

Chapter 5: Theodicy: God's Justice

A powerful and beautiful scientific discovery like Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation diminishes human ignorance in the same way that we diminish an infinite series of whole numbers by deleting, say, a billion of them. One billion is certainly not nothing, but the infinity remains, paradoxically undiminished—because it is infinite. So it is with the infinite mystery of the living God: *all* our experience teaches us about it, since the nature of life in God's world is expressive of *some* of the inexhaustible nature of its Creator. Life includes agony and despair and hate and loss, as well as joy and hope and love and abundance (not to mention milder conditions like contentment and tedium). This is the mystery of pain, an ethical mystery that forms the subject of the Book of Job, and much theology besides. Leibniz called it *Theodicy* (the title of his book on the subject, published in 1710), or “Divine justice.” It, too, is a realm of limitless mystery of which we do nevertheless have some knowledge, which does indeed diminish our ignorance—except when we compare it to God's knowledge, where no comparison avails.

Apart from rare exceptions like the honeybee, almost all animals survive by eating other living things (including plants and fungi, and/or other animals) that themselves quite apparently yearn to go on living, and will do almost anything they can to avoid dying. Further, all are subject to inanimate natural disasters like hurricanes, droughts, and volcanoes. Further still, human affairs include abundant horrors of torture, war, tyranny, and betrayal, perpetrated individually and collectively. The rational explanation is that, as Leibniz claimed, “this world is the best of all possible worlds.” It is the *optimal* world; this philosophy is therefore called “optimism,” a word which has since come to mean something very different (namely, an attitude of expecting things to work out well).

Shortly after Europe was shaken by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which killed around 30,000 people, Voltaire mocked Leibniz' optimism in his 1759 novella *Candide*. One of its characters is a buffoonish philosopher named Pangloss, who keeps on saying “this is the best of all possible worlds” as he suffers disaster after disaster (e.g., blindness, enslavement, etc.). But

Leibniz never said this was the best of all *imaginable* worlds, which it quite obviously is not. Every utopia is an imagined world apparently superior to this one, but the more perfect any utopia seems, the more impossible its achievement and the more perilous the attempt. The term “utopia” is a brilliant coinage by St. Thomas More (1478-1535), brilliant because it means both “Good Place” and “No Place,” playing on the phonetic similarity of two distinct Ancient Greek prefixes, *eu* for “good” and *ou* for “no.”

The best *possible* world is one which is governed by an unchanging physics, within whose stable limits the creatures of the Creator can exercise their free will. “Natural evil,” such as the Lisbon earthquake or the predation of lions upon antelopes, arises from the constraints of the physics and eventual biology which such a world turns out to require. Of course, we can *imagine* a world without predation, and it does seem that for the first billion years of life on Earth, unicellular organisms directly metabolized chemicals like hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide from the environment, without eating each other. Eventually a primitive form of photosynthesis evolved, which used light to liberate energy from those chemicals, without producing oxygen. An unthinkable long time later, other microbes developed the familiar, modern form of oxygenic photosynthesis, which uses water. It turned the world green, and made the oxygen-rich atmosphere that produced the living planet we recognize. But this happened at the expense of the old anaerobic bacteria, who now thrive only in extreme environments below the Earth’s surface and in the ocean depths. The birth of multicellular plants and animals was mostly death to their primitive forbears, just as the advent of the Olympian Gods condemned the Titans to the underworld.

So the switch to a more efficient form of photosynthesis spelled disaster for the life forms that preceded it, even if the new bacteria did not eat the old—they innocently drank water and sunshine to build sugars, but with poisonous oxygen as the waste product. Eventually, new organisms exploited this emergent abundance of oxygen with a new respiration strategy that ushered in a whole new biosphere. After more than a billion years, as life became ubiquitous, *predation* developed—because eating one’s neighbors was such a radically efficient strategy for securing energy supplies and other nutrients. “Explanations of several major transitions in evolution (emergence of eukaryotes, sex, multicellularity, tissues, active directed motility, etc.) often cite emergence of predation as a decisive factor” (from “On the evolutionary emergence of predation,” Ispolatov and Doebeli, 2023). The diversity and dynamism of the teeming forests,

seas, deserts, and plains appears to have been driven largely by the horrors of predator-prey relationships. Natural disasters, too, have been pivotal to the emergence of myriad forms that would never have evolved otherwise, as the major Mass Extinctions show, from the end-Permian world of toxic vapor, to the giant meteorite that ended the Cretaceous. Destruction and creation turn out to be inseparable, just as Heraclitus once declared.

Counterfactuals are an attractive but rather unreliable tool for thinking about “natural evil.” Daily life is, of course, full of contingencies and personal choices that could easily have gone differently from their eventual real results. But here we are asking about big, stable features of the world, like tornadoes and parasites. At first, it seems very simple to imagine a world just like ours, but without these afflictions. Must there be viruses? Must the gorgeous, intelligent octopus live so briefly? One might begin with the idea that the Divine has hidden reasons for these troubling phenomena. Science, in this context, could be understood as a process of discovering some of these concealed reasons by investigating the way different natural systems support and, more importantly, entail one another. Taken together, the constraints of fundamental physical systems shape the less fundamental eventualities, including those unpleasant ones whose necessity we want to question.

