Moral Ontology in the Age of Science: A Philosophical Case for the Mystery of Goodness

by

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In this dissertation, I attempt to convince an audience of modern naturalists that Socrates' famous moral thesis—that we should prefer to suffer injustice rather than inflict it, because it is impossible for an unjust person to be happy—is true. Rather than logical proof, however, I focus on questions of rhetoric and of spiritual practice. In short, I argue that the existential truth of Socrates' claim only begins to manifest for those who adopt a particular curriculum of spiritual training, which combines the pursuit of moral goodness with the pursuit of self-knowledge; this training, however, needs to be undertaken under the aegis of a philosophical rhetoric that first opens us to at least the *possibility* that Socrates might be right. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, therefore, I focus on rhetoric, as the attempt to destabilize the common naturalist confidence that their own scientific worldview is grounded on the true nature of reality, and that this unprecedented understanding shows Socrates' moral thesis to be nonsense. Following this, from chapters three to five, I present the aforementioned spiritual curriculum: the "spirituality from above," oriented towards moral goodness, in contradistinction to the "spirituality from below" that is oriented toward self-knowledge. After presenting the logic of this bivalent practice in chapter three, I then explicate it with reference to the philosophies of David Hume and Richard Rorty (chapter four), and then Plato and Nietzsche (chapter five). Finally, in chapter six, I consider what accepting the truth of Socrates' moral thesis would mean for the way we live our everyday lives, under conditions of peace, in which the question of whether to suffer or inflict injustice will likely not be a pressing existential concern, and the question of what it actually means to be just will always be unclear and disputed.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor Ronald Kuipers. Without Ron's willingness to let me explore these ideas, freely, without necessarily knowing where I was going, this dissertation could not have been written. At the same time, Ron also provided me with the right amount of direction, to keep these free explorations focused on the simple necessity of actually producing a completed dissertation. My goal was always to write something that would satisfy the demands of academic philosophy, but which would also be relevant (and readable) to non-philosophers who have an interest in these subjects. It might have taken a bit longer than usual, but I think we have succeeded in fulfilling both of these constraints. Also, I must thank Ron for his conscientious editing as we got closer to the finish line, even as his time came under increasing pressure from an expanding list of new responsibilities.

Let me also express my gratitude to some of the other senior members at ICS: Bob Sweetman, whose course on "Rhetoric and Philosophy" in 2013 first furnished me with the seed that slowly grew into this dissertation; Nik Ansell, whose "Biblical Foundations" course in 2010 opened my eyes to the possibility of Biblical interpretation as a vehicle for spiritual and philosophical insight; and Lambert Zuidervaart, whose course on Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, way back in 2007, first opened me to the idea of doing a PhD at the Institute for Christian Studies.

On that note, let me also thank the people who have generously supported this institution over the last half century.

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Introduction

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that "doing what's unjust [is] worse than suffering it,"[1] not only because doing what is unjust is bad or shameful, but also because it is impossible for an unjust person to be happy. As he puts it, "the admirable and good person, man or woman, is happy, but … the one who's unjust and wicked is miserable."[2] In this thesis, I argue for the truth of this claim: that despite all appearances to the contrary, and when understood in the correct way, Socrates is telling the truth—which means that we, too, can only become happy by struggling to become just.

Perennial Objections to Socrates' Moral Thesis

It would be customary to begin a philosophical argument of this sort by defining exactly what Socrates means by words like "good," "happy," "unjust," and "miserable." Against this normal procedure, however, I will instead begin from the opposite end of the rhetorical spectrum, with a description of some of the immediate objections we might want to raise against Socrates' claim, based on our own everyday understanding of these terms. As we will see, many of these initial objections were as viable in Plato's time as they are today.[3]

In the *Gorgias*, for example, Polus makes the obvious initial rebuttal, arguing that Socrates' claim is clearly refuted by the unjust yet happy Archelaus, who, through a series of betrayals and murders, became the tyrant of Macedonia. Polus argues that, in spite of these crimes, Archelaus "remains unaware of how 'miserable' he's become, and feels no remorse either."[4] In *Pluralism and Philosophy* (2000), philosopher John Kekes makes a similar point. The "religious-moral

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[1] Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 474b.

[2] Plato, *Gorgias*, 470e.

[3] To be clear, when I cite the words of Socrates in this dissertation, I am referring to the Socrates that Plato portrays in his dialogues, primarily the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. I am not concerned with what the real, historical Socrates may or may not have said, or how Plato's depiction might deviate from this historical person. It is also worth noting, however, that my goal here is also not Platonic interpretation. My goal is rather to explore the kind of philosophical arguments that take place around the claim that it is impossible for an unjust person to be happy. In this sense, the *Gorgias* is a particularly useful resource, as this dialogue portrays the character "Socrates" arguing for the truth of this claim, and two other characters, Polus and Callicles, arguing strenuously against it.

[4] Plato, *Gorgias*, 471b.

tradition," he writes, is undergirded by the assumption that "the scheme of things is such that ultimately only morally good lives will be satisfying and immoral or nonmoral lives cannot be." According to Kekes, however, this view of reality cannot do "justice to the plain fact that many evil and morally unconcerned people live meaningful lives," nor can it explain "why so many people live lives in which immoral and nonmoral satisfactions dominate over moral ones." While Kekes acknowledges that this latter idea "outrages our moral sensibility, which is deeply influenced by this [religious-moral] tradition,"[5] he nevertheless insists that we should jettison the comforting platitude in favor of the unsettling reality.

Callicles' criticism of Socrates' position, which occurs slightly later in the *Gorgias*, also has parallels in the modern world. Callicles argues that "no man would put up with suffering what's unjust; only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive, who when he's treated unjustly and abused can't protect himself or anyone else he cares about."[6] This claim resonates with the understanding of morality that Nietzsche offers in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

> We can hear the oppressed, downtrodden, violated whispering among themselves with the wily vengefulness of the impotent, "Let us be unlike those evil ones. Let us be good. And the good shall be he who does not do violence, does not attack or retaliate, who leaves vengeance to God, who, like us, lives hidden, who shuns all that is evil, and altogether asks very little of life—like us, the patient, the humble, the just ones."[7]

Peter Sloterdijk's *The Art of Philosophy* (2012) provides a more recent example of this same kind of critique. According to Sloterdijk, Plato was a "romantic loser," a man who retreated into the metaphysical fantasies of his academy in order to assuage the fact that he, and Athens in general, had become politically impotent: "what was henceforth called the 'love of wisdom' was the first and purest form of loser romanticism, reinterpreting a defeat as a victory … and painting an irreparable loss as a boundless profit."[8] In all cases, the essential idea is the same: that only the impotent will bother insisting on the superior happiness of those who suffer, as a psychological bulwark against a reality that they have lost the power to alter.

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[5] Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy: changing the subject* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 102.
[6] Plato, *Gorgias*, 483, b.
[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), I.XIII, p. 179; in *Nietzsche on Morality*, Brian Leiter also argues that Nietzsche's view of morality is akin to the view expressed by Callicles (see Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, pp. 41-42, 99, 118).
[8] Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*, trans. Karen Margolis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 42.

In the *Gorgias*, however, when faced with Callicles' relatively straightforward version of this objection, Socrates simply reaffirms his original position while at the same time adding an even more extraordinary addendum: that philosophy "always says what you now hear me say," that "what philosophy says always stays the same."[9] If this is true, it would mean that all the different positions, all the controversies and arguments that would have been taking place in Socrates' day, and which have since occupied philosophers for over two thousand years, are but froth that cover over the single rational position to which all sincere argumentation should eventually arrive. Callicles actually grants this new assertion, but then argues that philosophy is therefore a dangerous waste of time, serving only to befuddle the wits of otherwise sensible people: "'How can this be a wise thing, the craft of which took a well-favored man and made him worse', able neither to protect himself nor to rescue himself or anyone else from the gravest dangers, to be robbed of all his property by his enemies, and to live a life with absolutely no rights in his city?"[10] Callicles is pointing here to the opposition between our normal human desire for life and security and the apparently otherworldly ideal to which Socrates seems to appeal.

Hannah Arendt, who actually endorses a version of Socrates' moral thesis, also argues for a radical cut between the truth of philosophy and the reality of political life. As she puts it, insofar as a human is "a thinking being," this "ethical proposition about doing wrong and suffering wrong is no less compelling than mathematical truth."[11] However, even as she accepts Socrates' claim as a philosophical truth, Arendt also argues that, insofar as a human is "a citizen, an acting being concerned with the world and the public welfare rather than with his own well-being … the Socratic statement is not true at all."[12] Arendt further notes that this kind of criticism has a long history in Western philosophy:

> The disastrous consequences for any community that began in all earnest to follow ethical precepts derived from man in the singular—be they Socratic or Platonic or Christian—have been frequently pointed out. Long before Machiavelli recommended protecting the political realm against the undiluted principles of the Christian faith (those who refuse to resist evil permit the wicked "to do as much evil as they please"), Aristotle warned against giving philosophers any say in political matters. (Men who for professional reasons must be so unconcerned with

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[9] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482a.

[10] Plato, *Gorgias*, 486a-d.

[11] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 241.

[12] Arendt, "Truth and Politics" *Between Past and Future*, 241.

"what is good for themselves" cannot very well be trusted with what is good for others, and least of all with the "common good," the down-to-earth interests of the community.[13]

To be clear, in arguing that the Socratic moral thesis is not true politically, Arendt is not claiming that politics must therefore follow the logic of Machiavelli's *Prince*, according to which "it is often necessary, in order to keep hold of the state, to act contrary to trust, contrary to charity, contrary to humanity, contrary to religion."[14] For Arendt, the real conflict between philosophy and politics does not concern the question of whether it is better to inflict injustice or to suffer it, but rather the tension between a solitary and somewhat self-absorbed concern for my own personal goodness, in opposition to a pragmatic concern for the common good of everyone. As she puts it, "[t]he political concern is not whether the act of striking somebody unjustly or of being struck unjustly is more disgraceful," but is rather "with having a world in which such acts do not occur."[15] For her part, Arendt tries to resolve this tension by arguing that the Socratic moral thesis only gains political relevance "in extreme, that is, in marginal situations" —in other words, that it is only when we become politically impotent that "moral propositions become absolutely valid in the realm of politics."[16]

In the case of Socrates, however, even when confronted with this final consequence—the prospect of having to choose between dying and becoming unjust—in the end he simply assents: "Let someone despise you as a fool and throw dirt on you, if he likes. And yes, by Zeus, confidently let him deal you that demeaning blow. Nothing terrible will happen to you if you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence."[17] Socrates' point, of course, is that the gravest danger is not "to be robbed of all [our] property by [our] enemies, and to live a life with absolutely no rights in [our] city." The gravest danger is rather "to arrive in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions."[18] This is perhaps the most counter-intuitive consequence of Socrates' position. However, we can tell that Socrates is not simply making empty philosophical boasts here, for he eventually accepts this consequence in real life as well,

[13] Arendt, "Truth and Politics" *Between Past and Future*, 241.

[14] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and other Political Writings*, trans. Stephen J. Milner (Vermont: Everyman, 2004), §18, p. 97.

[15] Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 93.

[16] Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 156.

[17] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527b-d.

[18] Plato, *Gorgias*, 522d-e.

showing through his death that he truly believed the truth of the arguments he spent his life defending.

Modern Naturalism and the Socratic Moral Thesis

So far, I have introduced a number of potential objections to Socrates' moral thesis: that it is refuted by the clear existence of people who are unjust yet happy; that it is just a metaphysical fantasy, providing psychological compensation for the politically powerless; and, finally, that it is diametrically opposed to the way most people live their lives, in pursuit of the goods of life and security that, if Socrates' claims are true, would ultimately be irrelevant to human happiness. All of these objections stem from an experience of morality, politics, and history that was readily available in the ancient world, and which remains readily available today.

However, notwithstanding these ancient and modern parallels, anyone trying to argue for the truth of the Socratic moral thesis in today's world will have to deal with one additional line of critique: namely, that Socrates' claims appear utterly incompatible with the worldview of modern science, namely, naturalism. Even at the level of initial impressions, the lineaments of this objection are not difficult to see. For example, speaking of cosmology, it might seem that Socrates' claim runs counter to the cultural experience of disenchantment, whereby the old poetic cosmologies have dissolved in the infinite abyss of time and space revealed by modern physics. Indeed, what sense can there be in talking about the necessary unhappiness of an unjust person, if we now know that "justice" and "meaning" are really just human projections on an essentially meaningless universe? Alternatively, we might consider the way "justice" looks through the lens of the theory of evolution. If we are basically just clever animals, and if our sense of morality is ultimately rooted in the evolutionary struggle for survival and reproduction, how can we possibly speak of the *necessary* unhappiness of the unjust?

In the *Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum offers a description of the Socratic philosophical journey that provides a more precise vocabulary by which to describe these naturalist objections. According to Nussbaum, philosophy begins "when we acknowledge the possibility that the way we pre-philosophically see the world might be radically in error," and it progresses under the

sense that there "is a true nature out there that 'loves to hide itself' (Heraclitus B123) beneath our human way of speaking and believing."[19] While Nussbaum is here referring to Plato's so-called "theory of the forms," her description could apply equally well to the Socratic moral thesis. In short, Socrates is (perhaps obviously) not claiming that the only way to be happy is to uncritically adhere to whatever our own culture happens to define as "just" and "unjust." On the contrary, he is appealing to the way that justice would manifest beyond this or that pre-philosophical worldview—a vision of justice that lies hidden "beneath our human way of speaking and believing," but that could still become manifest for us through the dialectical analysis of our pre-philosophical beliefs.

For a naturalist, however, the epistemology implied by this Socratic journey is nonsensical. After all, how can conceptual analysis of our understanding of virtue lead to any real insight into "true nature out there"? For a naturalist, science and science alone gives insight into "true nature" — and, moreover, the scientific picture of "true nature" has no place whatsoever for the kind of culturally transcendent form of justice to which Socrates hearkens. For a naturalist, in other words, the truth that hides beneath our human ways of speaking and believing could not possibly be the rather counter-intuitive idea that we need to align ourselves with some kind of "transcendent" justice in order to be happy. Instead, a naturalist would propose an alternative vision of how justice exists in "true nature": to wit, that our pre-philosophical belief in morality shows itself, through a process of rational analysis, either to be a human projection on an essentially meaningless universe, or else to be grounded in a fundamentally amoral struggle for survival and reproduction. As for the potentially disquieting consequences of this vision, a naturalist would likely draw examples from the history of science, which has already shattered many unjustified preconceptions. As Daniel Dennett puts it in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, "every schoolchild today accepts" the idea "that our planet is not the center of creation," and the same will eventually be true of Darwinism, which will eventually "come to occupy a similarly secure and untroubled place in the minds—and hearts—of every educated person on the globe."[20] In other words, the only reason we are not yet at ease with the scientific cosmology in general, and with Darwinism in particular, is that we have not finished digesting them.

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[19] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 241.

[20] Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*: *Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 19.

Now, the idea that our sense of justice is actually grounded in the pragmatic necessity of cooperating in a violent world is not actually an unprecedented insight of evolutionary biology. As with many of the objections we saw above, this alternative understanding of morality and justice was also available to people in the ancient world. In the *Republic*, for example, when Socrates considers whether "a city, an army, a band of robbers or thieves, or any other tribe with a common unjust purpose would be able to achieve it if they were unjust to each other,"[21] he is essentially considering a macroscopic version of the same view: that our desire to follow the dictates of morality might be grounded in nothing more than the deadly competition between different groups of humans. Moreover, in the *Laws*, Plato even begins to sink this understanding of morality into ever smaller levels of organization. The conversation in question begins with Clinias excoriating "the stupidity of ordinary men, who do not understand that they are all engaged in a never-ending lifelong war against all other states,"[22] and who therefore fail to understand that victory in war is the ultimate goal for the sake of which human groups must be organized. The Athenian then asks whether this same logic applies to the organization of villages against other villages, households against other households, or even the interior life of an individual person. Clinias assents to everything: "not only is everyone an enemy of everyone else in the public sphere, but each man fights a private war against himself."[23] In the context of this conversation, the theory of evolution appears as an extension of this pattern into the emergence of the entire living world. In short, the sense of morality that binds us to each other and to a larger community would be but a macroscopic example of the same logic that binds together the cells of our bodies, based on the principle that larger and more coordinated entities can devour smaller and weaker ones.

To be absolutely clear, my intention here is not to make a scientific argument against a scientific theory. I am interested instead in the understanding of justice to which this theory usually gives rise when it is extended from the science of biology to a discussion of human morality and our felt desire to be good. I refer to the view of morality that results from this extension as the "ontology of war," the idea that our desire to be moral is grounded ultimately in the struggle between different entities to survive and reproduce within the indifferent violence of ambient

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[21] Plato, *Republic*, Trans. G. M. A. Grube, and rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 351c.
[22] Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 625e-626b.
[23] Plato, *Laws*, 626d.

reality. In this context, my critique of naturalism consists in a Socratic examination of the various naturalist attempts to understand concepts like goodness, justice, nobility, and hope within the reality disclosed by this "ontology of war." I argue, in short, that none of these concepts make rational sense within this view of reality. More precisely, I argue that someone who views morality in this way would only be able to understand the *practical* necessity of maintaining a public appearance of goodness, plus perhaps the *practical* necessity of convincing other people to act morally (as Freud puts it, even the tyrant "would have every reason to wish that the others would observe at least one cultural commandment: 'thou shalt not kill'").[24] Ultimately, however, the ontology of war has no room for the Socratic claim that "it's not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life."[25] According to the ontology of war, this claim must sound as it does to Thrasymachus in the *Republic*: like "very high-minded simplicity"[26] that stands in opposition to the "good judgment"[27] of what, in effect, turns out to be rationally pursued injustice. In effect, I argue that the ontology of war *should* produce brutal Machiavellian cynics, people who adopt a façade of goodness as a rational strategy to fulfill their own unbridled appetites, in line with the vision of the good life suggested by Callicles, who argues that "the man who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them,"[28] and that the best life involves securing the power to fulfill these unrestrained appetites as often as possible.

Despite this ontological understanding, however, naturalists who adopt the ontology of war usually insist that it is still possible to maintain a rational belief in concepts like goodness, justice, nobility, and hope. At the level of concrete hope for the future, this insistence usually takes the form of what Arendt describes as the perennial critique put forward by the 'practical' human being. As we saw above, this critique seeks to avoid Socrates' moral thesis in favour of the (political) concern to create conditions and arrangements—a world—in which unjust, morally blameworthy acts do not arise in the first place. To this political emphasis, modern naturalists usually add that the historically unprecedented power of modern science and technology will finally allow us to fulfill this dream, or at least to get closer to it than has ever been possible

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[24] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Penguin Freud Library: Volume 12, Civilization, Society, and Religion*, ed. Albert Dickson (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 194.
[25] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527b.
[26] Plato, *Republic*, 348c.
[27] Plato, *Republic*, 348d.
[28] Plato, *Gorgias*, 491e-492a.

before. We hear Bertrand Russell give voice to this hope in *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*: "It is science, ultimately, that makes our age different, for good or evil, from the ages that have gone before"; or again, "science, whatever harm it may cause by the way, is capable of bringing mankind ultimately into a far happier condition than any that has been known in the past."[29]

In addition to arguing for the continued possibility of goodness by prioritizing this practical political project, most naturalists also defend the possibility of sincere moral commitment by drawing on a significant difference between the two versions of the ontology of war, ancient and scientific. To wit, the ancient version occurs in the context of a discussion concerning morality, concerning "which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us."[30] When the ontology of war is adopted within the context of such a discussion, it immediately produces the hideous ethical and moral consequences that Plato condemns, and that modern critiques often describe with the word "nihilism." The scientific version, by contrast, is presented as an emotionally neutral scientific discovery, in whose light we are then urged to rethink our understanding of morality and ethics. This modern characterization of the ontology of war in terms of a neutral scientific discovery establishes the unique shape of naturalist moral philosophy. In short, modern proponents of the ontology of war will seek to shield their understanding of morality and goodness from the acid of their underlying ontological commitment, which they think has been given by science.

The pattern I have in mind here can be elucidated with reference to the work of biologist E. O. Wilson. In an essay entitled "The Evolution of Ethics," Wilson claims that the theory of evolution entails viewing "[m]orality, or more strictly our belief in morality, [as] merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends," and that "ethics as we know it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate."[31] However, Wilson concludes *The Social Conquest of Earth* with an inspiring call for "a rationalist passion for morality,"[32] which will inspire us all to transform the earth "into a permanent paradise for human beings." I argue

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[29] Bertrand Russell, *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*, 5, quoted in Denton, *The A, B, C of Armageddon: Bertrand Russell on Science, Religion, and the Next War, 1919-1938* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 26.
[30] Plato, *Republic*, 344e.
[31] Ruse and Wilson, "The Evolution of Ethics," quoted in Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 470.
[32] E. O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Liveright Pub., 2012), 293.

that the prior claim that morality is an illusion should disenchant the power of Wilson's subsequent appeal for a "rationalist passion for morality," or indeed, *any* moral appeal at all. However, most naturalist moral philosophers will offer a series of arguments for why it remains possible to disenchant morality *per se* without losing our capacity to be moved by inspiring rhetoric in the direction of this or that moral good. I refer to these arguments as "inverse theodicies," the attempt to rationalize the possibility of goodness within a fundamentally indifferent universe, in contrast to the problem of traditional theodicy, in which we must rationalize the possibility of evil within a reality understood to be fundamentally good.

The reason my project cannot take shape as a straightforward interpretation of Plato lies here, in the difference between this modern ontology of war and its ancient cousin. In short, Plato does not have to deal with the possibility of inverse theodicy, the possibility of an interlocutor who *both* adopts the position of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, or Callicles in the *Gorgias*, and who then *also* insists that it is perfectly rational to maintain a serious commitment to morality, goodness, and justice in spite of this understanding. I suggest that Plato's arguments in favour of the Socratic moral thesis are not sufficient to counter the objections that a modern naturalist will raise against him—and my project therefore takes shape not so much as an interpretation of Plato as the attempt to pursue the same project as Plato, but within a modern naturalist culture. On the one hand, this means that I must provide an *elenchus*, or dialectical refutation, of the various naturalist understandings of the good, the various inverse theodicies that harmonize the naturalist vision of "true nature out there" with some kind of moral commitment. On the other hand, this means that I must argue that the naturalist *insistence* on the real possibility of goodness, despite their implicit acceptance of the ontology of war, is actually their own point of access to the Socratic view of "true nature out there" —not, obviously, as the truth of the so-called "objective" world, but rather as a way of approaching the true ontological reality of goodness that hides beneath our pre-philosophical vision of it.

I will use the term "ontology of mystery" to refer to the Socratic understanding of "true nature out there" that I set in opposition to the "ontology of war." In an essay entitled "Hope and History," Joseph Pieper provides a good initial understanding of what I mean to describe with this phrase. Referring to the work of German psychologist Herbert Plügge, who conducted an empirical study of "the inner situation … of people who have just learned that they are incurably

ill; and also … the inner condition of people who have tried to commit suicide," Pieper argues

for the reality of a hope that transcends the individual hopes and desires towards which we

normally orient ourselves in our everyday lives:

> Plűgge caught sight, as he says, of a quite different hope, different from what he calls the ordinary, common everyday hopes. … Plűgge calls it the fundamental and the genuine hope. Ordinary hopes are directed towards an object that belongs to the world, towards something which we are expecting from somewhere else, towards some news or success or bodily health, whereas the fundamental hope has no object of this kind. You cannot point to it with your finger, and it is rather difficult to describe it. Moreover, the fundamental hope seems to come about only if the ordinary hopes are disappointed. Of course, the hope (singular) also has an object. Plűgge says this object does not belong to those things that man can 'have'; it has to do with what man himself 'is'. The object is self-realization in the future, or personal wholeness.[33]

As Pieper continues his account, he describes how this "fundamental hope" often only emerges

into view when our ordinary, everyday hopes are dashed:

> One main point, however, is that (I am quoting Herbert Plűgge) "the genuine hope comes into existence out of the loss of the ordinary hopes." Disappointment here means to become free from, and to get rid of, an illusion. The illusion which perhaps nobody is able to avoid from the beginning consists in the belief that wholeness of existence implies the attainment of certain material goods, including bodily health. The disappointment of this belief all of a sudden enables us to realize what perhaps we knew 'theoretically'; namely, that not only does the true wholeness of man consist in something else, but also, that we ourselves are in fact hoping for this 'something else' with a much more vital and even with an invincible power of our soul. And yet, disappointment means not only the correction of an error. Plűgge speaks of liberation. The definite experience of incurability, he says, makes possible "a freedom from the captivity of illness, which could not possibly be reached before the breakdown." … Every deep disappointment of a hope which had been directed towards something within this world contains, as it seems, the chance that 'the' hope (singular) might turn without resignation (this is important) to its true object, and that, in an act of liberation, a larger breathing space might become open and enterable. It is precisely in the disappointment, and perhaps only in the disappointment, that we receive the invitation, which we are nevertheless not bound to follow, to enter the larger room of 'the' hope.[34]

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[33] Joseph Pieper, "Hope and History," *What is a Feast?* (Waterloo, Ont.: North Waterloo Academic Press, 1987), 32.
[34] Pieper, "Hope and History," *What is a Feast*, 32-33.

To be clear, Pieper does not intend for us to understand this hope as a mere subjective opinion. It would be better understood as an ontological possibility that occupies exactly the same place in this alternative vision of reality that, in naturalism, is occupied by the ontology of war. In this thesis, therefore, my goal will be to attempt to persuade an audience of naturalists as to the reality of this mysterious ontological hope, to the possibility that their own felt desire to be good is grounded not in an essentially amoral struggle for survival, but rather in a kind of fundamental ontological goodness. Finally, I will try to show why this switch in consciousness, from the ontology of war to the ontology of mystery, is actually an integral part of our common struggle to build a peaceful and prosperous political world—a world in which one group of people no longer inflicts injustice on another, and in which individual people are no longer obliged to choose between the demands of justice and the desire to live.

Outline of the Argument

In chapter one, I examine the rhetoric involved in arguing against the ontology of war and in favour of the ontology of mystery. I argue that any argument in favour of ontological goodness only gains rhetorical power when it is mediated through a tradition of speakers who merited "the victory of an unjust death"[35] (as Boethius puts it in the *The Consolation of Philosophy*). In short, only those who have died nobly, those who have actually suffered wrong instead of committing it, can speak credibly, in their own voice, on behalf of a fundamental hope that can persist even in the face of injustice and death. I then argue that the reason many naturalists have difficulty believing in this hope is not because they have accepted some unprecedented scientific discovery about a meaningless universe, but rather because they have opted for a scientific epistemology that simply rejects the capacity of such a tradition to disclose truth.

In chapter two, I turn my attention to various naturalist understandings of morality. I first examine three naturalist moral theories: Bertrand Russell's "doctrine of the subjectivity of values," Daniel Dennett's attempt to derive a new scientific morality from the goods of life and security, and J. L. Mackie's claim that realizing the truth of the Darwinian picture of morality

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[35] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962), 7.

will help bring about a world of peace and prosperity (essentially, by disenchanting various religious visions of morality that otherwise make it impossible to peacefully negotiate our differences). I argue that, although each of these moral ontologies leads to patently immoral consequences, each one is at the same time based on a profoundly moral motivation. I then argue that there is a dichotomous opposition between this moral motivation and the logic of the ontology of war. However, in the face of this opposition, I argue that naturalists should abandon the ontology of war in favour of their commitment to morality. From here, I set aside the immediate critique that a naturalist might want to level against Socrates' moral thesis—the idea that science simply disproves it—and instead focus on the kind of *moral* critiques that a naturalist might want to level against my argument from chapter one. The most important of these comes from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, where Taylor describes naturalist moral philosophy as motivated by a desire to avoid the "dilemma of mutilation,"[36] a spiritual predicament that arises when our desire to live up to a high moral ideal causes us to repress those aspects of ourselves that do not accord with it, leading to inner division and psychic torment. I grant that naturalists raise an important concern, but I argue that we can honour this concern without committing ourselves spiritually to the ontology of war, which gives rise to a different kind of spiritual dilemma: namely, the problem of nihilism and the subsequent attempts to defend ourselves against nihilism through the aforementioned practice of inverse theodicy.

My exploration of the naturalist desire to avoid this dilemma leads to my argument in chapter three, where I present a curriculum of spiritual practice that enables us to respond to the threat posed by the "dilemma of mutilation," but without thereby adopting the naturalist ontological position. Broadly speaking, my argument in this chapter draws on a view of philosophy opened up by Pierre Hadot, who argues that "philosophy," at its inception in the ancient world, was not so much a theoretical discourse oriented towards forming a systematic account of reality as it was a "form of a way of life, an art of living, and a way of being."[37] In this sense, my argument for the truth of the Socratic moral thesis does not take the shape of an attempt at deductive proof. Instead, I offer an argument that supports the adoption of a particular form of spiritual practice, one that combines a *stabilizing* practice oriented towards selfless moral discipline (through

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[36] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 518.
[37] Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, translated by Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 268.

apprenticeship to traditional understandings of morality) with an *unsettling* practice oriented towards self-reflection (through a critical softening of adherence to those same moral traditions). This form of spiritual practice, I argue, gives rise to a state of being in which the Socratic moral thesis begins to manifest as a clear *existential* truth.

In chapter three, I introduce and explore the logic of this bivalent spiritual practice through the lens of three different vocabularies: 1) Benedictine monk Anselm Gruen's language of the "spirituality from above" and "spirituality from below"; 2) an interpretation of the first and second temptations of Christ; and 3) Origen's suggestion that the three books of Solomon— *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*—describe a spiritual curriculum that begins with morality (*Proverbs*), then engages with the infinite abyss of time and space (*Ecclesiastes*), and eventually leads to an existential encounter with the ontological love of the *Song of Songs*. In this context, I argue that the "dilemma of mutilation" occurs when we adhere to moral traditions without critical self-reflection, or when we engage in the spirituality from above without balancing that engagement with the practice of the spirituality from below. In turn, I also argue that the opposite error, nihilism, occurs when we practice critical self-reflection without prior engagement to any moral tradition.

My description of this spiritual practice then develops into a new critique of naturalism. In short, I argue that the common historical narrative, in which the Copernican revolution shatters the finite cosmos of the ancient world, exposing humanity to an unprecedented sense of the infinite, is actually the same ancient spiritual practice that Origen finds in *Ecclesiastes*. As Hadot puts it, "it was not necessary to wait for Copernicus for the 'walls of the world to fall apart' or for the transition to be made from the closed world to the infinite universe."[38] On this basis, I argue that the common naturalist conclusion, that we live in a fundamentally meaningless universe, should not be seen as a new scientific discovery but rather as the logical result of a flawed spiritual practice, a precocious descent into the abyss of *Ecclesiastes* without the necessary preparation in the stabilizing spirituality of *Proverbs*.

Having laid out this spiritual curriculum in chapter three, I then explore various aspects of it over the course of chapters four and five. In chapter four, I interpret the work of two naturalist

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[38] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 203-204.

philosophers, David Hume and Richard Rorty, through the lens of the above spiritual curriculum. I first interpret Hume's psychological breakdown, which he describes in the conclusion of the first book of his *A Treatise on Human Nature*, as the result of a lopsided spirituality from below (that is, one that is not balanced by a stabilizing spirituality from above). I then argue that Hume's use of distraction, through entertainment and work, can be seen as the generic strategy that members of modern naturalist culture employ in order to avoid a similar lopsided descent. Following this analysis of Hume, I turn to the work of Rorty, and interpret his distinction between liberalism and irony as another version of Gruen's spiritual "path upwards" and "path downwards." However, I proceed to argue that Rorty's naturalism, along with his consequent refusal to allow his practice of irony to dissolve his own commitment to the ontology of war, prevents him from entering the realm of spiritual practice that Origen describes in terms of the *Song of Songs*.

Next, in chapter five, I offer a comparison of the spiritual practices of Plato and Nietzsche, in terms of their teachings about how to deal with one aspect of the experience of the abyss that I do not deal with in chapters three and four: namely, the experience of abyssal pleasure, abyssal joy, as opposed to the more immediate experience of abyssal anxiety and dread. The dangerous allure of pleasure can be seen in the *Republic*, where Plato describes how the practice of dialectic can bring about a state of "lawlessness."[39] This occurs when the realization that we are unable to provide a rational account of our own understanding of justice prompts us to believe that "the fine is no more fine than shameful, and the same with the just, and good, and the things [we] honored most."[40] In this case, our desire for illicit pleasure, which was previously held in check by our pre-philosophical belief in our own culturally conditioned understanding, might be unleashed. Following Hannah Arendt, I refer to this possibility as "nihilism," a danger inherent in the activity of "thinking," insofar as thinking inevitably has "a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics."[41] I argue that Plato recognizes this danger, and so offers a series of spiritual practices designed to offset it. In contrast to this, I argue that Nietzsche falls victim to a very refined version of this problem, developing a craving for his

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[39] Plato, *Republic*, 537e.
[40] Plato, *Republic*, 538d-e.
[41] Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 176.

"joyous science," the experience of abyssal joy that can manifest for those who have the fortitude to endure the storms of unpleasant emotion that usually assault us when we first engage with the practice of spirituality from below. I argue, therefore, that the proper practice of critical self-reflection involves exposing our moral commitments to the acid of self-reflection without giving ourselves over to that dissolution entirely. We must instead remain trained on the reality of a mysterious ontological goodness. Finally, I argue that the naturalist rejection of this ontological possibility means that this nihilistic collapse can only be held in check by avoiding the practice of critical self-reflection—either by avoiding philosophy altogether, or else through the practice of inverse theodicy and the attempt to rationalize the continued possibility of morality despite its being an illusion.

Following this engagement with Plato and Nietzsche, I conclude my argument in chapter six by returning from the perspective of the abyss to the perspective of everyday life, as the attempt to show the relevance of Socrates' moral thesis to the way we live our normal, oftentimes peaceful lives. In short, against Arendt's claim that Socratic morality only gains political relevance "in extreme, that is, in marginal situations,"[42] I argue that Socratic morality is also relevant within non-extreme life, because we can be tempted to act unjustly not only by the threat of pain, but also by the allure of pleasure. In this context, I present an interpretation of the third temptation of Christ as describing the way that someone who agrees with the Socratic moral thesis should engage with the realm of politics: first discovering the ways that our love of the good has been corrupted by our love of pleasure, and then having the existential courage to reject this corruption in the name of a deeper commitment to the mystery of goodness. In this context, I present a spiritual practice of mythic interpretation, which I employ in various stages of my argument, as one way to try to discern how our love of goodness has become corrupt.

The following passage from Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* provides a lens through which to explain this final point:

> [T]he doctrine of Right and Wrong, is perpetually disputed, both by the Pen and the Sword: Whereas the doctrine of Lines, and Figures, is not so; because men care not, in that subject what be truth, as a thing that crosses no mans ambition, profit, or lust. For I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any mans right of dominion, or to the interest of men that have dominion, *That the three Angles*

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[42] Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 156.

of a Triangle should be equall to two Angles of a square; that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of Geometry, suppressed, as farre as he whom it concerned was able.[43]

Basically, our understanding of "justice" will inevitably be of interest to the people "that have dominion." As such, our understanding of "justice" will always be distorted by the "ambition, profit, or lust" of the powerful. In this sense, because religion invariably deals with the question of "Right and Wrong," the truth of religion is likewise distorted by the lust of the powerful, and our approach to religious truth will therefore always have to struggle with these distortions. This means that our pre-philosophical understanding of justice is always *partly* an illusion, and our job as philosophers is to try to see through the illusion to the reality hidden beneath. Finally, I argue that in our modern world, science has now become of interest to the people who have dominion, and so the truth of science is now subject to the same distortions. As such, it makes sense for modern scientific culture to draw on the insights of religious culture, as this older culture has had thousands of years to develop strategies to deal with this problem.

Again, however, I argue that the fundamental insight of religious culture consists in an understanding of the nature of reality that simply makes no sense within the universe disclosed by modern naturalism. To be clear, this religious insight—that it *really is* better to suffer injustice than to inflict it, because it *really is* impossible for an unjust person to be happy—has always been immensely difficult to believe. However, in the modern world, the immediate objections of practical common sense are buttressed by a massive philosophical system that presents itself as *the truth*. As Wilson puts it in *The Social Conquest of Earth*, "[t]here is a real creation story of humanity, and one only, and it is not a myth."[44] Alternatively, as Alex Rosenberg puts it in *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, "I have finally seen how all the pieces fit together to settle the daunting, unavoidable, relentless questions we all have about the nature of things and the nature of us. There is only one way all the pieces of the puzzle fit together."[45] Or, alternatively again, as Dennett puts it in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*,

> [the theory of evolution] is … a stable system of explanation that does not go round and round in circles or spiral off in an infinite regress of mysteries. Some

[43] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 1.11, p. 166.
[44] Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, 10.
[45] Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), xiv.

people would much prefer the infinite regress of mysteries, apparently, but in this day and age the cost is prohibitive: you have to get yourself deceived. You can either deceive yourself or let others do the dirty work, but there is no intellectually defensible way of rebuilding the mighty barriers to comprehension that Darwin smashed.[46]

This, then, is the problem I am trying to address in this thesis: to shake up this naturalist confidence in the truth of their own "stable system of explanation," this "one way all the pieces of the puzzle fit together," in favor of what I have referred to as the "ontology of mystery." I argue that it is possible to orient one's life to the contours of this alternative ontology without uncritically swallowing unnecessary mystification. Indeed, I argue that naturalists are themselves relying on this alternative ontology in their own moral philosophy, even though they themselves would vehemently deny it. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor argues for the necessity of "a very controversial but very important job of articulation," which must be carried out "in the teeth of the people concerned, which can show to what extent the real spiritual basis of their own moral judgements deviates from what is officially admitted."[47] This is the project I attempt to carry forward in this dissertation, and it is to this project which I now turn, with my initial argument for the rationality of traditional authority.

[46] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 25.
[47] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9-10.

Chapter 1

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On the Rhetoric of Suffering

Introduction

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, holocaust survivor Victor Frankl argues that it is possible for human beings to retain their dignity even in a death camp, because we are free to decide our spiritual fate regardless of our external circumstances. In the first section of this chapter, I develop an argument based on the following observation: that Frankl makes a much more persuasive speaker of such a moral/ontological claim than would, for example, a privileged speaker from a relatively peaceful milieu. Because of this, it would be *rational* for the privileged speaker to cite Frankl's authority when trying to make persuasive arguments for this kind of position. I argue that this is a rational justification for the appeal to traditional authority. In sections two and three, I apply this same logic to the case of Socrates, and in section four I apply it to the case of Jesus: in short, Socrates only becomes an effective speaker of the claim that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it by proving that he really means what he says—by suffering an unjust death rather than fleeing unjustly—and Jesus only comes to function as an effective speaker of the claim that we should turn the other cheek after he publically forgives his torturers even as they crucify him. In section five, I introduce the term "spiritual religion" to refer to those aspects of a traditional culture that are oriented towards convincing us of the truth of this broad family of moral positions. In section six, I make a distinction between two ontological possibilities, the ontology of mystery and the ontology of war, and I argue that the purpose of "spiritual religion" is to convince people to opt for the ontology of mystery over the ontology of war. Finally, in sections seven and eight, I discuss some of the difficulties involved in making this kind of argument to the specific audience I have in mind: the members of modern naturalist culture, who often think that the ontology of war has been proven true by modern science, and in particular by Darwin's theory of evolution. I argue that the ontology of war has

come to appear true not on account of scientific discovery, but rather on account of scientific epistemology. Basically, if the only way to argue persuasively for the Socratic morality is by making reference to the authority of a tradition, then a culture that rejects the capacity of tradition to disclose truth will have a difficult time believing claims that are, frankly, already extremely difficult to believe: that we are responsible for the type of person we become, regardless of contingency and fate, and that the only way to be happy is to opt for goodness, regardless of what it might cost us to do so.

1. The Rhetorical Power of Suffering and the Rationality of Traditional Authority

Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* almost immediately following the end of the Second World War. In this book, he makes a remarkable claim based on his experiences as a prisoner in the Nazi death camps:

> Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him, mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.[1]

To be clear, Frankl is not asserting that *he*, one particular individual, was able to retain his dignity despite his awful tribulations. He is instead making a universal declaration: *all* people, at *all* times, in *all* cultures, no matter how horrible their life circumstances, are *free* to decide the type of person they will become—that is, whether they become the type of people who "walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread,"[2] or whether they become "the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate."[3] What Frankl is describing here is a kind of ontological freedom,

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[1] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984); 86-7.
[2] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 86.
[3] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 87.

a freedom that can persist even if all our political freedoms have been taken away, even if we are enslaved in a brutal prison system specifically designed to murder us, either immediately in gas chambers or else by forcing us to work until we die. Frankl calls this "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."[4]

Let us temporarily set aside the usual gamut of philosophical inquiries that such claims might provoke: Are human beings really free in the way that Frankl insists? What must reality be like such that this can be true? What must "truth" be like, such that one could meaningfully apply it to this kind of claim? If all people are indeed capable of maintaining their freedom and dignity even in a death camp, what would prompt someone to freely renounce these things? And, for that matter, what could it even mean to speak of freely renouncing one's freedom? We will deal with such questions as they emerge over the course of these investigations. For the moment, let us explore the logic of what should be a far less controversial point: the fact that only someone like Frankl, who actually lived nobly through the hell of the extermination camps, functions as a persuasive speaker of this tremendous ontological assertion.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes that the first and "the most effective means of persuasion [a speaker] possesses"[5] is the personal character of the speaker: "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided."[6] The claim that all humans are able to maintain their dignity no matter how awful their external circumstances would seem to fit these qualifications perfectly: exact certainty is probably impossible, and opinion is certainly divided. There is, however, no need to rely on the authority of Aristotle to vouch for the truth of this observation. Just consider how a dubious audience would be likely to react if, instead of someone like Frankl, a white, middle-class male from Canada, a man from a privileged background who has never *really* suffered—were, *in his own voice*, to make this same kind of sweeping declaration. When spoken by someone like Frankl, an audience might at least pause to consider the claim, whether it is true, and what it might mean to their own individual lives.

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[4] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 87.
[5] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1325-1455; 1356a10.
[6] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a5.

However, when spoken by a speaker who has never proven his or her virtue in the crucible of extreme suffering, this same audience would be much less likely to engage in such contemplation. Indeed, if people even bothered to pay attention at all, it is more likely that they would be moved to reflect on the temerity of such a person to speak about a topic he could not possibly understand—or even be moved to anger, at his insensitivity to the injustices being suffered by real people, at his holier-than-thou attitude, at his vacuous moral pride, or at his oblivious optimism in the face of real political horror.

Then again, if Frankl's claim is true, it is true regardless of whoever happens to be speaking it. As Socrates wryly observes in the *Phaedrus*, we should "listen to an oak or even a stone, so long as it [is] telling the truth."[7] However, the claim obviously has more credibility, and is more likely to prompt actual reflection, if it is spoken by a holocaust survivor like Frankl than it would be if, to propose an even more absurd example, the teenage son of a millionaire were to declare such things to the impoverished residents of a slum.[8] That being said, because Frankl has lived, has suffered, and has written about his experiences, it is no longer necessary for relatively privileged speakers to make such claims in their own voices. Instead, such speakers are able to cite the words of people like Frankl, so as to provide a kind of proxy credibility for the position they are attempting to defend—as though to say, "Do not take my word for it, but rather heed the words of this person, whom both of us can acknowledge *might* have better knowledge of the issue than we do." Aristotle calls this one of the "'non-technical' means of persuasion,"[9] an appeal to ancient martyrs, ancient witnesses "whose judgements are known to all."[10] I will henceforth use the terms "ancient martyr" or "ancient witness" as interchangeable technical terms to refer to commonly accessible cultural figures like Frankl—people who, during their lives, suffered and sacrificed in the light of a vision of the truth, and whose words and examples can therefore be

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[7] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). 275b.
[8] Frankl's autobiography, *Recollections: an Autobiography*, contains another good example of this logic: "In 1946 I lectured … against collective guilt in the presence of the commanding general of the French forces. The next day a university professor came to see me, himself a former SS officer, with tears in his eyes. He asked how I could find the courage to take an open stand against collective guilt. "*You* can't do it," I told him. "You would be speaking out of self-interest. But *I* am the former inmate number 119104, and I *can* do it. Therefore I *must*. People will listen to me, and so it is my obligation to speak against it." (*Recollection: an Autobiography*, trans. Joseph Farbry and Judith Fabry, New York: Insight Books, 1997; 103). This example also shows the rhetorical difficulty involved in making moral arguments concerning issues in which we have a personal vested interest.
[9] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1375a22.
[10] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1375b27.

cited now, by living speakers, to lend persuasive credibility to the moral or ontological claims that the "ancient martyr" upheld. In a sense, the appeal to an ancient martyr would be akin to the appeal to expert opinion, the recognition that the informed thoughts of another person might be closer to the truth than our own native ideas.

These observations function as an argument for the *rationality* of the appeal to traditional authority in moral argumentation. It would, in short, be *rational* for people who agree with Frankl to refer to the words and authority of people like him, either to inspire themselves, in the face of some moral dilemma, to act like "those who walked through the huts comforting others," or else to inspire others in a similar way. Therefore, *if reality is indeed as Frankl insists it to be*, then the truth of reality could be most persuasively spoken through the mediation of the words and examples of a tradition of such authorities, people who suffered nobly and so became rhetorically capable of responding to the critique that almost invariably greets this kind of claim when it is spoken by living individuals in their own voice: that the speaker's belief in such absurdities is contingent upon the relative peace and luxury within which the speaker lives, contingent upon the fact that the speaker has been sheltered from the brutal reality of violence.[11]

To summarize, I began with a simple observation—that only people who have publically proven their virtue through noble suffering can function as effective speakers of the claim that human beings are fundamentally free no matter how terrible their external circumstances. From this observation, I derived a simple conclusion: that it would therefore be rational for speakers who have not publically suffered to cite the words and examples of authorities who have, especially when trying to convince dubious interlocutors of the above moral ontology. However, the fact that we now live in a culture in which such witnesses exist allows us to contemplate the opposite possibility: it is obviously not necessary that a culture possess authorities like Frankl. His words

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[11] In *On the Meaning of Life*, John Cottingham makes a similar point from the opposite perspective. Cottingham begins by describing how the "paradox of the religious outlook" lies in the fact that suffering, which we normally strive as hard as we can to avoid, "can none the less, in an extraordinary way that defies analysis, function when it does come as the key to a deepening of our nature." However, Cottingham then immediately adds that "comfortable academic theologians who [argue for] this, coughing dryly into their papery hands, are horrible in their cold glibness" (*On the Meaning of Life*, London: Routledge, 2003; 75). For Cottingham, in other words, even though "there is … a profound truth grasped in those religions … that put suffering at the very center of their account of the human condition and the possibility of its redemption," there is also something horrible, even insulting, in the prospect of a *comfortable* academic earnestly arguing for this point. By my argument, the appeal to a tradition of "ancient martyrs" helps build a rhetorical bridge across this difficulty, which inevitably arises when "comfortable academic theologians" try to argue persuasively for the "religious outlook."

are the result of contingent historical tragedy—and, while lamenting the conditions that enabled Frankl to speak persuasively, we can note that in a culture without this kind of ancient witness, it would be much more difficult for people to be persuaded of the position that Frankl insists is universally true.

Again, at the risk of pleonasm, if the claim is true it is true, regardless of whether common cultural authorities exist who can be called upon to vouch for it. However, if someone came to believe such a position in a culture without the requisite authorities, it would be much more difficult to persuade others of its truth—as nobody would be able to persuasively reply to the criticism that the speaker did not really know what he or she was talking about. This, I will now argue, was the situation in ancient Greece prior to the martyrdom of Socrates—not that there were no cultural authorities who could be cited in moral argumentation, but rather that there were no moral authorities who could be called upon to support the tremendous moral position that Socrates consistently argued for. As such, Socrates was obliged to argue in his own voice, from the goodness of his own character, and was ultimately obliged to accept an unjust death in order to publicly prove that his moral character was sufficient to his moral claims.[12]

2. The Rhetoric of the Socratic Moral Thesis

The moral position Socrates upholds is actually far more extreme than Frankl's, perhaps the most extreme position one can possibly take with regard to human morality. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that "doing what's unjust [is] worse than suffering it, and not paying what is due worse than paying it,"[13] and that this is true not only because it is morally wrong to inflict injustice, but also because it is ontologically impossible for an unjust person to be happy. I will henceforth

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[12] As I mentioned in chapter one (footnote 3), my concern here is not with the historical Socrates, but rather with the way Socrates is depicted in Plato's dialogues, and (in light of the above argument) the way that this literary character can then come to function as an ancient martyr for a cultural community. Similarly, when I turn my attention to Jesus later in this chapter, my concern will not be with what the historical Jesus actually believed, but rather with the way that the character "Jesus," who is mediated to us by the gospels, comes to function as an ancient martyr for the community that orients itself in light of his life and work. In chapter six, I will show how hermeneutics can be a useful spiritual practice for those who have already recognized that something important is being mediated to us via the texts in which these characters appear. For the moment, however, the goal of my argument is much more fundamental: to show that, *if* reality is indeed as Frankl, Socrates, (and Jesus) suggest, then it is very useful to have a tradition of such texts in one's culture.

[13] Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 474b.

refer to this as the "Socratic moral thesis."[14] Socrates insists that everyone already agrees with this position even if they do not know it yet, because people believe in justice and no one "can say anything else without being ridiculous."[15] More precisely, Socrates claims that this extreme understanding of justice is the *only* understanding that can stand up to rational analysis, that "what philosophy says always stays the same"[16] even if the multitude of competing opinions fluctuate according to the fickle tides of politics, culture, and emotion. The unscrupulous Polus counters that it is Socrates who is making ridiculous claims, and that everybody in fact believes the opposite: that it is better to inflict injustice on others than to suffer it oneself. Polus then describes what would follow if Socrates were correct:

> Take a man who's caught doing something unjust, say, plotting to set himself up as tyrant. Suppose that he's caught, put on the rack, castrated, and has his eyes burnt out. Suppose that he's subjected to a host of other abuses of all sorts, and then made to witness his wife and children undergo the same. In the end he's impaled or tarred. Will he be happier than if he hadn't got caught, had set himself up as tyrant, and lived out his life ruling in his city and doing whatever he liked, a person envied and counted happy by fellow citizens and aliens alike?[17]

Even in the face of this extreme consequence, Socrates stands his ground: although the would-be tyrant who is tortured to death and the successful tyrant who rules his city are both miserable—because both act unjustly— "the one who avoids getting caught and becomes tyrant is the more miserable one."[18]

The traditional distinction between appearance and reality is useful to making sense of what Socrates is saying here. Essentially, Socrates is saying that people being tortured to death are, in

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[14] In the most common interpretation of the *Gorgias*, Socrates is taken as actually believing this moral claim, and the dialogue is understood as an attempt to defend this thesis against powerful counter-arguments. Charles Kahn, for example, argues that the dialogue shows "the basic principles of Socratic morality" being defended "against attack from spokesmen for its most drastic alternative" (Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 127). Similarly, Terence Irwin argues that Socrates is trying to compel "even a highly critical interlocutor to accept the Socratic belief" (Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 95). İlham Dilman, meanwhile, argues that Socrates' goal is "converting his interlocutors to his own moral convictions" (Dilman, *Morality and the Inner Life*, 170). Against this common interpretation, Devin Stauffer argues that Socrates' real aim in taking this apparently absurd moral position is to convince the great rhetorician Gorgias to use his powers of persuasion on the *hoi polloi* of Athens, to present the philosophical life as "an object of admiration and respect rather than contempt and hostility" (Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's* Gorgias, p. 179). By this reading, the Socratic moral thesis would be an aspect of the political rhetoric of philosophy, rather than a position to which a philosopher would actually agree. My own interpretation follows the common line.
[15] Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a.
[16] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482b.
[17] Plato, *Gorgias*, 473c-d
[18] Plato, *Gorgias*, 473e.

reality, less miserable than their torturers, even if the phenomenal appearances would suggest otherwise. I will henceforth use the word "ontological" to refer to the reality that presumably hides beneath phenomenal appearances—to the fact that, even though the evidence of the senses would seem to refute the Socratic thesis as absurd, at the hidden level of reality itself, the level that rigorous dialectical conversation would sometimes be able to reveal, this thesis manifests as the only possible truth. As Socrates puts it at the end of the dialogue, in admittedly far less exacting terms, "Let someone despise you as a fool and throw dirt on you, if he likes. And, yes, by Zeus, confidently let him deal you that demeaning blow. Nothing terrible will happen to you if you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence."[19] If this is true, then being good and being happy would be the same, even to the extent that a good person in the process of being tortured to death would be *ontologically* less miserable than the person doing the torturing. Alternatively, this also means that pain is not the same as misery, and that pleasure is not the same as happiness—such that, *ad absurdum*, someone could be ontologically happy even while feeling the hideous pain involved in being tortured. Of course, it is possible that *being* good and happy in this ontological sense would not be possible for mortal human beings, but that it is still possible for mortal humans to *become good*—and, as Socrates makes very clear, the only way to *become good* is by being punished for one's injustice: "the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one's due, by being disciplined,"[20] because "both here and in Hades … there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice" except "by way of pain and suffering."[21] If this is true, then would-be tyrants who are captured and tortured to death would be ontologically less miserable than successful tyrants, because the dying usurper would be in a better existential position to incur the pain that their unjust souls warranted.

Polus responds to all this with scornful laughter. He accuses Socrates of "saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain."[22] Considered in light of Aristotle's point on the persuasive power of a person's moral character, there is truth to Polus' critique: without cultural authorities to appeal to, Socrates is forced to argue in his own voice, from the strength of his own character, and no matter how good he shows himself to be, no living human can ever credibly claim to have a moral character so excellent as to prefer being tortured to death than to continue

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[19] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527d.
[20] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527c.
[21] Plato, *Gorgias*, 525c.
[22] Plato, *Gorgias*, 473e.

to live unjustly. As such, when making claims to listeners who do not already agree with him, nothing Socrates says can be convincing: he appears to be either a naïve fool, or a hypocrite, or a skilled debater who enjoys embarrassing otherwise respectable people in public. If, however, Socrates is indeed "dead earnest about this,"[23] as his friend Chaerephon insists him to be, then Socrates would be in the unenviable position of thinking he knows what people need to do in order to be happy but, like the tragic prophetess Cassandra, being constitutionally unable to persuade those who most need his help. This, in turn, is why Socrates must ultimately accept an unjust death rather than flee unjustly: this final act proves the strength of his character, which retroactively serves to support the plausibility of his claims. Then, when Plato subsequently transforms Socrates into a cultural authority, an ancient witness to whom other people can appeal in their own thinking on such issues, Plato's witness to the witness of Socrates helps give rise to a culture in which it would be easier to argue for and believe the position that Socrates lived and died to uphold.[24]

3. Science and the Rhetoric of Morality

The difference between the kind of claim Socrates is making and the kind of claim one makes in science can be clarified with reference to Galileo's famous conflict with the Catholic church. As the story goes, when the church threatened to torture Galileo unless he renounced his belief that the earth revolves around the sun, Galileo recanted. However, since anyone who actually observes the Solar System will inevitably come to the same conclusion, Galileo's death would have made no difference to the strength of his *scientific* argument. In short, the nobility of Galileo's moral character in the face of unjust suffering is irrelevant to the credibility of the

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[23] Plato, *Gorgias*, 481b.

[24] In *The Examined Life*, Robert Nozick notes that "[i]t is difficult to grasp precisely what another's conclusions about life come to, without seeing what that person is like who fits these conclusions and reaches them." This, he says, is why Plato presents "the *figure* of Socrates in the early dialogues" (Nozick, *The Examined Life*, 16). For Nozick, meanwhile, Socrates' life exemplifies the claim, from the *Apology*, that we should not care about money, or reputation, or prestige, but only about the improvement of our souls (Nozick, 19). Devin Stauffer also recognizes that the enduring appeal of Plato's philosophy is based on the fact that Plato provides "an answer to the question of the best life, conveyed by a moving portrait of a noble figure who lived that life" (Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's* Gorgias, 2). Indeed, Stauffer even confesses that he was first "drawn to Plato by an enchantment with his vision of the philosophical life as it was lived by Socrates." For Stauffer, however, Socrates' life embodies a different ideal than the ideal of Nozick: Stauffer's Socrates exemplifies a life devoted primarily to the free questioning of everything, as opposed to Nozick's Socrates, who exemplifies a life devoted to the improvement of a soul.

scientific position he is arguing for. Indeed, if his nobility does have any relevance, it would only be insofar as the members of the scientific community that orients itself around his "ancient martyrdom" can refer to this story in order to inspire themselves to stand firm for the truth and goodness of science in the face of superstition and oppression.

Socrates, by contrast, is not proposing a new scientific theory about the shape of the physical universe. He is making a claim concerning "which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us."[25] Moreover, in opposition to the common vision of Socrates as one whose only knowledge is that he does not know, Socrates repeatedly makes very strong claims concerning this issue: as he puts in in the *Gorgias*, "no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of."[26] To put it in terms of another commonly cited Socratic maxim—if indeed "the unexamined life is not worth living,"[27] this would be because the unexamined life has a tendency to become enraptured by the evidence of the external senses, and thereby fall victim to the kinds of "refutation" that Polus tries to muster against Socrates' moral thesis. Against this, Socrates is effectively claiming that, in the same way as anyone who looks at the solar system will eventually come to agree with Galileo, so too will anyone who looks inward, through the practice of philosophical dialectic, eventually come to agree with Socrates. The pivotal difference between philosophy and science would be that self-examination for anyone who is not *already* good (meaning, essentially, all mortal human beings) will necessarily involve pain, as the unjust parts of ourselves are burnt away. Scientific observation, by contrast, would ideally be able to progress in a more objective, more emotionally neutral manner.

Mortal humans, obviously, have a natural tendency to run from pain. This is why the examples of ancient martyrs like Socrates and Frankl would be rhetorically useful when arguing for the kinds of claim they make: by the terms of this vision of reality, the deeper and more fundamental part of us, the part that loves goodness and despises injustice, must be awakened and inspired to overcome the part of us that hates pain and craves pleasure. In short, we require inspiration, courage, and *faith* in the reality of this hidden ontological goodness in order to have the strength to push through the experience of pain that, according to Socrates, *becoming good* necessarily

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[25] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, and rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*; 344e.
[26] Plato, *Gorgias*, 522e
[27] Plato, *Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*; 38a.

entails. Indeed, it might even be possible to think of concepts like "soul" and "body," which tend to be understood as descriptions of distinct ontological realities, as originating in a rhetorically useful shorthand for describing the conflict between these two standards of value, the soul's love of goodness in opposition to the body's love of pleasure. In the rhetorical sense of these terms, meanwhile, someone who does not believe that they have a good "soul" would perhaps have more difficulty finding the motivation to press through the pain entailed in the process of becoming good. Such people, in turn, might have a tendency to view Frankl's claim, that "human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death,"[28] as in reality nothing more than inspirational gobbledygook—an unfortunate result indeed, if these words happens to be true.

To be clear, Socrates is basically arguing that we should become the kind of person who is willing to stand firm for the sake of goodness, even unto death. Unlike Galileo's scientific truth claims, however, this moral truth claim does not aspire to intellectual acceptance by the mathematically inclined rational intellect. The job of Socrates' truth claim does not end when one assents to it. On the contrary, accepting such a claim would be just the first step of the journey, a necessary preliminary step to the real work of *becoming* a good person, the kind of person who actually feels reality like this, a person for whom the barrier between phenomenal and ontological has become porous. To engage in such difficult work, however, one has to be *moved*, inspired by love of the good to press through the pain that becoming good entails; and to be moved by the speech of another person, you have to trust that this person actually means what he or she is saying. Because of this, if Socrates, the person who makes these tremendous statements, subsequently runs from death—or even *appears* to be running from death—he will appear to be a hypocrite, someone who does not really believe his own words, and his argument will be tarnished in direct proportion to the strength with which he previously upheld it. Polus' scoffing critique, meanwhile, would be vindicated:

> POLUS: … So you'd take suffering what's unjust over doing it, would you?
> SOCRATES: Yes, and so would you and everyone else.
> POLUS: Far from it! I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would, either.[29]

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[28] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 104.
[29] Plato, *Gorgias*, 474c.

By accepting death—or, as Boethius puts it beautifully in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, by "meriting the victory of an unjust death"[30] —Socrates proves that he would indeed take suffering what's unjust over doing it, and Polus' rebuttal transforms into a description of Polus rather than a description of reality in general: even if Polus is so deluded as to prefer doing injustice to suffering it, Socrates is not. This single counter-example, meanwhile, also refutes the claim that nobody would act in this way, thereby forcing Polus to contemplate the possibility that, while reality might appear a certain way to him, the fact that Socrates diametrically opposes this view is not just a clever façade designed to trick others and defeat them in verbal combat. In this sense, therefore, Socrates' noble death helps establish the trustworthiness of his character, which in turn would hopefully inspire people like Polus to at least pause to think about whether there might be some truth to the position he consistently argues for.

4. The Rhetoric of Suffering and the Crucifixion of Jesus

So far, we have derived the rhetorical necessity of Socrates' death from an obvious problem in moral rhetoric: the fact that only those who have suffered nobly can plausibly argue that humans can retain their dignity no matter how dire their external circumstances. Again, it would be rational for us to give more weight to the moral arguments of a virtuous person like Frankl over those of a tyrant like Joseph Stalin—even if they made the exact same claims in the exact same words—because we could trust that Frankl actually cared about our wellbeing, while we would have good reason to suspect that Stalin was simply trying to trick us into obediently following one of his murderous schemes.[31] From this thoroughly obvious point, we saw why it would be rational for those who believed Frankl, yet lacked the experiences necessary to prove their own virtue, to make arguments with reference to cultural authorities, ancient martyrs whose noble

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[30] Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962), 7.

[31] In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche makes the same observation, but with the opposite intention: "*For the 'truth'! —* 'For the truth of Christianity there spoke the virtuous behavior of the Christians, their fortitude in suffering, the firmness of their faith, and above all the way in which Christianity spread and increased in spite of all the difficulties in its path' —this is what you say even today! How pitiable! You must learn that all this argues neither for nor against the truth, that a proof of truth is not the same thing as a proof of truthfulness and that the latter is in no way an argument for the former!" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §73, p. 44). Over the course of the first five chapters of this thesis, I will engage slowly with Nietzsche's critique of the position I am arguing for. For the moment, let it suffice to point out that, when it comes to moral argumentation, "proof of truthfulness" is *also* necessary. Indeed, as the example of Stalin indicates, a potentially true position can even become *untrue* if it is spoken by an untrustworthy speaker.

suffering vouched for their claims. We then saw why, for the even more extreme moral position that Socrates upholds, it is actually impossible for living speakers to persuasively argue in their own words, because nobody who is not already dead can prove their character so excellent as to prefer death to an unjust life. This means that if Socrates' claim is true, it would only be possible to plausibly make the case for it in cultures that had developed a tradition of cultural authorities who themselves had merited "the victory of an unjust death."

We might note, however, that even in death, Socrates does not function as a perfect speaker for his claim. Socrates may have died unjustly, but he still was not tortured to death—which means that there remains an extreme of suffering to which even Socrates' ancient witness cannot speak, and which can still be cited as evidence that Socrates does not really know what he is talking about. This problem is perhaps easier to see in the example of Frankl, whose 'ancient martyrdom' suffers from the same defect as that of Socrates. Consider, for example, the way Frankl's witness appears in light of the witness of another holocaust survivor, Primo Levi:

> [W]e, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. … we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.[32]

According to this understanding, those who survive and are therefore capable of speaking about their experiences are not "complete witnesses": the fact that they are alive and still capable of speech proves that they did not meet the Gorgon, and this undercuts the rhetorical power of their noble-sounding rhetoric. Applied to Frankl, the claim would be that Frankl's stubborn belief in the universal possibility of freedom and dignity is still contingent upon the fact that Frankl himself did not experience the full horror of death in the gas chambers. Indeed, Levi's point pushes the logic of martyrdom into the realm of paradox—because the one who has gone all the way, the so-called "complete witness" whose words would have "general significance," is actually not a witness at all, as this person only gains the right to speak authoritatively by losing

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[32] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988), 63-4.

the power to speak, by passing into death, that "undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns," that final black hole of experience beyond which no information can return.[33]

That being said, even if Levi's criticism undercuts the rhetorical power of the ancient witness of Frankl and Socrates, it could be argued that the ancient witness of Jesus has the power to respond even in the face of this ultimate criticism. Jesus, in other words, would function as a speaker who *did* go all the way to the bottom, who did see the Gorgon—and who maintained his spiritual freedom and dignity even as he was being crucified.[34] Indeed, just as Socrates represents a more extreme witness than Frankl, so would Jesus represent a more extreme witness than Socrates—as a person who publically forgives his torturers even as they are in the process of torturing him to death: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."[35] In fact, we might see this as the most extreme possible articulation of the logic we have been examining, the most compassionate words accompanied by a death so gruesome that nobody could reasonably complain that Jesus does not fully understand what it means when he says that we should turn the other cheek to those who strike us.[36] Because of this, in death, Jesus becomes the best possible ancient witness for the same essential claim that Socrates lived and died to render plausible.[37] What this means, finally, is that those denizens of the ancient world who had already

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[33] One might criticize Levi here for committing the error for which Socrates criticizes his judges in the *Apology*: "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know."[33] By the terms of this criticism, Levi is presumptuously claiming to *know* what lies on the other side of a boundary beyond which no living human being can speak.

