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The Dialogic Imperative

By
Jay B. Gaskill



Whenever we think we are in intractable trouble, the kind that seems like a dead end, it is only because our dialogic is stuck. We must unstick it. Now would be a good time.

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Forward to

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The September 11, 2011 Edition

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Dialogic –*an overall communication scheme or culture that is characterized by dialogue*

There are communication barriers between the religious and secular, between ideologues, other ideologues and non-ideologues; between and among atheists, agnostics, deists and theists, nationalists and internationalists, and so on and on. But bridging any of those gaps is far easier than shouting across the chasm between reasonable and unreasonable minds. The wall between the reasonable and the unreasonable, between those who are part of the larger dialogic and those who cannot or will not play – that wall is the greatest barrier of all.

Historians have chronicled - and to a degree explained – humanity’s many wars, social and political conflicts, by showing how they arose out of the fracture lines that tend to open up over and over again between opposing interests, cultures and belief systems. The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (535-575 BCE), told us that wars and conflicts are an inherent feature of the human condition.¹ The recent two and a half millennia hardly contradict Heraclitus’ assessment. But not all wars were necessary, nor are all conflicts between positions of equal merit. Conflicts are resolved through a dialogic process, sometimes after the smoke of battle has cleared, sometimes before a battle even begins. But dialogue requires a common language and some measure of underlying agreement on the way things are, in effect, a certain underlying shared world view.

Context frames our decisions, but philosophy frames context. No state of affairs worth struggling to attain, no victory or worthwhile compromise, was achieved in human history without individual decision makers using reliable facts, helped by good luck, but guided by good philosophy.

Why *philosophy*? Whether we choose to study or even attend to it, we are inherently incapable of making a single important decision without employing philosophy. How do we determine the reliability of facts? The problem belongs in the realm of practical epistemology. How we determine the relevance and significance of these facts? That problem belongs in the study of values and meaning, the normative territory of the philosophy of ethics and esthetics. Can we reject philosophy? We can pretend to, but only by embracing the philosophy of nihilism. We can try to ignore the philosophical process, but we can never escape the consequences of disregarding it.

Philosophy is too important to leave to the academics. Our personal philosophies are either an unexamined muddle (the default position), or something we have acquired and

¹ “...war is common, strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity.”

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refined by reflection and introspection. However we have acquired them, our working philosophies are always running in the background; there they serve to filter and frame reality for us, shaping the context of our decisions before we have made them. Our philosophies prune our decision trees.

We are the most supremely adaptive species on the planet because we were endowed with *reason*, by which I mean to include the whole the cognitive suite that includes imagination, creativity, logic, compassion and intuition, among other faculties of the mature mind. Perhaps the most important achievement of adaptive reason was civilization itself, our primary social technology. Civilization remains the single technology by means of which we have ascended to the role of Planet Earth's most successful predator species. We have survived and even thrived so far, only because our immense predatory powers – amplified as they are by civilization – have been coupled with adaptivity and *moral restraint*. As a result we've escaped mass suicide and large scale large scale cannibalism. This is the major survival benefit conferred by the capacity for moral reasoning - and a caution about the consequences of losing that capacity.

Our entire suite of cognitive tools was developed through a process of fruitful person-to-person, mind-to-mind interactions (“I to I”) in the context of a civilized order that facilitated those interactions. We are humans still alive and functioning because of that larger dialogic with other minds (both living and remembered). Civilization, institutional memory and the dialogues that ensued as a result of civilization's facilitation and protection, have served to develop and hugely extend our powers of adaptation. There is grand dialogic through which this is accomplished; it is based on a set of heuristic² strategies, reasoning protocols and information-processing technologies. Foremost among these tools is the art of heuristic dialogue. And that flourishes only where good philosophy prevails.

As I will be arguing throughout, good philosophy honors human life, and the sanctity of unforced human choice in a morally supported milieu that protects unforced human choice in the context of a life-affirming civilization. The huge ongoing question of the human condition is and always has been: Can we recover from bad philosophies? Among the primary features of good philosophies are the moral precepts that support civilization and human creativity. This set includes the affirmation of individual human life, individual human reason and individual human creativity. No good philosophy can operate on the practical level without a robust supporting moral order. The common features of any supporting moral order include the alignment with three core affirmations (life, reason and creativity), and the concomitant commitments to human dignity, honesty, intelligent compassion and individuated justice -as the latter is tempered by humility, humor and intelligent mercy.

Ah, all well and good, you might think, but what about all those practical, real-world application issues that keep tripping us up? This is why we need to maintain an ongoing *heuristic* dialogue. The real world is far too complex and tangled for any fixed set of

² This Greek borrowing (Εὐρίσκω, to find, discover, learn, etc.) is now used in software design, among other places, to describe systems that are capable of learning from their mistakes.

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linear solutions to guide us. The need for an ongoing, corrective dialogue cannot be overstated. Any truly useful dialogue, the kind capable of generating new knowledge and wisdom and of prompting course-corrections requires, does not work for very long without a common normative foundation. That practical requirement requires that we visit and revisit the perennial questions of philosophy, not as some academic exercise but as a necessary first step toward our long term survival and eventual triumph.

The most prevalent form of bad philosophy is Glandular Tribalism (GT) (usually wrapped up in pseudo-intellectual jargon). In GT, the emotional-collective becomes the arch enemy of peace-loving communities of rational, creative individuals. Our glands are the enemies of our rational minds, but more to the point - evil ideation easily infects Glandular Tribalism. The 20th century is an object lesson in the malign consequences of unrestrained GT.

The real question is whether the essentially conservative policies that support the larger liberal goal – which is the optimization of the human condition - can reemerge in the developed world in time to preserve civilization while the rest of the planet gets its act together. Note that I'm using the term conservative here in its most general, ongoing role – the defense of our essential boundaries. Liberalism thrives within those boundaries - crashes without them. The leftist project (as distinguished by the healthy liberal one), is the comprehensive erasure of boundaries, among them, our national and cultural borders, all in the service of equality, even those and other boundaries prove essential to individual self-definition and actualization. This is why the leftist trend always becomes dangerous when left unchecked and uncontained.

Both liberals and conservatives need to honor our essential boundaries. At the risk of sounding apocalyptic, the unchecked path towards a comprehensive erasure of boundaries - moral, political and economic - will not only result in the destruction of Western civilization, but also will put the survival of the human species into question.

Glandular Tribalism fueled Hitler's inner life, and propelled his evil accomplishments, including his vile, racist eugenics projects. Hitler is dead, but GT is alive and well.

Glandular Tribalism can hijack any otherwise rational impulse towards human improvement. The opportunities for GT are many. The roiling resentments in the world, directed at the financial elites, at the successful free countries that have robust boundaries (esp. Israel), and at the presumed cancerous effects of the human species on the biosphere, together constitute the ingredients of a malignant witches' brew. The danger this presents can't be overstated. This is not only a virulently toxic cultural recipe; it is the single most likely candidate to ignite the next wave of authoritarian mass movements. Social and cultural warning signs are evident. In certain fevered minds, the "environment" has become far, far more important than its human stewards are now being called an ecophage, a cancer on the planet earth. If not checked, this malign conception (or something derived from it) will mutate into a moral cancer. Malign ideas readily metastasize in a morally ambivalent environment. If this sort of thing ever reaches critical mass, it can ignite an inferno (holocaust by any name) that will almost certainly

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consume the best of Western civilization (including Israel, most Jews and most Christians as a subset of Judaism, in all about half of the world's decent people). A dark age would follow in the best case, or a species death spiral in the worst case.

The deliberate adoption of authoritarian policies in the service of large scale human death (the great thinning, as it were) is one of those singular bright lines that, when crossed on a sufficiently large scale, will presage the moral demise of the species, just as the holocaust line presaged the demise of German Nazism. After that failure, our species' biological demise would be a mere aftershock.

All optimistic scenarios begin with an honest, informed dialogue among reasonable minds. But those dialogues require more than some fuzzy, new age, crystals-and-aroma-therapeutic fog. They demand mental clarity and reasonable attitudes - minds imbued with conservative wisdom and liberal hope; characters formed in a spirit of honesty, integrity. We are to be saved, if we are to be saved, by a dialogue among reasonable minds well anchored in their commitment to a common moral framework.

I write this on the eve of September 11, 2011, and once again, the human condition seems at grave risk. If you have an ironic sense of history, you might have acquired a virtual collection of apocalyptic announcements – I can imagine a whole set “the end is near” sandwich boards in some closet. I don't want to recite the range of our currently vexing problems and issues here; instead let me quote the sage who reminds us that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”³. Of course, as any historian can tell you, things actually do change. That aphorism is really telling us that our institutions and political arrangements may fluctuate like the tides, but certain aspects of the human condition and human nature stubbornly endure. Of course, there are those constant irritants; we are never without troublemakers and miscreants. But we are never without the resources to move our lives forward. In our latest troubles, our conversations seem too circular to lead us anywhere; our conflicting positions seem too intransigent, and our disagreements seem too unbridgeable. This, too, will pass. From Socrates to Buber, we have learned more from our interpersonal dialogues than from all our posturings, fads, blind imitations and arrogant assertions combined. Dialogue, once again, will save us.

I believe that the German philosopher, Hegel, sowed a great deal of mischief when he introduced the notion of the *dialectic* as a great law of historical development that would govern all progress. “*Thus, the march of reason through history is a complex dialectical process, in which both individuals and nations are mere tools, unaware of the import and significance of their own deeds.*”⁴ This is turgid stuff - I have no intention of getting us sidetracked into the dark forests of German philosophy.

Twentieth century authoritarians like Marx and Lenin adopted the pattern of the Hegelian dialectic in the service of a brutally dictatorial theory of social engineering. Their whole loony exercise masqueraded as science. When the Marxists appropriated Hegel's top-

³ Attributed to the Italian revolutionary, Garibaldi, but he undoubtedly stole the aphorism from some earlier sage.

⁴ Introduction to the 1820 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894)

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down construct, their materialist dialectic became a clumsily parody of a real dialogue, impersonal, without nuance, and without the sense of correction and accommodation that accompanies our best personal conversations. Marxist dialectic materialism is to human dialogue as the clumsy dance of Frankenstein's monster is to the graceful *fouetté* of a ballerina. Human dialogue is too messy, too beautiful and often too funny to fit some neat, abstract formula.

