

ATHEIST DEBATE POINTS

Edward Jayne
August 29, 2002

1. All powerful and all knowing, why was God unable to explain to Moses and his followers what really happened when He launched the universe? Why did God fail to mention atoms and molecules, and to suggest that the sun is much bigger than either the earth or moon, and that the earth both rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun, and that the sun is a star like all the rest, too many to count, and that land floats on the earth's core of hot liquid magma, and that random DNA mutations have sustained evolution since the emergence of the eukaryotic cell approximately two billion years ago? The world we know today was supposedly God's original plan--why couldn't He even begin to describe it to the authors of the Bible? If God had put this entire system into motion, He should certainly have been able to inform these "chosen" scribes and prophets what He had done with a relatively high degree of accuracy. Why instead did He convey blatant misinformation as if He were just as ignorant of his cosmic achievement as everybody else in Israel during Biblical times? Was God a liar, or was it Moses, or did Moses and all the scribes merely presume to know a good deal more than they really did? Was their divine wisdom nothing better than a medley of blatant fabrications that they put in the mouth of their concocted God?

More specifically, how could both the E (for Elohim) and J (for Jahweh) authors of Genesis, presumably inspired by God, describe a haywire creationist sequence? The E author, for example, argued that water preceded earth, that both preceded stars, that vegetation preceded the sun, etc., and the J author arguing that God made mankind from wet dust (i.e., mud) and that male and female were suddenly planted in a snake-infested paradise. The E author's sequence is almost totally irrelevant to the findings of modern science, and the J author's sequence bears obvious parallels with pagan mythology more than anything else. Also, how could E and J contradict each other, E telling of Adam and Eve's joint creation after all the animals, and J telling of Adam's creation, then all the animals, after which Eve was created from Adam's rib almost as an afterthought? But most tellingly, how could E and J's God-inspired creation stories fail to describe the universe as a grand cosmic paradox that first erupted as a "big bang" and that includes novae and supernovae which explode with similar violence, but that also contains planets and moons which complete orbits like clockwork billions of times without fail? Nowhere do God or His prophets and apostles take this extraordinary contradiction into account. And if they offered bold pagan-derivative pronouncements at odds with this basic information, how can we trust anything else they said?

Christ's neglect of science might seem justified by God's failure to discuss the matter with him during any of their encounters, for example when God spoke from the clouds to assure Peter of Christ's divinity (Matthew, 17.5). God suddenly enunciating pronouncements from behind a cloud--how so totally absurd! We cannot forget that Christ lived when ancient classical philosophy still thrived, and that he travelled a circuit not more than 800 air miles from Athens and 300 from Alexandria, two of the most remarkable epicenters of science and philosophy in

the entire history of western civilization. Jerusalem triangulated with Athens and Alexandria from just about the same distances, respectively, as Louisville does with New York City and Chicago. But it's as if these two remarkable epicenters of civilization never existed. Unlike the Old Testament's book of Ecclesiastes two hundred years earlier, which resonates with stoic and Epicurean wisdom, there is no evidence in the Gospels that Christ was even remotely familiar with the concepts and arguments of ancient philosophy, much less the astronomers and mathematicians of Alexandria (Aristarchus, Hipparchus, Eratosthenes, etc.). Nor is there any evidence that Christ was familiar with the writings of Cicero and Lucretius, who respectively championed skepticism and materialism just a few decades earlier. Christ does not even seem to have been aware of the drastic revision of skepticism by Aenesidemus, who lived in Alexandria almost at the same time. Instead, Christ and his followers drew much of Christian dogma from mysteries, fertility cults, and other such pagan religions in currency at the time, but without the slightest debt to Graeco-Roman philosophical trends that anticipated modern secular ideology beginning with the Renaissance. What might Christ have said if he had been acquainted with any of these? How might he have revised his millenarian expectations of heaven, hell, and the inevitability of judgment day within a generation of his death?1

Today, the misinformation of Genesis can only be justified as inspired allegory devoid of factual claims. Moreover, its errors are compounded by the New Testament's insistence upon Christ having been the Son of God and savior of mankind seated next to God on high come Judgment Day. Christian apologists first suppressed doubt about these extravagant claims by their incessant use of the slogan, "Don't ask questions, just believe," and later by the famous paradox of the Christian theologian, Tertullian, "Just because it is absurd, it is to be believed."2 Tertullian offered this argument to defend Christ's incarnation, but it obviously extends as well to his miracles, his resurrection, and the use of Zoroastrian eschatology to patch together many of the concepts later identified with Christianity: free will, Judgment Day, a savior, God pitted against Satan, and an afterlife in heaven or hell respectively characterized by eternal bliss and eternal agony consumed in hellfire. The Persian prophet Zoroaster (first identified as Zarathustra) had formulated this entire supernatural apparatus six centuries earlier, and Christ's death and resurrection effectively packaged it as a brand-new sky-god religion that could be marketed in competition with all the rest of the imported oriental sects fashionable throughout the Roman empire once Virgil's resurrection of Greek mythology at the personal request of the Emperor Augustus collapsed in absurdity.

In retrospect the Christian innovation seems ingenious. Spring sacrificial deities of the eastern Mediterranean region such as Osiris, Dionysus, Attis, and Heracles had lacked flesh-and-blood credentials and a sufficiently fearful sense of cosmic destiny, while the Zoroastrian eschatology from Persia, brimming with final answers, was nevertheless deficient in the sacrificial component. Obviously, a useful synthesis was possible, and all the better if the sacrificial victim were a flesh-and-blood human being who could be identified as the son of a monotheistic god. Christ took the hit (few deny he was crucified), Paul drew the necessary connection, and, remarkably, their bold but jerry-built venture in pagan syncretism flew. Christ's death and resurrection in the tradition of pagan fertility cults was explained as having initiated his ascent to heaven soon to be followed by the Judgment Day anticipated by Zoroaster, but of course with Christ's unique achievement also supposedly having been predicted by Old Testament prophecies. Altogether bizarre, therefore necessarily true--in essence this was

Tertullian's argument to justify what resulted, and it can even be stretched to explain the comparable destiny of all good Christians when their souls also ascend to heaven. Because Christ did it, so can they, they want to think, their eternal joy unsullied by their knowledge of less fortunate friends and relatives damned to eternal hellfire in a realm below identified as hell.

2. This willful commitment to Christian mythology persists even today. The single concession by Christian apologist to the cosmic immensity disclosed by astronomical discoveries (our particular universe, for example, containing a hundred billion galaxies that average a hundred billion stars apiece) would be the scholastic philosopher St. Anselm's ontological proof that if the most inclusive concept of God is not sufficiently inclusive, an even more inclusive concept may be presumed: "something than which nothing greater can be thought."³ This thesis supposedly preserves God's final authority, whatever the size of the universe, but it also confirms a universe without God if Anselm's less famous corollary can be taken at its face value: "For there can be thought to exist something whose non-existence is inconceivable, and this thing is greater than anything whose non-existence is conceivable."⁴ Anselm identified God rather than the physical universe as an entity whose non-existence is inconceivable. However, for those of us able to invert his categories, such that God's non-existence is at least conceivable while the existence of the universe is obvious, hence all too conceivable, his corollary seems if anything to provide decisive ontological evidence of God's uncertainty. We know the universe exists, whereas God at best might exist; ergo, the universe predominates. And, to invoke the ontological argument on this basis, if the "real" universe is bigger still than we can imagine, this enlarged entity, whatever the extent of its enlargement, constitutes the universe we inhabit.

Understandably, St. Anselm and his followers ignored such a possibility and reduced totalization to the demonstration of God's limitless authority, embracing the universe as a whole as well as God's exacting moral judgment of mankind's tiniest, most fugitive thoughts and temptations. The principal emotional benefit of this assumption derives from the assurance that human destiny plays a primary role in God's mind. We are expected to believe that a deity of indeterminate size has created an infinite universe to accommodate the needs of a small contingent of worshippers who deserve salvation for the rest of eternity in their own special realm described as heaven. The only question is how one can accept this cosmology despite a total lack of supportive evidence beyond Biblical revelation presumably inspired by a God utterly ignorant of the universe He created. Ghosts and miracles once confirmed such a possibility, but cameras, tape recorders, and sophisticated newspaper reporters have spoiled this verification except in remote villages populated by illiterates and rustic enthusiasts.