[34] See Corinthians 15:14 for an interpretation of Jesus as a spokesman for what occurs beyond the boundary of death.

[35] Luke 23:34 NRSV.

[36] The rhetorical difficulty involved in this kind of claim can be seen in Miroslav Volf's autobiographical preface to *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). When Volf argued, in a seminar, that Christians should be able to "embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ," theologian Jűrgen Moltmann stood up and asked whether Volf could embrace a *četnik*, one of the Serbian fighters who, at that very moment, were "herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities" in Volf's native country of Croatia in the winter of 1993. Volf relates that, although it took him a while to formulate his answer, he knew immediately what he wanted to say: "No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to." Volf goes on to describe his book as "the product of the struggle between the truth of [his] argument and the force of Moltmann's objection," a struggle that Volf describes in terms of two apparently incompatible positions that must yet coexist: "How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offered to the perpetrators?" Volf describes himself as "caught between two betrayals—the betrayal of the suffering, exploited, and excluded, and the betrayal of the very core of my faith" (9).

[37] Emile Fackenheim disputes the claim that the witness of Jesus can respond even to the horror of Auschwitz: "A good Christian suggests that perhaps Auschwitz was a divine reminder of the sufferings of Christ. Should he not ask instead whether his Master himself, had He been present at Auschwitz, could have resisted degradation and dehumanization? What are the sufferings of the Cross compared to those of a mother whose child is slaughtered to the sound of laughter or the strains of a Viennese waltz? This question may sound sacrilegious to Christian ears. Yet we dare not shirk it, for we—Christian as well as Jew—must ask: at Auschwitz, did the grave win the victory after all, or, worse than the grave, did the devil himself win?" (Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 75). In response,

come under the sway of the Platonic philosophical tradition would have been perfectly *rational* to begin making reference to the story of Jesus once this story became a cultural possibility.[38] In fact, Socrates himself suggests such a course of action at the end of the *Gorgias*, when he concludes his mythic account of judgment after death with the following pragmatic suggestion: "Maybe you think this account is told as an old wives' tale, and you feel contempt for it. And it certainly wouldn't be a surprising thing to feel contempt for it if we could look for and somehow find one better and truer than it."[39] In Plato's dialogue, the reference to a "better and truer" story is probably referring to the transition from a mythic account to the story of Socrates, a man whose real words and real death give concrete form to the reality towards which the mythic story of a judgment after death hearkens. Extending this same logic, the words and death of Jesus would be a "better and truer" story than those of Socrates, and Christianity would indeed be a "Platonism for 'the people,'"[40] as Nietzsche once disparaged it—a religion that adopted the same Socratic moral thesis as Plato, but that did so through the medium of an "ancient martyr" whose rhetorical power may be taken to surpass that of Socrates, an ancient martyr who publically descends further into those abyssal realms of experience, to do public battle with the unspeakable horror that Levi describes with reference to the monstrous Gorgon.[41]

To describe this logic in terms of Christian theology, for those who believe Socrates, his death would be seen as giving rise to a cultural situation in which the truth and the capacity to speak

we might suggest that Fackenheim is taking issue not so much with the credibility of Jesus' witness, but rather with the fact that some "good Christian" —who was likely never a prisoner—had the temerity to propose such an interpretation. Indeed, when theorizing about such extremes, it is possible that even the appeal to authority must be mediated by yet other authorities, as a series of scholars and philosophers construct a web of rhetoric around the trauma of a religious position that only the crucified Jesus would ever be capable of articulating in his own words.

[38] These arguments have interesting ramifications concerning what we mean by the term "faith." Joseph Pieper argues that the "decisive element in the act of faith is not *what* is believed but the *someone* on the basis of whose witness one accepts as valid something one cannot, for oneself, verify as true" (Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*, 58). Drew Hyland, by contrast, argues that the act of faith involves something far more profound than mere trust: "As Kierkegaard understood so well, there is in faith a much larger "leap" beyond what experience warrants than occurs in trust. Trust, as we often say, is earned; someone may or may not be trust-*worthy*. We trust someone or something, therefore, when our experience tells us that the person or thing can be depended upon. Trust, unlike faith, is not blind." (Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, 185). Controversially perhaps, my own argument would suggest that, at least in Christianity, trust and faith are identical: we *trust* that Jesus meant what he said because he demonstrated his trustworthiness by showing compassion for his tormentors as he was being crucified. The "much larger leap beyond what experience warrants" that Kierkegaard is talking about would refer to the size of the claim for the sake of which Jesus (and Socrates) lived and died, in contradistinction to the normal stance of common-sense pragmatic rationality that prompts the objections of someone like Polus.

[39] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527a.

[40] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 32.

[41] For a similar "religious" interpretation of Plato, see Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*,18-20, 39-40, 59-62; Dilman, *Morality and the Inner Life*, chapters 9-10.

the truth, Being and *Logos*, came closer together—since, by referring to the martyrdom of Socrates, it would be easier to believe in the truth of a position that would otherwise appear almost entirely implausible. This would be even more the case after the death of Jesus—which means that once this new story emerged into ancient culture, it would have made sense for those who already accepted the authority of Socrates to think of the crucifixion of Jesus as the historical moment when Being and *Logos* came into accord, when the cultural community that oriented itself around the ancient witness of Jesus gained an even more powerful rhetorical lens through which to articulate the hidden ontological truth. Extending the same logic slightly further, if we consider God's proclamations in Genesis that the world is good as an attempt to persuade humanity that, despite the clear realities of suffering and death, *the world is indeed fundamentally good*, the same rhetorical difficulty arises: for the same reason that a millionaire will be unable to persuade the residents of a slum that life is wonderful, God will not function as an effective speaker of this deep affirmation until God has suffered more than all of God's potential listeners. The crucifixion of Jesus, therefore, can be seen as a response to this problem: only by suffering the full horror of mortal life does God gain the rhetorical credibility necessary to affirm the fundamental goodness of reality to all humans.[42]

Finally, lest these arguments be misunderstood as a morally questionable, prideful, and intolerant attempt to assert the superiority of Christianity or of Western philosophy over all other religions, cultures, and ways of life, let me close these opening arguments by introducing the words through which this entire line of reflection began to manifest for me. On the seventh day of a Buddhist meditation retreat, S. N. Goenka speaks the following words concerning the death of Jesus:

> Whether someone is really saintly or not, the yardstick is, at the time of death what kind of mind this person is carrying? And what kind of mind was he carrying? He was tortured to death, crucified! Being tortured, he has not a trace of anger or aversion or hatred towards those people who are torturing him. Only love. Only compassion. They don't know what they are doing. Ignorant people, may

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[42] This would be one way to make sense of the theological claim that Jesus is both fully God and fully human: only because Jesus is God (the son) does he function to close the rhetorical circle opened up by God (the father) at the start of *Genesis*; and only because Jesus is human does his death serve as a response to the criticism implied by Levi.

> they not be punished for their bad deeds. They are so ignorant. Only love, only
> compassion—a real saintly person![43]

If the words of S. N. Goenka can be taken as at least partially authoritative for the Buddhist tradition, we would seem justified in claiming that Platonism, Christianity, and Buddhism—or perhaps more aptly put, Socrates, Jesus, and Siddhartha—all independently arrived at the same tremendously counter-intuitive moral position. The followers of these people, who would perhaps have grounds to call themselves "Platonists," "Christians," and "Buddhists," would therefore consist of people who had committed themselves to a spiritual path, the attempt to become good, to become the kind of people who actually feel reality as these people felt it.[44] Speaking very generally, meanwhile, the differences between these traditions might be described in terms of different practices through which this transformation is promoted: thus, if Socrates, Platonism, and the logic of Christianity in general, has focused on producing a language through which the truth can be persuasively spoken to anyone, Buddhism would seek the same realization through the practice of silent meditation.

5. The Rhetoric of Religion and the Culture of Modern Naturalism

In order to articulate this commonality between the teachings of Socrates, Jesus, and the Buddha more clearly, it will be useful to cut the word "religion" into smaller and more precisely defined concepts. Thus, I will use the term "spiritual religion" to refer to those aspects of religious traditions that seek to persuade people as to the truth of the family of moral and ontological positions that we have been examining so far: that we are free to decide our spiritual fate no matter how awful our external circumstances (Frankl); that with this freedom, we would be wise

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[43] S. N. Goenka, *Dhamma Discourses*, Day 7, 24:00-25:00; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWVIOBMLfrA ; my transcription.

[44] John Cottingham notes that Buddhism, like Christianity, also "makes suffering central to its conception of human existence," although he argues that the two religions are different because in Buddhism, "suffering is not regarded as redemptive, but as something ultimately to be escaped, through enlightenment" (Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, 115n15). I would argue that this difference would be better understood in terms of emphasizing different aspects of the same reality: for example, in the practice of meditation taught by Mr. Goenka, the only way to escape suffering is by facing it. In this sense, while suffering is indeed something to be escaped through enlightenment, this is only possible because suffering is, or rather *can be*, redemptive.

to choose to suffer injustice rather than to inflict it (Socrates), even to the extent that we would forgive our torturers (Jesus) because, in an ontological sense, we have been persuaded that they are suffering worse than we are. In contrast to this concept of "spiritual religion," meanwhile, I will focus on two conceptions of "religion" common in secular, scientific culture: first, "religion" as a culturally conditioned nexus of beliefs and superstitions that, for example, New Atheist Sam Harris disparages as an "Iron Age philosophy" that has been "passed down to us from men and women whose lives were simply ravaged by their basic ignorance about the world,"[45] or that atheist philosopher A. C. Grayling likens to "the survival of what is essentially a stone-age outlook in the modern world."[46] Second, "religion" as a cultural weapon that evolved in order to inspire warriors to die in battle with other tribes, along the lines that biologist E. O. Wilson presents in *The Social Conquest of Earth*: "[t]he creation myth is a Darwinian device for survival. Tribal conflict, where believers on the inside were pitted against infidels on the outside, was a principal driving force that shaped biological human nature."[47] For the members of naturalist culture, "religion" will usually be rejected for one of these two reasons: either because it is a stone age worldview that needs to be replaced by the truth of science, or because it is a Darwinian device for survival that may have once made evolutionary sense, but which now needs to be replaced by the rationality and worldview of modern science.[48]

I will argue that the differences between various "spiritual religions" can be understood in terms of the differences between the audiences to which the purveyors of this kind of religion were trying to make their visions plausible. Historically speaking, in other words, different "stone age religions" would have been met by different "spiritual" vocabularies, while the presence of fanatical warrior religion, and the political violence to which all religious vocabularies seem prone, will in turn limit the ways that teachers of "spiritual" religion would have been able to

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[45] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004; 21.

[46] A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case* Against *Religion and* for *Humanism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 15; the so-called "New Atheists" are useful as interlocutors, because they often take very big positions, and they argue for them very forcefully. As my intention in this thesis is to argue forcefully *against* these big positions, the New Atheist articulations are useful.

[47] E. O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Liveright Pub., 2012), 8.

[48] In *The Social Reality of Religion*, Peter Berger notes that "[d]efinitions cannot, by their very nature, be either "true" or "false," only more useful or less so" (Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969; 175). The definitions of religion offered above are meant in this utilitarian sense. My project, in this context, could be read as an attempt to introduce and defend the viability of "spiritual religion" to people who tend to view religion along the same lines as people like Harris, Grayling, and Wilson.

speak.[49] In this context, meanwhile, I will argue that modern scientific culture represents a decisive transformation of human culture, away from the old nexus implied by stone-age/warrior religion, such that the rhetoric of spiritual religion, which would have evolved over many thousands of years to appeal to the members of such cultures, will have lost much of its persuasive power to the members of modern naturalist culture. In other words, even if the *truth* of spiritual religion has remained the same across history and culture, the *rhetoric* of spiritual religion has arguably ceased to function, due to the transformation of the cultural presuppositions of those to whom the appeal is being made. The overall purpose of my thesis, therefore, would be to help renovate the rhetoric of spiritual religion so as to make it more amenable to the ambient scientific culture, such that those members of this culture who begin to make the transition into spiritual life will have an easier time making the transition safely.

To be clear, the rhetoric of "spiritual religion" has never been easy. Even in ancient Greece, for example, this kind of claim came across as wildly implausible. Consider Callicles' startled exclamation in Plato's *Gorgias*: "By the gods! … Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking? For it you *are* in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true, won't this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won't everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?"[50] I will argue, in chapter six, that the question of what accepting the Socratic moral thesis means to "this human life of ours" is much more complicated than the straight overturning suggested here by Callicles. However, it will not make sense to tackle the specifics of how those who accept the Socratic thesis ought to live until an argument for the raw truth of the claim has been made. This is the project I will engage in from chapters two to five.

The difficulties involved in such an argument, even in the ancient world, can be gleaned from one of Socrates' statements in the *Crito*:

> One should never do wrong in return, nor mistreat any man, no matter how one
> has been mistreated by him. And Crito, see that you do not agree to this contrary
> to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it, and
> there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do

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[49] See Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: the lost history of esoteric writing* for an insightful discussion of the reasons and ways that philosophers might hide their teachings in order to avoid being killed by fanatical political sects.
[50] Plato, *Gorgias*, 481b-c.

not, but they inevitably despise each other's views. So then consider very
carefully whether we have this view in common, and whether you agree, and let
this be the basis of our deliberation, that neither to do wrong nor to return a wrong
is ever right, nor is bad treatment in return for bad treatment.[51]

The point here is that a different kind of discussion will occur *between* those who already agree with the Socratic moral thesis, and *across* the divide separating "those who hold this view and those who do not." The purpose of this thesis is to make the latter kind of argument, to argue *across* the dividing line, to try to convince an audience of people who will "inevitably despise" the position I am trying to render persuasive. In other words, my purpose here is not primarily to argue what the Socratic thesis might mean to those who already agree with it, nor to explore the differences between the traditions upon which I have drawn to make my argument so far. My purpose is instead to argue for the simple relevance of the initial question to our lives. As Callicles' startled exclamation already attest, the Socratic moral thesis was offensive to common sense even in the ancient world. However, in the modern world, this initial problem is vastly compounded, for this immediate implausibility will be strengthened by the naturalist picture of reality as a whole, within which the Socratic morality does not appear to make any sense at all.

The scope of the rhetorical difficulties involved in trying to persuade the members of this culture can be gleaned from the following passage from Bertrand Russell's *The Impact of Science on Society*, in which Russell concludes his analysis of the future of a scientific civilization now faced by the horror of thermonuclear obliteration: he insists that the "root of the matter is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean—please forgive me for mentioning it—is love, Christian love, or compassion."[52] For Russell, this claim is grounded in an experience of what he describes as "mystic illumination" that occurred in 1901. Bearing witness to his friend's invalid wife passing through an unusually severe bout of pain, he experienced the ground give way beneath him:

Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the
loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the
highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached;
whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless; it follows

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[51] Plato, *Crito*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 49d.
[52] Russell, *The Impact of Science on Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 59.

that war is wrong, … that the use of force is to be deprecated, and that in human relations one should penetrate to the core of loneliness in each person and speak to that.[53]

Prior to this experience, Russell describes his emotional life as having been "calm and superficial," that he had "forgotten all the deeper issues, and had been content with a flippant cleverness."[54] After this experience, he remarks that he became "a completely different person," that he was filled in the days that followed "with semi-mystical feelings about beauty … and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable," and that he was possessed by a strange excitement, containing "intense pain but also some element of triumph through the fact that [he] could dominate pain, and make it … a gateway to wisdom."[55]

In this context, the problem with Russell's appeal to "love, Christian love, or compassion" might be expressed as follows: he is unable to link the surface of his worldview to this deep root in any coherent way, and thus has to rely on four lines of text describing his shame, his fear of derision, as well as pleas for forgiveness for giving voice to such an apparently absurd position in an otherwise serious lecture on the world's problems. Indeed, what could Russell possibly say to the cynical interlocutor who has never experienced the kind of mystic illumination that inspired Russell to adopt this position in the first place? This is the problem to which I am responding in this thesis: to provide people like Russell with a better linguistic bridge between this "root of the matter" and the outer contours of their worldview—such that, instead of wrapping concepts like "love" and "compassion" in a veil of apologetic language and then dropping them into a worldview where they simply do not fit, and where they will likely appear as the kind of suprasensible or supernatural illusions that Nietzsche spurns with such vehemence, people like Russell would be able to argue more persuasively for the ontological reality of this love, and then articulate more clearly how this love relates to the everyday experience of life within modern civilization.

In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl provides a clue as to how such a language might operate:

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[53] Russell, "Autobiography: Mystic Illumination," in *Russell on Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39.
[54] Russell, "Autobiography: Mystic Illumination," in *Russell on Religion*, 39.
[55] Russell, "Autobiography: Mystic Illumination," in *Russell on Religion*, 40.

> The concept of religion in its widest possible sense, as it is here espoused, certainly goes far beyond the narrow concept of God promulgated by many representatives of denominational and institutional religion. They often depict, not to say denigrate, God as a being who is primarily concerned with being believed in by the greatest possible number of believers, and along the lines of a specific creed, at that. But alas, not only is this order based on a distortion of any sound concept of deity, but even more importantly it is doomed to failure: Obviously, there are certain activities that simply cannot be commanded, demanded, or ordered, and as it happens, the triad "faith, hope, and love" belongs to this class of activities that elude an approach with, so to speak, "command characteristics." Faith, hope, and love cannot be established by command simply because they cannot be established at will. I cannot "will" to believe, I cannot "will" to hope, I cannot "will" to love …. Nowhere, to my knowledge, is this brought home to us more strikingly than with the uniquely human phenomenon of laughter: You cannot order anyone to laugh—if you want him to laugh, you must tell him a joke.[56]

Thus, if we are trying to promote love (or faith, or hope) to the audience that would instinctively treat such appeals with a sense of cynical superiority, we will need to discover a language that relates to this triad as a joke relates to laughter. Moreover, just as laughter is only authentic if it is a spontaneous response to something funny, so too would faith, hope, and love only count as authentic if they emerged naturally in response—to what? To a surprising sense of the mysterious goodness at the root of reality?

So far, I have been making the case for this mysterious goodness through the lens of an argument for the rationality of the appeal to "ancient martyrs" when making certain types of moral and ontological arguments. For the remainder of this opening chapter, I will introduce a vocabulary through which to describe the kind of ontological choice towards which "ancient martyrs" like Frankl, Socrates, and Jesus beckon us. Following this, I will consider how this choice might appear, at least initially, to the members of modern scientific culture. In so doing, I hope to help the members of this culture move coherently and safely into those realms of experience where such insights become possible not merely as authoritative statements backed by the suffering of martyrs, but rather as personal insights into the true grounds of our emotional and existential predicament. Indeed, I will argue that being open to the insights and guidance of such traditional voices is actually pivotal to safely entering these realms of experience, and that the general

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[56] Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (London: Rider Books, 2000), 18.

rejection of tradition as a source of truth will produce a culture whose members *must* close themselves off from spirituality—in order to keep themselves safe from its dangers.

6. The Ontology of War and the Ontology of Mystery

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates states that he does not have time to waste reinterpreting all the fantastical beasts of ancient mythology in light of the latest scientific discoveries, because he does not yet know what he is: "Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?"[57] In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard dubs this question "The Absolute Paradox,"[58] a question we *must* be able to answer in order to distinguish between wisdom and foolishness, but also a question that human thinking cannot possibly solve. Indeed, for the same reason that we cannot *be* good, so too will it be impossible for us to *know* which of these two ontological possibilities *is* true. At the same time, however, as we act and make decisions into the world, we implicitly presuppose one or the other of these possibilities—and the way reality comes to appear to us will depend upon which ontological possibility we have presupposed in our actions. Kierkegaard, for his part, posits this question as the wall against which human reason shatters, as the fundamental problem that we require the assistance of divine Revelation to answer, to convince us that the latter answer is actually correct. In opposition to Kierkegaard, I will argue that the Platonic philosophical project is essentially the same as this characterization of Christianity: an attempt to first raise this fundamental opposition to the level of conscious thought, and then to help the one who has become aware of the stakes involved to choose the path of goodness.[59] As humans, in other words, we are presented by two fundamental possibilities, and the goal of Socrates'

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[57] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230a.

[58] Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37-48.

[59] For Kierkegaard, the difference between Socrates and Jesus consists in the fact that Socrates, as a person, is irrelevant to the truth he is guiding his pupils towards— "My relation to Socrates … cannot concern me with regard to my eternal happiness, for this is given retrogressively in the possession of the truth that I had from the beginning without knowing it. … the ultimate idea in all questioning is that the person asked must himself possess the truth and acquire it by himself" (Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 12-3)—whereas Jesus is *himself* the condition without which the truth cannot possibly be learnt. By my position, Kierkegaard is wrong on this point: the historical fact of Socrates' martyrdom transforms him into a teacher without which, as we have seen, it would be exceptionally difficult to accept the truth for which Socrates argues.

philosophical pedagogy would be to provide arguments and examples that would help individual people incline towards the latter rather than the former possibility.[60]

"Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?" This same type of bifurcation appears in the final words of Frankl's essay "The Case for Tragic Optimism," appended to the 1984 edition of *Man's Search for Meaning*:

> Sigmund Freud once asserted, "Let one attempt to expose a number of the most diverse people uniformly to hunger. With the increase of the imperative urge of hunger all individual differences will blur, and in their stead will appear the uniform expression of the one unstilled urge." Thank heaven, Sigmund Freud was spared knowing the concentration camps from the inside. His subjects lay on a couch designed in the plush style of Victorian culture, not in the filth of Auschwitz. *There*, the "individual differences" did *not* "blur" but, on the contrary, people became more different: people unmasked themselves, both the swine and the saints.[61]

Needless to say, most people do not have direct experience of such brutal extremes of human existence. At the same time, however, most people have some sense of what reality is like at those extremes—and this sense will subtly inform the choices they make in the mundane, peaceful world of "normal" life. Now, when the dialectical imagination is pushed out to these edges, there are basically two possibilities: either Freud is right, and the Gorgon of suffering and death will uniformly transform all people into savage beasts, and 'might makes right' will show itself to be the fundamental truth of the façade of justice we adhere to in 'normal' life; or else Frankl is right, and the way people behave at the extremes will be a revelation of who they actually are, the path they have been walking via the choices they have made in their lives, either towards the beast or towards the god. For both Freud and Frankl, in other words, the extreme burns away the façade, revealing the hidden "ontological" reality beneath. Freud, however, bets the revelation would be of the underlying animal that is selfishly concerned only with its own brute survival. For Frankl, by contrast, his experience shows him the "ontological freedom" of

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[60] Consider *Phaedo*, 77e, in which the characters are discussing the fear of death: "Cebes laughed and said: 'Assuming that we were afraid, Socrates, try to change our minds, or rather do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child in us who has these fears; try to persuade him not to fear death like a bogey.' You should, said Socrates, sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears." By my argument, this practice of charming away our fear of death would be an integral part of philosophy, and the life and death of Socrates would form an integral part of the charm.

[61] Frankl, "The Case for Tragic Optimism," from *Man's Search for Meaning*, 178-79.

human beings to decide what they become, the freedom to be free, to follow the path of the saint, or to renounce freedom and become a cruel and amoral beast.[62] In this latter case, the idea that justice is fundamentally determined by power would be an illusion to which people fall victim precisely insofar as they have chosen to walk the path of the beast.

We can get a further sense for these two options by returning to the *Gorgias* and considering how Socrates' arguments will appear to a cynical interlocutor like Polus. In short, even by the implicit standard of Polus' vision of reality, whereby justice is seen as nothing more than the will and advantage of the rulers, it remains the case that, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, "a city, an army, a band of robbers or thieves, or any other tribe with a common unjust purpose" would be able to achieve nothing "if they were unjust to each other."[63] Indeed, if each person went around exercising their "marvelous tyrannical power" to put to death anyone they wanted by stabbing them with a dagger, or bashing their head in with a stone, or burning down their house, the city would obviously fall into political anarchy—and the first thing that this anarchy would destroy is "the dockyards and triremes of the Athenians, and all their ships,"[64] which happens to be the naval power that supports the Athenian empire. In short, even by the logic of Polus' vision, we would still need to cooperate in order to resist the unjust intentions of our international rivals—and this means that the rulers will be pragmatically obliged to instill a sense of "justice" in the people, if only in order to inspire their subjects to go to war, to fight, to die for the sake of the group's survival. This would be the Darwinian logic behind a kind of warrior religion, the idea that a culture will need to cultivate in its members a willingness to die, by means of a "noble lie" that only the wise will see beyond. Polus' vision, in other words, logically gives rise to a bifurcation between appearance and reality, between the façade of morality that inspires the

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[62] In *The Human Condition*, John Kekes provides a "secular" approach to this vision of the human heart: "We may have reasons to act both morally and immorally, and both reasons derive from our mixed nature. … If a society's system of values is in good order, it strengthens the reasons for good actions and weakens the reasons for evil ones" (Kekes, *The Human Condition*, 160). For Kekes, the role of culture is to help inspire us opt for the better angels of our nature. Kekes, however, grounds this pursuit of goodness in the utilitarian necessity of staying alive within an indifferent reality, and he dismisses any argument that this is not the case as "theology." In this way, Kekes' position circles around a tension that will crop up later in this dissertation: between the rational necessity of believing what amounts to irrational falsehood; the fact that we must allow "theology" to operate on us, while not believe that "theology" is actually true. I will argue that this perspective is the logical result of an incorrect spiritual practice that has become predominant in modern scientific culture.

[63] Plato, *Republic*, 351c.

[64] Plato, *Gorgias*, 469d-e.

ignorant to sacrifice their lives, and the brutal truth that the wise have recognized and have learnt how to manipulate for their own benefit.

By choosing to die, however, Socrates is able to give concrete voice to a different understanding of the relationship between appearance and reality, an alternative vision of the surface and depth of justice that transcends the obvious point that some belief in 'justice' is pragmatically necessary to bind together an army or a band of thieves. From Socrates' perspective, therefore, Polus' vision of a façade of morality that is undergirded by what, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates calls "the wolf's side of the story"[65] (the idea that victory over one's opponent is the only thing that really matters), would itself be an appearance, beneath which lies an even deeper, even more hidden reality. By this latter approach, the façade of morality that we are obliged to wear in public would be our point of access to a deeper and more abiding truth—and our pragmatic concern for appearing good, for our social reputation, and our sense of shame when this appearance is broached, would be the phenomenal manifestation of an ontological goodness to which every human always has some degree of access. Alternatively, to draw on a different cultural vocabulary, the appearance of goodness we struggle to maintain in public would be the image of the real goodness of God, and the practices of what I have called "spiritual religion" would involve bringing this appearance more closely into alignment with its reality.

I will now introduce two terms of art through which to speak of these two opposing ontological possibilities: the "ontology of war" and the "ontology of mystery." I draw the term "ontology of war" from the opening pages of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, a book which opens with the most succinct articulation of what is at stake in these reflections: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality." The ontology of war entails the belief that we are so duped. Levinas says that this is the conclusion to which all philosophy necessarily arrives: "We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophic thought."[66] By this vision, the job of rationality would be "the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means," and morality would be just another kind of weapon, promoting intra-group cooperation in order to dominate others. Alternatively, as Socrates puts it ironically in the *Gorgias*, if the

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[65] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 272c.
[66] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: *An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 21.

ontology of war is true, a wise person "ought either to be a ruler himself in his city or even be a tyrant, or else to be a partisan of the regime in power,"[67] and wisdom would basically be the art of gaining and maintaining power. In terms of Kierkegaard's Absolute Paradox, the ontology of war would entail presupposing that human beings are really just complicated and savage beasts, that the wolf's side of the story is true, that our conceptions of 'justice' really are just weapons in the battle for survival.[68]

Levinas says that only a messianic perspective gives grounds for believing the ultimate untruth of this ontology. Plato would agree in condemning the position, but would disagree in the condemnation of philosophic thought. He would argue instead that the ontology of war is completely irrational, and can be shown to be so if it can actually be brought forth into philosophical discussion. I will use the term "ontology of mystery" to refer to this opposite possibility.[69] Terminologically, it might also be possible to follow Tolstoy, who contrasts "the

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[67] Plato, *Gorgias*, 510a.

[68] For a more existentially grounded articulation of this "ontology of war", we might consider Jean Améry's descriptions of the shocking revelation that greets the secular humanist when faced with the experience of life in the Nazi death camps: "[T]he SS could carry on just as it did: there are no natural rights, and moral categories come and go like the fashions. A Germany existed that drove Jews and political opponents to their death, … And what of it? Greek civilization was built on slavery and an Athenian army had run wild on the Island of Menos as had the SS in Ukraine. Countless people had been sacrificed as far back as the light of history reaches, and mankind's eternal progress was only a naïve belief of the nineteenth century anyhow. … Against the horrors there wasn't much to say. The Via Appia had been lined with crucified slaves and over in Birkenau the stench of cremated human bodies was spreading. One was not Crassus here, but Spartacus, that was all" (Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 11-12). In Améry's case, of course, this is not a mere intellectual conclusion. It is a lived position that derives from his own experience of torture at the hands of the SS and of life in the hell of Auschwitz. It is worth stipulating that my arguments against this ontology of war are directed not toward people like Améry, but rather toward people contemplating the violent edges of experience from within the safety of "normal" life, and who would cite Améry as their own authoritative witness.

[69] The language of mystery can be found in the work of many philosophers. Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*, for example, describes "philosophical research" as "articulated on mystery" and that mystery "opens out on to eternity" (Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, xiv). In *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, Karl Jaspers writes that "[w]e are more than all our knowledge. What we know confronts an infinitely encompassing unknown. The world is a mystery, and each of us is a mystery to himself" (Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, 5). More recently, in *The Measure of Things*, philosopher David Cooper presents mystery as a middle position between the hubris of thinking we can have knowledge of the way the world really *is*, independent of humans, and the hubris of thinking that there is no reality beyond the human: "To hold that there is mystery, in my sense, is to maintain that what there is is indiscursible, ineffable, since any discourse inevitably captures only a 'human world'" (Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, 280). Similarly, Theologian John Haught defines "religion" as "*a conscious appreciation of and response to the mystery that grounds, embraces and transcends both nature and ourselves*" (Haught, *Is Nature Enough*, 22). Finally, biologist Andreas Wagner also makes reference to a mystery that unveils itself through lingering with the tensions between self and other, inside and outside: "Once you can stand in paradox—not that it will ever be comfortable—you may be able to glimpse beyond it. Such glimpses have been the goal of every great philosopher, scientist, mystic, and theologian. And this "something" behind paradox is what should be the book's real subject, though I have not succeeded in writing about it. To do this subject justice might take an endless conversation or one that does not take place at all—like a circle with an infinite diameter or a perfect mathematical point. Thousands of

Law of Love and the Law of Violence,"[70] or else to follow Hans Jonas and talk of an "ontology of death" in contrast to an "ontology of life."[71] I shy away from Tolstoy's vocabulary of a "law of love" for reasons that will become clear in chapter three: in brief, speaking about love as a "law" could easily inspire us to turn love into an ideal for the sake of which we begin to repress our less savory emotions—and, while this is a necessary stage in spiritual growth, I will argue that it would be disastrous to apprehend Socrates' moral thesis in this way. Jonas' vocabulary of death and life, meanwhile, gives the impression that we are talking about different approaches to "objective" truth. I will argue, however, that this language of "subjective" and "objective" is one of the cultural symptoms that makes it exceedingly difficult to see beyond the logic of the ontology of war. I therefore adopt the term "ontology of mystery" as a way to give voice to the initial sense of disorientation that will greet us when we contemplate the possibility that the ontology of war might be false, as well as the deeper sense of mystery that envelopes those who do not flee from this disorientation, but instead choose to cultivate it through the kind of coherent spiritual discipline I will describe in chapter three.

To be clear, I am using the word 'mystery' to describe two distinct spiritual moments. First, mystery refers to the initial movement beyond this or that culturally enclosed view of reality, beyond the "truth" as it has been conceptualized by one's upbringing within a particular cultural world. However, second, mystery also refers to a choice that manifests within this state of unsettlement. In this latter sense, adopting the ontology of mystery would entail moving from one side of the Absolute Paradox to the other, from the idea that we are fundamentally a beast that must repress its lawless desires in order to cooperate with other beasts, towards the idea that we are really simple animals with a share in a divine and gentle nature, but ones that have been "twisted by bad company into lives of injustice"[72] and who have thus forgotten their innate goodness. It makes sense to refer to both these moments with the term "mystery" because this is

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years ago, the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu had already expressed it best when he said, "Heaven and earth begin in the unnamed." Here, I can only point to the something behind paradox. The rest is up to you." (Wagner, *Paradoxical Life*, 5). For my own purposes, the term "mystery" is useful as a reminder that my goal is not to replace the closed system produced by those who adhere to the ontology of war with a different closed system oriented, say, around the Socratic moral thesis; my goal is rather to allow moral thinking to flow once again, beyond the specific closed system of modern naturalism.

[70] Leo Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (New York: Penguin, 1987), 151-230.

[71] Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenology of Life*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966; 10-11.

[72] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250a.

how the matter will manifest for the particular interlocutor I have in mind: in short, those naturalists who adopt the "ontology of war" believe that they have uncovered the fundamental truth that pertains across all possible cultures, and that their own view is grounded in an unprecedented encounter with the truth that morality is grounded in the evolutionary struggle for survival and dominance within a fundamentally violent world. In other words, within this culture, there is a pervasive sense that the movement beyond the parochial perspective of culture has already been accomplished, and that this movement has culminated in the realization that the "savage beast" side of the Absolute Paradox is the truth. I will argue, by contrast, that this view of reality is the parochial response of modern naturalist culture to the encounter with the abyss, a reification of the perspective of common sense to which Polus and Callicles give voice in the *Gorgias*. I will further argue that this view of reality, while generally acceptable in 'normal' everyday life, becomes a catastrophic mistake when taken in an ontological sense, or when its adherents are exposed to the kind of existential extreme described by Frankl, when one is called upon to respond nobly in the face of the Gorgons of suffering and death.

7. The Rhetoric of Mystery and the Rationality of Naturalism

In *The Mystery of Being*, Gabriel Marcel argues that, when writing philosophy under the aegis of mystery, it makes no sense to try to compose "a kind of dogmatic exposition of which the listener or reader would merely have to grasp its content."[73] On the contrary, such a work should have "the nature of a kind of appeal to the listener or reader, of a kind of call upon his inner resources." David Cooper makes a similar point in *The Measure of Things*, pointing out that any attempt at dogmatic exposition of the ineffable mystery involves a clear self-performative incoherence, as though one could explain something that one has just defined as inexplicable. Cooper stipulates, therefore, that the purpose of philosophical speech about mystery cannot be to describe mystery as some objective reality, but is rather (as Cooper quotes from Chaung Tzu) to

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[73] Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: volume 1* (London: Harvill Press 1950), 213.

"make others vibrate."[74] Alternatively, as he puts it elsewhere, "the language of mystery performs."[75] David Schmidtz makes a similar point regarding the contemplation of the meaning of life: "[s]uccess in grappling with the question is less like articulating and defending a position and more like growing up."[76] Such writing does not aim at defending some rigid rational proof against potential refutation, but rather at the slow cultivation of something that, obliquely, will perhaps give rise to a more mature way of living.

In addition to this idea that the language of mystery must not so much describe as perform, Marcel also suggests that speech about mystery must be oriented towards a particular audience. Such speech will not work if it is presented as "a solution that can become common property," because the "idea of validity for 'anybody at all' … has less and less application the more deeply one penetrates into the inner courts of philosophy; into, that is to say, … spiritual reality."[77] The language of mystery, in other words, does not operate at the level of the universal, as would mathematical truth within a classical philosophical paradigm, but rather operates with regard to a particular group or even to a particular individual—to the "this-ness," the uniqueness, the irreducible *haecceity* of a culture or even of an individual person. In this context, then, the goal of my project, as a particular instantiation of the rhetoric of mystery, will be to perform the ontology of mystery for the *thisness* of modern naturalist culture. My goal, in other words, is to advance the persuasive power of the ontological mystery, and of the Socratic moral thesis, for the sake of a modern naturalist audience that tends to think, as Bertrand Russell puts it, that in "science … alone something approximating to genuine knowledge is to be found,"[78] and which also tends to think of rationality in terms of basing one's "arguments upon the kind of grounds that are accepted in science."[79]

In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel uses the term "scientism" to refer to this position: the idea that science alone is "in charge of the universe and what can be said about it," and which, at

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[74] Cooper, *The Measure of Things Humanism, Humility, and Mystery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 292.
[75] Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, 294.
[76] David Schmidtz, "The Meanings of Life," in *Life, Death and Meaning*, ed. David Benatar (Lantham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 92.
[77] Marcel, *The Mystery of Being v. 1*, 213.
[78] Russell, "Can Men be Rational," in *Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943-1949* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 9.
[79] Russell, "Am I an Atheist or an Agnostic: a Plea for Tolerance in the Face of New Dogma," in *Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943-1949*, 5.

"its most myopic," entails the view "that everything there is must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories like those we have developed to date—physics and evolutionary biology are the current paradigms."[80] What Nagel calls "scientism," I will refer to with the blanket term "naturalism."[81] In *The Brain and the Meaning of Life*, Paul Thagard defines "naturalism" as the idea that "we can best address philosophical questions by taking into account scientific evidence and theories rather than supernatural sources."[82] In my own use of the term, I will not contrast "naturalism" to the appeal to "supernatural sources." Instead, I will set naturalism into dialogue with the spiritual religion of people like Frankl, Socrates, and Jesus. This, I will argue, is the way we should understand the debate between science and religion: not as a debate about whether or not there exists some supernatural world in contradistinction to the natural world, but whether or not the Socratic moral thesis is true.

For the moment, let it suffice to point out that, just as the naturalist epistemology tends to neglect or ignore mystery,[83] so does the worldview generated by this epistemology tend to view the

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[80] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9; David Cooper refers to this same error as the "privileging of theory" (*The Measure of Things*, 342-344). For a good example of the idea that contemporary physics and evolutionary biology are nearly perfect expressions of the truth, see Alex Rosenberg's *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*: "we'll call the worldview that all us atheists (and even some agnostics) share 'scientism.' This is the conviction that the methods of science are the only reliable ways to secure knowledge of anything; that science's description of the world is correct in its fundamentals; and that when 'complete,' what science tells us will not be surprisingly different from what it tells us today" (Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, 6-7). The current philosophical debate concerning the proper definition of "naturalism" is also quite complex; as Kevin Meeker points out in *Hume's Radical Scepticism and the Fate of a Naturalized Epistemology*, "it is incredibly difficult to provide useful characterizations of naturalism, as many philosophers adamantly point out" (Meeker, *Hume's Radical Skepticism and the Fate of a Naturalized Epistemology*, 104). Within the literature on this topic, my own position would be close to that of Bas van Fraasen, who suggests that we understand positions like materialism and naturalism not in terms of content, but rather in terms of a general attitude: "[materialism] is not identifiable with a theory about what there is but only an attitude or cluster of attitudes. These attitudes include strong deference to the current content of science in matters of opinion about what there is" (van Fraasen, *The Empirical Stance*, 59); "[m]aterialism and naturalism as embraced in contemporary analytic philosophy have nothing to them but a certain attitude, a spirit of deference to the content of physics" (van Fraasen, *The Empirical Stance*, 190). In this context, I would be recommending something akin to "a spirit of deference" to tradition—or, better put, a spirit of heeding the words and example of ancient martyrs—as another useful way of approaching truth.
[81] For a good discussion of the term "naturalism" and its relationship to the term "scientism," see John Haught, *Is Nature Enough: Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, 1-13.
[82] Paul Thagard, *The Brain and the Meaning of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), xii.
[83] In the preface to *How the Mind Works*, psychologist Steven Pinker expresses one common naturalist approach to mystery. He first divides "our ignorance" into two categories: "*problems and mysteries.*" These represent two dichotomously opposed approaches to our ignorance: "[w]hen we face a problem, we may not know its solution, but we have insight, increasing knowledge, and an inkling of what we are looking for. When we face a mystery, however, we can only stare in wonder and bewilderment" (Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, ix). For Pinker, in other words, mystery is mute, entirely beyond the ken of speech. As science progresses, however, mysteries slowly get "upgraded to problems" —as, for example, in Pinker's own book on the mind, which is basically a popular explanation of how some of the mysteries of the mind have transformed into problems. Pinker stipulates that

Socratic moral thesis as nonsense—clearly refuted, for example, by the theory of evolution that shows morality to be rooted in the evolutionary struggle for survival. However, rather than focus on the question of whether the theory of evolution does indeed show this, I will focus instead on the naturalist epistemology itself. In short, I will argue that the members of a naturalist culture have a difficult time believing the Socratic moral thesis, not because modern biology has definitively refuted Socrates' absurd claims, but rather because naturalistic epistemology (Nagel's "scientism") has undermined the rhetoric necessary for Socrates' claims to become persuasive in the face of the objections of everyday common sense.

As we saw previously, the members of a culture that lacks access to ancient martyrs like Socrates will find the Socratic moral position rhetorically difficult to defend, insofar as living speakers will never sound plausible when they argue, *in their own voice*, that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it. A similar problem will be faced by the members of a culture that rejects in principle the capacity of traditional authorities to disclose truth. Modern scientific culture, however, is defined by such a rejection. Indeed, for naturalism, not only is science taken to be the sole source of truth, but tradition and authority are often viewed as positive impediments to knowledge: as John Kekes puts it, naturalists generally think that "once we are freed from the burden of tradition and authority and become well enough educated to rely on our native reason and good will, there will remain no obstacle to the improvement of the human condition."[84] As we have seen, however, the reference to traditional authority is the *only* way that such extreme and counter-intuitive moral positions as Frankl's or Socrates' become plausible: the free use of reason, in these cases, *depends* upon such traditional authorities to get underway. As such, for members of a culture that rejects the authority of tradition in principle, the Socratic moral thesis will become almost impossible to speak persuasively. In such a culture, therefore, philosophical reflection on the type of extreme situations that we have been examining so far—concentration

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"[e]very idea in the book may turn out to be wrong, but that would be progress, because our old ideas were too vapid to be wrong." By this view, the appeal to mystery is nothing more than an expression of ignorance, a sign that science has not yet become subtle enough to turn an ineffable ocean into a series of concrete problems to which a rational person could assent or dissent. In this context, persuading a naturalist culture to give heed to mystery will entail transforming problems back into mysteries that one can stand before in "wonder and bewilderment." However, in addition to this, it will also be necessary to show how there is more to be done in the face of mystery than "staring." In chapter three, I will argue that the way the bewildering mystery manifests—as wonder or as terror— will be a reflection of the type of person we have become. In this sense, the practice of exposing ourselves to mystery functions as a way of achieving self-knowledge or self-awareness.

[84] John Kekes, *The Human Condition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209.

camps, injustice unto death, torture—will very likely incline toward the conclusion that, in the final analysis, it is probably better to inflict injustice and live rather than to suffer it and die. This, I will argue, is one of the main origins of modern nihilism, which I will define as the idea that considers the opposite of the Socratic moral thesis to be fundamentally true—because, for from this perspective, the claim that the person being tortured to death is ontologically happier than the torturer is simply too absurd to be seriously entertained.[85]

8. The Ontology of Mystery and the Danger of Madness

Over the last century, many arguments have been put forth with the aim of reconciling science with morality. Some, for example, have tried to undermine the apparent nihilism of modern naturalism by arguing that science does not actually reveal a brutally violent nature, but that this view of reality is rather the result of an arbitrary metaphysical doctrine—reductive materialism— that is being presented as though it were an unprecedented scientific discovery.[86] On this critique, the description of the factual world provided by orthodox science, which seems to repudiate the Socratic moral thesis in favor of the ontology of war, would actually be an ideological illusion created by a pervasive, invisible, but ultimately groundless philosophical commitment. Others have accepted the orthodox naturalist description of the factual world but then argued that this factual reality has no bearing upon the way we think about things like morality and religion, that

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[85] In *Nihilism*, Stanley Rosen describes nihilism as "a permanent human possibility," but also insists that "the actual pervasive presence of nihilism today is due to a series of specific philosophical decisions" which have produced "a radical deterioration in our conception of what it means to be reasonable." Rosen then describes the relationship between nihilism and what I have referred to as a naturalist epistemology: "the conception of 'reason' has been detached from its traditional affiliation with the conception of 'good.' It has become a virtually unanimous article of faith, among the ostensible friends as well as the avowed enemies of reason, that one may speak reasonably about logical patterns of inference or 'empirically verifiable facts' (a phrase which is a tissue of ambiguities), but not about what is good" (Rosen, *Nihilism*, xiv). Rosen, however, does not link nihilism to the Socratic moral thesis.

[86] See Dembski, *Uncommon Dissent*, for an anthology of essays that delineate the problems with Darwinism from a scientific point of view. See Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, for a physicist's interpretation of the debate between "science" and "religion" in terms of a debate between two *philosophical* positions: materialism and religion. As Barr puts it, "there *is* a bitter intellectual battle going on, and it is about real issues. However, the conflict is not between religion and science, it is between religion and materialism. Materialism is a philosophical opinion that is closely connected with science. It grew up alongside of science, and many people have a hard time distinguishing it from science. But it is not science. It is a philosophical opinion … The basic tenet of so-called 'scientific materialism' is that nothing exists except matter, and that everything in the world must therefore be the result of the strict mathematical laws of physics and blind chance" (Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, 1). Although my own argument could also be framed in these terms, my sense is that this debate is too abstract, and takes place too far away from the terms of our everyday experience, to be useful for my own purposes.

these latter modes of discourse represent entirely different modes of access to truth. Gould's famous "Non-Overlapping Magisteria" interpretation of the relationship between science and religion would be a good example of this strategy: "I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis; but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, … Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings, and values."[87] Alternatively, some members of the naturalist culture, uncomfortable with the apparently unsavory moral consequences of their view, have tried to incorporate the phenomenon of morality into their own scientific epistemology, arguing that we should apply the same techniques that worked so well in dealing with the natural world to explore the world of morality and value—and that when we do, we will eventually discover a moral vision that accords with our vision of scientific truth.[88] In this context, my own approach will be a variant of the first. I agree with those who argue that the so-called "factual" worldview provided by modern science is actually nothing more than the description of the world as it appears through the lens of a reductive materialism; however, rather than trying to make the case for this by suggesting alternative approaches to science, I will instead focus my attention on morality and the moral consequences of the naturalist picture of reality.

In *The Measure of Things*, David E. Cooper uses the term "hot and alive" to describe how a philosophical position can transform from an intellectual problem into a felt experience. In his own work, Cooper argues that when the "human world thesis" —the idea that it is incoherent to talk about the way the world *is* independent of humans—becomes "hot and alive within us," as opposed to "simply a set of propositions coolly stared at and assented to,"[89] the position becomes unendurable. My argument will rely upon a similar approach to naturalism's vision of morality. I will argue that when morality becomes a "hot and living" problem for a naturalist, naturalism

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[87] Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 1999), 4.
[88] Sam Harris' *The Moral Landscape* is a good example of this: "morality should be considered an undeveloped branch of science" (Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 4); E. O. Wilson takes a similar position in *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge*: "The empiricist argument … is that by exploring the biological roots of moral behavior, and explaining their material origins and biases, we should be able to fashion a wiser and more enduring ethical consensus than has gone before. The current expansion of scientific inquiry into the deeper processes of human thought makes this venture feasible" (Wilson, *Consilience*, 240).
[89] Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, 238.

becomes unendurable. This is because naturalist moral philosophy leads logically to the unmitigated ontology of war, and the ontology of war, if understood logically and consistently, will entirely undermine all belief in morality. Because of this, those members of a naturalist culture who, on account of their commitment to naturalism, have adopted the ontology of war, will generally take steps to prevent this ontology from becoming hot and alive. In chapter two, I will discuss these modes of flight in terms of two related strategies: "misology," as the hatred of philosophical thinking, the rejection of philosophical thought as a useless and possibly harmful waste of time; and "inverse theodicy," as the attempt to justify some mitigating degree of goodness within an indifferent cosmos and a generally hostile living world. In short, if the problem of traditional theodicy involves trying to justify the existence of evil within a fundamentally good reality, the problem of inverse theodicy would involve trying to justify the existence of goodness, as well as our own persistent commitment to it, within a fundamentally indifferent and violent reality.

This philosophical method brings with it a certain existential danger. For example, in *Problems in Philosophy*, Colin McGinn accounts for "the chronic lack of progress that seems endemic to [philosophy], compared to other intellectual pursuits"[90] by arguing that (in the more straightforward language of Steven Pinker) "our minds lack the equipment to solve the major problems of philosophy."[91] McGinn dubs his position "Transcendental Naturalism," the idea that "[r]eality itself is everywhere flatly natural, but because of our cognitive limits we are unable to make good on this general ontological principle."[92] The "hot and alive" response to McGinn's claim is that, if our minds are indeed constitutively unable to know reality, then McGinn's own claim that reality is "everywhere flatly natural" is itself unknowable. This claim, in other words, is just a blind assertion, a fideistic commitment to naturalism that cannot be verified by the terms of its own epistemology. For his part, McGinn appears to have experienced the "hot and alive" version of this problem, the feeling of disorientation that occurs when we linger seriously with this kind of problem: "it is a perplexity of a peculiarly knotty kind, generating intimations of ultimate mystery, a dazed sensation where knowledge ought to be."[93] McGinn is also aware that

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[90] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy* (Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 12.
[91] Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 562-3.
[92] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 2.
[93] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 9.

taking these "intimations of ultimate mystery" at face value would mean stepping outside of "naturalism," into a view of reality he describes as "magical, miraculous, mystical … mad."[94]

In my opinion, McGinn is not wrong to describe the reality that exists beyond the confines of a naturalist worldview with such adjectives: magical, miraculous, mystical, mad. Speaking in general terms, once we step outside the boundaries of whatever our culture accepts as real, rational, and true, it is easy for us to lose all capacity to distinguish between the sane and the insane, the sensible and the utterly absurd. This is the existential condition that Nietzsche describes so evocatively in terms of how the death of God would feel to a believer: "Whither are we moving? … Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?"[95] For a specific example more germane to naturalist culture, we might consider Robert Pirsig's famous *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. As the story goes, a previous version of the narrator, at some point in "his" past, stepped too far beyond his culture's naturalist paradigm, suffered a total mental collapse, and was then subjected to electric shock therapy. Quoting the philosophical notes left behind by this previous self, the narrator observes that "present-day reason is an analogue of the flat earth of the medieval period. If you go too far beyond it you're presumed to fall off, into insanity. And people are very much afraid of that. I think this fear of insanity is comparable to the fear people once had of falling off the edge of the world."[96] In chapter five, I will examine Nietzsche's own descent into this fraught realm of experience, after first presenting Plato as offering a different way to approach the same essential experience. For the moment, let me simply state that, for a naturalist, to accept in a hot and living way that naturalism might be somehow fundamentally mistaken about reality would entail the same total loss of bearings that would afflict a believer contemplating the idea that God might not exist.

Previously, I used the term "nihilism" above to refer to acceptance of the unmitigated claim that it is better to inflict injustice than to suffer it. In this sense, nihilism would refer to a philosophical position that has embraced the ontology of war as true. In her essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Hannah Arendt provides a more genealogical account of the origins of

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[94] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 16.
[95] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §125, p. 181.
[96] Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981), 151.

this nihilistic conclusion, which relates to the more general danger of stepping outside the bounds of one's own traditional cultural worldview. Nihilism, Arendt says, is a permanent human possibility, because it is a possibility inherent in "thinking," which "inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics."[97] Arendt defines this destruction of our traditional ways of measuring good and evil as "nihilism," which we "are tempted to date historically, decry politically, and ascribe to thinkers who allegedly dared to think 'dangerous thoughts'," but which "is actually a danger inherent to the thinking activity itself."[98] As examples, she cites two historical characters from Plato's corpus—Alcibiades and Critias—for whom thinking served only to undermine their belief in traditional morality, and who thus emerged from their encounter with Socrates aroused not to virtue but rather to "license and cynicism," interpreting "the nonresults of the Socratic thinking examination [as] negative results: if we cannot define what piety is, let us be impious."[99]

Arendt's account of the danger of thinking stems from Book VII of the *Republic*. There, Plato describes how those raised in a traditional culture will be taught to "hold … certain convictions about just and fine things."[100] However, when a questioner asks such people to provide a rational account of their understanding, they will likely discover that they cannot provide such an account. In this way, the act of philosophical questioning will be experienced, initially, as an undermining of traditional culture, which shakes such a person "from his convictions, and makes him believe that the fine is no more fine than shameful, and the same with the just, and good, and the things he honored most."[101] This is "a great evil that comes from dialectic as it is currently practiced," in that "[t]hose who practice it are filled with lawlessness."[102] Because of this possibility of lawlessness, the philosophical thinking that leads to McGinn's "perplexity of a peculiarly knotty kind, generating intimations of ultimate mystery, a dazed sensation where knowledge ought to be," can be existentially and morally *dangerous*. In particular, I will argue that those who become over-exposed to the mystery, without at least being open to the possibility

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[97] Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 176.

[98] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 177.

[99] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 176-7.

[100] Plato, *Republic*, 538c.

[101] Plato, *Republic*, 538d-e.

[102] Plato, *Republic*, 537e.

that the ontology of war might be false, run the risk of going mad in the precise sense described by Plato: they might become lawless, unable to control the irrational desires that their now undermined cultural training previously helped contain.[103] In this sense, spiritual strategies like misology and belief in this or that inverse theodicy would actually be sensible, insofar as they protect their practitioners from exposure to a "hot and alive" ontology of war that might otherwise induce a kind of existential/moral collapse.[104] The rhetorical difficulty in convincing such a person to reject the ontology of war, therefore, involves a precarious dance—renouncing the strategy of misology, we must employ our reason to show that the various hopes that the members of naturalist culture rely upon to stave off the brutal ontology of war are incoherent with the overarching naturalist worldview—and yet, the purpose in undermining these hopes is not to drive relatively hopeful naturalists into existential despair, but rather to help such people see through their ontological presupposition, into an embrace of the alternative ontology I have offered: the ontology of mystery.

In the concluding pages of his essay "On Fairy Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien divides the concept of "catastrophe" into two. There are, he says, "eucatastrophes" and "dyscatastrophes," with the former as a breakdown that leads to the good, and the latter as a breakdown that leads to the bad. In the context of this discussion, the practice of a "hot and alive" philosophical discussion would lead to the initial catastrophic sense of disorientation, the realization that we do now know what we thought we knew. However, this initial catastrophic breakdown can lead either to the dyscatastrophe of dialectic, in which we embrace the ontology of war and becomes nihilists,

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[103] I am talking about the tendency of philosophical reason to replace confident acceptance with perplexity and doubt. In his general introduction to the philosophy of David Hume, Don Garrett describes this existential danger as follows: "To deny the truth or probable truth of one's beliefs, or even to remain without any belief concerning their truth or probable truth, would inevitably undermine the stability of one's beliefs about the causal consequences of actions and characters, and would thereby undermine the moral approval of wisdom as well"(Garrett, *Hume*, 232). In chapter four, I will describe Hume's response to the existential danger involved in following rationality into the abyss of skepticism: basically, Hume cleaves arbitrarily to the worldview of his own culture.

[104] John Kekes articulates a similar point in *The Human Condition*: "The impulse to go beyond the familiar segment of the world and explore what lies outside of it is probably irresistible …. The results of scientific explorations, however, can only alter but not transcend human concerns. Any attempt to do more is a dangerous denial of our humanity. I share Montaigne's sentiment that 'these transcendental humors frighten me.' They lead to trying to 'escape from … man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change us into beasts…. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own'" (Kekes, *The Human Condition*, 25). I agree entirely with Kekes' point, but I draw a different lesson from it: Kekes argues that we should refuse to "go beyond" the world as described by science, on account of the danger of becoming beasts; in contrast to this, I would say that it is dangerous to "go beyond" unless one is ready to be transformed into an angel, and that the problem with the naturalist view of reality is that it denies this possibility.

accepting the full consequences of the claim that it is better to inflict injustice than to suffer it; or else this same movement can lead to the eucatastrophe of a genuine love of the good, in the realization that there remains a distinction between good and bad even after the traditional cultural understanding of these things has been swept aside, even if we no longer claim to know exactly what this distinction amounts to. My goal in this project will be to expose the members of naturalist culture to this catastrophe, McGinn's "dazed sensation where knowledge ought to be" —and then, within this catastrophe, to argue against the ontology of war, which would lead to the dyscatastrophe of nihilism, in favor of the ontology of mystery. This alternative way of understanding reality might initially appear "magical, miraculous, mystical … mad."[105] However, if engaged with in the proper way, the way of "spiritual religion" which I will describe in chapter three, this alternative can also lead to that broad family of existential attitudes held by people like Frankl, Socrates, Jesus, and the Buddha.

Conclusion: Common Ground

Previously, I quoted Plato's *Crito*, where Socrates argues that, with regard to the Socratic moral thesis, "there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other's views."[106] If this observation were simply true, there would be no way to convince anyone of the Socratic moral thesis who did not already agree with it, no way to bridge the gulf between one side of the debate and the other. In this particular dialogue, however, Socrates is speaking to Crito, someone who has previously professed agreement with the Socratic claim. Socrates' goal in speaking these words, therefore, is to prompt Crito to recommit to the position, so that the two of them can rationally investigate how those who agree that it is better to suffer than to inflict injustice should act in the particular situation in which they find themselves: Socrates facing an unjust death at the hands of the state, and Crito trying to convince Socrates to bribe his guards and flee into exile. In the *Gorgias*, by contrast, when speaking to the utterly dubious Callicles, Socrates makes the exact opposite point: "if human beings didn't share common experiences, some sharing one, others sharing another, but one of us

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[105] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 16.
[106] Plato, *Crito*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 49d.

had some unique experience not shared by others, it wouldn't be easy for him to communicate what he experienced to the other."[107] Here, Socrates' is not claiming that his approach to morality is based upon some special experience, some divine insight that people like Callicles will just have to accept on faith in Socrates' authority. There is indeed a common ground, a common experience shared across the two sides of the debate, and lingering with this common ground should lead someone like Callicles towards eventual agreement. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates describes love as the common experience, and he suggests that Callicles should move from a love of the opinions of the people of Athens towards a love of the good. In chapter two, I make a similar argument to the particular audience I have in mind: in short, I argue that the naturalist experience of disenchantment from tradition, and the naturalist commitment to moral goodness despite accepting the fundamental ontological meaninglessness that often accompanies this experience of disenchantment, are both points of common ground between the naturalist worldview and the practice of "spiritual religion." I argue, however, that these two sides of the naturalist worldview—disenchantment and morality—are fundamentally incompatible, and that lingering with this incoherence leads to the catastrophic breakdown described by Plato and Arendt as the danger of philosophical thought. My goal, therefore, is to steer this catastrophe toward the good, by showing how the ontology of war leads towards an understanding of morality that, if grasped in a hot and living way, naturalists themselves cannot and do not agree with. This leads into my third chapter, in which I describe how the tension between commitment to morality and the experience of disenchantment operates within the practice of spiritual religion.

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[107] Plato, *Gorgias*, 481c.

Chapter 2

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Naturalist Moral Philosophy and the Catastrophe of Thinking

Introduction: The Catastrophe of Thinking

Near the end of chapter one, I presented Hannah Arendt's description of "nihilism" as "a danger inherent to the thinking activity itself,"[1] because thinking can lead to a 'dyscatastrophic' loss of faith in the moral training we received from our traditional culture. Interestingly, however, Arendt also argues that the activity of thinking can lead to moral goodness, in the form of an utter refusal to participate in social evil: as she puts it, "the activity of thinking as such … could … be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing."[2] This latter idea came from her observation of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who, from the safety of his desk, helped organize the trains that carried millions of Jews to their deaths during the Second World War. In Eichmann, Arendt can discern "no sign … of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives," but only "*thoughtlessness*."[3] From this example, Arendt infers the general possibility that "the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience [might] coincide."[4]

Arendt defines "thinking" as "the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content."[5] For Arendt, however, this activity is morally ambiguous: on the one hand, thinking can lead to nihilism—which we might want to protect ourselves from by *not* thinking; on the other hand, however, *not* thinking can lead to the disastrous failure of conscience we see in someone like Eichmann. Arendt draws together this sense of promise and danger by suggesting that thinking "will make good men better and bad

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[1] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 177.
[2] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1978), *5*.
[3] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.
[4] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 160.
[5] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 5.

men worse"[6] —that the activity of thinking will increase the moral corruption of those who are already walking the path of corruption, but that this same activity will result in moral improvement for those who are already walking the path of goodness.

It is important to point out that, for Arendt, thinking does not lead to moral goodness because it leads to some substantial vision of reality, some metaphysical ground that thinking ultimately lays bare. On the contrary, if thinking gives rise to moral goodness, this is due to the internal conditions that must exist for the process of thinking to be possible in the first place: the fact that thinking depends upon an internal dialogue, and the success of this dialogue depends on our capacity to be our own friend. More precisely, Arendt describes a philosopher as a person whose "existence … depends upon constantly articulated intercourse with himself, a splitting-into-two of the one he nevertheless *is*." She then argues that the reason philosophers would rather suffer injustice than inflict it is that they know that "man contains within himself a partner from whom he can never win release," and that "he will be better off not to live in company with a murderer or a liar."[7] Again, this means that the philosopher's goodness does not come from some substantial metaphysical worldview, but rather from a cultivated sense of self-awareness, as it emerges naturally from the practice of solitary thinking:

> [I]t is not a question of seeing something imperishable and divine outside yourself, …. With Socrates, … you remain within yourself and no transcendent standard, as we would say, or nothing outside yourself, received with the eyes of the mind, informs you of right and wrong. … [Y]ou yourself have arrived at it for the sake of this living with yourself that becomes manifest in discourse between you and yourself. If you are at odds with your self it is as though you were forced to live and have daily intercourse with your own enemy. No one can want that. If you do wrong you live together with a wrongdoer, and while many prefer to do wrong for their own benefit rather than suffer wrong, no one will prefer to live together with a thief or a murderer or a liar. This is what people forget who praise the tyrant who has come to power through murder and fraud.[8]

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[6] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 104.
[7] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 240-41.
[8] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 91.

In this context, the reason it is better to suffer than to inflict injustice is that it is "[b]etter to be at odds with the whole world than be at odds with the only one you are forced to live together with when you have left company behind."[9]

Arendt derives her claim for the relationship between evil and not-thinking from a negative version of this same idea: "if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be *friends*"[10]; and while it is possible to "remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?" Evil-doers, on this account, are only able to act unjustly by refusing to reflect upon what they do, or by justifying what they do in terms of some ideology that they refuse to question. In either case, the evil-doer must avoid solitude, that state of being alone with oneself that Arendt describes in terms of a quotation from the ancient Stoic politician Cato: "never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."[11]

The danger of nihilism can also be explained in these terms. In short, when the silent dialogue of solitary thought reveals that we are living with a liar or a murderer, the activity of thinking will take shape as a battle. More precisely, having realized that we are in discord with ourselves, there would be two broad strategies for reestablishing harmony. Thinking would lead to the 'eucatastrophe' described by Plato and Arendt to the extent that the lying, murderous aspect loses power in the face of this newfound awareness. However, it would also be possible for this lying, murderous aspect to overwhelm whatever remained of our conscious commitment to morality, in which case the activity of thinking will lead to the 'dyscatastrophe' of dialectic, as the hopeless cynicism of a hot and living ontology of war, in which morality comes to appear as a pragmatic veneer that covers over (what has come to appear as) an irredeemably brutal animal nature: as Arendt quotes Shakespeare's Richard III, "Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe."[12] This, finally, is why the activity of thinking will tend to make bad people worse: because those who have acclimatized themselves to acting immorally will have increased the power of the dreadful alter-ego that is encountered when we

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[9] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 188.
[10] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 187-88.
[11] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 7-8.
[12] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 189.

let our mind wander freely, and will thereby have increased the chances that this alter-ego will overpower the moral commitments of the thinking ego in the internal battle of solitary thought.

In this chapter, I argue that this kind of 'thinking' can be especially dangerous for naturalists. More precisely, I argue that, for those who think that science has proven the truth of the ontology of war, the activity of thinking *should always* give rise to the dyscatastrophe of dialectic, transforming a cold intellectual adherence into a hot and living nihilism. In section one, I present Charles Taylor's critique of what Bertrand Russell calls "the doctrine of the subjectivity of values," which Russell takes to follow logically from the truth of science. Taylor argues that this understanding of morality *should* simply undermine all moral argumentation, but that those who adopt this position invariably continue to make moral arguments, often even presenting the doctrine of moral subjectivity as a more *moral* approach to morality. In section two, I explore this latter point more thoroughly, showing how naturalism is based on more than a simple reification of scientific epistemology, but that it is also based on serious and often legitimate moral concerns: for example, the observation that moral and religious dogmatism can lead to political violence, or that the attempt to live up to high moral ideals can lead to stifling personal repression. I argue that, even though the moral concern is legitimate and the moral critique is apt, the doctrine of moral subjectivity does not work as a solution. Instead, for those who practice Arendt's 'thinking' from within this view of reality, this activity *should* lead to a catastrophic sense of perplexity, from which two opposing paths will become available: either adhere to the deep moral concern and revise the theory—in which case thinking leads to the eucatastrophe of genuine philosophy—or else adhere to the logical consequences of moral subjectivity and drop the moral concern, which would result in the dyscatastrophe of dialectic. Both of these options will be severely unpalatable to a morally sincere naturalist, as the latter path involves the nihilistic rejection of morality, while the former path involves (I will argue) rejecting naturalism.