Science has advanced the human condition. But scientism?⁵ Not so much. In an important sense, the hypotheses and experimental tests of empirical science, those carefully structured inquiries and answers, are part of our species' fruitful dialogues with nature. But vast areas of human enquiry lie outside of all direct, experimental tests and verification. In those areas, too, our ongoing dialogic with the unknown and each other continues yield results that increase the depth and scope of our knowledge. Scientism, if taken seriously, denies the very moral framework that motivates and guides the scientific enterprise.

Whenever we think we are in intractable trouble, the kind that seems like a dead end, it is only because our dialogic is stuck. We must unstick it. Now would be a good time.

Personal Journeys

For most of my legal career, I was privileged - if that is the word - to spend thousands of hours in face-to-face confidential discussions with the inhabitants of the criminal *under-culture*. I refuse to give this sad, crippled cohort the stature or glamor we sometimes attach to the term "underworld", but I do love the old fashioned criminals, the ones still endowed with residual consciences⁶.

In my journey, I was made acutely and painfully aware of our failure as a culture to transmit the core precepts and principles of interpersonal morality to the next generations – this is a regressive trend that has gradually accelerated. I have become persuaded that, without really secure underpinnings - anchored well beyond fads and evanescent cultural trends, the whole moral infrastructure of civilization will ultimately fail. Until the advent of full-on post-modernity, those underpinnings were fairly well supported by the traditional religions. But our culture's moral support system, like the foundation of a shoreline beach house, has begun to fall away – except within certain perfervid fundamentalist subcultures where it has been perverted.

⁵ Scientism describes the hubristic claim that all real knowledge is scientific knowledge. This takes out ethics, among other things, as a restraining force, and it provides a seductive opening for the exploitation of all scientific technologies for malign purposes. As a Nazi war criminal writing from Spandau prison, Reichminister Speer described how Hitler's regime exploited the amoral enthusiasms of the technicians and scientists. "*Basically, I exploited the phenomenon of the technician's [read amoral scientist here] often blind devotion to his task. Because of what seems to be the moral neutrality of technology, these people were without scruples about their activities.*" (Albert Speer. (*Inside The Third Reich*, Simon & Schuster 1970).

⁶ See my essay posted at <http://www.jaygaskill.com/THUGOLOGY101.htm> .

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I am ever reminded of Yeats' words, "*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world; the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.*" From William Butler Yeats' poem, "*The Second Coming*": It was written in 1919, and first published in 1921, well before the advent of the Soviet purges, the Nazi death camps and the current murderous Jihadist eruptions.

No one denies that there is bad religion. But there is also very good religion, and without any religion we would need to recover its core support function (underpinning the essential moral precepts of civilization), or work posthaste to fashion a robust substitute. Without religion's core functions, things fall apart and the center cannot hold. The attempt to come up with a working substitute so far has been botched: Faux scientific Marxism and the faux scientific eugenic racism of German National Socialism were ersatz religions.⁷ Their spectacularly malevolent consequences are the 20th century's most grisly object lessons. This leaves us mere mortals with an urgent project: to recover robust, good religion or, alternatively to take on the daunting task of finding a substitute that can persuasively and powerfully answer the following question: *Why should we even CARE about the generations who will follow us?* In either of those endeavors (which are by no means in irreconcilable conflict), we will need a robust, heuristic dialogue. You think that is easy?

Enter a wise philosopher named Jacob:

"Twist and turn as we may, explain it or deconstruct it as we may, we know that though we may be animals, we are ethical animals. In everyone, in every place, in every occasion of our lives and culture we see that we are failing what we are meant to be – and we suffer from that, we run from one answer to another – religion, relativism, psychology, medical drugs, psychotropic drugs, mass movements, charismatic leaders, fundamentalisms of all kinds from the religious to the atheistic to the scientific; we run here and there looking for our moral power, trying to exercise it even though all evidence screams out to us that we do not have this power, that we cannot be the moral beings we know, down deep, that we are meant to be." (p 244, *Why Can't We Be Good?*" (Penguin 2007 by Jacob Needleman)

I was one in a diverse group of readers that convened in a Berkeley bookstore (sadly, now shuttered, like so many independent booksellers) to hear Professor Needleman talk about his new book. Dr. Needleman has taken some giant steps in honing ordinary language so that it speaks meaningfully and simultaneously to our culture's religious and secular ethical sensibilities. And, *inter alia*, he also has just made a very persuasive case for an innate human conscience, the inner stirrings of moral agency, impaired by our crippled and cramped understanding. I can't do his latest work justice here (it's accessible, insightful and deserves careful study), but this short summary may convey a flavor of his contribution.

⁷ As the famous longshoreman-philosopher, Eric Hoffer, persuasively argued in his classic, *The True Believer, Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, Harper & Rowe 1951.

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The famous story about Hillel the Elder is central to Needleman's account. Some scholars are familiar (in one form or other) with the first century Jewish narrative in which Hillel was confronted by a young man (presumably he was seeking the Cliff notes version of the Law) who challenged the great teacher to summarize the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel agreed. He then recited a version of the biblical injunction (from Leviticus) to love one's neighbor ("don't do to another that which is hateful to yourself") as a summary of the entire corpus of the law. He then told the young man that, "All the rest is commentary. Go and study!"⁸

Dr. Needleman (a self-described "Jewish boy") was by far the oldest soul in the standing-room-only book talk area, but he quietly and lucidly demonstrated the supple mind of someone four decades younger. It was refreshing to encounter a professional philosopher (Dr. Needleman taught philosophy at San Francisco State) for whom the grand old subject represents the integration of real life lessons. His was the kind of discourse in which one hears insights from Plato, Socrates, the Stoics, Meister Eckhart, Paul the Apostle, and Hillel the Elder. And more deeply impressive still, was his transparent moral authenticity. When Dr. Needleman talked about *conscience* as a faculty, as something far deeper and more important than Freud's "superego", he was sharing a secret lost on the post-modern culture, and he was revealing his own life journey.

Dr. Needleman's thesis obviously distills a lifetime of living, study, reflection and applied interaction with the world and his own internal self. In his Berkeley talk he shared a classroom technique he had successfully employed on several occasions. In one classroom demonstration, two women agreed to participate in a structured dialogue on a topic about which they passionately disagreed. One was fervently pro-choice, the other devoutly pro-life. The rules required each to really listen to the other, and to demonstrate that by summarizing the opposing position to the satisfaction of its proponent before advancing her own. As Dr. Needleman described it, the dialogue went on for some time, eventually resolving itself without agreement. But professor and class were able note two things: (a) something new seemed to have emerged in the dialogue, a shared area of value-agreement between the participants; (b) the two disputants walked out of the classroom arm in arm.



Some books by Jacob Needleman

Why Can't We Be Good? Penguin 2007

What is God? Penguin 2009

The Heart of Philosophy Penguin 1982, 2003

⁸ I note that a few years later, another rabbi (Jesuah, AKA Jesus) said much the same thing, after reciting the *shema*, the injunction to love G-d. See Mark 12:30

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INTRODUCTION

Reflections on Awe, Wisdom and Weaponized Doubt

Science has not killed the religious enterprise any more than Nietzsche killed God.

We must undertake the task of climbing out of that arid desert of the soul -- that imagined realm where there exists no good, no evil, and no love, except that which is bestowed for self-centered reasons. I believe this is a matter of our survival. To find our way out we need to achieve a truly universal perspective, and to take in its deep implications.

THE PALE BLUE DOT

We have a hint of that process from that nominal atheist, Carl Sagan, who wrote:

“We succeeded in taking that picture [from deep space], and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.

“The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.

“Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity -- in all this vastness -- there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us. It’s been said that astronomy is a humbling, and I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

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This is the most famous excerpt from a commencement address delivered by the late Carl Sagan on May 11, 1996

I find it deeply significant that human intelligence is able to proceed from an awe-at-creation narrative (Sagan was a secular Jew) to an ethic of kindness and compassion. Awe is the beginning of wisdom. Why do you suppose that could be true?

Science may lead the scientist to the edge of awe but has nothing to say about the experience or its implications. Science does not instruct us to doubt the very organizational principles on which the scientific enterprise is founded, nor does it advocate unreasonable doubt concerning those areas of human experience and belief, such as love and trust, about which the metrics of strict empiricism are so obviously inadequate. But science, as such does not tell us why we should pursue it.

Faith is a much-abused term, often derided in modern secular circles as the blind obedience to some arbitrary authority. But it has a wiser and more useful meaning: faith as a critical but curious mind's readiness to adopt a reality model (even if provisionally) for which there is less than absolute, empirical proof. I propose that this kind of faith is the necessary adaptation by any rational mind to the challenges of life in the real world in which reality presents us with far too much, far too quickly. Events, personalities and relationships that carry embedded meaning and value are not the sorts of existents that can pass any rigid absolute-empirical-proof test.

All trust relationships contain a measure of faith. So when the term faith is used in this essay, it refers to reasonable faith, as in the faith that is necessary for a reasonable mind to operate in the real world. Faith in this sense requires courage. Reasonable faith is heuristic in the sense that it is only by means of growing trust that we can open ourselves to the full range of knowledge that the universe presents to us.

There is a faith path from Isaac Newton through Baruch Spinoza to Albert Einstein that has propelled the scientific enterprise: Each of these great minds was moved by the faith-based conviction that the universe has been endowed with an elegant underlying design, so miraculously intelligible to human intelligence that scientists are justified in doggedly pursuing its secrets.

Einstein found the ineligibility of the world to be a marvel. In a letter written in his last year, he said,

“You find it surprising that I think of the comprehensibility of the world (insofar as we are entitled to speak of such world) as a miracle or an eternal mystery. But, surely, a priori, one should expect the world to be chaotic, not to be grasped by thought in any way. One might (indeed should) expect that the world evidenced itself as lawful only so far as we grasp it in an orderly fashion. This would be a sort of order like the alphabetical order of words. On the other hand, the kind of order created, for example, by Newton's gravitational theory is of a very different character. Even if the axioms of the theory are

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posited by man, the success of such a procedure supposes in the objective world a high degree of order, which we are in no way entitled to expect a priori.”⁹

I would venture to say that most working scientists are prone to acknowledge that, in the beautiful handwork of nature, one discovers the “mind of God”, even while a subset of the same group might resist the implications of that thought. But God, even as a metaphor, has the power to increase understanding.