Aristotle is helpful here, as his *Physics* (194 b17–20) contains an account of *causality* having four components, commonly illustrated with the example of a dinner table. The *material* cause of the table is *wood*; the *formal* cause is the table’s *design*, or structure; the *efficient* cause is the active means of its coming into being as a table, namely *carpentry*; and the *final* cause is its purpose, the furnishing of meals for people *dining*. Supposing we read biology as Rupert Sheldrake does, we can include in our account of evolution Aristotle’s “final causes.” These have to do with purposive action, or “teleology,” from the Greek *telos*, meaning goal or desired endpoint—something most evolutionary biologists, following Jacques Monod, have strictly forbidden from any account of evolution.

If the final cause of Creation is (or involves) richly conscious relationships between the Creator and at least some of the creatures, and our actual world has come to include exactly such relationships, we may do well to assume that everything else we find is somehow a necessary part of the larger means by which these relationships between God and us are brought about or made possible. The physics that God specifies as reality—those laws, constants, ratios, particles, waves, and fields that are our best available descriptions for what we see only “through a glass,

darkly”—gives rise to the observable material world and its processes, including life. Our dimly understood but powerfully useful atomic theory of matter is the basis for biochemistry, and with it our staggeringly complex account of molecular biology (for an account of the possible origin of life on the lifeless early Earth, see Nick Lane’s remarkable 2015 book *The Vital Question: Energy, Evolution, and the Origins of Complex Life*). Molecular biology itself, in turn, underlies disciplines that observe life at larger scales, like ecology.

Even if the fundamental physics is not deterministic, its regularities do seem to necessitate that life must collectively be roughly the way it is, at least on our planet. Earth has peculiar features—such as tectonic plates that move around, causing continental drift—that other planets may lack. Though there may be life on some of those plateless worlds, our own biosphere has been profoundly influenced by plate tectonics. It is their behavior that causes volcanoes (like Mt. Vesuvius, that destroyed Pompeii in 79 CE) and earthquakes (like the one that wrecked Lisbon in 1755). They also affect the fates of species, as land masses split apart to isolate populations, or join together to confront them with myriad new neighbors (a major change in sea level can have similar effects). Since such facts of geology are themselves grounded in the initial conditions of the early solar system (and so on), the same sort of necessity must govern any ambitiously broad description of how life got to be the way it is—complete with Ebola and pandas, redwoods and hookworm. It’s a package deal, like being born into a particular body, a particular family, or a particular culture. One makes the best of it.

So much for “natural evil.” “Human evil” arises from the necessary ethical structure of the world, which the poet John Keats compared to a kind of cosmic schoolhouse (a “vale of soul-making”). It seems, to the theist, that however wide the mystery of God’s motives for the Creation might be, part of it was a desire for mortal creatures with free will who could *grow* by living their finite, embodied lives, within the abiding constraints of physics and biology. That growth would be of interest to the God for several reasons; first, because it includes possible progress in our conduct, out from indifference and cruelty, toward compassion and care. In saying this, I am not attributing badness to infants and children, and goodness to adults (though this has often been done, with awful consequences); I am referring to any developmental struggle that has an ethical dimension, regardless of the age at which it is reached. Second, it includes possible progress in our spiritual condition, out from sterile dogma (whether scientific, religious, or otherwise), toward an experiential, relational, partial but nontrivial knowledge of the God

from whom we and our world are derived.

Attempts to unify those two forms of human growth go awry, I believe, when they claim God must be the ground of morality in some sense different from God's general role as ground of everything. Atheists are right to be offended by this impolitic mistake. Yet it remains possible to avoid it while noting that part of the theistic experience includes the intuition that love is God's ultimate nature, and ours; that the cosmos is a school for learning this, against a steep gradient of pain and indifference (rather like noise and silence that are both opposites of music); and that we are so made as to mirror a Divine nature in which love is primary, but hate is also present, because this produces the world-process of their Heraclitan "strife" of opposites.

A Theistic Explanation for the Brain's Two Hemispheres

It seems the serious yet playful game of the God is to make a universe that produces creatures with free will, living their lives in a physical world whose regularities form an invariant stable frame (like the stage in a theater, or an unchanging chessboard that structures the gameplay) around the teeming variability of relatively free behaviors. Of course our behavior is constrained, too, but it is much less constrained than is the behavior of, say, the elements on the periodic table (noble gases never react, lead is never radioactive, etc). Like everything else about us, our freedom is far from absolute, but it is not nothing. As Augustine (354-430) wrote, regarding the issue of God's foreknowledge: "If God foreknew my free will, it was not nothing that He foreknew." A major arena of activity for that free will is the reckoning each of us makes with this invariant stable frame, freely espousing, modifying, or replacing his or her convictions as to its completeness and self-sufficiency.

Suppose we speculate in this vein for a moment. Historians and evolutionary psychologists have devised some cogent, semi-scientific explanations of the abiding structures of human experience, like religion, war, art, sexuality, and so on. Compatible with these existing explanations are unscientific, *ulterior* explanations—Aristotelian "final causes"—that encompass and transcend them. For example, whenever Iain McGilchrist is called upon to explain in the briefest possible terms the evolutionary reason for the two brain hemispheres, he uses the image of a bird pecking at seeds on the ground: the left brain pays focused attention to the seeds, which it already knows are important, while the right brain scans the environment for predators or other threats, with a generalized, unfocused form of attention.

