

Lecture 6

Spirituality Naturalized?

“A Strong Cat Without Claws”¹

Tonight is my last chance to say something intelligent with a worthwhile take-home message. My topic is spirituality and religion. Specifically, how can *the scientific image of persons* and spiritual and religious impulses, commitments, traditions, and institutions co-exist in the *Space of Meaning*^{21stcentury} – if, that is, they can co-exist.

I’ll be using a distinction between *asserting*, on one side, and *saying, stating, or expressing*, on the other. Spiritual and religious conceptions cause themselves difficulty, as well as difficulty for those who are not on-board with a particular (or for that matter, any) spiritual or religion story, when the story is *asserted* to be true and authoritative.

When such a story (or stories) is *stated, expressed, and understood as a story*, those who spin the tale cause much less epistemic difficulty for themselves and others. I’ll explain.²

¹ There is an old Joni Mitchell song, “Just Like This Train,” aka “Come Away With Me,” where she sings of looking for a “strong cat without claws.” When I think of spirituality/religion I have similar desires. Most religions, strong or weak, are like cats with claws that can do harm. Religions, like cats, are the result of a thoroughly human domestication process. No sensible person has a real cat (lion, tiger) as a pet (I know some do, but I said “sensible”). Trouble is that many religions treat themselves to a story according to which they are not domestic human creations at all; they are the true, original word of God. Think differently. Tame your religion. Declaw it. Let it be very strong and noble. But declaw it. Then and only then can we be assured that it will be a good pet, possibly do more good than harm, provide comfort, and so on.

² The state of discussion about whether one is a theist, atheist, or agnostic is (sadly) informative about the state of religious epistemology. Everyone is an atheist when it comes to most conceptions of divinity. Christians are atheists with respect to Greek and Hindu gods. Hindus are atheists with respect to the Abrahamic God (or Gods). The question of theistic belief makes sense only in relation to a conception of God that is, as it were, on the table for discussion. Most smart people when they enter this terrain have not thought about or been the slightest bit impressed by what I have just said. This is utterly bewildering. In any case, the dialectic commonly goes this way among open-minded people: agnosticism is respectable but atheism is not. This is insane. There is we’ll suppose a denumerable, but potentially infinite number of conceptions of “a creator.” If you ask whether I am a theist or an atheist (or agnostic), you are not, I take it,

First, a brief piece of autobiography. When I was a young boy, just seven or eight, I began to lapse from my Catholic faith: God just couldn't be as I learned he was. I was a skeptic, perhaps an atheist, if you can be one that young. I was not an agnostic, which even then, I understood, to be a sort of neutrality on the God question. The God I had learned about was not sufficiently loving or compassionate for me to think Him possible as God. I was in a bind, a painful bind, since "hell fire" did have me very scared. In 1966, in my first year of college, exactly forty years ago I read Alan Watts, D. K. Suzuki, and best of all, E. A. Burtt's *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. I was not then exploring becoming a Buddhist or anything else, but I was impressed by this: Buddhism was nontheistic and ethically very beautiful. I knew a fair amount about French deism, so I was familiar with the "Enlightenment" idea of conceiving of *my* God as creator and leaving it at that. I saw the merit in this, but I was not impressed by the ethical beauty of Enlightenment thinking. Politically it was good, but ethically, as a way of locating a noble, worthy, and meaningful way of living a life, I felt that something was missing. Enter Buddhism. The missing part was there. I was vividly aware that Buddhism practice, *if* there was in fact such a genuine item, truly embodied the only good idea I had ever heard from Catholicism -- the Golden Rule, a rule that I was painfully aware was not part of the life of any Roman Catholic I had ever met, except possibly my mother, including even Popes. God, remember, put kids in hot oil for all eternity if they

asking me where I stand on *all* the conceivable contender conceptions; you are asking me about a conception available in and entertained by people in our culture. (Note Pascal's wager only works, if it does at all, on a very specific conception of God). Assuming one does not believe in revelation, because that would be stupid, one ought to be an atheist for each conception of God I have ever been asked, or thought of entertaining. The conception is not normally demonstratively false, i.e., by the standards of deductive logic; but the conception is normally without inductive warrant if we treat them as assertions. So agnosticism is, as best I understand, not an interesting epistemic position with respect to this question, since it treats theistic claims as assertions, as truth functional, but ones where the evidence is insufficient to decide which assertion to make. But theistic claims are *sayings* not *assertions*. And thus questions about their evidentiary status can't really sensibly arise.

died without having confessed “impure thought or actions.” Jesus of Nazareth, rightfully the hero of the New Testament, truly believed in the Golden Rule. But my God was one cruel bastard.

I was existentially-cut-off from my God at a very young age. I remained a good altar boy and even a compliant Catholic boy. The Mass in the late 50’s was still in Latin, which was good. We wore exotic, often colorful altar boy uniforms, and there was enough incense during certain services to keep me curious about this zone of life. I was quiet about my existential situation. I often served 6 AM daily Mass and helped give communion to the same old-red-faced men and old non-red faced women. I loved these old folk, thinking they were sweet, dear, and needy. I was cut-off and worried. I had, without knowing it, a Nietzschean conviction: your God isn’t. But I felt protective of the old folk in a Dostoevskyeian way: I’d hold the secret for them. The Dostoevskyeian thought that “if there is no God, then everything is allowed” crossed my mind with some regularity. But it, unlike the Nietzschean conviction, never gripped me. It seemed to me that there were plenty of reasons to aim for goodness independently of the mean-spirited system of reward and punishment which I was encouraged to believe in.

Dad realized that I was lapsing. He didn’t know that I *had* lapsed. Dad was a very devout Catholic, the first in our family to go to college, Fordham, after the 2nd World War at night, and at the same time an independent thinker. The copy of the liberal Jesuit magazine, *America*, was always on the table next to his chair, next to his martini. I’d peruse it sometimes, realizing there were different takes on *my* God, as well as on the Church’s function, role, and position on a myriad of theological and social issues. I was glad for the Catholics that they allowed themselves some space for thought and free

inquiry. So there was *America*, and, in addition, all of Teilhard de Chardin's books on evolution made it onto the small set of living room bookshelves along side the *Federalist Papers*. I skimmed them. When I was thirteen, Dad gave me an abridged version of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* that he had read in college circa 1948-1950. I read all five arguments for the existence of God carefully, saw the logical preposterousness of them all, and remember wondering vaguely if you could make a living examining and teaching about the tradition and the fallacies. This thought, as I recall, did not involve any intention to "trash talk" and expose what I perceived as preposterous. I saw how important the tradition was for the many "true believers." Meanwhile, I loved my Catholic education. At Archbishop Stepinac High School I learned Latin and Greek. Before each Greek class we said the "Hail Mary" in Greek, which was, of course, temporally inane. In junior and senior year on most Saturday's at 7PM, I'd drive my girlfriend Barbara to confession in White Plains so *she* could tell a priest about our antics at the "Kensico Reservoir Lover's Lane" from the previous Saturday. This was a bit crazy, since we were on our way back to the Kensico dam to continue our sexual education, and Barbara certainly would not be able to take communion on Sunday Mass. But it all made its own crazy sense.

Kids from Stepinac, almost all Irish or Italian Catholics, who did not intend to become engineers, went to Fordham, Boston College, or Georgetown. In 1965, there was no doubt that I was, despite being an atheist, a Catholic -- an Irish Catholic -- and I'd go to Fordham. This was fine; in fact, it was good. I received a great education, and no religious types ever tried to win me around. Ed Reno, my first philosophy teacher, a very

strong and tall A.B.D. from Yale, said these words on the first day of freshman philosophy class: "Plato posits *the Good*." I was smitten immediately by philosophy.

By Thanksgiving we had read Plato's early dialogues as well as his *Republic* and Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. I felt as if certain things were falling into place. I had a particularly exciting Thanksgiving with Grandma Gus and Great Aunt Mame in Taunton Massachusetts, reading Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. By Christmas of 1966, I was a neo-Marxist Platonist, or some such inane adolescent thing. And remember Buddhism had caught my eye, but there was no one to talk about or study Buddhism with. In any case, as was my style, I was not pushing my ideas on anyone else. Remember, I was very Dostoevskyeen, even though it would be a few more years before I read any Dostoevsky. I felt different, a bit lonely, but less and less frightened with each passing day. I smoked marijuana most nights after studying, I was very involved in the anti-war movement, but I never took a hallucinogen. No principles stopped me. I just knew too many friends who had bad trips on acid. I think this was unfortunate, since I knew even then that many very interesting states of mind, some that fit the description of spiritual, mystical, and so on, were drug-induced. A grown man who works in consciousness studies should know first-personally 'what it is like to trip.' Someday, in the right conditions, I plan to trip. I remain very interested in this question: why do some altered states of consciousness make those who have them want to make assertions about more than the experience itself, especially sincere confident assertions about *realities* they have seen revealed in these states?

My applications to graduate school expressed my intention to do something simple, something that only a budding philosopher could think was an outstanding

question worth exploring: “what is a person?” So here I stand, the grown man who was that boy, wondering about what a person is and trying to understand what religion is, how it fits in, and why it matters to so many.

Back-to-the present and on-to-the-future

For the rest of this evening’s lecture, my exploration of spirituality and religion and how they work within the *Space of Meaning*^{21stcentury} proceeds in this personal vein. Know that is the case, since autobiographical interludes will now recede from view. But I see the issues from where I am and have come from. I won’t pretend, I hardly have time, to speak either objectively or about all that is relevant to the status of spirituality and religion.

How can *the scientific image* of persons and spiritual and religious impulses, commitments, traditions, and institutions co-exist in the *Space of Meaning*^{21stcentury} – if, that is, they can co-exist? Recall the basic picture of the human quest that I drew in the first few lectures: We humans are *cognitive-affective-conative* creatures who live as beings-in-time with our feet-on-the-ground interacting in and with the natural, social, and built worlds. Living is a *psycho-poetic performance*, a drama that is our own, but that is made possible by our individual intersection and that of our fellow performers in a *Space of Meaning*. How we act, feel, move, speak, and think in the world depends in large measure on how we weave a tapestry of sense and meaning by participation in various subspaces within the spaces of meaning that constitute the *Space of Meaning*^{21stcentury}. I picked out six spaces as the relevant ones for my exploration: these spaces are ideal types associated with the aspirations, theories, traditions, and images associated with *art*,

science, technology, ethics, politics (and law), and spirituality/religion. I also said in the first lecture that I thought Plato got this right about human nature: we have an orientation, an urge, to live among, what he described as the forms of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The neo-Darwinian picture of our nature allows, I claimed, a similar picture without actually positing such things as genuine Forms of these things. It is, I suggest, this platonic orientation that captures part of what we are speaking of when we talk of our “transcendent impulses.” Minimally, we seek to transcend a narrow, local, occluded view of the world, our compatriots and ourselves, and locate a wider, broader, deeper way of making sense of things and finding meaning. Where? In spaces that are truthful, good, and beautiful.