Long before Christianity, however, the capacity for skepticism thrived in ancient Greece. According to Cicero, the ancient poet Simonides was asked at the turn of the fifth century, B.C., to explain the concept of God. After many days of postponement he explained his delay, "Because the longer I deliberate the more obscure the matter seems to me." Within the next century the ancient Sophist Protagoras was the first to make a theoretical issue of his failure to confirm the existence of god(s):

As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.⁵

Simonides and Protagoras may accordingly be identified as having been western civilization's earliest agnostics, since they did not deny the existence of gods, but rather their own possession of the necessary intellectual resources to determine whether they exist. Likewise, Critias and Diagoras, more or less contemporaries of Protagoras, enjoy the status of having been western civilization's earliest atheists on record, since they rejected the existence of the gods except as a human invention to manipulate human feelings. The first materialists willing to differentiate the authority of the gods from the laws of the physical universe included, among others, Thales, Anaximander, and Democritus, followed much later by Epicurus and Lucretius. And Xenophanes was the first pantheist willing to identify God with the universe as if the two were one and the same. Xenophanes, Empedocles, and Democritus were the first materialists to advocate skepticism, followed by its more persistent application by Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Socrates, and several dozen others. Finally, to complete the roll of honor among Hellenic freethinkers, Aristotle's description of God as an "unmoved mover" established his credentials as western civilization's original deist, since he reduced God's existence to an abstract function devoid of human identity, totally lacking the persona of Zeus or any of the other Olympian gods.⁶ Today Aristotle's explanation seems all too appropriate, for, as well demonstrated by both ancient polytheism and monotheistic trends since ancient Greece, God is more than likely to be burdened by his worshippers with an almost endless assortment of human traits once His description is amplified in any fashion.

In the late eighteenth century, David Hume gave currency to the word anthropomorphism to describe this benighted projective strategy, and by the mid-nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach first explained at length how any conception of God's human identity derives from anthropomorphic wish fulfillment--a pursuit that combines, I would argue, two complementary assumptions: (1) whatever we do well let God epitomize; (2) whatever we lack let God provide.⁷ Human personality is attributed to God as the boss and creator of all else when He is said to possess intelligence, or wisdom, or compassion, or love, or forgiveness, or anger, or jealousy, or indignation, or vindictiveness, or will power, or a good memory, or the ability to see and hear, or the ability to choose and make decisions, or ethnocentric standards of morality, or a dedication to justice, or even indecipherable motives (as for example when a busload of innocent children plunges off a cliff). These are strictly human traits, all of which are projected as if they are essential features of God's authority. Even a God turns out to be anthropomorphic who is task oriented, who gets things done, who puts special emphasis upon human need, who experiences trust or mistrust, who initiates events (for example both the universe and mankind) in order to obtain acceptable results. Not to forget a God motivated by favoritism, cruelty, callousness to suffering, or even sadism as recounted in the story of Job.⁸ In all such instances God takes on the aspect of transcendent human achievement. He becomes a benign but mysterious patriarchal figure who looms just beyond perception, yet close enough for worshippers to invest in his authority all the traits and feelings they either regret or wish they themselves might possess.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to anthropomorphism. Worshippers are able to cultivate virtue by projecting it upon God ("If it's good enough for God, it's good enough for

me"), but in many instances this projective capacity for worship also depletes human consciousness of exactly the qualities it bestows upon God. Too much, for example, is sacrificed in initiative and personal responsibility, and the more one engages in worship, the bigger the loss. Pious believers cut corners--they displace qualities they should cultivate in themselves to a hypothetical deity on the assumption that He might better exercise these qualities on their behalf. If Christ is merciful, they need not be; if God can be expected to help them, they need not take the necessary steps themselves. And sometimes believers depend on God's authority as a passive-aggressive weapon to bully others who are less dutifully religious (husbands, wayward daughters, etc.) into complying with their demands. But this is often at an enormous sacrifice in human potential, since individuals treated in this fashion learn to rely on the same tactic in their relationship with others both as victims and aggressors. When enough people lapse into this passive-aggressive syndrome, society as a whole necessarily declines into authoritarian stultification. Grand cathedrals loom enormous over acres and acres of impoverished huts and tenements.

Of course anthropomorphism works both ways. Granted, the worship of a loving God at times encourages the experience of love and generosity among believers, while the emphasis upon love and generosity can be expected to lead to an improved vision of God. However, the worship of a vindictive God bears similar impact by encouraging comparable levels of violence and hostility among worshippers. Transcendent claims become dangerous, even lethal, when they legitimize the promotion of fanaticism, bigotry, religious wars, and in fact all warfare justified by the almost inevitable vilification of enemy nations for being "godless," or agents of the wrong god, or agents of the right god worshipped the wrong way. And just as warfare seems to encourage renewed faith, religious belief too often encourages the pursuit of warfare, the two locked in a vicious feedback cycle that can only be diminished, if not eliminated, with the cessation of one or the other. Help us, oh God, we're at war, says the religious patriot; but also, God is on our side, let's make war. Let's invade somebody we don't like.

Also the product of religion were pogroms, the medieval Crusades, extensive Inquisition and witchcraft persecutions from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, modern cult suicides, more than a dozen contemporary civil wars (Ireland, Israel, Sri Lanka, etc.), homicidal binges by deranged fanatics, a catastrophic population explosion through the enforced rejection of birth control, and, not least, the use of religious instruction to impose blind obedience at the expense of genuine personal growth, and even, it seems at times, to impose obnoxious sexual demands justified by one's status as a pious servant of Christ. Moreover, a potentially dangerous arrogance results from the sense of belonging to God's "chosen" people, and a primitive carrot-and-stick ethics results from the incessant fear of God's wrath: heaven reserved for "good" guys, eternal hellfire for "bad" guys, and, worse yet, incessant agony in the most fiery bowels of hell for disbelievers --by far the most unforgivable sinners of all.

3. Today the original Hebraic version of a vindictive God has lapsed into a more tolerant figure, but many Christians continue to believe in a humanized God that plays an inhuman role both infinitely loving and, if need be, infinitely cruel. God, we are told, is all powerful, all knowing, and all good despite the obvious paradox that crime, poverty, misery, and injustice are everywhere to be observed. But how, one asks, can an all-powerful, all-knowing God play a

benevolent role in an imperfect universe? Then again, how can a benevolent and all-powerful God be all-knowing, or a benevolent and all-knowing God be all-powerful? At least one of these three supernatural capacities must be sacrificed to the other two, and benevolence seems the most obvious candidate. For why would a loving, generous God inflict poverty and misery upon most of humanity, then consign it to eternal hellfire for presumably sinful behavior that is ultimately His responsibility, if in fact He, God, is both omniscient and omnipotent? Why would such a God create a tribe of creatures most of whom He knows full well are doomed to endure short, miserable lives, then perpetual agony in hell through faults that He himself instilled in them or permitted to be instilled by Satan, or, worse yet, that He inflicted on them by granting free will fully aware of its results?

No matter how one juggles the connection, God as depicted in the Bible is finally responsible for mankind's eternal destiny, whether in heaven or hell. As a result the ethical burden shifts to God himself, who is just as vulnerable to self-incrimination as Oedipus of Thebes, obsessed with infractions that must finally be laid to his own charge. For, again, why should God impose a disproportionate punishment for crimes and misdemeanors that are directly or indirectly His own responsibility? Ordinary mortals may be held responsible even when they become accessories to crime by letting it be committed. Why not God as well, especially if the punishment He imposes is eternal perdition? Then again, if Satan, not God, is responsible, God falls short of omnipotence, since He lacks control of the universe at least to the extent that Satan exerts this much authority; and if God cannot anticipate an individual's final destiny, He falls short of omniscience, ignorant of problems that are His own final responsibility. What is it going to be?

