. As with other Indo-Europeans, Indians likely originated in Southern Russia. They arrived as conquerors before 2000 BCE. Their ideas changed due to contact with local people, but I cannot describe what happened. Originally the invaders were nomadic cattle herders. Their priests were like Celtic Druids or Roman priests, called “Brahmans”. The Brahman priests kept a tight hold on the militaristic leaders and common people through rituals for most situations, which only they could act. As the cattle herders settled down and formed princedoms, the rulers and the Brahmans split duties: rulers got military power but they had to support the Brahmans, who, in turn, made sure everything ran well by making sure the princedom was in tune with the cosmos. The two social classes were mutually dependent.

After 1000 BCE, the power of the priests began to wane. A similar split between rulers and the priestly class also happened in other parts of the world under similar conditions, such as in China and Greece. When the power of the Brahmans waned, the new ideas listed above really took hold. In India, the new ideas were expressed by thinkers who wrote a set of texts called the “Upanishads”, as described in the chapter on the self and above. The Upanishads are among the greatest documents in world religion, are fairly short, and can be fun to read. In addition to the Upanishads, the new ideas appeared in Theravada Buddhism, Jainism, and later Mahayana Buddhism.

The Upanishads stressed a key idea in the Mahayana-Hindu solution to the problem of existence: “you are that”. You are just like all other sentient beings and they are like you. There, but for the grace of karma, go you. Here, but for the grace of karma, goes him-her. The Upanishads did not always say explicitly that you and he-she are exactly the same, are similar because you are both aspects of God, have God in you, or are a part of God; but it was easy to develop any of those interpretations later.

When the Indo-Europeans had gained most of the north of India (Bharat), agriculture supplanted cattle rearing, and the new people had to interact on a daily basis with old local people. The Indo-Europeans and local people merged, kept separate, and interacted across their separation, in many ways that need not be explained here. What is important is how they saw their relations. The invaders and original people were separated but mutually dependent in a way that fostered social relativism and ideological relativism.

First, everybody was divided into four large ranked classes or “castes”. The Indian word for social-class-caste is “Varna” which means “color” as in “color of your skin”. The Indian conquerors were lighter in skin color than the local people, and so they held lighter-skinned people, themselves, better. The highest class-caste in prestige was the Brahmans, who continued as ritual specialists and advisors to the rulers. (A “Brahmin” is a member of the group of “Brahmans”; sometimes “Brahman” is also used for a single person; and sometimes “Brahmins” is used for the group). The second class-caste was the military-political rulers (“Kshatriya”). The Buddha Siddhartha Gautama was a member of this caste-class. The third class-caste was farmers who controlled their own land, although under the ultimate ownership of the rulers. The fourth class-caste was merchants and crafts people. In addition to these class-castes, some people fell outside the system for various reasons, including making a living through crafts that were considered morally bad such as butchery. These people became the infamous “outcastes” that Gandhi tried to help and that are still an issue in India.

A similar social division into four or five large classes appeared in many agricultural state societies, such as in Rome, Europe, and China. How India differed cannot be addressed here. Although in theory the Brahmins were at the top of the hierarchy, in practice the military-political elite often ran the show, and they demanded respect from the Brahmins. Although in theory merchants ranked low, in practice, a rich merchant family would have much prestige and power. The real power of the rulers and merchants is one reason that religions offering equality, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hindu Devotion (bhakti), spread in India especially among the military-political rulers and the merchants.

Even though the castes were in a hierarchy, the castes understood their relation to each other as mutual dependence. No caste could get along without the others. Just as the rulers and the priests needed each other, so the priests and farmers needed each other, the rulers and merchants needed each other, and everybody needed everybody else. This idea is similar to how the major castes understood each other in the novel "Brave New World". It is still how social groups explain each other in modern times.