The space of spirituality and religion is unusually interactive, as the spaces go, with art, music, poetry, and the visual arts – with the aesthetic dimensions of life. From the 4th through the 18th century this was – in the West -- due to an explicit alliance between politics and Christianity and thus to patronage for arts of the right sort. Sacred music -- Bach’s “Magnificat” and his “Mass in B Minor,” Handel’s “Messiah” and his “Israel in Egypt,” Mozart’s, Verdi’s, and Faure’s requiems, as well great religious painting, all do something to my heart and mind that is special and different from non-sacred music and art. I do not dare try to explain what that is or how it is done, although I do think it has something to do with activation of “transcendent urges and impulses” and these I do not think are all due to cultural learning. In any case, it is a zone I go to on purpose sometimes, to have what happens happen. Emotions of awe, solemnity, a sense of the holy and sacred are evoked.

The space of spirituality and religion is also one of the few spaces in the *Space of Meaning*^{21st century}, indeed across the *Spaces of Meaning* for any time and place, which has prospects for giving comprehensive form to life-on-the-ground. What I mean is this: although most people want and need to intersect and interact with all or most of the spaces in the Goodman set of {art, science, technology, ethics, politics/law, spirituality/religion}, it is only some artists, scientists, engineers and inventors, and professional politicians who are likely to find life in the relevant zones of art, science, technology, or politics *the* most meaningful space for them and, at the same time fertile and spacious enough to find in that space much, even most, of the fulfillment they need. A meaningful life for such individuals might come primarily from passion for, and fulfillment in, painting, poetry, composing or performing music, doing science, creating new technologies, or being politically engaged. There is one caveat, a reminder from Aristotle: most everyone, no matter what space they are most absorbed in and by, will also typically want friends, companionship, family, and passionate love, perhaps. In terms of the *Space of Meaning*^{21st century} (which may go back, in the West, at least to the *Space of Meaning*^{5th c. B.C.E.}) this desire to connect meaningfully with others is a tentacle that descends from the space of ethics, since ethics is powerfully opinionated about matters of love, friendship, family, and community in living a good life.³

In any case, with respect to these spaces of art, music, science, and the like, where some are plugged in to-a-high-degree and find satisfaction from an almost single-minded

³ Clarification: the spaces of meaning were created in the first instance from the ground up, by humans living their lives and eventually creating forms of life and institutions that reflect the ways they live, give guidance about them, and so on. So in saying that the “desire to connect meaningfully with others is a tentacle that descends from the space of ethics,” I do not mean that this desire originated there. It originated on the ground in our social nature. Once the space is articulated however it guides us, on the ground, in this zone of life. This point generalizes across all the spaces.

passion, most of us are much, much less involved than the aficionados, or better than the “*absorbates*” (to coin a term). We are appreciative and opinionated perhaps about art, music, poetry, literature, science, and technology, but we do not seek to find the main source of fulfillment in one of these spaces.

The space of spirituality and religion is designed, it seems, to function comprehensively for those to whom it designed to appeal -- in principle to everyone in the vicinity. Among secular Western liberals, ethics and politics (and law) taken together, do similar work. That is, they can, in principle, provide the bases for what Rawls calls a “comprehensive theory of the good.” There is a discussion underway right now on the American left about recapturing for itself some leverage among the spiritually inclined which has been more or less ceded to the “religious right.” One move is this: claim that secular liberalism only means that religion is not to be invoked as a basis for legislation. Simple Jeffersonianism. But a secularist in this sense can be religious – most are -- and she has every right when engaged in political discourse to remind her interlocutors about what Jesus said about the treatment of the poor and suffering. Invoking what Jesus said and what his rationale for saying it was, is not to seek to ground legislation in religion, specifically in Christianity. Jesus was a wise Jewish ethical thinker, a saint for all times.⁴ If you think him admirable, then listen to what he said and why he said it.

⁴ Go to <http://www.naturalism.org/> to see how naturalists like myself (I am a board member) conceive of our own spirituality. Note that Tom Clark, the director, speaks for many when he claims that a naturalistic picture leads to greater, more universal compassion than traditional theism(s) does. There was a recent meeting in Berkeley in the summer of 2005 to discuss what spiritual, but not conventionally religious folk, can do to bring a spiritual tone to the political discourse on the American left (See *Tikkun*, January/February, 2006, for many excellent articles on the response of the left to “Theocracy in America: Hostile Takeover”).

Ok, to keep on focus, I now ask directly what sort of *theism* can co-exist with the scientific image? What I mean by *theism* is a set of propositions. I need for purposes of my analysis to leave open the question of whether the propositions are *asserted* as true or simply *said* or *expressed* or *told* as a good, uplifting story. I state my view of the situation up front in this way: Aspirations to locate our selves in the vicinity of what is good, true, and beautiful are noble and worthy. Given our platonic orientation they are also natural (note: not all our natural tendencies are noble and worthy). Naturalism, as I conceive it, is plenty broad enough to make room for robust conceptions of the sacred, the spiritual, the sublime, and of moral excellence. But theism of the sort that takes certain texts as authoritative, that *asserts* that certain facts that cannot possibly be known by humans to be true are uncontrovertibly true, is a problem. *Assertive theism*, but not what I'll call *expressive theism*, is epistemically irresponsible and dangerous to boot. Let me explain.

There is one form of traditional theism that can, it seems, co-exist with the scientific image. Science does not answer the question: *why is there something rather than nothing?* The God of deism, or even a panoply of creative gods, can *seem* to do so. Since no answer is any good epistemically speaking – just differentially satisfying – go with some such answer if it satisfies you and site some sort of conception of meaning and goodness upon the foundation provided.

In his new book (1) about belief in God and (2) belief in belief in God, *Breaking the Spell* (in press, 2006), Dan Dennett relentlessly presses the question *Cui Bono?* Who benefits? Dennett's team is now exploring a difference that, if it exists, makes a difference: Do most people, Americans, say, believe in God or do they believe in believing in God (or both?). The difference would come to something like this: recall the

discussion of “positive illusions” in the previous chapter. I might not really believe that I have lower than average odds of suffering various calamities, but I might nonetheless believe that it is good for me to believe that I won’t suffer these calamities.

If one does what I have just suggested is allowed in a world in which science is thought to speak authoritatively about what exists and what doesn’t exist, then one can imagine this answer to the question *cui bono?*: Many benefit if they enjoy positing a satisfying story about *why there is something rather than nothing*. If that story is theistically minimalist in the sense that it keeps itself *in front of the world*, and in addition supports a way of living that is noble, honest, and worthy, then it is a good thing, and there is no conflict between what science says and what religion says.

For a naturalist, theistic minimalism of the *expressivist* sort involves the following: Place your God, or panoply of gods, outside the natural world as the creative force that brought the world into being. Most think the only option here is the thin, boring, disinterested God of the French deists. But that is not so. If one ascribes to the originary creative force enough power to create the world, then one can also, indeed one might as well, ascribe to it great goodness. The demiurge that overflows with goodness to make the world in Plato’s *Timaeus* is a nice picture of the sort that is permissible.

A powerful creative force that is exceedingly good provides both a satisfying answer to the puzzling question of *why is there something rather than nothing*, and at the same time, a way of grounding an uplifting moral vision that can provide a coherent sense of how to think, be, and live so as to find meaning.

Such stories might be thought to function as positive illusions as discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike all the other positive illusions discussed and endorsed as mostly

harmless and apparently helpful to living well, such creation stories might be thought to be blessed with immunity from all empirical or theoretical feedback. Remember illusions, even positive ones, yield some to the facts. A creation story of the sort I am thinking about -- *if it is held to be literally true* -- is a delusion, or akin to one.⁵ Whether a delusion can be “positive,” all things considered, is something I am skeptical about.⁶ But I won’t offer any argument for my skepticism, other than to say it has its roots in deep-seated convictions that assertions ought to be testable.⁷

⁵ One might divide the attitude into (1) the relevant propositional attitude, in this case it is a *belief*, and (2) its content [*an all-good & all loving God created the universe*] and (3) the epistemology that it believed to warrant the belief in that proposition. Commonly the epistemology does protect the belief with the relevant content by a view about the authority of revelation (as God’s word) plus sometimes first-person authoritative experience. Philosophically, the epistemic standards about revelation are losers, but as a sociologically matter they are often impossible to budge. It helps a lot that entire communities hold the belief in the epistemic authority of the relevant texts as the word of God. An additional important factor is that the epistemic standards governing certain other spaces in the *Space of Meaning*^{21st century}, art, music, and literature, for example, do seem to allow untestable expression. Friends of theism might try to find solace in these spaces. I don’t think religious epistemology of the worrisome sort will find friendly standards in these places for making its own problematic *assertions* (these being more than sayings or expressions). But I can’t provide the required analysis of the bases for these different epistemic standards in art, music, and literature here. But the overall epistemic situation is worrisome. Epistemology is an area of expertise among philosophers. It is not a general area of expertise among those who work in the special sciences although their research methods normally incorporate such expertise. Ordinary well-educated folk know little about epistemology (it is a common experience to teach the cosmological or design arguments to bright undergraduates and show that they are invalid; only to have some students say they still believe in God because of those very arguments.) Meanwhile theists do claim to work in epistemology, but it is, as I see things, always in a question-begging manner, offering “epistemic standards” designed to warrant theistic conclusions. This is epistemically disgraceful; but thanks to massive social support, theists, via many priests, ministers, imams, and rabbis, get away with the ruse. Among the Abrahamic religions, Judaism is the only tradition that is remotely honest about its being an historical phenomena. One needs to go outside orthodox Christian circles to discover (1) that at least two of the canonical four gospels were based on a source entitled “Q”; (2) that many early political battles occurred about which gospels would be considered canonical; (3) The “Gospel of Thomas” is repeatedly mentioned as not approved; and (4) The “Gospel of Thomas” has now been found, and is basically like Jefferson’s Bible, no virgin birth, no miracles, Jesus is a great moral leader. Ask around.

⁶ It seems to me that most people sincerely think that their belief in God is defeasible. Belief in God isn’t like a psychotic believing that he is Napoleon. The person with Napoleon delusion gets feedback that what he believes is true is false, but won’t change. Religious believers are not this crazy; they protect their belief from ever getting genuine, disconfirming feedback.

⁷ Truth be told, the whole issue of testability is more complicated than I let on in lecture three or in the present lecture. Many of our best physical theories, or promising ones, are judged by compatibility with the way the world seems to work and in terms of internal consistency. There are no direct tests for many of the ontologically basic stuff posited by elementary particle physics, especially by its string theoretical variant.