Christ himself never seems to have been bothered by this demented imbroglio of contradictions, as would be indicated by his ample references to judgment day, Satan, and the inevitability of hellfire for the majority of mankind. But this is hardly suggestive of a loving and benevolent God! Or of Christ as his loving and benevolent son! "I love mankind beyond human capabilities," Christ argues, "But if you don't accept my status and authority as the one and only son of God, God (not me) is guaranteed to punish you with eternal hellfire." What extraordinary nonsense! It would seem more appropriate for Christ to have let himself be crucified not in atonement for man's sins, but for God's sin against mankind by having saddled us with free will to trap most of us into a destiny of eternal hell fire. The Hellenistic skeptic Carneades explored the basic lines of this paradox little more than a century before Christ, and the early eighteenth century French priest Jean Meslier, first of the strident atheists published in modern times, argued effectively to demonstrate how "the exercise of one of [God's] perfections is always at the expense of another."--a powerful but ungenerous God, a benevolent but impotent God, etc.⁹ The theodicies of Paul, Milton, Leibnitz, and others to "justify the ways of God" fail to convince the modern reader, and one continues to be haunted by James Mill's opinion recorded by his son John Stuart Mill toward the beginning of his Autobiography, that such a God provides "the most perfect conception of wickedness which the human mind can devise."¹⁰ Moreover, Mill's father argued, the worship of such a God comprises "the *ne plus ultra* of wickedness . . . embodied in what is commonly presented to mankind as the creed of Christianity." These are harsh words at the expense of both a cruel God and worshippers able to revere such a figure.

Stendhal's nihilist defense, "what excuses God is that He does not exist," only makes matters worse for Christian apologists.¹¹ "But who created the universe?" they demand, and they seem befuddled by the obvious response, "Who, then, created God?" "But who else could have given design to the universe?" they persist, no less confused by the equally obvious reply, "Who, then, bestowed upon God the configurative skills--themselves the product of intelligence--to impose design on the universe?" For if God the creator can be imagined to exist *sui generis* without beginning, in effect the product of himself and nothing more, why can't this exemption from finitude apply to the universe itself free of God's intervention? Why is a God needed to do for the universe what never happened in the first place?¹² Aristotle's explanation three centuries before Christ seems no less appropriate today that the history of the universe extends to infinity both into the past and future, thus reducing to bizarre fiction the possibility of the creation story told by Genesis.

4. As to be expected, contemporary religious apologists argue that the big bang described by modern physics does in fact confirm the Biblical creation story, and, indeed, some kind of a cosmic explosion seems to have occurred from thirteen to sixteen billion years ago. However, cosmologists describe its occurrence as an instantaneous eruption of sheer energy devoid of mind, matter, and everything else significant to human intentions. There was no distinction at the time between heaven and earth, nor was there darkness as told in Genesis relevant to any location that might be described as deep. Moreover, current speculation by the cosmologists Tryon, Hawking, and Guth, and Linde, among others, would suggest that this extraordinary event occurred in a preexistent energy field infinite both in time and space in which countless other big bangs might also have occurred--a cosmic plenitude far more sweeping than the observable stars and galaxies in the one particular universe we inhabit. Just as Bruno extended Copernicus's heliocentric theory by suggesting a more inclusive universe consisting of many suns and planets (speculation that led to his *auto da fe* by the Roman Inquisition), current trends in post big-bang cosmology might bear the same impact upon the relatively parochial concept of a single expanding universe that has prevailed since Edwin Hubble's discoveries in 1929. For like bubbles within bubbles or sparks from an enormous bonfire, a multiplicity of big bangs might be exploding into existence with robust frequency compared to their scale, only to congeal into mass and finally expire, either scattered into the void or gathered into an enormous all-consuming black hole whose "big crunch" somehow initiates another big bang. For example, our own particular universe, a mere 14 billion light years wide, has been estimated to have a total remaining life span of perhaps seventy billion years, after which--nobody can be sure--either dispersal will complete itself or a cataclysmic big-crunch big-bang event will occur.¹³ And how might our Christian maker play any kind of a role in so much bigger a plan? Alas, the infinite God explicable in Christian terms is no longer infinite enough to account for heaven's immensity. Christian ontology declines into empty verbiage if trillions of planets encircle trillions of stars in trillions of galaxies gathered in perhaps an even bigger infinitude of universes. The God concept becomes obsolete, since any effort to link Biblical mythology with this extraordinary boundlessness imposes answers more baffling than the problems it explains.

5. And what belief might offer a suitable alternative? Various options suggest themselves, but, whatever the choice, there must first be a more aggressive pursuit of the truth. Nietzsche

argued in *The Antichrist* that the only useful truth in the Bible was Pontius Pilate's skeptical question to Christ, "What is the truth?"¹⁴ Which, of course, Christ refused to answer. One might add that this veridical obligation is not a question of what might be nice, or aesthetic, or socially acceptable, but, as much as possible, what is true in and of itself--true, and nothing but true. This, I would argue, was totally beyond Christ's ability to explain, even to comprehend. According to modern science, such a task is limited to the pursuit of truths that can be tentatively accepted from having been confirmed by verifiable evidence susceptible to confirmation on an experimental basis. In the simplest possible terms, as Locke explained, one's appropriate objective consists of, "the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant."¹⁵ This agnostic recognition was first established by Greek skepticism centuries before Christ, yet it remains almost impossible for religious believers to accept without some kind of an escape clause that protects their most cherished beliefs from the same standards of verification needed to confirm or reject other, supposedly less compelling assumptions. Comfortable truths are eagerly affirmed, and without sufficient recognition that the demand to ease discomfort necessarily subverts truth in and of itself. Diversionary issues get emphasized, and, as to be expected, contradictory evidence is either ignored or denied exactly where it bears the most telling implications.

Milton warned against this tendency in "*Areopagitica*": "If it comes to prohibiting, there is not aught more likely to be prohibited than truth itself."¹⁶ Demote truth to a second position on one's list of priorities by subordinating it to happiness, chastity, social stability, religious devotion, a successful career, patriotic loyalty, spiritual profundity, or anything else, and soon enough it can be expected to sink to the very bottom. As a rule of thumb, worldly success results from one's ability to "modulate" the truth whenever needed in order to justify the pursuit of acceptable ends rather than confronting this truth regardless of its impact on one's feelings or those of anybody else. An individual can live an entire lifetime by filtering truths in this fashion, and he/she can finally die in peace as a pious and worthy person, yet almost entirely devoid of ideas worth a second thought. And in fact most of us do. However, at least a few of us feel the need for more stringent standards of truth, obliging the ability and courage to dispense with useful evasions exactly when these seem the most expedient.

The use of empiricism as a methodology to ascertain verifiable truths began in earnest four centuries before Christ. Aristotle and Theophrastus, his successor as director of the Lyceum (later described as the Peripatetic School), gathered as much data as they could to establish a categorical basis for the explanation of nature. Strato, the third head of the Lyceum, took this approach to its limit by imposing what has been described as the Stratonician Supposition--the rule that the universe must always and without exception be interpreted on its own terms without any reference to supernatural agency. Moreover, perhaps for the first time in history, Strato put to use simple laboratory equipment such as vacuum jars to test the validity of competitive hypotheses, for example Democritus's theory of atomism as opposed to Aristotle's theory of continuous space.¹⁷ In contrast to Aristotle, Strato gave god(s) no role whatsoever in the universe he investigated. Probably to avoid persecution, his contemporary Epicurus spoke of powerless gods confined to a realm separate from the rest of the universe, but Strato simplified his rejection of the gods by insisting on nothing more than their lack of input. Whether they exist or not, they have no bearing upon the universe, so our knowledge, entirely the product of this universe, cannot be tainted by any reference to their intrusiveness. As explained by Cicero, who

tentatively rejected Strato's thesis, "He [Strato] does not make use of divine activity for constructing the world, [since] all existing things of whatever sort have been produced by natural causes." The burden of proof accordingly shifted to believers, whatever their belief, to demonstrate their assumptions based on sufficient empirical evidence.