Second, the major classes were good as general guidelines for social relations but they did not help in daily life, as the case of the merchants shows. In practice, people were divided according to particular occupation such as tailor, barber, chariot soldier, bow soldier, grain farmer, fisherman, goldsmith, etc. People were divided by region, so that the barbers of one "county" were not necessarily the same as the barbers of another county. People were divided by family history, so that the rulers of this county were not necessarily of the same family as the rulers of the next county. People of one particular group, such as warriors of Snowy Mountain, tended to marry within the group, or to marry consistently with a few other similar groups such as the ruling classes of Bald Peak and Fertile Valley. Social scientists say Indians are "largely caste endogamous". Caste endogamy is holding up pretty well even in modern urban life.

Third, the major castes did not necessarily have their own patron deity but nearly all other divisions did: place, particular occupation, family, etc. The local deity of one occupation in one place might not be the same local deity of the same occupation elsewhere, although there was a lot of overlap. Each deity had its own rites and expectations for worship. This situation in India is much like the patron saints in Europe and Latin America.

When Indians explained this situation to each other, they used an idea that is common in the West but is not given as much force: What is right for them is right for them but is not necessarily right for us; and what is right for us is right for us but is not necessarily right for them. This is relativism. This is not such a bad idea for the situation. It is a good version of "live and let live". It is like saying that all the species in nature have a right to go on living, and that there are no better or worse species. It is also like saying that all the social groups mutually depend on each other in one system in the same way that all the species in nature mutually sustain each other in one system.

Most people were content not to force a single system onto this multitude but instead to live out relations as events came up naturally in their daily lives. Only intellectuals would want to force a single system onto such a multitude, but India had intellectuals, and respected them. When intellectuals saw a single system, they explained the diversity like this: All the local deities are manifestations of one basic god, or of no more than a few basic gods. At heart, the one god is simple, but, in practice for most of us limited beings, the god is so complex that few people can see the god in entirety. Most of us see only aspects of the god. The aspects of the god are the local deities. People relate to the one god by relating to their

local deity. They have various ways of relating to their local deity. For the few people who see the god in its entirety, these various ways might be more accurate or less accurate, but for the vast majority of people who cannot see the one god in its entirety, the various ways are only different, and each way is right in its own style. We should respect the various ways. We should respect different ideas about god not as absolute ideas about god but as relative ways of seeing god according to the situation and past history of people. People belong in a social group due to past karma. People in various ways depend on each other. If we subvert the local deities, we subvert the identity of the particular social groups, we subvert their mutual dependence, we subvert the fabric of society, and we subvert the karmic system that keeps the Dharma and the whole world going. So respect is not only a matter of respect for other people but also respect for the basic god and for the entire Dharma-karma system that the basic god instituted. Disrespect for the social system is disrespect for god. When we consider other people and the social system, we also consider ourselves, because we are like them and they are like us. We can help them by considering their place in the social system and their beliefs. We can also help them by guiding them toward better understanding of the one god and the entire system.

This system eventually was put in a larger theological setting under mature Hinduism, but it is better to delay giving that picture for a while.

This is relativism. It can be good or bad relativism depending on how it works out. Modern Hindus would like to make it good relativism, and so would modern people of other religions. Whether good or bad, this is exactly the religious relativism that the Tanakh (Old Testament), New Testament, and the Koran fought against. They refused to see local gods as manifestations of the one true God, refused to see the social system as depending on karma and local deity worship, and refused to see nature as the interplay of local deities. For Theravada Buddhists and Zen Buddhists, ultimately the controversy is not important as long as you keep to the goal of freedom from the world-that-is-not-itself-worthwhile. The trick in the modern world is to sort through all this so as to keep both the good relativism of Hinduism and the spiritual-mental rigor of theism and Hinduism.

As Social Assimilation.

I first learned of this system not as a mental system that assimilates various views of the gods but as a social system in which a large society assimilates smaller societies even while it seems to let the smaller societies retain some of their identity. The process is called, appropriately enough, "Hindu-ization". The following example is completely artificial.

As large Hindu society conquered its way across the Indian sub-continent, it encountered a local people whose society had the following characteristics: they herded goats (not cattle), raised millet (not wheat of the Indo-European conquerors), adeptly sold goat and millet products on the market, and their young men were staunch warriors. Hindu society will certainly defeat these people. Thus these people face these choices:

(1) Fight until the local people are defeated, nearly wiped out, their lands are taken away, and their way of life totally lost forever. This is the option that some Native Americans took when Europeans and ex-slave Blacks invaded.