Weaponized Doubt

For the intellectual rebels of the last century, doubt became a weapon, selectively employed, to attack the social authority structures seen as oppressive (as were the religiously supported institutions of royal privilege, for example). But the arrogance of doubt was not to be denied, leading to challenges to any authority structure or system administered by those who could be described as the “less intelligent”, even when the moral precept being challenged was *prima facie* valid. Weaponized doubt became a scattershot weapon. There was a huge collateral damage toll in the last century; consider the millions of victims of just two “scientific” ideologies of the day, authoritarian Marxism and National Socialism. The echoes of the doubt-weapon persist in the 21st century. Liberation ideologies tend, perversely, to be all about the liberation of the self-anointed intelligentsia from moral constraints “invented by lesser minds”. Thus, conscientious ethicists who warn us about the moral perils of opening up a market in fetuses and improperly obtained human body parts are dismissed as anti-science religious nuts. This is a charge I can readily imagine being levied against physicians squeamish about some of the Nazi medical experiments in the 40’s.

There is plenty of fresh collateral damage from weaponized doubt. When it is aimed at “G-d”¹⁰, it really is aimed at any ultimate moral authority. Weaponized doubt promotes forms of moral narcissism, both harmless and malevolent. The most serious risk: weaponized doubt promotes blindness to true evil. I’m talking here about the cold blood dripping, flat out evil of Adolph Hitler and his amoral clones, not the rhetorical evil-as-impurity. Blindness of that sort actually serves to divert us from and therefore empower true Evil, endowing it by default with the preternatural power of a blowtorch in a gasoline soaked forest.

We humans *yearn* to integrate the mundane and the sublime, to integrate the laboratory world (with its measurable weights, energies, qualities and properties) with the equally real world of meanings, beauties and portents. So we begin by *asking questions*.

⁹ A. Einstein, “Lettres a Maurice Solovine” (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1956)

¹⁰ Why did I just drop the vowel in G-d? **YHWH** is the most common English version of the sacred Hebrew name for G-d. Note the absence of vowels. In English, the Hebrew tradition continues. But there is more to the “G-d naming problem” than a linguistic convention. The very notion of naming something implies the assumption of a degree of control, and it inevitably imports a sense of limitation. In the mystical tradition (one that runs through and beyond the major world religions) the notion recurs that one should not attempt to name the divine being at all, because the direct experience of the numinous communicates much more than any mere name can “capture”.

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It started with the child's first, "Why?"

We feel deeply called to acquire deep understanding of the world and our place in it. Why not? We humans arrived on scene as the carriers of meaning. We are the universe "come awake" and full of questions.

We are hard wired to find the deepest most coherent integration of all knowledge -- although most of us, most of the time don't think of it in those terms. But this very quest drives us to explore our interactions with the material world *and within our minds*. This very quest drives scientists, explorers, poets, philosophers *and theologians*. We seek to knit together the world inside our heads with the outside world that can bite us, feed us, annoy us, scare us and enthrall us. Why do we seek this integration? We are endowed -- or cursed, some would say - with an insatiable thirst, for answers, for *explanations*. We have been implanted with a built-in "Why?"

All of the deep and satisfying explanations involve discovered and rediscovered *connections*. We are willing to stay in the quest because *keep finding* new connections. We are driven to continue that quest, because we *thirst* for meaning, and because, on a deep level, we *know* that, somehow, some day *we will find it*.

That very confidence is sometimes shaken, but never extinguished. It is the faith that drives scientists who seek "the Theory of Everything" and the theologians who seek "the Maker of Everything". All of their efforts rest on a single foundation: the conscious or unconscious *a priori* conviction that reality really *is* an integrated whole without arbitrary breaks and discontinuities. We may or may not be the product of an original sin, but we inherited the enduring belief that all things are deeply and mutually integrated and that we came into the universe equipped sufficient powers of reason to uncover that integration; that inheritance is our species' *original faith*.

And it is a *reasonable* faith, because it is powerfully *heuristic*: Without such a heuristic faith, we would lack sufficient confidence in our own cognitive powers, and we would more readily abandon the long quest towards the 'great attractor', the goal towards which those cognitive powers are leading us. So our project demands faith-as-fuel: the core belief that we *will* discover the hidden connections, correlations and unities of all reality powered the scientific revolution of the 18th century and it continues.

WALKING HUMBLY AND LISTENING

"And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." – Micah 6:8

Frequently, we hear the claim that all religion is "made up". This view is common among the secular humanists, but it has wide consequences, such as -- if religion is all made up, the why are not morality and logic and our very notions of the true, the good and the beautiful also 'made up'? This presents a downward slope to a subjectivist

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nightmare where there is no “real” morality except that which someone asserts it to be. Historically, this has led susceptible minds to adopt power-based ethics, otherwise known as the “might makes right” school of thought (if thought it is).

A friend, a physicist in a spiritual quest, asked me for my comments on the “all religion is made up” thesis. That prompted a good deal of reflection. Those of us who are embedded in a community spiritual life somewhere (read religion) are all too painfully aware that religious institutions can get in the way of spiritually mediated insight and moral wisdom.

But “made up”? My first thought was, *Ah, but is mathematics made up?* Actually this is not a trivial issue. The persistent fad of the modern “enlightened culture” is full-on materialism. In the philosophical sense, this is the notion that all that is real (and they really mean all) is fully accounted for by the physical realm of matter, energy in the space-time continuum.

The comprehensive materialist notion is completely antithetical to Plato’s vision of reality, and common sense. Plato, Pythagoras and other ancient thinkers adopted a view that, in effect, that “true” reality consists of essentially perfect, eternal form, discoverable by the mind, but only shabbily and transiently represented in the messy realm we people temporarily inhabit. In its extreme forms, this anti-materialist idea led – by extension – to all kinds of unreasonable spin-off notions, particularly to the silly notion that sex is impure and that humanity is inherently corrupt (well that’s not so silly, but you get the notion how obnoxious this kind of thing can seem in its extreme forms), and so on...

But the extreme version of materialism (I’m calling this mindset “arch-materialism”) is even more pernicious, leading to the ridiculous notion that even the core logical findings of mathematics are “made up” as opposed to discovered. This path can and often does lead us to the truly malign point of view that human morality is “made up”. This in turn leads to cultural and moral relativism. And one arrives eventually at the impasse: moral paralysis in the face of evil (because for these disabled minds evil can’t exist except as a cultural construct) and so on... You get the idea.

I am convinced that our culture’s salvation will start with the insight that *all reality is deeply integrated*. This is not really a novel idea and is rapidly emerging as a working paradigm because, after all, the conviction that reality makes sense to reason, which is the core faith of the entire scientific enterprise, is based on the *a priori* assumption of deep reality integration. Isaac Newton did his science, while driven by the conviction that G-d made nature intelligible to the mind of man.

The plain inadequacy of using arch-materialism in a satisfactory explanatory model of “life, the universe and everything” is its Achilles heel. Some things can’t be reduced.¹¹ The scientific mind and the spiritual mind share that same faith.

¹¹ Glory (using the term here as a stand-in for wonder, awe, esthetic and ethical enlightenment) can be *poetically* compressed, but it cannot be *physically reduced*; similarly, Schrödinger’s cat (the hapless feline in quantum physicist E. Schrödinger’s eponymous thought experiment) might be dissected and reduced in a heated crucible to her constituent elements, but not without losing the essence of the little creature herself.

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When we take the intuition of ultimate integration seriously, we are no longer willing to sharply bifurcate our methods of acquiring and evaluating knowledge, as some thinkers have attempted to do. The ancient, now mostly discredited “idealists” (using the term in its technical, philosophical sense), believed that all knowledge is “in our heads”. The latter-day arch “materialists” (again using the term in its technical sense) advocate (though, most secretly don’t really believe) that all knowledge is discovered by testing the material world, that there is nothing more to “life, the universe and everything” than matter, energy and the patterns that they tend to take in space-time.

The lowly possum has a bifurcated brain, one in which the huge bandwidth connections between left and right hemispheres (that we smart humans take for granted) are missing. You can show something to a possum’s left side without the right side “knowing” anything about it.

The artificial bifurcation between the material and spiritual, between the real of the measurable physical and that of un-measurable meaning is a mental disability. It is as if we humans had decided to emulate the lowly possum. This dualistic fracture is particularly disabling in our ‘assigned’ project (using all we can know to model all that is). To go forward, we no longer dissociate epistemology (about the art of discovering reality) and metaphysics (about the grand reality picture we seek). Instead, we need to pursue a mutually correcting dialogue between the two. We continue to build, test and refine our comprehensive world picture. We allow our philosophy of knowledge to be informed by that larger world view and empowered by the faith of ultimate integration that drives it.

The non-material realm of form and order, re-understood in the 21st century, is capable of containing much more complex and dynamic forms than Plato conceived of, such as the evolution modeling algorithms or the common design features of living organisms, as well as the whole of human culture. Surely that realm and the physical-material realm are equally real – after all we live in both. If so, it is reasonable to conclude that these two realms are in active relationship with each other in a sort of mutual interpenetration.

Following that reasoning, *the mind* must have a special place in this integrated picture of reality.¹² The mind is the stage where values and meanings appear.

In this model of reality, mathematics is a discovered property that is shared by the material and non-material realms. So it is hardly coincidental that mathematics is such a brilliantly successful tool in describing the physical world, *but so are esthetics and ethics*. It is no accident (I believe) that our esthetic and ethical sensibilities are very closely related cognitive faculties. That is to say – meaning and purpose are also discovered properties of the universe, of “all reality”. They are manifested in us because we are the

¹² Note the use of *mind* as the more inclusive term than mere *brain*. The latter is better understood as a communication instrumentality in the same sense that a radio receiver or iPod are communication instrumentalities for the songs or symphonies they carry.

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universe some awake. Our meaning-encounters are discoveries rather than inventions. Cultures and languages frame meaning but do not create it.

The information age (in the form of reality-modeling computer algorithms, reality-simulating computer games, and reality-manipulating “intelligent” systems) has taught us something new about the world. Cogently and persuasively, the information age has demonstrated to millions of people that information, *qua information*, a non-material aspect of reality is both ethereal and powerful.

Of course, raw information in the bits and bytes sense, blindly conveys meaning, but does not constitute meaning. When Buckminster Fuller said that “the medium is the message” he meant only that our choice of media affects the messages that can be carried and, to that extent, affects our reactions to the conveyed messages.

The conscious mind becomes the venue in the universe wherein the two realms are in their most intensely active relationship with each other. In a sort of neo-Copernican model, we can imagine a “value space” surrounding and interpenetrating our “mind space” (using space metaphorically), whenever a conscious decision is made. Meaning is discovered, as a distributed property of the developing universe, an artifact of a creator being, but not as whimsical caprice of a random, absurd universe.