Actually there is a move here: I have already hinted at it and I find myself inclined to recommend it: Think of a very complex, exciting creation myth *as* a myth. Then it is not a criticism that it is resistant to all forms of naturalistic confirmation or disconfirmation. It speaks about matters that science is unopinionated about, *and* it does so in a way that recognizes forthrightly that it is simply telling a story where (a) one is “wanted” and would come in handy and (b) might do some good for those who want a story that makes the universe *seem* purposeful and not a surd, not an inexplicable given (one might judge the urges behind (a) and (b) as themselves irrational, but I won’t take up that issue here).

That said, naturalism recommends, indeed it requires, an epistemically reserved attitude towards such origin stories, as well as towards any eschatological stories about what happens after one dies.⁸ That is, although naturalism is unopinionated about what, if anything, caused the universe to exist, this does not mean that anything goes when it

⁸ Naturalism involves a commitment to a certain picture of the world and its operations—a metaphysic, that is anti-supernaturalistic and this is so because it considers certain epistemic approaches that warrant belief in supernatural posits – in this world, at least—to be discredited. It would be a mistake, however, to think that naturalism is derived solely from the scientific image. Science certainly played a role in the ascendancy of naturalism. But as importantly so have the success of certain methods of imaging and locating persons morally, spiritually, aesthetically, and politically that accept naturalism this far: they reject a common epistemic foe that involves grounding certain beliefs and practices on certain texts that are deemed to be the word of God. Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Buddha all rejected the latter sort of epistemology in advance of its becoming widespread and familiar in the West, and they did so for very similar reasons to those that humanists who live in a post-scientific world do. Because the epistemology that privileges certain texts as containing how God sees things and what God commands, it is not benign. It can have horrific ethical consequences and thus it does not deserve respect and tolerance. This is something that affects not only how we interact with religious fundamentalists but also has implications for how we treat the religious moderate. The fundamentalist and moderate, as I will use the terms, differ in the following way: both believe certain texts contain the authoritative word of the One, True God. They differ only on the matter of literal interpretation. Genesis is literally true or it is metaphorically true. In either case, the belief that God is the creator is unquestionable. God’s word, so conceived, is an action-guiding trump. Many will say that the gospels command universal love of humankind. This is true. But the “first and greatest commandment” is not that. But is emphatic that Jesus taught this: “Thou Shalt Love The Lord Thy God With All Thy Heart, And With All Thy Soul, And With All Thy Mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself” (Matthew 22:37-39). The belief in authoritative texts that contain God’s word – a view largely idiosyncratic to the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is supported by an unsupportable, predictably dangerous, epistemology. Theism of the sorts that takes certain texts as authoritatively true is a problem – epistemically problematic and socially and political dangerous..

comes to spinning origin stories. Because they are untestable, such stories can be *said*, *expressed*, even embraced, *but they cannot be asserted as worthy of true belief*. They are not evaluable in terms of the ‘true’ and the ‘false.’ But you can like your story so much that you treat it as true, even if can’t be evaluated as such. Or at least, something like this might be the best way to describe the self-understanding of the persons who tell a certain story that they conceive mythically: They do not quite believe their story to be true (they can’t responsibly do so), but they believe that belief in their story is beneficial. *Cui bono?* Those who feel the need for the story and find it compelling, uplifting, and satisfying. Who might that be? Most everyone, since the question grips us, and the answer is compelling, satisfying, or whatever. The situation is not dissimilar to the common phenomenon of kids who don’t really (any longer) believe in Santa Claus, but go a couple of Christmas seasons acting as if the story is true. They put out carrots for the reindeer and cookies and milk for Santa. This is fun and makes the whole event especially meaningful. Trust me, parents enjoy those last couple of years.

The issues are more complicated when it comes to beliefs about miracles and the afterlife, as opposed to creation stories and myths about the nature of the creative force(s). Miracles are alleged to be happenings in this world, so they are evaluable by epistemic standards governing assertions about such happenings. Life after death occurs in another (the ‘next world’) world in the Abrahamic religions. This might seem to give afterlife stories the same immunity as stories that creation stories have. But this is not quite right, since the stories involve the possible futures of embodied sentient beings, and physics, chemistry, biology, and neuroscience get a say in judging whether survival makes sense. Most will say it doesn’t. In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions we have a

different issue. Many lives involve recycling back into this world after each death, via either reincarnations (Hinduism) or rebirths (Buddhism). Here the situation is closer to the miracle case. Miracles, reincarnations, and rebirths are all alleged to be happenings in this world, and thus they are evaluable by epistemic standards governing assertions about such happenings. And they will be deemed to be ill-founded ideas by those standards.

What Shouldn't Be Asserted ⁹

Naturalism, as we've seen, places restrictions on what can be *asserted* legitimately, with epistemic warrant.¹⁰ '*Asserting*' is different from *stating* or *saying*, in that asserting is

⁹ I want to be clear that nothing in the analysis so far precludes spirituality or religion. It depends on whether the objectionable form of 'supernaturalism' is espoused. According to that, not unfamiliar form, of supernaturalism (i) there exists a 'supernatural being(s)' or 'power(s)' outside the natural world; (ii) this 'being' or 'power' has causal commerce with this world, and; (iii) the grounds for belief in both the 'supernatural being' and its causal commerce cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic methods. Many forms of naturalistic spirituality reject supernaturalism in the objectionable sense (see Ursula Goodenough 1998; in press). I myself am spiritual: a Celtic-Catholic-quasi-Buddhist atheist. And I see my ethical commitments as supported and enhanced by deep transcendental cognitive convictions and emotions that powerfully ground a conviction that I am a part of the whole, inextricably connected to everything else that there is. But I reject (i-iii).

¹⁰ The OED suggests that the original philosophical meaning of the term 'naturalism' dates back to the 17th century and meant "a view of the world, and of man's relation to it, in which only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed." Barry Stroud (1996) writes: "Naturalism on any reading is opposed to supernaturalism...By 'supernaturalism' I mean the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it. Most metaphysical systems of the past included some such agent. A naturalist conception of the world would be opposed to all of them." Indeed, Stroud goes on to suggest that anti-supernaturalism is pretty much the only determinate, contentful meaning of the 'term' naturalism. Assuming he is right, then anti-supernaturalism forms the common core, the common tenet, of 'naturalism' insofar as 'naturalism' is anything like a coherent philosophical doctrine spanning the last four centuries. Let me be clear about a matter of considerable importance: the objectionable form of 'supernaturalism' is one according to which (i) there exists a 'supernatural being(s)' or 'power(s)' outside the natural world; (ii) this 'being' or 'power' has causal commerce with this world (iii) the grounds for belief in both the 'supernatural being' and its causal commerce cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic methods. Note that the commitment to the dispensability of supernaturalism does not entail a rejection of all forms of spirituality or religion. Theologians and philosophers who are religious naturalists reject the conjunction of (i-iii) above and that amounts to a rejection of the objectionable form of supernaturalism. Furthermore, many forms of embodied spiritual commitment are themselves committed to the dispensability of supernaturalism in the objectionable sense (i-iii). Buddhism comes to mind, as do some strands in Hinduism, Jainism, many kinds of shamanism, as well as among many liberal Christian communities in America (Quakers, Unitarian Universalism).

governed by epistemic standards of warranted assertability. ‘*Stating*’ or ‘*saying*’ is epistemically free range. Self-conscious “myth-making” is an elaborate form of saying without asserting. You can say anything you want, including all manner of false and foolish things. It’s a first amendment right. The restrictions governing asserting come from hard won victories by practices that use epistemic and methodological naturalistic standards, which are then refined, modified, and enhanced, and confirmed as good knowledge-yielding practices because they are successful. Here are some things that ought not be asserted, or expected or demanded of others who “say” different things:

- *You should not assert that any creation story you believe in is true, even that it is comprised of “warranted beliefs.”* You are free, of course, to say you believe the story and to do so. **Rationale:** Assertions need to be falsifiable in principle, and such stories aren’t.
- *It follows that it would be irrational to demand, led alone expect, others to believe the same story you do.* **Rationale:** Epidemiological models in psychological anthropology show that religious ideas spread like germs inside communities (D. Sperber, 1996; Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). This explains shared belief. And such explanations, if reflected upon, undermine the rationality of expecting others to share your beliefs. People seem to be remarkably immune to the “Location, location, location” mantra most familiar from real estate agents, as it applies to religious coin. The mantra explains why folk attach incredible epistemic weight and value to obviously non-shared religious and moral beliefs. This is something I’d love to hear anthropologists explain.

- *Although you can't assert that your creation myth is true, you can assert that belief in its truth benefits certain folk. (This is exactly the move the "Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's **Brother's Karamazov** makes: He gives the ordinary folk what they need -- "miracles, mystery, and bread," and keeps the dreadful truth to himself. **Rationale:** This assertion that belief in a false belief benefits folk, is a sociological-psychological claim and testable as such. Of course, a lot needs to be said about who the beneficiaries are, what sorts of benefits accrue, and so on.¹¹*
- *Do not give "supernatural forces" genuine causal explanatory force when making assertions of the form "**phi** explains **omega**." That is, do not assert that "Allah created the universe" is true. **Rationale(s):** (1) The best explanation for why humans almost universally posit "supernatural beings" and /or "forces" to explain the unexplained (possibly in the case of the *why is there something rather than nothing* question – which may be "eternally inexplicable"), is that we possess, as a gift of Mother Nature, an *HADD*, "Hyperactive Agent Detection Device" (Justin Barrett, 2000)¹². How so? And what is *HADD*? The basic picture is this (Atran 2002; Boyer 2001; Bloom 2004; Dennett in press 2006): *Homo sapiens sapiens* have prepotent epistemic settings that are easily activated and that enable us to catch on to the regularities that govern the ordinary causal world, as well as ones that suit us to negotiate social life. Social life involves taking the "intentional stance," attributing beliefs, desires, and so on to other sentient beings,*

¹¹ "Team Dennett" is doing work examining this claim: true believers get divorced less frequently than atheists or agnostics. The evidence so far is that this is false.