In section three, however, I introduce a common third option in the face of this dilemma: the path of avoiding it, through either misology (the straight refusal to think) or what I have called 'inverse theodicy', the attempt to show how we can still seriously commit to morality and goodness despite knowing that morality derives from the necessity of survival in an indifferent and ultimately meaningless world. In sections four and five, I examine the inverse theodicy of Daniel Dennett, who tries to derive a new naturalist morality from the rational projects of staying

alive and staying secure. I show how this vision of morality fails in those extreme situations where life and security come into direct conflict with goodness—as, for example, in the death camps experienced by Frankl. In sections six and seven, I turn my attention to J. L. Mackie's claim that universal acceptance of the ontology of war will lead to world peace—a vision that I refer to as "the inverse theodicy of disenchantment" and which I present as the way that the experience of catastrophic thinking is incorporated into the naturalist picture of reality. I argue that these inverse theodicies only work to preserve morality by a steadfast refusal to think about them too deeply. However, this refusal to think is itself motivated by a fundamental concern for goodness, as philosophical thinking under the aegis of the ontology of war, which naturalists think of as having been given by science, leads to the dyscatastrophe of nihilism. My point, of course, is that this ontology of war is false, but that the only way to realize this is to engage in the morally dangerous activity of thinking. My purpose in this chapter, therefore, is twofold: first, to expose naturalists to the catastrophe of dialectic, and then to make a plausible argument for the reality of a mysterious ontological goodness.

In the final two sections of this chapter, I turn my attention to the kind of critiques that a naturalist might level against my argument in chapter one. In section eight, I show how the appeal to traditional authority is, like thinking, also morally ambiguous. Basically, the death of a noble warrior like Achilles, or the death of a suicide bomber, produces the exact same rhetorical power as the death of Socrates—but in the name of entirely different moral ideals. I suggest, then, that the naturalist rejection of tradition is likewise motivated by a serious moral concern, a desire to undercut the dangerous appeal of a tradition of ancient warrior martyrs. This means, however, that the moral concern underlying naturalist epistemology is actually in alignment with the moral concern of Plato: they are different strategies for dealing with the corrosive appeal of the warrior tradition. However, if the naturalist strategy involves an outright rejection of tradition, Plato's strategy involves the attempt to establish an alternative tradition rooted in the example of a different kind of ancient martyr. This observation leads into section nine, when I introduce the naturalist *moral* objection to the Socratic morality: that this inhumanly high moral ideal only leads to an immense moral repression, which in turn destroys our capacity to be happy. I respond to this objection in chapter three, where I present the practice of "spiritual religion" as a combined practice of morality and disenchantment, a practice of respect for traditional authority

in combination with a critical distance from it, which should lead slowly toward the experience upon which the Socratic moral thesis is based.

1. The Doctrine of the Subjectivity of Values

In his work *Religion and Science*, Bertrand Russell considers the consequences of a naturalist epistemology, whereby "[w]hatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods." Russell argues that this epistemology logically entails the idea that, since "science cannot decide questions of value," this means that such questions "cannot be intellectually decided at all, and lie outside the realm of truth and falsehood." Russell dubs the resulting moral doctrine "the subjectivity of values,"[13] which he describes as follows:

> This doctrine consists in maintaining that, if two men differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference in taste. If one man says, "Oysters are good," and another says, "*I* think they are bad," we recognize that there is nothing to argue about. The theory in question holds that all differences as to values are of this sort, although we do not naturally think them so when we are dealing with matters that seem to us more exalted than oysters.[14]

In other words, despite our "natural" tendency to view our moral preferences as more "exalted" than our preference for oysters, by the terms of modern scientific rationality (which Russell takes to be "true" rationality), this distinction turns out to be an illusion. As for the consequences of this view, Russell notes that "what one man calls 'sin' another may call 'virtue,' and though they may dislike each other on account of this difference, neither can convict the other of intellectual error."[15] S. T. Joshi explains the consequences of this view in much starker terms: "Offensive as it may be to many, it is a brutal truth that everyone's system of morals is merely a bundle of preferences that, insofar as they are preferences, are logically shielded from refutation." This doctrine is offensive because, as Joshi puts it, this would mean that "one would not even need a

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[13] Russell, *Religion and Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 255.
[14] Russell, *Religion and Science*, 249-50.
[15] Russell, *Religion and Science*, 250-51.

reason (plausible or otherwise) to justify the view that 'Murder is right'; the expression of the preference would be sufficient."[16]

In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor argues that this doctrine of the subjectivity of values results from a misguided attempt to apply the methods of reasoning used in modern science to our sense of morality. However, Taylor does not reject this doctrine of moral subjectivity in the name of some objectively true system of moral knowledge. Instead, he argues for the possibility of a different kind of rationality, a moral rationality as distinct from scientific rationality. Taylor's argument for this involves a distinction between two facets of our moral responses: first, as acknowledged by naturalists, our moral responses would be "almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling"; second, as rejected by naturalists, our moral responses would "seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings," such that "a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human."[17] Taylor criticizes modern naturalists for trying to "hive this second side off and declare it dispensable or irrelevant to morality."[18] The reason for this rejection, meanwhile, is that this second side—which I will henceforth call "moral ontology" —makes no sense within the epistemological and ontological framework of the naturalist worldview. As Taylor puts it, the biggest reason for naturalism's tendency to reject moral ontology is "the great epistemological cloud under which all such accounts lie for those

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[16] S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers* (Amherst, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 2011), 228; Gilbert Harman makes the same point in his essay "Moral Relativism Defended": "Suppose that a contented employee of Murder, Incorporated was raised as a child to honor and respect members of the 'family' but to have nothing but contempt for the rest of society. His current assignment, let us suppose, is to kill a certain bank manager, Bernard J. Orcutt. Since Orcutt is not a member of the 'family,' the employee in question has no compunction about carrying out the assignment. In particular, if we were to try to convince him that he should not kill Ortcutt, our argument would merely amuse him. … Now, in this case, it would be a misuse of language to say of him that he ought not to kill Ortcutt or that it would be wrong of him to do so, since that would imply that our own moral considerations carry some weight with him, which they do not" (Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," 5). In his essay "Moral knowledge and mass crime," Nenad Dimitrijevic criticizes Harmon's position along the lines I will follow in this chapter: that this moral philosophy breaks down when considering extreme examples in a hot and living way. For example, Harmon himself suggests that moral relativism might not apply to extreme examples like Hitler, which prompts Dimitrijevic to make the following argument: "By asserting the weakness of the moral argument in the face of evil, we say that overstepping *some* borders … pushes the whole issue beyond the reach of moral evaluation. … If a relativist cannot unambiguously state that any inner judgment provides for a valid moral perspective, then the existence of the objective criteria for the assessment of any particular intention of action, could logically follow. This … comes close to moral universalism" (Dimitrijevic, "Moral knowledge and mass crime: A critical reading of moral relativism,"140).

[17] Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5.

[18] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.

who have followed empiricist or rationalist theories of knowledge, inspired by the success of modern natural science."[19]

Taylor's argument against the naturalist attempt to dispense with moral ontology involves a phenomenological analysis of the way we speak about morality. Thus, against those who would reduce our moral reactions to instinct, something like a taste for sweets or a visceral reaction like nausea, Taylor points out that "we argue and reason over what and who is a fit object of moral respect, while this doesn't seem to be even possible for a reaction like nausea."[20] In short, any attempt to equate our moral responses to these "visceral" responses entails viewing all speech about what is or is not a fitting object for moral worth to be, at root, meaningless drivel. There is a clear difference, however, between visceral responses like nausea and moral responses, in that it would obviously make no sense for me to "articulate a description of the nauseating in terms of its intrinsic properties, and then argue from this that certain things which we in fact react to that way are not really fit objects for it," such that we should strive to realign our approach to nausea in terms of this newly articulated understanding. This, however, is exactly what we do, all the time, when we make moral arguments.[21] Indeed, the essence of Taylor's argument is that the naturalists are doing this too: even as they "propose to treat all moral ontologies as irrelevant stories, without validity," they "go on arguing like the rest of us about what objects are fit and what reactions are appropriate."[22]

This disconnect that Taylor is pointing to here—between the logical consequences of the doctrine of the subjectivity of values and the way those who adopt this position continue to think, speak, and argue—is evident in the work of Russell. For example, Russell defends his doctrine of moral subjectivity by describing the positive moral consequences that it will supposedly promote: "the most important is the rejection of vindictive punishment and the notion of 'sin'."[23] He also rejects the common criticism that this doctrine will lead to "the decay of all sense of

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[19] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.

[20] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 6.

[21] See Marcus Singer, *The Ideal of a Rational Morality* for another version of this argument: "we cannot make sense of a change of moral *belief* or *judgement* or *opinion* apart from the conception of a rational or true morality. A change in one's tastes or preferences is of a different order. ... I used to not like broccoli, now I do; … whether or not I think I understand the causes of this change of taste, I do not for a moment think of it as something rationally based or that my later preferences are more rational or correct than my previous ones" (Singer, *The Ideal of a Rational Morality,* 7-8).

[22] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9.

[23] Russell, *Religion and Science*, 252.

moral obligation" by pointing out that it is "not by ethical theory, but by the cultivation of large and generous desires through intelligence, happiness, and freedom from fear, that men can be brought to act … in a manner that is consistent with the general happiness of mankind."[24] For Russell, in other words, moral obligation remains important even if it is just a matter of taste. As such, the claim that morality is rationally groundless need not prevent us from striving to promote a strong sense of moral obligation in ourselves and our comrades. Russell, for example, uses his own moral rhetoric to promulgate the high-minded moral opinion that "the general happiness of mankind" is a worthy goal.[25]

Taylor would argue that this kind of moral philosophy is riven by an immediate self-performative incoherence. What, for example, is the sense in *arguing* for a moral system when one has already stated that morality is in principle beyond the ken of argumentative rationality? In short, if we accept Russell's doctrine of moral subjectivity, then his subsequent arguments for the moral benefits of this doctrine make no sense. Alternatively, if Russell's aim is to persuade us to adopt such values as "the general happiness of mankind," it would seem that openly arguing for the doctrine of the subjectivity of values would undermine what he is trying to accomplish with his moral rhetoric: again, "[i]f one man says, 'Oysters are good,' and another says, '*I* think they are bad,' we recognize that there is nothing to argue about," and the doctrine of the subjectivity of values "holds that all differences as to values are of this sort" —a position which would seem to undercut all of Russell's subsequent arguments for his own high-minded moral vision. According to Taylor, we should view the sheer fact of this disjunction—that even those who adopt the subjectivity of values cannot help but continue to make moral arguments— as evidence that these people do not *really* believe what they are saying. More precisely, if

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[24] Russell, *Religion and Science*, 254-55.

[25] See *The ABC of Armageddon*, Peter Denton's study of Bertrand Russell's thought between the first and second world wars, for a good discussion of this aspect of Russell's thought. Here is Denton's statement of the problem I am currently discussing: "If ethics was only an expression of desire, not of any kind of knowledge or truth, then there was no reason to assume that any group of individuals, much less an entire society, would share equivalent desires, thereby rendering a social ethic by consensus impossible" (Denton, *The ABC of Armageddon*, 108). Denton concludes by suggesting that if Russell had "allowed for a kind of epistemology other than one based on 'facts' …, he might have found a way to articulate a different view of knowledge-as-experience that could have incorporated his understanding of instinct, impulse, and the 'generosity of spirit' he associated with 'love'" (110-111). Denton argues that, because Russell "had invalidated the association of science and metaphysics," he was ultimately left with "no other grounds than the utilitarian exercise of power on which to establish a modern social ethic" (110). As a slight contrast to this, I would argue that Russell *has* associated science and metaphysics, in the sense that his so-called "scientific" vision of reality is grounded on the ontology of war, which is basically an alternative *metaphysical* position that undermines his attempts to construct a consistent ethical system. I will argue for this in chapter four, with reference to Richard Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

naturalists themselves cannot help but rely on the very kind of appeal to moral ontology that they explicitly reject, this should suggest that there is another kind of rationality beyond the rationality of modern natural science, which gives us access to a reality that, perhaps, natural science is unable to approach.[26]

2. The *Whatness* and the *Thatness* of Morality

I will now introduce a terminological distinction, between the "whatness" and the "thatness" of morality/goodness, through which to explicate the problem to which Taylor is pointing. The "whatness" of morality/goodness would refer to a particular, culturally mediated, and relatively stable understanding of what is good and bad, noble and base, proper and improper. The "thatness" of morality/goodness, by contrast, would refer to the ontological claim implied by the simple fact that we take *any* system of morality seriously—the claim *that* there is moral truth, even if we do not have clear knowledge of *what* it is.[27] The doctrine of the subjectivity of values,

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[26] Drew Hyland's discussion of the relationship between the type of knowledge available to "science" (*episteme*) and the type of knowledge available to philosophical discourse is relevant here: "our self-knowledge, and the knowledge of virtues and implicitly of forms that such self-knowledge entails, is not the sort of rigorous demonstrative knowledge that we associate with *episteme*. But since, fortunately, Plato is a pre-Cartesian, he does not infer from the impossibility of *episteme* in this realm that *knowledge altogether* is impossible. To the contrary, we are in the realm of a different sort of knowledge, one which, difficult as this is for modern minds to appreciate, is a knowledge that does not entail certainty." (Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, 184-85). Hyland further clarifies the difference between Descartes and Plato a few pages later: "Whereas Descartes recommends that we doubt, and so distrust and reject in advance, that which is not apodictically certain, Socrates again and again *begins* with the opinions of the day, and so reveals that he trusts them to be worthy of question, even if the result of our questioning is to transform radically the original opinion." (Hyland, *Finitude*, 186-87). In this context, we would say that the naturalists, following Descartes, only accept *episteme* as knowledge, while Plato accepts the possibility of a different kind of knowledge that applies when dealing with questions of virtue. This Platonic kind of knowledge, however, only emerges if we reflect seriously on our opinions about goodness—and this is precisely the kind of reflection that the naturalist is explicitly refusing to engage in. It is also worth noting that the "orthodox" interpretation of Plato would have Plato's philosophy progressing from opinion to epistemic certainty, sure knowledge of the so-called "Forms." Hyland argues that this orthodox reading of Plato is wrong, an imposition by post-Cartesian philosophers who have lost the capacity to imagine a kind of knowledge that could be different from scientific knowledge, a "truth" that could be different from "objective truth." I will consider these issues in more depth in chapter five.

[27] In *The Meaning of Life and Why it Matters*, Susan Wolf uses the term "objective values" to serve the same terminological role that I am filling with the concept of the "*thatness* of morality/goodness." For Wolf, in other words, "objective value" provides a point of reference by which to measure our own subjective approach to values. Wolf repeatedly stresses that the content of these so-called objective values is mysterious and imprecise: "I must confess that I have no positive account of nonsubjective value with which I am satisfied" (Wolf, *The Meaning of Life and Why it Matters*, 45); "On my view, then, finding an adequate account of the objectivity of values—that is, of the ways or respects in which value judgments are not radically subjective—is an unsolved problem in

in this context, would consist in an outright rejection of this *thatness*. On Taylor's argument, this rejection of morality's *thatness* should unmoor all conceptions of morality's *whatness*, and the incoherence of those who adopt the doctrine of moral subjectivity lies in the fact that, even as they reject morality's *thatness*, they continue to argue seriously about its *whatnesss*.

The sense of what I mean here can be clarified with reference to theology. For example, different people might agree *that* God exists, but they might also disagree as to *what* God is, *what* God's existence means to human beings, and how we might hope to acquire answers to such questions. In this sense, accepting the *thatness* of God would open up a field of discourse within which it would make sense to speak about such issues—indeed, accepting God's *thatness* would make this kind of speech into an existential necessity. At the other end of the spectrum, however, atheism would consist in the claim that there is no *thatness* to God, and from the context of this rejection, all discussion concerning the proper *whatness* of God should appear as irrelevant, nothing more than one arbitrary opinion deploying pseudo-rationality against some other equally arbitrary opinion. In this context, meanwhile, the doctrine of the subjectivity of values *should* mean to morality what atheism means to theology. In other words, this doctrine is not an argument for one understanding of morality's *whatness* in opposition to some other understanding. It is instead an argument against the *thatness* of the entire field of discussion. More precisely, just as we immediately recognize that there is no point in arguing whether a preference for broccoli or a preference for cauliflower is more true, or whether it is rationally coherent to enjoy eating these two different vegetables at the same time—so too should those who adopt the doctrine of the subjectivity of values refuse to engage in all argumentation concerning what values are true, or whether it is consistent to hold this or that value at the same time. However, as Taylor puts it, even as people like Russell adopt the doctrine of moral subjectivity, they "go on arguing like the rest of us about what objects are fit and what reactions are appropriate."[28]

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philosophy. ... Though I believe we have good reason to reject a radically subjective account of value it is far from clear what a reasonably complete and defensible nonsubjective account will look like" (47). I would argue that the language of "objectivity" obfuscates the issue; this kind of language makes one think that, in order to escape the consequences of "a radically subjective account," one must figure out the *true whatness* of value, some code of value written into the ground of reality. The language of *thatness*, by contrast, implies the same critique of radical subjectivity, but without the implicit ideal of figuring out the true *whatness* of the good.

[28] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9.

For Taylor, the fact that these philosophers continue to argue about morality is more significant than the fact that their own overt positions should not allow such arguments at all. In fact, Taylor insists that these arguments point to the serious moral concern that lies at the root of the naturalist worldview, which is grounded in a series of entirely valid observations concerning the ways that trying to articulate a moral ontology can distort our approach to the *whatness* of the good. For example, Taylor notes that naturalists have recognized that ontological accounts of our moral inclinations have often been used to exclude certain groups from moral consideration—women, slaves, foreigners, etc. —and that this recognition has led to the idea that moral ontology is immoral, serving only to artificially limit the proper universal scope of moral concern. This distrust is often strengthened by "a primitivist sense that unspoiled human nature respects life by instinct,"[29] with the concomitant idea that moral ontology can serve only to artificially distort the expression of this innate goodness. Finally, Taylor notes that "the pluralist nature of modern society makes it easier to live"[30] if we don't bother talking about moral ontology. In other words, we suppress talking about the deep sources of our moral commitments because we get angry at each other when we do talk about such things, and this anger can make it difficult for people from different cultures to live together in peace.[31] For his part, Taylor would support these criticisms of a certain approach to moral ontology. However, he would also argue that these criticisms do not work except by implying an alternative moral ontology—and that the naturalist refusal to acknowledge this, out of a misplaced commitment to a constricted naturalist vision of rationality, is stifling to serious moral discussion.

I would suggest, however, that Taylor's own arguments here lead to another danger, the danger of nihilism, to which Taylor has not adequately responded. Basically, if Taylor's criticisms produce their desired effect in their desired audience, there would still be two possible ways to respond to the ensuing crisis: we could either stick to the doctrine of moral subjectivity, in which

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[29] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.

[30] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 10.

[31] Socrates articulates the reason for this beautifully in the *Euthyphro*: "What subjects of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?" (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 7d). On a side note, the reason Socrates recommends the study of math before the study of philosophy is that studying math will train us to think rationally concerning a relatively neutral subject, such that when we turn our attention to subjects we actually care about—what is good and what is bad—we will be better able to discern the logical flow of ideas through the distorting haze of our own desires (re. *Republic* 525d-527e).

case we would have to struggle to purify our practice of rationality from the tendency to make such moral arguments; or, alternatively, we could drop the doctrine of moral subjectivity and strive to understand the ontological implications involved in the seriousness of our own implicit moral commitments. In chapter five, I will present Nietzsche as encouraging the first path, as trying to compel modern naturalist culture to live up to the hot and living consequences of what it *actually* means to deny the *thatness* of the good. In contrast to this, Taylor would be pointing to the same incoherence as Nietzsche, but in the hope of moving his naturalist interlocutors in the opposite direction, to have them revise their understanding of reality in light of their own recalcitrant concern for moral goodness.[32] Thus, when Taylor observes that the naturalist rejection of moral ontology is grounded not only in a scientific epistemology but also in "strong (if unadmitted) moral reasons,"[33] his intention is not Nietzschean—to compel his naturalist interlocutors to purge themselves of their latent moral feelings, reliant as they are on a now-debunked religious metaphysics. Instead, Taylor's intention is to liberate these moral sources from the stifling influence of a naturalist epistemology, one that Taylor would say has overstepped its proper limits.[34]

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[32] My sense that Taylor and Nietzsche are adopting opposite responses to the same inconsistency comes from the work of theologian John Haught, who uses Nietzsche to give voice to a similar critique of the so-called New Atheists. Basically, Haught argues that Nietzsche pushes the atheist position towards its logical conclusions, and that the New Atheists are only able to hold onto their understanding by avoiding these extremes. As Haught puts it, for the "really hard-core atheists" like Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche, embracing atheism is understood as demanding a "radical transformation of human culture and consciousness" (Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 19-20), and all three of these thinkers eventually concluded that "it would take a super-human effort to embrace [atheism]," and that "most people will be too weak to accept the terrifying consequences of the death of God," even if "anything less would be escapism, cowardice, and bad faith" (20). In contrast to this, the "soft-core atheism" propounded by the New Atheists would leave our own cultural world more or less intact: "[t]hey would have the God religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—simply disappear, after which we should be able to go on enjoying the same lifestyle as before, only without the nuisance of suicide bombers and TV evangelists" (20). I have tried to avoid the language of theism/atheism in explicating my own position, relying instead on a different set of contrasting philosophical positions: again, the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, as derived from naturalist epistemology, *should* lead to a nihilistic rejection of morality, but its proponents avoid this consequence by avoiding the kind of hot and living reflection that leads to this conclusion.

[33] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 60.

[34] For a different account of the relationship between Taylor and Nietzsche, see Simon Robertson and David Owen's essay, "Influence on Analytic Philosophy" (in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 185-206). On this account, Taylor adopts Nietzsche's practice of genealogy, as the proper way to make moral arguments, but he rejects the specific genealogy Nietzsche offers. The main difference between Nietzsche's genealogy and Taylor's lies in their different approaches to religion. As Ruth Abbey puts it in *Charles Taylor*: "Taylor is not just saying that Christianity has been an important moral source, but that making contact with such a constitutive moral good empowers, inspires and commands love. In this regard, his genealogy of morality differs markedly from that of Nietzsche, who claimed that tracing the history and returning to the wellsprings of current moral outlooks or standards can reveal how far they have mutated from their origin. Taylor, by contrast, suggests that such genealogical practice has the potential to inspire by reconnecting modern moral values to their constitutive source in theism" (Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 51).

My critique of Taylor, then, is that his project in *Sources of the Self*—to expose the incoherence and then articulate a map of the moral landscape that naturalists are probably unconsciously relying on—does not deal adequately with the danger of this Nietzschean denial. More generally, I would suggest that any argument for the incoherence of *any* vision of the *whatness* of the good must be accompanied by equally powerful rhetoric in support of the *thatness* of the good, lest the spiritual crisis instigated by the initial destructive argument lead not to the eucatastrophe of a genuine philosophical search, but rather to the dyscatastrophe of dialectic that Plato describes so evocatively in book VII of the *Republic*—when a newfound awareness of the incoherence of our own culturally inculcated approach to morality is combined with a rejection of the *thatness* of morality *as such*, which can easily lead to a cynical loss of belief in the rational possibility of morality.

3. Inverse Theodicy and Naturalist Moral Philosophy

Do we follow Nietzsche, and reject morality in the name of naturalism, or do we follow Taylor, and revise our naturalism in light of our concern for morality? This would be another way of describing the choice between the ontology of mystery and the ontology of war. On the one hand, in the face of the catastrophic realization that our own commitment to morality is inconsistent with our naturalist worldview, the ontology of mystery would involve recognizing the *thatness* of morality, as the presupposition necessary for a search for a better understanding of morality's *whatness* to make sense.[35] On the other hand, the path of the ontology of war would involve a hot and living embrace of what it means to reject the *thatness* of the good. However, the question of the *thatness* of the good will only appear spiritually relevant if we have first recognized that there

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This difference could also be described in terms of the language of *thatness* and *whatness*: Nietzsche rejects the *thatness* of the good, in which case the genealogical unravelling of our moral commitments must reveal how all visions of morality's *whatness* are fundamentally grounded in non-moral realities; Taylor, by contrast, accepts the *thatness* of the good, which means that the practice of genealogical unravelling would actually serve to *reconnect* us to an ontological source of goodness which has become distorted and corrupted in its articulation as a relatively defined *whatness*.

[35] This way of describing the *thatness* of the good resonates with the Learner's Paradox from Plato's *Meno*: as Socrates puts it, "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for" (*Meno*, 80e). According to Socrates's perspective, the doctrine of the subjectivity of values would represent a failure in the face of this paradox, insofar as those who accept this thesis *should* not see any point in inquiring after the truth with regard to values.

is indeed a legitimate incoherence here—and, according to Taylor, much naturalist moral philosophy involves constructing ways to avoid such recognition.[36] As such, in addition to the two horns of this dilemma described above, we must also describe a third option: the path of avoidance, either as the refusal to think too deeply about such issues, or else as the construction of some kind of philosophical justification for how one can reject the *thatness* of morality and yet continue to take its *whatness* seriously. The former strategy would involve the practice of "misology," or hatred of reason.[37] The latter strategy would involve what I defined in chapter one as "inverse theodicy," as the attempt to account for the existence of goodness within a reality that one has already decided is fundamentally indifferent.

A good example of this can be found in J. L. Mackie's *Ethics*. Mackie lays out the same moral thesis as Russell and Joshi, expressed in the language of objectivity: "[o]ne way of stating the thesis that there are no objective values is to say that value statements cannot be either true or

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[36] Fergus Kerr offers a critique of Taylor's kind of moral philosophy in his essay "Taylor's Moral Ontology": "[T]he kind of personal recognition of some good for human beings which springs from some other than purely human source … has to be spelled out in instances of ordinary everyday discriminations. So much of Taylor's effort goes into showing how philosophical preconceptions seductively prevent us from seeing how much our moral reactions are prompted, commanded, or inspired by something 'objectively' good that he does not get around to discussing moral dilemmas in any detail" (Fergus Kerr, "Taylor's Moral Ontology," 102). In response to this, Taylor would argue that the only reason it makes any sense to argue about different approaches to the *whatness* of the good is because we have implicitly presupposed its *thatness*—but naturalist moral philosophy explicitly denies this *thatness*. Taylor's argument is oriented towards raising this inconsistency to the level of conscious awareness—and then persuading us to opt for our implicit presupposition over our explicit denial. As for Kerr's critique, I will respond to it in chapter six, as the attempt to bring this discussion of ontological sources back into the context of everyday life in a relatively peaceful society, in which it will often be difficult to discern what morality actually entails.

[37] Heidegger offers praise for the path of avoidance in his commentary on the work of Nietzsche: "Unequivocal rejection of all philosophy is an attitude that always deserves respect, for it contains more of philosophy than it itself knows" (Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes 3 and 4*, 9). This rejection of philosophy would be worthy of respect, because it implies an awareness of the serious existential danger involved in unearthing this kind of problem. Jean-François Lyotard opens his *Inhuman* with a similar observation: "Humanism administers lessons to 'us' (?). In a million ways, often mutually incompatible. Well founded (Apel) and nonfounded (Rorty), counterfactual (Habermas, Rawls) and pragmatic (Searle), psychological (Davidson) and ethico-political (the French neo-humanists). But always as if at least man were a certain value, which has no need to be interrogated. … What *value* is, what *sure* is, what *man* is, these questions are taken to be dangerous and shut away again pretty fast. It is said that they open the way to 'anything goes', 'anything is possible', 'all is worthless.' Look, they add, what happens to the ones who go beyond this limit: Nietzsche taken hostage by fascist mythology, Heidegger a Nazi, and so on…" (Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 1). Lyotard is describing the danger of dialectic that Plato diagnoses in the *Republic*; I would argue that philosophy only leads to the nihilistic "all is worthless" position if we continue to presuppose the ontology of war from within the catastrophe. This is certainly true of Nietzsche. Heidegger, however, seems to have moved through the ontology of war through his engagement with Nietzsche's philosophy, and his criticism that Nietzsche has actually produced the final metaphysics, the metaphysics of the will to power. I will touch on this at the end of chapter four.

false."[38] Mackie insists, however, that it is possible to have rational discussions about the proper *whatness* of morality despite this view. Mackie uses the term "first order views" to refer to talk of the *whatness* of morality, and he uses the term "second order views" to refer "the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world" —the kind of discourse that Taylor refers to with the term "moral ontology." Using this language, Mackie's surprising position is that these "first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way around."[39] Basically, Mackie thinks that one can believe that all moral positions are ontologically groundless (reject the *thatness* of morality), and at the same time seriously argue concerning this or that first order moral system (the *whatness* of morality).[40]

Taylor refers to Mackie's theory as a "projection" view, the idea that "[g]oods or 'values' [are] understood as projections of ours onto a world which in itself [is] neutral,"[41] and he insists that this kind of theory should "have a devastating effect on first-order morality."[42] Indeed, Taylor argues that this "is the sense that everyone has before they are got to by philosophical rationalizations—that what they count with as they live—goods and the demands they make—is flatly incompatible with a projection view." According to Taylor, however, those who adopt a projectionist view will almost always "forget or fudge the fact that non-realism undermines morality," often by trying to derive our experience of moral obligation from some kind of "scientific rationality," on the grounds that "some rules [are] more conducive to survival and

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[38] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, NY: Penguin, 1977), 25; even those who adopt the language of "objective values" often end up grounding this objectivity in a higher-order subjectivity. Consider Susan Wolf's understanding of the "objectivity" of values in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*: "[o]ur interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in *feeling* a certain way, but rather an interest that it *be* a certain way, specifically, that it be one that can be appropriately appreciated, admired, or valued by others" (Wolf, *The Meaning of Life and Why it Matters*, 32). Wolf here equates "being" with "being appreciated, admired or valued by others." But with this, her concept of "objectivity" turns out to simply measure an individual's subjective commitment to the higher-order subjective standards of this or that culture. As such, Wolf's theory cannot offer any help when thinking about the phenomenon of Nazi Germany, where being "appreciated, admired or valued by others" entails committing the kind of horrendous acts to which this culture imputed value.

[39] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 16.

[40] S. T. Joshi's articulation of this position is useful here: "*moral relativism is not itself an ethical system, but an analysis of ethical systems*" (Joshi, *The Unbelievers*, 228). The pertinent question, of course, is whether the scientific analysis of ethical systems has any relationship to the particular ethical system we adopt: Mackie (and Joshi) insist that it does not. As I will argue, however, Mackie actually *relies* upon a link between second order analysis and first order ethics in his argument for disenchantment. This would be an example of the incoherence Taylor notices: the fact that naturalist moral philosophers generally end up practicing, in an *ad hoc* way, the very kind of moral philosophy they explicitly reject.

[41] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 53.

[42] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59.

general happiness, which we can assume are widely sought ends."[43] In this sense, the practice of "inverse theodicy" would involve this capacity to "forget or fudge" the "sense that everyone has before they are got to by philosophical rationalizations" that the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, as a moral ontology, should have a "devastating effect on first-order morality." Looked at from a positive light, however, the practice of inverse theodicy would also be protecting the seriousness of naturalist moral belief from the acid of an ontological position that *should* undermine such belief.[44]

In the following two sections, I will consider two examples of inverse theodicy, as it appears in the work of Daniel Dennett and J. L. Mackie. In Dennett, we will see an example of the attempt to derive a new scientific morality from the observation that "some rules [are] more conducive to survival and general happiness"[45] —such that, despite the truth of the ontology of war, we will still be able to justify our own serious commitment to the project of improving the world. In Mackie, meanwhile, we will see an argument that I will refer to as the "inverse theodicy of disenchantment," whereby universal acceptance of the ontology of war is seen as helping to inaugurate an era of universal peace and prosperity. In examining these inverse theodicies— these naturalist visions of the *whatness* of the good—I will argue, in line with both Taylor and Nietzsche, that these positions are fundamentally incoherent.[46] However, my response to this

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[43] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59-60.

[44] In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche adopts such a projectionist view of human valuing: "*The 'in itself'*. —Formerly we asked: what is the laughable? as though there were things external to us to which the laughable adhered as a quality, and we exhausted ourselves in suggestions …. Now we ask: what is laughter? How does laughter originate? We have thought the matter over and finally decided that there is nothing good, nothing beautiful, nothing sublime, nothing evil in itself, but that there are states of soul in which we impose such words upon things external to and within us. We have again *taken back* the predicates of things, or at least remembered that it was we who *lent* them to them: — let us take care that this insight does not deprive us of the *capacity* to lend, and that we have not become at the same time *richer* and *greedier*" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §210). My own response to this problem will be to argue that it is wrong to think that "goodness" inheres in the *whatness* of reality, as an objective quality that we could discover in things. Goodness is rather a *thatness* that shines through our experience, to the extent that we are attuned to it. In this way, goodness is neither an "objective" quality of the objects of the external world, nor a subjective projection onto an inherently neutral world, but is rather a mysterious ontological reality to which we can respond, or fail to respond, in the decisions we make in our lives.

[45] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59-60.

[46] My distinction between the hot and living engagement with the dilemma recognized by Nietzsche/Taylor, and the way the horns of this dilemma are blunted by inverse theodicy, is similar to the distinction between active nihilism and passive nihilism, as discussed in many continental interpretations of Nietzsche's oeuvre. Consider Gianni Vattimo's discussion in *Dialogue with Nietzsche*: "Passive nihilism in its various historical forms has always made a point of appearing to say yes, since its aim was to conceal the void at the core of everything that was esteemed as Being, value, fixed structure. … [R]eaction as the invention of every sort of disguise and ideological mask is one of the stances that refuses to admit that neither *objective* meanings and values nor *given* structures of Being exist—and that therefore they have to be actively created" (Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 135). In my language, the

incoherence will follow Taylor's line: that the felt necessity of protecting themselves against the immoral consequences of their own moral ontology should be understood as one of the ways that an implicit belief in the *thatness* of the good continues to manifest within the confines of a naturalist worldview that explicitly denies this belief. In this sense, my intention in exposing the logical failings of these positions, and thereby undermining various naturalist approaches to the *whatness* of the good, is meant as a preliminary move for the argument that I will make over the remainder of this work: an argument for the reality of a mysterious *thatness* to the good, set against the ontology of war that naturalist culture has misapprehended as an unprecedented scientific discovery.

4. Daniel Dennett's Scientific Morality

Unlike Mackie, who sunders first and second order moral discourse, Dennett fully accepts that the *whatness* of our moral commitment depends on the way we think morality fits into reality as a whole: as Dennett puts it, we need "to unify our world-view so that our ethical principles don't clash irrationally with the way the world *is*."[47] For Dennett, of course, "the way the world *is*" means the way the world manifests to modern science, which means that his project ultimately coalesces into an attempt to unify morality with the theory of evolution.[48] In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, for example, Dennett tries to clear up what he sees as the persistent misinterpretation of this theory—which he thinks has promoted "a loathing so great that it will excuse any illogicality and tolerate any opacity in what purports to be an argument, if its bottom

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practice of "inverse theodicy" would be a form of "passive nihilism," in that it covers over the immediate and devastating moral consequences of claiming that morality is just a projection onto an inherently neutral world. However, Nietzsche's own response to this—that we should practice an "active nihilism" that "doesn't stop at unmasking the hollowness of all meanings, structures, and values but goes on to produce and create new values and new structures of meaning, new interpretation" —would exacerbate the disaster. Instead, we should follow the path of people like Taylor, for whom "the hollowness of all meanings" would be an illusion created by naturalistic epistemology.

[47] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 468.

[48] My goal in this thesis is not to provide a clear account of how the ontology of mystery would relate to modern evolutionary biology. Instead, my argument here will simply explore the incoherence in trying to use the theory of evolution as a moral ontology. However, if I were to continue in this vein, I would focus on the question of being: basically, Dennett's view of "the way the world *is*" is unnecessarily truncated; if we expand our understanding of being, the question of how morality fits into reality would transform accordingly. For a good exploration of how the theory of evolution might fit into such a larger worldview, see the works of theologian John Haught: *Is Nature Enough?*, or *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life*.

line promises relief from the oppressions of Darwinism."[49] As an example of such a misinterpretation, Dennett offers biologist E. O. Wilson's claim that evolution entails the view that "[m]orality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends," or that "ethics as we know it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate."[50] This is one way of articulating the position I defined in chapter one as the ontology of war, and which I argued should render serious commitment to morality derisory.

To his credit, Dennett staunchly rejects this interpretation of the theory of evolution. Dennett refers to Wilson's interpretation as the genetic fallacy: "[i]t does not follow from the fact that our reproductive ends were the ultimate historical *source* of our present values, that they are the ultimate (and still principle) *beneficiary* of our ethical actions."[51] Basically, even if morality might have originated in evolutionary struggle, this fact about its origin does not limit the ends to which we are now able, freely, to direct our own moral lives in the present.[52] Thus, even if the

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[49] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 321.

[50] Ruse and Wilson, "The Evolution of Ethics," quoted in Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 470.

[51] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 470.

[52] In his *Atheist's Guide to Reality*, Alex Rosenberg presents a different response to this same problem: he argues that even though morality is indeed an illusion, this realization is irrelevant—because philosophical reflection itself is powerless to affect the way we act. Basically, Rosenberg argues that we get our understanding of the *whatness* of morality from biology, and that it is impossible for philosophical reflection to affect this biological substratum: as he puts it, "almost all of us, no matter what our scientific, scientistic, or theological beliefs, are committed to the same basic morality and values" (Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, 95). This is why Rosenberg sees fit to dub his position "nice nihilism": because even though nihilism is true, the truth of nihilism is irrelevant. Drawing out the consequences of this, Rosenberg argues that differences in moral goodness are reducible to biology: "If we were selected for niceness, how come there are so many … serial killers, moral monsters, and Adolf Hitlers? Biology has the answer. Remember, perhaps the most profound of Darwin's observations was that there is always some variation in most heritable traits in every generation. … In every generation, there are going to be a few people who are too nice and get walked on and a few people who are not nice at all—saints and sociopaths" (142). He concludes by arguing that "nice nihilism" is still amenable to the idea of moral progress: "Once it's saddled with nihilism, can scientism make room for the moral progress that most of us want the world to make? No problem. Recall the point … that even most Nazis may have really shared a common moral code with us. The qualification 'most' reflects the fact that a lot of them, especially at the top of the SS, were just psychopaths and sociopaths with no core morality. Where most Nazis 'went wrong' was in the idiotic beliefs about race and a lot of other things they combined with core morality, resulting in a catastrophe for their victims and for Germany. … Scientism allows for moral 'improvement'. It's a matter of combining the core morality that evolution has inflicted on us with true beliefs vouched safe for us by science" (143-44). The reason 'improvement' is in brackets, again, is that for Rosenberg, nihilism is true, so in reality, talk about moral 'improvement' is not actually sensible: "Nihilism rejects the distinction between acts that are morally permitted, morally forbidden, and morally required. Nihilism tells us not that we can't know which moral judgments are right, but that they are all wrong. … Nihilism says that the whole idea of 'morally permissible' is untenable nonsense." Rosenberg's position is so extreme that his book reads almost like a parody of scientism. That being said, the utterly unqualified extremity of his position also makes it useful. In other words, I would say that Rosenberg *is right* about what it means to fully adopt a naturalist understanding of reality; his error is to then adopt this understanding as the truth.

thatness of morality *as such* first emerged into reality as an adaptation to help certain genes reproduce, this raw fact does not make any difference to the *whatness* of the morality that we choose to follow today. In a sense, this line of argument recapitulates Mackie's claim that first and second order morality are "completely independent," insofar as Dennett has effectively stated that the ontological origin of morality makes no difference to the way we direct our moral intentions now. Armed with this interpretation, Dennett sees no problem in accepting the truth of the theory of evolution—which shows us that the *thatness* of morality emerged as the result of a blind mechanistic struggle for survival and reproduction—and at the same time earnestly exhorting us to use our freedom to create "a world at peace, with as little suffering as we can manage, with freedom and justice and well-being and meaning for all,"[53] in the name of such "sacred values" as "democracy, justice, life, love, and truth."[54] This would be Dennett's own high-minded approach to morality's *whatness*.

To be clear, my disagreement with Dennett does not concern the *whatness* of these sacred values, nor with his political goal of promoting a peaceful and prosperous world for all. My disagreement deals instead with the moral ontology upon which Dennett hopes to ground these sacred values. How, in other words, are we to make sense of these values from within the naturalist cosmos for which Dennett argues so strenuously? In his atheist polemic *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett's interpretation of J. M. Balkin's concept of "transcendent value" sheds light on the way Dennett tries to make sense of this issue. In *Cultural Software*, J. M. Balkin argues that the concept of "justice" only makes sense if understood in terms of a relationship between a concrete, culturally imbricated understanding of the term and a mysterious "transcendent value" towards which the members of that culture hearken. In Balkin's words, a transcendent value is "[a] value that can never be perfectly realized and against which all concrete articulations and exemplifications remain imperfect or incomplete"; it is "inchoate and indeterminate," a value "which human beings must articulate through culture but which is never fulfilled"; we can "attempt to realize and understand a transcendent value through its articulations in culture," but "these articulations are always incomplete and imperfect."[55] In effect, Balkin is arguing that concepts like justice, goodness, and morality only makes sense when split between an inchoate

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[53] Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Toronto, Penguin, 2006), 17.
[54] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 23.
[55] J. M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: a Theory of Ideology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 144.

and indeterminate transcendent concern (*thatness*) towards which people would aspire as they give shape to their lives and their cultural institutions (*whatness*).

In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett praises Balkin's concept of "transcendent values" as providing a "middle-position," between "a *moral relativism* that holds that *whatever* a particular culture approves of—polygamy, slavery, infanticide, cliterodectomy, you name it—is beyond rational criticism," and an "imperialist universalism" that hubristically presumes itself to already know the truth and conceives of its relationship to other cultures in terms of a project to convert everyone else to its own supposedly "universal" perspective.[56] In the language of *whatness* and *thatness*, moral relativism would be equivalent to the doctrine of moral subjectivity, the idea that the *whatness* of the good is entirely defined by culture, entirely independent of the way reality actually *is*. On the other hand, imperialist universalism would entail the idea that my own culture's vision of the *whatness* of the good is a steady reflection of its ontological *thatness*. According to Taylor, one of the moral motivations behind the naturalist rejection of moral ontology would be to undercut the appeal of this kind of hubristic claim to know the truth about the good.[57] As for Balkin, his position is that intercultural dialogue concerning justice is only possible if all parties orient themselves in light of an inchoate and indeterminate "transcendent value" —or, as I would put it, that dialogue concerning the proper *whatness* of justice only works if all parties acknowledge that they do not know the true *whatness* of justice, but also remain honestly concerned with the *thatness* of the topic under discussion.

For his part, Dennett presents his own philosophy as an example of Balkin's virtuous "middle position." However, it quickly becomes apparent that Dennett's understanding of "transcendent value" is quite different from Balkin's:

> [s]uccess [in the dialogue] does depend on the participants' sharing, and knowing they share, two *transcendent* values of truth and justice. What this means is only that both parties accept that these values are inescapably presupposed by the human projects that *we all* participate in, simply by being alive: the projects of

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[56] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 375.
[57] It is worth pointing out that Balkin basically sees Plato as one of these "imperialist universalists," promoting "a determinate and universal norm of Justice by which human institutions can be judged and found wanting" (Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 144). In chapter five, I will argue that this common interpretation of Plato is misguided, and that Plato would be better understood as pointing in the same direction that Balkin himself is pointing with his concept of "transcendent value."

> *staying alive*, and staying *secure*. Nothing more parochial need be assumed, and even "Martians" should be able to agree on this.[58]

Here, in this short passage, we see the trick that Taylor suggests is common in naturalist moral philosophy, whereby a scientific explanation of morality is subtly transformed into a moral ontology upon which a new, scientific approach to the *whatness* of moral life is to be built. In short, life and security are not being offered here as part of a scientific explanation of how our felt commitment to such values as truth and justice could have emerged from the mechanics of natural selection. They are instead being presented as inescapable human projects from which the trans-cultural values of truth and justice can themselves be derived—and, indeed, *must* be derived for anyone who wants to take part in the intercultural dialogue. This, then, is Dennett's moral ontology, the way Dennett tries to link his naturalist worldview to the *whatness* of his moral commitment to such "sacred values" as "democracy, justice, life, love, and truth."[59] For Dennett, this or that understanding of the *whatness* of justice would be valid to the extent that it promotes the projects of staying alive and staying secure.

I will offer two arguments against this moral ontology. First, I will argue that "*staying alive*" and "staying *secure*" cannot ground our adherence to truth and justice because, in situations of war, deception and injustice can be more useful at promoting these ends. Second, I will argue that, for those who accept the ontology of war, the idea that our commitment to truth and justice is grounded on the project of staying alive can actually undermine our capacity to *survive* in situations of extreme suffering. Again, however, my purpose in exposing these problems with Dennett's understanding is not to argue that it would be rational to dispense with our concern for truth and justice in those situations in which these come into conflict with the rational projects of life and security. My goal is rather to argue that this particular moral ontology cannot possibly account for our commitment to morality, at least in those extreme circumstances when the projects of life and security come into direct conflict with the goods of truth and justice. Ultimately, I aim at something akin to what Socrates articulates in Plato's *Gorgias*:

> [M]y blessed man, please see whether what's noble and what's good isn't something other than preserving and being preserved. Perhaps one who is truly a man should stop thinking about how long he will live. He should not be attached

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[58] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 376.
[59] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 23.

to life but should commit these concerns to the god and believe the women who say that not a single person can escape fate. He should thereupon give consideration to how he might live the part of his life still before him as well as possible.[60]

To be fair, Dennett is not claiming that justice ("what's good") *is* life/security ("preserving and being preserved"), but rather that our commitment to justice is "inescapably presupposed" by our inescapable commitment to the project of staying alive and safe. Regardless of these differences, however, Socrates certainly seems to be giving voice to an understanding of justice that makes no sense within Dennett's naturalist view of reality: that justice is ultimately more important than life, because everyone agrees that justice is important, and there is only one account of justice that "survives refutation and remains steady: that doing what's unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it's not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything."[61] Alternatively, as Socrates puts it earlier in the dialogue, "I don't know how these things are, but no one I've ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous."[62] My purpose in the next section will be to show how Dennett is indeed saying something "ridiculous" when he claims that the values of truth and justice are "presupposed" by the projects of staying alive and secure. This criticism, however, will function only as a preliminary step to the more important argument: that Dennett himself already believes in the *thatness* of justice, which is inescapably presupposed by his own obvious concern for the sacred values of "democracy, justice, life, love, and truth" —and that Dennett himself is relying on an "illogicality," tolerating an "opacity in what purports to be an argument," in order to relieve *himself* "from the oppressions of Darwinism."[63]

5. Life and Security as Moral Ontology

The essence of my first criticism can be found in Hobbes' *Leviathan*: "Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the

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[60] Plato, *Gorgias*, 512d-e.
[61] Plato, *Gorgias*, 527b.
[62] Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a.
[63] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 321.

two Cardinall vertues."[64] Basically, even if it is true that the values of truth and justice are useful for promoting life and security under conditions of peace and prosperity, the opposite seems to be the case under conditions of war.[65] It would seem, in other words, that the projects of staying alive and secure would only promote truth and justice sometimes, and would promote "force and fraud" at other times. Indeed, it would seem that in situations of dreadful tribulation, Dennett's moral ontology would promote immorality as superior to morality—with the caveat, of course, that the meaning of 'morality' and 'immorality' would transform for anyone who engaged in the intercultural dialogue that Dennett envisages: basically, if doing what promotes life and security is understood as the ground of our commitment to morality, then force and fraud would presumably become moral during times of war.

For a concrete example of the problem I am alluding to here, we might consider Arendt's reflections on how morality operated under the Nazi regime, when acting morally sometimes entailed not just the threat of death, but its absolute inevitability. Arendt describes an episode from Gűnther Weisenborn's *Der lautlose Aufstand* [The Silent Revolt], which describes the fate of "two peasant boys … who were drafted into the S.S. at the end of the war and refused to sign." The boys "were sentenced to death." In their last letter home, written on the day of their execution, they explained their rationale as follows: "We two would rather die than burden our conscience with such terrible things. We know what the S.S. must carry out."[66] Now, it might be entirely possible to construct an evolutionary account of the origin of the altruistic drive, which might explain why these two boys felt that they would rather die than join the S.S. The pertinent question, however, is whether it would make sense for these boys to commit their lives in this way if they themselves were operating under the aegis of a moral ontology that saw the goods of

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[64] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by C. B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), I.13, p. 188.

[65] In chapter four, I will introduce this same critique in terms of Nietzsche's radicalization of the moral philosophy of David Hume. In brief, Hume argues that "public utility" is "the *sole* origin of justice" and of the "the moral approbation paid to fidelity, justice, veracity, integrity, and those other estimable and useful qualities" (Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 737). Nietzsche *agrees* that public utility is the *sole* origin of these moral judgments, but criticizes Hume for reifying those values that happen to be socially useful in his own time and place into universal values. With regard to Dennett, Nietzsche would ask him to consider what kind of "transcendent values" the projects of life and security might give rise to under different conditions of existence—and, for that matter, what does it mean if we start consciously trying to adapt our understanding of morality to accommodate the projects of staying alive and staying secure within ever-changing historical conditions.

[66] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2006), 104.

truth and justice as grounded in the projects of staying alive and staying secure.[67] At the very least, it certainly *seems* that willingly accepting death in the name of a project of staying alive does not make sense.

Dennett's moral ontology also runs into problems in living up to its own stated goal—because, under conditions of extreme suffering, it is possible that our commitment to truth will come into conflict with our project of staying alive. Consider, for example, Jean Améry's description of the survival benefits conferred by religious faith in the hell of the Nazi death camps. Améry writes that his "religiously and politically committed comrades … survived better or died with more dignity than their irreligious or unpolitical intellectual comrades, who were often infinitely better educated and more practiced in exact thinking."[68] However, even as he acknowledges the survival advantages conferred by faith under such circumstances, Améry himself is unable to reap the benefits: "Mostly [the sceptic-intellectual] turned away and said to himself: an admirable and redeeming illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. … One could respect one's believing comrades and still more than once mutter to oneself with a shake of the head: madness, what madness!"[69]

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[67] Herman Philipse's essay "God, Ethics, and Evolution" (in *God, Goodness, and Philosophy*, ed. Harriet A. Harris, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011; 131-161) provides another good example of the conflict between the rationality of scientific arguments and the rationality involved in moral ontology. In this essay, Philipse rejects Francis Collins' claim that "the occurrence of genuinely unselfish altruism in humans cannot be accounted for by evolutionary models, such as kin selection or tit-for-tat" (Philipse 131). Philipse argues that this claim is nonsense, and he proceeds to delineate a number of possible ways to explain our desire to be altruistic from an evolutionary perspective. For Philipse, there is only one condition he needs to fulfill to produce a successful argument: produce a scientific theory that will explain our desire to be good as an aspect of an impersonal evolutionary mechanism. Collins, by contrast, is trying to explain how those who accept the truth of the theory of evolution can still take their desire to be good seriously. The following passage from Philipse's essay is telling: "Because of genetic variation and upbringing, the altruistic urge will be much stronger in one human being than in another. Oskar Schindler and Mother Theresa apparently had potent altruistic mechanisms" (Philipse 134). For Philipse, this counts as a possible explanation: genes and altruism just happen to have given some people a higher capacity for altruism; less altruistic people have simply not inherited this genetic predisposition. For Collins, by contrast, people like Schindler and Mother Theresa would have *become* altruistic because they consistently *chose* to follow the call of altruism over the call of selfishness, even in the face of great tribulation and personal risk. In this context, meanwhile, part of the purpose of "religious" discourse in general, and the appeal to "ancient martyrs" in particular, would be to help us to make this same choice in the context of our own lives. The "religious" critique of the theory of evolution, meanwhile, would be that this theory generally undermines our inspiration to follow the altruistic path. Thus, if Collins is arguing "that *no* secular or natural explanation of such phenomena is *possible*" (Phillipse 131), this would be because Collins does not think that any secular or natural explanation can function to inspire altruism even in the face of hardship. I agree entirely with this critique.

[68] Amery, *At the Mind's Limits* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 13.

[69] Amery, *At the Mind's Limits*, 15

Now, speaking as a scientist, Dennett would have no difficulty at all in applying Darwin's dangerous idea to Améry's observations concerning the survival benefits conferred by religious belief under conditions of extreme duress. Indeed, in his review of Walter Burkert's *Creation of the Sacred*, he offers the lineaments of just such a theory:

> [T]here also could be a genetic predisposition for the sort of hair-raising, bonetrembling awe that engulfs many of our conspecifics when they are given a religious experience. … Burkert offers an evolutionary scenario of a cascade of bottlenecks that could select for such genes. 'Although religious obsession could be called a form of paranoia, it does offer a chance of survival in extreme and hopeless situations, when others, possibly nonreligious individuals, would break down and give up. Mankind, in its long past, will have gone through many a desperate situation, with an ensuing breakthrough of *homines religiosi*.'[70]

As a scientific hypothesis, there is nothing wrong with proposing such things. Trouble arises, however, when we try to figure out what the reality implied by this theory would mean for the way we live our lives—in other words, when we try to turn our scientific theory into a new scientific moral ontology, as part of the attempt to harmonize the way we understand how reality *is* with the way we think human beings should live within this reality. At this point, we will have to consider whether our commitment to scientific truth might be damaging our capacity to survive—particularly if, like Dennett, we believe that our commitment to truth is grounded in the projects of staying alive and secure within an often dangerous world. If the scientific theory undermines the (illusory) religious faith that promotes the projects of life and security under conditions of extreme hardship, then (on Dennett's own terms) our commitment to rationality would be irrational.

In chapter five, I will examine Nietzsche's explorations of this line of thought in *The Gay Science*. Indeed, in that chapter, I will present this problem as one of the paradoxes within which the naturalist approach to reality begins to break apart. For the moment, we can consider Burkert's definition of "rationality" in *Creation of the Sacred*: "in our conscious world self-preservation appears to be the *conditio sine qua non* of existence and hence the ultimate goal that can be envisaged rationally."[71] On Améry's account, however, it seems that in certain extreme

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[70] Daniel Dennett, "The Evolution of Religious Memes: Who—or what—benefits?" from *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 10, 115-128; p. 122.

[71] Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 47-48.

situations, consciously adopting the "ultimate goal that can be envisaged rationally" would be *detrimental* to achieving this goal—because earnest belief in the existence of something more important than survival is more useful for survival than belief in the truth that Burkert thinks science has unveiled.[72] The essence of the problem might be put as follows: is it possible to admit intellectually that something is an illusion, and yet continue to reap the survival benefits offered by naïve belief in that illusion? If not, then the moral ideal that underlies the scientific project—truth—would undermine the project that morality itself is supposed to serve: life. In such extreme cases, therefore, the transcendental value of truth would undermine the project of staying alive, and the projects of life and security would be better served by illusion. Furthermore, given that we never know for certain what is going to happen in the future, it might even be prudent to cultivate a belief in the madness of religion, either in ourselves or in our culture, on the off-chance that we end up in one of the aforementioned bottlenecks.

6. Mackie's Inverse Theodicy of Disenchantment

Earlier, I introduced one aspect of Mackie's moral philosophy: that first and second order moral discourse are "completely independent," which would mean that morality's place within our vision of the cosmos would be irrelevant to our commitment to this or that first order moral system. However, in addition to this outright attempt to sunder ontology from morality, Mackie also offers an alternative argument in which he basically does exactly what he previously claimed is unnecessary. Namely, he constructs a scientific vision of first order morality on the basis of his own second order moral skepticism. I will henceforth refer to this as the "inverse

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[72] In *Is Nature Enough?*, John Haught offers a similar critique from a slightly different angle: "Is it possible in principle to give a fully naturalistic account of the mind's imperative to be responsible and at the same time declare in effect that the rest of us must adhere to the naturalist's rigid ethic of knowledge? Why is not the ethic of knowledge underlying the whole naturalistic project no less subject to naturalistic debunking than a religious one? The catch is that if the roots of the imperative to be responsible are ultimately biological, then the ethic of knowledge and the postulate of objectivity are themselves also exposed as purely adaptive, derived ultimately, for example, from selective pressures on gene populations" (Haught, *Is Nature Enough*, 153). Even if Dennett would criticize Haught's last point as an example of Wilson's "genetic fallacy" (that the origin of morality *per se* does not limit the aims towards which we can now direct our moral impulse in the present), the overall thrust of Haught's critique remains apt: if you try to ground a naturalist ethical system in the imperative to stay alive, then you will eventually have to deal with the fact that naturalism might sometimes be detrimental to the project of staying alive— in which case knowledge of the truth would undermine the biological imperative that (supposedly) grounds our desire for knowledge.

theodicy of disenchantment," a vision whereby universal peace is seen as best established through universal acceptance of Russell's doctrine of the subjectivity of values, which Mackie explicitly links to the position I have referred to as the ontology of war.

Mackie's argument for this begins from the acceptance of Plato's "wolf's side of the story," the idea that (in Mackie's words) "the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves who, as Locke says, keep faith and rules of justice with one another, but practice these as rules of convenience without which they cannot hold together, with no pretence of receiving them as innate laws of nature."[73] Unlike Plato, however, Mackie does not see this vision of morality as giving rise to brutal political cynicism.[74] On the contrary, Mackie presents it as leading to world peace, on the grounds that it is only when we have recognized that we "have no innate principles to guide us" that we will be motivated to "find principles of equity and ways of making and keeping agreements without which we cannot hold together."[75] In short, Mackie thinks that the belief that our own parochial values are rooted in the nature of reality makes it more difficult to find rational compromises, as people will be less willing to budge on moral principles that they take to be "objectively" true. Against this moral rigidity, therefore, Mackie argues that we must all accept the truth that values are really just projections upon a neutral background, just "rules of convenience" that humans have devised in order to build larger and more cohesive groups. As such, in response to Levinas' question at the beginning of *Totality and*

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[73] Mackie, *Ethics*, 10-11.

[74] For the kind of argument that might lead to Plato's denunciation of this position, we might consider Errol Morris' documentary *The Fog of War*, in which former U.S. secretary of defense Robert McNamara reminisces about the fire-bombing of Tokyo. Contemplating whether there was "a rule then that said you shouldn't bomb, shouldn't kill, shouldn't burn to death 100,000 civilians in a night," McNamara notes that the general in charge, Curtis Lemay, did recognize that "what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost" —whereupon McNamara poses the pertinent philosophical question: "what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?" According the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, the answer is that nothing makes something moral or immoral, because morality is just a matter of opinion; those who survive the war can define it however they see fit. Similarly, in Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing*, we are introduced to an old Indonesian man who, in his youth, participated in the death squads responsible for slaughtering over a million "communists" in 1965-66. When told that his acts would be viewed as "war-crimes" by the Geneva conventions, the old man defends himself by citing the doctrine of the subjectivity of values: "When Bush was in power, Guantanomo bay was right. Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. That was right according to Bush, but now it's wrong. The Geneva Conventions may be today's, but tomorrow we'll have the Jakarta Conventions and dump the Geneva Conventions. War crimes are defined by the winners. I'm a winner so I can make my own definitions." In other words, even though many people in our own culture might happen to prefer the "Geneva Conventions" to the so-called "Jakarta Conventions," any attempt to condemn someone like this old man by our standards would be rooted, ultimately, in nothing more than the brute fact that those who uphold the "Geneva conventions" are, at present, powerful enough to impose their own values onto those with whom they disagree.

[75] Mackie, *Ethics*, 239.

Infinity—as to whether we are duped by morality—Mackie might say that we are indeed duped, but only insofar as we think that our own first order morality is grounded in some second-order vision of the nature of reality. However, coming out of this second-order illusion would not mean that we lose our first-order moral commitments. Instead, the loss of this second-order illusion would simply give rise to greater moral fluidity, and this fluidity would in turn allow us the leeway to try to build better rules, such that (eventually) a group composed of the entire human race will be able to live on the entire earth together in peace.

In effect, Mackie sees two forces hindering the emergence of this peaceful global world: first, real objective conflict between different groups over scarce resources; and second, baseless subjective conflict over different understandings of the good. Science and technology can help solve the first conflict by creating conditions of universal material prosperity. Rational disenchantment, meanwhile, can solve the second, by convincing people of the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, which will reveal the substantive emptiness of all conflicts concerning questions of morality and goodness. More precisely, the idea that our own culture's parochial understanding of justice is somehow objectively true would be a vestigial remnant from a previous era in human history, when the Darwinian struggle between tribes required hard metaphysical beliefs for the sake of which its members would be willing to fight and die. In our own time, however, these old tribal belief systems have become counterproductive to human survival.[76] As such, promulgating the scientific truth of the ontology of war should help inaugurate a peaceful and prosperous world—since nobody will be willing to die for an idea they know is nothing more than an evolutionary ploy. As Mackie puts it, accepting the wolf's view of morality will help us "gradually reduce the artificial tension, leaving only the independent, prior clash of substantive interests to be adjusted."[77]

Interestingly, however, in the final paragraph of *Ethics*, Mackie himself introduces a potential problem with this vision: "[i]n so far as the objectification of moral values and obligations is not only a natural but also a useful fiction, it might be thought dangerous, and in any case unnecessary, to expose it as a fiction. This is disputable."[78] Here, Mackie is not pointing to the

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[76] See Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* for a systematically developed version of this idea, written in the context of the steadily worsening ecological catastrophe.
[77] Mackie, *Ethics*, 238.
[78] Mackie, *Ethics*, 239.

possibility that the wolf's ontology might be false. For Mackie, the wolf's ontology is given by science. It is the fixed horizon within which moral philosophy takes place, and it is beyond the ken of moral philosophy to call this ontology into question. In light of this, Mackie's objection would instead be pointing to the possibility that, even though the wolf's story remains true, the inverse theodicy of disenchantment might be politically naïve—because promulgating this particular ontological belief might undermine the faith in the metaphysical/ontological reality of justice that Mackie's own imagined band of outlaws relied upon in the struggle to survive in an often hostile world. This is similar to the second critique I leveled against Dennett's claim, that scientific skepticism can damage the faith that helps individuals survive under conditions of horror, which means that the project of staying alive might be benefited more by maintaining illusion than by promulgating what these thinkers take to be truth. By the logic of this vision, then, it would behoove the philosophically astute to keep this so-called "truth" of disenchantment an esoteric secret, while promoting political health by promulgating whatever metaphysical fictions their own group depended upon for its capacity to cooperate. In Mackie's terms, this would mean that first order morality would indeed depend upon second order morality, but since philosophy/science show that second order morality does not exist, it will be politically necessary to suppress the truth of philosophy/science in order to protect the politically necessary belief in first/second order morality.[79]

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[79] Even in the face of this possibility, one could still argue that, in the modern world, the power of science and technology has replaced the power of metaphysical belief. This kind of position can be found in several places in Bertrand Russell's work. For example, in "On the Value of Free Thought," Russell describes the difference between scientific and religious culture in terms of the difference between "free thinking" and "fanaticism." Russell first notes that one of the criticisms often leveled against "free thinking" is that "while free thought may be all very well in the abstract, it won't do in this actual world, because fanaticism is needed for victory in battle." He then proceeds to defend free thinking on the grounds that "scientific excellence … is the most important source of strength in modern war," such that "[i]n a war between a scientific and a fanatical nation, … the scientific nation is pretty sure to be victorious" (Russell, "The Value of Free Thought," in *Atheism: Collected Essays*, 23). Thus, while a previous generation of thinkers might have responded to this same insight by positing the aforementioned esoteric/exoteric split between the "truth" exposed by free inquiry (that morality is groundless) and the pragmatic political necessity of fostering belief in an illusory moral goodness—modern technology has made such cynical stratagems irrelevant. To be clear, however, this is not because there is indeed some mysterious moral ontology to which the *whatness* of morality can be referred, but rather because the power of science has now decisively replaced the power of fanaticism as a means of achieving victory in war. In a later work, *My Philosophical Development*, Russell expresses the same idea in a much darker register: "what modern physics has to say is somewhat confused. Nevertheless, we are bound to believe it on pain of death. If there were any community which rejected the doctrines of modern physics, physicists employed by a hostile government would have no difficulty in exterminating it" (Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, 17). This particular defence of the inverse theodicy of disenchantment, of course, draws the position much closer to an outright endorsement of the ontology of war: to wit, science is true only because it is stronger.

If I were arguing from within the universe implied by the ontology of war, my critique of Mackie would follow the logic of this "disputable" possibility. Basically, I would argue that the wolf's side of the story *cannot* function as a moral philosophy that binds together a group of outlaws. This is because, as Plato argues in the first two books of the *Republic*, for anyone who truly believed this position, it would be rational only to follow the rules of justice in public while flouting them as much as possible in secret—and no group will be able to cooperate in the struggle for survival when its members have decided that it is rational to break the laws as much as they can possibly get away with. Again, however, my claim is not that the inverse theodicy of disenchantment is an impractical response to the truth of the ontology of war; my claim is rather that the ontology of war is false, that there is a mysterious ontological *thatness* to the good that Mackie and the culture to which he belongs have lost the capacity to articulate intellectually, even as this ontological *thatness* continues to operate subtly within their approach to reality—as, for example, in the felt necessity to construct these inverse theodicies that mitigate the otherwise awful moral consequences of the claim that morality is grounded essentially in conflict and war.