These views are not offered as some sort of doctrine, but as one submission to our general dialogic, the product of a particular life-path. Each of us is individually entitled (and I would even say obligated) to independently form our own particular world view whether we choose to see it as probably or very probably true (the demand for absolute certainty is trap) and whether it is provisionally adopted or firmly committed to; and in this process we are to rely on our own powers of reason and our own assessments of the credibility and scope of trust we give to our various sources. Revision is inevitable. Critical reason is forever needed. Humility is heuristic.

For me, one insight opened up all the rest -- that the overall integration of reality is a primal fact, the *a priori* key to further knowledge about life, the universe and everything.

This section represents what I have come to believe as a result of that first insight. For example, I was persuaded early on that information (in its very broadest sense) is real in a radically comprehensive sense. In fact, I quickly came to believe that information has a dual ontology¹³, in that it operates/exists both in the “Platonic” (or non-material) realm and in the physical mechanical realm. This was the insight that led me to believe that the relationship between material and non-material existents frames the meta-dialogic of all reality. And this led in turn to my current understanding (as metaphorically expressed) that mind is an *amphibious creature* that touches the realm of *information* and that of

¹³ Sorry to introduce a technical term. The philosophical term, *ontology* just refers to the categories of reality. Arch-materialists deny the validity of the realm of form that to Plato and Pythagoras constituted the primary reality; for these materialists, that “ghost” realm was nothing more than a gloss on the material reality, completely derivative from the material world, a body of mere illusion. Extreme materialists deny the independent ontological status of non-material being. Our conscious being, for these minds, is a mere epiphenomenon.

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active physical events. I visualized our minds as existing partly submerged in the pond of “mere” physicality and partly emerged in the sky of “pure” eternity.

We thinking, feeling beings are the interface between these two realms. We are the venue of the meta-dialogic. There is an overall rational structure to our values that can be mapped (more on that project a bit later).

In my adopted model, all religious practices, doctrines, rituals and liturgies, are *software*, essentially functioning as connectivity protocols. Recall that not all software can run on every platform¹⁴. When a particular software suite works for us, it successfully facilitates our deepest *connections* to other morally aware humans across space and time, and (ideally) to the *numinous*¹⁵. These connections can be understood as dialogic pathways to our larger common reality.

Someone doesn't often arrive at a worldview overnight or as a result of a single noetic flash. I certainly didn't. It took me years of introspection, reflection and dialogue. This is a path I suppose that we all take in some form, whether consciously or unconsciously.

My starting point was a sort of Spinoza-deist¹⁶ intimation of the wholeness of all things, followed by an intellectual and interior journey characterized by baby steps of heuristic¹⁷ faith. Over time, I became gradually convinced that the *numinous* experience is the apprehension of a numinous level of reality, that the numinous is truly discovered rather than invented. My insight that the numinous is our experience of an aspect of reality was transformative. It represented (as I came to see it) a glimpse of that which transcends but includes nature - the space time continuum and all the laws that operate in it and on it.

Now, we might be said to “invent” our numinous connection modalities...but only the modalities (thinking of religious and meditative practices, for example). We invent our spiritual technologies the sense that someone might design a better procedure for meditation or a faster modem. But I am personally convinced that we did not invent the

¹⁴ One might say, for example, that the Buddhist operating systems and the Islam operating systems are not compatible, although the Sufi mystical OS can facilitate some fruitful interoperability. ☺

¹⁵ *Numinous* is a quasi-religious term that describes the human contact with or experience of the ineffable, the “mountaintop experience”, of that sense of awe and wonder of something “other”, inherently recognized as having a powerful spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, a nominal atheist, described this experience in poetic secular language in a famous passage from his book “Pale Blue Dot”-- referring to the awe, wonder and more one can experience when seeing earth from space. Others – the Medieval mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart and Siddharta Gautama who became the Buddha – have related the same experience in unambiguously spiritual terms. I cannot dismiss these experiences and “mere psychological states”, but instead accept them as insights (really aspects of the same insight) into reality itself.

¹⁶ Deism – essentially the world view of Thomas Jefferson and Albert Einstein – acknowledges a creative intelligence as the architect of the natural world and the laws that govern its operation, but sees this deity as either impersonal and/or not directly involved in how creation thereafter unfolds.

¹⁷ Heuristic is my favorite word these days. Mindsets capable of learning from experience are necessarily structured to operate in the faith that there really is something to be learned. If one rules out, *a priori*, the very possibility that, say, a cetacean might be sentient, then significant clues and cues are missed. If one dismisses, out of hand, the prospect of discovering non-local sentience, the clues and cues that might point to the existence of a creative intelligence - whether named God or not – will also be missed.

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inherited cognitive suite that enables our connection strategies to work, nor the domain of reality to which our experience of the numinous links us.

I really do believe that the *numinous* is a discovered, transcendent aspect of reality. There is a large body of literature about personal encounters with the numinous. I see these as field reports. In the countless individual experiences of the numinous, a distinct thread has emerged. Many report detecting *Being* at the very center, others a *Supreme Being*, *Ur-Being* or *Original Being*, *Ultimate Archetype of Being* or *Ground of Being*...or just *Beingness*.

The Buddhist experience of an oceanic compassion (another description of the numinous), is not to be parsed or analyzed (the Buddha explicitly promoted a method, not a metaphysical doctrine), but the experience points – inescapably in my world view – to a source *being*. I arrived at this conclusion because, in my world-view, only a sentient being is capable of compassion. Therefore, if the numinous is a discovered level of reality, rather than an intermittent psychological state, then its source is non-local and non-material, rather than local and material. It feels, ergo is a being; it is non-local, ergo a transcendent being.

The mystical tradition (which arises from the corpus of the reports by witnesses and seers who have reported their numinous experiences as transformative) favors not naming this *being* on the reasonable grounds that any name imposes implicit, inappropriate limits to that which is beyond human limits. The theology tradition favors naming this Being on the equally reasonable grounds that we benefit from discussion and dialogue, and because naming our subject is usually helpful to that conversation.

But there is another reason to avoid using a name for the being that inhabits (or subtends) the numinous: the risk of tribal appropriation. I regret – really I oppose - the tendency of some religious institutions to try to monopolize or narrowly channel our access to the numinous, in effect to appropriate our personal access to G-d (by whatever name or no name at all), or to filter and manage that access. The worst case of this is the appropriation of the name of deity (i.e., someone's idea of deity) in the cause of political repression. This “my God is stronger than your god” business is a common power-temptation, subject to all of the potential abuses of worldly power - whether cloaked as appropriated divine authority or not.

I had long believed there actually are essential *universals* resident outside (or alongside) physical/material reality that are subject to discovery, a view shared by Plato, Einstein and Bertrand Russell, among others. But I was thinking not only of the Pythagorean Theorem, the harmonic relationships in music theory, but also of the esthetic notion of *elegance* used by theoretical physicists when provisionally assessing the plausibility of a new theory and the core moral principles that exist to govern interpersonal relationships. When I thought through the implications, I realized with a bit of a start that moral principles find their ur-source in compassion and a sense of justice, and that these are the attributes or the signature of sentient being. Years later when I read C S Lewis as he

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described his journey away from atheism, I noted that, for him, the most compelling argument was the existence of a moral order.

Many modern thinkers have said (as is consistent with Spinoza's pantheism) that "all is God". But without attributing the authorship of a universal set of moral principles or precepts to deity – or some equivalent universally-rooted authority, we are drawn back into the subjectivist nightmare.¹⁸

So when I concluded that one common, sentient, normative (i.e., value-affirming) being hovers at the source-point of the compassionate and benign aura that accompanies the human experience of the numinous, my leap was not an unreasonable one. Whether it is persuasive to you or anyone else depends in part on whether you have experienced the numinous, or alternatively, have learned enough from trusted sources to accept its reality and character.

For me, once the full implications of a total integration of the numinous and mundane were recognized, the sense of an encounter with benign *personality* became inescapable. The essence and value of our encounters are as free from the greedy grasp of tribal ownership as are the principles of geometry. And the numinous realm is as different from the cold realms of mathematics as is the trusting face of a little child who loves you. The source of the benign affect that accompanies and characterizes the numinous has been recognized by countless thousands as the signature of a benign being. Having shared the experience, I can't dismiss these accounts, and I decline to psychologize them away.¹⁹

I came to visualize this Being as the primal source of our moral awareness, operating in potential communication with all receptive, morally-receptive minds. For me – and many others, this benign persona is resident at the center of all reality.²⁰

¹⁸ Alternatively, to conflate the "good" with the entire universe in its current state is to degrade the good. But the theodicy issues (as the class of "if God is benevolent, what hasn't he done a better job" is called) are way too convoluted and messy to engage in this piece. Suffice it to say that a developing, unfinished universe, presents the problems in an entirely different light.

¹⁹ I first encountered the term when reading Karen Armstrong's, *A History of God*. The various definitions converge in describing an apprehension of something ineffable, with great sublimity, beauty, an *encounter* freighted with spiritual implications and even a Presence. Our atheist friends might describe it somewhat dismissively as a mere esthetic state, like Carl Sagan's rapture when contemplating the earth as a Pale Blue Dot in space. But Sagan's experience was unmistakably spiritual. It comes down to this: Does the numinous experience evidence a numinous *reality*? Thousands of saints and mystics have reported the latter. I find it hardly coincidental, (nor particularly surprising), that the many recorded accounts of human encounters with the numinous level of experience over the last five millennia (from Moses, the Buddha, the Hasadim, the Christ, the saints, seers, shamans, mystics, artists, musicians, and scientists, the skeptics during unguarded moments, the ordinary people in their "mountaintop experiences", and most children during their thoughtful innocence) are deeply consistent with the insights that describe two overlapping realms of reality, the material world of space-time events and an eternal realm suffused with meaning and value.

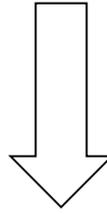
²⁰ Evolution is outside the scope of this essay. But it is instructive that the overall pattern of the successive "accidents" in biological evolution (in the context of a universe that was "accidentally" fine-tuned for the emergence of life) is that of the gradual emergence of increasingly information-sensitive systems. Think of a progression from the tropic mechanism of a sunflower plant to the ethics-sensitive mind of a rabbi. A link to my articles, *Naming the Universe* and *The Designs of Intelligence*, which continue this line of discussion, are set out just before the [Bibliography](#) at the end of the present article.