¹² "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion," *Trends in Cognitive Science*, vol. 4: 29-34.

learning to read minds, e.g., to detect motives and intentions before they are enacted, to detect cheating and cheaters, and so on. In creating adaptations, evolution commonly overshoots. That is, designs that work very well in the domain they are designed for – in this case the “agent-attribution-domain” – will sometimes see agency where there isn’t any, where for example, ordinary causation is operative. Thus, the human tendency to anthropomorphize. This tendency is normally innocent enough and causes no harm. Before the germ theory of contagious disease existed and before much of anything could be done about germs, believing that evil spirits caused illness was neither a bad surmise, nor harmful (so long as people were following basic rules of hygiene for other reasons). (2) Supernatural interventions conflict with naturalistic epistemology: If, as often happens, the aggressive form of brain cancer of a person who is thought to have a short time to live goes into a complete remission, we often speak of a “miracles.”¹³ One sense is innocent: due to some odd constellation of

¹³ One caution here: Paul Bloom (2004) thinks that we see in young children powerful “dualistic tendencies.” The dualism could be epistemic or metaphysical. Epistemic dualism involves commitment to two different kinds of causation, and two different styles of explanation: (1) ordinary causation and (2) psychological or intentional causation. Metaphysical dualism involves commitment to a world in which there are two ontologically distinct types of substances, events, processes or properties. Bloom thinks children are natural born dualists in both senses. I’m not so sure. I grant that all people are epistemic dualists. But, for many adults, this just involves taking the intentional stance and explaining and predicting the behavior of other humans (and more) using psychological language. But many adults (all naturalists) who use both kinds of explanation do not believe in metaphysical dualism. One possibility is that kids make no metaphysical divide while using both the language of psychological and ordinary causation. The experimental fact(s) that kids are very surprised when a physical object changes trajectory or speed as it enters and exists an occluded space, whereas they are not surprised when a person does so, could mean they just get that people can decide how to move in ways objects can’t. If this is true, then becoming committed to metaphysical dualism might require being introduced to a theory, a philosophical theory, specifically a metaphysical one, that is alleged to explain the unusual powers of persons. I do agree that being “natural epistemic dualists” primes us nicely to accept metaphysical dualism. The point has direct bearing on whether our natural epistemic dualism directly explains posits of supernatural forces and entities, miracles, and the like. Here again caution suggests this division: ‘supernatural forces’ might be conceived as special kinds of occupants of the natural world. The language of ‘spirits’ simply captures their unusual ways of operating. Many ancient religions, arguably, place their gods in this universe as unusual, but not immaterial, causal players. If so, then the move to immaterial spirits who operate from outside the world

factors involving the person's immune system, the nature of the cancer, and so on, she defied all odds. But some set of causal events produced the miraculous effect. Other times, the concept of a miracle is invoked non-innocently and it is not allowed as an assertion, as for example when a cure is attributed to Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II from beyond the grave. You can say "a miracle occurred" you just can't responsibly assert it. The objectionable usage involves causal commerce between immaterial causal powers and the ordinary physical world. The big problem is that "immaterial causal powers" can be attributed with impunity unless we introduce a testability constraint (specifically, a falsifiability constraint) in which case they can't be asserted at all. Two subspecies of "the big problem" are these, both seemingly insuperable: First, if immaterial causal energy is imputed to do causal work in the universe, this violates well-confirmed conservation principles.¹⁴ That is, any immaterial cause that is invoked to explain

involves coming to believe three pieces of theory: (1) that immaterial entities exist; (2) these immaterial entities live outside this world; (3) but these immaterial entities, forces, or whatever, are capable of visitations that causally effect what happens in this world. I will assume that we are talking about such a metaphysical theory as I go on to speak about supernatural causes, that is, as = immaterial causes, because that is the view in play nowadays. I am skeptical, at least agnostic, about whether it was always and everywhere the view of the nature of the occupants of the "spirit-world."

¹⁴ There is this move: Admit that the principle of conservation of energy is well-confirmed, but point out, what is true, no one tracks (no one could, in principle, do so) that the total amount of energy is in fact absolutely constant. But assume it is. If so, it is possible that when some spirit creates some energy here *ex nihilo*, an identical amount of energy leaks out somewhere else in a distant galaxy. Or assume, that the principle of conservation of energy is only well-confirmed around here whereas physics thus assumes it applies throughout the universe. Since the principle could be false, assume it is. If the principle of conservation of energy is false, at least not perfectly true, then occasional, even common divine interventions, might not be revealed in any measurements now being done, or even under epistemically ideal conditions. This last point might be falsifiable (if one is being very generous), since it predicts that under much better, or ideal, measurement conditions that the principle of the conservation of energy would show "extra" energy. The problem is that the *only* reason to entertain this hypothesis is to make room for miracles. One last point: I often hear people say "that (whatever happened) was God's doing for me what I couldn't do for myself.' Or take the Roman Catholic doctrine that God vaginally inserts souls at each conception (see Lecture 3, *Appendix II*). One way both these ideas could work is *if* all supernatural commerce with this world is with *immaterial souls*. So God makes me different by making my soul different, or God inserts an immaterial soul "in" each fertilized egg. Naughty idea(s): dualism is a bad idea, worth discarding for logical and evidentiary reasons I and most other philosophers of mind and mind-

a material happening violates the laws of nature, because it assumes, indeed it invokes, the introduction of physical energy from a zone that contains no physical energy. This violates principles like *ex nihilo nihil fit* which theists commonly deploy (but then unsuccessfully) in cosmological arguments for the existence of God (Flanagan 2002). Furthermore, ‘asserting’ (as opposed to ‘saying’) that such tricks occur is to assert something unfalsifiable. Invoking a principle that says no empirical data are relevant to the truth status of the claim causes this problem. Second, if there already exists a standard causal account that explains the unusual occurrence, then the immaterial power invoked to “really” explain it overdetermines the event in a way that makes it explanatorily superfluous; its only warrant is that it permits saying (but not asserting) that ‘a miracle has occurred.’

Meaning and Moral Glue

I don’t think that the *HADD* account remotely explains all that needs explaining about spirituality and religion. It does explain a fair amount about why humans across cultures, at times even when cross-fertilization was not much in play, engage in supernaturalistic personification. But religion typically does more, much more, than provide causal explanation of why the world exists, or why surprising things happens, where naturalistic causal explanations are (or once were) lacking. Two common functions are these:

1. Providing stories that make sense of things and provide meaning.

scientists agree on. Furthermore dualism causes the “theist” one of two problems – possibly both: either once I am changed because my soul is, then assuming the change affects my mind/brain or how I act, we are back to violation of conservation laws; if “soul work” has no effects, then the soul is epiphenomenal and doesn’t change me.

2. Providing some sort of “superglue” to an ethical conception.

Philosophers for understandable reasons focus mostly on the zone of religious assertions that compete – or seem to compete -- with naturalistic causal stories, with stories about cosmic origins or miraculous happenings, as well as stories also about what happens after we die. This can lead to the view that most of the work of a spiritual tradition or a religious one is mainly to provide such causal or eschatological stories. This could be an illusion, specifically an instance of an availability and/or representative bias, where one overrates the role or frequency of what is paying most attention to. Suppose I am in the market for a new, small four/five passenger car, and I set my price range between \$15,000 and \$20,000. I now see cars mostly in terms of what they cost, less so in terms – we’ll suppose -- of features, warranties, longevity, horsepower, overall size, and so on, so long as they can seat four/five passengers and are in my price range. When driving I see and examine lots of Hondas, Toyotas, Mazda’s, Hyundai’s and Suzuki’s in my price range, the ever abundant SUV’s recede from view. Even the bothersome forty-foot semis seem less common.¹⁵ Now that I am attending to what’s-on-the-road with an agenda, I see a lot of what I want and need. What percentage of cars on the road is actually in the class of cars I am considering? Many it seems. Now, because I know a lot about these cognitive biases, having first learned and written about them over twenty years ago, I won’t fall for my own trick. The point is that I, like everyone, am prone to the mistake of overrating the frequency and/or importance of what I am paying attention to – I feel the tug of the scenario I described even though I know better than to fall for what my intuitions tell me, that being something like “most cars are inexpensive subcompacts.”

¹⁵ Last time I drove with Dan Dennett he was driving an American Volkswagen Bug ‘Wanna-Be.’ I forget the name. But it certainly was in my price range. They apparently do not exist in North Carolina.

I am going to assume that what I'll just call *theology* for simplicity's sake – a triplet of theories about creation, miracles, and the afterlife -- is what philosophers pay most attention to, but that theology is not in fact all or most of what religions say, assert, or do.¹⁶ What else is there? What other functions are there? My answer is: *Meaning* and *moral glue*. Furthermore, these two are commonly connected.¹⁷

In lecture two, I discussed some recent work in positive psychology that claimed evidence for certain common, ubiquitous, possibly universal virtues. There was one alleged virtue on the list of six, “transcendence,” that I claimed is not a virtue. It isn't because, as I said at the time, it doesn't have the right structure to be a virtue. A virtue is a disposition to perceive, feel, think, judge, and act in the way the virtue calls for when the right sort of situation(s) arises. Nonetheless, the fact that something in the vicinity of “transcendence” is alleged to be universal deserves attention. Recall “transcendence” is introduced this way: “The transcendent according to Kant is that which is beyond human knowledge. We define it here in the broad sense as the connection to something higher – the belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves.” (Peterson et al., 2004, p. 38).

¹⁶ James does not make this mistake. In his justly famous, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1892), James takes religious experience as primary and explicitly states that he considers religious institutions and their associated theologies to be secondary. I do, however, have two criticisms of James (1) he treats spiritual experiences as more common than I think they are, at least independently of systems of practice, “forms of life” designed to produce them, e.g., shamanistic rituals or intensive contemplative practice; (2) he seems to think that religions and religious institutions arise primarily out of such a transcendent experiential base, whereas on his own view he also seems to see the power of non-spiritual factors, politics, and so on, in the construction of religions. On my view, the latter have at least as much power in shaping the institutions of religion as the former, probably more, possibly much more.

¹⁷ Truth be told, meaning and moral glue are also commonly connected to and interwoven with theology, so what I am doing is separating them out for analytic purposes. It matters for someone like myself who would like theology to self-understand its role as myth-making that the meaning and moral glue aspects are, in principle, logically separable from theology incorrectly understood as a set of epistemically respectable assertions.

We are given two characterizations, one cognitive, one affective: Transcendence is a *belief* that [there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves] or it is the *sense* or *attitude* or *feeling* that [there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves].” Perhaps it can be one or the other, or both.

From what Peterson et al. go on to say, and putting what Kant says to one side, “transcendence,” it seems to me, is best conceived as a prepotent part of our basic cognitive-affective-conative constitution as human animals that is easily activated across environments. It can then appear as beliefs, as beliefy-like things, as beliefs or beliefy-like things with feeling and motivational bearing, or as weak or powerful ‘I-know-not-what’ feelings of connection, merger/merging, awe and the like. Transcendence has almost completely to do with such things as the urges to make sense of things and to live meaningfully. Both these urges involve, indeed require, situating myself in the world in some sort of expansive way where I become at once smaller but more connected, and part of that which is larger. Making sense of things and living meaningfully involve some of sort of fulfillment attained by engaging and making sense of the outside world, our place in it, and our prospects for living meaningfully as part of everything that there is. There is no illusion whatsoever in truthfully seeing ourselves, our situation, our predicament in this way.