For Mackie, arguing against the ontology of war would mean arguing in favor of "objective values" —and it is partly to counter this line of thinking that I have introduced my concept of the *thatness* of the good. With this concept, it should be possible to maintain the morally beneficial openness that Mackie lauds, correctly, as one of the benefits of rejecting the idea of "objective values." However, it should also be possible to avoid the danger of nihilism that inheres in the idea that values are subjective opinions, either of an individual or of a culture. However, once again, my claim is not that this concept would be useful to help instill a morally beneficial fiction; my claim is rather that Mackie's fundamental understanding of reality, an understanding that makes moral arguments appear as morally beneficial fictions, is deeply mistaken—that the *thatness* of morality does not emerge, fundamentally, from any kind of struggle for survival, whether this is envisaged as the struggle of genes to reproduce, or the struggle of groups to cooperate in their battle with other groups, or the struggle of individuals to survive excruciating tribulation. Instead, the *thatness* of morality is a feature of reality itself—not the "objective" reality to which science gives us access, nor a "subjective" reality that consists in nothing but parochial opinion, but rather a mysterious reality that shines into our experience through our felt desire to be good.

7. Summary of the Argument

Against Mackie's claim that first and second order morality are "completely independent," I have agreed with Dennett, that we need to "unify our world-view so that our ethical principles don't clash irrationally with the way the world *is*."[80] However, I have disagreed with how this project takes shape in Dennett's work—essentially, because I think that Dennett has profoundly misunderstood "the way the world *is*." Dennett thinks that the truth of reality is given by modern science, which means that we must think of our moral commitments from beneath the horizon of Darwin's dangerous idea. I have argued that, ultimately, *no* moral system makes sense from beneath such a horizon. However, I have also argued that it is very important that people like Dennett and Mackie insist that morality is indeed still a rational possibility. The felt necessity of constructing such arguments, such "inverse theodicies," would be one way that the *thatness* of the good yet manifests itself within the naturalist approach to reality—as the irrational fudge that prevents naturalist first order morality from collapsing into the nihilism already implied by an intellectual commitment to the ontology of war. I have spent the last three sections examining the practice of inverse theodicy in the moral philosophies of Dennett and Mackie, trying to establish the rational problems with these inverse theodicies. This examination was not meant to be exhaustive. It was rather meant to expose what I take to be a far more important debate: concerning the truth or falsity of the ontology of war; or, more positively, concerning the idea that our commitment to some vision of morality's *whatness* can indeed be our point of access to an ontological truth, the reality of a mysterious *thatness* to the good.

In this context, Mackie's "inverse theodicy of disenchantment" is a particularly useful place to begin. The reason might already be clear: the experience that modern naturalist culture refers to as "disenchantment" is not actually unique to modern culture at all, but is rather rooted in a far older spiritual tradition. We have already seen one alternative approach to something akin to disenchantment, from book VII of Plato's *Republic*, where Plato describes what happens to people who discover that they are unable to provide a rational justification for the moral understanding they inherited from their traditional culture. This experience leads either to moral virtue, as the eucatastrophe of a genuine philosophical search for the good, or else to moral vice,

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[80] Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Ideal*, 468.

as the dyscatastrophe of spiritual tyranny, when our loss of belief in our own cultural approach to goodness leads us to believe that goodness itself is nonsense, and thereby undermines our capacity to repress the lawless desires of our unconscious. As a critique of Mackie, meanwhile, I would suggest that the moral fluidity that disenchantment introduces into our experience does not necessarily make us morally better. It is also possible for moral fluidity to make us morally worse. Furthermore, according to Plato's account, moral fluidity would make us morally worse precisely under those conditions when we enter the catastrophe without prior belief in the *thatness* of the good—the "wolf's side of the story" that Mackie is promoting as indubitably true.

Thus, to reiterate one of the main themes of this chapter, the critique I have been levelling against the various naturalist inverse theodicies can be spiritually dangerous, leading potentially to the dyscatastrophe of a hot and living nihilism. This is why I argued that any attempt to expose the members of a culture to the incoherence of this vision of the *whatness* of morality must be supplemented by an equally powerful argument for the possibility of the *thatness* of the good, for the rational possibility of the ontology of mystery as opposed to the ontology of war. In line with this project, therefore, I will now flip the valence of my critique—from the negative project of showing how naturalist moral philosophy is incoherent, to the positive project of showing how a sincere concern for goodness is still operating at the root of the naturalist worldview. I will introduce these moral sources through a potential *moral* critique that a naturalist might level against my argument from chapter one, concerning the necessity of tradition in making persuasive moral arguments.

8. The Ambivalence of Traditional Authority

In chapter one, I argued that, if the Socratic thesis only becomes persuasive when spoken through the medium of traditional authorities, then a culture that rejects the capacity of such authorities to disclose truth would very likely come to experience the Socratic thesis as unpersuasive. To recapitulate, the Socratic moral thesis only appears plausible if stated through the medium of a tradition of "ancient martyrs," people who publically proclaimed this moral position and then proved their sincerity by, as Boethius puts it, meriting "the victory of an unjust

death." Therefore, if a culture rejects the legitimacy of this kind of appeal to traditional authority, the Socratic morality will become almost impossible to argue for persuasively—as no speaker will be able to withstand the *ad hominem* argument that their belief in this apparently absurd claim is based on a position of existential privilege, not yet in existential contact with the true horror of suffering and death.

The trouble with this argument, however, lies in the fact that the traditional authority contains a wide variety of such ancient martyrs, living and accepting death for the sake of a wide variety of moral visions. Consider Arendt's essay "Truth and Politics," where she explores the logic of such moral exemplars. Arendt begins by correctly pointing out that "[t]he Socratic proposition 'It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong' is not an opinion but claims to truth."[81] She then makes the same observation that I made in chapter one: that the Platonic dialogues show "how unpersuasive Socrates' statement remained for friend and foe alike," but that the thesis gains a measure of persuasive power from the fact that "Socrates decided to stake his life on this truth—to set an example … when he refused to escape the death sentence." This "teaching by example," she says, is "the only form of 'persuasion' that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion." She then stipulates that "philosophical truth can become "practical" and inspire action without violating the rules of the political realm only when it manages to become manifest in the guise of an example."[82]

The problem is that the persuasive power of moral exemplars applies to more than just the Socratic moral thesis. It actually applies to any "ethical principle" whatsoever: as Arendt puts it, "to verify … the notion of courage we may recall the example of Achilles, and to verify the notion of goodness we are inclined to think of Jesus."[83] In other words, even though the ethical example of Achilles points in a very different direction than the examples of Socrates and Jesus, the rhetorical strategy is identical in both cases: a person who lived and died for the sake of some vision of human excellence is cited in order to lend rhetorical weight to a moral position that might otherwise remain unpersuasive. Thus, if the rhetorical plausibility of Frankl's claims concerning the possibility of dignity and freedom even in a death camp, or the Socratic thesis, or the power of forgiveness, depends upon a tradition of ancient martyrs who proved their sincerity

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[81] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 243.
[82] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 243.
[83] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 243.

by meriting an unjust death—it now turns out that these are just particular examples of a more universal pattern: that the rhetoric of any "moral" position depends upon the words and example of ancient martyrs—people who lived, suffered, and died for the sake of this or that understanding of goodness, regardless of what the moral position happens to be.

Now, when I make a moral argument, I am basically telling somebody that they should endure some pain, or forsake some pleasure, for the sake of an axis of goodness that supposedly trumps the axis of pleasure and pain. In other words, I am drawing a distinction between pleasure/pain and goodness/badness, and the situational context within which I argue usually entails trying to convince someone to resist some "bad pleasure" or to endure some "good pain." However, if I am to function as a persuasive speaker of my claim, it will be necessary for my actions to *publicly* align with my words. To take a relatively simple example, if I am trying to convince you to give money to charity—to undertake the pain involved in giving up some of your income in order to accord yourself with the moral good of "benevolence" —then the strength of my appeal will be undercut if it turns out that I myself am a miser. More pertinently, if I am trying to convince you to go to war, that you should not be concerned with the pain of potential death, but should rather fight bravely for the glory and honour of your homeland, it would be very helpful if I myself were a warrior, the kind of person who had *publically* embraced the same pains I was exhorting you to embrace. If not, no matter how coherent my arguments, I would be unable to respond to the cynical *ad hominem* attack that I was just trying to trick you into adopting a "phantom" axis of goodness, urging you to take on the pain of war, for example, so that I could continue to enjoy the pleasures of peace. However, even if I were not a distinguished warrior myself, I might still be able to give my exhortations a modicum of rhetorical power if our shared cultural heritage provided access to a tradition of noble warriors, ancient warrior martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for the good of our community. The point, again, is that the only way the speaker of *any* moral argument can avoid the charge of hypocrisy is if the speaker has *publically* suffered for the sake of whatever moral good they happen to be espousing, or if they can refer to a tradition of "ancient witnesses" who lived and died for the sake of this moral good, and whose authority can be cited to lend rhetorical power to the moral axis the speaker happens to be arguing for. Public moral rhetoric is sustained by public suffering and public death—and this is true for all moral positions, not just the morality espoused by Frankl, Socrates, and Jesus.

Conclusion: The Dilemma of Mutilation

This observation, concerning the way that the appeal of the warrior ideal is also sustained by the appeal to a tradition of "ancient martyrs," would be one of the moral insights that lie at the root of Mackie's inverse theodicy of disenchantment: that we need to reject the legitimacy of the appeal to authority of the tradition in order to undercut the rhetorical power of the warrior martyrs who inspire people to die and kill for the sake of their tribe. With regard to exemplars like Socrates and Jesus, however, a different critique could be leveled: that trying to live in light of such extreme visions of moral goodness places an overwhelming burden on human life, imposing an impossibly high standard of moral perfection that would crush any reasonable approach to human happiness. We have already seen one version of this kind of argument, in Russell's claim that the doctrine of the subjectivity of values is good because it will liberate us from the notion of sin. To argue that this critique is incoherent, that the doctrine of moral subjectivity should not allow Russell to claim that being "liberated" from the notion of "sin" is "good," is to miss the point. Russell is giving voice to a legitimate critique here: those who commit to high moral ideals can indeed find their capacity for human happiness crushed beneath an overwhelming burden, and the Socratic morality does indeed appear as an inhumanly high target at which to aim. In "Some Questions of Moral Responsibility," Arendt articulates a similar critique: after pointing out that we "have lost the ear" for the "the extraordinarily paradoxical nature of Socrates' statement," she suggests that "the same can be said with even greater emphasis for the radicalization of old Hebrew commands in Jesus' teachings" —and that "[t]he strain [Jesus] put on his followers must have been beyond bearing, and the only reason we don't feel this anymore is that we hardly take them seriously."[84] Thus, echoing the naturalist critique, Arendt argues that taking Jesus' teachings "seriously" entails feeling a "strain … beyond bearing" —and it is to avoid this "strain … beyond bearing" that Russell would recommend dissolving our moral ideals in the doctrine of moral subjectivity.

Taylor recognizes this problem as one of the main motivations behind the naturalist suppression of moral ontology: because "the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the

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[84] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Responsibility and Judgment*, 117.

most crushing burdens on humankind."[85] He calls this the "dilemma of mutilation," and notes that the "naturalist rebellion against the ascetic demands of religion" reflects "at least in part the recognition that a terribly high cost was being demanded."[86] Indeed, Taylor even recognizes that this problem might even constitute a *legitimate* reason to avoid the very kind of moral articulacy that he is trying to promote in *Sources of the Self*, a legitimate argument in favor of misology: "If the highest ideals are the most potentially destructive, then maybe the prudent path is the safest, and we shouldn't unconditionally rejoice at the indiscriminate retrieval of empowering goods."[87] Taylor further notes that this is very often the critique leveled against Christianity in particular, a religion that lays "a guilt trip … on its devotees," a "crushing burden on those in whom it inculcates a sense of sin."[88]

Interestingly, however, while recognizing the power and legitimacy of the critique, Taylor's hope for a way out of this "dilemma of mutilation," his hope for a vision of moral goodness that does not lead to a crushing sense of guilt, is also rooted in Judaeo-Christian theism:

> If the highest ideals are the most potentially destructive, then maybe the prudent path is the safest, and we shouldn't unconditionally rejoice at the indiscriminate retrieval of empowering goods. A little judicious stifling may be the better part of wisdom.
> The prudent strategy makes sense of the assumption that the dilemma is inescapable, that the highest spiritual aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction. But if I may make one last unsupported assertion, I want to say that I don't accept this as our inevitable lot. The dilemma of mutilation is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate.
> How can one demonstrate this? I can't do it here (or, to be honest, anywhere at this point). There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided.[89]

The first half of this quotation, if true, would function as an argument for the ultimate rationality of misology, based on the claim that we can only be happy by not thinking about deep moral issues, as such thinking will only unveil a set of impossible moral quandaries in the face of which it is impossible to live happily. If there is indeed no way out of this dilemma, then hot and

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[85] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 519.
[86] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518.
[87] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.
[88] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 81.
[89] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520-21.

living philosophical contemplation would accomplish nothing but to make life unbearable—and the naturalist suppression of moral discussion would be a rational strategy for avoiding unnecessary psychic turmoil. Taylor, however, offers as an "unsupported assertion" that reality is not like this—and he suggests that Judaeo-Christian theism provides the basis for hope that there is some way to get in touch with our own deep sense of moral goodness without at the same time feeling crushed by overly high demands.

In fact, we have already encountered the outline of an argument for this possibility, a way of approaching the Socratic morality that does not involve transforming it into a crushing moral ideal. In the introduction to this chapter, I presented Arendt's description of the activity of thinking, which would ideally lead towards a realization of the truth of the Socratic moral thesis, based on the realization that (as Socrates puts it in the *Gorgias*), "it's better to have … the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I'm only one person."[90] On this understanding, the Socratic moral thesis would simply emerge as an insight into the nature of the self—as opposed to being taken up as a moral ideal for the sake of which we would need to crush our natural human emotions. Interestingly, however, Arendt also indicates that the influence of the Judaeo-Christian religion has slowly transformed the Socratic morality into just such a moral ideal. This point emerges from a comparison of the moral philosophies of Socrates and Kant. Both philosophers, she argues, draw their inspiration from the experience of philosophical solitude, and both philosophers are essentially saying the same thing: that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it. However, this common insight takes verbal shape in two radically different ways:

> [T]he Socratic proposition "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong" … has remained the only ethical proposition that can be derived directly from the specifically philosophical experience. (Kant's categorical imperative, the only competitor in the field, could be stripped of its Judaeo-Christian ingredients, which account for its formulation as an imperative instead of a simple proposition. Its underlying principle is the axiom of non-contradiction—the thief contradicts himself because he wants to keep the stolen goods as his property—and this axiom owes its validity to the conditions of thought that Socrates was the first to discover.[91]

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[90] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482c.
[91] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 240.

By "conditions of thought that Socrates was first to discover," Arendt is again referring to the fact that I lose the capacity to think insofar as I am in contradiction with myself. In this sense, both Kant and Socrates would recognize that action should not be rooted in "the usual rules, recognized by multitudes and agreed upon by society," but rather by "whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace when the time has come to think about my deeds and words."[92] However, while Socrates simply presents us with an "ethical proposition," a description of the way reality is—that it is ontologically impossible for people who act unjustly to be happy—Kant presents us with a moral commandment, a categorical imperative that he argues we, as rational agents, are obliged to follow *regardless* of what we desire. Furthermore, the cause of this transformation from an ethical proposition to a categorical imperative lies, somehow, in the influence of "Judaeo-Christian ingredients."

This, then, is the problem to which I turn my attention in chapter three. Acknowledging the valid moral concerns of naturalism—that Judaeo-Christian theism is often responsible for tremendous moral repression—I will at the same time try to do justice to Taylor's hope that, somehow, Judaeo-Christian theism can also provide a way out of the dilemma. However, rather than presenting some historical narrative of how the truth of Christianity was corrupted and now needs to be recovered, I instead present the dilemma of mutilation as emerging out of the logic of spiritual life itself. More precisely, I present the practice of what I have called "spiritual religion" as a fluctuation between the practice of morality and the practice of disenchantment under the aegis of—and leading towards—the ontology of mystery. As I argue, the practice of morality without disenchantment can lead to the dilemma of mutilation, while the practice of disenchantment without morality can lead to nihilism. In fact, we already encountered something similar to this in Arendt's descriptions of the ambiguity of thinking: that thinking can lead either to nihilism or to a reconnection with conscience, and that the refusal to think can protect us from nihilism but can also lead us into the kind of moral collapse characterized by people like Adolf Eichmann. However, rather than trying to tease my argument out of Arendt's concept of "thinking," I instead turn to sources in the Christian tradition itself, which I will argue already possesses the linguistic and conceptual resources to unwind the dilemma of mutilation that often afflicts the way we experience of religion in modern Western culture.

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[92] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191.

Chapter 3

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The Curriculum of Spiritual Religion

Introduction

At the end of chapter two, I argued that one important moral motivation underlying the naturalist approach to disenchantment was the recognition that extreme moral ideals often impose a crushing psychological burden on those who adopt them. Taylor calls this the "dilemma of mutilation," and he argues that the "naturalist rebellion against the ascetic demands of religion" is a reflection of the fact that "a terribly high cost was being demanded."[1] On the terms of this naturalist rebellion, there would be a fundamental discord between human happiness and the demands of morality—and in the face of this discord, people like Russell would be arguing that we need to reject the stifling demands of morality in favor of a liberated human happiness.[2] As for Taylor, he would be arguing, against Russell, that naturalists themselves still feel the weight of morality, that they cannot help but feel this weight, and that they should therefore consciously explore what this weight implies about the nature of the reality. Taylor, however, admits the possibility that this project of moral articulation might serve only to increase our suffering, by exposing us to the unavoidable existential contradictions involved in conscious human life—and he further admits that he has no argument against this somewhat tragic view of our condition. In other words, concerning the possibility that the dilemma of mutilation might be dissolved, that human happiness might be reconciled to the sometimes extreme demands of moral goodness, Taylor can offer only hope: an "unsupported assertion" that this dilemma might be "our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate."[3]

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[1] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518.
[2] For an extended discussion of the potential conflict between the moral life and the good life, see Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 191-92; 204-207.
[3] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

In this chapter, I introduce the practice of "spiritual religion" as a response to this hope, an attempt to transform Taylor's "unsupported assertion" into a coherent discourse. This response will take shape as an extended interpretation of three interlinking vocabularies, each of which I have drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To be clear, I draw from this tradition not out of some sense that this tradition has exclusive access to truth, but rather because I think that the spiritual imbalance of modern Western culture, as often expressed in terms of a conflict between "religion" and "science," can be more easily perceived when expressed through its own traditional language. Thus, in the first two sections of this chapter, I explore the logic of spiritual religion through the lens of a distinction between "spirituality from above" and "spirituality from below." I adopt this distinction from *Heaven Begins within You*, a spiritual guidebook by the German Benedictine monk Anselm Gruen. The "spirituality from above" is the attempt to live up to lofty moral ideals. As Gruen makes clear, however, when a person's approach to moral life consists in *only* this "path upwards," it gives rise to Taylor's "dilemma of mutilation," wherein we experience morality as an impossible burden that stifles our capacity to be happy. Drawing on Gruen's vocabulary, I also refer to this same dilemma as a "lopsided spirituality from above." However, unlike Russell, who would dispense with morality itself on account of this problem, Gruen recommends a countervailing practice of the "spirituality from below": the attempt to cultivate self-knowledge or self-awareness. I argue, then, that "spiritual religion" is the practice of these two countervailing aspects of spiritual life, and that when the path upwards and the path downwards are practiced in tandem, they give rise to a state of being in which the Socratic moral thesis comes to appear as an obvious phenomenological truth.[4] However, when these two sides of spiritual life are not in balance—in other words, when morality is practiced at the expense of self-knowledge, or when self-knowledge is practiced at the expense of morality—those who veer too far upward tend to become stiff and intolerant, while those who veer too far downward might

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[4] In *Plato*, Eric Voegelin suggests that a similar correspondence between going up and going down is also central to Plato's project in the *Republic*: "It is disquieting … that the truth of human existence can be found *both* by descent and ascent. The truth brought up from the Piraeus by Socrates in discourse, and the truth brought up from Hades by the messenger of Er, are the same truth that is brought down by the philosopher who has seen the Agathon. We are reminded of the Heraclitian paradox (B 60): "The way up and the way down is one and the same." … The identification of the upper with the nether There as the source of Truth raises formidable questions with regard to the ontological status of a pattern that is laid up in heaven, but also can be found through descent into the depth" (Voegelin, *Plato*, 60-61). In Voegelin's reading of Plato, however, one gets the sense that one could choose whether to follow the path upward *or* the path downward, depending on one's predilection; for Gruen, by contrast, the path upwards of morality and the path downwards of self-awareness must *both* be walked, alternatively and in balance with each other, in order for either path to arrive at the truth.

mistake the demons of the unconscious mind for the hidden truth of all human aspirations to goodness and nobility.[5] Indeed, in chapter five, I argue that Nietzsche should be understood as a paradigmatic example of what might be called a "lopsided spirituality from *below*," a dangerous but powerfully seductive response to the immensely repressive "lopsided spirituality from above" that characterized the religious culture of 19th century Europe.

In sections three and four, I offer an interpretation of the first two temptations of Christ. In brief, I argue that the first temptation represents the benefit of tradition, to provide moral strength to resist the allure of physical pleasure and pain, while the second temptation represents the danger of tradition, as the devil cites scripture in an attempt to trick Jesus into committing an absurd act out of his earnest desire to follow the words of God. Naturalist culture, in this context, would have successfully recognized the spiritual danger of the second temptation. However, naturalism takes the fanaticism being criticized in the second temptation to be the truth of religious piety itself, and therefore comes to see the eradication of tradition as the only rational response to this spiritual problem. This response, however, leaves naturalist culture prone, first, to the danger of the first temptation, the inability to resist the allure of physical pleasure and the threat of physical pain in the face of temptation (which Plato describes in the *Republic* as the first great danger involved in stepping beyond one's traditional culture). Second, it leaves naturalist culture prone to the very same danger of fanaticism, in this case an increasingly rigid adherence to the ideals of scientific and technological progress, which would become a new "lopsided spirituality from above" that eschews critical self-reflection in favor of blind devotion to an increasingly rigid vision of how to build a better world.

In section five, I offer my interpretation of the three books of Solomon—*Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*. Here, I develop a critique of the common idea that the vision of reality as an infinite void is an unprecedented possibility bequeathed to modern culture by the Copernican Revolution, and that the logical result of this new perspective is a sense of dread, anxiety, and fear—at least during those rare moments when we are gripped by a "hot and alive" sense of the

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[5] Pascal offers similar advice to those struggling before the leap of faith: "realize that your inability to believe … arises from your passions. So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions" (Pascal, *Pensées*, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), §680). This advice is in line with the kind of "spiritual religion" I am trying to describe. In short, religion cannot be secured (or refuted) by producing arguments for the existence (or non-existence) of "God," but rather by calming the storms of passion that both cause and are caused by our unjust patterns of behavior.

significance of the infinite abyss in which we now find ourselves. I argue, against this common historical narrative, that this "view from infinity" is not a discovery of modern astronomy at all.[6] It is rather a spiritual practice that has existed since the ancient world, designed to promote the very same moral virtues for which its naturalist expositors laud it today: namely, to curtail our sense of pride and inculcate a morally beneficial sense of humility and awe at the natural world. From here, I argue that the sense of anxiety that often grips us when we encounter the void should not be understood as a revelation of our true human condition, but rather as a revelation of what we ourselves have *become*, due either to our leading an immoral life, or else due to repressing our so-called "immoral" desires along the lines of a lopsided spirituality from above. In the case of naturalism in particular, the feeling of anxiety would be the logical emotional consequence of an incorrect practice of spiritual religion, a precocious leap into the abyss, the second phase of spiritual religion, without the preliminary apprenticeship in the practice of selfless morality.[7] Simply put, the reason it is unsafe to enter the abyss without first practicing morality is that those who are not already living relatively "selfless" lives with others—i.e.

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[6] I will use the term "view from infinity" to describe this vision of human life as rendered insignificant from the perspective of the cosmos. Alternatives would be Thomas Nagel's "view from nowhere" (Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*), or Pierre Hadot's "view from above" (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 238-250). I have not adopted Hadot's vocabulary for simple terminological reasons: the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* functions as a mode of what I have already called the "spirituality from below," so using the word "above" to refer to this practice might be confusing. As for Nagel's "view from nowhere," I do not find that the word "nowhere" captures the sense of boundlessness that inheres in the very etymology of the word "infinite."

[7] Contemporary philosophy deals with this "view from infinity" in many different ways. For example, in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Susan Wolf dismisses this perspective as irrelevant: "Many people are upset by the thought that they are mere specks in a vast universe. They are upset, that is, by their smallness, their inability to make a big and lasting splash. My remarks … do not speak directly to this concern. Such people will just have to get over it. Their desire is unsatisfiable." (Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 29n14). Basically, Wolf is arguing that such thoughts are useless, so you should not bother entertaining them. In his essay "The Meaning of Life," Richard Taylor argues that even though this cosmic perspective does indeed render all our projects absurd, this insight is irrelevant because we are moved not primarily by philosophical analysis as by vital need: "You no sooner drew your first breath than you responded to the will that was in you to live. You no more ask whether it will be worthwhile, or whether anything of significance will come of it, than the worms and the birds. The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is in your nature to be. You go through life building your castles, each of these beginning to fade into time as the next is begun; yet it would be no salvation to rest from all this. It would be condemnation … What counts is that you should be able to begin a new task, a new castle, a new bubble" (in *Life, Death, and Meaning*, 27-8). Here, the truth of meaninglessness is acknowledged, but the moral weight of this truth is denied. My own approach is perhaps most similar to that of Thomas Nagel in his famous essay "The Absurd," insofar as Nagel argues that this "view from infinity" can be morally beneficial, because it inculcates a healthy sense of irony that will prevent us from taking our lives too seriously. I would argue, however, that Nagel's approach to the "view from infinity" (which he refers to as the view from nowhere) could lead to nihilism if this irony extends into the domain of morality.

practicing morality—will have difficulties when engaging with a spiritual practice oriented to dissolving our sense of self.[8]

This analysis leads into a more general analysis of the spiritual predicament of modern Western culture. In short, I argue that naturalism has effectively co-opted the "view from infinity" represented by *Ecclesiastes*, and then misinterpreted its own parochial and culturally conditioned experience of the abyss as the indelible scientific truth of our human condition. On account of this, the path into "spiritual religion" often gets blocked for those who have begun the religious journey in the proper order. More precisely, to the extent that those who practice the morality of *Proverbs* get taken in by this misappropriation of *Ecclesiastes*, they might come to see the step into the abyss as the destroyer of morality, the leap into the ontology of war, the destroyer of faith—or, even worse, as the replacement of their own religious moral system with some new nihilistic system of ideals grounded in the ideal of scientific and technological progress. These practitioners might therefore avoid the step into *Ecclesiastes* as though it were a step into atheism. In this way, the naturalist misappropriation of *Ecclesiastes* produces a cultural situation in which "religion" tends to be identified with the spirituality of *Proverbs* alone, instead of with the three successive stages of spiritual life.[9] Similarly, the seemingly intractable debate between

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[8] In *Shaping the Future: Nietzsche's New Regime of the Soul and Its Ascetic Practices*, Horst Hutter describes these two sides of spiritual life in terms of Nietzsche's language of Apollonian order and Dionysian chaos, which Hutter's Nietzsche balances through the practice of dance: "In dancing …, human groups reaffirm their need for Apollonian order as well as that order's very dissolution into Dionysian chaos. But they also affirm and accept the dangerous and inescapable presence of Dionysus. Neither Apollo nor Dionysus can be abolished, nor is there any escape from either. Every culture that lasts is a successful synthesis and recognition of this duality. … Any tendency to affirm either side at the expense of the other will threaten a culture with dissolution, either in the form of being absorbed into a stronger and more comprehensive culture, or of becoming undermined by its own schizoid self-division and the emergence of Dionysian madness. The favoring of Apollo tends toward schizophrenia, while too great an emphasis on Dionysus leads to fragmentation of the self and its disintegration into madness and death" (Hutter, *Shaping the Future*, 182). For another good description of Nietzsche's approach to the path upwards and the path downwards, see Philip J. Kain, *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence* (Lexington Books, Toronto, 2009), 2-6: "The Apollonian, for Nietzsche, derives from the Olympian gods of Homer. It refers to a realm of clear, beautiful, plastic images. The Appolonian heals us with its beauty. It allows us to escape from pain. It makes life possible and brings calm. It is beautiful illusion. … The Apollonian, however, is mere surface appearance. The Dionysian, on the other hand, derives from the older Orphic tradition of the orient—from the pre-Olympian Titans. Dionysian ritual brings the collapse of appearance. It destroys one's sense of being a coherent individual. We are absorbed into a cosmic oneness. This involves a mixture of blissful ecstasy as well as pure blind terror—terror at the loss of self and blissful ecstasy over an intoxicating unity with nature, earth, the animal, the cosmos. The Dionysian is the reality behind surface appearance. … The Apollonian, then, is a veil that hides the terrifying Dionysian world from consciousness. This is the horrible need that forced the creation of the Olympian gods" (Kain, *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence* 3-4). I will engage with Nietzsche's approach to these issues in chapter five.

[9] This tendency to understand religion primarily in terms of obedience to rigid moral absolutes can also be found in the writings of Arendt: "[w]ithin the realm of religious experience, there can't be a conflict of conscience. The voice of God speaks clearly and the question is only if I will obey it or not" (Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral

"science" and "religion" becomes a conflict between these two sides of spiritual religion—and the spiritual pathology of modern culture might be expressed in terms of a growing dichotomy between these two practices, which are supposed to form the two complementary halves of a coherent spiritual life. Again, when *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, spirituality from above and spirituality from below, are practiced in tandem, they give rise to the experience of ontological love described in the *Song of Songs*, from the context of which the Socratic moral thesis appears as a simple phenomenological truth. However, when these two halves come to see each other as enemies, those who practice the path upwards of *Proverbs* tend to become stiff and intolerant, while those who practice the path downwards of *Ecclesiastes* tend to fall into a sense of listlessness, despair—or, worst of all, the idea that the cynical ontology of war is the most rational approach to life.[10]

That being said, this analysis is complicated by the fact that most members of naturalist culture only *pretend* to accept the ontological meaninglessness of life, while in reality, the hot and living consequences of the position are mitigated by means of the new, secular moral philosophies, the various inverse theodicies that I examined in chapter two. More precisely, even as modern naturalists are implicitly walking the same spiritual path as Nietzsche, toward the nihilism implied by a lopsided spirituality from *below* conducted under the aegis of the ontology of war, they usually avoid following the logic of their own position all the way to the end.[11] Instead, they

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Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 108). Similarly, in the context of a discussion of ancient Stoic and Epicurean literature, which is apparently "full of wise recommendations" but does not contain any examples of "a real command which ultimately is beyond argument," Arendt mentions, as though it went without saying, that a real unquestionable command is something you "must [find] in all religious teachings" —and she goes on to point out that "[e]ven Aquinas, the greatest rationalizer of Christianity, had to admit that the ultimate reason why a particular prescription is right and a particular command has to be obeyed lies in its divine origin. God said so" (Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 65-6). Nietzsche expresses a similar understanding of tradition in *Daybreak*: "What is tradition? A higher authority which one obeys, not because it commands what is *useful* to us, but because it *commands*" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §9, p. 11). If we accept this understanding, that religion/tradition entails the unthinking adherence to rigid moral commandments, we thereby admit that adherence to religion/tradition is equivalent to a lopsided spirituality from above, and that the dilemma of mutilation can only be solved by escaping the clutches of religion/tradition altogether. I would argue, by contrast, that this widespread approach to religion/tradition is a consequence of the lopsided spirituality from above that came to predominate in modern European culture. In chapter six, I will link this to the history of colonialism: in short, once you have killed in the name of obedience to a moral ideal, that ideal will become, for you, psychologically unquestionable.

[10] In what follows, I will focus mainly on the way the problems with the path upwards are alleviated by the path downwards. It is important to remember, however, that the reverse is also true: the problems of the path downwards are likewise alleviated by the path upwards. I will consider the danger of an unmitigated descent into the underworld in chapters four and five, when I engage with the work of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche.

[11] For an example, consider the moral philosophies of Russell and Nietzsche: Russell— "When we contemplate the human race, we may desire that it should be happy, or healthy, or intelligent, or warlike, and so on. Any one of these

mitigate the pathological consequences of the experience of the abyss—nihilism—by means of a new ersatz "spirituality from above," a new vision of the *whatness* of the good that defends them against a universe that has come to appear ontologically hopeless.[12] As such, the so-called "culture wars" manifest as two stiff and intolerant moral systems—a lopsided approach to *Proverbs* versus a lopsided approach to some secular inverse theodicy—at loggerheads with each other, poised above an abyss of despair that both sides refuse to honestly encounter.

Finally, once again, lest these arguments be misunderstood as some imperialistic attempt to assert the superiority of Christianity, or Western philosophy, over all other cultures and modes of being, let me end these introductory remarks by pointing out that this division of spiritual life into two halves is widespread. For example, in *The Buddha Pill*, Dr. Miguel Farias and Catherine

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desires, if it is strong, will produce its own morality" (Russell, *Religion and Science*, 253); and Nietzsche— "anyone who looks at the basic drives of mankind … will discover that they have all at some time or other practiced philosophy—and that each one of them would only be too glad to present *itself* as the ultimate goal of existence and as the legitimate *master* of all the other drives. For every drive is tyrannical: and it is as *such* that it tries to philosophize." (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §6). For those who understand philosophical reflection on morality in this way, thinking will appear as a veiled battle between desires, each striving to define "the good" in terms of its own satisfaction. Plato, for his part, describes a similar approach to morality in the *Phaedo*: "You know how those in particular who spend their time studying contradiction in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus and does not remain in the same place for any time at all" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 90c). This conclusion, he says, "is the first thing we should guard against. … We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound and that we must take courage to attain soundness." Plato is saying, in short, that if we are experiencing philosophy as an incessant fluctuation between different ideas of the good, this is not because argument itself is unsound—it is because *we* are unsound. By this appraisal, of course, Russell and Nietzsche would have fallen victim to the first mistake that Plato suggests a budding philosopher must guard against!

[12] In *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence*, Phillip Kain presents a useful rubric through which to articulate the relationship between the three options I have presented so far—the choice between the ontology of mystery and the ontology of war, and the befuddlement of this choice by inverse theodicy. Kain describes three fundamentally different approaches to the human condition. First, he says, there is the idea that "we live in a benign cosmos" or a "*designed cosmos*," which Kain characterizes as "the traditional view held by most philosophers from Plato, to Aristotle through the medieval," and which Kain notes "has largely disappeared from the modern world—few really believe it any more." Kain calls the second vision "the *perfectible*," based on the idea that the "cosmos is neither alien nor … designed for us … neither terrifying nor benign. The cosmos is neutral and, most importantly, it is malleable. Human beings must come to understand the cosmos through science and control it through technology. We must *make* it fit us." Finally, in the third vision—which Kain takes to be Nietzsche's vision—the cosmos is alien: "It was not designed for human beings at all, nor they for it. We do not fit. We do not belong. *And we never will*. The cosmos is horrible, terrifying, and we will never surmount this fact. It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all." Kain calls this view "the *horrific cosmos*" (Kain, *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence*, 10). Within the terms of this rubric, meanwhile, my argument would be that, at the level of ontology, we are faced with a choice between Plato and Nietzsche, but that Kain's characterization of Plato position as a "*designed cosmos*" is incorrect. Meanwhile, the idea of a "*perfectible cosmos*" that we can understand through science and control through technology would be an "inverse theodicy" that helps protect its adherents against the terms of the horrific cosmos that they have already implicitly accepted.

Wikholm describe the often overlooked dangers of "mindfulness meditation," the fact that the practice of meditation can sometimes drive people insane.[13] They then point out that in the religious traditions from which modern scientific culture has uprooted these ancient practices, meditation is usually introduced as part of a larger spiritual curriculum that begins with training in morality:

> In Patanjali's *sutras*, when he describes the various aspects of yoga, meditation is only one of them. The first one, the very basis of a healthy and eventual selfless being is self-restraint (*yama*), which he defines as 'non-violation, truthfulness, non-stealing, containment, and non-grasping' …. And to be sure that these are the definite and non-debatable foundations he adds:
> "These restraints are not limited by birth, time or circumstance; they constitute the great vow everywhere."[14]

In *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong makes the same point with regard to Patanjali's teachings. An aspiring yogin "was not allowed to perform a single yogic exercise until he had completed an extensive moral training,"[15] which included inculcating the virtue of *ahimsa*, or "harmlessness," as well as prohibitions against stealing, lying, sex, and intoxicants. Finally, the same understanding forms the basis for the training involved in the practice of Vipassana meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka: "Anyone who wishes to practice Dhamma must begin by practicing *sīla* [morality]. This is the first step without which one cannot advance. We must abstain from all actions, all words and deeds, that harm other people."[16] In terms of Gruen's vocabulary, this amounts to saying that spiritual life must begin with the "spirituality from above," whereby we learn to practice self-restraint in light of various moral ideals, but that this

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[13] In *A Path with Heart*, Buddhist meditation teacher Jack Kornfield makes a similar point, noting that "powerful spiritual transitions … are poorly understood in our culture and [are] often confused with mental illness" (Kornfield 1993, *A Path with Heart*, xi). Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* provides another account of this commonality between madness and spirituality, as does Plato's *Phaedrus*. In scientific culture, "religion" itself is often likened to a form of madness; my project, in this context, would be to show such people that within the realm of "religion," within the realm of "spirituality," there is a viable distinction to be made between, say, "insane spirituality" and "sane spirituality" —and that the refusal to grant such a distinction makes it extremely likely that the transition into spiritual life will turn out for the worse.

[14] Miguel Farias and Catherine Wikholm, *The Buddha Pill* (London: Watkins Media, 2015), 176.

[15] Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* (Toronto: Knopf, 2006), 196.

[16] William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 58-9.

first step of spiritual life must then be followed up by the practice of the "spirituality from below," whereby we strive for self-knowledge.[17]

1. The Spirituality from Above

The terms "spirituality from above" and "spirituality from below" come from *Heaven Begins Within You*, a book by German Benedictine monk Anselm Gruen. This book consists in a gloss of the writings of the 4th century desert fathers, the first Christian monks. Gruen argues that modern Western culture has lost touch with this spirituality of the desert, the "spirituality from below," in which the path to God and the path of self-knowledge are seen to be one and the same. Gruen describes the consequences of this loss in the opening lines of his book:

> The spirituality bequeathed to us by the moralizing theology of modern times works from the top down. It presents high ideals that we are supposed to translate into reality. Typical ideals include selflessness, self-control, continuous amiability, selfless love, freedom from anger, and mastery of sexual desire. Spirituality from above surely has some positive meaning for young people, since it challenges them and tests their powers. It prompts them to grow up and out of themselves and to strive for goals. But it also tries to leap above and beyond our own reality. We identify so intensely with our ideals that we repress our own weak points and limits because they clash with the ideal. That leads to inner division, which makes us sick. This is often manifested by the conflict in us between the ideal and the reality. We can't admit that we don't measure up to the ideal, and so we project our failure onto others. We become hardened against them.[18]

This criticism recapitulates Taylor's "dilemma of mutilation." Insofar as we strive to live up to some ideal of moral perfection—whatever that ideal might be—we will tend to repress those aspects of ourselves that do not align with our vision. Morality, therefore, gives rise to an inner

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[17] In *Steps to Spiritual Perfection*, Jeremy Driscoll argues that the ancient monk Evagrius Ponticus' division of spiritual life into "ethics," "physics," and "logic" should be understood as a rhetorical ploy necessary for instruction, but that the spiritual life itself is a single act: "Evagrius' 'words' can be described as concerned with thinking correctly about doing the good (ethics), thinking correctly about the world (physics), and thinking correctly about thinking itself (logic). Yet we must note well: this division of themes was a pedagogical arrangement on the part of both Evagrius and the philosophical masters. It was suited to *discourse*. But the *way of life* itself was not divided into parts. This was a unitary act that involved *living* the insights of the various themes all at once" (Driscoll, 6). My argument suggests that spiritual *life* must itself be divided into the practice of "ethics" and the practice of "physics" —and that the unified perspective promoted by Driscoll will only manifest as an existential truth for those who begin their practice in such a conscientiously divided way.

[18] Anselm Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1999), 17.

division between those aspects of ourselves that we accept as "good" and those aspects of ourselves that we reject as "evil." In this way, our pursuit of moral perfection can transform into the cultivation of an idealized self-image, which we then protect by refusing to acknowledge those aspects of ourselves that contradict our chosen ideals.

Unfortunately, repressed desires do not cease to exist simply because they have disappeared from conscious view. Instead, these desires persist within, perhaps first as conscious desires that we struggle to prevent from expressing themselves in action, but eventually as unconscious desires that we have ceased to be aware of at all. Gruen refers to these repressed desires as forming an alter-ego, a "shadow side,"[19] and he says that this shadow side then enters into a kind of warfare with the idealized self-image that we have a tendency to mistake for our "true" self. This gives rise to a vicious circle: the more we struggle to live up to our ideal, the more we are obliged to repress those aspects of ourselves that do not align with the ideal; this, in turn, gives rise to a more powerful shadow side, which then requires an even more powerful repression.[20] As this problem increases in intensity, it can produce a state of unending tension, a state in which we can never relax from constant vigilance, lest the festering desires that we have chained begin to free themselves. Indeed, once this vicious circle has begun, repression becomes a pragmatic necessity—because, as the shadow gets more powerful, the consequences of failing to repress it become continually more severe.

Gruen is not alone in making this kind of critique. Gregory Mayers, a Catholic Redemptorist priest and Zen Monk, makes the same point concerning the spiritual dangers that can accompany a vow of celibacy:

> The danger is that promises such as these set us up for denial, for the illusion that
> our efforts at fulfilling the promise actually do so, when what happens is that we

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[19] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 20.

[20] There are many artistic representations of the battle between the idealized self-image and its repressed shadow: Ursula K. Le Guin's classic novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*; Fred M. Wilcox's classic movie *Forbidden Planet*. One can also interpret the relationship between Yoda and the Dark Lord of the Sith, in episodes I, II, and III of the Star Wars saga, as essentially a description of a repressive persona (Yoda), unaware of its own dark-side (Darth Sidius), eventually being destroyed by an overwhelming storm of violent passion. By this interpretation, meanwhile, the artistic failure of these three films would lie in the fact that the director, George Lucas, is himself unaware that Yoda and Sidius are actually different aspects of the same persona. More precisely, Lucas himself appears to have bought into Yoda's own ideology, Yoda's own idealized self-image of himself as a master Jedi, the incarnation of goodness and equanimity. In other words, both Yoda and Lucas are unaware that this façade is only sustained by an immense spiritual repression—which has, over a long period of time, created the boiling inferno of rage represented by Sidius.

> simply ignore a whole set of erotic energies, fooling ourselves into believing we've "conquered" what we've ignored. Our left foot may be numb, but we've still got to drag it around. Believing that this condition makes us graceful is the height of self-deception.[21]

Here, the attempt to live up to some idealized vision of sexual purity causes us to numb those aspects of ourselves that do not accord with the ideal. This gives rise to a kind of systematic self-deception: we construct a mask, an idealized persona, and then we mistake this persona for an expression of our *real* self. In this way, moral ideals give rise to a dialectic of appearance and reality that operates within our most intimate sense of self-identity—not in the sense that a false sense of self struggles to maintain itself against some sort of "true" self, but rather in the sense that an island of order struggles to cohere in the face of a raging ocean of negative desires. The irony and tragedy of this predicament, of course, is that the struggle to maintain the ordered self, the façade of goodness, is actually invigorating the storm that threatens to overwhelm it.

Gruen continues his account of the dangers of spirituality from above by showing how this kind of self-deception can have dire consequences for the people around us:

> It's really amazing that very pious men and women can often react quite brutally, … when a theologian voices an opinion different from theirs. For example, in one diocese an art exhibit on the topic "Mary the Human Being" was organized not long ago by the diocesan office, which led to the bishop's being subjected to brutal, even filthy attacks. But brutality is often repressed sexuality. Such people imagine they are defending the cause of piety; in fact they are behaving with impious militancy. Such representatives of a spirituality from above don't even notice that their arguments are hitting below the belt.[22]

Here, the negative desires fostered by the struggle to maintain an apparently faultless persona find vent in terms of hatred of those we see as undermining this persona, or the group that this persona relies upon for its coherence. In Gruen's example, people struggling to maintain the persona of good and upstanding Catholics are appalled when the ideology that sustains this social persona, orthodox Catholicism, is seen as being undermined by an artistic exhibit, sponsored by the very Church that is supposed to be protecting the cause of purity. For these people, defending the idealized persona is seen as defending goodness, defending holiness, defending God, with the concomitant perception that any threat to this persona is a threat to the existence of goodness

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[21] Gregory Mayers, *Listen to the Desert* (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph Books, 1996), 47-8.
[22] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 17-18.

itself, a source of corruption and moral turpitude.[23] Gruen argues that this approach to piety has, in reality, become impious. According to his interpretation, what is actually happening in such situations is that the repressed shadow is starting to leak out through the cracks of a wavering persona. These negative desires then latch on to whatever target the person or group perceives to be the source of these cracks. Those who are perceived as undermining the ideal thereby come to be seen as enemies of goodness. Here, we can see that a lopsided spirituality from above, when it begins to waver, can lead to scapegoating.[24]

Speaking in terms of the pain of philosophy, we are essentially talking about what it feels like when an understanding of goodness for which we have sacrificed comes under attack: the more we have sacrificed in the name of some idea of the *whatness* of goodness, the more unpleasant we will feel if we should ever start to doubt this understanding, and the more likely we are to lash out against those we perceive as undermining the ideals in which we have invested so heavily.[25] In chapter six, I will consider an extreme version of this problem, in terms of what tends to happen to personal and social understandings of the *whatness* of the good once people have started killing in its name. For the moment, however, we can say that the spiritual transition from the path upward to the path downward would entail the following change in perspective: even as I recognize that my own understanding of the *whatness* of goodness might be mistaken, I

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[23] Mayers describes the logic of a lopsided sexualized moral system as often expressing itself "in the sense of feeling affronted by behavior that is less than ethical, in a smug superiority that disguises our inability to deal with our own unethical urges, and especially in a kind of jealousy of those who appear unfettered by ethical imperatives" (Mayers, *Listen to the Desert*, 47-8). In this case, the internal cut between what is "good" and what is "bad" finds expression in terms of judgmental condemnations of the perceived faults of others. These feelings of superiority and scorn, however, are also often motivated by a secret jealousy of those who are unrestrained by morality, and who thus appear able to enjoy their illicit desires without the burden of guilt.

[24] See René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* for an analysis of scapegoating that deals more with its intersubjective origins in mimetic desire, the way that people tend to copy each other's desires.

[25] In Plato's *Crito*, one of the arguments Socrates uses to defend his decision to accept an unjust death is that, if he flees, this act would put him in contradiction with himself: "What will you do in Thessaly but feast, as if you had gone to a banquet in Thessaly? As for those conversations of yours about justice and the rest of virtue, where will they be?" (Plato, *Crito* 53e-54a). Basically, if Socrates acts contrary to justice, he will lose the capacity to speak freely about justice—or, more precisely, he will lose the capacity to say things like "[d]o not value either your children or your life of anything else more than goodness" (*Crito* 54b). He will lose this capacity because he will then appear ridiculous, having shown himself to be a hypocrite who does not actually believe what he is saying. In this example from the *Crito*, of course, Socrates is talking about his capacity to speak with others. The same logic can be applied to a person's capacity to *think*: if Socrates chooses life over goodness, it will become difficult for him to even *think* the opposite possibility. Speaking more generally, the more one chooses to *act* in an unjust way, the more difficult it will be to *think* freely about what justice is, because it is painful for someone who cares about justice to contemplate the possibility that we might be acting unjustly. According to my argument, Socrates' martyrdom would help alleviate the cynical response to this pain—that we should simply stop caring about justice, reject the reality of justice, as part of a psychological strategy to stop feeling the pain involved in contemplating the possibility that we have acted, or are acting, unjustly.

maintain my faith in the *thatness* of the good, which I now commit to exploring in the hope that a new and better vision will emerge. In other words, in the face of a catastrophic breakdown in my concrete understanding of goodness, and within the existential turmoil created by this breakdown, I commit to the idea that my own desire to *be* good (as opposed to merely *appearing* good) is larger and more primordial than the way this belief and desire might have been manifesting in my life until now. On the basis of this belief in the *thatness* of the good, my initial inchoate desire to live a noble and virtuous life—which would have moved me initially to pursue my now-compromised vision—can once again move me in a new direction.

Of course, the longer one goes without reflecting on what one is doing, the more likely it will be that a gap opens up between one's aspiration to be a good human being and the actual activities one is engaged in, and the more painful and difficult it will be to close this gap between aspiration and reality. Similarly, the longer one takes the path upward of spiritual life without periodically stopping to engage in the path downward, the more difficult the initial move to rebalance will become. In this way, the vicious circle of spirituality from above is fueled by fear of the psychic pain that any questioning of the ideal is likely to release. However, in the same way that periodically undertaking that painful trip to the dentist is a good way to avoid the much bigger pain of having one's teeth rot and fall out, so does the pursuit of a moral ideal need to be periodically paused—*not* for the sake of figuring out the proper moral ideal, such that we could be sure that our sacrifices were not in vain, but rather so as to release the repressed negativity that moral ideals *as such* give rise to.[26] To be perfectly clear, even if we had a true and perfect moral system, the perfect understanding of the *whatness* of the good, our attempts to adhere to this system would still give rise to the problems described by Gruen and Mayers if our practice of spirituality from above were not balanced by a corresponding practice of spirituality from below. As such, even if we accept the Socratic thesis as ontologically true, to the extent that we take this thesis as a moral ideal anchoring our practice of spirituality from above, as though we

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[26] Mayers provides a nice expression of this: "two emotions, shame and fear, shield us from our own tumultuous unconscious. Everyone learns early in life that shame guards what we believe is unacceptable about ourselves. But if we are to be whole, sooner or later we must summon the courage to enter the pit of shame in our own backyard and deal with it, engage the demons, and pull up the hidden things about our self buried there. These discarded and unknown fragments of our self will serve us and others well if they are cleansed of our shame, redeemed from the well of our own dark side, and seen for what they are. They too have a place in us. We are incomplete and fractured until we welcome and embrace them in friendship and love" (Mayers, *Listen to the Desert*, 46-7). This does not mean that we should embrace our dark side in friendship, but rather that it is possible to cleanse the emotional energy that has become bottled up within our "pit of shame," such that it is no longer necessary to bottle it.

should *strive* to feel compassion for our tormentors even as they torture us unto death, our efforts will inevitably consist in stifling our well-justified feelings of rage, producing paralyzing passivity on the surface and twisting resentment at the depths. Simply put, the dilemma of mutilation cannot be solved by correcting deficiencies in our understanding of the *whatness* of the good, by altering the ideal to which we orient ourselves. This dilemma can only be solved by the practice of the spirituality from below, the practice of self-knowledge whereby our own vision of *whatness* is purified by the fire of *thatness*. Needless to say, this purification will very likely lead to changes to our understanding of the *whatness* of the good as well—but these changes are not the purpose of the descent. They are a side effect that comes about when we no longer *require* a stiff and rigid moral system to keep the raging inferno of our "shadow side" under control.

2. The Spirituality from Below

So far, we have been examining the problems of a lopsided spirituality from above, whereby we believe that we become good by adhering to this or that idealized model or by following a set of moral commandments. Insofar as we walk this path upwards, our pursuit of moral goodness will become increasingly estranged from honest self-awareness, as we will be obliged to repress those aspects of ourselves that do not align with the ideal. Basically, when our idealized vision of ourselves is threatened, the negative emotions that hide beneath this ideal will tend to vent themselves on the source of the perceived threat. I have argued that part of the hidden moral motivation behind ideas like Russell's doctrine of the subjectivity of values, which I also referred to as the inverse theodicy of disenchantment, would be to dissolve this spiritual predicament— this "dilemma of mutilation" —by erasing belief in the *thatness* of morality and goodness. In contrast to this, Gruen would recommend the practice of "spiritualty from below," the paradigm examples of which would be the 4th century desert fathers. In fact, his book *Heaven Begins Within You* is basically an attempt to translate the wisdom of these ancient monastics into a language that will make sense to a modern reader:

> The desert fathers teach us a spirituality from below. They show us that we have
> to begin with ourselves and our passions. The way to God, for the desert fathers,

always passes through self-knowledge. Evagrius Ponticus puts it this way: "If you want to know God, learn to know yourselves first!" Without self-knowledge we are always in danger of having our ideas of God turn into mere projections. There are also pious individuals who take flight from their own reality into religion. They aren't transformed by their prayer and piety; they simply use it to lift themselves over others, to confirm their own infallibility.[27]

Here, the same critiques that naturalism levels against religion—that our idea of God is a "mere projection," that religion consists in a "flight from our own reality," that it is nothing more than a prideful self-assertion—are being leveled by a monk against the distortions that can occur when spirituality from above forgets about its complementary double: spirituality from below, the practice whereby the negative desires of the shadow self are confronted, accepted, and thereby allowed to evaporate.[28]

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[27] Gruen *Heaven Begins Within You*, 18.

[28] In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor describes Western culture in terms of an historical narrative that begins with a "classical" spiritual predicament, roughly equivalent to what I have referred to as a lopsided spirituality from above, and ends with a "modern" predicament, which corresponds to a lopsided spirituality from below. More precisely, Taylor describes the "classical" predicament as consisting in "an unchallengeable framework [making] imperious demands which we fear being unable to meet" (18). For Taylor, Martin Luther is a paradigm example of this predicament, a man for whom the meaning of life was unquestionably given, and whose spiritual crisis therefore entailed the realization that he was unable to live up to an impossible standard of perfection. In the "modern" predicament, by contrast, the frameworks that give us our standards have become problematic, in the sense that "no framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework *tout court*, can sink to the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact." Unlike Luther, in other words, most modern people do not measure themselves against unwavering moral absolutes, nor is there a universally accepted vision of the *whatness* of the good that simply goes without saying. Instead, modern people generally have some vague sense of "the spiritual source they can connect their lives with; but they are aware of their own uncertainties, of how far they are from being able to recognize a definitive formula with ultimate confidence." This means that the modern spiritual predicament usually entails something that Taylor, following Alasdair MacIntyre, calls "a quest for sense," in which individual people "embrace … traditions tentatively, but … also often develop their own versions of them, or idiosyncratic combinations of or borrowings from or semi-inventions within them" (16-17). I would describe this quest as an orientation within the *thatness* of the good. The danger of the "classical" spiritual dilemma of someone like Martin Luther involves "the prospect of irretrievable condemnation or exile, of being marked down in obloquy forever, or being sent to damnation irrevocably, or being relegated to a lower order through countless future lives" (17) —an "immense and inescapable" pressure under which "we may crack." The danger of the "modern" spiritual dilemma, by contrast, is senselessness, an endless identity crisis, a sense of appalling dissociation. In fact, following his description of these two modes of spiritual life, Taylor describes two contrasting patterns of psychopathology: in Freud's time, apparently, the bulk of the clientele were "hysterics and patients with phobias and fixations," while in recent years "the main complaints centre around 'ego loss,' or a sense of emptiness, flatness, futility, lack of purpose, or loss of self-esteem," a fear of "meaninglessness," the possibility of falling "into a life which is spiritually senseless," whereby "the world loses altogether its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing," accompanied by the fear of "a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body-space" (18). In my language, this modern malaise would be the product of a lopsided spirituality from below, which would occur when we expose ourselves to the abyss before having first habituated ourselves to the call of selfless moral purity.

Gruen describes "spirituality from below" as entailing the idea that "dealing with the passions [is] the path to God,"[29] that between the façade of goodness that we maintain in "normal life" and the deep ontological reality of goodness, there lies this "shadow" composed of those negative desires we are obliged to repress in order to live in society with others. Thus, to speak in terms of an absolute minimum level of commitment to moral life, in which morality consists in nothing more than the socially necessary repression of our negative drives, the spirituality from below would consist in a disciplined encounter with the negative emotions that we must repress in order to get along peacefully with others. Gruen, however, does not present this path downwards as a socially useful way to safely vent; to be clear, as with the pursuit of moral purity, the pursuit of self-knowledge *is* socially useful, but that is not its primary justification. As Gruen puts it, "[t]he way to God leads through the encounter with myself, through the descent into my reality."[30] It is through this disciplined passage toward real self-knowledge, whereby my previous identification with an idealized persona is complemented by an awareness of my repressed shadow, that the repressed negative desires lose strength and the dangerous rigidity of the persona can soften. The result, according to Gruen, is gentleness and compassion, a goodness that emerges spontaneously and naturally, instead of through an internal struggle with our own darkness.

Gruen repeatedly insists on this point—that the true measure of spiritual progress is gentleness and compassion: "The goal of the spiritual path is not the great ascetic, not the indefatigable master, nor the consistent person, but the meek and gentle one"[31]; "Without gentleness, we can read the Bible as much as we like and engage in the harshest ascetical practices, but we will never understand the mystery of Christ"[32]; "Gentleness and compassion are the criteria of genuine spirituality. If we view and judge contemporary forms of piety with these criteria, we will quickly realize which kinds derive from fear of the repressed shadow and which come from the spirit of Christ."[33] This insistence suggests that those who walk the path downward of spiritual life will face different and perhaps unforeseen spiritual problems, in comparison to those who practice the more common moralistic path upwards. In this case, Gruen seems to be

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[29] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 19.
[30] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 25.
[31] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 116.
[32] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 117.
[33] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 118.

warning against developing a sense of spurious pride in our capacity to engage in practices that, ironically, are supposed to dissolve our pride. In chapter five, I will describe another potential problem that those who enter the path downward might encounter: the danger of abyssal pleasure, which can sweep us away if we are not careful. For the moment, however, let it suffice to say that, if practiced properly, the combined practice of morality and self-knowledge should give rise to a more porous persona, one which will no longer harbor a powerful shadow-side, and will therefore no longer require a powerful psychic wall to repress it.

Gruen elucidates the difference between these two modes of spirituality in terms of the emotion of rage. In the mode of spirituality from above, a person "reacts to the rage that boils up in us by repressing or crushing it: 'Rage is not supposed to happen. … I've got to be friendly and balanced at all times. So I have to control my rage'."[34] In the mode of spirituality from below, by contrast, we take the emotion as a message: "Perhaps my rage is pointing to some deep injury. Perhaps in my rage I encounter the wounded child in me that reacts with impotent fury to harm done to me by my parents or teachers. … Thus rage isn't automatically bad; it could be showing me the way to my true self."[35] Obviously, if we begin to feel the emotion of rage in our normal social life, we must control it; however, if we are only able to maintain a façade of external calmness through a struggle with our internal darkness, it is likely that we will eventually lose. The purpose of spirituality from above is not to confront our demons, but to contain them—and this is a very useful power, provided we also know how to face our demons through the practice of the spirituality from below, and thereby allow our inner demons to dissipate safely.

The difficulty with this practice, of course, is that acknowledging and exploring our rage entails the possibility that it will get out of control, that one will react to it and thereby unleash its destructive power into the outside world. As such, the practice of spirituality from below can be dangerous, insofar as it entails becoming aware of aspects of ourselves that we normally repress: in short, letting ourselves feel long repressed emotions might lead to being taken over by them, possessed by them. This is why the spirituality from below is best practiced in solitude, why the desert fathers went into the desert to work toward self-knowledge. As Gruen writes:

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[34] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 24.
[35] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 24-5.

> The monks do not remain sitting in their cells because they think they are better than the men and women in the world. Rather they withdraw into their cells in order to protect the world from themselves. They are working on a sort of environmental protection for the mind. On the small site of their cells they do waste removal for the world by cleaning up anger and resentment. That way they create a purer atmosphere, an atmosphere of love and compassion.[36]

In short, the monastic retreat from the mundane social world is grounded not in pride or cowardice, but rather in a serious and pragmatic concern: it is dangerous to try to work through repressed fury in the presence of those with whom we might be furious. The monastic retreat into the desert would therefore be, at root, just another instantiation of the logic behind why our psychotherapist is usually separate from our normal social circle, or why, in Catholicism, confession is usually given in secret to a priest. Nietzsche's famous aphorism from *Beyond Good and Evil* describes the logic perfectly: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster."[37] In this sense, one's shadow side is akin to an inner monster, and the practice of spirituality from below entails encountering this monster. However, one does not want to do battle with a monster in the middle of one's hometown—one wants to fight it in the safety of the wilderness, such that even if one periodically succumbs to the beast, the resultant explosion will occur in a place where other people will not be harmed.[38] Again, the goal of spirituality from below is not the blind pursuit of self-knowledge at all costs—this would give rise to the lopsided spirituality from below that I will examine in chapters four and five, with reference to the work of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche. The goal of a coherent

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[36] Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, 30.

[37] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §146, p. 102.

[38] In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett articulates a common critique of this type of monastic solitude: "There are many people who quite innocently and sincerely believe that if they are earnest in attending to their own personal 'spiritual' needs, this amounts to living a morally good life. I know many activists, both religious and secular, who agree with me: these people are deluding themselves. … Consider, for instance, those contemplative monks, primarily in Christian and Buddhist traditions, who, unlike hardworking nuns in schools and hospitals, devote most of their waking hours to the purification of their souls, and the rest to the maintenance of the contemplative lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. In what way, exactly, are they morally superior to people who devote their lives to improving their stamp collections or their golf swing? It seems to me that the best that can be said of them is that they manage to stay out of trouble, which is not nothing" (Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 306). Two points can be made in the wake of this common accusation. First, Dennett is giving voice to a legitimate spiritual mistake that needs to be criticized. The spirituality from below, the encounter with the shadow, is indeed very difficult, and there are many ways to go wrong. In the passage above, for example, Dennett appears to be criticizing a person who has overemphasized the spirituality from below, which would now need to be balanced by the pressure to live up to an idealized vision of selfless morality in normal life. However, second, those nuns who devote themselves to "useful" work in schools and hospitals are very likely engaged in some kind of contemplative practice as well. Their capacity to lovingly serve others is cultivated in the atmosphere of love and compassion that contemplation helps foster.

practice of the spirituality from below, rather, is self-knowledge combined with the power of self-control that one has already cultivated through the practice of spirituality from above.

3. The First and Second Temptations of Christ

So far, I have described the two halves of the practice of spiritual religion in terms of a tension between the path upwards of morality and the path downwards of self-knowledge. From here, I will explore the same tension through an interpretation of the first two temptations of Christ.

In the first temptation, the devil asks Jesus to transform some stones into loaves of bread to assuage his hunger. Jesus responds to this temptation by drawing on the authority of the Bible: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."[39] Here, by acknowledging the authority of the Bible, Jesus gains the spiritual strength necessary to opt for goodness in the face of hunger. This first temptation, therefore, would represent the spirituality from above, as the conflict between commonsense practicality and the demands of virtue, between the idea that bodily comfort is the highest good and the idea that we must sometimes endure hardship for the sake of justice, virtue, and goodness.

In the second temptation, the devil changes tactics. Now that Jesus is drawing on the authority of the Bible to inspire this spiritual fortitude, the devil begins to cite the Bible, trying to trick Jesus into committing a foolish action as though it were the height of piety. Taking Jesus to the top of the temple, he tells him to jump, because the Bible says that "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."[40] Jesus responds by citing a different passage of the Bible: "Again it is written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Now, if we passed the first temptation by adopting the power of religious authority to strengthen us against our desire for food, the religious authority has now become the source of a new danger, in which our passionate desire to follow the path of goodness prompts us to pursue abominable ends as though they were divine commands. We would pass this second temptation by transforming how we approach the traditional authority:

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[39] Matthew 4:4
[40] Matthew 4:6

instead of seeing it as a concrete set of moral commandments to help us resist the concrete temptations of the world, we would view it as a strange and ambiguous medium through the interpretation of which it becomes possible to distinguish between wisdom and folly. This newfound recognition of the ambiguity of the traditional authority would represent the movement from the path upwards to the path downwards, the pursuit of moral purity in line with a simple and defined understanding, in contrast to the attempt to discern what moral purity actually entails within the messy particularity of real life.

To fail in the first temptation would be to adopt the claim, either implicitly or explicitly, that practicality trumps morality, that virtue is a luxury to be pursued only after we have secured our supply of bread. Needless to say, food and virtue will not be opposed all the time, or even most of the time. Existentially, therefore, the first temptation would be referring to those rare situations in which some tragic choice breaks through the normal routines of everyday life, when bodily comfort comes into direct opposition with the evident demands of justice. In such situations, the claim that food is more important than virtue will give way logically to the politics of capitulation and the cynical ontology of war—for, as Socrates puts it in the *Gorgias*, if the comforts of bodily life are indeed our highest human concern, then a wise person "ought either to be a ruler himself in his city or even be a tyrant, or else to be a partisan of the regime in power,"[41] as this kind of policy will ensure that these goods are always supplied. This is essentially the critique I levelled against Dennett in chapter two: that his attempt to derive the values of truth and justice from the projects of life and security will lead to problems in those extreme situations when life comes into conflict with justice. It is under extreme conditions that one must have the moral fortitude to sacrifice bodily comfort for the sake of virtue—and this is where the authority of tradition can help inspire us to follow the thorny path of goodness.