I want to suggest that perhaps the *ulterior* reason we have two brain hemispheres, each with its own form of experience, is that this generates *a need and a corresponding capacity* to experience spiritual growth whereby we overcome the left brain's arrogance and heed the right brain's awestruck humility when it alone "hears" the "still, small voice" of the Holy (1 Kings 19:12). This structure gives (or at least it can, and has, given) the illusion of a continuous, self-sufficient, disenchanted empirical world that is almost completely convincing, while also supplying an alternative form of experience that continually hints at something beyond it. The divided brain is exquisitely disposed to present us with a lifelong project of figuring out that a God exists whom we cannot detect by ordinary means. Before I consider possible "ulterior reasons" for a few other features of the human situation, I want to dwell on this one a bit further.

If God routinely appeared undisguised, as one more visible entity among the myriad others that comprise the natural world (as when He "walked in the Garden in the cool of the morning" in Genesis 3:8), there would be no opportunity for any struggle toward faith. Conversely, faith would also be impossible if He were so thoroughly concealed from all our faculties that we had no capacity for it (I note parenthetically that in the Christian story of the Incarnation, Jesus appears as a human being among human beings, so that recognizing his purported divinity is depicted as neither easy, nor impossible). If our brains were entirely configured in the manner of the left hemisphere, we might be altogether incapable of detecting God by spiritual experience. If we somehow lived exclusively in the right hemisphere's mode of consciousness, God's absolute reality might be so obvious to us that no lengthy intellectual and spiritual struggle for faith would ever arise to seek and discover it.

Others cultures (especially, much earlier ones) than the one that produced this book were perhaps fortunate in their freedom from a scientific worldview with its mechanistic implications; perhaps they enjoyed something like a universal and effortless theism. But it seems inevitable that, eventually, an intelligent species like ours must surely develop an incomplete but systematic knowledge of the material world and its behavioral regularities that would include atomic theory, the physical laws of Kepler and Newton, and so on. Once such a science is up and running, sooner or later it is likely to crowd out the sense of the sacred for many people, much of the time, because of this peculiar feature of science as a world view—the amazing tenacity with which the left hemisphere grasps onto it: it *seems complete*, but it is not.

A century after Shelley, and a century before McGilchrist, William James joined the

timeless chorus of thinkers who have been struck by the binary quality of human experience, whose underlying neurology comprises the hemisphere hypothesis:

The struggle seems to be that of a less articulate and more profound part of our nature [i.e., the right hemisphere] to hold out, and keep itself standing, against the attempts of a more superficial and explicit or loquacious part [i.e., the left hemisphere], to suppress it. ...a man's religion is the deepest and wisest thing in his life. I must frankly establish the breach between the life of articulate reason, and the push of the subconscious, the irrational instinctive part, which is more vital.... In religion the vital needs, the mystical overbeliefs... proceed from an ultra-rational region. They are gifts. It is a question of life, of living in these gifts or not living. ... (TC, 2:328)⁵²

Excessive Right-Brain Thinking

In 1963 Eric Havelock published *Preface to Plato*, which argued that the rise of the written word had tremendous effects on the consciousness of any people that experienced it. Walter Ong, S.J. developed this idea further in *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Preliterate societies are often capable of memorizing amazingly large quantities of poetry, a capacity that tends to vanish after a “literacy revolution.” The written word is less inherently social than speech, and it makes possible a more private “life of the mind” in which individuals can produce and consume books without the presence of another person. Perhaps most importantly, writing eventually demonstrates the distinction between a word and its referent, between the sound image *ah-pull* and the sweet fruit on the tree.

There is a ready parallel in the shift toward monotheistic worship of an invisible God, a shift away from reverence of the Divine as symbolized in, say, a golden calf. The symbol becomes separated from what it symbolized, and since only the latter is worthy of worship, any worship of the former becomes a serious transgression. Once this epochal shift has taken place, the statue becomes an idol, an object of contempt in the eyes of monotheists. The term *anathema* now denotes anything alien, taboo, and repugnant, but its literal meaning was “something set up,” a pagan marking-stone set in the earth as a focus of worship (to commemorate a death, a battle, or some other significant occurrence on the site). Homer’s work was all composed orally, and remained so for several centuries until the Greeks learned the alphabet (*alephbet* =

⁵². Note that by “ultra-rational” James means *beyond* rational (like “extra-,” the prefix “ultra-” now means “very,” but once meant “outside of” or “beyond”). By “overbelief,” he means the *temperament* that disposes someone to believe something—not an excess of belief.

alphabet) from the Semitic Phoenicians. Thus there is only one mention of writing in the entire *Iliad*; there (VI, 154), a man is shown by his enemy “murderous symbols, enough to destroy life.” Writing was still extremely rare and alien in Homeric times, and a written spell was regarded as lethally potent because its “murderous symbols” were not distinct from their referent, death.