Additional standards of inquiry were provided by Arcesilaus and Carneades, the principal leaders of the so-called Academic school of skepticism. As explained by Arcesilaus (friend of Strato and the primary beneficiary of his will), theoretical speculation depends on a suspension of belief described as *epoche*.¹⁹ Just as faith was essential to religious belief, *epoche* was essential to the use of skepticism in quest of more verifiable answers. Moreover, as explained by the skeptic Carneades (who lived around 100 B.C., a hundred years after Strato), the confirmation of truths finally depends on a calculation of probability that is "both irreversible and tested," first in the sense that it accords with other seemingly valid information and second in the sense that it withstands systematic inquiry, a thorough analysis of data that later came to be identified with science.²⁰ Once Strato's inductive standards could be integrated with these two concepts--Arcesilaus' version of *epoche* and Carneades' use of probability (ridiculed by later critics for its encouragement of "probabilism")--an entirely new mode of investigation became possible. Tentative speculation was emphasized toward probable answers based on exhaustive investigation--exactly the inductive methodology we take for granted today.

By contemporary standards this fusion of concepts (*epoche*, probabilism, and uncompromising empiricism) might seem too obvious to justify making a point of it, but at the time it was a basic intellectual achievement with ultimately more substantial impact than Christ's synthesis between mystery sacrifice and Zoastrian eschatology combined with Plato's use of metaphysics to refute both materialism and skepticism. I would argue, in fact, that, more than anything else, this unprecedented combination of materialisms and skepticism justifies a particularist celebration of western civilization as being superior to all other cultures and civilizations, none of which has granted theoretical priority to such an essentially godless vision of the universe. For the most accurate knowledge turned out to depend on a careful and necessarily tentative investigation of data instead of the far more attractive valorization of "clear and distinct" ideas, in the words of Descartes, by stoic philosophers and much later by Descartes himself in order to appease the populist demand for simple answers to simple questions. Too often, however, these presumably fathomable answers have turned out to be wrong, and, worse yet, their lucent immediacy almost inevitably discouraged further inquiry. Of course the earth is flat, of course stars are lighted pinpricks in the night sky, of course people totally differ from animals, etc., but not so, and it took the experience-specific epistemology of ancient Academic skeptics to justify the systematic quest for better answers. What mattered was accurate judgment in response to thorough research. This was a truly unique advance in human discourse.

Unfortunately, this remarkable synthesis of skepticism and materialism bore little impact upon ancient ideology except among Academic skeptics during two centuries that elapsed between Strato and Cicero, an epoch of enlightenment that ended when the Alexandrian skeptic Aenisidemus reinvented skepticism to cloud the distinction between belief and disbelief. At about this time, give or take a couple of decades, the Emperor Augustus mandated a new commitment to religious worship with the hope and expectation that this might help to validate Rome's imperial authority under his command. Not surprisingly, Aenisidemus's innovation

helped to discourage the use of skepticism to challenge this effort. Just as Virgil's Aeneid updated Homeric mythology at the request of Augustus to promote his imperial plan, Aenesidemus, with or without Augustus's knowledge, neutralized systematic doubt as a mode of inquiry by which this use of religion might be questioned. For if the primary aim of skepticism was to induce tranquillity (*ataraxia*), as the earlier and by then all but forgotten skeptic Pyrrho had once insisted, and if lip service to conventional belief was essential to this task, Aenesidemus' unique contribution consisted of resurrecting Pyrrho's version of skepticism to give free rein to Augustus's patently exploitive use of religion to help justify his imperial authority. The sequence between Aenesidemus and Augustus's contributions to the resurrection of religious belief after a couple centuries of skepticism among the educated classes remains uncertain today, but their combination was more than fortuitous. For any orthodoxy would suffice as a tentative belief system if all truth was unavoidably false. Ergo, one could disbelieve in order to believe with impunity, for example in Roman gods who, like the Homeric gods, fully supported taking warfare to foreign lands. Aenesidemus's stance was later adopted by Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius, and still later by Pico della Mirandola and the fideist Christians of the Renaissance and seventeenth century, their pursuit of faith via doubt so fully described (and appreciated) by modern students of skepticism, themselves with admittedly religious predilections.²²

However, Cicero's friendly assessment of Academic theory as well as supportive arguments that may be gleaned from Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius' less sympathetic observations two centuries later also survived the Dark and Middle Ages to bear a substantial impact on modern science and philosophy. Montaigne and Gassendi emphasized *epoche*, Montaigne actually having inscribed the word on the ceiling over his desk. Bacon offered his own synthesis of *epoche* and scientific induction in his Preface to *Novum Organum*, in which he emphasized "just hesitation" and the avoidance of a "fixed rule" (essential to *epoche*) as well as the determination of the "degrees of certainty" (i.e., probability). Probability was later quantified by Pascal, Condorcet, and others, finally becoming one of the most important tools of science once Galton, Pearson and their successors standardized its measurement. Add Strato's vision of uncompromising empiricism to Arcesilaus' vision of *epoche* and Carneades's vision of probability, and the theoretical basis for modern science becomes obvious, all of which preceded Christ and Christian dogma by at least a century.²³

Essential to Carneades' integration of *epoche* and probabilism was the recognition that all human truths must be accepted on a tentative basis as the closest approximations to the "real" truth, based on the assumption that such a truth exists whether or not it can be fully established by human intelligence. As Carneades explained, a probable truth can always turn out to be false based on new information that obliges a revised assessment of its probability. However, like all other "truths," its validity can be tentatively accepted until it has been proven otherwise. Thus many truths can turn out to be wrong, and many untruths can turn out to be correct, and the proper task of skeptics is to remain accessible to the choice that presents itself in determining their relative validity. Many truths, for example the earth's rotation and the circulation of blood, pose little need for further clarification, but others are less probable, and many that appeal to us the most turn out to be highly improbable based on the lack of evidence to confirm their validity. What results is an interesting but overlooked interplay between at one level "hard" and "soft" truths and, at another level, the "hard" and "soft" evidence by which these truths might be

verified. Apropos of final, unimpeachable truth with intrinsic validity, whatever its perception by the human mind, the word *hard* describes presumably simple and irrefutable truth that can be accepted at face value without further inquiry. On the other hand, *soft* describes truths in need of additional examination based on the assumption that scientific knowledge is never totally established, but is always in the process of being further refined. Of what relevance is all this to Christianity? Of crucial relevance, actually. As clear and distinct ideas that are presumably irrefutable, "hard" Christian truths escape the issue of probability, whereas "soft" scientific truths lack this advantage. On the other hand, apropos of the evidence used to establish truths, "hard" evidence (or data) consists of that which may be confirmed by means of further investigation, for example by conducting additional scientific experiments, while "soft" evidence more often than not calls into play universal affirmation based on hearsay claims--the "everybody knows" constructions we are all familiar with, especially regarding religion.

What I am suggesting here is that unswerving belief in hard truths based on soft evidence (surely there is a God who loves mankind, surely Christ died for our sins, surely the universe was created in seven days, etc.) must be replaced by the tentative acceptance of soft truths whose probability is determined by the hard evidence that can be gathered supportive of their validity. For example the ample data supportive of evolution, plate tectonics, and any kind of a big bang may be considered "hard" in the sense that it has been gathered and evaluated on a scientific basis, while those truths that seem to be confirmed by this evidence are "soft" in the sense that our current knowledge does not necessarily represent a final determination. As explained by John Dewey, the best that may be claimed for any of these truths entails nothing more than its "warranted assertibility"--that is to say, its tentative acceptance by experts in the field in light of the most recent findings. Dewey's assumption, shared with Arcesilaus, and Carneades, was that "no belief [is] so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry?"²⁴ Unlike Pyrrhonian skepticism, which discourages further inquiry, this inductive obligation (more than a "leap") seems especially relevant to science today. Truth might be said to be on a float in the sense that we can never be entirely confident of our knowledge, for example the exact age of our particular universe and the latest common ancestor of chimpanzees and *Homo sapiens*, but we do have a better sense of possibilities that can be granted warranted assertibility based on current findings. We might be less confident of our knowledge, but, whatever its shortcomings, our knowledge is in fact superior to that of all the "flat-earthers" who take their simplified version of the truth for granted. Like Socrates, we know more because we are better aware of the limitations of our knowledge.