Thus I’ll treat the “transcendent” urge this way, as a prepotent disposition or orientation, and not as a virtue. But I will, at least for argument’s sake, take seriously the idea that in either or both its cognitive and affective forms, something like it is universal in this sense: one sees forms of “transcendence” in most every human community. How

individual persons interact and intersect with the communal forms of transcendence available to them is variable.

Despite the fact that “transcendence,” as I understand it, is not a virtue, it might support virtue. What I have in mind is a simple thought. The perennial question: *why be moral?* might receive a credible answer while individuals and communities search for answers to such questions as: *what matters? what counts?; how do I/we find meaning and purpose?; how is my life connected to the whole?* That could happen if the answer to the “meaning of life” questions requires virtuous activity on my part. And lo and behold, they commonly do. Question: *Why be moral?* Answer: *Because living morally is a condition for a meaningful life.*

There is something normal about having this thought. Why? One reason is biological. If a parent is nurturing, then at a very early stage, human infants release oxytocin when they hear mommy or daddy’s voice. Oxytocin is a feel-good neurochemical, and it is implicated in later life in trusting behavior and generosity behavior (S. Taylor, 2002). Some orphans miss the critical stage for oxytocin release and tragically don’t ever recover to a point where even if placed in loving families they feel good, welcomed, trusting; nor do they see to engage in generosity except for purely instrumental reasons. Other reasons are biological and cultural. Play and games are fun, but they require cooperation. Learning about the norms governing cooperation in play and games is a laboratory for gaining experience and knowledge about the role of normative governance in other zones of life. Life is better, more fun, less boring, and more meaningful when one learns to play games well, than if one doesn’t. School days go better if everyone behaves, and so on.

Then there are discoveries of talents. Some talents are energized by passion or reveal passions. Chess, art, music, and sports sometimes, even often, involve both -- talent discoveries, and passion discovery and energization. To the degree that all these activities are either $n+1$ (chess)... $n+10$ (soccer) games or activities, or require as conditions of learning, more than just me, my desires, and my activity, they require cooperative norms. Nothing very 'moral' in the high falutin' or rhapsodic sense people like to employ the term 'moral' for is required; but normative learning, some of it moral, is, nonetheless, in taking place.

Peterson et al., as I've said, say "transcendence" is a virtue. This is false. What they then do for "transcendence" is identical to what they do for true virtues: describe what they call "strengths of character" that are utilized by and give form to "transcendence" conceived as a virtue. I want to briefly comment of these alleged "strengths" that are alleged to support or enable "transcendence," on the charitable assumption that what they find in the vicinity of the "transcendent impulse," as I conceive it, might shed light on how it manifests itself and what, if anything, this does as far as illuminating the nature of spirituality and/or religion.

The strengths associated with transcendence are each alleged to "forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning." This is the list of four (I leave one strength, "humor," out)¹⁸:

¹⁸ *Humor [playfulness]* is depicted as "Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes." Leaving humor/playfulness out simplifies the discussion. But I also have a principled reason for leaving it out of the discussion. Peterson et al. explain that "humor/playfulness" is a late addition that satisfies the universality condition but that was also added because their "classification was too grim without it." This is a very funny reason to add it -- almost a joke itself. They say that humor/playfulness may eventually be classified as a "value-added strength" -- "most praiseworthy when coupled with one or another strength." I love humor and playfulness; and I prefer spiritual types to not take themselves too seriously, not be dour, etc. But I seriously doubt that there is any

“Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen: taking time to express thanks

Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort”

For the rest of this evening I’ll draw in these four orientations or attitudinal clusters (now not conceived as “character strengths”) into a discussion of *meaning* and *moral glue*.

The Meaning of Life

The worst question to ask is “What is the meaning of life?” The definite article is one major cause of trouble. There is no single meaning of life. Persons naturally engage in psycho-poetic performances in which and by which they seek to make sense of things and to live meaningfully. This “questing propensity” is part of our natural cognitive-affective-conative endowment as social animals, specifically as *Homo sapiens sapiens*. It is part of natural teleology.

interesting connection between actualizing transcendent impulses and being like Charlie Chaplin, Lucille Ball, Bob Newhart, and Bill Cosby (yes, I swear these are some of their examples!).

Returning to principles evoked and explained in the first two lectures we can say this: Aristotle's and Rawls's *Aristotelian principle* is one way of describing what sorts of desires give form to the quest, for example, desires for companionship and desires to develop our natural talents and abilities. Nussbaum's and Sen's *Capabilities Criterion* is required as a normative principle to fix the following sort of problem with going just with *AP*. *AP* expresses a desire that ought to be honored, all else being equal. Specifically, every human ought to be given equal chance to develop her talents and interests so as to live in a fulfilling and meaningful way. The problem is that (a) the development of talents and interests depends on social recognition of them, and then on the availability of modes of advancing them. Prior to many important inventions, the violin, basketball, ice skates, and people with talents for these things were in no position to recognize that they had the talents. The practices that could or would eventually support them did not exist. In many cases, this is just a fact of life, not something we can complain about. But (b) is something to complain about. (B) is the fact that "mistaken preferences" and "false consciousness" are possible, and when they occur, attempting to correct them is permissible. Some argue that it is analytic that if a person prefers *p*, she prefers *p*. The *Capabilities Approach* says that a person may prefer *p*, but not really, all things considered, prefer *p*. The *Capabilities Criterion* derives from the *capabilities approach* and says this: Honor the *Aristotelian Principle*, but when and where there are legitimate reasons to think that certain people are not "seeing" their human potential accurately, work to adjust their vision so that they are better positioned to accurately judge what they are capable of, what they want, and so on. This is all, I acknowledge, complicated stuff. In many cases, we need to ask individuals, groups, and whole societies to see how certain

longstanding socio-economic-political practices occlude their own clear vision of their situation.

The *Capabilities Constraint* allows normative criticism within and across traditions. It justifies itself by utilizing now familiar insights from social psychology. These range from work on the authoritarian personality, to work on identifying with the oppressor, to research on “the hedonic treadmill,” to common facts of self-recognition of mistaken preferences based on (self-acknowledged) overrating of short-term pleasures, and so on.

Instead of asking “what is *the* meaning of life?” we can ask such tame but very difficult questions as these:

- How shall I/we live?
- What ways of being and living produce fulfillment and meaning?
- What attitudes and beliefs about such matters as my place in the universe is it sensible to adopt?
- How can I understand my life’s meaning given that I am mortal?
- Given what I know about my talents, aspirations, hopes, and expectations, and given what I know about the existing network of social support, what sort of sensible plan can I make about how to live?

I won’t spell out my own answers. I don’t have space or time. Plus I can’t do so fully; they are unfolding – works in progress. We are each, with social support, supposed to find our own way to the answers. Spiritual and philosophical traditions often do the following work: they give us a head start in asking and answering these questions by being repositories of past “good answers.” Aristotle, Confucius, and Buddhism all, in

different ways, see productive and respectful social relations as time-tested ingredients of meaningful and fulfilling lives. Aristotle, in his three-fold taxonomy of friendships into friendships of utility, pleasure, and true-friendship where you love the other as yourself, says something wise that still resonates among those engaged in the quest. Gratitude, on Peterson et al.'s list, comes in backward and forward looking forms. If I see myself correctly, I see that I am who and what I am thanks to ancestors (see *Appendix 1* for a recent Thanksgiving toast that I gave expressing my thoughts on this matter).

Then there is the issue of death. Many spiritual traditions moralize death by embedding a life story in what, in lecture three, I called a *karmic eschatology*. There is a payoff system that kicks in after you die. Your fate is determined by the moral quality of your earthly life, and in a surprising number of cases, by whether you believed in the “true God.” Again this can be said, but it can’t be asserted.

Here is the way I think about my own death, given that I think karmic eschatology(ies) makes no sense (I don’t even get why anyone would find the idea of living forever, even blissfully, very appealing). I recently heard a wise Buddhist friend say that “death is the ultimate absurdity, you lose everything you care about.” This, it seems to me, is not true. Furthermore, it is not a particularly Buddhist way (even for a secular Buddhist) to see things. Here is a better way: If you live well, then when you die *you* lose nothing you care about. Why? Because *you* are no longer there. *You* are just gone. That which is gone has nothing to lose. That which was once something, but is now nothing, cannot suffer any loss. But assuming the world and the people in it, including your loved ones remain, then your good karmic effects continue on. This is something to be proud of and happy about while alive. Your goodness, your presence,

your worth are why the living feel your loss, and are sad, possibly very sad. But you are not sad, you neither suffer nor experience any loss because you are gone. Nothing absurd has occurred. True, dying could be miserable, but your own death is nothing to worry about. Chill.

Moral Glue

Here we are faced with a chicken-egg problem. Which comes first a theology, or an ethical conception? Does one ground or give rise to the other, and if so, what is the direction of origination? My own best guess is that because all social groups are made up of individuals with selfish urges, as well as tendencies towards fellow-feeling, that problems of social coordination will need to be addressed immediately with norms that prohibit big ticket moral violations, such as murder, taking more than a fair share of resources, and the like. And thus that such norms will be invented first. That is, before the *HADD* device kicks in to wonder about *why there is something rather than nothing*, some moral norms will be introduced, abided, and violations punished.

But given tendencies towards free-riding, simple selfishness, and sensible knavery, social groups will utilize whatever systems of sanction for violations that might prove useful. Gods can usefully come into play to serve multiple roles. Gods or a God can explain puzzling origin questions and, in addition, anthropomorphic spirits who see what's going on, even when humans, their policing mechanisms, governments, and so on, don't, can produce a superb normative incentive system. "He knows when you are sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake."

The basic idea is such a natural one that it is almost inevitable that the creative function of theism will be bound to its moral function if only for earthy norm enforcement purposes, and then possibly consciously by cynical (or realistic, depending on how you see human nature) political leaders. Binding the two functions together is too good of an idea, too effective a means of getting people to do what is hard, not to be utilized. Thus it is so utilized, again and again and again.

I say that the binding of a karmic eschatology to a moral vision is “almost inevitable” because, well, it is not absolutely inevitable or necessary. Some small ancient communities, usually where there is infrequent exiting of members or entry of new members, have non-karmic eschatologies where ancestors recycle but without the elaborate system of heavenly or hellish payoff in another place. Among Trobrianders, although this is rare, there is not even ancestral recycling (although the deceased do travel to an island 10 miles away). People are just supposed to behave well, and they seem to do so – to a point (Obeyesekere, 2002). Furthermore, China, both ancient and modern – except possibly in Tibet -- seems to be unusual in talking about heaven (*tian*) and heaven’s mandate (*tian-ming*) in an impersonal way and without either a non-karmic or karmic eschatology. This seems to have been the pattern since at least the time of Confucius (600 B.C.E.). So, China, despite being famous (or infamous) for ancestor worship, does not have ancestral spirits recycling.