If failure in the first temptation entails placing comfort ahead of justice, failure in the second temptation entails becoming a fanatic who refuses to question their understanding of the *whatness* of the good—a problem that I described above with the term "lopsided spirituality from above." In short, if the struggle of the first temptation entails gaining the spiritual strength to withstand bodily discomfort, the struggle of the second temptation entails not becoming captured by our idea of what to live for, not becoming ensnared by the defined purpose that has given us

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[41] Plato, *Gorgias*, 510a.

the power to resist the pleasures and pains of the world. More precisely, once Jesus has accepted the authority of the Bible to inspire him to stand firm for justice in the face of temptation, the authority of the Bible itself becomes the temptation—whereby our own parochial understanding of the *whatness* of goodness becomes more important than goodness itself, whereby the spiritual strength necessary to resist the threats and bribes of the world transforms into the inflexible rigidity of a lopsided spiritualty from above.

Needless to say, if we presume that Jesus is already a wise person and is thus not *really* being tempted by the devil's devious citation, seeing through the devil's interpretation might not be so difficult: Jesus would simply draw upon his true wisdom to cite the correct passage to counteract the devil's misguided advice. However, for people like ourselves, people who are not already wise, Jesus' counter-interpretation gives rise to a situation in which two different and contradictory interpretations of the Bible, two mutually incompatible understandings of wisdom, vie for the right to express themselves in action. A Lutheran approach to the three temptations, *Between God and Satan*, written by German theologian Helmut Thielicke on the eve of the Second World War, gives powerful voice to the seriousness of this predicament:

> The terrible thing about the tempter's second question is that it is such a pious one. It is more pious than the first, because it goes to work not only with a religious phrase and the right and wrong uses of the fact of God, but because it quotes the Bible and 'takes God at his word'. That is the most dangerous mask possessed by the devil: the mask of God. It is more horrifying than the garment of light. Luther knew something about it. He was dreadfully afraid of it. He saw himself as it were encircled by God. He had to flee from God (from this masked demon) to God. This flight is one of the ultimate secrets of his faith.[42]

The logic here is akin to that of Plato's Learner's Paradox: if we are not already wise, we will be unable to distinguish real wisdom from fake wisdom when we encounter them—but if we are already wise, then we have no need to search for wisdom to begin with. This means that the search for wisdom is impossible. In the dialogue, Meno posits the Paradox to support the spiritual stance of commonsense complacence—as though to say, "since we cannot figure it out anyway, it is useless to think about it." This resembles the way the doctrine of the subjectivity of values operates in modern naturalism: since all values are nothing more than opinion, there is no point in subjecting them to rational analysis. Luther's horror derives from the fact that he is

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[42] Helmut Thielicke, *Between God and Satan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958), 52-3.

already deeply committed to the good, but now it turns out that his very commitment to the good might be bringing about his damnation. In my language, this would be the spiritual turmoil entailed in the realization that we might be operating within a compromised vision of the *whatness* of the good.

In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal describes someone who believes that we cannot really know about God or goodness as a "Pyrrhonist," after the renowned ancient skeptic. For such Pyrrhonists, wisdom would consist in dealing with the practical business in front of us, earning money, raising families, having a good time, and generally not taking spiritual things too seriously. In chapter four, I will present this as the spiritual posture of David Hume, as well as the general spiritual stance of modern naturalism. Here, it can be seen to represent a failure in the first temptation. Pascal notes, however, that even though this position is wrong, one solid point can be said in its favor: "Nothing strengthens Pyrrhonism more than the fact that there are some people who are not Pyrrhonists. … because human weakness is much more apparent in those who do not recognize it than in those who do."[43] Slavoj Žižec makes the same point in *God in Pain*, when he approvingly cites physicist Steve Weinberg's claim that "without religion good people would continue to do good things and bad people bad things, only religion can make good people do bad things."[44] My point, in this context, is that this critique of "religion" already exists within "religion": the second temptation is a clear and precise warning against the possibility that our weaknesses will draw upon the authority of the Word of God to propel us blindly toward immoral ends.[45]

To put the point in more secular terms, those who consider comfort and security to be the highest goods are unlikely to be very dangerous, either to themselves or to others. However, those who are ready to sacrifice food, safety, and even their lives for the sake of their vision of goodness are prone to being led toward disaster. Paul Tillich describes the risk of faith in these terms: "The risk to faith in one's ultimate concern is indeed the greatest risk man can run. For if it proves to be a failure, the meaning of one's life breaks down; one surrenders oneself, including truth and

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[43] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §68.

[44] Slajoy Žižec, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 45.

[45] For an interesting Hasidic spin on this idea, consider the following: "The rabbi of Lublin said: 'I love the wicked man who knows he is wicked more than the righteous man who knows he is righteous. But concerning the wicked who consider themselves righteous, it is said: 'They do not turn even on the threshold of Hell.' For they think they are being sent to Hell to redeem the souls of others'" (Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, 315).

justice, to something which is not worth it."[46] In this context, we might think of passing through the first temptation in terms of adopting an ultimate concern, a vision for which we are willing to die. But if this concern turns out to be an illusion, this would mean that we have staked our lives on a fraud. Tillich describes this possibility in terms of the intimate relationship between the divine and the demonic: "This is the point where the ambiguous character of religion is most visible and the dangers of faith are most obvious: the danger of faith is idolatry and the ambiguity of the holy is its demonic possibility. Our ultimate concern can destroy us as it can heal us."[47] Tillich's own descriptions of the demonic power of ultimate concern relate mostly to the idolatrous nationalism of Nazi Germany.[48] For more overtly religious examples, we might also think of the mass-suicide of nearly a thousand people in Jonestown, 1978, at the behest of Jim Jones, or of the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack in 1995, at the behest of Shoko Asahara. The temptation to commit such atrocities will never occur to those who refuse to be seduced by the inspirational rhetoric of religion or moral goodness, people who refuse to step outside the ambit of simple pragmatic concerns. This, once again, is the political logic behind Mackie's inverse theodicy of disenchantment, which we examined in chapter two.

4. Radical Hope in the *Thatness* of the Good

As these examples indicate, there is an inherent tension between the first and second temptations of Christ, in that the strength that helps us stand up for justice in the first temptation becomes the danger that we must overcome in the second. Consider, for example, the actual verse the devil cites: in a situation where personal security has come into conflict with the demands of justice, one might very well cite the authority of the Bible to recommend a bold leap from the tower, a refusal to give in to fear, a confidence that God will protect those who commit to the path of

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[46] Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 17.

[47] Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, 16.

[48] Frankl offers a similar argument in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*: "we are tempted to reverse Freud's statement and dare to say that compulsive neurosis may well be diseased religiousness. In fact, clinical evidence suggests that atrophy of the religious sense in man results in a distortion of his religious concepts. Or, to put it in a less clinical vein, once the angel in us is repressed, he turns into a demon" (Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 75).

goodness. However, if this same spiritual strength is carried forward into the predicament of the second temptation, it gives rise to a spiritual disaster—as the advice of the devil comes to be followed with an unshakeable conviction in its own justice. As such, if the passage through the first temptation requires spiritual hardness, passage through the second entails the recognition that, if it is sometimes correct to be hard, it is also sometimes correct to be soft—or, perhaps better, that there is a spiritual hardness that differs from rigid fanaticism, and a spiritual softness that differs from blithe complacence.

This tension can also be elucidated in terms of the language of *thatness* and *whatness*. For those struggling with the first temptation, belief in traditional authority provides the spiritual strength necessary to resist the often very powerful temptations of the world. The cultivation of this strength, however, requires a firm and consistent belief not only *that* wisdom and goodness are real, but also a willingness to live (and possibly die) based on some particular understanding of *what* wisdom and goodness demand from us. It is this confident belief in the *whatness/thatness* of goodness that the traditional authority provides, and which allows us to resist the lethargy of Pyrrhonic complacence. Passing through the second temptation, however, requires splitting *thatness* from *whatness*, continuing to accept *that* goodness is real while engaging in free and open conversation—which would explore doubt, criticism, pluralism—concerning the *whatness* of the good. In this sense, meanwhile, the healthy fluctuation between the spirituality from above and below would mean first leaping into the *whatness/thatness* of the good, in the form of a strong moral commitment, then allowing the concept to separate into distinct aspects of *thatness* and *whatness*, and then working to help them come back together in a different form—and to proceed like this again and again and again.

The difficulty in following this procedure lies in the fact that orienting one's life in terms of a vision of the good requires more than mere intellectual engagement. In his book *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear provides a good example of this. Reflecting on the total breakdown of the way of life of the Crow tribe in the mid-19th century, when the buffalo were exterminated and the tribe was obliged to change from a nomadic warrior society to a sedentary agricultural society living on a reserve, Lear wonders "how one could be psychologically equipped to face a cultural

collapse."[49] He then observes that it might be "in the lineaments of our psychological natures that my flourishing as a member of my culture makes me *less* able to confront the challenges of a radically new future."[50] In short, becoming an exemplar of one particular understanding of the *whatness* of the good requires a deep habituation that informs our most fundamental sense of self, such that the more one comes to embody one particular vision of goodness, the more difficult it might be to leave this vision behind in order to transition towards another:

> [I]t is through training and habituation that a person's character is shaped—in particular, the character and outlook of a virtuous person. This outlook is deeply ingrained, and it is psychologically stable. … This view is not *just* a view: it is a psychologically ingrained nexus of perception and motivation.[51]

One does not, in other words, take one's deep ethical commitments on and off like a hat. One is habituated slowly into such things, and to the extent that they sink in, this habituation is difficult to alter. As such, those who have deeply internalized a vision of the *whatness/thatness* of the good might be least able, emotionally, to separate *whatness* from *thatness* when the situation calls for a free search for something better, when the old understanding of *whatness* has ceased to make sense.

According to Lear's analysis, this spiritual movement, from striving to become the exemplar of a particular understanding of the good to facing a cultural devastation in which all one's old cultural understandings of the good life cease to make sense, requires "some conception of—or commitment to—a goodness that transcend[s] one's current understanding of the good."[52] He calls this "radical hope," a "commitment to the idea that the goodness of the world transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it,"[53] such that, even though our "understanding of self and world is based on a set of living commitments that are vulnerable, it is nevertheless possible to commit to a goodness which transcends that understanding," without at the same time claiming "to have any grasp of what it is."[54] He further notes that, if this "radical hope" can be thought of as a kind of religious commitment, it would be a religious commitment

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[49] Lear, *Radical Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 62.
[50] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 63.
[51] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 63.
[52] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 92.
[53] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 95.
[54] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 95.

that would breed not intolerance— "as though believers had a 'direct line to God'"[55] —but rather humility: in my own language, those who were committed to radical hope would recognize that the *thatness* of the good transcended their own understanding, and would therefore be open to different expressions of its *whatness*.

"Radical hope" would also be another way to describe the spiritual posture necessary in order for one's engagement with the abyss to result in a "eucastrophe" rather than a "dyscatastrophe." In the terminology of chapter one, "radical hope" would fall under the purview of the ontology of mystery, and the ontology of war might be defined as an explicit rejection of it. This, meanwhile, is the reason the ontology of war is so spiritually dangerous: because, from the basis of this ontological presupposition, the catastrophe of cultural devastation will always appear as a dyscatastrophe. Basically, if control over contingency is defined as the source of all goodness, then loss of control is nothing more than a dyscatastrophe that can only be rectified by regaining control. In the language of the three temptations, meanwhile, radical hope would be the virtue that helps one pass through the second temptation, the catastrophe entailed by the realization that our psychologically ingrained habituation towards one particular understanding of goodness is potentially causing us to become bad. In this context, if the first temptation entailed developing the capacity to endure bodily suffering for the sake of some vision of human excellence, the second temptation would entail enduring spiritual suffering for the sake of "excellence" itself. Conversely, if failure in the first temptation results from fear of "physical" pain, failure in the second temptation results from fear of "spiritual" pain, refusal to allow the good to split into dimensions of *thatness* and *whatness*, refusal to entertain the devastating possibility that we ourselves might be following the teachings of the devil as though they were the word of God.

Now, from the perspective of the lopsided practitioner of spirituality from above, it might appear that spiritual softness will lead inevitably back to spiritual complacence. This would only be true, however, if the *whatness* and the *thatness* of the good were inseparable, if being willing to admit that I do not know exactly *what* is good is tantamount to the cynical rejection of goodness itself. Basically, the leap into strong moral commitment only becomes fanatical commitment insofar as *thatness* and *whatness* are conflated, insofar as it comes to appear that a rejection of *this* particular definition of the good entails rejecting the concept of goodness itself, or if questioning

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[55] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 95.

the viability of *this* hope is equated with doubt as to the reality of Hope itself. To the extent that one gets caught in this, one's spiritual life will be trapped in the dynamic of the first temptation, the lopsided practice of spirituality from above, as a constant battle with the pleasures and pains of the "normal" world, against which one posits one's own increasingly rigid understanding of the *whatness* of the good. On the other hand, if one's lopsided spirituality from above has anchored itself in ideals of progress and disenchantment, then progressive technological control over the contingencies of nature will be understood as the only possible vision of the *whatness/thatness* of the good, and the failure of progress to actually achieve control over these contingencies could easily be attributed to the irrationality of religious fanatics who refuse to accept the truth of disenchantment.[56]

Conversely, the predicament of the second temptation only leads to the opposite problem, complacence, when one relies upon a concept of the *thatness* of the good in order to avoid bothering with its *whatness*. Lear uses the term "Pollyanna" to describe such a spirituality, a person "whose hopefulness depends on averting her gaze from devastating reality."[57] This would be the person who maintains mental tranquility by refusing to read the news or to think too deeply on the troubling contradictions of human moral and political life. The arguments of my first chapter can be read as an argument against the claim that adopting radical hope entails a descent into such pathological spiritual softness. In this context, we might say that only people like Frankl, Socrates, and Jesus can function as speakers of radical hope, because only people who have suffered in such ways can attest that their own affirmation of radical hope is not based on a tranquilizing refusal to engage with the possibility of devastation and the inevitability of suffering and death. In chapter six, I will argue that, in less extreme situations, someone who accepts radical hope in the *thatness* of the good would avert the descent into complacent

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[56] In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud argues that, eventually, it will be possible to rid the world of religion. In his essay "The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science," by contrast, Robert McCauley argues that "no development in science will ever seriously threaten the persistence of religion or the forms of explanation religion employs or the emergence of new religions," because "religion and its characteristic forms of explanation are a 'natural' outgrowth of the character and content of human association and cognition" (McCauley, "The Naturalness of Religion and the Unnaturalness of Science," in *Explanation and Cognition*., 62). Thus, in contrast to Freud's hope for the eventual victory of science, McCauley suggests that science will need to fight an endless battle against our "natural" impulse to fall victim to "our familiar, commonsense psychology about agents' intentions, beliefs, desires, and actions for the explanation of phenomena throughout the natural and social worlds" (79). By my argument, meanwhile, what McCauley criticizes as "religion" would be better referred to as "superstition," and McCauley would be transforming "science" into a lopsided spirituality from above, an ideal that will need to do endless battle with our so-called "natural" ways of thinking.

[57] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 105.

Pollyanna-ism through a committed search for its *whatness*—or, perhaps more precisely, through a committed attempt to discern how their own commitments are being corrupted by the deceptions of unjust power, by the devilish institutions adopting the façade of goodness in order to promote their own nefarious ends as though these were the height of virtue. Indeed, as will become clear in chapter six, one does not escape the predicament of the second temptation by avoiding traditional religious authority—because culture itself is forged as a battle between goodness, however it is defined, and oppressive powers that adopt the image of goodness to promote their own ends. I will argue that this is what is at stake in the third and final temptation, which describes how the practitioner of spiritual religion should engage with the political and social world.

6. Origen's Interpretation of the Three Books of Solomon

Origen's interpretation of the three books of Solomon—*Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *The Song of Songs*—provides yet another symbolic language through which to describe the relationship between morality and self-knowledge, the path upwards and the path downwards, or the first and second temptations of Christ. The passage of interest can be found in the introduction to Origen's *Homily on the Song of Songs*:

> Wishing … to distinguish one from another of those three branches of learning …
> —that is, the moral, the natural, and the inspective, and to differentiate between
> them, Solomon issued them in three books, arranged in their proper order. First, in
> Proverbs he taught the moral science, putting rules for living into the form of
> short and pithy maxims, as was fitting. Secondly, he covered the science known
> as natural in Ecclesiastes; in this, by discussing at length the things of nature, and
> by distinguishing the useless and vain from the profitable and essential, he
> counsels us to forsake vanity and cultivate things useful and upright. The
> inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we have now
> in hand—that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instils into the soul the love of
> things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and
> Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the
> paths of charity and love.[58]

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[58] Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1957), 41.

Here, the "science known as natural" is described as logically occurring after the "moral science," as part of the path that leads toward insight into "things divine and heavenly." In fact, Origen insists that this same triplex relationship between morality, natural science, and insight occurs in many parts of the Bible. As an example, he cites the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who he says represent the virtues of obedience (Abraham), followed by science (Isaac), followed by the spirituality of Jacob, described allegorically in terms of a wrestling match with God on the far banks of the Jordan. The three temptations of Christ might be seen as another example, with the obedience to tradition described in the first temptation succeeded by the rational analysis of the tradition described in the second—followed by the third, in which one is obliged to refuse to acquiesce to whatever evil one has discerned.

As is perhaps already clear, *Proverbs* would correspond to the spirituality from above, as the attempt to live up to a high moral ideal, while *Ecclesiastes* would correspond to the spirituality from below, as the attempt to dissolve the ego in the infinite vastness of the physical universe. What makes Origen's vocabulary interesting is the way he describes the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* as germane to "the science known as natural." In this book of the Bible, we are enjoined to experience our lives from the perspective of the infinite vastness of cosmic time and space, which reveals our ambitions to be just "vanity and a chasing after the wind"[59] —and this language resonates strongly with a common historical narrative that modern scientific culture tells itself concerning its relationship with religion. In *Pale Blue Dot*, for example, Carl Sagan describes the reality of the human place in the universe as revealed by modern astronomy: "You're ordinary, you're unimportant, your privileges are undeserved, there's nothing special about you."[60] In effect, Sagan is practicing the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes*, dissolving his normal human perspective in the vastness of time and space. However, rather than viewing this "view from infinity" as a perspective that one might periodically adopt within a larger curriculum of spiritual practice, Sagan presents it as an unprecedented discovery of modern astronomy: "In every culture we imagined something like our own political system running the Universe. … Then science came along and taught us that we are not the measure of all things."[61] Thus, while Origen presents *Ecclesiastes* as the second phase of spiritual life, Sagan presents this perspective

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[59] Ecclesiastes 1:14, NRSV.
[60] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision for the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 48.
[61] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 46-7.

as a truth that modern science has discovered about the human condition—which means that the religious sense, that there is some kind of deep meaning to reality, is actually nothing more than a weak-kneed retreat from the hideous truth: "a little myth and ritual to get us through a night that seems endless."[62] Sagan condemns traditional philosophy on these same grounds: "[t]he long standing view, as summarized by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, that 'without man … the whole of creation would be a mere wilderness, a thing in vain, and have no final end' is revealed [by science] to be self-indulgent folly."[63] As the story goes, we need to reject the "childishness and narcissism of our pre-Copernican notions,"[64] and embrace the harsh truth that we are "in a bottomless free fall … lost in a great darkness, and there's no one to send out a search party." Many of us, unfortunately, continue to cringe before the face of this truth, preferring to "shut our eyes and pretend that we're safe and snug at home, that the fall is only a bad dream."[65] According to Sagan, however, this is a complacent, cowardly retreat from our responsibility as rational human agents: "We long for a Parent to care for us, to forgive us our errors, to save us from our childish mistakes. But knowledge is preferable to ignorance. Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable."[66]

Now, one problem with this common naturalist historical narrative is that, as I have already argued, it is historically false. People have been dissolving their ego in the infinite vastness of

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[62] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 53.
[63] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 39.
[64] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 47.
[65] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 53.
[66] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 57; on Origen's terms, Sagan's story is roughly half correct. A collection of the sayings of the mystically inclined Hasidic masters, compiled by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, provides a concise expression of the half that Sagan is missing: "Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in his left: 'I am [dust] and ashes'" (Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*, 249-50). Sagan would be reaching into the "dust and ashes" pocket in every situation, and he accuses religious adherents of reaching only into the "for my sake" pocket. We can make a similar point with reference to the famous words at the end of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. … The first view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, …. The second, on the contrary, raises my worth as an intelligence infinitely through my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world" (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:161-62; as quoted in Paul Guyer, *Kant*, 1). Naturalism adopts the first practice, looking at the starry heavens to annihilate our sense of importance as an animal; however, it rejects the reality of a moral law. It is this spiritual imbalance that leads to nihilism, as the moral law (*Proverbs*) is also dissolved within the infinite meaninglessness of the abyss. I would argue that the moral law is grounded in the phenomenological experience of ontological love, as it will manifest for those who enter the abyss in the correct way.

cosmic time and space for thousands of years.[67] For example, besides *Ecclesiastes*, a similar practice can also be found in the *Dream of Scipio*, written by the famous Roman orator and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero over two thousand years ago. Cicero describes Scipio's spiritual ascent into the higher spheres of the universe, from which the Roman Empire appears as a tiny dot, and human aspirations for glory and fame are shown as nothing within the endless cycles of cosmic time.[68] Also like Sagan, who is quick to laud the moral benefits of these hard realizations, pointing out that they give us "good reason for humility," Cicero draws the same moral lesson from this perspective: speaking to an aristocratic warrior culture, he argues that there is no point in perpetrating injustice for the sake of a fleeting glory, the memory of which will be extinguished long before the universe completes even one of its infinite revolutions. In *What is Ancient Philosophy*, Hadot offers a much more extensive list of such examples: in addition to Cicero, he offers examples from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius' *On Nature*, Seneca's *Natural Questions*, as well as Lucian's *Icaromenippus* and *Charon* to illustrate that this "view from infinity" was not discovered by post-Copernican humanity, but is rather a perennial human possibility.[69]

The thrust of my argument, however, is not to simply expose the errors of this common naturalist historiography. My argument is instead directed against the sense that we are "in a bottomless free fall … lost in a great darkness," and that the only way to avoid this conclusion is to "shut

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[67] Hadot makes this point in *What is Ancient Philosophy*,: "[l]et us note in passing that, despite what certain historians may believe, it was not necessary to wait for Copernicus for the 'walls of the world to fall apart' or for the transition to be made from the closed world to the infinite universe" (Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 203-204). What Hadot notes "in passing," I am simply developing into a more thorough and directed critique of modern naturalism.

[68] Cicero, *The Dream of Scipio*, translated by Edward Henry Blakeney (London: The Fortune Press, 1927), p. 31-35; see also Lucretius, *On Nature*, III, 16 and 30, as quoted in Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 203: "The walls of the world fall apart. I see things hurled about within the immense void … The earth does not stop me from distinguishing all that is happening beneath my feet, in the depths of the void. At the sight, I find myself seized by a kind of shudder of divine pleasure."

[69] Hadot's analysis of Lucian's *Charon* is worth considering in more detail: "In … *Charon*, the ferryman of the dead looks at human life on earth from a vertiginous height, and considers how foolish men's actions are when one examines them while bearing in mind that their agents will soon die. It is significant that Lucian's observer should be the ferryman of the dead. To view things from above is to look at them from the perspective of death. In both cases, it means looking at things with detachment, distance, and objectivity, seeing them as they are in themselves, situating them within the immensity of the universe and the totality of nature, without the false prestige lent to them by our human passions and conventions. The view from above changes our value judgments on things: luxury, power, war, borders, and the worries of everyday life all become ridiculous" (Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 207). Here again, we can see that the spiritual benefits that accrue to the "view from above" (my "view from infinity") are identical to those suggested by Sagan and other modern purveyors of this technique.

our eyes and pretend that we're safe and snug at home."[70] This perspective, I will argue, is actually an illusion fostered by an erroneous spiritual practice. Essentially, on the basis of a naturalist epistemology that views science as the sole legitimate source of truth, people like Sagan have come to experience the spiritual perspective of *Ecclesiastes* as the sole legitimate perspective—the truth in contrast to the "childishness and narcissism of our pre-Copernican notions."[71] Thus, while the ancient practice set "natural science" within a larger rubric that began with "moral science" and culminated with "insight," modern naturalist culture views the perspective of natural science as the sole authentic vision of reality. From the perspective of the ancient curriculum, however, the results of this univocal elevation of *Ecclesiastes* are entirely to be expected: we come to experience the dissolution of the self as an existential despair that goes down forever.

The reason for this becomes clear if we think about the perspective of *Ecclesiastes* from the context of Gruen's descriptions of the spirituality from below. Basically, this sense of cosmic insignificance would produce the same flickering of the ideals that we considered with regard to the German Catholics who felt threatened by a prurient art exhibit. However, while that case could be likened to a scalpel blade being applied by other people to a set of revered symbols, the void of *Ecclesiastes* would give rise to a more generalized melting of our aspirations and ambitions—but a melting that would still allow the shadow cast by these ideals to float up through a wavering of our self-image. It is for this reason that the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* would correlate to the path of self-knowledge: not because the perspective of natural science, of the vanity of all things, is the "true" vantage from which to view our condition, but rather because imaginatively adopting this cosmic perspective can be a useful technique for allowing the walls between the conscious façade and its unconscious shadow to become more porous, thereby allowing us to behold the hidden underbelly of the moral persona we inhabit during our everyday life. In other words, the self-knowledge that arises from the practice of the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* is not the realization of the "true" insignificance of human life from the vantage point of the universe, as Sagan would have it, but is rather a process whereby the walls of the ego soften, allowing normally repressed shadows to rise into the field of awareness, where they can be recognized and allowed peacefully to dissolve. In terms of this ancient spiritual practice,

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[70] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 53.
[71] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 47.

therefore, the despair and anxiety that we sometimes experience when exposed to the "view from infinity" would eventually give way to "insight" into the ontological love described by the *Song of Songs*.[72]

This vocabulary also suggests a new way to describe the spiritual imbalance of modern culture. In short, "religion" tends to be identified with the spirituality of *Proverbs* alone, while the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* tends to get misappropriated by modern natural science as its own unprecedented discovery. In this way, through a dynamic similar to one we already saw with regard to the temptations of Christ, naturalism effectively deploys the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* to undermine the spirituality of *Proverbs*, while lopsided practitioners of *Proverbs* refuse to engage with the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes*, lest it upset their confidence in the moral sensibility they have inherited from their traditional culture. According to Origen's account, however, the apparently opposing spiritual principles of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* are actually complementary to each other, as the two wings of a bird that must work together to enable the bird to fly. Cooperating, the wings produce the spiritual state that Origin describes in terms of the *Song of Songs*—the experience of ontological love. Competing, however, the wing of *Proverbs* tends to become stiff and intolerant, while the wing of *Ecclesiastes* tends to melt into an unpleasant experience of meaninglessness, despair, and ontological anxiety.[73]

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[72] Concerning the relationship between spiritual fear and spiritual love, consider the following anecdote from Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*: "Once Zusya prayed to God: "Lord, I love you so much, but I do not fear you enough! Lord, I love you so much, but I do not fear you enough! Let me stand in awe of you like your angels, who are penetrated by your awe-inspiring name." And God heard his prayer, and his name penetrated the hidden heart of Zusya as it does those of the angels. But Zusya crawled under his bed like a little dog, and animal fear shook him until he howled: "Lord, let me love you like Zusya again!" And God heard him this time also" (Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, 246-47).

[73] A similar structure can be found in Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*, where Tillich makes a distinction between an "ontological" type of faith and a "moral" type of faith. Although Tillich's understanding of "ontological" and "moral" is not exactly the same as my "downward" and "upward" directions of spiritual life, Tillich's observation concerning the relationship between these two moments remains apt: "[i]n the experience of the holy, the ontological and the moral element are essentially united, while in the life of faith they diverge and are driven to conflicts and mutual destruction" (Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 69). For Tillich, in other words, there is some ecstatic experience of the holy wherein the way the world *is* and the way the world *ought-to-be* come into alignment, but once this experience ends and we return to our mundane experience of reality, these two elements tend to differentiate away from each other and to come into conflict—nay, are "driven to conflicts and mutual destruction," implying that the tendency to fight between the two elements of holiness actually *destroys* holiness. In my own terms, it is difficult to maintain a balance between the two sides of holiness, between the pursuit of moral perfection and the pursuit of honest self-awareness; however, the struggle to do so will lead back to the experience of the holy in which morality and ontology were/are/will be identical. A similar argument could be made with regard to Anselm's discussion of the relationship between God's justice and God's mercy. That being said, all of these points remain vulnerable to the

Indeed, Sagan's approach to *Ecclesiastes* can be spiritually damaging, insofar as it can give rise to nihilism.[74] More precisely, if human life is indeed infinitely insignificant, if human understandings of good and bad, noble and base, really are just projections over a fundamentally indifferent canvas, and if we are indeed irretrievably lost in a great and all-encompassing abyss, then why should we ever bother struggling to be "good," why should we ever bother repressing our immediate desires for the sake of some culturally contingent "moral" ideal that is, in reality, nothing more than a façade that serves the needs of power? From this perspective, the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* does not help us distinguish "the useless and vain from the profitable and essential," as Origen would have it, but rather teaches us that everything is useless and vain. The problem here is not only that we would come to the unpleasant sense that reality is meaningless. The danger is also moral: that, as our old ideals dissolve in the abyss, the dark passions that these ideals previously helped contain would be released from their previous restraints. This is the point that Plato makes in book VII of the *Republic*, the reason why dialectic can be dangerous for those who undertake it prematurely: as we will see more clearly in chapter five, it is very dangerous to engage with the passions of the shadow without first developing a capacity to observe them without being overwhelmed.

It is important to note, however, that when thinkers like Sagan return from the cosmic perspective back to everyday life, they almost always fudge the consequences of what they have said—thereby producing an ersatz *Proverbs* that can contain the dangerous psychic forces that might otherwise be set free. Sagan, for example, closes his chapter on what he calls the "Great Demotions" with a rousing call— "If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a

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objections we discussed in chapter one: that only those who have suffered immensely have any right to speak of these things, in public, in their own voice.

[74] See John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, for a good description of the way an awareness of our cosmic insignificance can lead to morally egregious conclusions: "if we view it from a purely factual standpoint, without any special evaluative focus on the noblest and best, our human nature is simply the result of various configurations of genes produced by a long process of mutation and survival pressure. From this perspective, though we can see how certain moral or altruistic tendencies may have evolved (perhaps because they contributed to cooperation that benefited the species), other traits—aggression, drive for power, ruthlessness—will equally have conferred advantages (which no doubt explains the peculiarly vicious and warlike nature of much human history). Now if the ultimate nature of reality contains no bias towards the good as opposed to the vicious, if there is nothing to support the hope that the good will ultimately triumph, if essentially we are on our own, with no particular reason to think that our pursuit of the good is any more than a temporary fragile disposition possessed by a percentage (perhaps a minority) of a certain class of anthropoids—then it is very hard to see how we can achieve the necessary confidence and resolution to follow the path of goodness; and at worst the very idea that some lives can be more meaningful than others seems a fantasy" (Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, 71-2).

worthy goal."[75] He makes this stirring invocation of purpose without any sense of irony, without any sense that talking about a "worthy" goal does not make sense if one has already claimed that we are also lost in a great, meaningless darkness. As it turns out, for Sagan, the *really* significant goal of the human race is the colonization of the solar system, a project that Sagan says will satisfy "our inclination for great enterprises and wanderings and quests that has been with us since our days as hunter gatherers on the East African savannahs a million years ago."[76] In this sense, therefore, the "Great Demotions" turn out to be just one aspect of a polemic against rival visions of the purpose of human life, clearing the ground for Sagan to propose what he sees as the *real* significance of our lives. In this way, the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* is transformed from a generalized melting into a scalpel blade applied by an ideological enemy (naturalism) to the revered symbols of traditional religion, thereby exacerbating the natural tension that already exists between the spirituality of *Proverbs* and the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes*. In the cultural atmosphere created by this polemicized *Ecclesiastes*, the spiritual stance of "natural science" often comes to appear, to the traditional piety, either as the nihilism mentioned above, or as the portal into some other utterly contingent belief system: a fideistic commitment to some alternative moral ideal—such as the colonization of space—against which one is tempted to posit an opposing fideistic commitment to the demands of God.

Conclusion: Spiritual Religion and the Dilemma of Mutilation

In his essay "Religion, Atheism, Faith," Paul Ricoeur describes the historical relationship between the totalizing religious worldview of medieval Christianity, the destruction of this worldview in the wake of the philosophies of people like Nietzsche and Freud, and the possibility of a potentially more authentic spiritual life emerging on the other side of this destruction.[77] On Ricoeur's account, the atheism of Nietzsche and Freud destroys the old metaphysical religion of a divine law-giver, who dispenses retributions and rewards for

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[75] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 57.

[76] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 282.

[77] In *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney develops another version of this same trifold interpretation of human spirituality: from theism, through atheism, and into what Kearney calls "anatheism."

acquiescence to his absolute laws. However, this first transformation, from "religion" to "atheism," is itself followed by a second transformation, from "atheism" to what Ricoeur calls "faith," which only emerges as a spiritual possibility after traditional "religion" has been undermined.[78] By "faith," Ricoeur is pointing to a spirituality "that wanders in the darkness, in a 'new night of the understanding'—to use the language of the mystics—before a God who … does not protect me but delivers me up to the dangers of a life worthy of being called human."[79] In effect, Ricoeur is arguing that a false understanding of God's *whatness*, entailed by what he calls "religion," is destroyed by "atheism," which then clears the way for the search for a better understanding of God's *whatness*, in the light cast by the sometimes overwhelming *thatness* of the mysterious divine.

With this structure, Ricoeur is describing the same structure that Plato describes in book VII of the *Republic*, where Socrates describes the danger of "lawlessness" that can beset us once we step beyond the unquestioned terms of our traditional culture. In this context, "religion" would be the particular traditional culture that happened to exist in Europe in the Middle Ages. "Atheism," meanwhile, would be the danger that afflicts people when they apply dialectical rationality to their traditional culture, the danger of falling victim to the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, the idea that, as Plato puts it, "the fine is no more fine than shameful."[80] However, in order to do justice to the spiritual logic I have been describing, Ricoeur would need to split the concept of atheism into two halves: first, "atheism" as the movement beyond the *whatness* of one's own traditional culture, which would indeed be a necessary step in the progress towards "faith"; and second, "atheism" as the rejection of the *thatness* of the good, which would be the diametric repudiation of "faith." If the first kind of atheism is the catastrophe of dialectical rationality, the second kind would be its dyscatastrophe. For naturalists, meanwhile, these two senses of "atheism" would be equivalent, as the rationality that takes us beyond traditional culture is understood as also leading ineluctably to the truth of the ontology of war, the consequences of which I have argued are then covered over by the veil of inverse

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[78] In "Nietzsche and Biblical Nihilism," (in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism*, 37-44), Thomas J. J. Altizer argues that all three of these stages can be seen in Nietzsche's interpretation of Jesus in *The Antichrist*: Jesus originally offered Ricoeur's "faith," but this original message was transformed into "religion" by the Christian church; as such, the truth of religion now needs to be liberated by Nietzschean "atheism."

[79] Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, Faith," in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 88.

[80] Plato, *Republic*, 538d-e.

theodicy. For Plato, by contrast, the realms of experience beyond tradition will reveal a choice—either we accept the mysterious *thatness* of the good, and commit to the earnest and unending search for its *whatness*—in which case we will become philosophers who have fallen in love with wisdom; or else we reject the *thatness* of the good, in which case the movement beyond tradition will be a dyscatastrophe that transforms us into tyrants—again, unless we then create a new traditional understanding, an inverse theodicy, to hold back the moral disaster that we have thereby courted.

As another criticism of Ricoeur, it is also necessary to point out that the atheism of Nietzsche and Freud are not the same, insofar as Nietzsche actually enters the hot and living catastrophe involved in seriously rejecting the *thatness* of the good, while Freud mitigates the excesses of Nietzsche's atheism through his belief in progress: as he puts it, "[w]e believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means of which we can increase our power in accordance with which we can arrange our life. If this belief is an illusion, then we are in the same position as you."[81] This could be called the "inverse theodicy of progress," and part of my project, in this context, would be to show that this belief *is* an illusion. To be clear, however, my claim is not the Luddite idea that our lives would be better without science and technology. Instead, my claim would be that science and technology only make life better when pursued by people who are honestly concerned with goodness. The goal of my critique of Freud, therefore, would be the same as my goal in critiquing Dennett and Mackie: to undermine the inverse theodicy in the name of the moral concern that underlies it.

The typical naturalist/atheist response to Ricoeur's kind of argument would be to suggest that it represents nothing more than an inauthentic attempt to escape the devastating truth of the naturalist critique. For example, in *The God Argument*, A. C. Grayling argues that any such attempt to redefine concepts like "God," "religion," or "morality" by appealing to "mystery, ineffability, the finitude of the human intellect, the impossibility of our grasping what is meant" is "the last resort of the apologist," a "'get out of jail free' card for use any time and in any circumstance."[82] In other words, these attempts to replace the God of medieval Christianity ("religion") with some new understanding of God ("faith") are, for Grayling, just cowardly

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[81] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Penguin Freud Library: Volume 12, Civilization, Society, and Religion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 239.
[82] A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument*, 28.

retreats into an unassailable fortress of gobbledygook—the acceptance *that* God is, combined with an inarticulate refusal to make any concrete claims as to *what* God might be. On this critique, the appeal to mystery, the contradistinction between "religion" and "faith," the attempt to open a space between *whatness* and *thatness*—none of these moves function as ways to open up conversation, but rather as newfangled ways to close down the possibility of debate:

> [A]pologists of religion are typically apt to respond to accounts of their views, and especially to criticism of their views, by saying 'That's not what I mean by religion', 'That's not what I mean by God', 'That's a caricature of what I believe', and so on. If any such do not mean by 'religion' what has been painstakingly identified in the foregoing, then that closes the conversation: a strategy that apologists under pressure are frequently keen to adopt.[83]

Basically, if religion in its essence rests upon some fixed understanding of the *whatness* of God, then any questioning of this *whatness* would entail simultaneously questioning the *thatness* of God—which means that it would be senseless to speak about opening a space between *whatness* from *thatness*. To put it more simply, naturalists see all religious belief as essentially fanaticism, the unquestioned adherence to this or that Divine Revelation, which can be sustained only through misology, the refusal to think. As Grayling puts it, "'[t]rue' versions of … religions are by their nature fundamentalist, while 'moderate' versions of religions are temporisations," religion as a "faint version of its official self, existing only when its votaries have rejected most of the doctrines and practices associated with it."[84] Sam Harris makes the same point, arguing that the "retreat from scriptural literalism"[85] derives from the advances of modern scientific culture: "The only reason anyone is "moderate" in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought."[86] This same critique can also be found in the work of 19th century atheist anarchist Michael Bakunin, who levels this exact same indictment against the "somewhat numerous class of honest but timid souls" who reject Christian dogmas in detail, "but have neither the courage nor the strength nor the necessary resolution to summarily renounce them altogether." Bakunin's criticism of those

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[83] Grayling, *The God Argument*, 29.
[84] Grayling, *The God Argument*, 14.
[85] Harris, *The End of Faith*, 17.
[86] Harris, *The End of Faith*, 18; Gavin Hyman argues that the idea that God is a mystery is postmodern, such that the rejection of this God of mystery should be seen as a kind of "post-modern" atheism, constituted not by a rejection of the traditional God, as a Big Person in the sky, but rather by a rejection of "the God of whom contemporary theologians speak" as "a vacuous concept that is unintelligible" (Hyman, *A Short History of Modern Atheism* 185).

who reject "the vigorous and powerful being, the brutally positive God of theology" in favor of a "nebulous, diaphanous, illusory being that vanishes into nothing at the first attempt to grasp it," is dripping with contempt:

> They are uncertain, sickly souls, who have lost their reckoning in the present civilization, belonging to neither the present nor the future, pale phantoms eternally suspended between heaven and earth …. They have neither the power nor the wish nor the determination to follow out their thought, and they waste their time and pains in constantly endeavoring to reconcile the irreconcilable. …With them, or against them, discussion is out of the question. They are too puny.[87]

These final sentences provide a perfect expression of the general atheist criticism of "spiritual religion": it is nothing more than a stop-gap measure used by those who have already walked most of the way towards authentic atheism, but who are just not strong enough to make the final courageous leap into authentic unbelief.[88] According to this vision, the stance of open questioning would be equivalent to atheism itself, and victory in the debate with religion could be secured simply by encouraging the religious adherent to *think*, to take a leap of faith into the possibility of doubt and the project of rational questioning.[89]

My response to this, meanwhile, is to say that the idea that science undermines belief in scriptural literalism is already in the Bible: this is the transition from *Proverbs* to *Ecclesiastes*,

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[87] Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (Dover Publications: New York, 1970), 17-18.

[88] We can find a more scientific expression of the same point in the work of sociologists Stark and Finke, who reject as absurd Paul Tillich's proposal that we "forget everything traditional [we] have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself" in order to comprehend that "'the word *God* means' the 'depth of existence'" (Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 146). Stark and Finke liken this to buying a ticket to watch a soccer game in which the players, lacking a ball, just stand around and look at each other. They argue that this abstract vision of God is "a faith of irreligion couched in metaphor and embroidered with poetry," (275), a "liberal" form of faith cannot ever come clean about its "positive beliefs," but instead only ever produces "metaphors or references to clever, but unfathomable, wordplays, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's proposal of a Christianity without religion" (275).

[89] It is worth pointing out that this criticism, leveled against moderate believers, has exactly the same structure as the argument I have just leveled against naturalism. Thus, on the naturalist critique, the true form of religion is fanaticism, and moderate believers only avoid becoming fanatics by refusing to seriously follow through on their own religious commitments. My own critique, meanwhile, suggests that the true form of naturalism is nihilism, and that "moderate" naturalists are only able to avoid nihilism by not seriously following through on their own naturalist presuppositions. In both of these criticisms, logic is being deployed in an attempt to force a moderate position into an extreme position, on the hope that this recognition will convince the moderate adherent to abandon their entire worldview—and not, it is worth adding, in favor of the opposite extreme, fanaticism/nihilism, but rather in favor of the opposing moderate position. Thus, the naturalist suggests that Ricoeur's "faith" is nonsense, that "faith" should become fanaticism, and that this morally repugnant conclusion should inspire us to abandon this entire frame of reference in favor of this or that moderate "inverse theodicy." On the opposite side, meanwhile, I have suggested that "inverse theodicy" should become nihilism, and that this morally repugnant conclusion should inspire us to open up our naturalist frame of reference to the *thatness* of the good already implied in our moral commitments.

from the path upward to the path downward, from the first to the second temptation of Christ. In the proper spiritual path, one begins with *Proverbs*, then steps into *Ecclesiastes*, and then proceeds to step back and forth between these two poles of religious life in a spiraling journey towards the ontological mystery of love. In this context, meanwhile, Origen's description of *Ecclesiastes* as the spirituality germane to "the science known as natural" is pregnant with significance: in short, the atheists are not wrong to claim that those who talk about the mystery of God have imbibed the fruits of scientific culture. This is exactly what one is supposed to do, but only after one has engaged sufficiently with the spirituality of *Proverbs*. Modern atheism, meanwhile, would be a consequence of venturing into the abyss without the necessary spiritual preparation.

In chapter six, I continue my interpretation of the three temptations of Christ by arguing that the third temptation is describing a spiritual practice of sifting the objects of our desire in terms of the *thatness* of the good, of discerning the relationship between our own particular hopes and the radical hope that transcends them. In that chapter, we will see that naturalist critique of religion—that it is fundamentally nothing more than a Darwinian device for inspiring the warriors to fight and die in battle for their tribe—is, like so many naturalist critiques, also half true: all understandings of the *whatness* of the good are indeed distorted by the influence of political power that twists our understanding of the *whatness* of the good towards its own benefit. This happened to "religion" when religion was viewed as the highest expression of human aspiration. It is currently happening to "science" now that the terms of social legitimacy have been transformed—now that any social policy must mask itself in the cloak of "science" in order to be accepted as good. The spiritual predicament described by the third temptation involves discerning how this corruption is occurring, even in the depths of our own deeply felt commitments, and then opting out of these corruptions as they become apparent: rejecting the ontology of war, as we have implied it in our own conduct, in favor of a leap into the ontology of mystery.

Before arriving at this argument, however, I will first apply this understanding of spiritual practice to the interpretation of four Western philosophers: Hume and Rorty in chapter four, followed by Nietzsche and Plato in chapter five. I have chosen Hume and Rorty as representatives of how the practice of spirituality from above and below can manifest, and even

produce beneficial results, from within the general horizon of naturalism. With Plato and Nietzsche, meanwhile, I turn my attention to a danger that can manifest within the practice of the spirituality from below: not the danger of pain and despair that we have examined so far, but rather the danger of abyssal *joy*. I argue that Plato, aware of the danger, offers a series of countervailing spiritual practices, while Nietzsche, unaware, gets carried away by a craving for abyssal joy into the oceanic void—a "labyrinth" where, as he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, we can easily be "torn to pieces limb from limb by some cave-minotaur of conscience."[90]

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[90] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990), §29, 60-61.

Chapter 4

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The Spiritual Practices of David Hume and Richard Rorty

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the tension between the spirituality from above and the spirituality from below, between morality and self-awareness, in the work of two broadly naturalist philosophers: David Hume and Richard Rorty. In section one, I present Hume's practice of the spirituality from below, as the realization that our everyday sense of self-identity is, in reality, an eddy in a fluid stream of sensations. In section two, I describe the skeptical paralysis and paranoia that results from this practice, as well as Hume's response to this experience: to reify the parochial common sense of his own traditional Scottish culture in order to defend his mind against the terrifying abyss. Following this, in section three, I describe Hume's version of the ontology of war, which I argue is the fundamental reason why his spiritual descent results in terror. From here, I turn my attention to the philosophy of Richard Rorty. In section four, I describe Rorty's vision of the relationship between public liberalism and private irony as a version of the path upwards and the path downwards I described in chapter three. In section five, I turn to Rorty's critique of Nietzsche: in short, that Nietzsche's nihilism derives from his attempt to establish harmony between his morality and his belief in the truth of Darwinism. Rorty argues that Nietzsche is insufficiently historicist, and that he could instead retain his morality and his belief in the Darwinian worldview by jettisoning the contingent Platonic requirement that morality and cosmology form a coherent whole. In section six, I turn this critique back on Rorty, arguing that Rorty is also caught within a metaphysical horizon—in this case, an extremely pared down version of the ontology of war, in which we think of human culture as a way of coping with the "brute power and naked pain"[1] of the world "out there." I then argue that Rorty should allow his historicism to melt his naturalism, viewing the claim that the world "out there" is "brute power

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40.

and naked pain" as a contingent belief of modern Western culture. Finally, in section seven, I elaborate on this critique by exploring Rorty's response to Heidegger, whose critique of Nietzsche is essentially the same as my critique of Rorty.

1. David Hume's Spiritual Practice

In chapter three, I presented the spirituality of natural science as the second phase of spiritual life, whereby we view our normal, everyday experience from the perspective of a "view from infinity." From this perspective, our normal sense of human significance is exposed to an unsettling sense of the cosmic insignificance of human life. Hume, for his part, is not practicing this 'view from infinity'; however, Hume's practice of philosophy still functions as a mode of the spirituality from below, insofar as it undermines his average, everyday sense of self. For example, in the second last chapter of the first book of his magnum opus, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that our sense of personal identity is an illusion. Against the idea of a "metaphysical" self, fixed and eternal, Hume argues that the self is actually "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[2] On this vision, our sense of self-identity would be akin to the patterns of eddies formed in a current of swift water, and the idea of a fixed self would derive from the relative stability of these eddies. Unfortunately, these relatively stable eddies are often then reified into metaphysical concepts like "soul," "self," and "substance," which then make it more difficult to realize the truth of impermanence and flux.

In the concluding chapter of the first book of the *Treatise*, immediately following this account of the illusory nature of the concept of self, Hume describes a state of terrifying confusion:

> Methinks I am like a man, who having struck upon many shoals, and having
> narrowly escaped shipwreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put

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[2] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.4.6, p. 222 (in *Hume: The Essential Philosophical Works*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2011); it is worth pointing out that Hume's use of the word "metaphysical" here is diametrically opposed to the meaning it bears in neo-Platonic spiritual practice. Here, Hume uses the word "metaphysics" to describe a vision of the *whatness* of the self that mistakenly thinks of itself as grounded in the *thatness* of reality itself. I would suggest that the neo-Platonic *practice* that corresponds to the experiential realm of "metaphysics" would be better apprehended as the attempt to slowly acclimatize ourselves to enduring the experience of ourselves as Hume himself describes it.

out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel …. My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties … increase my apprehension. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity.[3]

Now, to be sure, Hume himself does not draw a link between his arguments for the fluidity of the self and his experience of confusion and terror. However, by the logic of the spirituality from below introduced in chapter three, the plausibility of such a connection should be clear: the transition from a fixed metaphysical self to a fluid self is emotionally difficult, because the dissolution of the everyday sense of self would expose the conscious mind to the storms of its repressed shadow, those aspects of itself that must be repressed, denied, ignored, in order to live peacefully with others.[4]

In fact, the reason why a philosophical account of selflessness would lead to an experience of confusion and terror can be explicated in terms of one of Hume's own metaphors: the idea that our sense of self is akin to the flow of generations in a commonwealth or city:

[T]he true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are linked together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their corresponding ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expelled in its turn. In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and

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[3] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 231.

[4] In an autobiographical essay entitled "David Hume and the Buddha" (*The Atlantic*. 316.3. October 2015), philosopher Alison Gopnik describes how her research into the relationship between Hume and Buddhism was prompted by her own experience of psychological breakdown: "I measured each day by how many hours had gone by since the last crying jag…. I couldn't work. The dissolution of my own family made the very thought of children unbearable…. Everything that had defined me was gone. I was no longer a scientist or a philosopher or a wife or a mother or a lover." She then juxtaposes her own breakdown to the breakdown experienced by David Hume: "As a teenager, he'd thought he had glimpsed a new way of thinking and living, and ever since, he'd been trying to work it out and convey it to others in a great book. The effort was literally driving him mad." Gopnik's essay itself is both historical and personal: as Gopnik traces the lines of connection between Europe and Buddhist philosophy in the 17th century, in order to determine whether Hume's claim that there is no self might have been influenced by similar ideas in Buddhism, she also describes how studying this subject helped in her recover from depression. At the end of the essay she notes that "I'd always thought Hume was right about the self. But now, for the first time, I *felt* that he was right." To this, I would add that one cannot learn to feel that the self is fluid without passing through the kind of sadness and depression—the dark night of the soul—that Gopnik is describing in her essay.

> subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts.[5]

The key idea here is that Hume's mental commonwealth is divided into a class of rulers and a class of ruled. The ruling class would represent our everyday sense of self identity, a persona held together by a system of goals and ideals. In order to control the entire commonwealth of the mind, to steer it in one consistent direction, the governing class would be obliged to repress some aspects of the larger commonwealth: these subordinated classes would represent the shadow that tends to collect beneath an idealized persona. The path upward of spiritual life would consist in strengthening the governing persona's power, as backed by the ideological claim that it represents the unambiguous will of the entire body. The spirituality from below, by contrast, would expose the falsehood of this claim, expose how the body politic is in fact divided into governor and governed, and that the governing persona's claim to universal legitimacy is a falsehood grounded on its own *de facto* power.[6] Thus, when the stabilizing spirituality from above becomes too powerful, it produces the psychological equivalent of authoritarianism, in which the underclasses of the mind that do not accord with its idealized vision are repressed— and the relationship between governor and governed transforms into the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Conversely, when the spirituality from below becomes too powerful, it gives rise to fragmentation, revolution, or civil war, as the furious underclasses express their rage at being stymied by the oblivious ruling classes. Finally, in those situations in which the containing spirituality from above and the liberating spirituality from below have come into balance, the governing power's claim to represent the entire body would steadily approach truth,

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[5] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6, p. 229.

[6] Ricoeur's concepts of ideology and utopia provide another way to draw a connection between political metaphors and the spiritual logic I described in chapter three. Thus, in the essay "Ideology and Utopia," Ricoeur argues that there is a positive and a pathological side of both ideology and utopia, and "that the positive side of one and the positive side of the other are in the same complementary relation as the negative and pathological side of the one is to the negative and pathological side of the other" (Ricoeur, "Ideology and Utopia," in *From Text to Action*, 310). Akin to the spirituality from above, the function of ideology is "to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action"; ideology "preserves, it conserves, in the sense of making firm the human order that could be shattered by natural or historical forces, by external or internal disturbances" (318), and the pathologies to which ideology is prone all stem from this conservative role. Utopia, by contrast, is the discourse of possibility: as Ricoeur puts it, "[t]he shadow of the forces capable of shattering a given order is already the shadow of an alternative order that could be opposed to the given order. It is the function of utopia to give the force of discourse to this possibility." Thus, in contrast to ideology's "function of social integration," utopia would perform "the function of social subversion" (320). Ricoeur argues that "ideology" and "utopia" need to be practiced in tandem with each other, such that ideology does not become repressive and utopia does not become pathologically imbalanced ("Utopia tends toward schizophrenia just as ideology tends toward dissimulation and distortion" (324)). This point corresponds to my own claims concerning the necessity of balancing the spirituality from above and the spirituality from below.

and its capacity to maintain order would steadily cease to be dependent upon the violent repression of other aspects of its larger self.[7]

Hume's own descriptions of the philosophical arguments that led to his breakdown resemble the logic of the Learner's Paradox from Plato's *Meno*: (as Hume puts it) "[c]an I be sure, that in leaving all established opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune should at last guide me on her foot-steps?" In the *Meno*, Socrates responds to this problem with a myth about how we should trust that we will indeed be able to make such distinctions when we find them, as a presupposition necessary for such a search to make sense. Hume, by contrast, responds with a proto-version of the doctrine of the subjectivity of values that we encountered in chapter two: "After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I should assent to it; and feel nothing but a *strong* propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me."[8] In other words, Hume concludes that feeling and habit alone direct him to opt for one vision of "truth" over another. However, if established opinions are grounded on emotion, so too would be any doctrine that one might posit against established opinion, and argument itself also would be nothing more than mediated emotion. We would be a fluid self floating in a fluid universe, moved willy-nilly by currents of emotion and habit—even as we continually deceive ourselves into believing that our decisions are grounded in fixed standards of "rationality" or "truth," or that we even exist as a fixed "self" at all.

The Learner's Paradox from Plato's *Meno* could apply to any cultural world. The steps by which Hume arrives at this conclusion from the context of his own particular culture concern the principle of causation. This is the famous problem of induction, whereby any rational argument

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[7] Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism* provides another good example of the parallels between political theory and this spiritual logic. In this work, Baudrillard argues that Western philosophy, and in particular the philosophy of the Enlightenment, suffers from a "total misunderstanding … of the relationship between Good and Evil": "We believe naively that the progress of Good, its advance in all fields (the sciences, technology, democracy, human rights), corresponds to a defeat of Evil. No one seems to have understood that Good and Evil advance together, as part of the same movement. The triumph of the one does not eclipse the other—far from it. … Good does not conquer Evil, nor does the reverse happen: they are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated. Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing to be Good since, by seizing for itself a global monopoly of power, it gives rise, by that very act, to a blowback of proportionate violence" (Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 13-14). What Baudrillard is describing here is the logic of the dilemma of mutilation, the way the spirituality from above gives rise to a shadow-self, but at the level of global politics: in this case, the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy gives rise to the terrorism that now threatens to destroy it.

[8] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 232.

for causation relies upon presupposing its truth.[9] According to Hume, this means that our experience of causation must be grounded not in the objective world, but rather in our own subjective imagination: "this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquired by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant."[10] However, if the vaunted principle of cause and effect "proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination," then one might wonder why we should give this particular method of connecting ideas, upon which the legitimacy of both commonsense and modern science are based, any priority over other "illusions of the imagination"?[11] Why, in other words, would our own vaunted scientific worldview be any more "true" than the miraculous worldviews proposed by religion, philosophy, or superstition? Essentially, Hume is arguing that human reason subverts itself when turned back upon itself as

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[9] The radical insight that prompted Hume to study philosophy seems to have involved the attempt to derive our sense of physical causality from our feelings—that the idea that effects follow causes is also grounded not in the nature of reality, but rather in the predilection of our minds. Ernst Mossner puts it well in his biography, *The Life of David Hume*: "Hume's unique contribution to the philosophy of human nature may be stated in the form of … a principle: *the extension of sentiment or feeling beyond ethics and aesthetics … to include the entire realm of belief covering all relations of matter-of-fact*. … Hume applies this discovery to the principle of cause and effect. Why do we believe that the future will conform to the past? Why do we believe that when one billiard ball hits another, the second will be put into motion? … Now if causation is no more than belief, and if belief is no more than "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression," then what becomes of the vaunted certainty of knowledge upon which the modern world had so much prided itself?" (Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 76-77). As a way of entering the realms of spirituality from below, this approach would be much more destabilizing than the "view from infinity," as this understanding of causality undermines not only modern culture's hubristic sense of having achieved "certainty of knowledge" through science, but also our very sense of living in a coherent, intelligible world.

[10] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 234.

[11] Don Garrett refers to this as the "Dangerous Dilemma": "To approve the influence of all trivial features of the imagination … would lead to the endorsement of the most extravagant and inconsistent opinions—a 'false reason'. To disapprove all of them, however—which would antecedently have seemed the safer and more obvious course— would also be to reject the only feature of the mind that prevents reason's annihilation of its own initial belief, and would leave us with 'no reason at all'" (Garrett, *Hume*, 226). On this point, my interpretation is close to that of Kevin Meeker's *Hume's Radical Scepticism and the Fate of Naturalized Epistemology*. Meeker argues that, for Hume, "human beliefs lack the positive epistemic status of being more justified/rational/warranted than their contraries," such that "one cannot be certain of any proposition" (Meeker, *Hume's Radical Skepticism*, 17). For Meeker's Hume, in other words, "beliefs are determined by passions rather than evidential concerns," that "our preference for one set of arguments as opposed to another is determined, not by epistemic merit, but solely by feeling" (Meeker, 153). However, even though rationality leads us to this radical epistemic egalitarianism, which means that all beliefs are utterly relative, "we continue to believe because believing is like breathing" (Meeker, 154). On my argument, Hume essentially retreats from the abyss implied by this epistemic egalitarianism, into the parochial way of feeling that he inherited from being born and raised as a Scottish male in the 18th century. Basically, he pulls back from the dyscatastrophe of a lop-sided spirituality from below by cleaving to his own traditional culture.

an object of study—which means that the only choice for fastidiously honest philosophers is "betwixt a false reason and none at all."[12]

2. Hume's Response to his Philosophical Descent

Hume experienced the hot and living significance of these problems as a descent into dizzying skeptical paralysis:

> The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence upon me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, invironed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty.[13]

In chapter five, I will argue that Nietzsche responds to a similar experience by fearlessly plowing forward. Hume, by contrast, responds by proposing a simple and pragmatic return to the stability of port, abandoning the "*intense* view of these manifold contradictions" in favor of the pragmatic commonsense of his own culture. More precisely, Hume notices, correctly, that no emotion lasts forever, which means that this overwhelming sense of being "invironed in the deepest darkness" eventually gives way to less unpleasant dispositions. However, along with this realization of impermanence, Hume also notices that he can actively make the experience pass more easily, through a practice of distracting himself:

> Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras.[14]

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[12] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 235.
[13] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, pp. 235-6.
[14] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 236.

Following the practice implied by this first recommendation, that nature will eventually relax this bent of mind, Hume might well have descended yet deeper into the realms of the spirituality from below. However, following the practice implied by this second recommendation, that we can actively disperse these chimeras by means of "some avocation" or the "lively impression" of the senses, serves the exact opposite end: it replaces the storms of the spirituality from below with the prosaic level of everyday awareness.

As the passage continues, it quickly becomes apparent that the path of distraction became the primary route through which Hume responded to these emotional storms: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther."[15] Now, as a spiritual technique for dealing with overwhelming emotions, distraction is not necessarily a bad idea.[16] However, Hume's claim that the practice of distraction will "obliterate all these chimeras" is also not true. The technique of distraction does not obliterate the chimeras so much as cause them to

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[15] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 236; that distraction became Hume's primary method for responding to the terror of the abyss can also be inferred from his correspondence. For example, similar to Nietzsche, Hume's initial decision to pursue a philosophical path in life coincided with a period of consistent ill health that lasted almost five years, from 1729 until 1734. During this time, Hume describes his suffering as akin to the sufferings of a religious mystic: "I have notic'd in the Writings of the French Mysticks, & in those of our Fanatics here, that, when they give a History of the Situation of the Souls, they mention a Coldness & Desertion of the Spirit, which frequently returns, & some of them, at the beginning, have been tormented with it for many Years. … I have not come out of the Cloud so well as they commonly tell us they have done, or rather began to despair of ever recovering" (quoted in Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 70-71). During this period, Hume describes how his "only Security" against melancholy was in "peevish Reflections on the Vanity of the World & of all humane Glory" —the kind of reflection that we find in the book of *Ecclesiastes*. By Hume's own account, meanwhile, this period of ill-health only ended when he adopted a new spiritual practice. Basically, instead of wallowing in the vanity of things, Hume began to distract himself from himself: "I found … that there are two things very bad for this Distemper, Study & Idleness, so there are two things very good, Business & Diversion. … For this reason I resolved to seek out a more active Life, & tho' I cou'd not quit my Pretensions in Learning, but with my last Breath, to lay them aside for some time, in order the more effectually to resume them" (Mossner, 72). This alternative spiritual practice seems to have borne fruit almost immediately. Hume quickly recovered from his mysterious illness, and then proceeded to write his magnum opus, *A Treatise of Human Nature*—a work that Don Garrett has recently lauded as "by many accounts the greatest work of philosophy ever written in English" (Garrett, *Hume*, 14).

[16] Thomas Merton's anthology of the writings of the desert fathers contains advice on the necessity of taking periodic breaks from intense spiritual training: "Once Abbot Anthony was conversing with some brethren, and a hunter who was after game in the wilderness came upon them. He saw Abbot Anthony and the brothers enjoying themselves, and disapproved. Abbot Anthony said: Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it. This he did. Now shoot another, said the elder. And another, and another. The hunter said: If I bend my bow all the time it will break. Abbot Anthony replied: So it is also with the work of God. If we push ourselves beyond measure, the brethren will soon collapse. It is right, therefore, from time to time, to relax their efforts" (Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, CVI, p. 63). The difference between Hume and Abbot Anthony lies in the fact that Anthony recommends relaxation as a time to recuperate for a new descent, whereas Hume ends up devaluing the descent into the experience of "the desert" as meaningless.

disappear from view, to recede back into the unconscious, where they will hide and await the day of their next explosion.

The real trouble with Hume's spiritual practice, however, does not stem from this strategy of sensible retreat from a realm of experience he was clearly unready to face. The real trouble begins with the philosophical moves he makes afterwards, when the storm has passed and he begins to reflect upon what has occurred. Basically, he comes to see the passage into these realms of experience as a useless waste of time:

> [D]oes it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brains with subtilities and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest?[17]

On Gruen's account of the spirituality from below, engaging with these emotions is indeed useful, both for ourselves and for the rest of humanity, insofar as this practice helps dissolve the monsters of the abyss back into the free flow of positive emotional energy. For Hume, however, the pain and paranoia of the abyss is just meaningless pain, the madness of a brain that has taken its own philosophical ramblings too seriously for its own good. As such, after his good humor returns, Hume argues that we should engage in philosophy only to the extent that we find it enjoyable—in the sense that, as he puts it, it is sometimes pleasant to indulge in "a *reverie* in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a river-side."[18] In contrast to this, we might recall Socrates' claim, in the *Gorgias*, that "there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice" except "by way of pain and suffering."[19] Hume would argue that this kind of pain and suffering is essentially meaningless, and his subsequent spiritual practice—the elevation of the pragmatic common sense of an honest Scottish gentleman—consists basically in an attempt to avoid this pain.

If philosophy does have any serious role to play in human society, this would be the use of mild philosophy to defend ourselves against the excesses of philosophy, or else the use of philosophy

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[17] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 236.
[18] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6, p. 237.
[19] Plato, *Gorgias*, 525b-c.

in general as a way to defend ourselves against the much more dangerous excesses of religion and superstition:

> Since … it is almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the daily subject of conversation and action, we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide. And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination. For as superstition arises naturally and easily from the popular opinions of mankind, it seizes more strongly on the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions. Philosophy on the contrary, if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities. … Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.[20]

In the language of chapter one, we might say that Hume is aware that the practice of philosophy gives rise to a catastrophe, in which we become aware of the gap between the commonsense of our own culture and the weird paradoxes that begin to reveal themselves when we engage in radical self-reflection. Unlike Plato, however, Hume sees the catastrophe of philosophy as a sheer dyscatastrophe, a descent into a useless realm of skepticism and despair. However, because the dyscatastrophe of philosophy is much less dangerous than the dyscatastrophe of religion and superstition—which Hume understands to entail fanaticism—Hume ends up recommending the mild poison of philosophy against the virulent poison of religion, as a way to vent those aspects of our mind that would take flight beyond the stable commonsense of our own culture.