(2) Assimilate totally into Hindu society. Their way of life will be lost forever and their gene pool will be absorbed. In a different context, this is the solution that was forced on some Native Americans.

(3) Assimilate by taking a place in the Hindu caste system. To do this, they have to accept the authority of the Hindu ruling class and, in theory, the Brahman priests. To accept such authority does not require much of a change in life. In most cases, Brahman priests would have little to do with them anyway, so, to accept Brahman authority meant nothing. Local people still get to carry on most of their way of life, and most of their original culture. Local people have to decide whether to assimilate primarily as warriors, merchants, farmers, animal herders, etc. They might break up into different castes according to these particular ways of life within the larger sub-society. Each caste will need its own deities and its own marriage relations.

While the people in the local society might think they are preserving their way of life, in fact, they have become Hindu whether they know it or not. As long as they interact with Hindus, they are Hindus. The more they preserve of their way of life and its distinctions, the less those distinctions matter, and the more Hindu they become. In a few generations, they will not be distinct from any other older Hindu caste. This assimilation is as true of their religion as of their social way of life. "Resistance is futile".

The Hindus in this situation would rather the local group take the third alternative because it provides the Hindu rulers and priests with additional steady income, provides them with allies, and saves the problem of a war. That is what happened with most groups. Other empires and other groups faced these choices as well, including in Greece, Rome, and China. China was famous for assimilating peoples, especially its conquerors. As in India, mostly the other empires assimilated through option (3). How Hindus differ from other peoples is too much to consider here.

When Jews, Christians, and Muslims were the minority group, they tried to gain a successful version of option (1). When they were in power, usually they did not give other groups option (3) but allowed only options (1) and (2). Jews and Muslims were sometimes a bit more lenient, and allowed a conquered group to retain its identity as long as it was clearly subordinate.

Western "Hindu-ization".

Thinkers in India used widespread ideas in their time, such as karma, reincarnation, and Dharma, to forge systems that spread all through Asia and Europe. The first new system out of India was Theravada. Mahayana followed. When these idea systems moved around Europe and Asia, it was much like what happened after World War One through to the present, when America forged a pop culture that moved around the world. America conquered the world with its music, song, and drama rather than with guns (alone). In the same way, India conquered the world twice before with Theravada and Mahayana, and then developed another system that almost conquered the world with Hinduism. When non-Hindus feel uneasy with Hinduism, that uneasiness is the same feeling as when non-Westerners feel uneasy with Americanism.

To Americans, it matters little if other people watch American TV, watch American movies, play American video games, listen to American music, eat American food, wear American clothes, drive cars designed for American roads, drink American sodas, learn English, start schools on the British-American model,

send their children to American universities, and copy British-American institutions such as representative democracy, free press, impartial judiciary, and rule of law. To the other people, it makes a big difference. The other people appreciate the knowledge of the West but they fear the total loss of their identity. There is only so much any culture-society can absorb before it stops being its own culture-society and becomes the other culture-society.

The institutions that Americans take around the world are not so much American as of the modern middle class and upper middle class. They are how people live in a successful capitalist economy-society. They are international values now, values of the international middle class. Any society-culture has to develop versions of these institutions to support economic development.

It happened that these institutions grew first, and on a huge scale, in America, and that America exported them around the world. The institutions took an American flavor wherever they flourished. So, what are really more class institutions than cultural institutions feel like cultural institutions to other societies. Now other societies have to develop a version of these same institutions even if the institutions had not spread to them from America, as, for example, if they had spread from France, Germany, Russia, China, India, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. Many cultures-societies are making their own versions. When I first wrote this section, "Gangnam" style from the Korean pop singer Psy was peaking in popularity.