That said, even in places and times where the lights of doctrinal theism are on the dim side, there are normally rites, ritual practices, sacred places, and ceremonies where people come together to enact and confirm their commitment to a way of living and being that is their own. Harvey Whitehorse (2004) helpfully distinguishes *imagistic modes* of

spiritual practices and *doctrinal modes* (although they lie along a continuum and each utilizes features of the other). Shamanistic practices typically include high emotional impact initiation rites without a mother lode of doctrine. Whereas, Calvinism involves austere doctrinal views with very tame, one might say, boring rituals.¹⁹ The first (older) imagistic mode is easily passed on, enacted, and re-enacted in small communities; the doctrinal mode, especially once literacy is common, can spread very quickly across geopolitical space.²⁰

The word “religio” comes from the Latin “to unite or bind together.” One problem with certain religious forms of binding together is that they have in-group/out-group structure. Even the golden rule is sometimes interpreted in such a way that “love of neighbor” involves love for members of one’s own community only (Wattles 1996).²¹

The *superglue hypothesis* is testable and involves such ideas as these:

¹⁹ *Q*: Why don’t Calvinists allow married people to have intercourse standing-up? *A*: It might lead to dancing.

²⁰ Speaking for myself, I’d take peyote and getting naked in a sweat-lodge everyday day of the week over hearing a mass (even with incense) where the inane political compromise known as the doctrine of the trinity – a matter of faith and dogma and thus mandatory for a true believer -- is discussed in a homily.

²¹ The Abrahamic religions may be unusual in requiring literal interpretation of the relevant texts. In his book, *The End of Faith* (2003), Sam Harris asks: Suppose a loved one suggests that you give up belief in the God of Abraham and follow the Buddha’s path? *Deuteronomy* advises this: you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God. (13:8-11). The literal interpretation of this text is unambiguous. The moderate must offer a non-literal interpretation and she faces this problem: *Deuteronomy*, also says of the text itself, “Whatever I am now commanding you, you must keep and observe, adding nothing to it, taking nothing away” (13:1). The *Koran* implores the true believer in Allah this way: “Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate” (9:73, see also 9:123). Regarding martyrdom, the *Koran* speaks as follows: “God has given those that fight with their goods and their persons a higher rank than those who stay at home. God has promised all a good reward; but far richer is the recompense for those who fight for Him...He that leaves his dwelling to fight for God and His apostles and is then overtaken by death shall be rewarded by God...The unbelievers are your inveterate enemies” 496-101. The *New Testament* is a kinder gentler document that either the *Old Testament* which precedes it and the *Koran* which comes later. But crusaders of many stripes have found support in it for all manner of vicious actions. True believers are forbidden to become Rabbis, to be Jews. (Matthew 23: 8). And the demands on the true believer contain all manner of inane observations, advice, and commands. Luke writes: “if any man come to me and hate not his father, and his mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” Ok, Luke didn’t really mean “hate,” and all that. But there is a problem.

- Moral compliance is hard. Any practice that promises rewards and/or punishments for compliance or lack thereof might do important motivational work.
- Moral compliance is hard. Any practices that remind individuals that they share a form of life, are co-dependent on each other, and so on, might do important motivational work.
- The moral emotions which include the “reactive” attitudes of guilt, shame, regret, contrition, remorse, resentment, and envy, as well as such positive emotions as awe, love, empathy, and gratitude can be sensibly and powerfully unified by practices that tie them to a unified conception of a normatively approved form of life.
- Besides being evolutionary adaptations in their ‘proto-moral’ form, the moral emotions when activated have a self-referential nature. Self-reflection or self-awareness about one’s own feeling, thinking, and behavior is constitutive of many of these emotions. Thus in their socially advanced forms they are often referred to as emotions of self-consciousness or self-assessment. And this element of self-awareness connects the moral emotions to issues of self-fulfillment, living meaningfully and virtuously. In so far as a spiritual or ethical conception of a purpose beyond my own self-serving (selfish) ambitions is in play, I feel the motivational tug to participate in the normatively approved form of life (that does the job of realizing the higher purpose).

Suppose we accept some version of *the moral glue hypothesis*, a problem remains – call it the problem of spiritual and moral chauvinism. The problem is familiar: many spiritual-religious-moral conceptions portray themselves in a way that is self-congratulatory. They *assert* that *this is the (one, true) way!* Proselytizing religions actively seek to convert wayward souls. Even non-proselytizing traditions often look with mixtures of condescension and bewilderment at those who do not follow their path. Both have been known to kill non-believers, at least partly for that reason (there is often the gold too). Sometimes there are good and legitimate reasons to disapprove of the way(s) certain people live. But sometimes it is simple chauvinism. The big problem I address in closing that relates to this chauvinism has to do with the surprising narrowness of the conception of ethical community – specifically the scope of moral consideration – that afflicts many otherwise noble spiritual/religious conceptions.²²

To get a feel for the problem that concerns me consider the recent work by Stephen Post on religion & spirituality and human flourishing. Stephen Post explores this “integrated hypothesis”: *First, human nature appears to include a powerful spiritual and religious inclination toward worshipful union with a presence in the universe that is higher than our own; second, a fully flourishing individual and society must make room for spirituality and religion (i.e., spirituality organized around group worship, rituals,*

²² ‘Tribalism’ is the name sometimes given to communities of narrow ethical perspective. To be fair to actual “tribal peoples,” they are often sufficiently isolated that issues (and thus thoughts about) of loving outsiders, let alone everyone, don’t often arise. When they do many isolated communities have welcomed in, say, anthropologists; others have taken heads. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) has done some very important recent work which gives hope to those of us who fear both “tribalism” of the morally dangerous sort and the homogenization of the earth by Western (especially American) culture. Appiah sees the ubiquity of communication technologies (TV and cell phones) as having sown the seeds for a potentially healthy “cosmopolitanism,” with increasing numbers of people, rich and poor, seeing themselves as global citizens. At the same time, he sees little undermining of tradition ritualistic practices, myths, and specialized moral conceptions.

symbols, and acculturation) in their salutary forms; third these salutary forms can be described in terms of the degree to which they result in unselfish love of others, centering on our shared humanity, rather than on some small fragment of humanity” (2004, p. 1).

Post’s integrated hypothesis is what I call a hypothesis of human ecology. It is not simply a descriptive psycho-social-anthropological-historical hypothesis, but a normative psycho-social-anthropological-historical hypothesis, part of *eudaimonistic scientia*. I’ll simply accept that the first two parts of the integrated hypothesis as true. People are powerfully inclined to join with others to affirm stories that give voice to a higher purpose than one’s own individual desires. Such communities of worship, or what might be different, communities that express communal purpose to achieve high moral ends, can provide worthy forms of personal and communal identity, as well as powerful motivation to live well in a way that is meaningful. And thus such impulses ought to be respected (note this last is not a hypothesis; it expresses a norm – fine). I focus on the third component of the integrated hypothesis: *“third these salutary forms can be described in terms of the degree to which they result in unselfish love of others, centering on our shared humanity, rather than on some small fragment of humanity.”*

First pass, this third component is best read descriptively: *these salutary forms can be **described** in terms of the degree to which they result in unselfish love of others* (my emphasis). True, these “salutary forms” of communities of spiritual-moral commitment can be described in these terms. And then what? Clearly what Post wants to say, but which, as a social scientist, he may be shy about saying, is this: A spiritual-ethical vision that endorses a high degree of unselfish love is better than one that endorses unselfish love to a lesser degree, all else equal. There are three major world

traditions that I know of that endorse a very high degree of unselfish love, two are spiritual traditions, Buddhism and Jesusism,²³ and one is secular, Utilitarianism or Consequentialism.

If these three are considered the most worthy contenders because they seem to satisfy well the third component of Post's hypothesis, it seems that the first two, Buddhism and Jesusism will fare better, all-things-considered, because they satisfy the first two components better than Consequentialism does, in virtue of being transcendent spiritual traditions. Maybe that's wrong. How so? One might claim that Consequentialism has been picked up by certain liberal spiritual/ethical traditions that sometimes incorporate Jesusism, and to the extent that they know about it, Buddhist ethics as well. I have in mind "The Society of Friends" (Quakers), Unitarian Universalists, and the Ethical Culture Society.

Buddhism, Jesusism, and Consequentialism: The Possibility of Universal Altruism

In Buddhism the excellent person, a *bodhisattva*, aims at embodying or realizing the four divine abodes: compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Anyone can, and everyone should, take the bodhisattva's vows. Jesusism is defined, first and foremost, by the "Golden Rule," as well as by associated instructions on giving as much as possible – even at the cost of reducing oneself to poverty and homelessness – to those in need. He said to them: "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." (Luke 22.35). Consequentialism tells

²³ I call it 'Jesusism' because most Christian Churches do not endorse Jesus' message truthfully. Jainism could be added, but I focus on these three because they each have a large number of devotees. But consider Jainism in the mix. There may be others.

us that we are obliged to promote the greatest amount of well-being for the greatest number of people (or sentient beings) in the long run.

Two questions immediately arise for all three traditions: (1) Why should I live in this expansive ethical manner? (2) How could a community, possibly at the limit every individual, be motivated to live this way? The two questions are related, although the first asks for reasons whereas the second asks, as it were, for methods.

With regard to (1), we might try saying that humans have the relevant impulses. We might. But the settings are not, on any psychologically realistic view, strong enough without support – rational support, emotional support, methods of moral education and socialization and the like, to produce anything like expansive love. But perhaps with the right work to turn up all the initial settings, the desired effect can be produced. Maybe.

In Buddhism, certain contemplative practices are designed to do some of the motivational work.

Here I provide two examples of meditations designed to enhance ethical motivation. Both examples are provided by the Dalai Lama and are based on a type of Tibetan meditation (*Tong-len*), which is a form of widely practiced “give and take” meditation. The first is designed to enhance *compassion*; the second works first on *selfishness*, then on *empathy* and *love*.

(1): *In generating compassion, you start by recognizing that you do not want suffering and that you have a right to have happiness. This can be verified or validated by your own experience. You then recognize that other people, just like yourself, also do not want to suffer and that they have a right to happiness. So this becomes the basis for your beginning to generate compassion.*

So let us meditate on compassion. Begin by visualizing a person who is acutely suffering, someone who is in pain or is in a very unfortunate situation. For the first three minutes of the meditation, reflect on that individual's suffering in a more analytical way – think about their intense suffering and the unfortunate state of that person's existence. After thinking about that person's suffering for a few minutes, next, try to relate to that yourself, thinking, 'that individual has the same capacity for experiencing pain, suffering, joy, happiness, and suffering that I do.' Then try to allow your natural response to arise – a natural feeling of compassion towards that person. Try to arrive at a conclusion: thinking how strongly you wish for that person to be free from suffering. And resolve that you will help that person to be relieved from their suffering. Finally, place your mind single-pointedly on that kind of conclusion or resolution, and for the last few minutes of the meditation try simply to generate your mind in a compassionate or loving state (1998, pp. 128-129).