Along these lines, Hume strongly implies that it would be better if "the mind of man" would "rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the daily subject of conversation and action," and that the final goal of philosophical thought should be to free the mind of philosophy, so as to enable a return to that innocent immersion in the narrow circle of practical life. For example, Hume explicitly states that the "many honest gentlemen, who being always employed in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carried their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are everyday exposed to their senses," would best never think about such abstract problems, nor read any of Hume's own philosophical works. Hume's philosophical therapy is rather aimed at those who have taken the

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[20] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 238.

intense view of these problems too seriously: "I wish we could communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which would serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are composed."[21] According to Hume, these system builders have allowed their "warm imagination" into philosophy, and in this way have transformed philosophy into a battle between different forms of metaphysical dogmatism. Against this, therefore, Hume posits a philosophy that "will suit with common practice and experience," a philosophy which "if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hoped for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind."

To be clear, if Hume had proposed distraction and common sense as a provisional procedure, a way to temporarily regain mental equilibrium, there would have been nothing wrong. However, Hume proceeds to argue for the uselessness of such descents, and he then proposes a new spirituality from above, in which the virtues of an honest Scottish gentleman are reified into unproblematic exemplars of what is "satisfactory to the human mind." This amounts to self-consciously employing a procedure that, in chapter three, I criticized Carl Sagan for employing unselfconsciously: that we deploy the skeptical acid of rationality against the dangerous errors of religion, ignoring the fact that this same acid dissolves science and commonsense just as decisively.[22] Alternatively, we might say that Hume is consciously and purposefully committing to a philosophical project that, later in this chapter, we will see American philosopher Richard

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[21] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 238.

[22] In *Fideism and Hume's Philosophy* Delbert Hanson argues that Hume's naturalism should be seen as a fideistic response to the abyss of skepticism to which his initial insight eventually exposed him. Hanson argues that Hume "regained and preserved for himself" a series of "[d]octrines, conclusions, and beliefs" which he "could not rationally hold and defend on either a rationalist or an empirical approach" (Hanson, *Fideism and Hume's Philosophy*, 8). In fact, Hanson's Hume appears to be practicing something like the curriculum of spiritual religion. Hanson's Hume begins with common sense, passes through skepticism, and then returns to common sense, but now adopted as a fideistic response to the void that cannot be escaped through reason. As Hanson puts it— "Hume *does not remain a skeptic* after resorting to habit, custom, propensity, association, and the like. He believes all the doctrines he had previously analyzed away. If we understand Hume to be a fideist, his tendency to accept a doctrine or viewpoint he earlier rejected on logical grounds becomes perfectly understandable. It also explains his disquiet over his skepticism and the intellectual 'corner' into which it placed him" (Hanson, 15). Hanson describes Hume's philosophical practice as swinging back and forth between two opposing states of mind: thus, interpreting the conclusion to book one of the *Treatise*, Hanson observers that "[i]n the space of three pages Hume again and again demolishes and repairs, denies and recovers, rejects and replaces, excludes and reinstates, explains why skepticism comes and responds as to why it won't work" (Hanson, 155), and on the next page he describes this fluctuation between skepticism and fideism as "the continual seesaw in Hume's philosophy" (Hanson, 156). This is similar to the spiritual fluctuation I described in chapter three, between the path upwards and the path downwards, except that Hume's "continual seesaw" fluctuates between two utterly incompatible poles, common sense and skepticism, while spiritual religion fluctuates between the pursuit of moral uprightness and the pursuit of self-knowledge, which would slowly come into accord with each other.

Rorty accuse Plato and all "metaphysicians" of committing in spite of themselves: reifying his own form of life into a timeless ideal, as though the "human mind" were equivalent to the mind of a Scottish gentleman who does not bother thinking beyond "that narrow circle of objects, which are the daily subject of conversation and action."

3. Hume's Ontology of War

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume treats the distinction between superstition and common sense in a way that makes the circular logic of his position readily apparent. First, concerning the so-called "obvious" irrationality of superstition, Hume levels the common naturalist attack:

> Those who ridicule vulgar superstitions, and expose the folly of particular regards to meats, days, places, postures, apparel, have an easy task; … A fowl on Thursday is lawful food; on Friday abominable; eggs in this house and in this diocese, are permitted during Lent; a hundred paces farther, to eat them is a damnable sin. This earth or building, yesterday was profane; to-day, by the muttering of certain words, it has become holy and sacred. Such reflections as these, in the mouth of a philosopher, one may safely say, are too obvious to have any influence; because they must always, to every man, occur at first sight; and where they prevail not, of themselves, they are surely obstructed by education, prejudice, and passion, not by ignorance or mistake.[23]

Here, the religious distinctions between "sacred" and "profane" are seen as so obviously irrational that only someone whose rationality had been "obstructed by education, prejudice, and passion" would ever bother trying to defend them. Immediately after making this point, however, Hume acknowledges that the exact same criticism applies with equal force to the concept of property upon which his own cultural world depends for coherence:

> It may appear to a careless view, or rather a too abstracted reflection, that there enters a like superstition into all the sentiments of justice; and that, if a man expose its object, or what we call property, to the same scrutiny of sense and science, he will not, by the most accurate enquiry, find any foundation for the difference made by moral sentiment. I may lawfully nourish myself from this tree; but the fruit of another of the same species, ten paces off, it is criminal for me to

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[23] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 732.

touch. Had I worn this apparel an hour ago, I had merited the severest punishment; but a man, by pronouncing a few magical syllables, has now rendered it fit for my use and service. … The same species of reasoning it may be thought, which so successfully exposes superstition, is also applicable to justice; nor is it possible, in the one case more than in the other, to point out, in the object, that precise quality or circumstance, which is the foundation of the sentiment.[24]

This criticism is biting, and it is to his credit as a philosopher that Hume sees fit to address it: again, the same argument used to show why religion is irrational can also be used to show why property—which is the foundation of Hume's own cultural world—is also irrational. Hume responds to this critique by making an appeal to pragmatism: the difference between the groundlessness of superstition and the groundlessness of property is that "the former is frivolous, useless, and burdensome" while "the latter is absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and existence of society." Thus, even though "it is too apparent to ever be overlooked" that "all regards to right and property, seem entirely without foundation, as much as the grossest and most vulgar superstitions," the doctrine of utility allows us to say that property relations are "rational" while superstitions are just forms of useless irrationality.

In fact, in the essay where this comparison occurs, Hume is attempting to extend this pragmatic style of argument into the realm of morals, to prove that "public utility is the *sole* origin of justice, and that reflections on the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the *sole* foundation of its merit."[25] By the end of this essay, meanwhile, he concludes that his proof has been successful, that he has successfully proven that "the necessity of justice to the support of society is the sole foundation of that virtue."[26] Indeed, Hume even proposes that this principle of utility should be adopted as a Newtonian principle for an unprecedented scientific approach to the study of human moral life, that "humanity, benevolence, friendship, public spirit, and other social virtues," as well as "the moral approbation paid to fidelity, justice, veracity, integrity, and those other estimable and useful qualities,"[27] should all be derived from the usefulness of these traits to the health of society.

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[24] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 732-33.
[25] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 720.
[26] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 736-37.
[27] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 737.

This, of course, is a proto-version of the naturalist approach to morality that we encountered in chapter two.[28] In chapter five, meanwhile, I will present Nietzsche's moral philosophy as a radicalization of Hume's method.[29] In brief, Nietzsche would argue that Hume has unjustly reified the way social utility appears to an honest Scottish gentlemen into a universal description of social utility in general—ignoring the fact that, if social utility is indeed taken as the Newtonian principle from which a scientific understanding of virtue is to be derived, then we must consider what "virtues" a culture would need to inculcate in its members in order to survive in an often brutally violent world. According to Nietzsche, if we have the courage to follow this insight, we will realize that the principle of social utility cannot be used as the ontological foundation for our own bourgeois sense of morality.[30] As we saw in chapter two, Taylor would

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[28] The current scholarly literature on Hume is dominated now by a debate between skepticism and naturalism: as Garrett puts it, "the question of how to understand the relation between Hume's avowed skepticism and his avowed pursuit and endorsement of a naturalistic science of man is perhaps the most fundamental issue in the interpretation of his philosophy. It has evoked a wide array of different answers of every possible kind: that his skepticism defeats his naturalism; that his naturalism defeats his skepticism; that his skepticism and his naturalism co-exist inconsistently, perhaps by turns; and that his skepticism and his naturalism are consistent with each other and can be reconciled" (Garrett, *Hume*, 214). The basic interpretive problem, as defined by prominent naturalist interpreter Norman Kemp Smith, goes as follows: "Why is it that in Book I of the Treatise the existence of an impression of the self is explicitly denied, while yet his theory of the 'indirect' passions, propounded at length in Book II, is made to rest on the assumption that we do in fact experience an impression of the self, and that this impression is ever-present to us" (Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, v). On my interpretation, Hume's "skepticism" would emerge from his practice of the spirituality from below, while his "naturalism" would represent his spirituality from above. This interpretation is close to Garrett's third option: that Hume's skepticism and his naturalism "co-exist inconsistently, perhaps by turns." These two moments of Hume's spiritual practice are only inconsistent with each other because (as I will argue later) Hume adheres to the ontology of war, the idea that our sense of morality derives fundamentally from its social utility.

[29] Brian Leiter's "Nietzsche's Naturalism Reconsidered" (in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 576-598) also draws an interesting parallel between Nietzsche and Hume: "Hume models his theory of human nature on Newtonian science by trying to identify a few basic, general principles that will provide a broadly deterministic explanation of human phenomena, much as Newtonian mechanics did for physical phenomena. … Nietzsche's Speculative M-Naturalism [Methodological Naturalism] obviously differs from Hume's in some respects: … Yet Nietzsche, like Hume, has a sustained interest in explaining why 'human beings act, think, perceive and feel' as they do, especially in the broadly ethical domain. Like Hume, Nietzsche proffers a speculative psychology, though … Nietzschean speculations seem to fare rather well in light of subsequent research in scientific psychology" (Leiter, 577-78).

[30] Consider the following passage from *Daybreak*: "Nothing has been purchased more dearly than that little bit of human reason and feeling of freedom that now constitutes our pride. It is this pride, however, which now makes it almost impossible for us to empathize with those tremendous eras of 'morality of custom' which precede 'world history' as the *actual and decisive eras of history which determined the character of mankind*: the eras in which suffering counted as a virtue, cruelty counted as a virtue, dissembling counted as a virtue, revenge counted as a virtue, denial of reason counted as a virtue, … pity was accounted a danger, peace was accounted a danger, work was accounted an affront, madness was accounted godliness, and change was accounted immoral and pregnant with disaster! —Do you think all this has altered and that mankind must therefore have changed its character? O observers of mankind, learn better to observe yourselves!" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §18, p. 17). This is another way of articulating the critique I leveled in chapter two against Dennett's attempt to derive our commitment to truth and justice in the projects of staying alive and secure.

argue that this observation should be taken as evidence that the principle of social utility is not a good "Newtonian principle" upon which to build our new, scientific moral ontology—and, further, that if social utility is the only way that morality makes sense from within a naturalist worldview, then this should be taken as evidence that naturalism itself does not provide us with a good picture of the totality of reality. Nietzsche, by contrast, takes this same realization as the invitation to a dangerous philosophical experiment, in which he *actually* tries to take social utility as a new Newtonian principle—and then commits to retraining his moral conscience in light of this new perspective. Hume, by contrast, eschews this entire line of reflection, as these rarified concerns would take him too far beyond the common sense of the Scottish gentleman which he is self-consciously trying to appease.

That being said, in the same essay in which he argues for a new Newtonian science of morality, Hume also argues for the truth of what I have referred to as the ontology of war. Hume's position on this matter is evident in his analysis of what "justice" means beyond the bounds of a legal order. He writes, for example, that if "it should be a virtuous man's fate to fall into the society of ruffians, remote from the protection of laws and government," then it would be rational for such a person to abandon all concern for justice. As Hume puts it, when justice is "no longer of any use," a person "must consult the dictates of self-preservation alone."[31] However, beyond this kind of dry thought experiment, Hume also elucidates his understanding of how justice exists beyond the realm of law with reference to living historical experience:

> Were there a species of creatures intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment; the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them. … Whatever we covet, they must instantly resign: our permission is the only tenure, by which they hold their possessions: our compassion and kindness, the only check, by which they curb our lawless will: and as no inconvenience ever results from the exercise of a power, so firmly established by nature, the restraints of justice and property, being totally *useless*, would never have a place in so unequal a confederacy.[32]

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[31] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 723.
[32] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 726.

In the subsequent paragraphs, it becomes clear that Hume is referring here to the despoliation of the aboriginal populations of the Americas, to the fact that the "great superiority of civilized Europeans above barbarous Indians … made us throw off all restraints of justice, and even of humanity, in our treatment of them." This, for Hume, is a simple description of the way the world is, as should presumably be evident to any rational person.[33] On my account, meanwhile, this is the ontology of war pushed to its logical extreme—and this ontology, if thought through rationally back from this extreme into the context of normal life within the "protection of laws and government," should result in a hollowing out of our respect for the law in exactly the way described by Glaucon in the second book of Plato's *Republic*: "The best is to do injustice without paying the penalty; the worst is to suffer it without being able to take revenge. Justice is a mean between these two extremes. People value it not as a good but because they are too weak to do injustice with impunity."[34]

Again, as I argued in chapter two, once we start trying to derive our commitment to justice from Newtonian principles like social utility and self-preservation, our commitment will cease to make sense in those limit situations in which justice has ceased to be useful. More problematically, however, we can now see that this vision also runs into problems when exposed to the opposite case, the condition of power: again, once the provisions of 'justice' are "no longer of any use," a wise person should pay them no heed; as Socrates puts it in the *Gorgias*, a wise person "ought either to be a ruler himself in his city or even be a tyrant, or else to be a partisan of the regime in power"[35]; alternatively, as Glaucon puts it in the *Republic*, "[s]omeone who has the power to [commit injustice], and is a true man wouldn't make an agreement with anyone not to do injustice in order not to suffer it. For him that would be madness."[36] The only reason Hume's position does not collapse into these paradoxes is that, again, such reflections would take him too far beyond the perspective of the Scottish gentleman, whose common sense has been transformed into an ideal that protects Hume's belief in moral conscience from the "*intense* view of these manifold contradictions."[37]

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[33] My inspiration for this line of critique comes from the post-colonial interpretation of John Locke's understanding of property. See, for example, Barbara Arneil's *John Locke and America: the Defence of English Colonialism*.
[34] Plato, *Republic*, 359a-b.
[35] Plato, *Gorgias*, 510a.
[36] Plato, *Republic*, 359b.
[37] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, pp. 235-6.

Finally, according to the terms of my argument in chapter three, the reason Hume experiences the oceanic abyss as a roiling storm of paranoia and terror—as a form of madness, in other words—is ultimately rooted in the fact that he has opted for the "wolf's side of the story" in his vision of moral ontology. More precisely, by allowing his everyday sense of self to dissolve into an eddy in the ceaseless flow of sensations, Hume has entered the realms of the spirituality from below, in which the dark shadow of our psyche begins to percolate up to the surface of our consciousness. Within the curriculum of spiritual religion, the purpose of the practice of this path downward is to allow this dark shadow to evaporate—to allow the ontology of war, as it has crystallized in the habits and desires that form our existence as selves within a world, to dissolve. This kind of spiritual practice, however, makes no sense if one believes that the ontology of war is fundamentally true—if, like Hume, one thinks that in the reality beyond the "protection of laws and government," a person "must consult the dictates of self-preservation alone."[38] Alternatively, to set the critique in terms more germane to Hume's own philosophy, Hume thinks that "justice" exists to preserve the "self" and its external extension, property. As such, when "justice" ceases to serve the ends of self-preservation and self-extension—as in situations of civil war in which there is no juridical order to protect us, or (more dangerously) in situations when we have become powerful enough to not need bother with the dictates of justice—rationality would consist in spurning justice and instead doing whatever we thought necessary to preserve and expand our dominion. This conclusion not only shows the moral danger involved in positing that "public utility is the *sole* origin of justice" —as I argued in chapter two, this kind of vision leads to *injustice* in situations of extreme tribulation—it also shows the spiritual danger involved in entering the realms of spirituality from below on the basis of this presupposition: basically, if one takes self-preservation to be the highest good, a spiritual practice that dissolves the self will almost certainly come to appear as a terrible evil.[39]

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[38] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 723.

[39] It is worth pointing out that Hume does seem to have benefited greatly from his own practice of what I have called "spiritual religion." His equanimity, for example, was extraordinary, as can be gleaned from the various accounts of his good temper even on his death-bed. Consider the words of one of Hume's famous friends, the economist Adam Smith: "Mr. Hume's magnanimity and firmness were such, that his most affectionate friends knew that they hazarded nothing in talking or writing to him as to a dying man, and that so far from being hurt by this frankness, he was rather pleased and flattered by it" (quoted in Garrett, *Hume*, 33). Concerning Hume's general temperament, Smith writes the following: "[h]is temper … seemed to be more happily balanced … than that perhaps of any other man I have ever known. … Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death,

4. Richard Rorty's Spiritual Practice

For Hume, the fluctuation between the path upwards and the path downwards transforms into the reification of common sense, in opposition to the hot and living abyss of skepticism—and, as I just argued, the hot and living abyss of the ontology of war. In the spiritual practice of Richard Rorty, by contrast, the two sides of spiritual life are presented in a more balanced way: a public commitment to "liberalism" that is to be accompanied by a private commitment to "irony." As Rorty describes it, the practice of "irony" involves, first, accepting the historical contingency of our sense of self-identity, then kneading this contingent sense of self from one shape to another by exposing it to a variety of incompatible philosophical and poetical vocabularies.[40] By viewing our sense of self identity as a contingent pattern in a web of language, Rorty's practice of the spirituality from below involves the free exploration of "different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire."[41] As with Hume's philosophical speculations on the fluidity of the self, Rorty's irony does not entail the view from infinity described in *Ecclesiastes*. However, the effect is similar—in that, instead of dissolving his normal human aspirations in the abyss of cosmic time and space, Rorty is dissolving his fixed sense of self within the abyss of historicism. However, in tandem with this practice of private "irony," Rorty proposes a public practice of "liberalism," an exquisitely high-minded version of the path upwards, based on the idea that "cruelty is the worst thing we do," and taking shape in terms of the struggle to "make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel," such that "suffering will be diminished, that humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease."[42]

In Rorty's thought, irony performs the same moral function the doctrine of the subjectivity of values does for Russell: both irony and moral subjectivity are attempts to defuse the danger of

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as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit" (quoted in Garrett, *Hume*, 34).

[40] In his essay "Redemption from Egotism," Rorty presents the reading of novels as a spiritual practice that will free us from "egotism," which Rorty defines as the "willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation, all the understanding of the consequences of a completed action that could be needed. It is the idea that one is now fully informed, and thus in the best possible position to make correct choices" (Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," *The Rorty Reader*, 394-5). This could be seen as another spiritual practice oriented towards solving the predicament of the second temptation of Christ.

[41] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 83-4.

[42] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv-v.

fanatical adherence to some unquestioned vision of the *whatness* of the good—the danger of following the advice of the devil in the second temptation as though it were indeed the word of God.[43] For Rorty, the philosophical equivalent of such fanatical religious commitment would be "metaphysics," the kind of philosophy practiced by those who are "incapable of seeing their final vocabulary as contingent, and [are] thus driven to believe that something in the nature of reality would preserve that vocabulary."[44] In my terminology, "metaphysicians" would be those who believe in a fixed vision of the *whatness* of the good, or who believe that such a *whatness* exists at the base of reality, to be steadily uncovered by some kind of rational process. In this sense, "metaphysics" would represent either an already established lopsided spirituality from above, or else a mode of thinking that *aimed* at such a lopsided spirituality as its ideal, and Rorty's practice of irony would undermine the spiritual rigidity entailed by metaphysics through a concerted commitment to spiritual fluidity.

However, unlike Russell, who blithely ignores the potential dangers involved in the doctrine of the subjectivity of values, Rorty is deeply conscious of the danger inherent in the spiritual

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[43] Interestingly, while rejecting fanaticism, Rorty is amenable to what he considers to be more "open" forms of religion. For example, in a debate between Rorty and Jeffrey Stout, Rorty notes that in his "perfectly secular utopia," there would be "room for the sort of God worshipped by [William] James, Whitehead, Tillich, and West …, but none of the sort worshipped by St. Paul, Wojtila, Ratzinger, Falwell and Khomeini" ("Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition," 440; quoted in Kuipers, *Richard Rorty*, 147). Theological rigidity is clearly the standard whereby Rorty accepts or rejects this or that theologian. As he puts it: "The last thing the followers of Falwell or Khomeini are interested in is a tolerant and conversable deity. There are certainly passages here and there in the Christian Scriptures that suggest that accountability between the divine and the human goes both ways, but these passages are taken seriously by only a few liberal theologians" (Ibid., 147). By my analysis, the term "liberal" theologian is a misnomer, suggesting that this more congenial view of the deity is an unprecedented novelty necessitated by the rise of modern scientific culture. We should rather say that "a tolerant and conversable" view of the deity is what naturally emerges when the path upwards and the path downwards are practiced in a balanced way, and the reason liberal theologians tend to emerge in modern scientific culture is because the spirituality of "natural science" happens to correspond to the path downwards of spiritual life. As for people like Falwell and Khomeini, they would represent a perennial spiritual mistake, which occurs when the first step of spiritual life (adherence to a defined vision of the *whatness* of the good) is mistaken for the entirety of spiritual life. I would argue, meanwhile, that the proper response to a lopsided spirituality from above that has anchored itself to a traditional religion is not to reject the *thatness* to which religion seeks a relation, but is rather to do exactly what those "liberal theologians" do: point to those passages in the Scriptures that problematize the simplistic attempt to transform "religion" into a set of absolute moral precepts. In fact, Rorty himself also suggests that this would be a pragmatic strategy: "It is OK for Christian believers to have Christian reasons for supporting redistribution of wealth or opposing same-sex marriage, but I am not sure it counts as having such reasons if the person who finds such marriage inconceivable is unwilling or unable even to discuss, for example, the seeming tension between Leviticus 22:18 and I Corinthians 13" (Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square," *The Rorty Reader*, 461). By my argument, this kind of discussion would occur in the field of the second temptation of Christ, as the logical second step of spiritual life: after one has accepted that this or that traditional authority has some purchase on truth, one must set about interpreting it, in light of an honest engagement with its ambiguities.
[44] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 184.

fluidity to which this view of morality exposes us. As such, Rorty's tries to insulate our practice of spiritual fluidity from our commitment to morality. Rorty's argument for this consists in positing a sharp division between these two modes of philosophical practice: we are to practice "liberalism" in public and "irony" in private, and we are to reject any "Platonic" attempts to subsume these two different projects under a single theoretical vocabulary. This means dividing "historicist" philosophers into two camps, depending on whether they are useful exemplars of private irony or useful purveyors of public liberalism: thinkers like "Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov" are to be taken as "useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like," while thinkers like "Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls" are to be taken as "fellow citizens rather than exemplars," who are "engaged in a shared, social effort … to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel."[45] The danger of "private" thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, meanwhile, would be that they let their private irony infect their public political commitments. Against this danger, Rorty argues that we should ask thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger to "*privatize* their projects, their attempts at sublimity—to view them as irrelevant to politics and therefore compatible with the sense of human solidarity which the development of democratic institutions has facilitated."[46] Meanwhile, on the opposite end of the spectrum, Rorty wants the more politically inclined historicists to allow room for the free play of the imagination—that we not allow the political demands of public morality to stifle the fluid freedom of the ironical self.[47]

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[45] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiii-xiv.

[46] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 197.

[47] In his essay "Nietzsche and the Ancients," political philosopher George Grant describes a similar project to balance a public pursuit of liberalism with a private pursuit of self-knowledge that might undermine the social bond: E. R. Dodds' vision of a Freudian liberalism. According to Grant, Dodds equates modern Western rationalism with the rationalism of fifth century Athens, and then argues that "Western 'rationalism' … may be able to save itself from 'the failure of nerve' which caused the end of Athenian rationalism, because we have the advantage of Freudian therapy which will allow us to come to terms with our irrationalism and contain it within our rational tradition" (Grant, *Technology and Justice*, 84-5). According to Grant, at the time Dodds was writing, "the wisdom of American academia insisted on the close alliance of liberalism and psychoanalysis," against which Grant offers the following criticism: "The difficulty of such Freudianism united with a good-willed theory of democracy is that one doctrine of man takes over the private realm, while another is asked to rule in the public. Such a compromise may be practically acceptable in a society for a short span, but in the longer term such an elementary inconsistency becomes apparent even to busy public men. Why should constitutional regimes be considered superior to their alternatives if human beings are basically 'ids'?" (Grant, 85). In this criticism, Grant effectively denies Rorty's claim that, in the long term, we can sunder our public and our private discourses. Rorty, of course, would counter that the idea that there needs to be a consistency between our private and public understanding is a contingent legacy of Platonic philosophy, which we should reject—in order to prevent the acidic private doctrine from destroying our public

As a *practice* of philosophy, Rorty's proposals are in general accordance with the twofold practice of "spiritual religion" I presented in chapter three: again, we are to practice the spirituality from below in the desert of solitude, on the basis of a firm commitment to morality in our public lives with others. However, I would add one point that would not make sense within Rorty's worldview: the only reason Rorty is capable of enduring his own exceptionally high-minded spirituality from above (liberal morality) without falling victim to the dilemma of mutilation is that he has committed to a serious practice of the spirituality from below (irony), in which he continually dissolves his sense of self and thereby releases the negative emotional energy that would otherwise collect beneath the lofty moral ideals of his version of "liberalism."[48] Conversely, Rorty would only be able to endure such an openly fluid sense of self-identity because, in his "normal" public life, he is also actively working towards a relatively selfless moral ideal.[49] Thus, in Rorty's dual system of philosophical practice, the practice of

solidarity. In this context, my own project would involve translating this political vocabulary, between public "liberalism" and private "irony," or private "Freudianism," into the language of religious spirituality.

[48] Rorty himself sometimes compares his own aspirations to more traditional religious ideals. Thus, even as Rorty rejects the ontological claim implied by the Socratic moral thesis, he is still willing to commit to something very similar as a moral ideal: "Novel-readers … are seeking redemption from insensitivity rather than from impiety or irrationality. They may not care whether there is a way things really are, but they worry about whether they are sufficiently aware of the needs of others. Viewed from this angle, the hegemony of the novel can be viewed as an attempt to carry through on Christ's suggestion that love is the only law" (Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," *The Rorty Reader*, 395). Rorty even describes the practice of reading the novels of Henry James as aiming "for a kind of moral virtuosity" that can be seen as "the secular analogue to the kind of religious virtuosity facilitated by reading *The Imitation of Christ*" (Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," 401). This "moral virtuosity" can occur because James helps his readers gain a "sense of the possibility of a new level of consciousness … a sense of another world where beauty, kindness, generosity … are the norm." Along these lines, Rorty presents the Christian/Buddhist concept of sainthood as the "ideal limit" of the kind of morality he seeks to promote: "Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-making human selves so as to enlarge the variety of relationships which constitute those selves. The ideal limit of this process of enlargement is the self envisaged by Christian and Buddhist accounts of sainthood—an ideal self to whom the hunger and suffering of *any* human being (and even, perhaps, that of any other animal) is intensely painful" (Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," *The Rorty Reader*, 429). I would argue that this "process of enlargement" can only be accomplished through the practice of what I am calling "spiritual religion" —the process of dissolving the walls of the ego in concert with the practice of selfless goodness—which, ironically, can also assume a secular form (as Rorty shows).

[49] It does sometimes seem that Rorty might put too much emphasis on the path downward, which prioritizes fluidity and openness, over the path upward which prioritizes limits and obedience to moral law. For example, he urges us to "substitute hope for knowledge," and his ideal involves being willing "to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride," and being grounded in the "priority of the need to create new ways of being human, and a new heaven and a new earth for these new humans to inhabit, over the desire for stability, security, and order" (Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," 432). This tendency to emphasize the fluid over the stable would be in line with what I have characterized as the general spiritual error of modern naturalist culture, to give precedence to the *second* phase of spiritual life over the first. Most previous human cultures would have given precedence to the *first* phase of spiritual life—this would be the kind of culture that Rorty criticizes for reification and "metaphysics." That being said, Rorty does sometimes insist that the commitment to justice is far more important than the practice of irony. For example, at the end of the autobiographical essay "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," he writes: "The actually existing approximations of such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievements of

viewing the self as an eddy in a river of language would help release the shadows of the unconscious mind, while the public struggle for a world free from suffering and cruelty would provide a safe point of return from these descents into self-dissolution. Rorty himself describes his ideal as a person who is divided "into a private self-creator and a public liberal," such that we can be, "in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J. S. Mill."[50] I would add that the only way we will be able to endure being Nietzsche in private is if we are struggling to be J. S. Mill in public, and vice versa—and that the mental collapse suffered by both these thinkers can be read as examples of what happens when we follow only one side of this dialectic, with Mill going too far up and Nietzsche going too far down.[51] However, even though Rorty himself is *doing* this, through this combined practice of public "liberalism" and private "irony," he is unable to *understand* himself as doing this. This, I will argue, is because Rorty remains caught within the horizon of an almost invisible trans-historical vision: namely, the idea that the ontology of war is true.

In the next section, I will make the preliminary moves toward this critique by exploring Rorty's account of the relationship between Nietzsche and Plato.

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our species. In comparison, even Hegel's and Proust's books seem optional, orchidaceous extras" (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 20); similarly, in "Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes," he writes that "hope for social justice is … the only basis for a worthwhile human life" (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 204).

[50] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 85.

[51] J. S. Mill describes his own mental collapse in chapter five of his *Autobiography*: "I had what might truly be called an object in life: to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object…. I was accustomed to felicitate myself on the certainty of a happy life which I enjoyed, through placing my happiness in something durable and distant, in which some progress might always be making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment. This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence" (Mill, quoted in Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy*, 84-85). Eventually, however, this noble vision of the *whatness* of the good ceased to work: "the time came when I was awakened from this as from a dream … [I]t occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: 'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness answered: 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. … The end has ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for." This disillusionment would represent the initial entrance into the fields of the spirituality from below, in which an "irrepressible self-consciousness" reveals the emptiness of one's vision of the *whatness* of the good. In terms of my critique of Rorty, this is why it is not safe to be a liberal without at the same time being an ironist: because liberalism without irony would produce the kind of collapse that eventually beset Mill.

5. The Incomplete Historicism of Rorty's Nietzsche

In the introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty argues that the Socratic moral thesis should be viewed as Plato's "attempt to fuse the public and the private," as part of an "answer [to] the question 'Why is it in one's interest to be just?'"[52] Rorty argues that Plato's answer to this question—that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it—involves "metaphysics," the reification of the contingent truth of Plato's own culture to the level of ersatz universal truth. For Rorty, however, this is not the self-conscious reification we saw in the work of David Hume, who posits the staid commonsense of an honest Scottish gentleman in order to avoid the storms that assailed him when he delved too deeply into the paradoxes of rationality. Instead, for Rorty, Plato is someone who *really believes* that the commonsense of his own cultural world is *actually* grounded in the nature of reality. Rorty thinks that this kind of "metaphysical" philosophy informs the entire previous history of his own Western philosophical culture, and he hopes to cure this culture by convincing his contemporaries to simply cease asking the kinds of question that Plato sought to answer.

We can get a better sense for Rorty's alternative approach to justice by considering how he understands the rhetorical benefits of such fuzzy concepts as "child of God," "humanity," and "rational being." These ideas, he argues, have

> done an enormous amount of good, as have notions like "truth for its own sake" and "art for its own sake." Such notions have kept the way open for political and cultural change by providing a fuzzy but inspiring *focus imaginarius* (e.g., *absolute* truth, *pure* art, humanity *as such*). The philosophical problems, and the sense of artificiality associated with these problems, only arise when a handy bit of rhetoric is taken to be a fit subject for "conceptual analysis," when *foci imaginarii* are subjected to close scrutiny—in short, when we start asking about the "nature" of truth, art, or humanity.[53]

In short, Rorty recognizes the moral benefits that come when people are moved by such vague concepts.[54] In order to preserve these moral benefits, meanwhile, he argues that we should

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[52] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii.

[53] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 195.

[54] In his essay "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," Rorty describes this use of fuzzy concepts as germane to the pragmatic approach to morality: "[I]f Whitman and Dewey have anything interesting in common, it is their principled and deliberate fuzziness. For principled fuzziness is the American way of doing what Heidegger called 'getting beyond metaphysics'." (Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*,

eschew Plato's kind of philosophical project, which involves submitting such fuzzy ideas to crisp rational analysis. For Rorty, such analysis is both pointless and dangerous, leading to a potentially disastrous disenchantment—what I have referred to as the dyscatastrophe of dialectic. In short, Rorty thinks that rational analysis of such ideas will inevitably undercut their capacity to move us, by stretching them too far beyond their natural use. The resultant disenchantment can have dangerous moral and political consequences: namely, that people might conclude that the groundlessness of morality means that it is irrational and foolish to bother with the struggle to be good.

Rorty explicates this point by analyzing what happens when we try to pin down the true ontological meaning of a concept like "solidarity." He first points out that, ever since Nietzsche, the very idea of offering an ontological ground for this kind of idea has begun to sound "artificial," because we all recognize that "solidarity" is a culturally contingent social achievement, not a reflection of some hidden ontological reality. However, Rorty also acknowledges that the realization that solidarity is just a social construct might influence some people "to have doubts about the notion," which might harm the political/rhetorical power of the concept to move us in a morally beneficial direction. In this context, therefore, Rorty accepts Nietzsche's critique that concepts like "solidarity" are ontologically groundless, but he rejects the idea that this realization needs to have any detrimental moral results. In his words, we should grant "Nietzsche his point about the contingently historical character of our sense of moral obligation," but at the same time we should argue that "a *focus imaginarius* is none the worse for being an invention rather than (as Kant thought it) a built-in feature of the human mind." With this move, Rorty is rejecting (his view of) the Platonic philosophical project, in which we should try "to *recognize* … solidarity, as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it," as this kind of project will only invite the "pointlessly skeptical question 'Is this solidarity *real*?'," which could easily culminate in "Nietzsche's insinuation that the end of religion and metaphysics should mean the end of our attempts not to be cruel." Against this Platonic style of reflection, Rorty suggests that the proper way to respond to such moral slogans as "[w]e have obligations to the human as such" is to engage in a positive political project: by "reminding

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27-28). By my account, "principled fuzziness" would be a way of opening an overly hard vision of the *whatness* of the good to its ontological *thatness*.

ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can," to "construe the slogan as urging us to *create* a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have."[55]

In chapter two, we encountered a similar argument: Mackie's claim that first and second order moral discourse have no necessary relation to each other. Nietzsche's politically dangerous nihilism would derive from the fact that he insists that these two levels of discourse need to be in harmony. Rorty, in this context, is basically arguing that this felt need is due to the historically contingent influence of Plato, within whose nets Nietzsche is still caught. In light of this argument, it would seem that Rorty agrees with my overall argument in chapter two: that for those who philosophize in the Platonic manner, the idea that we must derive our first order moral commitments from the Darwinian struggle for survival will indeed undermine morality—as our attempt to find the "true" ground of solidary leads inevitably to the conclusion that there is no real ground, which (within the Platonic style of philosophy) means that there is no reason why we should not be vicariously cruel. Rorty rejects this dismal conclusion by arguing that our felt need to produce such a holistic vision is historically contingent—and that, once we have recognized this contingency, we will be able to accept the universe described by Darwin without falling victim to the danger of nihilism. As for the opposite danger, the danger of fanaticism, Rorty hopes that our historicism, as carried forward through a practice of private "irony," will serve to undermine it. In this way, Rorty hopes to keep the moral benefits of the doctrine of the subjectivity of values—tolerance, etc. —while simultaneously protecting himself (and his political culture) against the danger of moral collapse that can occur when we adopt this doctrine from the perspective of the Platonic demand that our view of morality cohere with our view of reality.

That being said, it seems that Rorty is open to the same critique we saw Taylor level against Mackie in chapter two: that even as he insists that our felt need to square our morality with our cosmology is rooted in the contingent historical influence of Plato, Rorty's own philosophy is also rooted in the attempt to square his vision of morality with the cosmological vision revealed by Darwin's theory of evolution.[56] As in chapter two, however, my purpose in making this

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[55] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 196.
[56] In "The Infinite is Losing Its Charm: Richard's Rorty's Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique," (in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 635-655), Peter Dews levels another Taylor-esque critique against Rorty: "the prescriptions for linguistic usage that Rorty derives from his pragmatism

critique is not to suggest that Rorty should struggle to *really* free himself from the Platonic demand. My purpose is instead to follow Taylor's style of response, and suggest that something important is being disclosed by the fact Rorty seems unable to follow through on his own philosophical program.

In chapter three, I attempted to liberate our understanding of "disenchantment" from the way disenchantment is understood in the naturalist self-understanding: namely, that we should stop seeing disenchantment as an unprecedented possibility bequeathed to us by modern science, but rather see it as a universal human experience that has taken this particular shape due to the contingencies of modern European history. I will now make a similar critique of Rorty, arguing that there are two different visions of disenchantment at work in his oeuvre: historicist disenchantment and naturalist disenchantment. Rorty views these two modes of disenchantment as harmonious, presenting himself as a thorough-going historicist *and* a naturalist. I will argue, by contrast, that these two modes of disenchantment are *not* in harmony with each other. More precisely, I will argue that, in Rorty's thought, historicist disenchantment leads to the abyss that Plato and Arendt see as the logical result of dialectical thinking—the breakdown of a stable, unified traditional worldview into an existentially dangerous but also hopeful multiplicity of possibilities. As for naturalist disenchantment, it is the same insofar as it undermines the old traditional worldview, but the outcome is exactly opposite: instead of an abyss of possibility, we are presented with one fixed perspective (the ontology of war) that, I have argued, should undermine our capacity for hope. I will argue, then, that Rorty should cease viewing his historicism as a logical outgrowth of his Darwinian perspective, but should rather invert this relationship, and allow this naturalist ontology (which is basically the ontology of war) to dissolve in the acid of his historicism.

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come into conflict not only with the way that most people talk, but also the way in which he would like to—and indeed needs to—talk *himself*, in order to express his deepest moral aspirations" (Dews, 649). In this sense, Rorty's overly rigid adherence to his own pragmatist—and, I would argue, naturalist—presuppositions is distorting his ability to practice the very moral rationality to which he aspires.

6. The Incomplete Historicism of Richard Rorty

On the one hand, Rorty presents himself as a historicist in the tradition of thinkers like Hegel, who denies that "there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self," and who argues instead that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down—that there is nothing 'beneath' socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human."[57] On the basis of this thorough-going historicism, Rorty presents his project as the attempt to persuade us to adopt the (contingent) value system of a "liberal," who "thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do,"[58] combined with the philosophical perspective of an "ironist" who "faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance." At the same time, however, Rorty also locates this historicist, pragmatist perspective as a logical result of Darwin's revolutionary insight: "Given a Darwinian account of how we got here, can we still think of our inquiries as aiming at the One True Account of How Things Really Are?"[59] Alternatively, in his essay, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and Postmodernism," Rorty tells a story about "the importance of Darwin for the development of utilitarianism, pragmatism and twentieth-century social hope,"[60] arguing that, "[a]fter Darwin… it became possible to believe that nature is not leading up to anything—that nature has nothing in mind," that "humans have to dream up the point of human life, and cannot appeal to a nonhuman standard to determine whether they have chosen wisely."[61] Similarly, in "Truth without Correspondence to Reality," he interprets Dewey's phrase "a new metaphysic of man's relation to nature" as an unnecessarily awkward way of describing "a generalization of the moral of Darwinian biology," which once again Rorty locates at the origin of the turn to pragmatism in 19th century philosophy.[62]

Rorty continues this latter reflection by offering a brief reflection on the relationship between the theory of evolution and what I have referred to as the ontology of war:

[57] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiii.
[58] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.
[59] Richard Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism,"*Philosophy and Social Hope* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1999), 268.
[60] Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 263.
[61] Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," 266.
[62] Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 27.

> The only justification of a mutation, biological or cultural, is its contribution to the existence of a more complex and interesting species somewhere in the future. Justification is always justification from the point of view of the survivors, the victors; there is no point of view more exalted than theirs to assume. This is the truth in the ideas that might makes right and that justice is the interest of the stronger. But these ideas are misleading when they are construed metaphysically, as an assertion that the present status quo, or the victorious side in some current war, stand in some privileged relation to the way things really are.[63]

But this characterization of what it means to construe "might makes right" metaphysically is disingenuous. Those who would claim that "the victorious side in some current war" stands "in some privileged relation to the way things are" do not do so on the basis of the claim that might makes right; they do so on the basis of the idea that justice has finally emerged triumphant in the otherwise bloody course of human history—as, for example, in those ideological Hegelians who interpreted Prussia's defeat of France in 1870-71 as the "final coincidence of 'the rational' (i.e. the good) with the real; the 'end of history'."[64] The claim that "might makes right" is useful when deployed *against* such triumphant metaphysical pronouncements: basically, by showing how the claim to justice is really nothing more than a veiled assertion of brute power, the ideology loses its seductive veneer. This is the virtuous logic behind what I referred to in chapter two as the inverse theodicy of disenchantment.

However, the unmasking of such ideological metaphysics will only work to promote an increase in justice if one can then appeal to some other kind of justice—a fuzzy, imprecise longing for an as-yet-unrealized good (Balkin's "transcendent justice," Lear's "radical hope," my "*thatness* of the good"), which could stand in opposition to the brutal idea that "might makes right." It is *here*, in this second moment of naturalist disenchantment, that the liberating potential transforms into nihilism—because this kind of good does not have any place in the naturalist picture of reality, neither in Darwin's theory of evolution nor in the broadly materialist ontology that naturalism presupposes. In other words—to return to Rorty's reflection—the political and moral danger of construing "might makes right" metaphysically is not that "the victorious side in some current war" will think it stands "in some privileged relation to the way things are." The danger is rather that, to paraphrase Levinas, we will conclude that "the way things are" reveals that victory in war is, ultimately, the only thing that really matters. In this way, the "truth" of naturalist

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[63] Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 27.
[64] Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 169.

disenchantment becomes a double-edged sword—morally beneficial insofar as it unmasks the ideological façade of power, but morally devastating insofar as it reveals that power is really all that matters. Rorty's philosophy, in this context, consists in the struggle to find a way to keep the beneficial results of disenchantment while eschewing its dangers—to keep the capacity to undercut fanaticism and ideological metaphysics while avoiding the very real danger of moral nihilism.[65]

As I have argued, however, it is simply not possible to escape the danger of nihilism so long as we approach the experience of disenchantment from within the horizon of naturalism. Or rather, it is only possible to escape this danger insofar as we refuse to think too deeply about what our position *actually* means—as implied by Rorty and Mackie's cut between morality and cosmology, or Rorty's insistence that we not bother thinking through what is implied by our inspiring *focus imaginarius*. This strategy, however, would expose us once again to the very danger of fanaticism which the unsettling practice of "thinking" (re. Arendt) is supposed to alleviate. Rorty's philosophy is interesting because (unlike Russell, Mackie, and Sagan) Rorty does not simply present scientific disenchantment as a panacea, the magical unification of scientific truth with moral goodness. On the contrary, Rorty is intimately aware of the dangers involved in disenchantment, and his philosophy is a struggle to alleviate them: this is the deep moral motivation behind his wise insistence that irony be privatized, his appeal to the inspiring "*focus imaginarius*" which is to be preserved from the acid of rational thought, as well as his attempt use historicism to sunder Nietzsche's Darwinism from Plato's requirement that morality and cosmology form a unified whole.

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[65] Rorty actually admits that his philosophy breaks down in the limit case. As Kuipers puts it, "Rorty recognizes at least one valid objection to his insistence on the historical contingency of political liberalism. This objection involves the claim that, on Rorty's view, 'a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples had been razed and whose books have been burnt, has no share in human dignity'" (Kuipers, *Richard Rorty*, 128; quotation from "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*). Kuipers suggests that Rorty's insistence that we should still treat this child with humanity could be grounded in the simple desire for goodness described by Levinas as the proper response to the face of the other: "my inability to treat this child like an object is due to the fact that her sheer presence before me amounts to an ethical interruption of my sheer enjoyment of the world" (Kuipers 129). Rorty, by contrast, argues that we should simply thank the historical contingency that made us feel an obligation to help this person: (quoted in Kuipers, 128-29) "it is part of the tradition of *our* [postmodern bourgeois liberal] community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity. *This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists like myself*, who would like to let differences like that between the Kantian and the Hegelian remain 'merely philosophical.'" This is the same kind of argument Rorty makes with regard to the *foci imaginarius*: we should not bother thinking about such issues, but should rather be grateful that these fuzzy concepts have the capacity to move us toward the good.

In making these arguments, Rorty has almost perfectly recapitulated the structure of spiritual religion that I described in chapter three: the spirituality from above, combined with the spirituality from below, under the aegis of a mysterious goodness that we hearken towards when we enter the abyss. There remains, however, one significant difference. For Rorty, the *focus imaginarius* is nothing more than a rhetorically useful ploy, while I would argue that these fuzzy concepts should be seen as windows into a deeper, fuzzier ontological mystery: the *thatness* of the good, which is able to shine through the *focus imaginarius* into our otherwise overly crisp view of reality.[66] I would further argue that rational analysis of such concepts will only destroy them if, in the catastrophe of dialectic, we opt for the ontology of war—and that this is the fundamental problem with Rorty's approach: his non-historicist commitment to the naturalist worldview makes it impossible for him to rationally doubt the truth of the ontology of war. More precisely, even as Rorty insists that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down—that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human,"[67] Rorty still adheres to one very clear idea of one particular transhistorical condition that he thinks frames the experience of all possible human cultures:

> The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute despair, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out. But that sort of power is not the sort we can appropriate by adopting and then transforming its language, thereby becoming identical with the threatening power and subsuming it under our own more powerful selves. This latter strategy is appropriate only for coping with other persons—for example, with parents, gods, and poetic precursors. For our relation to the world, to brute power and to naked pain, is not the sort of relation we have to persons. Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an

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[66] In "The Infinite is Losing Its Charm: Richard's Rorty's Philosophy of Religion and the Conflict between Therapeutic and Pragmatic Critique," (in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 635-655), Peter Dews also suggests that the only way to make sense of these "deepest moral aspirations" is to make reference to some deep, hidden, ontological goodness that we aspire towards in our own contingent cultural creations. Dews makes this point with reference to an aspect of Dewey's pragmatism that Rorty entirely overlooks: "if our remote moral goals are to be more than 'mere rootless ideals, fantasies, utopias,' we cannot help believing that 'there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. … It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'" (651; quotations from Dewey *A Common Faith*). I would call this the *thatness* of the good, which Rorty, as a naturalist, cannot acknowledge. Drawing on Dews' essay, Kuipers describes Rorty's invocation of hope a "form of openness to transcendence," the "opening of a temporal 'gap,' a space of expectation, longing, or hope for an ideal world that, while *not yet* actual, nevertheless informs our activity in the here and now," and he describes the difference between Rorty's transcendence and traditional religious views of transcendence in terms of the difference between change and stasis: "[t]he salient difference between this understanding of transcendence and the metaphysical or supernatural versions that both Dewey and Rorty reject is that, in opposition to these latter construals, neither Dewey nor Rorty understand transcendence as something statically and antecedently in existence" (Kuipers, *Richard Rorty*, 135).
[67] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiii.

ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy—the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery—would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have. For that would be the final abjuration of the notion that truth, and not just power and pain, is to be found "out there."[68]

This is the ontology of war, pared down almost to its purest form. According to this passage, it appears that "socialization" and "historical circumstance" do *not* go all the way down—that, even if there is no transcendental *whatness* to humanity that can be discovered at the bottom of reality, there is a transhistorical *thatness* to our human condition: that "[t]he world can blindly and inarticulately crush us," that "mute despair, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out." The status of this idea as ontological ground within Rorty's picture of reality can be gauged by the fact that this "truth" does not appear to be subject to the powers of poetic description.[69] It would seem, in other words, that Rorty has not entirely abjured the notion that "truth" is to be found "out there." On the contrary, he argues that "power and pain" *are* this "truth," and that any attempts at self-creation that did not build upon this foundation would simply be wrong.[70] In this way, Rorty's claim to have liberated himself from the chains of theology and metaphysics turns out to be based upon what amounts to another implicit metaphysical position, a knowledge claim concerning the nature of reality as it exists beyond the ken of human language and culture. It is this metaphysical knowledge claim that I will now attempt to disenchant—essentially, by sundering Rorty's approach to disenchantment into its two opposing halves, historicist disenchantment and naturalist disenchantment, and then subjecting the naturalist disenchantment to the acid of historicism.

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[68] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40.

[69] Another good example of Rorty's ontology of war: "Socialization … goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* 185).

[70] In his essay "Idealism, Pragmatism, and the World Well Lost," (in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 47-68), James W. Allard contrasts Rorty's philosophical project to the project of Edward Caird. According to Allard, both are trying to reconcile "the conflict created by the demands of morality and religion in the world described by Darwinian science" (Allard, 47). For Caird, this takes shape as a "conflict between 'the religious consciousness' and 'the secular consciousness,' between Darwinism and Christianity with its attendant morality" (Allard, 48). In Rorty, by contrast, this takes shape as a conflict between "science and the high literary culture that has for many people replaced religion. In this conflict one side takes science to have a distinctive method for finding truth, a method not found in other areas of culture. This side privileges science epistemologically. The other side takes science to be one among many other literary genres and takes scientific principles to be just as subject to historical relativity as those in any other area of culture" (Allard, 48). I would argue that he has not *actually* taken science in this way, as "one among many … literary genres." More precisely, Rorty's historicism is held in place by a very broad vision of the truth of reality that is not subject to historical relativity: the idea that "just power and pain, is to be found 'out there.'"

In his essay "Pluralism, Pragmatism and Postmodernism," Rorty provides an account of "the intellectual shift from unity to plurality,"[71] against "the good old theologicometaphysical verities,"[72] that almost perfectly recapitulates the structure that Plato describes in book VII of the *Republic*: "neither utilitarianism nor pragmatism *entails* a commitment to liberalism. That is why Nietzsche can be as good a pragmatist as James, and why Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor can be as good a utilitarian as Mill."[73] With this, Rorty acknowledges that the catastrophic shift from belief in the old "theologicometaphysical verities," which we (might have) inherited from our traditional culture, does not necessarily lead to the enlightened moral pragmatism of people like James and Mill. This same movement could just as easily transform us into immoral pragmatists like Nietzsche or cynical manipulators like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. For Rorty, this is why the work of the pragmatist philosopher, to open us up dialectically to plurality, needs to supplemented by the work of the pragmatist prophet, whose rhetoric will help inspire us to resolutely commit to the projects of social justice and happiness for all. As Rorty puts it, "[n]o argument leads from a coherence view of truth, an anti-representationalist view of knowledge, and an antiformalist view of law and morals, to Dewey's left-looking social prophecies. The Heidegger of *Being and Time* shared all those views, but Heidegger looked rightward and dreamed different dreams."[74] In effect, Rorty is trying to dissolve the old dream of "theologicometaphysical verities," and then, in the abyss of potentiality to which we are then exposed, to promulgate the dream of "Dewey's left-looking social prophecies" —in opposition to the "rightward" dreams of people like Heidegger and Nietzsche, or else the brutal political cynicism of the Grand Inquisitor.

Against Rorty, then, I am basically arguing that these "left-looking social prophecies" will not *work* so long as we think of "our relation to the world" as a relation "to brute power and to naked pain." To be clear, however, I am not arguing that we therefore need to revise our rhetoric to hide this brutal truth, along the lines of the "disputable" possibility that Mackie introduces at the end of his *Ethics*: to wit, that politics demands that we invent an ontological ground for morality that science has shown us does not really exist. I am instead arguing that Rorty's claim that only

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[71] Rorty, "Afterword: Pluralism, Pragmatism and Postmodernity," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 277.
[72] Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 277.
[73] Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 272.
[74] Rorty, "The Banality of Pragmatism and the Poetry of Justice," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 97.

"power and pain, is to be found 'out there'," [75] is *wrong*—or rather, that it is a historically contingent metaphysical presupposition beneath which modern naturalist culture is operating, which emerges from the specifically naturalist experience of disenchantment, and which now needs to be disenchanted itself, by being dipped into the acid of historicism. More precisely, a *truly* historicist disenchantment, which really did think that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down," would open us onto a horizon of possibility, in which we could choose how we want the world to be. In contrast to this, a *truly* naturalist disenchantment *should* destroy hope, by revealing that all that really matters is power and control. Thus, to put this in terms of the Absolute Paradox from chapter one— "Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?" [76] —I am basically arguing that a thoroughly historicist disenchantment would expose us to a choice between two possible paths: in Rorty's vocabulary, in the abyss of plurality, historicist disenchantment would open us up to the choice of becoming either the virtuous Mill or the cynical Grand Inquisitor. Naturalist disenchantment, by contrast, should simply make us into the cynical Grand Inquisitor, by dissolving "the good old theologicometaphysical verities" [77] into the metaphysical claim that "might makes right" —unless, that is, we fudge the consequence of our position by inventing a new "theologicometaphysical" verity to take the place of the old one. This, I have argued, is what Hume did, turning the common sense of his own culture into a new moral ideal.

In effect, I have just levelled against Rorty the same critique that Rorty leveled against Nietzsche: that his historicism is incomplete, that he is still operating within the contingent historical horizon of some as-yet unexamined presupposition—in this case, the horizon of the ontology of war that has been given to him by Darwin's dangerous idea. In the next section, I will flesh out this critique by exploring Rorty's approach to Heidegger, whose criticism of Nietzsche mirrors my own criticism of Rorty: that Nietzsche has not actually freed himself from the long history of

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[75] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40.
[76] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230a.
[77] Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 277.

Western metaphysics, but has in fact simply posited a new metaphysical principle to replace the old one—the metaphysics of the will to power.[78]

7. Rorty and Heidegger

As we have seen, Rorty thinks that the only thing we find "out there," in the "nonlinguistic" and "nonhuman" world, is "brute power and naked pain," which he characterizes as a truth that we can "*recognize*" but never alter.[79] In light of this fundamental vision, Rorty distinguishes between the hope offered by the metaphysician and the hope offered by the liberal ironist. Metaphysicians claim that adopting their "redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshaled against you," while the liberal ironist knows that conquering such forces is "a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected the 'movement of history.'"[80] Heidegger's critique, in this context, would be that this entire metaphorical language of having to "conquer" forces that are "marshaled against" us is itself based upon a metaphysical assertion—again, that the world beyond our language is "brute power and naked pain." Heidegger then suggests that this metaphysical assertion is also caught up in the play of historicism: this is not a truth that we have discovered, but rather a contingent metaphysical dogma that the members of modern Western culture have lost the capacity to seriously question. In Rorty's language, we might say that the idea that reality beyond language is "brute power and naked pain" would itself be a poetical construct that our own culture has reified, unconsciously, into an ersatz eternal "truth" —one that the free play of irony is not allowed to touch.

We can gauge Rorty's likely response to this critique by considering the way he interprets Heidegger. Basically, just as Heidegger would argue that Rorty is a closet metaphysician, so

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[78] For a good analysis of Heidegger's approach to Nietzsche, see Béla Egyed's "Tracing Nihilism: Heidegger to Nietsche to Derrida" (in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism*, 1-14).

[79] Here is another good example of Rorty's version of naturalism: "As a good naturalist … I take the source of this occasional irruption of Otherness to be simply some curious neural kink, or odd psycho-sexual twist, or genetic mini-mutation. On my view, there is nothing more to Otherness than the random events which produce random effects on our language, and thus on poetry, politics, and philosophy" (Rorty, "Comments on Taylor's 'Paralectics'," quoted in Kuipers, *Richard Rorty*, 131). The question is: are these just poetic rediscriptions, or are they poetic rediscriptions that make sense given the scientific truth revealed by Darwin?

[80] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 91.

would Rorty level the same charge at Heidegger: that Heidegger got stuck on the the idea that he could find some "true" final vocabulary that later poet-philosophers would be unable to see beyond. For Rorty, in other words, Heidegger is to be praised as a philosopher-poet who ingeniously reimagined the history of Western philosophy and thereby succeeded in consciously (re)creating himself. This Heidegger, for Rorty, is "an exemplary, gigantic, unforgettable figure."[81] However, the Heidegger who "thought he knew some words which had, or should have had, resonance for *everybody* in modern Europe, words which were relevant not just to the fate of people who happen to have read a lot of philosophy books but to the public fate of the West,"[82] the Heidegger who tried to function "as a philosopher of our public life, as a commentator of twentieth-century technology and politics," is "resentful, petty, squint-eyed, obsessive—and … cruel."[83] On my argument, of course, Heidegger would indeed have discovered words that "should have … resonance for *everybody* in modern Europe" —insofar as modern European public life takes place under the aegis of the ontology of war, which Heidegger takes to be a disastrous ontological mistake.

To be clear, Rorty is perfectly aware that, according to Heidegger, Rorty's own "humanism and pragmatism, insofar as they identify "truth with power" are "the most degraded versions of nihilism in which metaphysics culminates."[84] In other words, Rorty knows that his own explicit ontological doctrine is exactly the position that Heidegger criticizes as the worst possible metaphysical position. According to Rorty, meanwhile, it is out of fear of this so-called "degraded nihilism" that Heidegger suggests we treat final vocabularies as "not just means to ends but, indeed, houses of Being."[85] But Rorty's way of articulating Heidegger's critique elides the thrust of Heidegger's argument. Indeed, if naturalists, even philosophically sophisticated naturalists like Rorty, were to actually ponder what it would mean if "our relation to the world" were *not* merely a relation to "brute power and naked pain," they would be thrust into the catastrophe of a real philosophical reflection that has *actually* transcended the horizon of their own culture. To appreciate how radically odd Heidegger's criticism would sound to those who approach reality from within this "final" metaphysics, we might imagine the difficulty of trying

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[81] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 118.
[82] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 118.
[83] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 120.
[84] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 116.
[85] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 116.

to convince someone like Daniel Dennett that life and security are *not* the two transcendental values to which all people either consciously or unconsciously adhere, but that Dennett's absolute certainty on this point is actually nothing more than a historically contingent metaphysical assertion, the particular horizon that, for him, defines the *whatness* of the good within the confines of modern Western society. In fact, we have already caught a glimpse of what it would feel like to step beyond this horizon, in terms of Colin McGinn's descriptions of how the "intimations of ultimate mystery, a dazed sensation where knowledge ought to be"[86] can, if taken seriously, plunge us into a view of reality that McGinn describes as "magical, miraculous, mystical … mad."[87] We are, in short, talking about a philosophical presupposition that, for those who hold it, it would appear mad to doubt. How can it possibly be the case that human culture is *not*, ultimately and finally, a response to the necessity of ensuring group survival within a potentially hostile ambient environment?

For his part, Rorty is well aware that hard religious visions of the *whatness* of the good often cover over deep reservoirs of unpleasant emotion, and that ironic play with such doctrines can be very painful for those who adhere to them:

> [M]ost people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms—taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions—the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all the other children—are redescribed as "trash," and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one.[88]

Rorty, of course, is describing these things from a position of presumed cultural superiority, as the liberal ironist who has already completed the journey beyond "primitive culture," and he presents the play of irony as a kind of one-way door from a childish adherence to religious myth to a mature position of freedom. Heidegger would counter that the metaphysics of the will to

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[86] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 9.
[87] McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*, 16.
[88] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 89-90.

power, the idea that power and pain are the two factors that fundamentally determine our relation to the world, is itself a childish fantasy that we must get beyond, not on the basis of some other perfectly prescribed vision of the *whatness* of the good, but rather in order to descend into the mystery of our own experience, a mystery that this metaphysics of the will to power—as well as the weapons it constructs to defend itself—is blocking from our view.[89]

To be clear, our purpose in provisionally setting aside this metaphysics of the will to power would not be to figure out some new "metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling"[90] —as though we wanted to replace the false metaphysics of the will to power with the *real* true metaphysical doctrine of the *whatness* of the good. The point would rather be to explore the emotions hidden beneath our own use of language, but without presupposing, before we even begin, that these emotions are fundamentally grounded in the necessity to stay alive and secure within the brute power and mute pain of physical reality. In other words, our purpose would be to practice a kind of pragmatism, but a pragmatism that operates on the basis of the ontology of mystery as opposed to the ontology of war.[91]

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[89] Here is another way of putting this critique: Rorty is effectively positing "liberal" values as a resolute moral stance to be adopted in the face of the anxiety of "irony," while I am suggesting that Rorty should follow Heidegger through his engagement with the philosophy of Nietzsche in the mid-1930s, which will take him through the ontology of war and towards the concept of *Gelassenheit*, or "letting-be." In *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, Lambert Zuidervaart criticizes both the stance of "resoluteness" and the stance of "letting-be" as pertaining to "a nonpublic or antipublic self" (Zuidervaard, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 87). I would argue that this "nonpublic" quality is to be expected, because these parts of Heidegger's philosophy are operating within the realms of the spirituality from below, which is meant to be conducted in solitude.

[90] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi.

[91] In "Rorty's Progress into Confucian Truth," (in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 447-475), Yong Huang argues for a similar point, that Rorty would be a better Rortyan if he adopted a Confucian metaphysics: "love, as a natural feeling, is based on *ren*, and *ren* is nothing but the life-giving activity of ten-thousand things and therefore is identical to the ultimate reality of the universe as conceived by neo-Confucians" (Huang, 466). Huang also argues that this "metaphysics" must be accompanied by a spiritual practice: "Human love is indeed based on life-giving activity as the ultimate reality, but Confucianism does not think that we can grasp this ultimate reality before we love humans and other beings. … It is in this sense that the Cheng brothers argue that in order to understand the ultimate reality, humans 'should not merely engage themselves in talks about classics and discourses about *dao*. One should try to get it in one's activities deliberately conducted in conformity with propriety'" (Huang, 467). In my terms, the truths of metaphysics will only disclose themselves to people who contemplate from the ontological foundation of proper moral behavior. Rorty's response to these suggestions is telling: he completely ignores the claim that *ren* is the ontological foundation of human love, and instead insists that philosophers should not "try to find something that underlies the realms of the moral, the scientific, the aesthetic," but "should instead concentrate on keeping these various activities from getting mixed up with one another." Rorty then observes that "[m]uch of the sort of philosophical therapy that pragmatists like myself engage in consists … in saying that morality and natural science serve such different purposes that nothing that goes on in one area of culture is likely to have much bearing on what happens in the other" ("Reply to Yong Huang," 478). On my argument, Rorty's philosophical therapy

And this, finally, is perhaps the reason Rorty feels aversion for those aspects of Heidegger's thought that deal with "modern society, or the destiny of Europe, or contemporary politics," describing them as "at best vapid, and at worst sadistic."[92] Beyond the danger that Rorty sees in Heidegger's "rightward" dream, this aversion would lie in the challenge that Heidegger offers to the one part of Rorty's worldview that remains unbendable, beyond the ken of poetry, the one aspect of Rorty's position that is not subject to ironic redescription. In short, this sense of reality as "brute power and naked pain" is the fixed horizon within which Rorty's own politics of liberal irony makes sense. Thus, even though my entire critique of Rorty is, in effect, just an elaborate way to articulate the classic critique of relativism—if there is no absolute truth, then the claim that there is no absolute truth is also not absolute—the upshot of this critique does not entail a move towards fanaticism or "metaphysics," as though the only opposite to the infinite abyss were some rigid version of the *whatness* of the good. No—when relativism becomes relative, the retreat back into hard "metaphysics" would represent one spiritual possibility, as would the dangerous descent into moral nihilism. The third possibility, which I do not think Rorty has seriously considered, would be to accept the ontological *thatness* of the good, as the mysterious ground for the hope that otherwise so obviously inspires his own philosophical endeavors.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the philosophical practice of two naturalist philosophers—David Hume and Richard Rorty—from the perspective of the curriculum of spiritual religion I described in chapter three. In this context, Hume would represent the generic spiritual strategy of modern naturalist culture: to reify the perspective of common sense practicality in opposition to the absurdities of philosophy and religion. Generally speaking, while I agree entirely with Hume's observation that "errors in religion are dangerous,"[93] I would add that this is because the realms of experience within which religion comes into serious play are inherently more

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consists in keeping morality and naturalist science separate because morality and his own scientific cosmology are fundamentally incompatible: thus, as with Mackie, Rorty's implicit commitment to the *thatness* of the good inspires him to protect the *whatness* of morality from the nihilism that ensues if we try to link Darwinian natural science to our moral conscience.