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However we resolve those theological or metaphysical issues for ourselves, our task (when we choose to undertake it) becomes one of discernment and discovery. I believe that we are called to undertake to decode of the embedded meaning of our encounters with the numinous, knowing that millions have shared the same experience, not screen it out as some intrusive chimera or illusion as the arch-materialists would have us do. Surely this is an effort that is facilitated by an ongoing dialogue with other intelligent morally-aware persons.

I am strongly drawn to this translating-decoding model in part because it suggests that we need the humility of a bad translator-decoder, coupled the confidence that our core moral sense actually comes from a universal source. In life's challenges we are frequently called to summon sufficient moral confidence for us to take risks, tempered by the humility and humor needed to avoid making pests of ourselves as moral Nannies. The sturdy courage that accompanies true moral confidence is never more vitally needed than when we confront the really large issues of evil and wickedness; moral courage is as necessary to our survival as air and water. What subjectivist, feel-good moral system would have prompted hundreds of brave men and women to bus themselves into the 1960's Deep South, risking (and sometimes losing) life and limb, just to oppose segregation? Moral confidence tempered by caution, beats normative paralysis. But true moral courage defeats evil.

The empirical model does provide guidance outside the domain of physical experiment, especially as interpersonal dialogues expose and reinforce our common insights, but it is necessarily more stochastic and intuitive as it is applied within the esthetic, ethical and spiritual domains. Scripture holds valuable information: When read carefully, but allegorically, it consists of a huge body of lab notes.



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Martin Buber and the Future of Dialogue

In my twenties, I recognized the falling away of the underpinnings of common morality as a result of the structural damage done by a pathological extension of skepticism. I imagined the whole body of human ethical principles, precepts and core beliefs as body of water held together by a bucket which represented the religious underpinnings of morality. That was frame one.

In frame two, the bucket is removed, revealing the temporarily bucket-shaped glistening contents hanging in the air. In frame three, without any support, the contents become a quivering blob. And in frame four, gravity takes over. The “modern” culture hovers between frames two and four....

As the late Douglas Adams might say, the mystery of Life, the Universe, and Everything is more about the quality of the question than the deceptive simplicity of the “answer”.²¹ Here we will explore some of my threshold reflections and the resulting questions:

Among the first questions: Why is existence?

The universe is unfinished. We awake into it, endowed with the capacity for reason, creativity, compassion and a longing for meaning and purpose. That we were born into an unfinished project suggests a message to those of us who are able to discern our place in the order of things as creative beings. What might be encoded in that primal fact, in the conditions of our discovery, and our self-knowledge as creative beings? Are we assigned a role in the overall creative project? At the very minimum, the intimations of conscience tell us that our relationships carry obligations.

By now it should be evident to all thinking people that ethical belief in the sophisticated subcultures has lost its firm moorings, and that a trickle-down effect has eroded the ethical moorings of the less sophisticated.

²¹ Fans of Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series will recall that the immense supercomputer, Deep Thought, having been assigned the centuries-long task of discerning the Meaning of Life, the Universe and Everything, finally came up with the answer: **42**. I’ve always thought that Deep T, having been asked the wrong question, was spitting out a fault code because it was at “sixes and sevens”.

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I am reasonably optimistic that recovery from this condition is possible. Decadent cultures eventually do experience a recrudescence of moral belief. The challenge is whether this can happen without first being conquered by atavistic barbarians. There are at least five seeds from which an optimistic scenario can be imagined:

1. The recognition that arch-materialism is dead will spread;
2. the understanding that the universe is an unfinished project will grow and provoke thought about our role;
3. the realization that creative emergence in this universe ultimately invalidates “accidentalism”, suggesting a return of the sense of an overarching human purpose;
4. the growing understanding that the main props of the anti-religious secular-materialist mind are slipping;
5. the emerging belief in the profound integration of reality and the essential unity of being; this mindset, which is natural to healthy conscious intelligence, will begin to return as the underpinnings of secular materialism begin to give way.

My survey of religious and anti-religious sensibilities revealed five general approaches to the problem of ethical authority, no one of which is entirely satisfactory:

1. The rational, religious mind incorporating the promise (inherently unverifiable within the arch-materialist framework) of post-mortal consequences for moral/immoral behavior;
2. Post-modern mysticism which (at its best) promotes an ethics-friendly spiritual hedonism that offers immediate psychic rewards for the “right” path;
3. A “quivering blob” humanism in which the religious underpinnings of common moral precepts are reasserted in an “as if” model. Think of the Judeo-Christian or classical moral ethos without any “supernatural” baggage. The appeal to tradition and “human commonality” without any resort to religious belief or post-mortal consequences fails to answer the three linchpin questions that ultimately must be addressed by all authentic ethical systems: *Why care? Why bother to act? Why is any of this relevant beyond one’s own mortal term?*
4. Materialist utilitarianism as the greatest good for the greatest number where the “good” is defined either in materialist terms (a chicken in every pot) or autonomous terms (my life, my sins, my drugs);
5. A cautious pragmatic majority (typically of the productive intelligentsia) whose moral compass is one part the weakened cultural respect for ethical tradition (here the retreating ghost of Pascal’s wager is evident) and one part get-ahead social calculation.

We, the 21st children of the Cro-Magnon tribes should be able to do much better than that. The following sections mark the points where our dialogue starts:

I Our Species’ Commitment to Integration

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Metaphysics needs to become our species' pet project. We are called to acquire deep understanding of the world and our place in it. We need to seek the coherent integration of all knowledge (whether learned from interaction with the world or known within the mind) in the confidence that we *will* find it. The *a priori* conviction that reality **is** an integrated whole - without arbitrary breaks and discontinuities is our reasonable faith. It is also a powerfully *heuristic* faith: Without it we would lack the confidence in our own cognitive powers that the project demands. The belief that we *will* discover the hidden connections, correlations and unities of all reality is the core faith stance of scientific and spiritually aware minds alike.

When we take the intuition of ultimate integration seriously (as I believe we should) we are no longer willing to sharply bifurcate our methods of evaluating knowledge from our project of using all we can know to model all that is. We will no longer dissociate epistemology and metaphysics; we pursue a mutually correcting dialogue between the two processes. We build, test and refine our comprehensive world picture. We allow our philosophy of knowledge to be informed by that larger world view and empowered by the faith of ultimate integration that drives it. Yes our goal is audacious: We seek to understand all reality, physical and non-physical, moral, esthetic and transcendent, on the deepest and most comprehensive scale possible. Of *course* we will do metaphysics. Even an unfinished city rising up from the ground is better than an empty desert.

Our species has made immense progress in the quest to understand deep reality. We owe this to a powerful heuristic engine. Starting with the principle of parsimony of explanation (Occam's Razor, that holds in effect that the simplest, most elegant theory or explanation is preferred)²², we humans have added one element, and produced something that has succeeded brilliantly in illuminating the Nature of Reality and the Reality within Nature. Whether explicitly or implicitly, we have been using the following test: ***All other things being equal, the simplest, coherent explanation of the greatest integrative explanatory power is more likely to be true or valid.*** This powerful heuristic engine can still force some of our most fundamental questions to yield up their secrets.

Consider the problem of our time-sensitive mortality vs. the time insensitive durability of the underlying order of things. *Can* conscious being exist apart from our own space-time bound versions of it? Our inner sense, carried deep within the architecture of our consciousness, tells us that, yes, somehow conscious might last outside our space-time bound versions. This insight has persisted in all cultures despite the spell cast by the arch materialists (increasingly discredited) who told us not to trust that inner sense (or anything else that can't be measured in a laboratory).

²² **Occam's razor**, or the principle of parsimony of explanation, is attributed to the 14th century Franciscan friar, William of Oakham. Isaac Newton adapted it in the 17th & 18th centuries: "We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances". The classic example is the Ptolemaic model of the skies, in which stars and planets were attached to rotating spheres, the movements of which could be tracked closely by an overly complicated system of 'epicycles'. Deeper and simpler explanations followed, first by Copernicus and Galileo, then by modern astronomers.

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As we recover from the arch-materialist spell, we may know *intellectually* that the extant order manifest within nature is real, that latent form and design is real even before it emerges into the world, and that the deep order mirrored within our “mind space” captures a reality resident outside of space and time.

Yet we fear death.

This is a deeply plausible fear, partly because we are wired that way, and partly because our individual conscious world lines are fragile. We may grasp that our separate conscious experiences somehow represent the “localization” of a general, timeless conscious “beingness”, much as last night’s sunset was an instance of some archetypal experience. But our life stories are precious, finite tales with a beginning, middle, and end. We stubbornly fear that we are alone and will be at the end. It is our primordial fear. It continues to warn our species never to give up on our eternal dialogue with Reality or renounce the faith that all is connected, all is part of an integrated whole.²³

II Our Necessary Alignments

Not long after 911, I was asked to organize and participate in a forum on evil. There were several points of view represented by the panelists, a Buddhist Monk, a Christian Theologian, a former prosecutor and trial judge, and me, the former Public Defender for a major urban jurisdiction.

My own experiences in New York on September 11, 2001, had prompted some serious reflection. At that presentation, I opened with these insights -

Why should we talk about evil?

I submit that a common human vision of what is truly evil, a vision of the universal evil, if you will, at the same time, can expose a common vision of the good.... When purposeful human malevolence looms, we are threatened on the immediate physical level, but we are also attacked on the level of our deepest values. The confrontation with true evil calls us back to our core values.

I share the conviction of those humanists and religionists alike who believe that there **is** a universal good that transcends our sectarian perspectives. For me it begins with life affirmation, leads to affirmation of conscious being, and proceeds to reverence for all creation. Conscious being presents at least three powerful, life enhancing capabilities: compassionate empathy, creative innovation, and foresight. This suggests the moral purpose of conscious being as well as its provenance.

²³ The Christian experience and its metaphysical implications raise an interesting and relevant set of considerations, all outside the scope of this discussion.

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In this way, consciousness and life affirmation necessarily lead to creation affirmation, though the deep understanding of the universality of the processes of creation, of the roots of life and consciousness in those processes, and of the incarnation of ongoing creation in the human mind. Life affirmation, respect for conscious being and reverence for creation are the innate affirmations of the enlightened being.

Our universal values are protected within almost any civilized enclave more than in a brutal state of nature, [and] not all social conditions and regimes support these values equally. We require the robust infrastructure of a civilization dedicated to protect life, consciousness, and creation.