When the American version of capitalist society-culture spreads around the world, Americans do not force it on anybody, or not very much. Other cultures-societies take it up the American version of middle class values so they can interact with the dominant culture-society-economy of the world. Other cultures-societies become assimilated into the American version of world middle class values in the same way that local peoples in India became Hindu-ized in the past. America seems like a large amoeba, as did Hindu society-culture when it spread. To many people around the world now, Americans are the Hindus of modern culture and society. To many people around the world in the past, Hindus would have been the Americans of religion.

Cultures-societies can take on enough Western ways to develop economically without necessarily taking on all good Western institutions and without necessarily taking on the American version of middle class culture-and-society. China and India are now developing economically without taking full Americanized identity. It is still an open question how much a culture-society can develop without also taking on at least some version of middle class political institutions such as free speech, rule of law, equality for women, and equality for formerly-oppressed groups such as gays. I think cultures-societies that adopt economic change with only limited social and political change will be able to develop for a while but will not be able to compete over time with societies that accept the full array of changes.

30 American Religious Fascism

Huey Long, the politician from Louisiana, was powerful in the 1930s as fascism was rising in Europe. Americans then feared America might “go fascist”. Long rightly said: if fascism ever came to America, it would not come as an explicit doctrine and will not be called fascism. Rather, fascism would come as Mom, Apple Pie, Baseball, The Flag, Our Troops, Americanism, and a fight against enemies of America. Fascism was a tendency in many societies but did not take the same form everywhere. Fascism would come to America in a crusade to preserve what is “American” against enemies. It would come much as Right Wingers now promote Americanism to sustain a class system in which they are secure, and use Islam and poor people as enemies; or Left Wingers deny the European Christian roots of America so as to make an American identity to serve Political Correctness and its beneficiaries. Only some people get to decide what is American, what gets preserved, what gets discarded, and who the enemies are. The fact that fascism comes this way is a message of novels and movies “The Watchmen” and “V for Vendetta”. To stop fascism in America, we have to head off false Americanism while preserving good universal American values and while extending them to everybody who can live by them. A good movie about Long, based on a good book, is “All the King’s Men”.

“Fascism” with a big “F” refers to the governments in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan around World War Two while “fascism” with a small “f” is the general term for that kind of society. The term “fascism” means “state system based on the idea of a bundle of sticks” in that one stick breaks easily while a bundle is strong, much stronger than the sum strengths of the individual sticks; the state is a team; so we should all work together, and be bound together, for greater good. “Fascism” in Germany was “National Socialism”. All fascisms combine: people believe society is a system, people believe the system can work, people believe they depend on the system and on it working, people believe they have a place in the system, people believe that people come in different kinds such as occupations and-or socioeconomic classes, people believe the system is based on mutual cooperation, people believe their mutual dependence and cooperation makes them much stronger, moderate socialism (not communism), strong civil order, putting almost everyone in the system but not everyone, taking care of everyone who is in the system, making scapegoats of people who are not in the system, state support for business, business support for the state, cooperation between business firms, using business to lead the country, a sense of national and ethnic destiny, and having constant enemies so as to stimulate cohesion. America already has all this, as do China, Russia, India, likely Brazil, and some Muslim countries such as Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. In social science, fascism is a kind of socialism but it is better to think of socialism as a kind of fascism. Russian and Chinese socialism were more like fascism than like idealized British or German socialism from 1910. Chinese socialism now is more like German or Japanese fascism than like idealized communism. Fascism is not like the socialism that Right Wingers dread in theory but is more like the strong state that they work for in fact. The intent of Left Wingers is not authoritarian society but the end result of their programs resembles fascism.

I am not worried that: Americans will adopt Hinduism en masse, worship blue skinned Krishna, and worship cows; Americans will adopt Islam en masse and follow Muslim law; or Americans will become

pacifist vegetarian Buddhists. If individual Americans do wish to do any of that, their decision is fine, as long as they do it out of enlightened free choice.

I am worried that America will move to modest fascism similar to what China or Russia have now, call it Americanism, and find a religious rationale. This fascism does not have to be heavy-handed as German Fascism was up to World War Two; it can be fairly light-handed as long as it is pervasive. To do so, Americans will have to give up the teachings of Jesus and Western values; but that does not seem to be a big obstacle.

Driving Issues.