(2): To begin this exercise, first visualize on one side of you a group of people who are in desperate need of help, those who are in a unfortunate state of suffering, those living under conditions of poverty, hardship, and pain. Visualize this group of people on one side of you clearly in your mind. Then, on the other side, visualize yourself as the embodiment of a self-centered person, with a customary selfish attitude, indifferent to the well-being and needs of others. And then in between this suffering group of people and this self representative of you in the middle see yourself in the middle, as a neutral observer.

Next, notice which side you are naturally inclined towards. Are you more inclined towards that single individual, the embodiment of selfishness? Or do your natural feelings of empathy reach out to the group of weaker people who are in need? If you look objectively, you will see that the well-being of a group or large number of individuals is more important than that of one single individual. After that, focus your attention on the needy and desperate people. Direct all your positive energy to them. Mentally give them your successes, your resources, your collection of virtues. And after you have done that, visualize taking upon yourself their suffering, their problems, and all their negativities.

For example, you can visualize an innocent starving child from Somalia and feel how you would respond naturally towards the sight. In this instance, when you experience a deep feeling of empathy towards the suffering of that individual it isn't based on considerations like 'He's my relative' or 'She's my friend.' You don't even know that person. But the fact that the other person is a human being and you yourself, are a human being allows your natural capacity for empathy to emerge and enable you to reach out. So you can visualize something like that and think, 'This child has no capacity of his or her own to be able to relieve himself or herself from his or her present state of difficulty or hardship.' Then mentally take upon yourself all the suffering of poverty, starvation, and the feeling of deprivation, and mentally give your facilities, wealth, and success to this child. So, through practicing this kind of 'giving and receiving' visualization, you can train your mind. (1998, pp. 213-214)

Recently, in the middle of writing this lecture, I spent a week at retreat doing this kind of meditation. Why? Because I am committed to improving myself. I have, in fact, taken the bodhisattva's vows (nothing exotic was involved), so I am committed to following the path that such practices are designed to take me further on. But why should anyone who is not already committed to Buddhist ethics or Jesusism, or Consequentialism want to engage in such practices? They are, after all, designed to produce a certain way of feeling and thinking, a certain type of expansive, altruistic motivation. If you don't want to be "brain-washed," beware. I use the term 'brain-washed' deliberately. Many good friends and acquaintances are now studying how meditation re-creates the mind-brain. It does so by reconfiguring neural circuits, rebalancing the relations among our cognitive-emotional-conative settings.

Indeed, viewed from a naturalistic perspective, all practices designed to make persons more loving, altruistic, and compassionate – whether they work on social structures, or through rational argument or emotional appeals, or charismatic persons – work, if they do work, by utilizing our neuroplasticity.²⁴ It's true, so deal with it.

Is Universal Love Too Demanding an Ideal?

²⁴ In ancient Chinese philosophy, especially on one reading of Confucius's *Analects* (Hagop Sarkissian, forthcoming) there is considerable emphasis placed on "moral charisma." The person who is *ren* (humane) is *de* (virtuous), and some very virtuous people have "moral charisma." Sometimes such charisma is characterized as engendering something like moral contagion, everyone catches the virtue of the charismatic person. But Confucius also raises concerns about what he calls "village worthies," charismatic types who produce the same effects, for example, gaining followers, but only *seem* virtuous. Shades of Thrasymachus and Machiavelli.

One might think this is not the interesting question. Ideals are just ideals. The real question is whether humans could live in a way that embodies universal love, compassion, and altruism. It is true that there are two questions here, one about the ideal and one about our prospects for embodying it. Both need eventually to be addressed. One reason is that an ideal that is too demanding, in the sense that it is psychologically unrealizable, might be judged as useless since it can gain no motivational grip at all (Flanagan 1991). But the relevant ideals in the three traditions under discussion do seem to be attractive as ideals. They are embraced by some after all, and furthermore, some few, perhaps, have embodied the relevant ideals.

The charge of excessive demandingness is commonly made by philosophers against consequentialism (philosophers typically pay no attention to Buddhism or Jesusism)²⁵, especially against and the version of act-consequentialism that requires that for each and every action opportunity I have, I should do, or try to do, what will maximize the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. The first objection to a theory of this form is that it requires a psychologically impossible amount of attention to ‘each and every action opportunity.’ What are all my action opportunities at this moment? How many different actions are action-opportunities that I have at this moment? If an ethical theory requires me to give determinate answers to these questions, even if I am only required to unconsciously compute what all my action-options are

²⁵ The reason no attention is paid to Buddhism and Jesusism by philosophers is simple: They are conceived of as religious in the bad sense, as asserting spooky non-sense. What Alasdair MacIntyre calls the “project of the enlightenment” is to ground ethics on a secular foundation. The reason Kant’s ethics does not make my list of ethical conceptions that endorse universal love is because, well, it doesn’t. Kant does endorse impartiality and he does speak of a kingdom of ends where everyone is treated as an end and never as a mere means. But Kant’s ethics embodies a very powerful strain of the standard Christian construal of the “Golden Rule.” That is, actively embodying the “golden rule,” or the Buddhist’s “four divine abodes,” or being a dedicated consequentialist is *supererogatory*, above and beyond the call of duty. Jesus was not a Kantian.

(before choosing the most ‘optimific’), it asks something impossible, perhaps something that makes no sense.

There are familiar ways around this serious objection. Most credible versions of consequentialism define the good as that which maximizes welfare *impartially construed*, but then go on to suggest a variety of psychologically possible ways that the best state-of-affairs can be brought about. For example, the good will be maximized if people proceed to love their loved ones, extend benevolence to their neighbors, show concern for their community, and care about the well-being of all. In this way, circles of concern will come to overlap, so that each is the beneficiary of an “expanding circle” of concern. The usual move is to suggest that impartial good will come from the spreading outward of partial concern.²⁶ It is not certain that this is true. But it is testable in principle, and it is a popular idea, captured most visibly in bumper stickers that read, “Think Globally, Act Locally” -- which seems like pretty good advice.

Without resolving the issue of whether there is an adequate way for consequentialism to keep its distinctive character (defining the good impartially), without also being judged to be too demanding, it will be useful for present purposes to try to understand exactly what feature or features of Buddhism, Jesusism, and Consequentialism are thought to cause the problem of excessive demandingness. The feature most often cited seems to have do with the requirement that we live in an excessively *impartial* way.

²⁶ There is an underdiscussed debate in ancient Chinese philosophy between Confucius and Mencius, on one side and Mozi, on the other side. The first pair argue that *ren*, humaneness, needs to start in each family and then that it will spread. Mozi endorses a more expansive virtue, *jian ai*, universal love or solicitude, and is skeptical that without it, morality can escape some form of local chauvinism, village, nation state, and so on (Flanagan, rightfully unpublished).

To get quickly to the point, distinguish among these different senses or types of impartiality: (1) the *belief* that everyone has equal ‘right’ to flourish; (2) *equal love* for everyone; (3) impartiality in *action*.

(1) The *belief* that everyone has an equal ‘right’ to flourish is not psychologically too demanding. Furthermore it is a sensible belief. Here, I repeat the Dalai Lama’s rationale for (1), from meditation #1 above: “In generating compassion, you start by *recognizing* that you do not want suffering and that you have a right to have happiness. This can be verified or validated by your own experience. You then *recognize* that other people, just like yourself, also do not want to suffer and that they have a right to happiness (my italics).”

As stated, this rationale is not logically demonstrative. If it appeals or makes intuitive sense, it does so by simply drawing on some sort of desire for consistency in thought. But the two relevant thoughts, that I don’t want to suffer and neither do others, do not entail anything about “rights.” And even if I acknowledge that others have a ‘right’ to happiness, nothing follows logically about my responsibility to assist them in their quest (consider the standard libertarian view: everyone has rights to happiness, but I have absolutely no obligation to help others achieve happiness; that’s up to them)²⁷.

One might try this line of argument:

1. If there is something I desire for its own sake and recognize that everyone else wants the same thing, then I ought to believe that everyone has a ‘right’ to that thing.
2. Whenever I recognize that I ought to believe something, I believe it.

²⁷ Two problems for evolutionary psychology: (1) why do 3-4 year old boys ‘know’ the names of dinosaurs?; (2) why are 18-19 years old males extraordinarily prone to become Ayn Rayndians? Notice both pass after the critical stage. Unfortunate in the first case, good in the second.

3. I desire to flourish (not suffer, be happy).
4. I recognize that everyone else wants to flourish (not suffer, be happy)
5. I ought to believe that everyone has a 'right' to flourish
6. I believe that everyone has a 'right' to flourish

This argument is valid I think (I need to sleep on it). If it is, then *everyone who believes the premises **must** believe that everyone has equal right to flourish.*

The smart point of entry for a critic who wants to challenge the argument's soundness would be to challenge (1), the major premise. It states a norm in the form of a conditional, and thus the critic can legitimately point out that its logical form as a conditional wears on its sleeve the fact that the consequent does not logically follow from the antecedent. Since this is true, the proponent of the argument will need to supply good reasons for asserting that (1) is sensible, wise, and true. I think this can be done. But (1) cannot be given a demonstrative, theorem-like warrant. It will have to be accepted, if it is, as an excellent idea with the weight of reasons behind it. In any case, the sense of impartiality that consists in the thought that not only I have a right to happiness, but rather that everyone does is sensible and common enough. Affirming such a right to exist is not demanding at all.

Next consider (2), *equal love* for everyone. Two questions arise: First, who conceives of commitment to impartiality – now interpreted in accordance with (1) – as *believing* that everyone has a 'right' (the same right) to flourish -- as entailing *equal love* for all?

Jesus and Buddha might be thought to be likely suspects. John Stuart Mill tells us that the main message of his essay, *Utilitarianism*, is summed up in Jesus of Nazareth's "Golden Rule." This is helpful since Mill is not, in arguing for consequentialism, promoting a doctrine that is particularly 'lovey-dovey'. That is, I don't need to "love" you in one familiar sense of the term, to believe that I ought to promote your welfare. What then does *equal love* mean? There are issues about the meaning of both words 'equal' and 'love.' I'll be brief.

Mill's Jesus is not asking us to have warm and fuzzy feelings when he tells us to "Love one's neighbor, as oneself." Was exactly did Jesus mean? Biblical scholars agree that Jesus best clarifies what the Golden Rule means when a hostile lawyer asks him "who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer comes in the form of the parable of the "Good Samaritan." The Jewish people and the Samaritans were bitter rivals, worshipping different Gods, and so on. The story is that a certain Jewish man is robbed, beaten, and left to die in a ditch. A Rabbi first, and then a Levite (a man of lower rank than a rabbi who assists the rabbi in preparation and oversight of Jewish religious services) both pass by, despite seeing the badly injured man. Then a journeying Samaritan comes along "and when he saw him, he had compassion on him," nursed him, bound up his wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to an Inn where he nursed him overnight. In the morning when it was time to leave he paid the Innkeeper and said, "Take care of him and whatever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee."