Our dialogue is profoundly shaped by a deep alignment of our basic motivations, one shared by all intelligent, living creatures. As we humans emerged from the raw state of nature, the underlying alignment of our basic motivations became increasingly visible to us. Given a sufficiently deep introspection, that alignment resolves into the first three affirmations of all living conscious beings who acquire a critical level of self and situation consciousness: (1) *the affirmation of life* (especially one's own life, then human life, and life generally); (2) *the affirmation of conscious intelligence* – one's own, that of our fellow humans and in general; (3) *the affirmation of creation* (both in nature and as a specifically human endeavor).

These three affirmations form a correlated triad, in that no element is separable from the rest, and each separately exists only in a context framed by the other two. A breach in that integration or the denial of these affirmations is the beginning of evil. They form the three dimensions of what I am calling “value space”, the virtual realm that holds three-in-one “normative architecture” of conscious choice. They are the three axes along which all our species' conscious decisions can be mapped. They can only temporarily be ignored. I will refer to this triad of core values as the **V3 set, or simply, V3**.

Once we members of Tribe Homo Sapiens advanced sufficiently in the Darwinian struggle for planetary dominance to achieve a measure of security from fear (one of the perks for the eco-system's supreme predator is that the other predators run from us, not the converse), three “new” imperatives began to emerge in our lives. In the 3V context, they are understood as necessities, hence these three *imperatives*:

- (1) The *scientific imperative*, the dialogic impulse to query all Nature, is the developed, systematic form of our species' food-threat dialogic.
- (2) The *civilization imperative* is our discovered social technology, the preservation of which is necessary to maintain the working venue for social exchange, the human-to-human dialogue.
- (3) The *creation imperative* is a new commitment creative change, in dialogue with the moral law, a dialogic that can yield inspiration, revelation and innovation.

Much more is to be said about our creative activities. All science, art, ethics and spirituality can be understood as products of the Dialogic Imperative. I note here a

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powerful, emerging normative model, the ideal of the *Creative Civilization*, in which the civilized order explicitly and effectively protects and nurtures the conditions for human creative activities. These conditions include zones of safety from predation and zones of protected freedom where creative activities are kept safe even from internal oppression.

Before the “modern” era, creative civilizations appeared in history as special nodes within a larger civilization. One thinks of the ancient city states like the Athens²⁴ of 600-200 BCE and of Renaissance Florence under the protection of the Medici family. The modern efflorescence of scientific inquiry and exploration are all part of the human creative endeavor, broadly construed.

Some civilizations are doing a far better job in nurturing and protecting human creative activities with their respective boundaries. None, to date, have self-consciously organized to perform this function. The advent of large scale, self-consciously creation-engendering civilizations will be a signal event in our species development.

Naturally, all of our species affirmations and dialogues are deeply entangled with each other.

III Martin Buber’s²⁵ Template

I propose that all improvements in the human condition are driven by an overall Dialogic Imperative. At least these three “I-2-I” dialogues are included:

1. “**Self to self**”: This is Martin Buber’s archetypal individual “I” to individual “I” dialogue, in which Buber’s Triad” (“I - it, I - thou & I - Thou”) becomes the template for the larger “I-2-I” dialogic described in this article. Secular humanists have embraced Buber’s method, emphasizing the contrast between “I to It”,

²⁴ Remarkably, Athens had a population of about 140,000 (just 40,000 male citizens) when the Peloponnesian War started in 431 BC. Among that one city’s breakthrough geniuses were **Pythagoras** (570-495 BC), **Heraclitus** (535-475 BC), **Socrates** (469-399 BC), **Aristotle** (384-322 BC), **Plato** 428-327 BC), and **Archimedes** (287-212 BC). The intellectual seeds of all modern systems of thought, of logic, mathematics, mechanics, science and philosophy really were the intellectual products of “those highfalutin Greeks”, their dialogues and discussions.

²⁵ **Martin Buber** was arguably the most famous Jewish religious philosopher of the 20th century. His masterwork, “I and Thou” (*Ich and du*), published in 1923, first reached the English speaking world a 1937 translation. In Buber’s view, all our person-to-person relationships are either “I to Thou” or “I to it”. But only our meaningful relationships confer the status of “I” to ourselves, and this can happen only when we confer the status of “Thou” to the other person. Buber was a relational theist (my term). For him, G-d is the omnipresent (though not always noticed) Thou. As he put it, “The extended lines of [our meaningful] relations meet in the eternal Thou. Every particular Thou is a glimpse though to the eternal Thou...” (“*I and Thou*”, Scribners, London - New York 1937-1957), Part Three, page 75.) When in Oxford, I picked up a really brilliant analysis of Buber’s work: “*Buber On God and The Perfect Man*” by Pamela Vermes (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London - Washington 1994), a must read for Buber fans.

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- which treats a person as an object, and “I to I” in which human dignity is mutually honored. But little attention has been given to the third person in the dialogic, “Thou”²⁶. It seems Buber incorporated Ultimate Being as the third member of our connecting relationships with all other selves. I believe that this framework allows all of our species’ core ethical insights to be unpacked and applied;
2. **“I-to-Civilization”**: This dialogic embraces: (a) all the routine exchanges that are mediated by civilization as humanity’s socio-economic technology; (b) our utilization of (and contributions to) the deep institutional memory perpetuated by civilization; and (c) all of the essential support exchanges between “I” and civilization, such as when civilization protects us, when we rise to our concomitant obligation to protect civilization, and when civilization nurtures and protects our species’ precious creative function;
 3. **“I-to-Creation”**, the multi-faceted dialogue that embraces all our creative, innovative activities (in the very largest sense), including the arts, invention, exploration, and the dialogic activities of science (wherein the experiment and theory represent our dialogue with creation-as-nature).

The insight that our own biological, space-time consciousness is a bridge state or living interface between the physical and non-physical realms (our amphibian role) does carry spiritual implications, even within a secular framework. For example, once we entertain the likelihood that the non-physical realm would necessarily contain at least the archetype of conscious being itself, the meta-design which is also meta-designer, we may realize with a start that the creative capacities of the human mind were embedded in the unfolding universe. The Genesis insight that humankind was formed in the divine image has strong implications for the protection of human dignity, even when taken solely as a metaphor.

As I outlined in the “*What I believe*” section, *infra*, the internal evidence of our own conscious states necessarily includes our sense that the numinous level of experience is of discovery of a transcendent existent. We came pre-equipped by evolution with powerful personality detection cognitive faculties that enable most of us to detect sentience in our pets, our friends, loved ones and strangers. *A fortiori*, we may be equipped to encounter Buber’s third party, Thou. Even from a secular humanist perspective (once the shackles of arch-materialism have been cut) it is possible to accept that the ontological status of the numinous state is self-validating in the same sense that the internet coding protocols enable a scattered message (sent in a distribute form across the www) to be more or less accurately reassembled on receipt. Those of us who have chosen to integration principle very seriously (that all reality, physical and non-physical, including the contents and essence of conscious being, are part of one fully integrated reality) are justified not only in concluding that the numinous level of experience represents the apprehension of a numinous level of *reality*, we are equally justified that the sense of personality that so

²⁶ *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber, Scribner, 1970, 1996 (1923 in German, first English translation 1937) Note Pamela Vermes’ book in the Bibliography for another translation, an analysis and biographical account.

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often accompanies the experience also represents a reality. Agree with us or not, we do need to be part of the dialogic.

This reality at the center of the numinous need not be named, though it is most often seen as the presence of G-d or of ultimate being or ultimate self. The name is not the thing. Whether named or not, the insight that the human relationship with an ultimate reality endowed with moral properties constitutes a dialogic relationship is a central one. The overall dialogic described here is not just a spiritual nexus, but one that takes other forms, as in scientific inquiry, creative activity, or humanitarian engagement, support for these things, or any combination. All of these activities are potentially holy to the extent that we are willing to see them as part of the human dialogic relationship with ultimate being, and even in the absence of that belief system, they are worthy of the same degree of reverential awe that the late Carl Sagan described in the Pale Blue Dot passage.

In this model, all science, art, ethics and spirituality can be understood as products of a dialogic imperative. I should note here something that I cover in separate articles, the ideal of the *Creative Civilization*, in which the civilized order explicitly and effectively protects and nurtures the conditions for human creative activities. These conditions include zones of safety from predation and zones of protected freedom where creative activities are kept safe even from internal oppression.

Before the “modern” era, creative civilizations appeared in history as special nodes within a larger civilization. One thinks of the ancient city states like the Athens of 600-200 BCE and of Renaissance Florence under the protection of the Medici family. The modern efflorescence of scientific inquiry and exploration are all part of the human creative endeavor, broadly construed.

Some civilizations are doing a far better job in nurturing and protecting human creative activities with their respective boundaries. None, to date, have self-consciously organized to perform this function. The advent of large scale, self-consciously creation-engendering civilizations will be a signal event in our species development. Finally, the “liberty-friendly” civilizations will confidently answer the question, “Freedom for what?”

I now believe that each dialogue in the “Buber Template” is the best working model of the human moral response to our existential moral problems and challenges to the extent that it represents a step toward the integration of our moral decisions with “Value space”.

Value Space can now be understood as the contextual matrix formed by what I am calling the *V3*, the three axes of affirmation (life affirmation, the promotion of conscious intelligence and the reverence for creation). These axes form the ordinal contours, if you will, of the realm within which all moral dialogic processes can be mapped. They make up the underlying normative foundations of our ethical architecture.

IV Moral Precepts, the Virtues & Evil

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Each of the “I-2-I” dialogues can be correlated to a corresponding set of virtues. All virtues (and the contrary anti-virtue inclinations or perversions) naturally emerge from the “real world” interface that is constantly presented to each conscious, living being. This is a result of one defining property of the “real world”: Exchange processes pervade. Because exchange processes permeate the domain of *event space*, exchange *relationships* form the architectural framework of all being-in-the-world.

But the rules of exchange relationships can seem ruthless and heartless. Something for something seems always to trump something for nothing. Every action provokes a reaction of equal strength. And in the end nature’s books must balance. But the real trump card of exchange is creation. We living, conscious beings are nature’s innovation that promotes innovation. As long as creation processes (of which we are the principal exemplars) remain aligned with the *V3*, there remains the prospect that life will trump its opponents in nature. I suspect this basic insight was captured in the Biblical image of light overcoming darkness.

Moral precepts are the maxims of application that are employed by *moral agents*, consisting of all conscious, living intelligent beings who understand that our actions in physical space-time (call it Event Space) must intersect with Value Space. As moral agents, we employ that understanding to guide our decisions. Our cultural preconceptions are just an overlay.