I mention this because of an excellent but obscure work by psychiatrist Sim C. Liddon, *The Dual Brain, Religion, and the Unconscious* (1989). Liddon anticipated Iain McGilchrist’s work by some twenty years, and though it perforce lacks the sophistication and neuroscientific depth of *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009), it makes some of the same fascinating points. Whereas McGilchrist makes an overwhelming case for the superiority of the right hemisphere, with only cursory attention to its possible excesses, Liddon’s focus is the high price of unbalanced right-brain thinking. He calls the right brain’s holistic mode of experience *Gestalt*, to emphasize its reluctance to make distinctions that divide wholes into parts.

Comparing preliterate societies to some of his more wretchedly superstitious patients, Dr. Liddon points out their failure to distinguish between their own internal experiences, and the events that prompt those feelings in the objective world of consensual reality. For them, anxiety is a demon; conscience is a punitive God; and gods are also behind all the other markedly emotional experiences that human life affords, including puberty (Hebe), childbirth (Eileithyia), falling in love (Aphrodite), fighting in war (Ares), becoming sick, or well (Apollo), making a journey (Hermes), etc. Per Havelock, when in Book I of Homer’s *Iliad* the furious Achilles decides not to kill Agamemnon, that decision is due to the Goddess Athena herself grabbing him by the hair and turning him around.

Of course Liddon’s analysis of the perils of superstition has implications for my argument. I am suggesting that the dual brain was created by God to set us the difficult but not impossible task of inferring the Creator from our experience in the Creation which includes us. If the left hemisphere is to be associated with the scientific illusion that only nature (including culture) exists, then the right hemisphere will be celebrated as our saving guardian/detective who equips us to find God. Liddon’s book tempers that enthusiasm, by reminding us that, as usual, there are two opposite errors to make, and having made each of them, we must learn to avoid them both. Excessive left-hemisphere thinking is what McGilchrist critiques in his powerfully

biologized enhancement of a tradition that can be said to include Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, and the great thinkers of the Romantic movement, both early (e.g., Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley) and late (e.g., Owen Barfield, Colin Falck); to which one might add the later writings of the disgraced thinker Martin Heidegger, and his great predecessors in German Romanticism (e.g. Herder, Schlegel, Schelling).

Peoples and persons who are not saturated in a modern scientific worldview often go to the opposite extreme, attributing conscious agency (and sometimes malevolent or benevolent intent) to any object of significant experience. To do so is to dwell far beyond a merely intellectual panpsychism; it is to live at the mercy of an unmasterable profusion of invisible powers, as an animist whose inferences about the lives of stones and trees are anthropomorphic in the extreme. I am not speaking of situated participants in preliterate cultures whose shamans (and perhaps many others) can intuit the presence of spirits, the feelings of trees, and so on—I have no authority to pronounce upon the veridical or illusory nature of their experiences.

For what it's worth, I am largely persuaded of the truth of many such claims. I am referring to modern, literate people who are immersed in the shared techno-scientific milieu we call modernity, but who are afflicted by a mixture of its materialist ontology and the unsupported burdens of de-situated Gestalt thinking. Without an oral culture to support animism, and give it consensual coherence as a normatively shared worldview, it can show up as a feature of mental illnesses—as it does in case reports by Dr. Liddon, and by others who treat ailments like severe Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Schizophrenia. I am far more ready to credit an indigenous person's story of being saved from a lightning strike by a timely personal warning from a benevolent tree, than to believe a retired suburban cashier who is certain that the television is talking only to him.

Let me state, then, that I am writing as a situated participant-observer, not a postmodern empty cipher who strives to eschew *all* value judgments, like a professional anthropologist. I am recommending, to those already interested, the form of consciousness with which I am most familiar, and which has resulted from some decades of effort. It includes a basic scientific education on one side, and on the other, a lived experience of religious feeling, supported by a textual journey of reading religious thought. Other people's concrete thinking, and especially the iconoclastic fanaticism to which it leads, are shared perils in a shared world. A special danger attends those whose left-brain process embraces a literal reading of some single text as divine

revelation, warranting an authoritarian social politics, but whose right-brain process colludes with it to produce a world haunted by divine surveillance, punitive guilt, and dependency upon an external locus of control that is projected into inanimate objects or opportunistic religious authorities.

That would be the worst of both worlds—and it is all-too common, and growing daily. Our dual brain has indeed produced just that unfortunate result in millions of people, and this counts against any unduly optimistic version of my argument. So might another sort of right-brain error, the New Age “law of attraction” mindset that defaults to magical thinking and cannot abide rational debate, nor benefit from naturalistic explanations. I encompass these vexing counterexamples by classing them among the built-in pitfalls that beset us all as we strive for a robust, if merely human, knowledge of both nature and the Holy. Now to return to some speculations about Divine ulterior motives behind various features of the human situation.

Perhaps an ulterior reason we have so much destructiveness, is so that we will have a need, and a corresponding capacity, to overcome cruelty and trauma by growing into compassion. If this growth process is indeed consistent with the Divine nature, then perhaps God is gratified by its occurrence and, for that reason, has so constituted us as to need it *and* to facilitate it.

Perhaps an ulterior reason why we are creatures who make art, is so that we can infer something about God’s creativity in making and sustaining the world.