[92] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 120.
[93] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 238.

dangerous than the everyday experience of an honest Scottish gentleman. Hume, for his part, thinks he can avoid these dangers by cleaving to common sense. I would argue that this is itself a dangerous religious error, which will lead to the slow strengthening of the chimeras that Hume thinks he has obliterated, and the slow stiffening of his culture around ideals like "commonsense" and "progress."[94] Indeed, as I argued in chapter three, the only way to safely experience a sense of ontological selflessness is to commit to the practice of living selflessly in "normal" life; without this commitment, the sort of skeptical dissolution described by Hume will *inevitably* be experienced as terrifying. As it is, Hume proceeds too far, too fast into the disorienting spirituality from below—and then, on the basis of this heedless descent, ends up rejecting the rationality of this mode of spiritual practice. As a result, the common sense of an honest Scottish gentleman is transformed into an ideal anchoring a lopsided spirituality from above, floating over a fearful abyss of skepticism that Hume has come to see as the logical result of philosophical rationality.

Rorty, in this context, can be understood as a philosopher working within the culture that inherits Hume's spiritual practice, grappling with some of the tensions that have become apparent in the intervening centuries. In fact, I argued that Rorty comes very close to resolving these tensions, but that his approach is ultimately undermined by a lingering commitment to a purified version of the ontology of war, which as a naturalist Rorty is unable to doubt. Against this, therefore, I argued that Rorty should allow the acid of his historicism to undermine his lingering belief in naturalism. Practically speaking, this means that Rorty should allow this final metaphysical

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[94] Hume concludes this chapter by proposing a proto-version of the inverse theodicy of progress, as another way of dealing productively with the chimeras of the abyss: "Two thousand years with such long interruptions, and under such mighty discouragements are a small space of time to give any tolerable perfection to the sciences; and perhaps we are still in too early an age of the world to discover any principles, which will bear the examination of the latest posterity. For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction. … [T]he hope of this serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevail upon me" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.7, p. 239). Now, there is nothing wrong with working for the advancement of knowledge and hoping that this work will help make the world better in the future than it is now. However, as with Hume's conception of "truth," his standard for "progress" basically involves the creation of a world that would satisfy the parochial common sense of an honest gentlemen of his own culture. Furthermore, to the extent that the motivation for this work is to "compose [his] temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence" that still sometimes assails him, Hume is effectively transforming "progress" into an ideal to anchor a lopsided practice of spirituality from above, as a way to contain the monsters of his own shadow. In this case, the emotions of "spleen" and "indolence" would be the chimeras that Hume did not manage to exorcise, and which will ultimately corrupt his noble intention to make a better world.

commitment—the idea that "our relation to the world" is "to brute power and to naked pain," the only things to be found "out there"[95] —to dissolve into the same experience of philosophical plurality that he valorizes everywhere else. Then, in the face of this true catastrophe of naturalism, in which he would *actually* step outside of the fundamental horizon of his own traditional culture (naturalism), Rorty could freely opt once again for the very thing he has been arguing for all along: goodness.

Alternatively, to put the critique in terms of Rorty's own concepts, I argue that Rorty is correct to say that solidarity has a public component, and that this public kind of solidarity has grown over the process of history to include ever larger numbers of humans within the "we" of a liberal democratic political order. I also agree with him when he says that we should strive continually to make these institutions both better and broader. However, Rorty is wrong to claim that solidarity has no private component, that deep engagement with the realms of what he calls "irony" will simply reveal the ontological groundlessness of such public concepts. Solidarity will only break apart in this way for those who enter the realm of "irony" as Nietzsche entered it, as a lopsided spirituality from below conducted under the aegis of the ontology of war, which makes "morality" appear as nothing more than a hypocritical façade. As I argued in chapter three, however, for those who enter these realms in the proper order, our sense of social solidarity will eventually reveal itself as grounded in the universal selfless love that Origen sees in the *Song of Songs*, and which I would refer to as the *thatness* of the good.[96] The purpose of the curriculum of "spiritual religion" would be to bring people safely towards this realization of the ontological ground of solidarity.

The word "safely" is very important. Even when conducted in the proper order, the descent into the realms of the spirituality from below can be dangerous. In chapter five, therefore, I turn my

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[95] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40.

[96] D. Vaden House offers a similar criticism of Rorty in *Without God or his Doubles*: "For Rorty, we measure ourselves and others in the light of our own ethnocentric norms. Other cultures do the same. Not only will God or the World not come to decide the issue between us, but God is dead and the world cannot speak. Rorty seems to be left, despite himself, with the conclusion that the only thing between us is our rival likes and dislikes. This unpalatable conclusion suggests to me that Rorty's anti-dogmatic motives are undermined by his anti-teleological concerns. Ontology need not be construed as an attempt to acquire divine certification for our own commitments. It does need to be construed as the attempt to make intelligible our sense that the merely willful human word is not the last word, that something is eternally gained or lost for the universe when we decide for compassion rather than violence, for conversation rather than coercion" (D. Vaden House, *Without God or his Doubles: Realism, Relativism and Rorty*, 7).

attention to one particular danger of the spirituality from below that I have not yet had the opportunity to explore: the danger of abyssal joy, which can catch us unawares and sweep us down into realms of experience we are unprepared to face. For example, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot quotes the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius as speaking of a "*divina voluptas et horror*" that emerges through "the imaginative contemplation of an infinite number of universes in the infinite void."[97] In light of this, we can see that my description of what happens in the abyss of spirituality from below has so far been one-sided, dealing with only half the problem: divine horror, the terrifying abyss in which the cosmic meaninglessness of humanity is revealed, and which we require stoic courage to face. If, however, one persists through this initial experience, the experience of abyssal pain can give way to the experience of abyssal joy— "*divina voluptas*," divine desire. In chapter five, therefore, I turn my attention to the second half of the experience. First, I present Plato as aware of this danger, and as describing a series of practices oriented towards developing our capacity to maintain self-control in the face of both sides of the problem, pain and pleasure, divine horror and divine desire. After this, I interpret Nietzsche's practice of philosophy through the same lens. I argue that, while Nietzsche was very skilled at enduring the "divine horror" that grips those who enter the infinite void, he ultimately lost himself to the "divine *voluptas* [desire]" that also sometimes manifests there.

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[97] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 208.

Chapter 5

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The Temptation of Pleasure in the Abyss

Introduction

In this thesis, I have contrasted two opposing ways to understand the ground of our commitment to morality: the ontology of mystery and the ontology of war. According to the ontology of mystery, the *whatness* of our own felt commitment to morality is grounded in the *thatness* of the good. According to the ontology of war, by contrast, our felt commitment to morality and goodness is grounded in the struggle to survive in a dangerous world. I have argued that this latter moral ontology should render serious commitment to morality derisory, but that most naturalists, who are essentially obliged to adopt the ontology of war as part of their commitment to science, will try to mitigate the awful moral consequences of this position by means of various "inverse theodicies," the attempt to justify our commitment to goodness within a reality seen to be fundamentally violent and indifferent to human flourishing. Among the many different inverse theodicies, I have focused in particular on the "inverse theodicy of disenchantment," the idea that traditional worldviews are evolutionary survival strategies oriented towards convincing us to be willing to die and kill for the sake of our group, and that getting rid of these worldviews will therefore lead to world peace. I have argued that this argument for the moral benefits of disenchantment is partially valid, but that there is also a moral danger that those who adopt this position usually ignore: the danger of nihilism, the dyscatastrophe of philosophy, in which our loss of belief in traditional morality undermines our capacity to control the wild desires of our (usually) unconscious shadow-self.

From here, I argued that the experience of "disenchantment" is actually a much more widespread cultural phenomenon than is suggested by the naturalist account, in which the movement beyond tradition is seen as an unprecedented possibility bequeathed to us by modern science. For

example, in chapter three, I argued that the idea that reality is fundamentally violent and indifferent should not be seen as a scientific discovery, but rather as the logical result of an unhealthy spiritual practice, the engagement with the *second* phase of spiritual life—the spirituality from below, the void of *Ecclesiastes*—without the adequate preparation in the stabilizing spirituality from above, the practice of the selfless morality of *Proverbs*. Similarly, in chapter four, I argued that Rorty's understanding of disenchantment involves the conflation of two different approaches—historicist disenchantment and naturalist disenchantment—with the former leading to the possibility of hope for the future, and the latter leading to hopeless cynicism that is then fudged through the practice of inverse theodicy. I then argued that Rorty should dissolve his lingering belief in naturalism within the abyss of historicist disenchantment.

In this chapter, I explore a different aspect of this experience of disenchantment: what happens if we go deeper into the realms of Rorty's "irony," Gruen's "spirituality from below," the "view from infinity" of *Ecclesiastes*, or the dangerous predicament described by the second temptation of Christ? In short, I have up to now limited my descriptions of the experience of the abyss to the initial experience of a harrowing self-dissolution, when we become aware of the dark desires that lurk beneath our façade of uprightness, desires that often directly contradict the persona we maintain in everyday life. Thus, if my focus up to now has been to describe the pain of becoming aware of this shadow-side—which, I would argue, naturalism has reified into an ontological principle—my focus from here will be to describe the joy that can eventually manifest on the other side of this pain. I argue that this experience of abyssal joy presents a different kind of danger, and I compare the philosophical practice of Plato and Nietzsche in terms of how they deal with this danger.[1]

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[1] There are many different ways to draw a comparison between Plato and Nietzsche. For example, in *Nietzsche on Morality*, Brian Leiter draws the obvious parallel between Nietzsche's view of morality and the position of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, pp. 41-42, 99, 118). Indeed, Nietzsche himself once characterized his own philosophy as "inverted Platonism": "My philosophy an *inverted Platonism*: the further removed from true being, the purer, the more beautiful, the better it is. Living in *Schein* as goal" (III 3:207)" (quoted in John Sallis, *Platonic Legacies*, 9). This is the kind of claim that would prompt Rorty to argue that Nietzsche is still caught in the web of Plato's philosophy—as negated Platonism is still platonic in essence. That being said, it is also possible to draw a distinction between Plato and Platonism, as in Stanley Rosen's reading in "Remarks on Nietzsche's 'Platonism'" (in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism*, 145-163): "An accurate account of the history of philosophy would … look something like this. There are three fundamental 'positions' or teachings: 1) the position of Plato and Heidegger, or genuine Platonism, namely, the attempt to preserve the quarrel between poetry and philosophy in a third language that is the origin of both; 2) "Platonism", or the self-deluded attempt to replace poetry by a fundamentally mathematical philosophy which is actually itself poetry; 3) the teaching of Nietzsche, or the self-

In sections one to four, I expand on Sean Kirkland's approach to Plato's early dialogues in *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*. In section one, I present Kirkland's interpretation, whereby we understand the purpose of Platonic philosophy as exposure to the experience of *aporia* through the realization that our vision of the *whatness* of the good is rationally incoherent. I argue that this is another way of passing from the confident moral idealism involved in the spirituality from above, into the labyrinths of the spirituality from below. Following this, in section two, I argue that Kirkland's description of the experience of *aporia* is unnecessarily one-sided: in short, he interprets the experience of *aporia* only in terms of lingering with an unsettling and painful excess, and neglects the sense of *aporia* as a seductive doorway in which our desire for pleasure is liberated from the chains of its previous moral constraints. In section three, therefore, I return to the text of Plato's dialogues to explore some techniques that Plato offers for dealing with the danger of pleasure in the *aporia*. Finally, in section four, I offer my critique of Kirkland, arguing that his interpretation of the experience of *aporia* is too tied to the experience of everyday life, and that if he were to loosen this anchor point, his approach would eventually recapitulate the threefold Neoplatonic spiritual curriculum I describe in chapter three, in which steadfast moral discipline, combined with the practice of dialectical philosophy, leads to insight into those mysterious realms of experience hearkened to by the word "metaphysics."[2]

After this analysis of Plato, I then turn my attention to the philosophical practice of Friedrich Nietzsche. In section five, I argue that Nietzsche falls victim to the very spiritual danger that

conscious recognition that poetry is triumphant over philosophy. What is today called "postmodernism" is a version of the teaching of Nietzsche" (Rosen, "Remarks on Nietzsche's 'Platonism'," 149). Within this framework, Rorty would be a Nietzschean who was trying to deploy the power of poetry in order to build a just world without cruelty and suffering. By my reading, Nietzsche would be an inversion of Plato in the sense that Leiter points to, with Nietzsche taking the position of Callicles against Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*: that it is better to inflict injustice than to suffer it. Rather than returning to this earlier point, however, this chapter will compare Plato and Nietzsche in terms of their different approaches to the experience of abyssal pleasure.

[2] I am not alone in this attempt to read Plato's dialogues through the lens of spiritual practice. For example, in *Plato's Socrates as Narrator: A Philosophical Muse*, Anne-Marie Schultz considers what we can learn from the fact that certain dialogues are written in Socrates' voice, and she concludes by arguing that "Socrates' narratives illustrate the process of self-transformation," that "his narratives are an invitation to embark on Socrates' own careful process of self-examination" (Schultz, *Plato's Socrates as Narrator*, 202). She even explicates this concept with reference to the Absolute Paradox: "[Socrates] describes his philosophical queries as centered around the question, 'Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?' To answer this question fully is an ongoing process, a practice that takes place over a whole human life. As Hadot remarks, 'Self-transformation is never definitive, but demands perpetual reconquest.'" In contrast to Schultz's approach, in which a spiritual practice is gleaned from the implications of Socrates' first-person narration, I will try to pick out some concrete techniques that Plato describes in the dialogues themselves.

Plato warned against in book VII of the *Republic*, in which the experience of *aporia* begins to undermine our belief in the *thatness* of morality. In the language of chapter three, I argue that Nietzsche practiced an immensely lopsided spirituality from below, in which he pushed through the pain of the abyss with the power of his immense willpower and spiritual pride, and thereby came to experience the abyssal pleasure that can manifest on the other side of abyssal pain. I argue, however, that Nietzsche developed a craving for this abyssal pleasure, and that this craving prompted him to endure ever more immense degrees of pain in order to experience his so-called "Joyful Science." Following this, in section six, I engage with a common interpretation in which Nietzsche is read as elevating art above truth. I argue that it would be better to read the tension between art and truth as another example of the tension between spirituality from above and spirituality from below, but manifesting in Nietzsche's thought as a vicious circle in which the desire for truth (path downward) leads to the realization that we require the illusion of morality in order to live (path upward), but that an illusion that we know to be an illusion does not function in this life giving capacity. In section seven, I turn my attention to Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche's goal to recreate "all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'."[3] Against Rorty, I argue that we should see Nietzsche's project in terms of the attempt to desire the eternal recurrence of an irredeemably brutal reality. Finally, in section eight, I argue that Nietzsche himself was unable to live up to the demands of this impossible ideal, which actually gives rise to an oddly inverted version of the dilemma of mutilation, whereby we repress our desire to be good in order to live in accordance with the ontology of war.

1. The Virtue of *Aporia* in Plato's Early Dialogues

In *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, Kirkland argues that the purpose of Plato's early dialogues is to bring us into an experience of *aporia* or "waylessness," which Plato takes to be the highest human good. In these early dialogues, Socrates usually begins by eliciting some definition of virtue or goodness from his interlocutor. This initial definition is then followed by a dialectical *elenchus* or "refutation," in which the proposed definition is shown to be inconsistent with some other claims that the speaker has made. Through this process,

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[3] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 29.

Socrates and his interlocutor are led to the conscious recognition that they do not have knowledge of whatever they are talking about. This is the *aporia*, which Kirkland describes as a "condition of acknowledged non-knowing with respect to virtue."[4] In the face of this experience of *aporia*, Socrates usually suggests that they renew their search for the truth of virtue, motivated now by a newfound sense of distress at the painful distance between their present condition and the good to which they aspire: "[h]aving been made needful or made to suffer this non-possession, one would most properly live, think, and act in a wondering, questioning, searching mode, attending to this compelling non-presence in so doing."[5] In my language, this would be the movement from a complacent sense that we already know the *whatness* of the good, towards an emotionally difficult but existentially more honest state of "painful concern," or *meletē*, for the *thatness* of the good, a "compelling non-presence" that pulls us forward through its absence. On Kirkland's reading, Plato takes this painful concern for virtue within the *aporia* as equivalent to the highest human good, and the purpose of Socratic questioning would be to provoke and promote this existential state: "just as acknowledged non-knowing is human wisdom, suffering and needfulness in some way might be *Eudaimonia* or 'true happiness, flourishing' for human beings."[6]

According to Kirkland, most modern interpretations of Plato's philosophy misunderstand the experience of *aporia* in two opposing ways. First, there is a "constructivist" interpretation, whereby the dialectical acid that leads to the *aporia* is seen as a preliminary clearing away of false or problematic understandings of virtue, which opens up the space into which a true understanding can be taught. Constructivists, in other words, see Socrates as promoting a conversion from a false *whatness*, through a disorienting state of *aporia*, into the true and rational understanding of the *whatness* of virtue—as, presumably, it would already be understood by Socrates. When Rorty rejects Plato as a paradigmatic "metaphysician," a philosopher who has reified his own parochial understanding of virtue to the level of ersatz universal truth, he is taking issue with the Plato of this constructivist reading.[7] This constructivist reading is opposed

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[4] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 94.
[5] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 95.
[6] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 96.
[7] This constructivist paradigm also underlies the relationship between disenchantment and scientific progress as understood in naturalist culture: those wise and rational people who have successfully internalized the "true" *whatness* of the good—technological and scientific progress—must now struggle to dissolve all "false" understandings within the *aporia*, so as to clear a space in which the rational truth can be made manifest.

by the aptly named "non-constructivist" interpretation, whereby Socratic philosophy is presented "as purely destructive, as merely exposing the ignorance of common opinion about virtue, but providing no alternative to common opinion."[8] On this reading, Plato would be an ancient precursor to the modern proponents of disenchantment—as though the rational analysis of our concepts of virtue inevitably shows that all such understandings are ultimately irrational, subjective projections, trusted only by those unsophisticated bumpkins who, accepting the culturally inculcated taboo against rational thought, refuse to abandon the sheltering safety of their own traditional vision.

For Kirkland, both of these approaches stem from a tendency to impose a modern subject/object ontology onto ancient Greek philosophical thinking. Thus, the constructivist, noting that Plato is obviously not a moral relativist, concludes that Plato must therefore believe in some "objective" reality to which concepts like justice, virtue, and goodness correspond: as Kirkland puts it, "because of his overt anti-relativism, it is concluded that Socrates' 'What is virtue?' question asks after something that has the status of objective reality, be it material or immaterial."[9] Non-constructivists, meanwhile, see Socratic questioning as revealing the groundlessness of all visions of virtue, thereby thrusting us into an inescapable pit of Cartesian solipsism: we become "trapped on the subjective side of a subject-object gap, dealing only with opinions and succeeding only in marking the absence of that necessary connection to the objective reality of 'what virtue *is*.'"[10] According to Kirkland, neither of these approaches can "take Socrates at his word and see his ostensibly destructive, elenctic discussion of virtue as itself accomplishing the greatest good for human beings."[11] For the constructivists, the *aporia* is just the first stage of a larger project, only good insofar as it gives way to the true vision of the *whatness* of the good, after which the *aporia* would presumably cease to be necessary or even beneficial. As for the non-constructivists, they have a difficult time accounting for why the pit of an infinitely isolated subjectivity can be considered a "good" at all, and their overall vision of the *aporia* seems to resonate more with the torturous experiences of modern thinkers like Nietzsche than with the benign calm of Socrates.

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[8] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 11.
[9] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 13-4.
[10] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 20.
[11] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 20.

2. The Temptation of Pleasure within the *Aporia*

In *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning*, Kirkland spends most of his argument trying to undermine the constructivist interpretation of Plato, as this remains the orthodox approach to Plato in the English speaking world.[12] Kirkland criticizes this vision using the language of *technē*, which he defines as "the intellectual capacity for sheltering ourselves or for providing ourselves with a dwelling place secured against *the excessive*."[13] In my language, possessing a *technē* of virtue would mean possessing a confident vision of the *whatness* of virtue—which, in Kirkland's view, would mean living in a protected and somewhat inauthentic niche, away from the disturbing sense of distance entailed by an immediate awareness of the *aporia*.[14] Speaking this language of *technē*, Kirkland describes the three main points of his own interpretation as follows:

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[12] In *Questioning Platonism*, Drew Hyland makes another good argument for unsettling this orthodox reading of Plato. He argues that Plato's choice to write dialogues instead of treatises indicates that Plato's purpose in writing philosophy was *not* to "present clearly and persuasively his own philosophic views" (Hyland, 2). Instead, Hyland argues that the idea that Plato is writing his dialogues in order to convey his own vision of reality— "Plato's metaphysics," "Plato's epistemology," "Plato's moral theory," —is an imposition upon the dialogues of the prejudices of the last two centuries of Plato scholarship: "most, we might say almost all, of the Platonic scholarship of the last two centuries has proceeded on [the] … assumption" that "Plato obviously must have been attempting what most treatise writers obviously are attempting, the clear presentation of his own philosophic views" (Hyland, 2-3). By Hyland's account, however, the dialogues should not be read as though they were artistic vehicles for Plato to express his own philosophy. Instead, they should be read as "provocations" to philosophical thinking: "if we take the various positions presented in the dialogues, whether commonly held views, sophistic positions, Pythagorean or Parmenidean positions, as primarily *provocations* to the reader, then we would be led to conclude that Plato himself, by the testimony of what happens in the dialogues, never abandons the conviction of Socrates his teacher that philosophy is not fundamentally an assertive but an interrogative activity, that the fundamental speech act of philosophy is not the assertion but the *question*. In this case, the Platonic philosophy that one might find in the dialogues would be less a series of Platonic positions on this or that (as in 'Plato's metaphysics', 'Plato's moral theory', 'Plato's epistemology', etc.) than a presentation of *what the fundamental questions are*" (Hyland, 6). In other words, for both Hyland and Kirkland, the fundamental purpose of the philosophical dialogue is to *unsettle*. In my language, therefore, these thinkers would be viewing the practice of Platonic philosophy as a mode of the spirituality from below.

[13] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 75.

[14] To be clear, if Kirkland's interpretation is right, the constructivist interpretation is diametrically wrong, a total misunderstanding of Plato's project: far from trying to construct a perfect *technē* of virtue, Plato's project would involve trying to move us out of all such *technē*-like understandings. The constructivists, in other words, would be misinterpreting the place where the Socratic elenchus begins as the ideal towards which it is aimed, and then attributing to Plato the very kind of philosophical position that Kirkland thinks Plato is trying to render problematic! Richard Rorty's vision of Socrates provides a good example of this. According to Rorty, Socrates "was hoping for absolute certainty: for the ability to make unquestionably correct decisions once he had found the right definition of the term "pious"" (Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," in *The Rorty Reader*, 395). By Kirkland's argument, Plato is trying to do the exact opposite: to undermine our unreflective confidence in our own definitions of terms like "piety," and thereby expose us to the *aporia*, in which absolute certainty is replaced by a kind of painful but committed longing.

the condition that Socratic elenctic questioning brings about, which constitutes its truth and its supreme benefit, would seem to be: 1) An exposure to excess (as opposed to the sheltering and securing of *technē*), 2) An ultimately non-explanatory and non-teachable experience of the unfathomable depths of our appearing world (as opposed to *technē*'s flattened and all-manifesting plane of causal relations, which explains everything relevant and allows for straightforward *paideia* [education]), and 3) A questioning and distant relation, but a relation nonetheless, to the being of virtue (as opposed to the immediate and mastering grasp and direct proximity of *technē*).[15]

Besides functioning as a clear definition of Kirkland's view, these three points also make it easy to articulate how my own interpretation deviates from Kirkland's. In short, while I judge that Kirkland is correct to say that the elenchus exposes us to a terrific excess, to the "unfathomable depths of our appearing world" (points one and two), I would also argue that the elenchus *does not*, on its own, give rise to a "questioning and distant relation … to the being of virtue" (point three). Such a relation is, of course, the *desired* result; however, it is also possible to step through one's own particular understanding of the *whatness* of virtue and at the same time reject the mysterious *thatness* of virtue within which alone such a "questioning and distant relation" would make sense. To be clear, Kirkland himself would obviously accept what I have referred to as the *thatness* of virtue. My critique is that he does not give adequate attention to the danger that someone might enter the state of *aporia* without this commitment—in which case the catastrophic breakdown of our *technē*-like understanding of the *whatness* of the good would give rise to a dyscatastrophe, the corrupting potential inherent in dialectical thought that Plato describes at the end of book seven of the *Republic*, and which prompts Arendt to present "nihilism" is "a danger inherent to the thinking activity itself."[16] Thus, *pace* Kirkland, I will argue that the state of *aporia* alone does not secure a relation, even a "questioning and distant" one, to the human good. Instead, a relation to the human good results from entering the state of *aporia* while maintaining a passionate commitment to the *thatness* of the good. Entering the *aporia* without this commitment can easily result in the *worst* possible outcome—the corruption of a partially virtuous human being into a completely vicious one.

To be fair, Kirkland does mention the danger of the *aporia* several times in his work: that Socratic philosophizing "is essentially suspicious and, because of its disruptive character, even

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[15] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 87.
[16] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 177.

essentially dangerous"[17]; that, for Socrates, "every occurrence of human virtue … must be an occurrence of extreme courage for it entails holding out before the painful excess of the being of virtue"[18]; that "the excess to which one is exposed in the elenchus is that which one glimpses only in the crisis, in the disturbing breakdown of one's own presumed grasp, when that which one believed one had constrained, controlled, and possessed slips through one's fingers and escapes"[19]; that Socratic questioning provokes "a suffering of [virtue] as questionworthy that can only flare up in the moment of crisis in which one's own previously confident opinions are disrupted and exposed as inadequate."[20] However, despite these acknowledgments, Kirkland never seriously explores what might happen when those who lack "extreme courage" fail to hold out before "the painful excess of the being of virtue," nor does he explore the ways that Plato himself might strive to protect those who have not yet developed the necessary mettle from entering a spiritual crisis they cannot reasonably be expected to pass.

I will now argue that part of the reason Kirkland (largely) overlooks the dangers of the *aporia* is due to his characterization of the condition of *aporia* purely in terms of such unpleasant emotional states as "self-disturbance, self-interrogation, distress, and pain,"[21] the idea that "suffering pain and needfulness in some way might be *eudaimonia* or 'true happiness, flourishing' for human beings."[22] Basically, Kirkland's account of the *aporia* tends to focus on the tension between a painful exposure and a retreat back to the sheltering safety of *technē*, and remains silent about the opposite danger: that we will be swept away by the allure of abyssal pleasures, which are normally held safely in check by our confident adherence to our own culture's *technē*-like definitions of virtue and vice.

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[17] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 65.

[18] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, xxiv.

[19] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 114.

[20] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 109.

[21] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 108.

[22] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 96.

3. The Danger and Promise of Pleasure in Plato's Dialogues

In chapter one, I introduced Plato's descriptions of the dangers of philosophy, in which the realization of a gap between the way our culture represents reality and the way reality actually *is* gives rise to a dangerous existential state: a state in which we lose trust in the training we received from our traditional culture, and thereby lose the capacity to control the lawless desires that such unthinking adherence usually serves to contain. Socrates uses the metaphor of parenthood to describe the transition into philosophy from this initial state of cultural imbrication. First likening our relationship to traditional culture as akin to a child being raised by adoptive parents, Socrates then presents our initiation into the catastrophe of dialectic as akin to this child realizing that "he isn't the child of his professed parents and that he can't discover his real ones."[23] According to the inverse theodicy of disenchantment, this realization would be the end of the story, a simple movement from the particularity of culturally imbued falsehood into the universal truth of a disenchanted worldview. I have argued that Plato's approach to this realization is better characterized as a catastrophe (literally a "turning down"), which can lead to two possible outcomes: the eucatastrophe of a genuine search for the good, or else the dyscatastrophe of a descent into lawlessness and vice.

Kirkland uses the Platonic term *aporia* to refer to this catastrophe of dialectic, and when he considers the danger of this experience, he focuses mostly on the possibility that we will retreat back into the shelter of a *technē*-like understanding. In my language, such a person would be hiding the catastrophic *aporia* behind a newly steeled vision of the *whatness* of the good— potentially leading to a lopsided spirituality from above, a moral fanaticism that eschews the disquieting rigors of dialectical thought. In the *Republic*, however, Socrates also describes the opposite kind of error, whereby this loss of confidence in our own enculturation leaves us vulnerable to "flatterers" who try to entice us into "ways of living … full of pleasures."[24] This is similar to the moral predicament I described in chapter three through the lens of the first and second temptations of Christ. Basically, after we have committed to the authority of the tradition

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[23] Plato, *Republic*, 538a.
[24] Plato, *Republic*, 538d.

and thereby gained the power to repress our lawless desires (first temptation; spirituality from above), the realization that the traditional authority is ambiguous (second temptation; spirituality from below) might lead to two possible spiritual errors. On the one hand, we might refuse to engage with the ambiguity, instead retreating back into a fixed and univocal interpretation of the traditional authority—which would give rise to a lop-sided spirituality from above now floating over a terrifying abyss. This is the error that Kirkland highlights when he describes "*technē*'s flattened and all-manifesting plane of causal relations, which explains everything relevant and allows for straightforward *paideia* [education]," in comparison to a "questioning and distant relation, but a relation nonetheless, to the being of virtue."[25] On the other hand, however, we might also interpret the ambiguity of the tradition as an indication that it is actually useless as a guide to conduct, in which case exposure to the predicament of the second temptation might strip us of our capacity to resist or redirect those same lawless desires that we had previously contained. This would be the danger of a lop-sided spirituality from below, in which the path that leads to a deeper awareness of ambiguity serves to undermine our belief in, and commitment to, morality. The inverse theodicy of disenchantment would be a positive spin on this possibility, whereby a universal loss of spiritual discipline is seen as culminating in a peaceful and prosperous world, in which everyone guiltlessly commits to peaceful "ways of living … full of pleasures."[26] As we saw in chapter two, this is one of the ways that Russell defends his doctrine of the subjectivity of values: that this vision of morality will help us get rid of "the notion of 'sin'."[27] According to Socrates, however, this loss of belief in the traditional authority invites a potentially disastrous descent into spiritual (and possibly even political) tyranny.

Given this danger, Socrates proposes a number of precautions to help mitigate it. For example, in the *Republic*, he suggests that philosophy should not be introduced to young people too soon: "one lasting precaution is not to let [people] taste arguments while they're young," because "when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who've refuted them by refuting others themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing around them with their arguments."[28] Socrates therefore suggests that young people should only be introduced to the practice of dialectic when

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[25] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 87.
[26] Plato, *Republic*, 538d.
[27] Russell, *Religion and Science*, 252.
[28] Plato, *Republic*, 539a-b.

they are thirty, as the culmination of a lifetime devoted to study.[29] Socrates also recommends that those who "take part in arguments should be orderly and steady by nature."[30] Plato expands upon this point in his own voice in the autobiographical *Seventh Letter*, where he notes that those who cultivate licentious practices— "a life filled with Italian and Syracusan banquets, with men gorging themselves twice a day and never sleeping alone at night"[31] —cannot possibly grow up to be wise. Plato therefore stipulates that the precondition for receiving advanced philosophical instruction is that a person must first commit to "philosophy and to the daily discipline that best makes him apt at learning and remembering, and capable of reasoning soberly with himself."[32] This claim, that philosophical instruction should only be given to those who are cultivating a calm morality in their daily lives, is in line with the curriculum of spiritual religion that I described in chapter three: that it is not safe to enter the fluid realms of the spirituality from below (the *aporia*) unless one has already been training in a stable spirituality from above.[33]

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[29] Plato, *Republic*, 537d.

[30] Plato, *Republic*, 539d.

[31] Plato, *Letter VII*, 326c.

[32] Plato, *Letter VII*, 340d.

[33] My interest in Plato's discussion of spiritual practices oriented towards developing self-control in the face of pleasure derives partly from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation—a mode of the practice of the spirituality from below, to be engaged in only *after* we have committed to a life of moral purity. In this tradition of spiritual practice, the danger of abyssal pleasure is well understood. Consider the following passage from one of the chief disciples of Sunlun Sayadaw, a Burmese meditation teacher: "Unpleasant sensation is an efficacious object of meditation which takes the yogi steadily up the path to the attainment of the final goal. The very fact that the yogi does not normally like unpleasant sensation can be employed by him to establish a deeper and more intense mindfulness. Made to work with an object he does not like, he will remember to arouse the necessary zeal to overcome the unpleasant sensation. It is different with pleasant sensation. Because he likes it, he will tend to sink in it, to suffuse himself with its pleasantness without trying to be mindful of it. When he does that, the greed and lust that are latent in pleasant sensation will overwhelm him. … It is as though a swimmer in a strong current were asked to grasp the bunch of flowers at the winning post. If he were swimming with the current and stretched out his hand to grasp the flowers and missed, he would be carried beyond the point by the force of the current. If he were swimming against the current and missed when he stretched out his hand to grasp the flowers, he would still be below them and thus have an opportunity to try again consciously and deliberately. The swimmer with the current is like the yogi who employs pleasant sensation. If he is unable to be mindful of pleasant sensation he will be carried beyond by clinging to it. The swimmer against the current is like the yogi who employs unpleasant sensation. If he is unable to be mindful of unpleasant sensation as it is in itself, he will still be conscious of it and will be able to summon up the energy and mindfulness to accomplish his mission" (Kornfield, *Living Dharma*, 98). Vipassana meditation teacher S. N. Goenka also mentions the twin danger of aversion to pain and craving for pleasure, both of which must be overcome on the path to enlightenment: "Whenever there is a pleasant thought, you react with craving, craving, craving. And whenever there is an unpleasant thought you react with aversion, aversion, aversion …Whenever you generate *rāga*, craving, you lose the balance of your mind. Whenever you generate *dveṣha*, aversion, you lose the balance of your mind, you are no longer equanimous. There is no equilibrium of the mind, there is no equipoise of the mind. When you become unbalanced, you become agitated and you become miserable. So the cause of misery becomes clearer and clearer. The root of all the defilements is *rāga* and *dveṣha*. And whenever you generate any defilement in the mind, every moment it is with *rāga* or *dveṣha*, *rāga* or *dveṣha*." (Goenka, *The Gracious Flow of Dharma*, 53). The point is that, in this Buddhist practice of the spirituality from

The question of the danger of pleasure and necessity of training to help alleviate it also comes up in the opening book of Plato's *Laws*. Thus after the Spartan Megillus describes how Spartan youth are trained to endure tremendous amounts of physical pain, the Athenian asks whether the virtue of courage also entails a capacity to resist pleasure: "[a]re we to define [courage] simply in terms of a fight against fears and pains only, or do we include desires and pleasures, which cajole and seduce us so effectively?"[34] Indeed, in response to this, the Cretan Clinias notes that we apply "[t]he term bad … to the victim of pleasures even more than to the [victim of pain]," and that "[w]hen we say that a man has been shamefully 'conquered by' himself, we are all … much more likely to mean someone defeated by pleasures than by pains."[35] The Athenian then suggests that a proper education in virtue should involve the cultivation of a capacity to be "courageous in face of pains and pleasures alike."[36] As it turns out, however, the educational institutions of neither Sparta nor Crete contain practices designed to counteract the danger of pleasure. The Athenian takes this as a prompt to discuss what kind of institutions *could* be developed to help inculcate such a capacity. Noting first that the laws of Crete enjoin Cretans "to keep away from the most attractive entertainments and pleasures, and to refrain from tasting them," he then points out that the exact opposite strategy is employed when trying to inculcate a capacity to resist pain: "when it came to pains and fears, your legislator reckoned that if a man ran away from them on every occasion from his earliest years and was then faced with hardships, pains and fears he could not avoid, he would likewise run away from any enemies who *had* received such a training, and become their slaves."[37] The point is that a city that does not train its members to withstand pain would be unable to fight effectively in war. As it turns out, however, the same is true of a city that does not train its members to withstand the temptation of pleasure:

> [i]f our citizens grow up without any experience of the keenest pleasures, and if they are not trained to stand firm when they encounter them, … their fondness for pleasure will bring them to the same bad end as those who capitulate to fear. Their slavery will be of a different kind, but it will be more humiliating: they will become the slaves of those who are able to stand firm against the onslaughts of

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below, pain *and* pleasure are understood as twin difficulties—and that pain is often seen as the *easier* of the two difficulties to work with.

[34] Plato, *Laws*, 633d.
[35] Plato, *Laws*, 633e.
[36] Plato, *Laws*, 634b.
[37] Plato, *Laws*, 635b-c.

pleasure and who are past-masters in the art of temptation—utter scoundrels, sometimes.[38]

I will take up this point again in chapter six, as part of an attempt to describe how the Socratic moral thesis might apply in everyday life, when our primary temptation to act unjustly will not be the threat of death so much as the temptation of pleasure. In the *Laws*, the Athenian suggests that the legislator should employ the same technique for pleasure that was employed for pain, by organizing state-run drinking parties that would train the young in how to remain self-controlled in the face of the temptation to act shamelessly. Thus, just as a person "has to fight and conquer his feelings of cowardice before he can achieve perfect courage," so too will we only develop the capacity for self-control if we have "fought and conquered, … the crowd of pleasures and desires that stimulate [us] to act shamelessly and unjustly."[39]

Finally, in addition to these discussions concerning the danger of pleasure—as it manifests in the *aporia* and as it manifests in politics—Plato also presents pleasure as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes a spiritual practice that could be characterized as an extreme version of the spirituality of courtly love. In short, Socrates recommends that we sit directly in the presence of our beloved, whom we desire with a passionate sexual longing, but we yet refuse to allow this passion to rule us. Unlike the medieval knight, however, who might long for his lady but who is also prevented by social and political taboos from carrying this desire through at the level of physical action, the spiritual practice described by Socrates involves longing for a person who is directly within our physical grasp, and yet resisting this longing with the power of our temperance and our greater love for the good. According to Socrates' account, this practice gives rise to an intense physiological experience:

> [W]hen he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him …. Meanwhile, the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, … as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings). Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching—that is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings. It swells up and aches and tingles as it grows them. But when it looks upon the beauty of the boy and takes in the stream of particles

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[38] Plato, *Laws*, 635c-d
[39] Plato, *Laws*, 647d.

> flowing into it from his beauty … when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy.[40]

The "wings" to which Socrates refers are those that a soul had prior to its descent into the material world. However, now that our soul is attached to a body, these wings will only grow back if they are nourished on "beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort," and will "shrink and disappear" when exposed to "foulness and ugliness."[41] This points to the great danger of this spiritual practice: that the process through which our wings grow back also invites the opposite possibility, that we will yield to a temptation that can cause our wings to shrivel. Indeed, Socrates himself points out that when someone "who has become defiled" is placed in the presence of this experience of beauty, "instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame."[42] Thus, although we are working here with an almost entirely alien understanding of "philosophy" than that implied by dialectical conversation, here too we can see that exposure to "philosophy" can be of great benefit to those who are ready for it, but it can be spiritually dangerous for those who are not. In this case, of course, the danger is not that we will erode our capacity to believe in the distinction between noble and base through intemperate dialectical discussions, but that we will expose ourselves to a degree of physical temptation that we are as yet unable to withstand. That being said, however, the same logic that appears in the *aporia* of dialectic appears here as well: by exposing ourselves to an experience that might lead us into becoming tyrants, and by consistently resisting the temptation of such a life, we are brought back into contact with a divine reality that we forgot when, as Socrates puts it, our spirits descended into the physical world.

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[40] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251c-d.
[41] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246e.
[42] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e.

4. Kirkland's Plato and the Spiritual Curriculum of Neoplatonism

In the previous section, I described some of the spiritual techniques that Plato recommends, at various points in his dialogues, to help us deal with the danger of pleasure that can manifest in the *aporia*. In this final section, I will consider how Kirkland's interpretation might transform if he gave more weight to this danger. In fact, I will argue that, if Kirkland were to alter his interpretation in response to this danger, he would end up recapitulating the very Neoplatonic spiritual curriculum I introduced in chapter three, whereby the practice of sober morality, softened by the experience of *aporia*, progresses downward into the mysteries associated with words like "metaphysics."

Again, as we saw in sections one and two, Kirkland presents the state of *aporia* as itself equivalent to the virtue that Plato is aiming at: that "the condition of acknowledged non-knowing with respect to virtue *is itself this pain, this distress Socrates calls for*, and this pain is nothing other than suffering the being of virtue *as not known* or *questionworthy*."[43] For the most part, Kirkland frames this novel description of *aporia* against the orthodox constructivist interpretation of Plato. For example, he insists that the *aporia* is not "a necessary cleansing that would then be surpassed by epistemological gains," but is rather "the abiding end-result and … in a sense the aim of the central elenctic activity of Socratic philosophizing."[44] According to the constructivist vision, the goal of philosophy would be to replace the false spiritual dogmas of our traditional culture with a new set of true philosophical dogmas. According to Kirkland, by contrast, philosophy would be better understood as a practice that leads us out into the void and teaches us to abide there without losing ourselves, through the cultivation of what Kirkland describes as "something like a *meta-serenity*, which would reside only within and on the basis of constant self-disturbance, self-interrogation, distress, and pain."[45]

I have argued that Kirkland's position is essentially correct, but that he has a tendency to underestimate the dangers involved in the experience of the *aporia*. From now, I will describe

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[43] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 94; italics in original.
[44] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 100.
[45] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 108.

two such dangers: first, Kirkland takes for granted that those who enter the *aporia* will be concerned for virtue; second, he does not sufficiently appreciate the danger of pleasure in the *aporia*, which can surprise those who are not ready for it and sweep its victims along into spiritual tyranny. I will argue that both of these limitations stem from Kirkland's emphasis on everyday life as the starting point of philosophy.

Let us first consider the danger that we will experience the *aporia* as destructive to our concern for virtue. Kirkland addresses this by observing, correctly, that "concerned relation to the being of virtue must *already* characterize the everyday attitude …, even if in a deficient mode."[46] He makes this point in order to emphasize that the state of "*meletē* or 'being concerned' cannot be *generated* either in oneself or in others by argument or persuasive discourse,"[47] but must rather be presupposed. In this way, the Socratic elenchus would amount to a way of bringing "this concerned condition to light, intensifying it, making it painfully palpable and undeniably distressing."[48] As a phenomenological observation, this is entirely true: people *are* concerned with virtue in their everyday life. However, for those whose intellectual commitments make it seem as though the ontology of war is true, the elenchus will appear not as an exposure to the depths of the hidden reality of virtue, but rather as the intellectual destruction of this initial state of concern. I have argued that naturalists will be particularly prone to this danger, insofar as the naturalist understanding of the hidden reality of virtue is already given as the ontology of war. The purpose of the inverse theodicy, meanwhile, would be to protect the naturalist's everyday concern for virtue, as expressed in a *technē*-like understanding of the good, from the acid of this underlying ontological commitment. In the second half of this chapter, I will interpret Nietzsche along these lines, as an example of someone who entered the *aporia* without a belief in the *thatness* of the good, and who therefore experienced it as entirely destructive to his everyday concern for the being of virtue.

Concerning the second problem—Kirkland's tendency to overlook the danger of abyssal pleasure—this also seems to derive from his tendency to frame the *aporia* against the experience of everyday life. As I argued in chapter three, our initial movements into the spirituality from below from everyday life will almost always be experienced as painful, because the softening of

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[46] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 110.
[47] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 110-11
[48] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 111.

the ego allows repressed negative desires to percolate up to the surface of the mind. As such, if Kirkland is right to characterize philosophy as a movement from stable contentment into *aporia*, then it makes sense why the initial exhortation to the philosophical life involves inspiring us to endure a "painfully palpable and undeniably distressing"[49] state of openness. However, if we successfully endure this state of abyssal pain, the experience of *aporia* will eventually switch valences, manifesting no longer as a painful exposure but rather as a seductive allure, and the danger of *aporia* will therefore no longer manifest as running away from a painful excess, but rather as being swept away by uncontrolled desire. Now, to be clear, my claim is not that our experience of the *aporia* manifests as a simple progression from abyssal pain to abyssal pleasure. Instead, the experience will manifest as sometimes painful, sometimes pleasant, depending on whatever emotional energy happens to be coming up at any given time. However, our *initial* experience of the path downward will almost always manifest as painful, because the most salient desires are usually those dark desires that we have been obliged to repress in order to adhere to the moral strictures of our culture—or, more generally, in order to live peacefully with others. This, I would argue, is the aspect of the experience of *aporia* that Kirkland focuses on. However, if we sit within this painful experience long enough, and if we allow enough of the dark energy of our shadow-self to dissipate, our experience of the abyss can switch valences— from a pain that we must endure to a *pleasure* that we must resist. In this sense, therefore, we might say that Kirkland's position focuses mainly on the relationship between everyday life and the surface of the *aporia*, while my critique would be focusing on the relationship between the surface of the *aporia* and its depths, or at least the beginning of our journey into its depths.

With a greater awareness of this latter danger, it seems that Kirkland's largely negative view of the *technē*-like understanding of the good would also take on a more ambivalent coloring. For the most part, again, Kirkland presents the stability of such understandings as an inauthentic shield from the true good of the *aporia*, to which we retreat because we cannot endure the pain of true concern for virtue; however, on my account, the *technē*-like understanding also protects us from the danger of abyssal pleasure, which might overwhelm our self-control and sweep us away into spiritual tyranny. Thus, to put it in my terms, a *technē*-like understanding only becomes malignant to the extent that it gets cut off from the experience of *aporia*, in which case

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[49] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 111.

it becomes a lop-sided spirituality from above. However, the experience of *aporia* itself is also dangerous, and can transform into a lopsided spirituality from below unless it is balanced by the stability provided by a *technē*-like understanding of the good. To use Kirkland's language, an over-exposure to the excess can be just as unhealthy as no exposure at all, and the dance of the philosophical life would therefore involve a disciplined movement back and forth across the limit of our *technē*-like understanding, as a way of making the sense of self-identity that resides safely within the contours of this understanding more porous to its beyond.

Finally, in light of these arguments, I would argue that Kirkland's approach to Plato should develop along the lines of the triplex division of human spiritual life that I discussed in chapter three, whereby the path upwards of *Proverbs*, complemented by the path downward of *Ecclesiastes*, gives rise to insight into the ontological love of the *Song of Songs*. Put more provocatively, this means that Kirkland's approach would develop into a recapitulation of the spiritual itinerary of Neoplatonism—not *qua* intellectual assent to a body of cumbersome metaphysical dogmas, but rather as assent to a spiritual practice that begins with moral training (ethics) and only then progresses into the *aporia* (physics), within which insight into those odd realms of experience described by the word "metaphysics" might begin to manifest. This, finally, would be the realm of experience I have been referring to with the term "ontology of mystery," as a way of hearkening not only towards the "excess" that Kirkland sets in opposition to "the sheltering and securing of *technē*,"[50] but also towards one particular way of understanding that "excess": when our "concerned relation to the being of virtue"[51] survives our descent into the abyss, and our vision of the *whatness* of the good is temporarily exposed to its *thatness*.

5. Nietzsche's Practice of the Spirituality from Below

In the previous four sections, I showed how Kirkland's interpretation of Plato fits neatly into the curriculum of spiritual religion I introduced in chapter three. Again, for Kirkland, the dialectic is not presented as leading to some true vision of the *whatness* of the good, but rather to the breakdown of all such understandings into a trackless *aporia*. Kirkland characterizes this

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[50] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 87.
[51] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 110.

exposure to *aporia* as equivalent to the highest human good. Against this, I have argued that the human good should rather be seen as exposure to the *aporia* combined with a steadfast commitment to the *thatness* of the good. To be clear, this is more or less what Kirkland actually recommends. In this context, therefore, my critique is simply that Kirkland has not given sufficient weight to the possibility that someone could experience the *aporia* as an acid that dissolves not only their belief in the *whatness* of morality, but also their belief in its *thatness*.

In the second half of this chapter, I will present Nietzsche as a paradigmatic example of this danger.[52] More precisely, I will argue that Nietzsche should be read as a practitioner of the spirituality from below, oriented towards self-knowledge, but that he commits three serious spiritual errors in his engagement with these unsettling realms of experience: first, he enters the dizzying experience of *aporia* without a firm belief in the *thatness* of the good, which undermines his belief in morality *as such*; second, he develops a craving for the experience of abyssal pleasure that can occur on the other side of the experience of abyssal pain; and finally, his capacity to endure the experience of the abyss, which is supposed to soften the ego and promote humility, is fueled by his immense sense of spiritual pride and superiority over others.

Nietzsche's first spiritual error consists in an extreme version of the vicious circle I described in chapter three. In short, he ventures into the abyss of *Ecclesiastes* on the basis of a firm

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[52] In his essay "With the 'Nightwatchman of Greek Philosophy': Nietzsche's Way to Cynicism" (in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language, and Politics*, 117-132), Horst Hutter comes close to my interpretation. Like me, Hutter reads Nietzsche as practicing an ancient spiritual discipline, but practicing it incorrectly. Thus, reading Nietzsche through the lens of Pierre Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life, Hutter makes a distinction between ancient "Kynism" and modern "Cynicism": "The Kynic is the prototype of the philosopher who rejects all established morality, refuses to feel ashamed of his animality, even sees in animality as well as in childhood a higher form of existence … Moreover, the Kynic does not merely teach the transvaluation to others but assumes it as a lived maxim in the practical conduct of his life" (Hutter, 121). However, Hutter argues that Nietzsche's Kynic practice is corrupted by an inability to see through the "cynicism" of the culture in which he lives: "… much of Nietzsche's attack on modern culture is afflicted by the terrible ambiguity of being both kynic and cynical. Indeed, … Nietzsche does not fully achieve a kynic position but remains partially caught in the stance of modern cynicism. … [H]e remains caught within the ethos of a culture based on domination and exploitation which he translated back, as ineffable constituents, into the nature of things. Hence his kynic return to fundamentals ultimately remains tied to a cynical denial of the liberating potential contained in his philosophy. … Before his philosophy can become therapy, either personally or politically, the cynical elements have to be disengaged from the kynic elements" (Hutter, 124). What Hutter refers to here as the "cynical elements" of Nietzsche's thought, I would refer to as the ontology of war. As for "the kynic elements," these would be the idea of a concerted spiritual practice to delve beneath the moral façade of self and culture, which I referred to with the term "spirituality from below" in chapter three. Thus, in my view, the proper response to what Hutter refers to as "the spiritual disorder presently afflicting large portions of humankind" would be a twofold practice of the spirituality from above and below (Hutter's Kynism), but on the basis of a rejection of the ontology of war (cynicism), and with an aim to slowly rooting out the places where cynicism has infected our emotional response to the world.

intellectual belief in the ontology of war, he so ends up undermining his belief in the stabilizing spirituality of *Proverbs*; this, in turn, increases the emotional tumult he uncovers when he ventures into the abyss—thus reaffirming his initial belief in the ontology of war.[53] However, unlike those naturalists who accept this as an intellectual position while defending themselves against its dangerous moral implications by means of various intellectual fudges and philosophical rationalizations, Nietzsche actively impales himself on one horn of the dilemma. In short, he tries to uproot not just his moral concepts, but more importantly, his moral *feelings* from the depths of his mind. Thus, in the same way as someone who has been raised to feel that sex before marriage is sinful might reach the conclusion, conceptually, that this belief is an error, and yet still find themselves bound by the *feeling* that such actions are sinful, Nietzsche concludes, conceptually, that his own Christian morality is pathological nonsense—and then, on the basis of this conclusion, he commits to the practice of uprooting all traces of this morality from the way he experiences reality.[54] In effect, Nietzsche is deploying the spirituality of *Ecclesiastes* to destroy the spirituality of *Proverbs*, and then arguing that the spiritual consequences of this practice should be taken as unprecedented insights into the truth of our human condition.

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[53] Nietzsche rejects any connection between philosophy and virtue in several places in his work. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Will to Power*: "I find nothing more repugnant than didactic praise of philosophy, as one finds it in Seneca, or worse, Cicero. Philosophy has little to do with virtue." (WP 420, Kaufmann; quoted in Heidegger, "Nietzsche as Metaphysician," in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 105). From my perspective, Nietzsche experiences reality as horrible because he is entering the abyss without the necessary training in virtue, and this practice then vindicates his conclusion that philosophy (which reveals the true horror of existence) has little to do with virtue (which hides this horror behind the illusion of moral goodness).

[54] In the introduction to *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*, Christopher Janaway and Simon Robertson describe two potential ways to understand Nietzsche's critique of normativity: "At an *evaluative* level, [Nietzsche] calls into question the value of morality—the value of those values, norms, and ideals we have inherited from Christianity but which remain dominant today despite our increasingly secular modern culture—on grounds that morality is inimical to realizing the highest forms of human flourishing and excellence. This is supplemented, secondly, by a challenge to the *foundational* or metanormative presuppositions that continue to hold morality in place, presuppositions that undergird morality's claims to objectivity and truth, and , in particular, the assumption that morality represents an authoritative and hence non-optional normative-evaluative standpoint" (Janaway and Robertson, 2). The question is—is Nietzsche criticizing the particularity of Christian morality, or is he criticizing morality *as such*; and if he is criticizing morality *as such*, what can he possibly mean by his famous call for a revaluation of values? Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick's essay, "Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity: The Development of Nietzsche's Metaethics" (in *Nietzsche and Morality*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007; 192-226) provides a good example of an interpretation whereby Nietzsche rejects Christian morality in favor of his own vision of morality, which he takes to be "objectively" true. In *Nietzsche and Morality*, by contrast, Brian Leiter argues that Nietzsche rejects both Christian morality *and* the idea that any system of morality can be grounded in "objective" reality (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, New York: Routledge, 2014; see esp. 118-126). On this issue, my reading is similar to Leiter's, and the tension of Nietzsche's position involves the realization that, even as morality is ontologically groundless, it is also necessary for healthy life.

As is perhaps already clear, Nietzsche's project is not some scholarly attempt to reconceive the history of human moral sentiment from the perspective of a philosophical naturalism. Nietzsche's project involves the attempt to uproot the effects of this history from the way he responds emotionally to the world—and this project causes him intense emotional torment. Indeed, he describes his practice of philosophy as a protracted war with his own heart, with philosophers (like him) as those who possess a "cruelty which knows how to wield the knife with certainty and deftness even when the heart bleeds."[55] As it turns out, following Nietzsche's famous moral theories in a "hot and living" way will exact a heavy emotional price:

> a theory of the mutual dependence of the 'good' and the 'wicked' impulses causes, as a more refined immorality, revulsion to a conscience still strong and hearty—and even more a theory of the derivation of all good impulses from wicked ones. Supposing, however, that someone goes so far as to regard the emotions of hatred, envy, covetousness, and lust for domination as life-conditioning emotions, as something which must fundamentally and essentially be present in the total economy of life, consequently must be heightened further if life is to be heightened further—he suffers from such a judgement as from seasickness.[56]

Nietzsche continues by describing these feelings of "revulsion" and "seasickness" as themselves but preliminary foretastes, "far from … the strangest and most painful in this tremendous, still almost unexplored realm of dangerous knowledge." However, despite the pain this practice of philosophy inflicts on his moral conscience, Nietzsche presses forward, goaded as he is by the allure of "dangerous knowledge":

> [I]f your ship *has* been driven into these seas, very well! Now clench your teeth! Keep your eyes open! Keep a firm hand on the helm! —We sail straight over morality and *past* it, we flatten, we crush perhaps what is left of our own morality by venturing to voyage thither—but what do *we* matter! Never yet has a *deeper* world of insight revealed itself to daring travelers and adventurers....[57]

With this, we can see the stark difference between Nietzsche's practice of the spirituality from below and the practices we examined in chapter three: within the curriculum of spiritual religion, the path downward would involve only temporarily bracketing our sense of honor and shame in order to acknowledge, and then safely release, the repressed negativity that tends to collect beneath such concepts; in contrast to this, Nietzsche's goal is to "flatten," to "crush" his moral

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[55] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990), §210, p. 141.
[56] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §23, p. 53-4.
[57] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §23, p. 53-4.

conscience in order to gain access to a "*deeper* world of insight." Both, in other words, begin from the same problem: an inauthentic morality, a lop-sided spirituality from above, a hypocritical cut between the moral surface and the repressed emotional reality. However, from this common problem they proceed in diametrically opposed directions: for Nietzsche, the spirituality from below would reveal the hidden truth concerning the illusory nature of morality, such that the practice of morality and the quest for honest self-knowledge come to appear as diametrically opposed; for spiritual religion, by contrast, the dichotomous opposition between morality and self-knowledge would be a pathological but logical consequence of a lopsided approach to moral life, which is to be *corrected* by the very kind of practice in which Nietzsche is engaged.[58]

If Nietzsche's first spiritual error is to engage too deeply in the spirituality from below from the perspective of the ontology of war, his second spiritual error is related to the danger we examined in the first half of this chapter, in which our capacity to endure the pain of *aporia* is not balanced by an equivalent capacity to endure its pleasure. In Nietzsche's case, of course, it is not the pleasure of illicit sex that befuddles him, but rather the subtle pleasure of the profound insights that sometimes manifest on the other side of the moral torture to which he submits himself:

> [A]fter we have long been on our way in this manner, we argonauts of the ideal, with more daring perhaps than is prudent, and having suffered shipwreck and damage often enough, but are, to repeat it, healthier than one likes to permit us, dangerously healthy, ever again healthy—it will seem to us as if, as a reward, we are now confronting as yet undiscovered country whose boundaries nobody has surveyed yet, something beyond all the lands and nooks of the ideal so far, a world so overrich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine

[58] For interpretations of Nietzsche from the perspective of spiritual practice, see Horst Hutter's *Shaping the Future: Nietzsche's New Regime of the Soul and Its Ascetic Practices*; see also a collection of essays edited by Hutter and Eli Friedland, *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*. Michael Ure's essay "Nietzsche's 'View from Above'" (117-140), from *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*, is particularly relevant to my reading, as Ure describes two opposing interpretations of the joy that comes from this "view from above," which I have referred to as the "view from infinity": "[Nietzsche's] conception of the 'view from above' wavers between Stoicism's untroubled, serene spectatorship based on the judgment that nature's 'cruelty' is a necessary or fated part of the whole, and the Olympian view of suffering as a delightful, entertaining spectacle. From the heights of Olympus, the gods enjoy the spectacle of human strife and suffering; from their cosmic view from above, Stoics conceive nature as a rational whole that justifies its parts. … these two variations of the ancient trope of the view from above, the Olympian and the Stoic are woven into the fabric of Nietzsche's philosophical 'naturalism'" (Ure, 126).

that our curiousity as well as our craving to possess it has got beside itself—alas, now nothing will sate us any more![59]

Essentially, having realized that "[o]nly great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit,"[60] Nietzsche commits to enduring ever greater degrees of pain for the sake of experiencing the delight of exploring this "beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine" world that he thinks he is the first person in history to behold.

Finally, as a third spiritual error, Nietzsche's capacity to endure this "great pain" is fueled by pride. Thus, against the "tyranny of pain," an experience of "desert, exhaustion, disbelief, icing up in the midst of youth," Nietzsche pits "the tyranny of pride that refused the *conclusions* of pain"[61]; against the spirit's "weakness or repentance or resignation or hardening or gloom," he posits "the *pride* of the spirit" that burgeons up on his so-called "healthy days."[62] This attempt to descend into the underworld on the basis of one's own strength is extremely dangerous.[63] One of the desert fathers puts it perfectly: "If you see a young monk by his own will climbing up into heaven, take him by the foot and throw him to the ground, because what he is doing is not good for him."[64] In effect, I argue that Nietzsche should be understood as engaging in the same realms of spirituality as the desert fathers—and that he possesses an immense willpower, which enables him to venture deeply into these realms of experience. However, pitting "the tyranny of pride" or "'the *pride* of the spirit" against the infinite abyss is ultimately a foolhardy endeavor. Again, in the curriculum of spiritual religion, the purpose of engaging with the abyss is humility, to soften

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[59] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §382, p. 346.

[60] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 36.

[61] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 32.

[62] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 34.

[63] In a speech on the relationship between Nietzsche's philosophy and the Second World War, Thomas Mann provides a similar description of Nietzsche's spiritual practice: "[Nietzsche] paid tribute to suffering as none other. 'It determines the *order of rank*', he says, 'how deeply a man can suffer'. Those are not the words of an anti-moralist. Nor is there a trace of anti-moralism in it when he writes: 'As far as torture and renunciation are concerned, the life of my last years can measure up to that of any ascetic at any time'. For he does not write this in search of compassion, but rather with pride: 'I *want*', he says, 'to have it as hard as any man can possibly have it'. He made things hard for himself, hard up to sanctity, for Schopenhauer's saint ultimately always remained the highest type for him, and the 'heroic life', that is the life of the saint. What defines the saint? That he does not one of all the things he would like to do, and all the things he does not like to do" (Mann, "Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Light of Contemporary Events," 365-366). On my reading, Nietzsche's tremendous capacity to confront pain was not balanced by an equal capacity to endure pleasure, and pitting one's own pride against the trials of the abyss is a dangerously incorrect mode of practice.

[64] Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, §LXII, p. 47; Nietzsche himself gives an interesting comment on the desert fathers in *Daybreak*: "in that age in which Christianity proved most fruitful in saints and desert solitaries, and thought it was proving itself by this fruitfulness, there were in Jerusalem vast madhouses for abortive saints, for those who had surrendered to it their last grain of salt" (Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §14, p. 16)

our pride. Nietzsche, however, ends up taking pride in his strength of will to endure the pain of the abyss, out of craving for the "beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine" world that he was sometimes able to glimpse on the other side of his pain.

Concerning these latter two spiritual errors—the spiritual error involved in craving abyssal pleasure, and the spiritual error involved in pushing through abyssal pain on the basis of pride in one's own strength—I will consider them again more thoroughly in section eight. Before this, however, I will spend the following two sections exploring the tensions that emerge from Nietzsche's pursuit of self-knowledge under the aegis of the ontology of war.

6. The Relationship between Art and Truth in Nietzsche's Thought

In the previous section, I described Nietzsche as committing three errors in his practice of the spirituality from below: first, he lacks belief in the *thatness* of the good; second, he develops a craving for abyssal pleasure; and third, his capacity to endure abyssal pain is fueled by a sense of pride and superiority. However, this interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophical practice stands in tension with another common interpretation, whereby Nietzsche is understood as an exemplar of self-creation. According to Rorty, for example, Nietzsche's revolutionary insight involved elevating art and poetry above truth, replacing the search for knowledge with an individual project of self-creation: "[Nietzsche] did not give up the idea that an individual might track home the blind impress all his behavings bore. He only rejected that this tracking was a process of self-discovery. In his view, in achieving this sort of self-knowledge we are not coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time. Rather, he saw self-knowledge as self-creation."[65] Thomas Nagel makes a similar point in his *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*: "What is distinctive about Nietzsche is that he turns a genealogical self-understanding, based on both biology and history, into a highly individual project of self-

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[65] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 27.

creation"[66]; that "Nietzsche's conception of his own task, the task of a true philosopher" was that it is not sufficient "merely to understand the world or to change it," but that philosophers must "create something new" —and for Nietzsche, "the field of his creation was himself."[67] In this section, I will set my own reading of Nietzsche, as a practitioner of a pathologically lop-sided spirituality from below, into dialogue with this view of Nietzsche as oriented fundamentally towards self-creation. In short, I will argue that the tension between the path upwards and the path downwards, between morality and self-knowledge, manifests for Nietzsche in terms of a deadly dichotomy between art and truth, illusion and honesty—and that interpreters like Rorty and Nagel have blunted the force of this dichotomy by emphasizing art and illusion over truth and honesty.

Now, to be sure, there are many passages in which Nietzsche makes statements that would suggest that he has abandoned the search for truth in favor of light-hearted play on the surface of things. Consider, for example, the following famous passage from the preface to *The Gay Science*:

> As for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to "truth at any price," this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too *profound*. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this.[68]

At face value, this passage would indeed suggest that Nietzsche has arrived at a perspective deeper than truth, in which "truth" shows itself to be a function of the creative will, or else at some new philosophical method whereby we decide "to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance," and cease our incessant attempts to delve beneath the appearance to the so-called "reality" beneath.

However, while there are indeed passages in Nietzsche's oeuvre that emphasize the necessity to abandon the will to truth, other passages suggest the exact opposite. Consider, for example,

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[66] Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.
[67] Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*, 33.
[68] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 38.

Nietzsche's understanding of the relationship between thinking and our drives: "Granted that nothing is 'given' as real except our world of desires and passions, that we can rise or sink to no other 'reality' than the reality of our drives—for thinking is only the relationship of these drives to each other—…"[69]; or, again, "anyone who looks at the basic drives of mankind … will discover that they have all at some time or other practiced philosophy—and that each of them would be only too glad to present *itself* as the ultimate goal of existence and as the legitimate *master* of all the other drives."[70] If we prioritize these passages, the aforementioned elevation of art above truth would be nothing more than one drive seeking to establish its mastery over another—and those who argue that Nietzsche is simply and straightforwardly arguing for the elevation of art above truth would be effectively adopting the perspective of one of these mastering drives, while ignoring the voices that offer resistance to it.