In contrast, Christian faith continues to thrive as unexamined belief, the very hardest "truth" based on what must ultimately be recognized to be the very softest evidence immune to empirical verification. Any scientist--or theologian, for that matter--who tries, for example, to demonstrate the existence of God with "hard" experimental data, for example by tabulating answered and unanswered prayers, would jeopardize his professional career as a crackpot unworthy of professional recognition. Though nobody seems to notice, the direct use of science to verify religion, as was arguably the intention of Sir Isaac Newton, has long since been abandoned, for, as explained by Montaigne, "The things about which we are most ignorant are the most suitable to be deified." Too much is held to be true based on far too little substantiation, and the bigger the discrepancy between the two, the more intense the experience of faith, especially among the most ignorant worshippers. Again as explained by Montaigne, with

obvious application to religious conviction, "the impression of certainty is certain proof of un wisdom and extreme uncertainty."²⁵

One defense of religion in light of this paradox has been Pascal's "wager" (*Il faut parier*) based on the logic that misbegotten belief is less dangerous than religious doubt that risks eternal damnation. For Pascal the value of his wager was obvious: there is "an infinity of infinitely happy life to be won," obviously referring to heaven, as opposed to the alternative left to one's imagination, an infinity of damnation in hell. As a result, Pascal claimed, "there is no room for hesitation, you must give everything" in your dedication to Christian belief in order to save yourself from the possibility of damnation.²⁶ Today, however, the improbability of Christian eschatology is too glaring--the odds too long--for one to be intimidated into dogmatic assent in order to avoid being consigned to hell. Moreover, too many religious denominations impose exactly the same wager, each identifying its membership as the "chosen people" more likely to gain salvation than the rest of humanity.²⁷ But what particular "elect" should we join--the Catholic, Moslem, or any of the Protestant fundamentalist sects, each of which claims to offer a better chance of acceptance in heaven? None, it turns out, since the overwhelming preponderance of current scientific evidence suggests a materialist explanation of the universe uncomplicated by the prospect of an afterlife.

6. Totally unacceptable to the religious mind is the high probability that the physical universe generated both mind and intelligence, not otherwise, and that life ends upon death, not otherwise. Nevertheless, the world we occupy is too gigantic and man's role too minuscule to justify the self-congratulatory depiction of God having created the universe primarily for the benefit of mankind. We live in a bottom-up, not a top-down universe, located in an otherwise unremarkable zone of an unremarkable galaxy. In the words of Stephen Hawking:

The earth is a medium-sized planet orbiting around an average star in the outer suburbs of an ordinary spiral galaxy, which is itself only one of about a million million galaxies in the observable universe. Yet the strong anthropic principle would claim that this whole vast construction exists simply for our sake. This is very hard to believe.²⁸

All in all, our felt sense of cosmic purpose is a brief splash of opportunity on a vastly enlarged canvas. It is our good fortune that the big bang led to an interplay between matter and energy conducive to the inception of biology on the planet earth, after which biology produced human intelligence as an evolutionary product of animal behavior focussed on survival.

Unfortunately, the human mind has also achieved levels of metaphysical insight both bright and dull-witted enough to accept Hegel's comfortable hypothesis that mind itself (*Geist*, or absolute idea) can be worshipped as the enlarged source and controlling agent of all existence--as if mind created the physical universe, not the other way around. Most worshippers accordingly believe that supernatural intelligence invented the entire cosmos in order to rule it with special emphasis on human destiny. However, the bottom-up sequence should be plain by now: that by means of evolution the physical universe invented human consciousness identified as mind,

which thereupon had the temerity to put the cart before the horse by inventing God as the creator of the physical universe. In the most inclusive sense, however, each advance in natural history has been the product of circumstances that preceded it. The dispersal and cooling off of big-bang energy has led to star formation, then the production of tangible matter in the interior of stars through the conversion of hydrogen into helium by nuclear reaction, then into carbon, heavy metals, and all the rest of the elements. The explosion of stars has thereupon produced planets consisting of matter, and life as we know it on earth has resulted from a sustained interaction between matter and energy perhaps beginning with carbon adhesions on subterranean iron sulfide surfaces.²⁹ Finally 3.8 billion years of natural selection, much as explained by Darwin, produced human intelligence sufficiently clever and egotistical to turn cosmic history upside down by worshipping an anthropomorphic God almighty for having instigated everything that ever happened. And what amazing pride, what extraordinary collective solipsism, to reinvent oneself as the inventor of all!

Does this mean that hard evidence proves God does not exist? Not really, since the existence of any supernatural presence in a realm beyond the limits of the physical world is impossible to disprove. This applies to absolutely anything one wants to suggest, as long as this presence is imagined to elude empirical verification except when He (She, It) pleases. For the God Almighty of Christian tradition one can substitute an invisible turtle, an almighty cockroach, or whatever else one wants with identical supernatural powers. These alternatives might seem silly, but no less silly than any other tangible vision of an intangible god. Everything conceivable bears a defensible supernatural status on these grounds--beyond yet imminent, seen yet invisible, felt yet immaterial--thus giving it the same ontological status as the Christian God of western tradition that once supposedly talked from clouds and walked in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, exactly the same arguments may be devised to prove that all heretics who presume to doubt its supreme authority must endure eternal hell fire to punish their impiety.

On a hypothetical basis, Descartes proposed an ingenious version of such a deity, a "malicious demon" who uses his supernatural powers to ensnare our minds with an inextricable web of delusions. This demon may be imagined to have distorted everything we think we know in order to deceive us, so all the evidence we have gathered either to prove or disprove his existence is totally false. It might even be possible--to Descartes' consternation, I'm sure--to maintain that this demon has clouded the proof of his existence precisely in order to limit salvation to iconoclasts with the courage and insight to deny his reality based on a valid assessment of his false information. As intended by this evil almighty god, their facts might be wrong, but their atheistic interpretation of these facts is correct, thus guaranteeing their acceptance in heaven. Eternal bliss is thus their reward, since they are brave and clever enough to reject the evil demon's existence with arguments that would be entirely valid except for his infernal trickery. These are the worthy souls He wishes to surround himself with, not the gullible believers so easily victimized by his deceptive strategy. Winners include all the skeptics and atheists busily arguing among themselves in heaven, of course to the delight of their shiftily demon god, while an enormous throng of credulous believers who used bad logic to draw the right conclusions writhe below in eternal agony as just punishment for their inexcusable *naï veté*.³¹ Suddenly Pascal's Wager is reversed. Uncompromising religious belief becomes too dangerous to risk, for, as Ralph Ingersoll has asked, why would such a God prefer to surround himself with trusting simpletons for the rest of eternity? Moreover, as Goethe has asked, what

honest skeptic wants to share eternal bliss with individuals who actually believe in heaven?32 Perhaps this inverted eschatology seems too absurd to treat seriously, but its implausibility does not exceed that of orthodox religion to any appreciable extent. The entire logic can be turned inside out with just a couple of negatives added here and there to the orthodox Christian catechism, and who can prove otherwise?

7. What, then, can one believe? In the final analysis the appropriate choice is agnosticism as first argued by Simonides and Protagoras, though the possibility of God--especially of the anthropomorphic variety seems so unlikely today that more than a fair share of freethinkers can be expected to make the necessary inductive leap by accepting the validity of atheism. Like death and taxes, a godless universe seems almost inevitable, and since every truth must be treated as a probability confirmed by empirical evidence, why not cut losses short on the "God concept," and accept its overwhelming improbability? Human need becomes the only justification of spiritual dedication, but this need is better served by an honest grasp of mankind's relatively limited role in the physical universe without the perpetual oversight and intervention of an anthropomorphic big brother. The caveat must always be granted that some freak new discovery in astronomy or biology might suddenly establish God's probable existence on a strictly scientific basis as obliged by Strato's Supposition. However, until this happens the pursuit of salvation in light of Tertullian's Paradox and Pascal's Wager seems a monumental waste of human intelligence. What might Pascal have accomplished if he hadn't saddled his genius with this kind of logic?

It may be conceded Nietzsche erred when he argued that God is dead, as did Stendhal when he offered his *aperçu* that what excuses God is that he does not exist. Obviously, God remains very much alive today at least in the hopes and aspirations of religious believers who find comfort in God's benign authority and the sure prospect of eternal life in Paradise. This is their pious expectation, and it dominates eulogies and panegyrics at their funerals, when their grieving friends and relatives affirm their shared confidence in a destiny of appropriate heavenly rewards. However, others cannot accept this blind optimism and therefore sympathize with Nietzsche's viewpoint at least in its implication that God as conceived two thousand years ago *ought* to be dead, and that the principal tasks allotted to God--creation, providential intervention, and perpetual sovereignty in heaven--may be ignored as divine absurdities without empirical justification. For them the God concept and heaven's promised jackpot have become threadbare delusions rather than any cure or source of hope or consolation.