Perhaps an ulterior reason we are creatures who have children, is so we can experience something like God’s feelings for living beings in general, and for us humans in particular: His love for us, His vexation, delight, sorrow, and so on—including the difficult truth that children (God’s, and ours) learn by experience, often quite painfully. Freud argued in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) that belief in God the Father arose as a skyward projection of our need for an omniscient, omnipotent and indestructible parent—one who could never inflict on us the trauma of adolescent disillusion that we experience when we realize our human parents are flawed and fragile. This idea seems to me both profoundly true, and profoundly incomplete. An ulterior truth may be that the reason we are creatures who have parents, is so that we can appreciate something of our relationship to God: *here is someone because of whom I exist*. As I once heard a theistic psychoanalyst put it, “your parents made you; they didn’t create you.” The difference is as big as it could be, yet the parallel remains.

Perhaps an ulterior reason we have both art *and* parenthood is to give us an appreciation of the *difference* between God's creation of the material world, and God's creation of living beings, and how God might feel about that difference. Christianity is particularly interested in this issue, as its Christ is "begotten, not made" (per the "Nicene Creed," 325 CE). But that faith has no monopoly on the distinction. It is linked to the general idea that a loving God is more concerned with subjects than with objects, and this difference in kind is also (especially for panpsychism) a difference in degree: traditionally, the greater a created entity's capacity for experience, the greater God's concern with it. This is the theme of Matthew 6, with its fowls and lilies, and of Matthew 10:29-31: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Deuteronomy 32:9: "For the Lord's portion is his people..." Darwin and the Torah are agreed that the inanimate physical world preceded the advent of embodied life, with a priority that is both temporal and logical. The "where" and the "what" of the Earth come early into being; its "who" only comes along later, when the time is ripe.

Perhaps an ulterior reason we all must die, is because the mortality of our bodies teaches us the infinite difference between us and our Creator—to whom we are nevertheless similar in whatever ways He has chosen to fashion us to be "in His image." Those similarities are revelatory, or expressive, of His own nature, which they exist to help us appreciate. Aging brings home to us our weakness, weaning us from our grandiosity and its precious illusions. The ever-present certainty of our own eventual death forces on us the developmental tasks of transcending the ego, as we gradually come to realize that we, too, must eventually let go of everything—powerless, peaceful, empty-handed. And if the soul is immortal, as I suspect and hope it is, then *death is a partition* between two forms of human existence. This side is an embodied spatiotemporal life in which the physical world is present to us as a self-enclosed, self-sufficient totality with nothing beyond it, through which we move as individual minds largely opaque to one another. On the other side is a disembodied life, of the soul unconstrained by the physical world and the body that evolved to negotiate it. A dominant left brain is certain that the embodied lifeworld is all there is, while the right brain intuits an unbounded larger picture, to which the issue of certainty is irrelevant.

The afterworld is, according to tradition and to the NDE literature, a place of unfolded,

expanded knowledge, in which the most poignant mysteries of earthly life are at last illuminated. Many religious Jews endured the horrors of the Nazi death camps and the Soviet Gulag (the vast majority were murdered, though a few survived) by trusting that God had a hidden plan, one so unfathomably mysterious and so mysteriously good, that it would completely dissolve even this—even bereavement, torture, rape, depravity, defilement, and humiliation, inflicted on millions, for no crime at all—into the ineffable blessings of “the world to come.” As per Job 13:15: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” It may be that death supplies the missing Theodicy, in the form of some barely imaginable postmortem experience of blissfully restorative loving reunion. Such experience would show how a loving God could permit the excruciating pain of our lives in this world, by somehow making it all up to us in the next. That notion, plus the idea that free will requires the risks and evils of this life so long as we are in the body, are the two halves of a common, workable solution to the spiritual enigma called Theodicy.

This worldview may be objectively false. It may turn out to be true. It sounds wishful and utterly unrealistic in isolation from the rest of the arguments (though they aren’t exactly arguments) for theism, and from the experiential supports that religion and other practices can supply. It is perhaps more realistic than the traditional belief that *in this life* the graves will open and the dead rise resurrected, justice will reign everywhere, and war will end forever. That is the messianic idea, and I have never been able to make much use of it—though I concede it, too, may be true. I can more readily believe that the soul survives bodily death; that God is more directly revealed to us after we die; and even, that this revelation ultimately heals all pain. The opaque barrier of death makes it impossible to prove or disprove it, which is consistent with the idea that mortality exists to motivate the journey of faith.

Theodicy is usually formulated the following way. Any two of these three propositions will make perfect sense without the other one:

1. God is all good (omnibenevolent).
2. God is all powerful (omnipotent).
3. Evil is real.

Unfortunately for monotheism, the three will not fit together as a set. A peculiar solution comprised Gnosticism, as described by Hans Jonas in his 1958 classic *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. The Gnostics understood the Divine as dual. Mankind was made by the eternal One True God, who dwells outside the cosmos,

and is both all-good and all-powerful. In His presence, there is no evil (1 and 2, without 3). But our world of injustice and decay is so flawed that it must have been made by the mere Demiurge (or “craftsman”), an incompetent and ambivalent lesser God, within whose bungled creation evil happens aplenty (3, without 1 and 2).