I believe that the moral precepts can be sorted into three groups:

1. Primary social injunctions, such as “Do not murder” and “Do not steal”, that are derived directly from the *V3*;
2. Secondary social injunctions, as “Approach strangers with respect and courtesy,” and “Keep your promises”) are exchange-reality-derived and arise as a result of the principle of necessity;
3. Empirically social derived injunctions (especially those that are prophylactic), such as “Do not covet that which doesn’t belong to you” and “Respect the relationships of others”.

Much more has been written about the moral virtues than I could ever hope to capture. My purpose is show they fit in the framework outlined here. All our moral virtues flow from their generating values and affirmations, which consist of the dialogic imperatives, the *V3* and the overall integration principle. Virtues are intensified exemplars. Put another way, virtues are incarnated moral precepts:

- (1) The virtue of *integrity* flows directly from the integrating principle.
- (2) The virtues of *prudence* and *forbearance* are empirically derived value-enhancing strategies based primarily on risk assessment.
- (3) The virtues of *courage* and *loyalty* are value-enhancing character traits (that potentially can be enlisted in the service of the non-moral). When these virtues are enlisted in the service of moral action, they sometimes can conflict with prudence and forbearance.

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The virtues are correlated to the *V3*, either: (a) as directly implied; (b) as value enhancing character traits; (c) or as strategies. Conflicts among virtues are resolved by mutual optimization adjustments among *reasonable* moral agents (i.e., those willing to accept realistic optimization, and who are committed to veracity and to acting within the moral context framed by *V3*). Dialogue leads to accommodation when the shared moral space is large enough and the participants are humble enough to sense the scope of their own hubris.

But actors with an *evil* orientation (often covert) have placed themselves outside this dialogue. For these predators, discussion is a prey opportunity.

Evil is defined here as an active, intelligent agency that opposes the *V3* and/or their mutual integration. For example, to enlist creative innovation against the interests of life and conscious intelligence (as the Nazi's did with medical technology in the death camps) is evil. Those who indiscriminately promote all life forms as "equal" and act against conscious, intelligent life (think of cultists for whom microbes and rats are somehow equal to human babies) represent another evil mindset. And so on. In my earlier career, I interviewed and represented thousands of criminals. They were on the whole a sorry lot, but they were ordinary people for whom the natural good in almost all of us was strongly overbalanced by moral failure and grossly narcissistic thinking. True evil (in the narrow but highly dangerous sense used here) was startling to encounter, but thankfully it was extremely rare among the criminal subpopulation.

V

One Illustrative Exercise in the Universalization of Scriptural Wisdom

The non-religious reader may want to follow this discussion as a particular example of how tribal norms tend to migrate into more universal moral principles. There is a fascinating Appendix to a series of essays by CS Lewis, collected as *The Abolition of Man* (See Bibliography), in which Lewis has located all of the major human moral precepts within a wide range of religious and secular traditions, supporting the notion that there is an underlying moral law.

All religious and moral insight has followed a process of development characterized by gradual universalization. This section is an exercise in the process by which modern religious thought achieves a greater and greater scope of universal meaning and application. I propose to examine how this process of development decodes the universals embedded in the Decalogue. Here is a sketch of the method:

Moral relationship begins at home in the form of the norms, explicit and implicit rules of conduct that we learn to use in our intimate relationships. Over time the most durable and robust of these norms travel from family to clan, from clan to tribe, even to "nation" (which is tribe writ large). This is part of an ongoing process in which values and norms are universalized.

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We learn to extract the underlying principles embedded in our received “we don’t do that”, and to connect the underlying principles to implementing rules. “Don’t hit your sister!” may become “don’t initiate uninvited violence, except when playing”.

But family, clan and tribal centered thinking exert a stubborn hold on the human psyche. We tend to think in “us and them” terms where our norms are concerned. “Don’t hit your sister” might become “don’t hit any members of the family.” We tend to develop two sets of norms, those that apply within and those that apply outside the “loyalty regimes” defined by our ethical cohorts. Folklore has long recognized the notion of “honor among thieves”. We can all think of examples in which our sense of moral obligation seems weakened or less complete when applied to a total stranger. Some of this is an entirely rational extension of the sage advice to children, “Don’t go anywhere with strangers.” Some of it is a form of bigotry.

Religion, at its best, teaches us to extend the reach of our moral impulses, and to avoid the trap of marginalizing or dehumanizing those who are outside our immediate loyalty regimes. But too often religion has been co-opted by power brokers where it operates as a thinly disguised tribal ideology, lending moral sanction to the “us-them” divide. This, of course, is the atavistic feature of militant Islam. But across many cultures, slavery is another ugly legacy of human tribal thinking at its worst. After all, our real tribe is Homo Sapiens.

As a devout, practicing first century Jew, Jesus was steeped in Torah law and the oral traditions that gave it life. His ministry and the decades that immediately followed his execution by the Roman procurator, Pilate, represented an acceleration of the moral universalization process. This process is vividly captured in the post resurrection accounts of the Pentecost, the seminal event when a handful of Jesus’ apostles canvassed thousands of their fellow Jews gathered in Jerusalem. The apostles carried a message that somehow transcended language barriers. Later, the unconverted Jew, Saul, became Paul, the apostle, carried the message to the gentile communities of the region. It is a defining characteristic of universal ideas that they quickly escape the culture in which they were gestated.

In a very real sense, Jesus incarnated the core moral message of Judaism and inaugurated the processes of its dissemination to the world. In this sense, Christianity began as pan-tribal Judaism. Far more about his parables and other teachings has been written with far more insight than I can attempt. But among his most memorable and central aphorisms is an answer to a questioner who asked “What is the greatest law?” Jesus’ answer was to love God with one’s entire being and to love one’s neighbors as one’s self. On this alone, Jesus told his inquirer “hangs all the law and all the teachings of the prophets.”

This is a paradigm example of the dialogic process of ethical universalization. Rules implement ethical principles. Ethical principles are extensions of core universal moral injunctions.

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Many Christians are under the misimpression that Jesus' teachings were a radical departure from the Jewish ethical sensibility of the time. But the Great Law, as stated by Jesus, represented a restatement of the Shema, the prayer at the very heart of Jewish worship, and the Golden Rule corollary.

Here is the core message of the Shema:

“And you shall love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your might.” [V-ahavta et Adonai Elohecha b-chol l’vavcha u-v-chol m’odecha.]

The Golden Rule is captured in various forms and iterations in several major world religions, including Judaism. This is powerful evidence, if any is needed, of the universal character of this precept. Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph, would have been a poor shepherd teenager when Jesus was executed.

Akiba is known for asserting that one commandment in Leviticus 19:18 *“is the great principle of the Torah”*. The commandment? *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Hillel the Elder, possibly the most revered and famous of rabbis within the Jewish tradition, lived about one generation before Jesus. Whether Hillel's life overlapped that of Jesus, his core teachings as a sage of great ethical wisdom, most certainly reached Jesus' ears. Among Hillel's aphorisms (which are generally recorded in Pirkei Avot - Ethics of the Fathers, captured in written form in the Mishnah) was: *“If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?”*

One day, a gentile seeking to know the Torah (apparently he wanted the first century Cliff Notes version) approached Hillel, after his request had been harshly rejected by another Rabbi. The gentile impertinently asked Hillel whether he could recite the entire Torah while standing on one leg. Hillel gracefully complied. *“Do not do to your neighbor that which is hateful if done to you. This is the whole of the Torah. All the rest is commentary. Go and study.”* According to the legend, the gentile did enter a course of Torah study and was converted.

This story is important because it contrasts a thinker, who can discern the underlying animus and core principles in a large body of text, and a literalist/fundamentalist who is cognitively incapable of doing so.

The process of universalization involves a more penetrating understanding of the core, underlying principles that underlie given moral precepts, a process that sometimes results in restrictive assumptions being transcended. Trivially, this means the understanding that a given precept applies outside the tribe. Less trivially, it means that the precept applies to the governed and those who govern with equal force. At the most general level, it may mean that the same principle may underlie more than one precept and that there are unexpected implications: Consider the belated discovery that slavery is incompatible with the Decalogue by necessary implication.

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As an exercise, I invite you to take a moment to look more closely at the Ten Commandments, as a testament of universal moral insight whose remarkable endurance and vitality have kept them relevant to civilization for millennia.

In this discussion, I personally see classic theism and a traditionally anchored spiritual humanism as mutually compatible with the conception of the supreme organizing principle of nature, the ur-source of creation, and the active center of ultimate morality as a single, integrated whole, a resident universal, if you will, whether named G-d or left unnamed.

I believe we can detect an implicit normative hierarchy in the Torah's creation story. It will be necessary for a full understanding the universal ethical contents of the Decalogue. For my analysis, there are three essential normative elements in Genesis.

From Genesis:

G-d is the creator of all life.

The human creation was the supreme act of the life creation phase, third in the following creation hierarchy-

light over darkness;

life over death; and

humanity over the other life on Earth.

The human species was created in G-d's own image. [As 21st Century humans, we recognize that with hierarchy goes obligation.]

That said, the Decalogue begins with a significant preamble, that—

I am G-d (Creator)

AND your liberator

AND I now reveal myself to you as ultimate law-giver (here, ultimate source of moral law).

Note that this is an original statement of the implications of the human dignity interest, liberation from oppression, and that G-d, as the supreme source of moral law, is liberator.

The Commandments, Summary Iteration 1

I am with you,

Your G-d,

Your liberator.

1 Honor me, the one G-d, the creator, the source.

2 Do not worship false gods or idols.

3 Do not make a false oath in my name.

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- 4 *Keep one seventh part of your time for me.*
- 5 *Honor those who gave you life in this world.*
- 6 *Do not murder.*
- 7 *Do not breach the marital covenants of trust by committing adultery.*
- 8 *Do not steal.*
- 9 *Do not lie against another.*
- 10 *Do not covet or envy that which is not yours.*

Note that, after the crucial introduction, the first three law elements all affirm the unity, validity, integrity, and primacy of G-d-given law and the G-d-authority, and *inter alia*, its non-appropriatable nature (i.e., #1 - supremacy & unity; #2 - no false gods; #3 no misappropriation of G-d's authority).

The next three elements all require one to honor the creation of life: the ultimate creator of life, those who gave one's own life, and the life of others (i.e., # 4 the creator through honoring the Sabbath; #5 honoring parents; # 6 avoiding murder)

The next three all require that trust relationships be valued / honored / respected in their various forms - fidelity, truthfulness-honesty, and theft-honesty (i.e., #7 no adultery; #8 no false witness; #9 no theft).