Are freethinkers a tiny faction whose impiety can be ignored? Not at all. They have always been a small minority, but their impact has been enormous since the beginning of western civilization. If nothing else, they have played the same role as a canary in the mine shaft, their "song" helping to confirm a sufficient oxygen supply to support life for everybody else. When freethinkers can be heard loud and clear, intellectual freedom thrives; when they fall silent, it is plain this freedom has been denied in one manner or another. In fact, it may be asserted as a general principle that the intellectual tradition of western civilization has endured as the product of intense periods of secular enlightenment when religious tolerance has extended to include freethought. The most impressive epochs of historic achievement at the pinnacle of their creative and intellectual accomplishment--Athens, Alexandria, Rome, medieval Arab civilization, the Italian Renaissance, the French Enlightenment, and advanced industrial nations since the mid-

nineteenth century--have all expanded religious freedom to include freedom from religion additional to the upbeat credulousness important to society at large. Freethinkers might have been a minority, but it was a vocal minority large enough to matter, and those aligned with it enjoyed the opportunity to pursue their ideas without intimidation by others. Moreover, no hard and fast boundaries have divided them from the poets, artists, scientists, and philosophers who came to the fore during these periods of extraordinary genius. Arguably, it was freethought that provided the necessary milieu--the social and intellectual context of individual achievement that made everything else possible. The god concept had to be neutralized before genuine innovations became possible in other fields. And of course freethinkers were among the first to be persecuted when periods of reaction followed.

Today there are many more skeptics, materialists, agnostics, and atheists than one might realize. Many avoid discussing the issue or deny their lack of faith or try to disguise it with evasive pronouncements in order to escape offending friends and relatives (mothers especially). This tactic seems more frequent than usual in the United States, perhaps ultimately because of our nation's historic role in providing haven for Europe's legions of impoverished and under-educated job hunters, most of whom took enormous pride in their religious convictions.³³ So it should be no surprise that only one percent of the American public now describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, as indicated in the 1993 Gallup Poll, that only 14 percent answer "none" in response to the form question, religious preference, and that the 1999 Statistical Abstract of the United States tallied not more than 1.6 million atheists and 27 million additional inhabitants who professed no religion. As a percentage of our whole population this combined subpopulation of freethinkers is small--not much more than a tenth of the total. However, for the advancement of civilization it is almost large enough, since it includes a disproportionate share of the educated community. If this minority could be augmented, say, to fifteen or eighteen percent of the total population, our society might fully match western civilization's most remarkable epochs of intellectual breakthrough that helped to catapult ancient enlightenment into modern times. For, as in all previous major cosmopolitan societies, we enjoy the benefits of a dominant economy supported by a dominant military apparatus that intimidates competitive societies. And no less important, we possess a major cultural epicenter, New York City, as well as a half dozen other cities and a formidable network of college towns in which sophistication is relatively advanced. Unlike Spain during the Renaissance as well as Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia during the Reformation, our nation might therefore pull its full weight in helping to propel western civilization to new and more impressive levels of achievement, so long as we can avoid national and international excesses spurred by misguided ideological zeal buttressed by "chosen people" assumptions derivative of religious dogma. Whether we like it or not, western civilization now persists under our nation's hegemonic leadership, but it is essential to realize, contrary to received opinion, that freethought instead of religious faith continues to be civilization's primary impetus. Of course neither of these complementary virtues--belief and disbelief--can be totally eliminated, but right now the American social and intellectual milieu needs to cultivate a more productive balance favorable to intellectual freedom unconstrained by orthodox demands.

In the final analysis, we primarily benefit from a secular tradition derivative of ancient civilization that is at least as impressive as its rival ideology, Christian tradition derivative of Hebrew religion retrofitted with spring sacrifice and Zoroastrian eschatology. Beginning with pre-Socratic Greek philosophy as early as 500 B.C., it was secularism that inspired most of the

innovations that have given western civilization its unique status in world history, while Christian tradition has primarily served to brake and absorb these innovations in order to defend historic institutions--itself included--as well as meeting the regressive needs and expectations of the populace as a whole.³⁴ Throughout this unique twenty-century dialectic history, the impact of secularism has almost always been progressive as compared to that of Christianity, which has mostly played a conservative role. Exceptions may be conceded, including the early atheist Critias, who led Athens' Thirty Tyrants in murdering fifteen hundred fellow citizen. Also retrogressive were the twentieth-century Marxist-Leninist leadership of China and the Soviet Union, which tried to impose atheism as a mandatory state religion upon reluctant populations. Nor can we forget that both Napoleon and Hitler were atheists, the former quite willing to admit it, the latter totally hypocritical in his successful effort to draw both Catholics and Protestants into harmony with each other supportive of the Nazi cause. He himself was raised a Catholic, and toward the end of his life he actually seems to have thought of himself as an instrument of God's wishes, playing a role much like that of Christ.³⁵ Mussolini was likewise raised a Catholic before becoming a stump atheist preceding World War I. He later turned religious when he sought to unite Italy under his fascist leadership. By the mid-thirties he was a regular churchgoer confident of fascism's destiny as the political arm of organized religion.

Apart from these glaring exceptions to the rule, secularism has consistently borne a progressive and humanistic influence upon the history of western tradition. Since ancient Greece it has encouraged science, democracy, social responsibility, and unfettered intellectual speculation. For example, the American constitutional experiment took place during the French Enlightenment largely in response to "radical" political theories in currency at the time proposed by Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau, among others. Not accidentally, most of our nation's most prestigious Founding Fathers (Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, etc.) were deists who at one time or another doubted both the concept of a personal God and Christ's status as the Son of God. On the other hand, Christianity has no less consistently resisted change, especially toward the beginning of periods of high secular productivity, when its support would have been the most useful. With uncompromising vigor Christian leaders rejected Copernican assumptions in the seventeenth century, geology in the early nineteenth century, and Darwinism a few decades later. Lest we forget, a large majority of the nineteenth century clergy also opposed both the abolitionist movement against slavery and the conversion of European monarchies to parliamentary democracy inspired by the success of constitutional government in the United States. Catholicism went on to reject radical politics throughout the twentieth century, and in promoting this cause it aligned itself too closely with fascist elements during the nineteen-twenties and thirties, after which it successfully blotted the episode from our collective memory. Today, it also neglects to mention its effort during the late fifties to establish South Vietnam as a Catholic democracy, leading to the Vietnam War and its fateful consequences to all involved. Nowadays, both Catholicism and fundamentalist Protestant sects oppose assisted suicide, stem cell research, and effective birth control, the latter arguably the single most important task confronting the twenty-first century as the world's population explosion continues to accelerate at an exponential rate.

Paradoxically, Christianity's most ingenious contributions to the history of western civilization have consisted of philosophical innovations that could only have been conceived in the effort to discredit secularism. Just as Plato invented metaphysics in order to refute pre-

Socratic materialism and skepticism, Aquinas reinvented metaphysics in order to refute Averroes (and thus also Arab civilization), Descartes reinvented metaphysics in order to refute Montaigne (and thus also the Renaissance), and Kant reinvented metaphysics, this time as epistemology, in order to refute Hume (and thus also the Enlightenment). Likewise, Wittgenstein's reinvention of logical empiricism as language games in order to refute Russell (and thus also modern empiricism) have played essentially the same historic role.³⁶ As perhaps to be expected, the ingenuity of these Christian apologists has led to improvements in secular theory that might not have otherwise been possible. Plato, for example, provoked a secularist reaction by both Aristotle and the New Academy; Aquinas similarly provoked both the fourteenth century Ockhamites and the sixteenth-to-seventeenth century scientific revolution; Descartes provoked Locke, Hume, and the French Enlightenment, and Kant capped by Hegel provoked late nineteenth century materialism starting with the apostate insights of David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach. True, Wittgenstein's Pyrrhonian use of language analysis to reject Russell's synthesis of logic and materialism still goes unanswered, except possibly by Karl Popper's theory of empiricism, but a new and more inclusive synthesis seems inevitable along similar lines. And what seems needed to refute Wittgenstein? A thorough grasp of Strato and Academic skepticism mixed with both Russell and Popper, served plain.