Recall from the chapters on issues some realities for the near future. Americans do not accept these realities well but instead try to ignore them or run around them. How these realities play out, and how Americans deal with them, or don't deal with them, will affect the future of America.

-The world is already over populated and will continue to over populate.

-Most of the people in the world cannot live like idealized American suburbanites even if the world economy was more productive and the wealth was evenly distributed.

-America gets more world resources, and lives "higher on the hog", than its productivity in relation to other nations warrants. While the overall standard of living in America need not fall, especially if the country is well run, Americans cannot continue to live much better than everybody else.

-If America is not well run, the average standard of living in America will fall.

-Capitalism is an effective and good way to run an economy but it needs to be regulated wisely.

-Capitalism inevitably has about 6% to 12% real structural unemployment so that even people who really want to work, and have trained somewhat to work, cannot get jobs.

-Capitalism inevitably has at least 10% under employment in that people who are will to work hard have jobs but the jobs do not pay enough, and offer enough benefits, to raise a family on well.

-Some people are not smart enough, and have not trained enough, to get good jobs even if there was no problem with unemployment or under employment.

-As more wealth is created, it does not increase the standard of living generally. Rather, the power to control the wealth concentrates into a few hundred families around the world.

-World climate is changing. The changes will hurt more than help.

-The world ecosystem is deteriorating.

-Class society is real. How bad or good it is depends on the situation.

-The people who have good jobs want to keep them and want their children to have them. The secure people are willing to oppress the poor in order to keep secure. They use the state to control the poor.

-People do not like to see the poor suffer in public. People will provide programs to alleviate public suffering. The programs never cure poverty.

-Socio-economic problems interact with ethnicity and religion.

-People, and business firms, quickly become dependent on the state.

-People, and business firms, seek to have the state take care of them.

Scenarios.

Below I list some options for the future of America. All but option one are kinds of fascism. Which of the scenarios below seems most likely in America? Feel free to make up your own scenarios.

1. Americans rediscover the teachings of Jesus and Western values. They see that working hard to make the world better is hard work, but it is also fun, so they put in the hard work, and they get out some of the fun. They see that citizenship is important but also is hard work; and they put in the hard work. They are able to extend values to include non-Christian religions and people of all kinds. They can sort real problems from false problems. They are able to face real problems and can provide workable long-term solutions that everybody can understand and live with. Individual Americans can assess their own ability as citizens. When they are not up to the task of citizenship, they do not assert their selfish desires. Instead, they choose wise representatives who can run the country well. Americans rapidly adopt "green" technology.

2. Americans revert to strong fundamentalist religion, Christian in name but not in practice. In theory, Americans give up pre-marital sex, serial monogamy, birth control, and abortion. In practice, they use all of them, but illegally. The police select who they catch, and the court selects the punishments given. In theory, Americans use drugs much less except alcohol and tobacco. They find a way for some middle class women to stay home to take care of children, likely by making sure women always get paid less even when they do the same work as men. They use business firms as a tool to address all social and economic problems even when business is not the appropriate tool. If a problem cannot be addressed through business and private charity, Americans give up on it. Americans adopt the "gospel of wealth" meaning that rich people are favored by God, if God likes you then he makes you rich, poor people are punished by God, and everybody should be able to make it on his-her own. Americans accept a socio-economic hierarchy of rich, middle, and poor. Americans use laws against drugs and sex to attack the poor and keep them from threatening the security of the middle class. To make sure the poor do not starve in public, Americans continue some care programs.

Christians extend tolerance to non-Christian religions as long as non-Christian religions are not taught at school or featured in state ceremonies, and non-Christian religions share the same fundamentalist values about family and class. Most major non-Christian religions are able to comply. Groups that do not share

the security and general standard of living adopt some religious ideas that are non-standard, such as strong social justice. As long as those ideas cause few problems, the majority ignore them.