The tenth commandment (no envy) echoes the first three elements, but as the individual obligations of one made in God's image. Inherent in the no-envy injunction are the virtues of self-sufficiency, honor, and integrity. These are reflections of deity's integrity, primacy, and unity. Seen as integrated in the ethical context of one conscious, sentient being created in God's image, and dealing with others so created, the tenth commandment is an implied recapitulation of the deity's nature, sanctioning and reinforcing all the prior values and injunctions. Increasing the reach of the underlying universal elements, we arrive at-

Iteration 2

- 1 *I am creator. I am one.*
- 2 *Serve me, and no other deity-pretender or image.*
- 3 *Do not misuse my authority or my name.*
- 4 *Guard a regular portion of your time for the holy.*
- 5 *Honor those who gave you life in this world.*
- 6 *Do not commit life threatening aggression.*
- 7 *Do not breach intimate covenants of trust.*
- 8 *Do not steal.*
- 9 *Do not lie against another.*
- 10 *Do not covet or envy that which is not yours.*

Iteration 3

Honor me, as perfect unity and integrity, source of universal law, and your liberation.

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1,2,3

Honor me and my law, rejecting pretenders, abjuring misuse of my authority.

4,5,6

Honor me, creator of life, your life-givers in this world, and the life of others.

7,8,9

Honor trust relationships, by keeping commitments, avoiding theft and mendacity.

10

Honor in yourself and other sentient beings, self-unity, integrity, value-integration

In this iteration, we have progressed from first stage monotheism (God as supreme among the other gods), through second stage monotheism (God as unique and unchallenged, but extrinsic to the world), to third stage monotheism in which God is understood (at minimum) as the supreme integration of material and non-material reality, as the ultimate integration of moral and physical order, and as the ultimate integration of local conscious, intelligent being with its non-local origin, Ultimate Being.

One Secular Humanist - Theist Reconciliation

The insight that our ethical systems are aligned with the three global affirmations (the V3 - life, conscious intelligence and creativity) and their mutual integration, can be understood in two complementary ways: as the governing normative framework of a renewed and deepened humanism, and as a reflection of the moral attributes of deity.

In the wake of the events of 9-11-01, as I addressed a panel on the topic of Evil (See Section II, The Necessary Alignments, *infra*), I reflected aloud how the arrival of existential evil on scene worked to clarify the meaning of the good, in effect allowing us to “reverse engineer” the universal good from its opposite. This is how I put it then:

In the current issue of *Scientific American*, Richard Dawkins makes this observation: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”

Perfectly stated, professor Dawkins. An attitude of value neutrality – Dawkins writ large - still prevails in the academy, permeated by various forms of moral relativism. The fact that nihilism is afoot in the larger culture is not unrelated. To battle nihilism from a platform teetering on a foundation of moral relativism is awkward at best. It’s like trying to swat flies while balanced on the back of a chair.

There was a sea change for most Americans on September 11th last year. The sudden appearance of massive, purposeful evil on one’s doorstep pierces denial and moral ambiguity; it cuts through the fog of cultural and moral relativism like a flare on a night battlefield. The events in Manhattan of 9-11 revealed an important truth. Evil’s appearance illuminates and calls forth the good in us

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because our ability to recognize and identify evil illuminates and informs our ability to recognize and identify the good.

...a common human vision of what is truly evil, a vision of the universal evil, if you will, at the same time, can expose a common vision of the good.... When purposeful human malevolence looms, we are threatened on the immediate physical level, but we are also attacked on the level of our deepest values. The confrontation with true evil calls us back to our core values.

I share the conviction of those humanists and religionists alike who believe that there **is** a universal good that transcends our sectarian perspectives. For me it begins with life affirmation, leads to affirmation of conscious being, and proceeds to reverence for all creation. Conscious being presents at least three powerful, life enhancing capabilities: compassionate empathy, creative innovation, and foresight. This suggests the moral purpose of conscious being as well as its provenance.

In this way, consciousness and life affirmation necessarily lead to creation affirmation, though the deep understanding of the universality of the processes of creation, of the roots of life and consciousness in those processes, and of the incarnation of ongoing creation in the human mind. Life affirmation, respect for conscious being and reverence for creation are the innate affirmations of the enlightened being.

For the theistic religions, these three affirmations combine to form the heart of the human -- deity relationship. For humanists, they make up the foundation stones of the core human agenda.

This suggests to me that there is a humanist version of the *Shema*, the commandment to love G-d, roughly as follows: to love and revere human life, conscious intelligence and creation, as these are expressed in the life well lived, seeking their full mutual integration as the essence of moral being.

And this suggests in turn how we might attain a deeper understanding of the original religious statement of the *Shema* by incorporating the understanding that G-d is both the source and the object of all life affirmation, the affirmation of living conscious being, and reverence for all creation, including our own life-affirming, intelligence affirming creative actions.

VI

The Great Attractor²⁷ to Which Our Dialogue Points

²⁷ The term is borrowed from chaos theory and astronomy. In the former, there are dynamical systems with outcomes that are inherently unpredictable in detail, while the varying results will cluster in a predictable pattern, called an attractor. In astronomy, the behavior of certain galaxies seemed to be influenced by a "great attractor", a posited hidden mass. I enjoy mentioning this because cosmologists and theologians tend to be operating at a similar distance from experimental verification, but only the theologians are exiled from the academy.

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Biological consciousness is the interface or bridge state between what we call the physical realm and that of the non-physical. Consciousness can be understood as co-inhabiting the domains of Event Space and of Form Space. In this framework our “Mind Space” enjoys a dual ontology. Within the physical realm, biological conscious being is an emergent property of certain high level biological organization. Within the non-physical realm it represents the multi-localization along various time-space world lines of the universal archetype of conscious being of extraordinary power. We represent an incomplete expression within that space-time world line of archetypal being. Our brain-minds are ontological amphibians.

Any observer from a sufficient remove can detect an apparent directionality in physical/biological evolution (from “Big Bang to Big Civilization”). This apparent progressive directionality always shows over itself sufficiently large time frames, measured by the evolved sense of purpose and value that accompanies biological consciousness. Such a “boot strap” measurement is allowed because consciousness is self-referential, and represents the emergence in the universe, of value and a normative reference frame. The progressive evolution vector originates in the non-physical realm and plays out in the physical one because the most supremely adaptive biological designs are conscious ones.

Biological consciousness is an emergent venue of purpose and value that links the non-physical realm of Form Space to the physical realm of Event Space. Its appearance in the universe opens the possibility of a dialogic relationship between the realms. Think of a reciprocal exchange relationship: *Local Consciousness appears as an emergent being-state within the physical realm* endowed with uniquely intensified creative power -- the design that is also a designer. Local consciousness operates by integrating the form-nature of both aspects of reality and thereby introduces novel form and design into Event Space. *Non-local Consciousness represents the pre-emergent meta-being-state within the non-physical realm that converges as distributed nodes of Local Consciousness in Event Space.* Non-local consciousness remains in relationship with the physical realm as a whole and with local, individual conscious being in particular.

The implications depend on whether you are inclined to see non-local being as a non-living archetype, as a remote detached being, or as a present, involved being. The deist perspective recognizes this archetype of being as Supreme Being, seen as the Ultimate Architect, if you will, but locates “The World” (Event Space) as a separate, created realm, rolling forward without further divine involvement, except as implicit in that First Push. In the theist perspective (with which I am aligned) deity is alive and present in creation. Of course, theists differ as to the nature of the creation (as whether it is finished or ongoing) and on the nature of divine involvement.

One of my favorite thinkers is the physicist, turned Anglican priest, the Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne, who wrote, “As embodied beings, humans may be expected to act both energetically and informationally. As pure Spirit, God might be expected to act solely through information input. One could summarize the novel aspect of this proposal by

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saying that it advocates the idea of a top down causality through “active information.” *Belief in God in an Age of Science, Does God Act in the Physical World?* by John Polkinghorne (Yale 1998) at p 63

If we are able to accept as true that local space time consciousness and its non-physical meta-form are in relationship, we are immediately taken to a broadened scientific perspective. We are no longer persuaded by a strict parsimony of belief stance that requires us to ignore, marginalize or deny the evidence presented within our own conscious states. We accept that our apprehension of the numinous or of the presence of a meta-intelligence or of ultimate being is something both relevant and real.

Human life is, at its very best, in dialogue with Universal Being (whether seen as an interactive relationship with deity, with universal “beingness,” with the vital archetype of being, or with the unnamed “other”). This is a dialogue into which all individual mortal conscious beings are called. Science, ethics, and esthetics are mutually integrated because they are essential aspects of this dialogue. The tendency to generate novelty, the “creation tendency” that suffuses the physical universe can be seen as the divine impulse within space-time.

The love of deity (or loving connection with the center of all being and creation) can be seen as the enlarged love of self, and as an actualized universal that gives our participation in ongoing creation an independent moral significance. Internalized, this alignment transforms the dialogic imperative into the creation imperative, the highest expression of the life impulse.

A Final Footnote:

When I think about such lofty universals, I want never to lose hold of the gritty, the palpable and sensual, the knowledge that we actually live in a real world of *particular* things, objects, forces, events and people. We exist in relationship with the holy, but we live in the grit. And when thinking about the Creator of this universe, I need to keep in touch with Tevye, the Dairyman of Sholem Aleichem’s *Fiddler on the Roof*, because we all need a deity we can occasionally shake a fist at.

This is why the great traditions of belief and practice are so important. I have tried in this essay to bridge the gap between theists, deists and the less doctrinal spiritual disciplines, like Buddhism, many of which do not recognize G-d in the formal sense. And I’ve sought to include the subset of Unitarians and spiritually alive secular humanists who are on the same page with those of us who see the traps and pitfalls in a purely subjectivist morality.

But don’t let me leave the impression that you or I should settle for a denatured, abstract take on our complicated relationship with Ultimate Being. I believe that our feet need to touch the dirt, whether in First Century Palestine, 500 BCE India, 400 BCE Athens, or 21st century New York, before the truly holy can touch our hearts.

I-2-I The Dialogic Imperative

One of the most powerful spiritual and/moral awakenings in my life was formed in the dust and tears of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing days in mid-Manhattan.



I took this picture in Manhattan right after 9-11-01, having walked providentially onto holy ground, near the Ladder Truck Company to which the beloved Roman Catholic Chaplain, Fr. Mychael Judge, gave his life in the line of duty while administering last rites to a fallen firefighter.

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