For Gnostics, the universe is split in two, like the Divine: this here cosmos is ruled by the Demiurge, while the extra-cosmic domain is ruled by the One True God, sparks of whom are human souls trapped in the cosmic prison (i.e., the material world, in which we are embodied). The stars we see at night are its gatekeeping wardens (an idea called “astralism,” evident in the writings of St. Paul), and the *gnosis* (literally, “knowledge”) of this whole scheme is what will liberate us from it. However, it remains a mystery just why the omnibenevolent and omnipotent True God permits this temporary but traumatic captivity of ours—so Gnosticism only reshapes the problem of theodicy, without constituting a solution for it. Staunchly monotheistic, Judaism firmly rejected Gnosticism, though the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) makes exquisite use of the idea that we human souls are sparks of God, sojourning on Earth seeking a reunion with Him that is our ultimate destiny.

Putting aside Gnosticism and returning to mainstream religion, the main solution to theodicy is that human free will somehow has turned out to require tsunamis and diseases, and the overwhelming likelihood of eventual horrors of human conduct like Auschwitz and Abu Ghraib. On the one hand, these unspeakable horrors of our real ongoing history are unthinkable bad, and the grief they inflict—especially in empathy for intimately beloved victims we cannot save—is emotionally unbearable, heart-shattering, mind-melting. On the other hand, this can mean that only the infinite could possibly contain and resolve these vast enormities—and in theism, the infinite is precisely the Person Who is found enacting this otherwise totally impossible role. If the horrors (that is the needful word) of this world can ever be... redressed (and that is *not* the needful word), it can only occur in the ultimate plan-and-action of an omnipotent, loving God who has at God’s disposal another world, beyond death, beyond causality, beyond linear time and the laws of nature.

If I find myself saying, “I will never be reconciled to the cruelty of life so long as I live,” well, this means two things at once: part of me means I never will accept it, and part of me means the acceptance shall come only after death discloses what the body must conceal from the soul. Until then, my faith is an aspirational position that keeps-open a mental and emotional

space (a question, Job's question) where the eventual holy redemption will appear, when the Divine sees fit to enlighten me—not when I manage to puzzle-out the unfathomable obscene horrors of human behavior, and of larval parasites that quite literally eat their hosts from inside. The ugliness of this world, like its beauty, remains beyond my understanding, and it can stay there until the time comes when, if ever, I am expanded enough to comprehend it. In the meantime, my life.

Free Will and Determinism

It was Leibniz who coined the term *Theodicy*, or “God’s justice,” in a remarkable book of that title in 1710. The heart of his argument, as I’ve said, is that the human evils and natural evils of life in this world are the necessary results of God’s commitment to the free will of us, His creatures. Much safer and more peaceful worlds can easily be *imagined*, but only if we forego this gift of free will in those imagined worlds. Free of all evils, we would also lose the abundant meaning, relief, joy, and achievement (not to mention prayer and piety) that arise from our resistance to them. Insist on free will, and this present world is the best possible result, with all its wars and earthquakes, its heroic rescues and strivings in adversity. Almost every thinker who has taken on the question of theodicy since Leibniz has kept free will at, or near, the center of the picture. The belief in it was, and remains, the beating heart of our precious capacity rationally to accept the unacceptable levels of grief, pain, sorrow, and anxiety that so much of human life seem to require of us. So any denial of free will is serious business for theism, as it imperils God’s benevolence, or indeed His very existence. Take away free will, and we not only lose the capacity to initiate or improve our relationship with the Divine, we also lose our only useful theistic explanation for the abundance of waste, fraud, abuse, violence, and loss in the lives of ourselves and our fellows.

Determinism is (some version of) the belief that all the events of time past, present, and future are already completely fated and inevitable. It denies that the will of a human or other mortal being is free in any meaningful sense. There have of course been theistic versions of this noxious idea, notably Calvinism, with its grim doctrine of “predestination.” John Calvin (1509-1564) taught that neither Catholic “good works,” nor Lutheran “faith alone,” could save a person from eternal torment in Hell, because from eternity God in His foreknowledge has already determined the fate of every soul. But determinism has also taken shape in various

atheistic philosophies, with the mercurial Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) as an arguable exemplar. Genius that he was, Nietzsche took so many different positions on so many questions during his short life that it's unwise to cite him as a representative of any one idea. But he did make "the will to power" a major rubric of his thought; and though that might sound like a philosophy of freedom, he also did more than perhaps anyone but Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) to show the limits of conscious and deliberate human volition.