3. Americans adopt a public ideology of radical equality but make sure, in practice, that a socio-economic structure develops which preserves the middle class and upper class. Women have to work, and do so in large numbers. Birth control is widespread and abortion is available. Despite legalizing some drugs, the middle class prefers to focus on school, jobs, and hard work. Middle class families fight to keep funding for their schools high, and the performance of children in their schools high, so their children can get good jobs. Middle class families make sure the schools of poor children are technically passable but really inferior so poor children cannot compete for jobs. The middle class extends some support benefits to the poor so the poor do not suffer in public. Rather than understand problems deeply and take account of human nature in addressing problems, the typical response is to “throw money at it” as long as throwing money does not undermine the security of the middle class. Hard-hit groups do not try to understand and to address problems at a deep level but instead seek to be clients of the middle class through programs.

Religious affiliation does not matter if believers follow these values in practice. People take pride in their religious tolerance even while knowing little about their own religion or other religions. Most people adopt a generalized belief in spirituality and some god, and go to some religious institution. Some hard-hit groups develop alternative religious ideas that explain their situation, such as Exile in Babylon or the ultimate revenge of God. These ideas are tolerated as long as they do not upset the basic order or require the general public to examine religion.

4. Options 2 and 3 combine by not stressing Christianity but instead by overtly stressing the destiny of America and by covertly stressing class society. In the new view of God, God does not obsess about ethical monotheism and social justice, God is all about progress and development. This idea of progress need not mean anything moral. This is not the idea of progress from the Enlightenment. This progress will mean stronger, wealthier, knowing more science that can be used to create wealth and power, able to implement technology; and able to assert national destiny and domination. A variation on this attitude has been present in states for at least 3000 years, so this attitude is not unnatural. In this idea, God is not personal in the sense that I feel. God is a principle of cosmic regularity and cosmic expansion, and our society is the particular representative of this principle. This is the idea of progress that C.S. Lewis feared in his science fiction. Groups that push for this kind of progress often use half-moral arguments about general prosperity but really they foresee that they will benefit, both directly and by having a strong country, and they do not really care much about anybody else. Both right and left wing groups argue this way. In theory, everybody benefits, and everybody is better off than in the past even if we do not have justice, so we don't need to worry about justice, humanity, and the planet: “a rising tide floats all boats” and “everybody gets a piece of a constantly bigger pie”.

America is the chosen country of God to lead the world into the best future. To lead the world into the best future, America has to be strong. To be strong, America must have some strong socio-economic classes, some strong ethnic and religious groups, and many strong business firms of all sizes. Not all groups in America need be strong but some must. The strong groups must cooperate. Religious groups need not reach perfect accord but they must agree on a set of core principles that they can “really get behind”.

The new core principles will echo the historic principles from America's past from Northwestern European Christianity but the new values will not actually carry out the old values. The relation between the historic core principles and how they are carried out is like the relation between the Judeo-Christian idea of social justice and how it is (not) carried out. Americans will call for individual freedom but the actual freedom, and how different groups are differently free, will depend on relations to the rest of the world and relations among groups in the country. Individual freedom will have to balance against group solidarity, and will not often prevail. For middle class people, freedom and responsibility will mean theoretically being able to find any job you want on the open market except for some of the highest jobs, and being responsible for your family given what programs and subsidies are available to your group.

The state will work through business firms to make sure a minimum percent of parents have secure jobs that pay enough to get their children well educated enough to take similar jobs. Not everybody has to be taken care of and so not everybody will be taken care of. Unemployment and under employment will not go away. The actual levels of employment, wages, and benefits will depend on the world economy, America's relation to the world economy, and political-ethnic relations in America. Through business firms, the state will extend medical care to children. Through business firms, employed people will be able to get some health insurance. Many markets will become too big, or too important, to fail, and so the state will make sure firms don't fail and financial markets remain stable. The state will pick key players that it supports. Firms will jockey for state patronage. People will not feel entirely secure, and so will compete with each other as members of socio-economic classes and-or ethnic groups. The state will use their competition to bolster institutions. Some groups will bear the brunt of unemployment and under employment, and will cultivate the people and ideas that keep them in that role.