All in all, the unique task of curtailing secularism derivative of Greek civilization seems to have given Christianity its sacred mission from the very beginning. One suspects, in fact, that it was this exceptional ability as much as anything that catapulted Christianity into its dominant role among near-eastern cults and religions in competition with each other when the Roman empire sank into decline. Without the incessant threat of secularism, Christianity might have more effectively cultivated transcendent spiritual values comparable to those of Buddhism, Taoism and other oriental religions. However, the task of thwarting, if not obliterating, secularism turns out to have been Christianity's unique destiny, and this it has fulfilled with relative success--almost entirely without compromise until the Renaissance, able to retreat when needed in later centuries. The incessant struggle between these complementary traditions, secularist and Christian, accordingly dominates our lives even today, the two of them intertwined like a DNA helix across twenty centuries of dialectic history--but of course with differences emphasized rather than identity. But a word of warning: when secularism predominates (the Age of Pericles, medieval Arab civilization, the Italian Renaissance, the French Enlightenment, etc.), a religious reaction ensues with relative ease. However, when religion takes precedence (fifth-century Rome, the Reformation, etc.), an elongated period of pious stagnation can be anticipated before secularism might once again make itself felt. Right now, whatever the risk, a bigger dose of secularism seems needed to carry on the more inclusive advancement of western civilization under America's unprecedented global dominance.

8. After two thousand years of sustained theological speculation, there is still insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate either God's existence or the prospect of an afterlife in heaven. The most that can be said is that nothing has yet been found to eliminate them from consideration, but, as already indicated, this exemption likewise applies to invisible turtles and sacred cockroaches. The lack of valid proof one way or the other finally compels the assumption that no God exists to be investigated on a scientific basis, so nothing providential need be taken into account. If God does not exist, help from God cannot be expected beyond his role as a

divine placebo. In other words, we are finally stuck with who we are and what we do with ourselves, and we must seize the day (*carpe diem*) and try to make the very best of it while we live. Toward this end a healthy respect for the truth can be valuable among those able to cope with its implications. For losses necessarily occur, whether recognized by oneself or others, when any kind of a programmatic lie buttresses one's sense of personal worth. Of course a generous assortment of fictions help to ease relationships and enhance our self-confidence, but too often they encourage a moral and intellectual sloth that prevents us from attaining our full potential. And in the process of calming our anxieties they very likely diminish the capacity for self-recognition as well as the ability to deal with what is--or ought to be--truly important to us.

Probably the most useful fiction, if such be needed for a secular vision of human destiny, is to grant ourselves the status of demigods and goddesses able to take pleasure in life, but also with a better and more compelling sense of responsibility than has been attributed to the official god(s) featured by orthodox religion. Without God to appease, we ourselves can take charge of our destinies and the world we inhabit. We enjoy extraordinary freedom, but as a result we paradoxically augment our sense of responsibility relevant to the standards of conduct we ourselves can accept as being valid.. And our ethics must emphasize what we do as well as what we are supposed to avoid doing. Instead of warping consciousness with too many "thou shalt not's," we must concern ourselves with "thou shalt's": to eat well, to sleep well, to marry well, to raise healthy and adjusted children, to help others, to promote life and the human mind as a general cause, and, not least, to educate ourselves as much as possible. In other words, we must make the most of lives on the assumption that our existence terminates upon death. True, flagrant libertinism becomes possible, but also possible is a more accentuated morality focussed on results instead of rigid injunctions. We must recognize, for example, that seemingly virtuous choices (e.g., unsullied virginity preceding marriage) might bear counterproductive results (e.g., incompatible marriage partners), and, vice versa, that goals offensive to many devout Christians (e.g., abortions and effective gun control) might bear excellent results beneficial to both individuals and society as a whole. Most of all, we must accept the burden that what we do, we do, and cannot be undone. Also that we cannot use prayer or confession to cleanse ourselves of our mistakes. Our misconduct can be offset or superseded, but it cannot be erased as if we can be rendered innocent of its effect. No supernatural authority can absolve us, so we must judge the value of each and every act based on our personal ethics relative to the more inclusive standards of society as a whole that we are able to accept.

This basic recognition should instill a far more sensitive ethical awareness than might be encouraged by religion.³⁷ Statistically, for example, today's least religious nations (e.g., the Netherlands, Norway, and Germany) tend to be the most law-abiding, while the most religious (e.g., Italy, Afghanistan, and the United States) tend to sustain the highest crime rates.³⁸ Not surprisingly, convicted criminals tend to resort to exaggerated piety when confronted with legal difficulties, especially those sentenced to death for capital offenses. On the other hand, law-abiding poets, philosophers, and psychiatrists tend to be freethinkers. Granted, a good dose of religion is often effective in curtailing misbehavior, but this dependence on religion becomes counterproductive when it encourages exactly the tendencies it is supposed to prevent with the promise and expectation that these might later be forgiven resulting from prayer, confession, or, as one's last chance, a presumably sincere deathbed appeal to God for His forgiveness. This seemingly paradoxical connection should be no surprise.. Too often a pathological feedback

mechanism occurs whereby anti-social transgressions encourage belief in a merciful God, while belief in such a God encourages these transgressions with the expectation of benefiting from God's mercy later on. Social harmony necessarily declines when a sufficient number of citizens resort to this logic to an excessive degree in their daily conduct.

An effective balance must also be found between Christ's Golden Rule borrowed from Leviticus (19.18) and its more restrictive negative application, a crucial but neglected "thou shalt not" that was proposed much earlier by Thales, Zoroaster, Confucius, Aristotle (quoted by Diogenes Laertius) and the Rabbi Hillel, that we should not do unto others what we would not have them do unto ourselves. In other words, we should be generous but not intrusive--give but not impose. And we should pursue this double goal with full appreciation of Aristotle's Golden Mean to let it all happen in moderation. On the other hand, we should reject Christ's harsh edict, "Compel people to come in" (Luke 14.21), an injunction that once justified forcing everybody to accept Christian teachings--if necessary, by excommunicating and burning at the stake those who resisted. To many it might seem charitable to lure or coerce "others done unto" into becoming good orthodox believers so they might escape eternal hellfire. Christ's words were accordingly featured by Saint Augustine and his successors to promote bloodthirsty religious persecution for the next twelve hundred years. The tendency persists even today, minus corporeal punishment, in the effort of Christian fundamentalists to convert non-believers to the true faith. Nevertheless, this militant benevolence can only seem excessive, indeed preposterous, if in fact the God hypothesis and an ecstatic afterlife derive from nothing more than "high" folk superstition twenty centuries out of date. To the extent that religion distorts charity to promote an agenda that depletes human vitality and intellectual freedom, its rejection--at least its neutralization--is a major step in the right direction. Rid of God, we can confront ourselves as we are--also as we ought to be.

© 2005 by Edward Jayne. This document may be reproduced in any non-profit form without permission of the author; however, for-profit reproduction requires written permission.