I touched on this in Chapter 1, quoting Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in which the grammar of language is said to produce the illusion of a free actor where there is actually "only the deed." Famously, he also asserted in *The Gay Science* ((1882) sometimes translated "Joyful Wisdom") that history is (somehow) so thoroughly fixed that it (somehow) all happens again and again forever, the exact same way in every repetition. Whoever can realize this "eternal return of the same" and be thrilled, rather than crushed (by the prospect of endlessly repeating the same agonies and joys, failures and triumphs) is worthy to be called the *Übermensch*, or "Overman." This now-familiar but rather bizarre idea was Nietzsche's strikingly original variation on a theme found in Goethe's epic *Faust* (1790). That poem's heroic protagonist makes a deal with the Devil, a deal whose crux is that Faust must be damned if he ever ceases to strive for more and more knowledge and experience, choosing instead to stay stuck in a single moment for its unique beauty, saying: "Stay, moment, thou art so fair!" The rich irony of Nietzsche's invention is that it combines the two opposing sides of Faust's situation: the *Übermensch* is a Faustian striver, always overcoming, but he is also stuck in unchanging time—not in Faust's one exquisite moment of perilous surrender, but in a static eternity that includes all moments (of horror, bliss, tedium, etc.), endlessly reiterated. It would seem the *Übermensch* earns that name—achieves *amor fati*, the "love of fate"—by a supreme act of will... and yet, in the "eternal return of the same," all is determined in advance, including, presumably, the all-important *amor fati*. Perhaps the *Übermensch* is no more responsible for his own exaltation than the pious or impious Calvinist is responsible for his own salvation by God's inscrutable grace.

Nietzsche's remarkable uniqueness (as Alcibiades says of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, "you could look and look, and find no one even near him") does not prevent him from sharing, with his contemporaries, the Victorian trend of determinism. Freud humbled the human ego by showing the enormous influence of the unconscious mind on our behavior. If this gave us

psychoanalytic treatment as a new option to increase our freedom from neurosis, it also shockingly truncated the scope of our control, our felt sense of authority over our own lives. No longer “master in its own house,” the ego (“I”) was reduced to an embattled contestant between the punitive superego, and a wild, unconscious Id (“it”), roiling with hidden lust and rage. Today’s psychoanalysis is markedly different—more relational and humane, with new scientific foundations from attachment theory (developed mainly by John Bowlby) and, more recently, from neuropsychanalysis (developed mainly by Mark Solms). But Freud’s determinism remains in the background; it’s in the background, but it remains.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his English collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) developed “Dialectical Materialism,” a deterministic theory of history made still more rigid and shallow by the totalitarian dictators who wielded it in the 20th Century. Every society, they claimed, must go through a set sequence of economic and political stages, each leading inexorably to the next. Subsistence and trade (or “primitive accumulation”) is the beginning, which leads to Feudalism as the nobility consolidate their power, until technological change and social unrest (“class struggle”) create a newly wealthy mercantile class, the *bourgeoisie*. With the growth of technology and, of course, more class struggle, these bring about capitalism, whose systemic injustice creates a vast, abject underclass of workers and peasants, the *proletariat*. Ever more miserable at the hands of their capitalist exploiters, the heroic proletariat engages in further class struggle, until it eventually makes a successful revolution, bringing about the next phase, socialism. Soon enough, under socialism the state “withers away” in the dawning light of communism, the final stage of history, a utopian paradise of shared prosperity, fairness, and general bliss. It didn’t work out that way at all, and tens of millions were starved, executed, imprisoned, or killed in wars, across the Eurasian continent from Eastern Europe and Russia to China and Cambodia, with more mixed results, often quite ugly, in the Western Hemisphere. Part of the shattering disillusion of communism’s horrific failure was the discrediting of its hubristic intellectual idol, Dialectical Materialism—the most disastrously influential form of historical determinism.

Today, however, influential atheists including the neuroscientists Sam Harris and Robert Sapolsky are vocal opponents of both free will and theism, on entirely different grounds than those of Nietzsche, Freud, or Marx. Harris, like Sapolsky, is an ethicist, a humane and discerning person of goodwill, who makes his living sharing his thoughts on a broad range of topics from

neuroscience to politics. Unlike Sapolsky, he is also an advocate for meditation, by way of a vaguely Buddhist, humanist version of spirituality that militantly eschews theism in all its forms. In fact, Harris was one of the “Four Horsemen” of the militant “New Atheism” of the 21st Century’s first decade, comprising Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett (1942-2024), and Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011). Like his fellows, he was and is a wry, arch, even sarcastic critic of most theists, seeming to find them tedious and benighted, or worse. But there is more to Harris than this, and his voice of reason has been an important element in counteracting some of the dangerously irrational trends in American politics and culture since 2016.

With different specifics from those I will improvise now, Robert Sapolsky’s determinist argument highlights a series of timescales that eventuate in a single bad decision of one person violently to attack another. Starting at the scale of millennia, he points to macro-historical forces of political economy that reward aggression and tribalism. At the century scale, lands change hands as specific wars, migrations, germs and technologies cause upheaval, with heritably epigenetic consequences. Decades ago, the man’s intrauterine environment was shaped by maternal stress and poverty; then his own adverse childhood experiences left post-traumatic mental scars. A few years back, he suffered a concussion that adversely modified his brain still further. Days before the assault, he lost his job. A few hours before it, he drank alcohol. Minutes before it, he hurt his hand in a car door. Seconds before it, various neurotransmitters were released into the post-synaptic clefts in his amygdala. And then he struck.

Sapolsky’s formidable expertise as a preeminent neuroscientist equips him to specify the biochemistry of each of these scales of time, rendering concrete their overwhelming constraints on the behavior of the killer in the story, until the jaws of disaster close, and the man becomes a murderer. Forces at every scale of time, from evolution’s two million hominid years, to a neuron’s two millisecond action potential—and from every scale of life, from the whole biosphere down to a bacterium in the human gut—are compounded on his head like granite slabs of influence and constraint, heaped to the sky till nothing—surely—remains of any chimeric “free will.” As Claudius says of old Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, “So much for him!”