Business firms of all kinds, big and small, will become like secular churches. With their ability to create jobs and wealth, business firms will be like grades of angels in the Middle Ages, with the most powerful, such as investment banks and venture capital firms, being like archangels. Any old religion can easily participate in this new religion simply by being a part of America without causing much trouble. It is not necessary to be Christian, and, in fact, religious diversity helps people to think beyond old ideas to see God as the Spirit of the Future.

Any religion could be re-interpreted to support an America like this, and likely that will happen. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism will be interpreted so as to support the new America. There will be too few Taoists or Zen followers to worry about.

Although any religion can participate, a generalized religion that stresses the Spirit and a vague God is most likely to come to the fore and become the core. People who "feel spiritual but not religious" will come to feel spiritual about the new Spirit of America and the future of America as leader of the world. God the Spirit will resemble the Dharma. God the Spirit will support social and economic relations, so social and economic relations will come to be like social Dharma. The teachings of Jesus, and Western values, will be made relative. When those values are useful, they will be invoked. When they are not useful, people will overlook them in favor of new values about success, destiny, security, and the power of our particular group. Any group that insists on its principles from its past, and so cannot support the new order, will be relegated to the economic bottom, and so reduced.

5. This version is like version four but played out on a global arena instead of nationally. This version is like the dystopia in the novel "Brave New World" by Aldus Huxley.

America will muddle along and slowly will become just another large modestly well-developed nation with all the troubles of other modestly well-developed nations, such as France and Brazil. America will have pockets of high development surrounded by pockets of decay. America will have more internal strife and disparities of wealth than most modestly developed nations, so it will be more like Brazil than France and more like the Philippines than Japan. America will have some strife between socio-economic classes and between races. As America becomes just another nation, rates of unemployment and under employment will stay at levels that we find now in England or France, that is, at least 10%. Working and middle class people will use ploys to make sure they keep their jobs, including making sure some ethnic and religious groups bear the brunt of the problems. The upper middle class and upper class of America will see they have more in common with those classes in other countries, such as Japan, Korea, Iran, Russia, China, and Germany. When they sense their international ties, they will lose touch with the working class, under employed, and unemployed in their own country. They will be less citizens of America than the world. As long as they benefit enough, they will take pride in feeling like citizens of the world even if the world is unfair and ecologically despoiled. They will accept whatever measures are needed to keep the world socio-economic order and their secure place in it. The end result will not be quite as in movies such as "District 9" and "Elysium" but that will be the underlying trend.

Once a country has a huge military apparatus, as America does in 2014, the country has a hard time dismantling that apparatus, but America will not be able to afford the present huge military apparatus. I don't know what might happen. The outcome depends in part on the rise of other nations such as China, Brazil, and India, and their military pushes. For example, America might have to cede control of the far Pacific Ocean to China. The global middle and upper classes might agree to a tacit division of the world into spheres of influence.

Old ideas of God, the Dharma, or Heaven will matter little. Religion will matter little, although particular groups within countries will cling to old religions and make a fuss from time to time. Anti-abortion religious activists in America might succeed in banning abortion in some states but middle class and upper class Americans won't mind as long as they can send daughters to get abortions in other states or in other countries. Nevertheless, people will pride themselves on a deft combination of religious fundamentalism and public religious tolerance.

People will feel that the world has a destiny, the world will share in cosmic order and development, and human society will be the local representative of cosmic order and development. The ruling class will feel as if they represent the God of destiny, cosmic order, and cosmic development. The ruling class will allow the rest of the world to have local beliefs because that will make control easier rather than harder. The end result will be hard only in a few places. In most places, control will be maintained through the media, drugs, and enlisting people in causes rather than through the police.

Real Needs.

America has a real need for some of the same solutions that can lead to fascism if the solutions carry too far. Other countries share America's situation. America needs a sense of purpose. Americans need to

feel they are going somewhere when they go into the future. Americans need to feel they are part of a big country but a country that also cares about them despite its bigness. Americans need to feel they are various, but, even so, all the varieties can work together, fit together, and make something better than any variety alone. They need a better balance of cooperation and competition than they have had since the 1970s. They need a role for business firms without allowing business firms too much power. Think about how to find these things and fit them together without going too far into fascism.