<http://www.edwardjayne.com>

Footnotes

1. See Matthew 25.31-46; 16.28; 24.34.
2. Apropos of the slogan, "Don't ask questions, etc.," see Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (Oxford, 1987), p. 54. Tertullian proposed his paradox in *de Carne Christi* (A.D. 208). For a full account of Tertullian's Paradox, See Bernard Williams' piece, "Tertullian's Paradox," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by Antony Flew & Alasdair Macintyre (SCM Press, 1955), pp. 187-211.
3. "aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit," in St. Anselm, "Proslogion," chap. 2, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, (Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), p. 93.
4. Anselm, p. 94.
5. Simonides is quoted by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*, in Cicero, vol. 19 (Loeb Classics, 1979), p. 59. Protagoras is quoted by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2 (Loeb Classics, 1979), p. 465.
6. Aristotle, *Physics* 226b, 10-17--in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon, p. 306.
7. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), in *passim.*; and Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841; trans. by George Eliot in 1854).
8. Carl Stecher lists these among other negative traits in his article, "Searching for a Lost God," *Sextant: The Journal of Salem State College*, vol. VIII, no 1, 1998, p. 15.
9. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, vol. 1, Sextus Empiricus (Harvard University Press, Loeb Classics, 1956), Bk. 3, chap. 3, pp. 325-33. Carneades is not identified here as the author of this section, but his authorship is considered probable. Meslier's quotation is in his *Testament*, translated into English by Anna Knoop under the title *Superstition in All Ages* (repr. by Truth Seeker, 1950), pp. 120-25, esp. 123.
10. See *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (Columbia University Press, 1924), p. 29--the third page of chap. 2.
11. In French Stendhal's words were "Ce qui excuse Dieu c'est qu'il n'existe pas." He was quoted having spoken them to Prosper Merimee. See Warren Allen Smith, *Who's Who in Hell* (Barricade, 2000), p. 1048--also Joseph McCabe, *A Rationalist Encyclopaedia* (Watts & Co., 1948), p. 57.
12. Perhaps the most useful text dealing with the proofs of God is the casebook, *The Existence of God*, ed. by John Hick (Macmillan, 1964). Also useful are articles on particular proofs of God's

existence in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols., ed. by Paul Edwards (Macmillan, 1967). These are listed in an entry under the title "God, Arguments for the Existence of," vol. 3, p. 344.

13. Useful texts for the layman include Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time from the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam, 1988), esp. p. 123; Alan Guth's *The Inflationary Universe* (Addison Wesley, 1997), esp. pp. 245-49; John Maddox's *What Remains to be Discovered* (Free Press, 1998), esp. pp. 25, 54-57; and, as a clear explanation of the issue from an earlier perspective, Lloyd Motz's *The Universe: Its Beginning and End* (Scribner's, 1975), esp. pp. 306-11. Recent speculation is effectively summarized by Dennis Overbye in "In the Beginning," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2002, Science Times section, p. 1.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. by H.L. Mencken (Noontide Press, 1980), pp. 134-35.

15. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Understanding* (1690), chap 19, sect. 1 ("Of Enthusiasm"); in *The Great Books*, vol. 35, p. 384. Unfortunately, Locke himself fell short of this ideal in his effort to abide by Christian dogma as much as possible.

16. John Milton, "Areopagitica," in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. by Merritt Hughes (Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 748 (the sixth from final paragraph).

17. The Stratonician Presumption was first described by Cicero in *Academica* (2.121), pp. 623-25. Strato's use of simple experiments is described by G.E.R. Lloyd in *Greek Science after Aristotle* (Chatto & Windus, 1973), pp. 15-19, and by Theodor Gomperz in *Greek Thinkers: A History of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. by G.G. Berry, vol. 4 (John Murray, 1912), pp. 499-506.

18. Cicero, *Academica*, 38.21, in *Cicero*, vol. 19, p. 623. Epicurus was suspected of atheistic hypocrisy by many of his contemporaries, as indicated by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*, pp. 83-84, 119.

19. Cicero discusses epoche in *Academica*, 2.59, p. 543; 2.104, p. 601; and 2.148, p. 659; see also Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in *Sextus Empiricus*, vol. 1, p. 21; and Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Harvard University Press, Loeb Classics, 1925), p. 45. Arcesilaus's close friendship with Strato is plain in Strato's will, quoted by Sextus Empiricus, vol. 1, pp. 515-17, in which Arcesilaus is mentioned eight times.

20. Carneades' theory of probability is treated by Sextus Empiricus, vol. 2, pp. 91-103, as well as in Cicero's *Academica*, 2.32-35, pp. 509-13, and 2.99-105, pp. 595-603.

21. See Sextus Empiricus, vol. 1, pp. 13, 142-143, 315--also Pyrrho's argument that because of skepticism, "We may choose a thing or shrink from a thing by habit and may observe rules and customs," Diogenes Laertius, vol. 2, p. 519.

22. These include Richard Popkin, Myles Burnyeat, David Sedley, C.B. Schmitt, and Michael Frede, all of whom prefer the Pyrrhonian version of skepticism explained by Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius to the Academic version of skepticism explained by Cicero. Insufficiently

critical of Pierre Couissin's biased interpretation of Academic skepticism, they acknowledge Cicero's role, but on the whole their treatment *Academica* and its impact on Renaissance ideology verges on total neglect.

23. Historians of Renaissance skepticism typically align Montaigne with sixteenth and seventeenth century fideists indebted to the assumptions of Pyrrho as interpreted by Aenesidemus and Sextus Empiricus. However, Montaigne's magnum opus in skepticism, "Apology for Raimond Sebond," approvingly quotes Cicero 109 times (*Academica* alone at least 30 times), as compared to Diogenes Laertius only 30 times, and Sextus Empiricus only 17 times, suggesting a much more supportive view of Academic skepticism than might otherwise be supposed.

24. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Henry Holt and Company, 1938), pp. 143 and 8.

25. Montaigne, "Apology for Raimond Sebond," trans. by George Ives, *Essays* (Heritage Press, 1946), pp. 690, 725.

26. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer, No. 418, pp. 150-51.

27. The vulgar and potentially bloodthirsty implications of the "chosen people" concept became apparent when Hitler secularized the concept with the derivative notion of a "chosen" race.

28. Hawking, p. 126

29. Günter Wächtershäuser champions the iron-sulphur theory in his articles, "Groundworks for an Evolutionary Biochemistry: the Iron-Sulphur World," *Prog. Biophys. molec. Bio.*, vol. 58 (1992), pp. 85-201; "The Origin of Life and its Methodological Challenge," *J. theor. Biol.* 1997, vol. 187, pp. 483-494; "The Origin of Life in an iron-sulfur world," in André Brack's *The Molecular Origins of Life* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 206-18, etc.

30. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First and Second Meditations, sects. 22-23 and 25, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, et al., vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 15 and 17.

31. the English philosopher Galen Strawson has made much the same argument: "It is tempting to conclude that if [God] exists, it is the atheists and agnostics that he loves best, among those with any pretension to education. For they are the ones who have taken him the most seriously." Quoted in *Independent* (London, 24 June 1990--cited by Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 375.

32. Ingersoll's exact words: "It has always seemed absurd to suppose that a god would choose for his companions during all eternity, the dear souls whose highest and only ambition is to obey." Goethe's exact words: "I shall be well content that after the close of this life we should be blessed with another, but I would beg not to have there for companions any who have believed it here." Both passages are quoted by James Haught in *2000 Years of Disbelief* (Prometheus Books, 1996), respectively on pp. 157 and 106.

33. My suggestion that anti-intellectualism has played a substantial role in the United States since its very inception derives from my sense, unsupported by data, that few university graduates emigrated to our nation, and that few immigrants either brought books or left much property behind (or had much of any to sell before coming). It can be mentioned that our Founding Fathers at the 1787 Constitutional Convention made a remarkable contribution to the history of democracy, but that only two of its members--William Wilson of Pennsylvania and Samuel Johnson of Connecticut--had obtained law degrees from England, both of whom were honored for this distinction.

34. My argument here is obviously inspired by *The Future of an Illusion* (Norton, 1961), in which Sigmund Freud argues that religion entails obsessional behavior comparable to childhood neurosis. See especially pp. 43-44 and 53.

35. Hitler's atheism is plain in *Hitler's Table Talk: 1941-1944* (Enigma Books, 2000), pp. 6-7, 9, 15, 59-62, 341-44, etc. However, as far as the German public knew during his lifetime, he was born and raised a Catholic, and never left the church. In his final days, especially after his narrow escape from assassination, he apparently felt he was on a divine mission.

36. My thesis here might seem excessively schematic, but I take pains elsewhere to defend it with ample evidence obtained from the major writings of the respective authors.

37. As a seemingly trivial personal example, when I come upon a worm writhing on the sidewalk, I make a relatively quick decision whether to let it die there, since it has only a couple more minutes to live, or to transfer it to the grass, where it may either recover or die more slowly but with less pain. Most Christians I know simply walk by without a second thought.

38. Percentage comparisons among nations regarding religious belief are summarized in Andrew Greeley's *Religion as Poetry* (Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 85 ff. Comparative crime rates may be obtained in Report of the Secretary-General on Crime Protection and Control, U.N. Report A/32/199, Sept. 22, 1977.