I have applauded the erudition, the creativity, and the apparent resigned benevolence of Sapolsky’s *tour de force* lecture, despite its whiff of contempt for the opposition, among which I count myself. Now I am free to repeat the standard objection to any philosopher’s assertion of determinism: come to lunch with me, and read the menu. Whatever hollow experience of choice

you actually feel unfolding as you make your selection, *that* is what will now merit the phrase “free will,” at least *chez vous* (your house, your rules). Calibrate the scale however you like, provided you do leave one end of it available to what you insist is (at least) the *illusion* of free will. *That*, illusion or not, is what the rest of us have in mind when we speak of choices, decisions, and actions, and of the regret, guilt, shame, pride, and admiration that we feel about the conduct of ourselves and of others.

Announcing there is no free will is like announcing “earth is a tiny speck circling an ordinary star in an unremarkable spiral galaxy,” etc. But Earth is the home of all we love and all we create; it is the place of meaning-making, local to this stellar region. Suppose we come upon a comparable species of speaking animals on some other world. Wouldn’t it be boorish, perverse, and needlessly grim to declare their experience and their cultures somehow ordinary and trivial, because their planet, and its star, and their galaxy, was too... physically small?⁵³ Not sufficiently central to a universe that has no center anyway? Similarly, “there is no free will” is a bit like “life has no meaning.” Compared to what? Life *is* meaning; life is where and when meaning happens. A theist can infer that life is far more broad than what Dante called “this so brief vigil of the senses,” but life—whether fleeting or eternal—is the domain of meaning.⁵⁴

Doubtless this familiar rejoinder is already obvious to Dr. Sapolsky and Dr. Harris, just as their own arguments are not lost on me. What divides us (among other things) is the decision—that word again—grimly to *label* this same human situation we all share as something sealed-off from any choice, to declare that “there is no free will,” rather than settle for the less dramatic, less provocative, and less marketable version of what are essentially the same set of observations: our will’s freedom is highly constrained, but it is a real subjective phenomenon, whose role in our existence is so central to life’s value that it would be foolish to dismiss it in the name of those admittedly prodigious constraints. We are not nearly so free as we tend to assume. But that tendency is itself a meaningful part of the picture in which we find ourselves. There is no reward, intrinsic or conferred from without by a panel of hidden judges, for stripping ourselves of this or that ordinary dignity that the world of daily life affords. What would be the

⁵³. It’s best not to wish for a grandiosely huge planet to call home, since the gravitational field of any world much larger than Earth would make life physically impossible. Even here, nothing bigger than the largest sauropods evolved on land, because (per Young’s modulus) bone has an inherent natural limit to its load-bearing capacity.

⁵⁴. Either we are meaning-making citizens of our day, arguing about some new Algeria with some new Camus and Sartre as we improvise our own significance over booze and smoke, or we are the junior cousins of the elephants, the speaking bipedal children of a living God who is Lord of music and the oceans, Maker of the universe, King of time and eternity, the unique ground of all meaning. Take your pick.

point of adding a heaping tablespoon—a shovelful—of nihilism to my own recipe for a life well-lived? I know of no cosmic prize for intellectual integrity, judged on our degree of accord with whatever inferences are the most difficult to tolerate. The Bible is not an unimpeachable revelation of certain Truth, but the world-picture espoused by Sam Harris and his fellows is just one more tissue of modern opinions, as the best of them readily admit in their finer moments. Why should I invite the misery of determinism, atheism, and disenchantment—and that droning monotone, the voice of such sober self-satisfaction that it seems never to have seen a strange thing, nor been taken in ecstasy and terror by the sublime.

Every philosopher—except perhaps Diogenes, the naked and homeless Cynic (from the Greek *kunis*, “dog”) who lived on the street, in his contempt for naive and corrupt human customs—every philosopher, regardless of his or her opinions on free will and determinism, lives a unique human life as if free will were as real as the sunrise. Call the sunrise an illusion if you must—it is the merely circumstantial result of the rotating Earth’s circumsolar position—but it is nevertheless real, a real perceptual experience with a real objective referent in the external world, configured such that this “sunrise” is the resultant. Calling it an illusion because it depends on certain abiding but contingent facts, is like calling love an illusion, merely because it has neural correlates in the brain. It is oxytocin and dopamine, yes—but it is so much more, that the physical side of it is dwarfed by the meaning it neglects. Michelangelo’s *David* is “just” marble; Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Crows* is “only” paint; the Stradivarius in Paganini’s hands as he plays Beethoven’s *Concerto* is “merely” wood. Nope. What Robert Sapolsky has proven is the plain truism that human will is highly constrained, not that it is entirely unfree. That my neighbor is neither an angel nor God Himself, I was already quite confident all along. Jew that I am, I would decline the offer to see *any* man, of any historical age or town, be it Nazareth or Mecca, as “perfect” or omnipotent, proof against all error, transgression, constraint and influence, above the fray of the turning world, and blessed with infinite leverage on his times. “Ripeness is all.”