Jesus asks "Which now of these three, thinkest thou was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?" And he [the lawyer] said "He that showed mercy on him." Jesus then said "Go and do thou likewise." (Luke, 10, 25-37)

Assuming, as everyone does, that the parable clarifies the meaning of the “Golden Rule,” what does it help us see? It helps us see that hatred (*dosa*) is a vice, as in indifference, whereas sympathy, empathy, and compassion (*karuna*) are virtues. Clearly the Samaritan doesn’t feel the sort of ‘love’ towards the injured Jew that he does for his spouse, parents, brothers and sisters, children, fellow community members – towards whom he may feel different kinds of love. Whatever love he feels here is an active responsive sort of love, but it needn’t be conceived as supporting certain desires to be in a continuing relationship with the man he lovingly cares for. No matter how he feels in his heart towards the Jew, his loving action is ‘impartial’ in a familiar sense. It is a ‘love’ born of compassion and mercy that would motivate him to help *anyone* suffering in the same way. The Samaritan doesn’t know the injured man in any way that could make him feel any special way towards his character, towards the unique person he is.

We have insufficient evidence, but we might think that the Samaritan is someone whose heart is filled with compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*). It needn’t have been that way, since some weaker form of fellow-feeling could motivate a person to help anyone in such dire straits. A difference might reveal itself if the straits were less dire, or a major inconvenience would result from providing assistance.

In any case, the ‘love’ required by Jesus in the “Golden Rule” is decidedly not personal love in any of the familiar forms; it is not romantic or sibling or parental or communal love. It is best described as compassion or loving-kindness toward any and everyone who suffers. As I understand Buddhism, it recommends the same virtues, the same kind of ‘love.’ Same for consequentialism. This helps considerably with psychological realism concerns about all three conceptions or traditions. Why? Because

if the demand to “love everyone” required “loving” in the familiar senses, then it would simply be unrealistic to think there was enough of that to go around!

What makes such love ‘equal’ or ‘impartial’ or ‘universal’? Well, as we have seen, it is not because one feels the exact same kind of love for the man in the ditch that one feels for one’s children or spouse. What one does ideally feel towards both one’s loved ones and the man in the ditch is impartial in the sense that one wishes happiness and no suffering for them all solely on the basis of their shared humanity. Both because of how one is positioned and because of the special (additional) love one feels for one’s loved ones, one might, possibly through the work of meditation, take some of the deeper features of those personal love relationships and feel-them-into-the wider-world. This would be, I take it, a morally healthy thing to do.

Finally consider (3), impartiality in *action*. A and B are both in equally dire straits. Both are drowning. I am equally well positioned to help A or B, neither of whom I know, but helping one means the other will die. It is obvious I must help one, but which one? The answer is that in this case it doesn’t matter. Flip a coin if you wish. But save one.

But suppose A is my child and B is a stranger. I know what I’d do. Critics of consequentialism sometimes say that a consequentialist in virtue of recommending impartiality in action should do the coin toss. The usual and plausible consequentialist reply is that the world will go better – the good, considered impartially, will be

maximized -- if people maintain, and abide the obligations intrinsic to, their special, partialistic human relations.²⁸

Such, happily rare, dilemmas aside, consequentialists, as well as Buddhists and Jesusists, will rightly press us about our chauvinistic tendencies. In a world in which 20% of the people suffer in absolute poverty as defined by the World Bank, am I really doing as much good as I can, as I should? Start just by thinking about America – although our ‘love’ ought to eventually extend beyond the borders of our nation state. “Imagine,” sounding like John Lennon, that well-off Americans were raised to feel compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*) in the way Buddhism recommends. There are 35 million working poor in America and perhaps an equal number of unemployed poor (Aristotle taught that you can’t lack basic necessities and have prospects for virtue and happiness; Buddhists agree, although they conceive of the basic necessities required as comprised of a more meager basket of goods than Aristotle did). Suppose that in addition to being raised to be compassionate and loving-kind, we also believed in moderation and quelled our avaricious tastes. Being raised this way, the poor and the suffering are on my mind and I want to act so as to alleviate suffering and help such souls become happy. What to do? I could contribute (large sums of now disposable income) to local charities. I could work for political reform, progressive taxes going from say 60% for people in my income bracket to 99% for Bill Gates. These are kinds of impartial actions, or better impartial strategies for the greater good. The people I am imagining, good Buddhists, Jesusists, or consequentialist persons, don’t feel bad that they have less. They feel good

²⁸ I have a deep-seated conviction, which I don’t know how to prove, that the monastic traditions of Buddhism and Christianity were in part designed to help with the natural problem of “family chauvinism.” When I was in Dharamsala, India meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2000, I mentioned to my then 18 year-old son, Ben how striking was the “warm glow” on the faces of the abundant monks and nuns. He commented: “Dad they have no spouses and no teenage children.” It is something to think about.

that *Fortuna's* hand in determining the fate of our fellows is weakened and that the hands of those whose hearts feel love and compassion are strengthened.

The only sensible conception of impartial action I have ever heard defended runs along these lines. This is true despite the fact that we are sometimes asked to picture individuals looking at their savings ledger asking 'what exacting ought I to do at this moment to maximize the impartial good?' And with this picture in mind, the practical impossibility of doing anything sensible, let alone truly good, bears down on us.

I am aware that, in this final section, I have not directly answered the question of whether an ethic of universal love is too demanding. I have, however, tried to do so indirectly. We ought to *believe* that everyone deserves to be free of suffering and to achieve some sort of happiness. This is more or less a matter of rational consistency. Working on compassion and loving-kindness, loving our neighbor as ourselves, makes sense. Doing so, possibly uniquely, holds prospects for making us happier than all the money or stuff in the world can. Furthermore, it positions us – in virtue of our belief about what everyone in fact deserves, and our greatly amplified fellow-feeling – to want to actively work for the impartial good.

Being a virtuous Buddhist, Jesusist, or consequentialist is not psychologically impossible. There actually exist exemplars of each form of life, and what is actual is possible. That said, universal love will take lots of work and practice. But the three traditions being discussed reveal several promising strategies. Meditation, concentration and prayer, rational arguments, and charismatic exemplars can all do considerable work.

Usually when an ethical conception is charged with being too demanding, the charge revolves around the criticism that the demands it makes are perceived to be

psychologically or practically impossible. But none of the traditions under discussion advocates any states of mind for the virtuous that are impossible to achieve.

Each tradition presents a vision of virtue and happiness. We are not told that we are logically obligated or compelled to follow the way of expansive love and compassion. What we are told is that by so doing we amplify, in healthy and rational ways, our most noble natural tendencies. If we want to find personal happiness and to make the world a better place, following the path of universal love and compassion (*Damma*, Pali; *Dharma*, Sanskrit) is wise and noble. Indeed, it is the only strategy that will work.

One final thought: an ethical vision of the sort recommended is “transcendent” in the sense discussed earlier, but which many incorrectly think can only be captured by a distinctively theistic conception. Happiness, flourishing, and meaning reside in the vicinity of embodying ideals of the human good that connect me to a goal beyond my own personal desires, and that are inclusive of all actual and future persons (possibly of all sentient beings) wherever they are or will be, as well as to the earth and the larger cosmos that is our home. There can easily be houses of worship where committed people gather to affirm this way of being and living. That is the “good news.” And that is “spirituality naturalized.” Amen.

My people on my father's side were from Taunton, Massachusetts close to Plymouth. As a small boy I felt incredibly lucky to be right where the first American Thanksgiving took place. I knew more than a small boy should about the Pilgrims and the great Indian chief Massasoit and his fellow tribe's man. Every Thanksgiving we journeyed from Hartsdale, New York to Aunt Mame's and Grandma Gus's in Taunton. Aunt Mame was the oldest of thirteen Fountain (Fontaine in French Canada) children. Mame had raised Gus after their mother died during Gus's childbirth. Great Grandfather Louis Fountain came back from his barber shop to say farewell to his beloved wife and name Gus. It was August, names were in short supply, and so Augusta it would be. Depending on the year, between four and eight Hartsdale Flanagans would make the journey. Eight hours by car in those days. Three and one-half today. Wonderful visits to Aunt Nell, Uncle Wilfred and Aunt Catherine, Aunt Fanny, Aunt Esther were part of the festivities. I was aware even then, as a ten year old, that these people made me. I am grateful to them.

Descartes said "I think, therefore, I am." This is true. But there is an even better idea, even more appropriate for Thanksgiving. My friend Ifeanyi Menkiti, an African-American philosopher, from Nigeria, an Ibo tribesman, tells me that his people say "*I am because we are.*" This seems right. I am who I am because of the Flanagans and the Lyons who on the Flanagan side go back, to the best of my knowledge to one, Owen Flanagan, an Irish journalist who came to America from London in the 1790's. On my beloved mother's side, Virginia Lyons, there were Malias (formerly, O'Malleys) and Lyons many of whom settled in Honesdale Pennsylvania after the Irish potato famine of the late 1840's. My Great Grandfather Malia, a 6'4" retired ice-man from Honesdale was a poet in his late years (he lived until he was over 90, until I was 11). We took long walks along the Bronx River, fed the ducks, and I was spell-bound on his knee, the lucky recipient of many wonderful magical stories).

Like Ifeanyi Menkiti says "I am because we are." I, Owen, am who I am because of my loved ones who I know and have known, as well all my ancestors. Joyce, Ben and Kate, The Walworths, my parents, their parents. Back and back in time. How far back?

Darwin's scientific descendents teach that we are "out of Africa." Our ancestors, various *Homo*'s and predecessor *hominins*, came out-of-Africa. *Homo erectus* journeyed into Europe and Asia. But modern *Homo sapiens* evolved only in Africa. They too journeyed into Europe and Asia, exterminating and, possibly interbreeding with Neanderthals and Asia's *hominins*. So we are "out of Africa." Who made me? When I was young a Catholic boy, I learned this answer. "God made me." This now seems unlikely, an understandable superstition. The best idea is that some ancient African couple somewhere between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, helped make me. I am grateful to that African Adam and Eve and to all my later ancestors. Insofar as I am thankful for who and what I am, that I am at all, I am especially grateful to all those around this table who have had a really significant effect on who I am. But I am also grateful to all my ancestors all the way back. I am grateful for a happy and lucky life.

May we always be grateful to all those, known and unknown, who make us who we are. And may we all be remembered after we pass with some measure of gratitude for how we contributed positively to the lives of our loved ones, and all the future generations they participate in making! Cheers!!