Indeed, Nietzsche often presents the drive for artistic creation and the drive for truth as dichotomously opposed to each other. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, we find a description of the drive for artistic creation followed immediately by a description of a contradictory will to truth. Thus, with regard to the artistic drive, we are told that there is a "fundamental will of the spirit" that "wants to be master within itself and around itself and to feel itself master: out of multiplicity it has the will to simplicity, a will which binds together and tames, which is imperious and commanding."[71] This simplifying power, says Nietzsche, will sometimes be "served by … a sudden decision for ignorance, for arbitrary shutting out, a closing of the windows, … a contentment with the dark, with the closed horizon"; at other times it will allow itself to be deceived, and at yet other times it will even purposefully deceive others, as a manifestation of the "continual pressing and pushing of a creative, formative, changeable force." However, this creative, deceptive, unifying force is opposed by the implacable desire for honesty that animates the philosopher:

> *This* will to appearance, to simplification, to the mask, to the cloak, in short to the superficial—for every surface is a cloak—is *counteracted* by that sublime inclination of the man of knowledge which takes a profound, many-sided and thorough view of things and *will* take such a view: as a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience and taste which every brave thinker will recognize in

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[69] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §36, p. 66.
[70] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §6, p. 37.
[71] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §230, p. 160.

himself, provided he has hardened and sharpened for long enough his own view of himself, as he should have, and is accustomed to stern discipline and stern language. He will say 'there is something cruel in the inclination of my spirit'—let the amiable and virtuous try to talk him out of that! In fact, it would be nicer if, instead of with cruelty, we were perhaps credited with an 'extravagant honesty'—we free, *very* free spirits—…[72]

Indeed, perhaps rather than speaking about a tension between art and "truth," it would be clearer to speak about a tension between art and this "extravagant honesty."[73] In *The Gay Science*, for example, Nietzsche says that if "we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then … the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead to nausea and suicide." He then says that art is "a counterforce against our honesty that helps us avoid such consequences: art as the *good* will to appearances."[74] Later in the same work, he presents this potentially suicidal drive to honesty almost as though it were a demonic possession: "One day the wanderer slammed a door behind himself, stopped in his tracks, and wept. Then he said: 'The penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent, certain—how it aggravates me! Why does this gloomy and restless fellow keep following and driving *me*? I want to rest, but he will not allow it.'"[75] Indeed, sometimes this cruel drive for honesty is presented as a battle between the principle of life, which seeks to close off the infinite within the horizon of an artistically constructed *technē*, and a principle of death, which sees the abyss beneath all the finite horizons within which alone life becomes possible: "Something might be true although at the same time harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, it could pertain to the fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of it would destroy one—so that the strength of a spirit could be measured in how much 'truth' it could take, more clearly, to what degree it *needed* it attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, falsified."[76] Suffice to say, it is disingenuous to read Nietzsche simply as a prophet of self-creation. He should rather be read as a thinker who lingers within the tension between art and truth. Indeed, I would argue that Nietzsche's experience of

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[72] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §230, p. 161-62.
[73] I find Kain's interpretation in *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence* to be spot on: "The issue, then, is to embrace life, to be invigorated by it, without succumbing to the horror of existence, without perishing. What is required, we have seen, is illusion, lies, or to put it more congenially—*art*. We need enough of a veil so that we can be invigorated by the life of the whole without being destroyed by the horror of existence" (Kain, 9).
[74] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §107, p. 163.
[75] Nietzshe, *The Gay Science*, §309, p. 246-47.
[76] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §39, p. 68.

this unlivable tension is what later prompts Mackie and Rorty to isolate art and truth from each other, to enable us live within this or that first order moral/artistic world without allowing the groundlessness of these worlds to cause them to collapse into paradox. In this context, meanwhile, we can see that part of Nietzsche's philosophical pride comes from his willingness to "take" more truth than the average person, and then construct the artworks within which these average people live.[77]

This tension can also be described in terms of the paradoxes involved in the claim that science is the sole source of truth. According to Nietzsche, in science, "convictions have no rights of citizenship"; all convictions must instead "descend to the modesty of hypotheses, of a provisional experimental point of view, of a regulative fiction" before they can "be granted admission … in the realm of knowledge."[78] But this procedure requires a tremendous discipline of the mind, which itself depends upon at least one prior conviction:

> *To make it possible for this discipline to begin*, must there not be some prior conviction—even one that is so commanding and unconditional that it sacrifices all other convictions to itself? … The question whether *truth* is needed must not only have been affirmed in advance, but affirmed to such a degree that the principle, the faith, the conviction finds expression: "*Nothing* is needed *more* than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value."[79]

Nietzsche proceeds from this initial emphasis—on the self-referential incoherence of a conviction that one must reject all convictions, on the disenchantment of all ideals that itself gets

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[77] In his essay "Nietzsche and Moral Fictionalism," Alan Thomas addresses Nadeem Hussain's description of the interpretive puzzle involved in Nietzsche's approach to value: in short, there appears to be a "prima facie inconsistency between the commitment to truthfulness of Nietzsche's free spirits, the truth that there are no values, and their positive project of revaluation and the creation of new values" (Thomas, "Nietzsche and Moral Fictionalism," in *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*, 148). Basically, we need to account for how Nietzsche can think that all values are groundless, and yet still propose a revaluation of all values. As Hussain puts it, how can the free spirit "have in his consciousness both the thought that the world is valueless and the psychological states required to value things" (Hussain, "Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits" in *Nietzsche and Morality*, 168)? Nadeem Hussain proposes "moral fictionalism" as a response to this problem: "The central thought in my solution to the interpretive puzzle is that valuing, in Nietzsche's recommended practice, involves the generation of 'honest illusions'. It can be thought of as a form of make-believe, pretending, or, the non-Nietzschean phrase adopted here, 'regarding … as': S values X by regarding X as valuable in itself while knowing that in fact X is not valuable in itself" (Hussain, "Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits," 166). Thomas dismisses this view as "inherently implausible" (Thomas, 135), insofar as such a view involves the inconsistency in "simultaneously taking up an honest stance towards illusion while knowing it to be an illusion" (Thomas, 139). In the context of this debate, my own position would be that, rather than trying to figure out how Nietzsche solves this problem, we should rather see this problem as the generative paradox from which Nietzsche's philosophy emerges.

[78] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344, 280.

[79] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344, 280-81.

adopted as an ideal—toward the deeper ontological presuppositions upon which this conviction rests. Thus, noting that the desire for truth at all costs seems to be based on the thought that being deceived "is harmful, dangerous, calamitous," such that science would amount to "a long-range prudence, a caution, a utility" (as in Dennett's view), Nietzsche observes that the idea that truth is better than deception must itself be based on an even more basic assumption about the nature of reality itself: "What do you know in advance of the character of existence to be able to decide whether the greater advantage is on the side of the unconditionally mistrustful or of the unconditionally trusting?"[80] Nietzsche's point here is not the rather benign idea that science is dangerous because it might overturn our cozy Ptolemaic cosmos, or that our comfortable faith in the literal truth of the Bible might be shattered by the theory of evolution. Nietzsche's point is rather that our pursuit of truth might eventually uncover that it is impossible for human beings to live without deception, such that our "will to truth" would actually be "hostile to life,"[81] a suicidal idealism, a "concealed will to death."

Nietzsche is basically making the same claim we saw Taylor make in chapter two—that naturalist culture is still operating, unconsciously, under the aegis of the same old metaphysics, even as its own self-understanding is predicated on the idea that it has left all metaphysical notions behind.[82] In Nietzsche's words, "it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests … even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from that flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith

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[80] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344, 281.
[81] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344, 282.
[82] John Haught's critique of the New Atheists involves pushing the naturalist position into the same realization, but with the intent of showing naturalists that they themselves must adhere to certain metaphysical positions: "[O]nly a little reflection is needed to notice that every inquiry of every human being emerges from the murkiness of some sort of faith, or trust, without objective evidence. Most of us simply believe that seeking truth is worthwhile. We cannot prove it since even the attempt to do so already presupposes this. This basic trust, then, launches and energizes every honest human inquiry, not least the scientific search itself. But my point is that this basic trust is not the outcome of any regime of scientific experimentation. Trusting that the natural world is intelligible and that truth is worth seeking is essential to getting science off the ground in the first place. We spontaneously trust that our journeys of exploration will be greeted by an ever-expanding field of intelligibility and an inexhaustible depth of truth. This trust also lies at the heart of genuine religious faith…. [B]y identifying the radical trust that underlies the cognitional life of every seeker and knower, we can locate the appropriate place of theology in its relation to science. Theology is not the answer to scientific questions, as the new atheists would like it to be— … Rather, theology responds to the question of whether the spontaneous trust that underlies every journey of inquiry, including science, is justifiable" (*God and the New Atheism*, 47-48). Unlike the New Atheists, Nietzsche seriously attempts to rid his mind of these lingering metaphysical commitments—which means calling into question such fundamental beliefs as faith in reason, faith that the real world is rational, faith that truth is something to be valued, faith that his own mind can grasp meaning and make valid claims to truth. According to Haught, the impossibility of actually carrying through with this radical project should be taken as evidence that thorough-going naturalism is not true.

which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine."[83] However, unlike

Taylor, whose project involves trying to reveal these repressed moral sources in order to allow

them to re-empower us—while, of course, acknowledging the possibility that "if reconciliation is

impossible, then articulacy will buy us much greater inner conflict"[84] —Nietzsche wants to

reveal these sources in order to then subject them to destruction. Indeed, he defines philosophy

itself in terms of an unconditional mistrust— "The more mistrust, the more philosophy"[85] —and

he then takes this mistrust one step further than the orthodox scientific culture, by introverting it,

by coming to mistrust his own will to mistrust.[86] And, to be clear, Nietzsche also has a prophet's

awareness of the violent political stakes of the kind of total breakdown his work both diagnoses

and also advocates: "This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and

cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play

the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of gloom and an

eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?"[87] If these are indeed the

stakes involved in the introversion of science's will to truth, is it any wonder that thinkers like

Mackie and Rorty would be reluctant to go further down the path to which both Taylor and

Nietzsche understand the logic of this position commits them? Is it any wonder that the

spirituality from below—which Nietzsche is most certainly practicing, even if in a pathologically

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[83] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344, 282-3.
[84] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 107.
[85] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §346, 286.
[86] In *Nietzsche on Morality*, Brian Leiter tries to debunk the postmodern interpretation of Nietzsche, which he describes as follows: "No philosopher can be a naturalist who thinks that the claim of the sciences to a special epistemic status is bunk, yet this is precisely the view often attributed to Nietzsche. Nietzsche's position is often thought to be basically Rortyean …: science is just one 'perspective' on the world, no more justified or true than any other perspective one might adopt (however useful it may be). For Nietzshe, then, to want to make philosophy continuous with science … would seem utterly arbitrary and bizarre" (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 17). By my reading, Nietzsche was indeed a naturalist, but he was a naturalist who pushed the consequences of his naturalism to the breaking point. I would suggest, then, that Leiter's naturalistic interpretation takes the reader up to the edge of these problems, but does not leap into them, while the postmodern interpreters usually begin at this breaking point without bothering to describe the steps that Nietzsche took to get there. As for Leiter, his impetus to engage with Nietzsche derives from a desire to acquire insights into the truth of naturalism: "[m]y own interest in Nietzsche is not simply antiquarian, and continued interest in any philosophical naturalist, like Nietzsche, should be, at least in part, a function of the extent to which he gets nature and the facts right, and thus teaches us important things" (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 260). By my reading, the important things Nietzsche has to teach have nothing to do with getting "nature and the facts right," but rather in the way that he seriously grapples with how concepts like truth and morality must change shape in light of a naturalistic/Darwinian picture of reality. Theologian John Haught puts it well: "if the roots of the imperative to be responsible are ultimately biological, then the ethic of knowledge and the postulate of objectivity are themselves also exposed as purely adaptive, derived ultimately, for example, from selective pressures on gene populations" (Haught, *Is Nature Enough*, 153). Leiter's reading of Nietzsche does not touch on these issues, but rather treats naturalism as unambiguously true, and Nietzsche as a useful source for insights into what the truth of naturalism entails for human life.
[87] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §343, 279.

lop-sided manner—might be seen as nothing more than a dangerous descent into personal and political hell, a gamble that only a fool or a madman would willingly pursue?

7. To Recreate all "It Was" into "Thus I Willed It"

The inadequacy of viewing Nietzsche as the philosopher who simply elevates art above truth becomes palpable if we examine Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy as an attempt to redeem the past. Thus, according to Rorty, Nietzsche's project of "recreating all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'" means seeing our own lives, or the history of our community, as a dramatic narrative, and then striving to rewrite this narrative according to our own personal artistic genius. Through this process, we will become able to "say of the relevant portion of the past, 'Thus I willed it,'" because we would have "found a way to describe the past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self to be which [our] precursors never knew was possible."[88] Our goal as Nietzschean poets of life, therefore, would be to become unprecedented, self-created beings who have successfully taken up that past and rewoven it according to our own vision. These poets would be motivated to think not by wonder, as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but rather by terror— terror that they will end up letting someone else build their sense of self instead of constructing it for themselves. As Rorty puts it, "[t]o fail as a poet—and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being—is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems."[89] According to Rorty's interpretation, therefore, the tension between art and truth in Nietzsche's thought would not be a battle between the life giving power of falsehood and the suicidal will to honesty, but rather a battle between "Nietzsche the perspectivalist," who is "interested in finding a perspective from which to look back on the perspectives he inherited, in order to see a beautiful pattern,"[90] and "Nietzsche the theorist of the will to power," who relapses into metaphysics in the attempt to discern "one big hidden reality rather than … a pattern among appearances."[91]

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[88] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 29.
[89] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 28.
[90] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 106.
[91] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 105.

The trouble with Rorty's interpretation lies in the pacification of the "*all* it was" into a much more manageable *some* "relevant portion of the past." To gain a sense of the unbearable tension involved in Nietzsche's philosophy, therefore, we might consider what it would mean for a ruthlessly honest philosopher—who refuses to attenuate, veil, sweeten, blunt, or falsify in any way—to try to recreate *all* it was into a "thus I willed it." One hint can be found in the epigraph to the first edition of *The Gay Science*, a passage from Emerson that also uses this language of "all": "To the poet and the sage, all things are friendly and hallowed, all experiences profitable, all days holy, all men divine."[92] Setting this passage in apposition to the passage from *The Gay Science* in which the famous phrase "eternal return" first appears, we can get a sense for what it would mean to say "yes" to everything:

> [T]here is no longer any reason in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; no resting place is open any longer to your heart, where it only needs to find and no longer to seek; you resist any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace: man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for that? Nobody yet has had this strength.[93]

The key is the idea that, to affirm all the past, we must "will the eternal recurrence of war and peace." As honest philosophers, in other words, our goal must be to look at the past, *as it really was*, and accept that everything that has occurred is bound to occur again, and again, and again, endlessly. This does not mean, as Rorty would have it, that all experiences are profitable only if I am clever enough to fit them constructively into my own unprecedented personal narrative.[94] This means instead that a real poet and sage should be able to affirm reality, in all its horror, without any belief in any reconciliation, and without any hope that things could ever be different.

One sometimes encounters people who do not like to read the news because they find it too depressing, not to mention useless, to be constantly aware of the all the suffering in the world that they are powerless to alter. Nietzsche has nothing but scorn for such people—and his project, in this context, can be read as an infinite extension of the opposite spiritual attitude. For Nietzsche, in other words, the truthful stance of joyous affirmation would involve looking not just at the suffering in the world now, but at all suffering that has ever occurred, and all the

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[92] Walter Kaufmann, "Translators Introduction," from Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 8.

[93] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §285, 229-30.

[94] It is worth pointing out that Rorty sometimes purposefully misreads people in order to put together his own original position.

suffering that ever will occur, and continue to "will" the eternal existence of this reality.[95] In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a similar problem inspires Ivan to reject salvation, on the basis of the fact that innocent children have been unjustly slaughtered in Russia's brutal feudal past. Ivan illustrates his point with the story of how a sadistic General once had a serf-boy torn to pieces by his dogs:

> The General ordered the boy to be undressed. The little boy was stripped naked. He shivered, panic-stricken and not daring to utter a sound. "Make him run!" ordered the General. "Run, run!" the whips shouted at him. The boy ran. "Sick him!" bawled the General, and set the whole pack of borzoi hounds on him. They hunted the child down before the eyes of his mother, and the hounds tore him to pieces![96]

For Ivan, the fact that reality has contained this kind of cruelty is sufficient to make God's salvation worthless: "if the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price."[97] Nietzsche, by contrast, sets himself the project of saying "yes" to a reality that has contained—and, as he sees it, *must* contain—this kind of brutality, repeating endlessly and meaninglessly, an irredeemable slaughterhouse that our ruthless philosophical honesty obliges us to see, and that our "gay science" inspires us to dance joyously within. To put it in theological terms, Nietzsche is basically trying to stand before this eternal recurrence of war and peace with the same goodwill with which God looks out across the world he has made at the beginning of *Genesis*.[98]

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[95] Julian Young characterizes Nietzsche's final spiritual position, in *Twilight of the Idols*, in similar terms: "'Goethe's faith' has expanded to embrace not merely things done directly to and by him but *everything* that happens. One cannot be *perfectly* happy unless one's faith in 'redemption' becomes *universal*, embraces the entire universe. If something in the world seems to me irredeemable (Auschwitz, for example) then, whether or not it belongs directly to my individual life, my happiness is less than complete." Furthermore, Young's Nietzsche does not insist that this universal optimism is true, but rather takes up this vision as a spiritual practice: "What is important … about willing the eternal return, is not that it represents a superior cognition but that it is a 'symptom', the defining test, of the ideally happy state of mind" (Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 501). But this practice, if undertaken earnestly as a mode of the spirituality from *above*, would produce an immensely repressive dilemma of mutilation—in which we might feel obligated to repress our own horror at the irredeemable injustice of existence.

[96] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 284.

[97] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 287.

[98] In *Nietzsche and Morality*, Leiter provides an excellent analysis of this existential state: "To admit that there is no meaning or justification for suffering is, indeed, an 'abysmal thought' (e.g. Z III: 13), which is why Nietzsche says, 'If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you" (GS: 341). This is the attitude of existential commitment, through brute force of will, to carry on in the absence of such a meaning or vindication, to give up, in effect, asking "Suffering for *what*?" Of course, … it is only the highest human beings who

This, finally, provides the proper context through which to interpret Nietzsche's metaphysics of "the will to power": it is essentially an attempt to re-describe reality beyond the terms of what he sees as the stifling, falsifying, and fundamentally groundless moral valuations of Christian culture. More precisely, Nietzsche says that the thought that has "given [him] the greatest trouble and still does" is the fact that "what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are," such that "it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new 'things.'"[99] The "will-to-power," then, is Nietzsche's attempt to create a new language through which to affirm this eternal recurrence of war and peace, outside the old terminology of "good" and "evil":

> One has to think this matter thoroughly through to the bottom and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation—but why should one always have to employ precisely those words which have from of old been stamped with slanderous intention? Even that body within which, as was previously assumed, individuals treat one another as equals … must, if it is a living and not a decaying body, itself do all that to other bodies which the individuals within it refrain from doing to one another: it will have to be the will to power incarnate, it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because life *is* will to power.[100]

Here, once again, we find the old position that Socrates gives voice to in Plato's *Republic*—that justice is nothing more than a means of allowing a group of thieves to cooperate—articulated as a simple and irrefutable truth. Nietzsche's project, in this context, would be to describe reality in these terms, without the encumbrance of the negative moral evaluation that he sees rooted in the historically contingent philosophy of Plato. In my own terminology, this means accepting the

can embrace the doctrine of eternal return; in that sense, the ascetic ideal will remain essential for the rest of humanity. But Nietzsche thinks it is at least possible for some—those higher human beings, presumably, who are Nietzsche's recurring concern—to avoid both suicidal nihilism and asceticism. The one who embraces this alternative ideal would endorse Nietzsche's 'formula for greatness in a human being', namely '*amor fati*' (love of fate): 'that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it … but *love* it' (EH II: 10)" (230-31). I would argue that anyone who adopted this abysmal thought in the way that Nietzsche adopted it would indeed end up being crushed by it—as Nietzsche was eventually crushed. Why? —because "brute force of will" is not the proper spiritual orientation through which to engage with the abyss. As a critique of Leiter, meanwhile, I would suggest that his scholarly distance limits his capacity to truly engage with what Nietzsche is getting at here. For this reason, I would agree with the diagnosis of Philippa Foot: "while Nietzsche's work now interests many analytic philosophers, one finds few who actually try to confront him" (Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 99).

[99] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §58, p. 121-22.

[100] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §259, p. 194.

ontology of war as true, refusing to mitigate the consequences of this position in any way, but rather reconstituting one's own moral vocabulary to align with this truth, so as to be able to dance joyously within the reality described by this ontology.[101]

In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche concludes this invocation of his own spiritual ideal—to have the strength to bear the eternal recurrence of war and peace—with a metaphor that perfectly expresses the unbearable emotional tension that this spiritual practice would create:

> There is a lake that one day ceased to permit itself to flow off; it formed a dam where it had hitherto flown off; and ever since this lake is rising higher and higher. Perhaps this very renunciation will also lend us the strength needed to bear this renunciation; perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to *flow out* unto a god.[102]

Nietzsche is talking here about the strength necessary to bear the infinite pain of reality, by building a dam that will have no vent, no release valve, no overflow, and so must grow higher to infinity in order to contain the weight of the eternal suffering that he is committed to joyously bearing. In effect, Nietzsche has effectively turned Emerson's ideal of the poet and sage, for whom "all things are friendly and hallowed," into an ideal anchoring a spirituality from above. Indeed, one might even say that Nietzsche has adopted the exact opposite of the Socratic moral thesis, the claim that it is better to *inflict* injustice than to suffer it, and in this way falls victim to an infernal inversion of the "dilemma of mutilation" we examined in chapter three: instead of repressing feelings of rage and hate in order to accord with an inhuman ideal of compassion, Nietzsche represses feelings of pity and compassion in order to accord with an idealized vision of the ontology of war. In this sense, Nietzsche's spiritual practice makes him into a kind of

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[101] The limits of Brian Leiter's analytic interpretation of Nietzsche can be seen in his interpretation of Nietzsche's critique of altruism: "Nietzsche is not claiming that people are *actually* too altruistic and too egalitarian in their practice; he is worried that … they are 'imprisoned among … concepts' valorizing equality and altruism, and that this vocabulary of valuing is itself an obstacle to the realization of certain forms of human excellence" (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 240). In other words, Leiter sees Nietzsche as trying to unwind the dilemma of mutilation by undermining the *ideal* of altruism and egalitarianism, but that this undermining of the ideal will not necessarily have any effect on the actual practice of altruism and egalitarianism. Armed with such a disarming interpretation, which is similar to the inverse theodicy of disenchantment I examined in chapter two, Leiter has nothing but impatience for "how readily Nietzsche inspires scholarly polemics in the service of moral indignation" (Leiter, 234-5n7). As for Nietzsche's concept of the will to power, Leiter wants to expunge it from serious reflection: "I am inclined to Clark's hopeful view that the crackpot metaphysics is really presented in an ironic spirit, and that Nietzsche, the otherwise sound naturalist, knew better" (260). In this passage, Leiter is approaching the idea that "all organic matter 'is will to power'" as though it were offered as a scientific theory. In contrast to this, I have presented it as part of a rhetorical ploy to undermine a moral system based on altruism and egalitarianism.
[102] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §285, p. 230.

inverted Jesus, a man who tries to bear the burden of all "sin" but without belief in the redeeming power of a God to whom the pain of sin can be released. The problem, of course, is that human beings are not infinitely strong, and when the dam eventually cracks beneath the weight of all the pain that is poured behind it, Nietzsche is entirely overwhelmed. Indeed, it is said that right before Nietzsche collapsed on the streets of Milan, he witnessed a horse being whipped and threw his arms around the beast's neck to protect it.[103]

8. The Craving for Pleasure and the Terror of the Abyss

But why, one might ask, would anyone even try to endure such a weight? Answering this question leads us back to the second spiritual error I diagnosed at the beginning of this chapter: in short, Nietzsche has discovered a very subtle truth that pertains to the spirituality from below, that pain and pleasure are correlative to each other—that (as Socrates puts it) "when a man has the one, the other follows later"[104] —and on the basis of this discovery, he begins to endure spiritual torment for the sake of experiencing the subtle spiritual pleasure that manifests on the other side. This is his "Gay Science," this joyous dance within the play of appearances, for the sake of which he is prepared to purposefully inflict the pain of the eternal recurrence of war and peace on his moral conscience.[105]

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[103] See Young *Friedrich Nietzsche* 531-32, for a good account of the "horse story."

[104] Plato, *Phaedo*, 60c.

[105] According to Bela Egyed, Nietzsche places extreme value on the intensity of our experiences: "Nietzsche attaches a higher value to life lived intensely than to a life lived within the comfort and security of hitherto existing norms" ("Advantages and Disadvantages of Nietzsche's Philosophy for Life" in *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*, 76). Egyed rearticulates this point in a telling footnote on the difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche: "the difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche is that the first warns his best readers to be aware of their limits, whereas the second urges his best readers to transgress them. This is the reason why Spinoza is primarily a teacher of ethics: how to seek the good life; whereas Nietzsche is not. He does not teach how to be happy, he teaches how to become other, how to acquire a new sensibility" (79n22). Egyed has an excellent sense for the extremes to which Nietzsche calls us: "[Nietzsche] describes for us three possible ways of life: the one in which drives are in complete chaos, the one in which drives are consciously repressed, and one in which a great number of drives are organized as a unity. He invites those who are willing to make the experiment, to cultivate the last, the best. Ordinary human beings, such as ourselves, will strive cautiously to maintain an optimum balance of unity and diversity; taking care that we do not exceed the limits of what we are capable of [sic.]. But, Nietzsche demands more of those who are to be the true therapists of culture: they must risk passing over the limits of what they can. In other words, they must, if they are to be true innovators, go to the limit without any precise notion of where that limit might be…. [t]he 'higher men' of today must be open to dangerous experiments with diversity even if they, themselves, break before attaining the required degree of unity" (75). On my reading, however, the "required degree of unity" will be forever impossible to

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche again and again observes that pleasure and pain are correlative. For example, under the heading "*On the aim of science*," he writes:

> What? The aim of science should be to give men as much pleasure and as little displeasure as possible? But what if pleasure and displeasure were so tied together that whoever *wanted* to have as much as possible of one *must* also have as much as possible of the other—that whoever wanted to learn to "jubilate up to the heavens" would also have to be prepared for "depression unto death"? And that is how things may well be. … To this day you have the choice: either *as little displeasure as possible*, painlessness in brief— … or *as much displeasure as possible* as the price for the growth of an abundance of subtle pleasures and joys that have rarely been relished yet. If you decide for the former and desire to diminish and lower the level of human pain, you also have to diminish and lower the level of their *capacity for joy*. Actually, *science* can promote either goal.[106]

This passage functions as Nietzsche's critique of the ideal of modern technological civilization, based on the idea that a world free from extreme pain would also eliminate the human capacity for extreme joy. Nietzsche does not want to make a safer, more humane world. Instead, he wants "*as much displeasure as possible* as the price for the growth of an abundance of subtle pleasures and joys that have rarely been relished yet."[107] Nietzsche describes his approach to these "subtle pleasures and joys" in numerous passages in *The Gay Science*. For example, under the heading "*The danger of the happiest*," Nietzsche writes that the best life would involve going "through life with a calm eye and a firm step, always prepared to risk all—festively, impelled by the longing for undiscovered worlds and seas, people and gods; … and in the most profound enjoyment of the moment, to be overcome by tears and the whole crimson melancholy of the happy: who would not wish that all this might be *his* possession, his state!"[108] It is not difficult to understand Nietzsche's desire—who indeed would not desire "the most profound enjoyment of

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attain so long as one adheres to the ontology of war: the ontological violence one sees in the abyss will always undermine whatever finite unity one manages to establish within it. As such, the Nietzschean "dangerous experiment", to "go to the limit without any precise notion of where that limit might be", will always culminate in a tragic breaking—especially if conducted in light of the specifically Nietzschean ideal of the superman: (as cited in Egyed's essay): "'The highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured' … [E]lsewhere [Nietzsche] calls the "greatest man, *the bow with the greatest tension*'" (Egyed, 76). The problem is that you will only be able to *know* the "greatest tension" you can endure after you have already broken.

[106] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §12, p. 85-6.

[107] In Kirkland's terms, we might say that Nietzsche utterly spurns the sheltering safety of *technē* in favor of the extremes of emotion that only manifest in the abyss of *aporia*. In fact, I would argue that this is the danger of Kirkland's own position as well: that by positing the safety of *technē* in opposition to the virtuous pain of the aporia, we risk replacing a lopsided spirituality from above with a lopsided spirituality from below, when the proper response to our dilemma would be to bring balance back to these opposing moments of human spiritual practice.

[108] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §302, p. 242.

the moment," the "whole crimson melancholy of the happy"? But again, immediately after these words, Nietzsche reminds his readers of the price that must be paid by those who wish to experience life in this way: "But we should not overlook this: With this Homeric happiness in one's soul one is also more capable of suffering than any other creature under the sun. This is the only price for which one can buy the most precious shell that the waves of existence have ever yet washed on the shore."[109] Once again, we find the correct phenomenological observation—that abyssal pain and abyssal pleasure are interrelated—being cited as the basis for a disastrous spiritual error: that we should endure abyssal pain for the sake of experiencing ever greater degrees of abyssal pleasure.

In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche describes this practice in terms that seem to reflect his own personal experience. He first writes about how "[o]nly great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time—on which we are burned, as it were, on green wood—compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths."[110] He then describes how this long, slow pain compels philosophers to "to put aside all trust, everything good-natured, everything that would interpose a veil, that is mild, that is medium—things in which we formerly may have found our humanity."[111] Finally, he describes the state of jubilation that sometimes emerges on the other side of this torment: "[t]he attraction of everything problematic, the delight in an *x*, … is so great in such more spiritual, more spiritualized men that this delight flares up again and again like a bright blaze over all the distress of what is problematic, over all the danger of uncertainty, and even over the jealousy of the lover. We know a new happiness."[112] In the very next section, meanwhile, Nietzsche reiterates this point yet again, now employing an almost religious idiom:

> In the end, lest what is important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.[113]

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[109] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §302, p. 242.
[110] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §3, 36
[111] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §3, 36
[112] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §3, 37.
[113] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §4, 37.

To put it provocatively, through this language of "rebirth," of a "second dangerous innocence in joy," of the return to a "childlike" state "a hundred times subtler" than before, Nietzsche seems to be describing an experience similar to the resurrection that follows the crucifixion, the pain of death that precedes the joy of rebirth: alternatively, as Jesus himself puts it, "[t]ruly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."[114] Might we say, then, that Nietzsche has tasted the "kingdom of heaven" within, but that he has wrested this experience of the depths with his immense pride and strength of will, as opposed to allowing the rebirth to emerge naturally through cultivating the gentleness, meekness, and compassion that Anselm Gruen insists is the only legitimate measure of real spiritual progress?

Alternatively, to adopt an image from an entirely different cultural tradition, consider the following haiku, written by the Japanese poet Masahide around 1688: "Now that my storehouse / has burned down, nothing / conceals the moon."[115] Masahide wrote this poem after his storehouse had indeed burnt down. Within the context of this experience, meanwhile, his poem expresses not so much a stoic resolve in the face of misfortune as a sense that this event, which from his previous perspective would have been a dreadful misfortune, reveals itself as a blessing from the new perspective that emerges beyond it. Perhaps we could say that Nietzsche has experienced this same sense of liberation that comes after the pain of the conflagration, when the building within which we have stored our past has been reduced to ash? However, on the basis of this experience, Nietzsche then proceeds to burn down his house, his farm, his village—not realizing, or realizing and not caring, or possibly even welcoming the fact that the moon brings not only freedom but also madness, and that the buildings within which we store ourselves are also necessary for our safety.

In fact, the three stages of this progression—from pain, through spiritual joy, and into madness—can be found in the passage right before the famous description of the death of God:

> *In the horizon of the infinite*. —We have left the land and have embarked. We
> have burnt our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the
> land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it
> does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries
> of graciousness. But hours will come when you will realize that it is infinite and

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[114] Matthew 18:3, NRSV.
[115] Yoel Hoffmann (ed.), *Japanese Death Poems* (Rutland, Vt.: C.E. Tuttle, 1986), 240.

> that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now strikes the walls of this cage? Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*—and there is no longer any "land."[116]

Nietzsche's first advice, that the ocean "does not always roar," is given precisely because it is the raging ocean that one will always encounter at the start of the descent. In Gruen's conceptual language, this would be the repressed negativity of the shadow releasing its pent-up energy. In terms of Hume's breakdown, this would be the layer of experience from which he fled back into the common sense of his own culture. For those who do not flee, however, the fury of the shadow will eventually subside, at which point the ocean will "spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness." This is the period of spiritual joy and insight that Nietzsche begins to crave, and for the sake of which he submits to ever greater degrees of spiritual torment. [117] However, as he discovers, this period of joy is in turn followed by a deeper and more dreadful storm: the terror of infinity, which Nietzsche describes in the subsequent section with the metaphor of a madman running into the marketplace, trying to inform those who do not believe in God as to the significance of what has happened:

> Wither is God? … I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Wither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward,

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[116] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §124, p. 180.

[117] Hutter's *Shaping the Future* provides a good account of how the tension between art and honesty, the path upwards and the path downwards, appear from the context of the ontology of war: "Every human culture is a living synthesis of two fundamental warring forces for which Nietzsche uses the symbols of Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo is the name for the law which life sets itself in its struggle for self-overcoming … These forces of order are set in permanent conflict with the forces of disorder and chaos in the Dionysian. … Every form of life is hence both a war and a peace, a war within the Dionysian base itself, as well as a war between that warring base and the peaceful synthesis of the Apollonian sheen world of individuation. Individual organisms are structures in movement, sustained by this double conflict within Dionysus himself as well as between Dionysus and Apollo. Individual existence may hence be seen as a finite dance, a dance of the two sides of Dionysus, the past and the future, against themselves, as well as the dance of both sides of Dionysus with Apollo. It is the dance of the Lord Shiva that symbolizes the eternal recurrence of war and peace. In the human species this universal dance becomes aware of itself" (Horst Hutter, *Shaping the Future*, 181). The key phrase occurs in the middle of the passage: "[e]very form of life is … both a war and a peace, a war within the Dionysian base itself, as well as a war between that warring base and the peaceful synthesis of the Apollonian sheen world of individuation." I would argue that the Dionysian base only becomes warlike due to the vicious circle involved in a lopsided spirituality from above. The key, however, is that our spiritual journey *always* begins from at least a partially lopsided version of the path upwards, because our initial formation in a culture inevitably involves teaching us to repress our desires. In this sense, perhaps Hutter's mistake is to see culture as our true parent, instead of an "adoptive parent" as Plato suggests in the *Republic* (538a)?

sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?[118]

This is not the terror of being formed by some other poet, as Rorty would have it. This is Russell's doctrine of the subjectivity of all values, taken up not as an expedient political doctrine to promote intercultural tolerance, but rather as an *experience* that one has arrived at as the conclusion to a process of thinking, as the feeling of what it is like to have no way to distinguish between good and bad, the loss of all ideals that could serve to anchor a spirituality from above.

For Nietzsche, "morality" would be nothing more than the artificial imposition of a finite horizon upon this infinite abyss—and against the artificial horizons of morality, Nietzsche would posit the artificial horizons of art. Indeed, in the same passage where he argues for art as the palliative to an excessive honesty that might otherwise lead to suicide, Nietzsche explicitly rejects the idea that morality could function for him as a shelter against this storm: "It would mean a *relapse* for us, with our irritable honesty, to get involved entirely in morality and, for the sake of the over-severe demands we make of ourselves in these matters, to become virtuous monsters and scarecrows."[119] Morality, however, only imposes such "over-severe demands" if one is practicing a lopsided spirituality from above—the "virtuous" only become "virtuous monsters" if their idealized sense of self is built on a foundation of repressed negativity, and the proper role of "irritable honesty" would be to off-set this problem. Moreover, it would be wrong to characterize the spirituality of *Proverbs* as implying that there are absolute moral commandments written into the ground of reality, some ultimate vision of the *whatness* of the good that we can know and thereby rid ourselves of the confusion of *aporia* forever. On the contrary, the shelter of *Proverbs* would be better understood as a work of art, a contingent cultural system which provides us with a relatively simple path through life, wherein the *whatness* and the *thatness* of the good are brought together provisionally as a concrete system. It is by following such a system that we prepare ourselves for the training that takes placed within the *aporia* of *Ecclesiastes*, when we allow the *whatness* and the *thatness* of the good to separate in our experience. This process of repeatedly separating *whatness* from *thatness*, and then allowing them to come back together again, is what allows the two sides of spiritual life to temper each other.

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[118] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, p. 181.
[119] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §107, p. 164.

In chapter six, I will present the practice of interpreting mythic discourse as one way of engaging in this process of separating and recombining *whatness* and *thatness*. For the moment, let us clarify Nietzsche's experience of the abyss through the lens of Kant's interpretation of *Genesis*, whereby the significance of our eating from the tree of knowledge is seen in the fact that, for the first time, we *chose* something instead of following the single track of instinct:

> He discovered in himself a power of choosing for himself a way of life, of not being bound without alternative to a single way, like the animals. Perhaps the discovery of this advantage created a moment of delight. But of necessity, anxiety and alarm as to how he was to deal with this newly discovered power quickly followed; for man was a being who did not yet know either the secret properties or the remote effects of anything. He stood, as it were, at the brink of an abyss. Until that moment instinct had directed him toward specific objects of desire. But from these there now opened up an infinity of such objects, and he did not know how to choose between them. On the other hand, it was impossible for him to return to the state of servitude (i.e., subjection to instinct) from the state of freedom, once he had tasted the latter.[120]

This sense Nietzsche has of "straying as though through an infinite nothing" would be the abyss of freedom, the awareness of an infinite expanse of possibilities combined with a total lack of ability to distinguish between good and bad. It is a tree of knowledge of *good* and *evil* because, now that we are aware of our capacity to choose, we require such systems of coordinates to transform the abyss into something manageable, a finite system within which we will be able to find our way: this would be the habituation we receive from our culture and our upbringing. Nietzsche, meanwhile, would be using his knowledge of good and evil as a gateway through which to regain access to the abyss of freedom, the total disorientation involved in having choice without standards—and in his moments of joy, he pictures himself as the spirit of God floating on the surface of this abyss, speaking the words through which new artistic worlds will come into being, new visions of the *whatness* of the good within which non-philosophical humanity can exist.

In other words, Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche as the strong poet who wants to recreate himself does capture something correct about Nietzsche's practice: Nietzsche does not look at the artistic worlds from his cultural past as sources of inspiration and guidance, but rather as rival

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[120] Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *Kant: on History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963), 56.

worlds to be destroyed and replaced by his own creation: "We who think and feel at the same time are those who really continually *fashion* something that had not been before: the whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, negations. This poem that we have invented is continually studied by the so-called practical human beings (our actors) who learn their roles and translate everything into flesh and actuality, into the everyday."[121] Part of Nietzsche's pride, then, would be this desire to construct his own artistic world, his own place of refuge against the terror of the void, on the basis of his sense that all such worlds are contingent projections into the abyss. The past, in this context, would form the bricks that the poets rearrange according to their desire.

As it turns out, however, the world Nietzsche ends up building involves directing his negative emotions against those who loiter around the marketplace laughing at the madman's useless anxiety. In this way, Nietzsche ends up transforming his spiritual practice—the insight that pain and pleasure are correlative, combined with the determination to experience depression unto death in order to jubilate up to the heavens—into a gruesome political doctrine whereby everyone will be *obliged* to go through the same crucible:

> [T]here are times when we behold *your* pity with an indescribable anxiety, when we defend ourselves against this pity—when we find your seriousness more dangerous than any kind of frivolity. You want if possible—and there is no madder 'if possible' —*to abolish suffering*; and we? —it really does seem that *we* would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been! The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering—do you not know that it is *this* discipline alone which has created every elevation of mankind hitherto? … In man, *creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is matter, fragment, excess, clay, mud, madness, chaos; but in man there is also creator, sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divine spectator and the seventh day—do you understand this antithesis? And that *your* pity is for the 'creature in man', for that which has to be formed, broken, forged, torn, burned, annealed, refined—that which has to *suffer* and *should* suffer? And *our* pity—do you not grasp whom our *opposite* pity is for when it defends itself against your pity as the worst of all pampering and weakening?[122]

Notice the transition from the anxiety of the abyss to an "indescribable anxiety" in the face of a definite object: *those people* who laugh at the anxiety of the abyss, and whose spiritual ideal involves pacifying both the pain of hell as well as the jubilation of heaven into a neutral soup of

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[121] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §301, p. 241-42.
[122] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §225, p. 155.

grey mundanity. Basically, as the reverse of the progression from fear to anxiety that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time*, Nietzsche transforms his trackless anxiety into a well-defined fear, an enemy that serves to anchor the otherwise unbearable emotions to which his philosophical practice has exposed him. In other words, for all his idealization of strength and danger, Nietzsche too is not strong enough to will the eternal recurrence of war and peace, and so the dam he builds to hold these horrors in check comes to rely upon a scapegoating mechanism that would abolish the entire historical world in which he lives. This is an ironic fate indeed for a philosopher who strives to say "yes" to all the horrors that ever were and ever will be, to the eternal recurrence of war and peace—to end up saying "no" to the world he actually lives in, and to all the people who actually surround him.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored a different aspect of the spirituality from below than usually manifests in naturalist descriptions of the psychologically harrowing 'view from infinity.' In short, I discussed the experience of abyssal pleasure, which both Plato and Nietzsche recognize will eventually manifest for those who travel down the disorienting path of philosophy. I argued that Plato recognizes abyssal pleasure as both a danger and as an opportunity—dangerous if we lose ourselves to it, useful to the extent that we can maintain our temperance in the face of it. Nietzsche, by contrast, develops a craving for the bliss of his "joyous science," and then throws himself headlong into an ever more extreme spiritual practice in order to experience these states of ecstatic connection. The very last passage in *Daybreak*, one of the first books Nietzsche wrote after quitting his professorship and devoting himself seriously to the *practice* of philosophy, encapsulates my criticism perfectly: "Whither does this mighty longing draw us, this longing that is worth more to us than any pleasure? … Will it perhaps be said of us one day that we too, *steering westward, hoped to reach India*—but that it was our fate to be wrecked against

infinity?"[123] This is exactly what I have argued: that Nietzsche's fate was indeed to be wrecked against infinity, due to his dangerously imbalanced approach to spiritual practice.

In my sixth and final chapter, I return from this discussion of the spirituality from below—the perspective of the abyss—and back to the perspective of the normal, everyday routines of life. My aim is now to respond to a question that has been lingering since chapter two, in my engagement with Dennett: namely, how does the transition from the ontology of war to the ontology of mystery, and the practice of spiritual religion, lead to Dennett's goal of "a world at peace, with as little suffering as we can manage, with freedom and justice and well-being and meaning for all?"[124] In chapter six, I attempt to flesh out what this ontological choice actually means in terms of living out our concrete lives, within a world riven by the violence of history.

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[123] Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), §575, p. 229. It would be interesting to look at how the metaphor of the sea slowly changes shape over the course of Nietzsche's career, as well as to contrast it to other uses of this image over the course of Western philosophy and religion. For example, we have already seen Hume employ a similar metaphor to describe his state of philosophical anxiety. Both of these 'water metaphors' could then be set into dialogue with various Biblical references: the spirit of God moving on the surface of the water, or Jesus walking on water through the storm, towards his terrified disciples, or Noah building a boat to survive the flood. Finally, the use of the image of water as a metaphor for chaos could be contrasted to a different image of chaos the developed in European culture in the centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire: chaos as the forest (*Silva*) that swallows civilization. In particular, the idea that we can fight chaos with technological progress only works to the extent that we understand chaos as forest, as something that can be cut down and cultivated, as opposed to the implacable rising of the ocean that simple erases what was there before.
[124] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 17.

Chapter 6

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The Utility of Myth within the Ontology of Mystery

Introduction: The Socratic Moral Thesis and "Normal" Life

In chapter five, I examined the danger involved in the experience of abyssal pleasure that can manifest on the far side of the more common experience of abyssal pain. In this chapter, I extend the same logic to my previous interpretation of the Socratic moral thesis. Basically, up to now, in discussing the question of whether it is better to suffer injustice or to inflict it, I have focused almost exclusively on the question of pain—of crime, of torture, of whether it is possible for human beings to maintain their dignity even in the hell of a death camp. From now, I will focus on the question of pleasure—not the extremes of abyssal pleasure that I examined in chapter five, but rather the normal, everyday pleasures that we desire in our normal, everyday lives.

Now, there is a certain rhetorical necessity for the initial emphasis on pain. This is because the Socratic claim that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it will almost inevitably be met, in argument, with the kind of imagined counterexamples that Polus introduces in the *Gorgias*—a litany of horrors that culminates in the question of whether the successful tyrant is really more miserable than a would-be tyrant who is "caught, put on the rack, castrated, and has his eyes burned out … then made to witness his wife and children undergo the same."[1] When arguing with skeptical interlocutors, this is the natural trajectory of the argument: first, an example of extreme and violent injustice will be cited, on the basis of which the sincerity of the speaker will be impugned—either that the speaker is just grandstanding, trying to win a petty debate that has ceased to have any relationship to real life, or else that the speaker is simply a self-deluded fool. However, even if the arguments for Socratic morality do manage to persuade, this entire line of argument and counter-argument can give rise to a more subtle problem: namely, our final

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[1] Plato, *Gorgias*, 473b-d.

conclusion might appear as all-but irrelevant to the everyday concerns of "normal" human life. For example, this is the way that Hannah Arendt interprets Socratic morality: it only becomes relevant "in extreme, that is, in marginal situations," places like death camps and torture chambers, in which the only option left is to bear our suffering with nobility. As Arendt puts it, the "marginal situation in which moral propositions becomes absolutely valid in the realm of politics is impotence."[2]

In chapter one, my purpose was to show how the reference to the authority of ancient martyrs helps offset the rhetorical difficulties involved in arguing for the Socratic moral thesis. In this chapter, by contrast, I presume that my reader has been at least partially persuaded by these arguments, and is therefore ready to consider the bevy of questions that then follow from this initial agreement. In this case, what does Socratic morality mean for the way we live our everyday lives, where we have to navigate a myriad of possibilities and potentials, each of which demands more complicated choices than the stark black-and-white choice implied by Polus' challenge to the Socratic moral thesis, where we must decide either to suffer injustice or to inflict it, to torture or to be tortured?

In fact, in the *Gorgias*, before Polus interjects with the topic of violence, it seems that Socrates' initial intention was precisely this: to discuss the ways that unscrupulous orators can hijack our love of the good for their own nefarious purposes. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates presents a short schematic in which he describes how the truth of justice is often obfuscated by oratory, one of the four parts of "flattery," whereby our desire for pleasure is harnessed to distort our understanding of what is actually good:

> Now flattery … takes no thought at all of whatever is best; with the lure of what's most pleasant at the moment, it sniffs out folly and hoodwinks it, so that it gives the impression of being most deserving. Pastry baking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body, so that if a pastry baker and a doctor had to compete in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children, to determine which of the two, the doctor or the pastry baker, had expert knowledge of good food and bad, the doctor would die of starvation. I call this flattery, and I say that such a thing is shameful … because it guesses at what's pleasant with no consideration for what's best.[3]

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[2] Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 156.
[3] Plato, *Gorgias*, 464c-465a.

According to Socrates, "what pastry baking is to medicine, oratory is to justice,"[4] a false façade that utilizes our love of pleasure to distort our understanding of what is good. In this context, we can see that if Socratic morality is indeed relevant to everyday "normal" life, this relevance would be found not only in debates on the possibility or impossibility of maintaining one's moral integrity in death camps and torture chambers, but also in the relationship between oratory and justice, in the way our desire for pleasure can be used to subtly distort our understanding of what is good—and in the way that unscrupulous orators can consciously exploit this mechanism to manipulate us. Again, this is the direction that Socrates himself seems intent on steering the conversation, before Polus forces them all down a far less cordial path of inquiry.

Pace Arendt, therefore, it would seem that the Socratic moral thesis applies to more than just marginal situations, more than just conditions of absolute impotence. Indeed, one might even say that the marginal condition, in which a person is obliged to choose between morality and death, only comes about through a much longer series of smaller capitulations. As such, for those of us who desire to live in a world where people will not have to make excruciating moral decisions in the face of the threat of pain and death, it seems that we will have to become the kinds of people who are able to say "no" to the bevy of smaller capitulations that lead, eventually, to the almost impossible dilemma. However, the situation is actually more subtle than this—for before we can say "no" to the smaller capitulation, we must first be able to discern exactly what constitutes a capitulation, and this is exactly where the distinction between oratory and justice becomes palpable. More precisely, if we define "temptation" as the offer of something pleasant, or the promise of something unpleasant, as a means to securing cooperation in this or that nefarious project, then we can see that my argument has so far dealt with only half the issue: the extreme threat in order to secure our cooperation in an extreme crime, torture for torture, murder for murder, etc. For a full understanding of the issue, however, it will be necessary to explore the other kind of temptation: the offer of something pleasant in exchange for our complicity.

In fact, in everyday peaceful life, this latter kind of temptation is far more common. However, grappling with the temptation of pleasure also requires an awareness that the true stakes of the conflict will be difficult to see, because political "oratory" will incessantly distort our understanding of "justice," of what constitutes a "temptation," of what constitutes "nefarious."

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[4] Plato, *Gorgias*, 465c.

To put it simply, part of the bribe offered by power for our cooperation is the pleasure of thinking we are agents of the forces of goodness—similar to the predicament implied by the second temptation of Christ, when the devil distorts our understanding of the traditional authority. Because of this, the main spiritual task in "normal" life will involve grappling with this second temptation, trying to see through the masks of ideology that wrap the nefarious intent with the clothes of virtue, to perceive what is actually at stake in the various minor decisions we make as we go about our everyday lives. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to provide some suggestions as to how we can discern the difference between oratory and justice—or, as I would put it, how we can subject our understanding of the *whatness* of the good to its *thatness*.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the practice of interpreting mythic discourse as a way to bridge the gulf between oratory and justice. I argue, in short, that the practice of interpreting myths can function as a window through the protective shelter of our own culture's *technē*-like understanding, such that we might be able to see the beyond without having to immerse ourselves directly in the more extreme dangers of *aporia*.[5] In section two, I present a concrete example of this, comparing Carl Sagan's interpretation of *Genesis* to an interpretation from the Hasidic masters, as described by Martin Buber. Following this, in section three, I draw on Slavoj Žižec's interpretations of the crucifixion and the Fall to introduce my final topic, the third temptation of Christ. In section four, I interpret the third temptation as describing the

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[5] My approach to myth resonates with Richard Kearney's concept of "metaxology," as "a middle way (Greek, *metaxy*) between the extremes of absolutism and relativism" (Kearney, *The God who May Be*, 6). For Kearney, the terms "absolutism" and "relativism" refer to two opposing approaches to the divine, and "metaxology" refers to a practice of religious hermeneutics that mediates the gulf between these extremes. Kearney describes the two extremes as follows: "(a) the hyper-ascendant deity of mystical or negative theology; and (b) the consigning of the sacred to the domain of abyssal abjection. In the first instance, God can take the form of a divinity so far beyond-being (Levinas, Marion, and at times even Derrida) that no hermeneutics of interpreting, imagining, symbolizing, or narrativizing is really acceptable. Indeed, God's alterity appears so utterly unnameable and apophatic that any attempt to throw hermeneutic drawbridges between it and our finite means of language is deemed a form of idolatry. In the second instance, the divine slips *beneath* the grid of symbolic and imaginary expression, back into some primordial zero-point of unnameability which is variously called "monstrous" (Campbell, Zizek), "sublime" (Lyotard), "abject" (Kristeva), or "an-khorite" (Caputo). While both positions push the notion of God to opposite extremes—to the highest of heights or the lowest of depths—they share a common aversion to any mediating role for narrative imagination. For both, the divine remains utterly unthinkable, unnameable, unrepresentable—that is, unmediatable. The hermeneutic approach to religion I am espousing here, by contrast, seeks to engage just such a mediating function" (Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 7). Kearney's concepts do not map perfectly onto mine—speaking of God as monstrous, sublime, abject, or an-khorite certainly corresponds to what I have referred to as the "spirituality from below," but the opposing extreme, the God who is too high to be spoken, seems to refer to a different way to engage with the path downward. Regardless, insofar as Kearney speaks of using the practice of mythic hermeneutics to bridge the gulf between this unspeakable height/depth and the normal, everyday world, our approach is the same.

relationship between spirituality and political life—as the way we purify the image of justice, which holds together our political world, from the history of violence in which it was formed. Finally, in the fifth and concluding section, I offer one final interpretation of the essential ambiguity of all visions of the *whatness* of virtue or the good, as my final response to Dennett's ideal of "a world at peace, with as little suffering as we can manage, with freedom and justice and well-being and meaning for all[.]"[6] In short, I argue that we are not going to get a peaceful, just, and free world by simply replacing the ideals of religion with the ideals of science. Instead, we need the curriculum of spiritual religion, which for naturalists in particular will mean engaging with the practice of spirituality from below, under the aegis of the ontology of mystery, in order to bring balance to their lopsided adherence to a secularistic spirituality from above.

1. The Interpretation of Myth as a Technique for the Spirituality from Below

In *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, Kirkland argues that the Greeks understood myth as "the mode of discourse suited to bringing the divine to light … as essentially and originally what exceeds human understanding and power." A myth accomplishes this because "it does *not* claim to reveal its subject matter completely or definitively, instead allowing and acknowledging a degree of indeterminacy and occlusion as proper to its presentation."[7] The Greeks, in other words, did not think of myth as "an authoritative revelation," but rather as a "a professedly partial, imperfect, mediated, and changing glimpse that would require of anyone who receives it properly active interpretation, questioning, and even imaginative appropriation."[8] In this way, myth would bring the mysterious world of the divine to light, but as a mystery, a riddle that would provide us with shifting and variable insight into those realms of experience that exceed our everyday experience of the world.

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[6] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 17.
[7] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 38.
[8] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 39.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Kirkland views the Socratic dialectic as ending in a state of *aporia*, in which we are made aware of an excessive and uncomfortable distance between ourselves and the being of virtue. On this understanding, there is an obvious parallel between philosophical dialectic and the logic of myth. In short, both expose us, albeit in different ways, to an excessive and hidden *something*:

> the proper subject matter of myths is what is outside, distant from, or beyond with respect to the comfortable, familiar, and presumably known region in which we live our everyday lives, and this distance and inaccessibility remains intact even in the mythical account of its subject matter. Myth does indeed bring its subject matter to light, but only *along with its beyond* … and thus without presuming to reveal it completely or definitively.[9]

On this account, engaging with mythic discourse would provide a way of exposing ourselves to this larger *aporia* without entirely abandoning the safety of our shelter. Alternatively, to adopt the language of a more classical Platonism, if Kirkland is right to say that the *aporia* is the good, then myth would function as an image of the good as it manifests within the shifting appearances of everyday life. The practice of interpreting such mythic discourse would then form one way of exposing ourselves to this good while at the same time remaining secured, at least partially, against the kind of dangers I have been discussing since chapter one, which I have described in general terms as the dyscatastrophe of philosophy (see especially chapter 1.8). Again, as a process whereby we may lose confidence in the truth of our own enculturated moral training, the dyscatastrophe of philosophy has the potential to undermine our capacity to contain the lawless desires of our unconscious, thereby transforming us into vicious tyrants instead of virtuous philosophers.

In his essay "Socrates and the Minotaur," Jeremiah P. Conway takes this parallel between dialectic and mythic discourse one step further, arguing that the Platonic dialogue itself should be understood as a myth. According to Conway, this approach is pedagogically useful, because it helps unlock the power "to effect the transformation of the soul, which Plato claims is at the heart of his philosophical endeavor."[10] Conway bases his argument on the *Crito*, the dialogue in which Socrates defends his decision to abide by the laws of Athens and accept his execution.

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[9] Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 39.

[10] Jeremiah P. Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur: Following the Thread of Myth in Plato's Dialogues," in *Teaching Philosophy, 16:3*, September 1993, p. 193.

According to Athenian custom, Socrates cannot be executed immediately because the ship commemorating Theseus' victory over the Minotaur in the labyrinth of Minos has not yet returned to port. Based on this mythic background, and the hints that Plato drops at the beginning of the conversation, Conway suggests we read the action of the *Crito* as a "counter-myth to the myth of Theseus": "Theseus models that heroism which responds to the enemy by meeting deadly force with deadly force,"[11] while the "hero's journey for Socrates is learning to do no harm, a ridding from the soul the desire for revenge."[12] The dialogue, however, does more than simply give us a heroic model for the Socratic moral thesis; it also gives us a vocabulary through which to contemplate our own experience. This is because readers are able to "recognize their situation within the myth. They know they have their minotaurs; they know their labyrinths; they recognize King Minos, Theseus, Crito, and even Socrates within themselves. Studying the story, they study themselves."[13] The mythic language, in other words, provides a common poetical vocabulary through which we can think about aspects of our own lives that might otherwise remain in pre-conceptual chaos—and, perhaps more importantly, express our insights in a language to which other people will be able to relate and respond.

Over the course of his argument, Conway offers advice for how to profitably engage with any kind of mythic discourse. On the one hand, he says, we must avoid the literalist interpretation, whereby we fail "to recognize images as images, treating them instead as tangible fact."[14] On the other hand, we should not "demand of it the same kind of conceptual clarity and precision appropriate to rational analysis," and above all not imagine that the goal of our interpretive practice is to uncover the one true meaning of the story: "A sure-fire way to kill myth is to insist upon defining *the* meaning of the story. Myth is essentially polysemic; not only does it contain layer upon layer of multiple meaning, but it conducts its inquiry by enjoining and gathering an apparently endless interplay of associative connections."[15]

These are important points to make, especially when speaking to the culture of "honest gentlemen" idealized by Hume, because the mysterious and essentially polysemic quality of myths is often cited as the reason why our modern, scientific, rational culture has no more use

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[11] Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur," p. 198.
[12] Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur," p. 200.
[13] Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur," 201.
[14] Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur," 194.
[15] Conway, "Socrates and The Minotaur," 195.

for them. For example, in his atheist polemic *The God Argument*, A. C. Grayling condemns religion in its entirety on account of this lack of clarity:

> [C]ontesting religion is like engaging in a boxing match with jelly: it is a shifting, unclear, amorphous target, which every blow displaces to a new shape. This is in large part because the religious themselves do not often have clear ideas, or much agreement among themselves about what is meant by 'religion', 'god', 'faith' and associated concepts. And this is not surprising given the fact that these concepts are so elastic, multiple and ill-defined as to make it hard to attach literal meaning to them.[16]

Now, this insistence on a fixed, literal meaning would certainly be useful if we were trying to figure out the terms of a spirituality from above, as a clear system of duties and responsibilities according to which we could then strive to live, to provide us with the psychological strength to resist the visceral desires involved in the first temptation of Christ, or as the platform of agreement around which this or that political group could cohere. However, insofar as we are using language as a mode of the spirituality from below, the elastic, multiple, and undefined nature of religious language actually becomes one of its strengths, opening up a field of discourse somewhere between clarity and mystery, *whatness* and *thatness*, a field within which people can help each other in their struggles toward self-knowledge. After all, it certainly seems as though the myth is saying *something*, but this hidden meaning only comes to light through a practice of interpretation, and any one interpretation never entirely exhausts the expressive potential of the mythic vocabulary.[17]

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[16] Grayling, *The God Argument*, 4.

[17] In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes an interesting point concerning the relationship between sanity, madness, and mythology: "What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination, is not his critical powers, but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance and, as Malebranche said speaking of Adam, touching him only with respect. What brings about both hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space directly experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception and by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers. … In order to realize what is the meaning of mythical or schizophrenic space, we have no means other than that of resuscitating in ourselves, in our present perception, the relationship of the subject and his world which analytical reflection does away with" (Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 339-40). The "sane man" in this passage would be Hume's "honest gentleman," who protects himself against delirium by "everyday perception and by objective thought." Philosophical consciousness, meanwhile, would reconnect with these repressed levels of awareness, described by Merleau-Ponty in a language that links the religious with the insane. Hume also experiences philosophical consciousness as reconnecting him to this mythic insanity. However, this encounter prompts him to reject philosophy and religion in favor of the common sense of an average gentleman. By my argument, the *reason* Hume's experience was so overwhelming was that his practice was incorrect. He progressed too deep too fast, without first constructing a proper foundation for the journey. Thus, against Merleau-Ponty, I would argue that, besides trying to resuscitate in

My own approach to mythic language combines Kirkland's sense of myth as revealing its subject matter as distant and mysterious, with Conway's sense of myth as "essentially polysemic," opening up an "apparently endless interplay of associative connections." This polysemic character of mythic language allows many different views of reality to be expressed through it—and when we translate our own worldview into this language, we thereby open ourselves to the mysterious and distant reality to which the myth hearkens. More importantly, however, different people will interpret the same story in radically different ways, and by comparing our own interpretation to those of other people, we gain insight not only into alternative ways of approaching the story, but also into the limits of our own view of reality. From here, the process of trying to make sense of these alternatives in light of our own interpretation, and then re-engaging with the original myth in light of this new expanded perspective, functions in a way similar to Rorty's kneading of his sense of self through alternative "final" vocabularies. In this way, as our linguistically mediated sense of self-identity becomes softer through this kneading, the dark repressed emotional energy that tends to collect beneath fixed, rigid interpretations, can emerge slowly and safely into the light and be dissolved.

From the perspective of the spirituality from above, the presence of ambiguous mythic language within sacred texts helps keep this stabilizing mode of spirituality from becoming rigid. On the other hand, from the perspective of the spirituality from below, it would be this interplay of sameness and difference—the same myth and our different understandings of it across time—that allows our engagement with the shadow to remain under control. Thus, unlike the disenchantment thesis, which calls for one decisive leap out of our entire previous vision of reality, a move from "all" to "nothing" (which could easily unleash an overwhelming torrent of emotional energy), in this practice of interpretation, we would be working *through* our previous visions, replacing the "all to nothing" of disenchantment with a more prosaic and controlled

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ourselves the "oneness of man and the world" in "our present perception," it is also possible to work through a practice of mythic interpretation. In this way, we would be able to reconnect to this deep "rooting of things in our body" without having to abandon our "sane" practice of "analytical reflection" and "everyday perception" —without having to enter the thoroughly dangerous realms of "delirium or hallucination," the "schizophrenic space" in which the boundaries between self and world, subject and object, begin to dissolve. Indeed, this very way of framing the distinction between the sanity of analytical perception and the delirium of the mythic world would actually be a false appearance created when we follow the spiritual practice of Hume, taking the perspective of "everyday perception" as the ultimate standard of truth. The reality to which the myth hearkens is, in reality, not the world of the schizophrenic but rather the world of the divine, which would only manifest as delirium and hallucination to those who have entered it improperly.

"some to some," allowing the same negative emotional energy to emerge, but slowly, without decimating our capacity to control it. Basically, if the practice of disenchantment would move into the abyss by negating the tradition, the alternative practice of interpretation I am describing would move into the abyss by passing *through* the tradition.

There is a Hasidic interpretation of the ten commandments that perfectly encapsulates the way this latter transition would work. A rabbi has just returned home from a journey to the school of his spiritual master. The rabbi's father-in-law asks him how they teach the Torah differently over there, and the rabbi replies with a question of his own: "How do you here interpret 'thou shalt not steal'?" The old man gives the obvious answer: "That we shall not steal from our fellow men. That's perfectly clear." To this, the rabbi offers a surprising response: "We don't need to be told that any more. In Kotzk this is interpreted to mean: You shall not steal from yourself."[18] With this reinterpretation, the Hasidic rabbi accomplishes the transition from *Proverbs* to *Ecclesiastes*, the movement from the initial stage of spiritual life, wherein the moral commandment is interpreted in the way that most of us probably assumed was so clear that it did not even require thought, and into the next phase of spiritual life, which opens up through a new interpretation of the same old text, an interpretation that transforms the clarity of the moral command into a riddle that calls for even further interpretive work. After all, what does it even mean to "steal from yourself"? —and how can I stop doing it if I do not even know what I am doing?

In sections four and five, I will argue that engaging with this final question will take us beyond the dialectical tension between the first and second temptations of Christ—the tension between what we commonly call "religion" and what we commonly call "atheism" —and into the predicament described by the third temptation, which Ricoeur refers to with the word "faith," and which Origen presents as the third phase of spiritual life, the *Song of Songs*, or the story of Jacob wrestling alone all night with God on the far banks of the Jordan. Before presenting this interpretation, however, I will first offer a few concrete demonstrations of this practice of mythic interpretation. Thus, in section two, I will contrast Carl Sagan's interpretation of *Genesis* to that of the Hasidic masters, and in section three I will contrast my own interpretation of the crucifixion to that of Žižec. On the one hand, these examples will help illustrate how mythic discourse can bridge the gulf between normal life and the abyss. On the other hand, however,

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[18] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 286.

they will also prepare a more fertile symbolic vocabulary through which to articulate my own reading of the third and final temptation of Christ, as the final topic of this dissertation.

2. Contrasting Interpretations of *Genesis*

According to Carl Sagan, the story of our expulsion from the garden of Eden describes the emergence of science from the mire of a stultifying tradition:

> Despite the determined resistance of every age, it is very much to our credit that we have allowed ourselves to follow the evidence, to draw conclusions that at first seem daunting: a Universe so much larger and older that our personal experience is dwarfed and humbled, a Universe in which, every day, suns are born and worlds obliterated, a Universe in which humanity, newly arrived, clings to an obscure clod of matter.
>
> How much more satisfying had we been placed in a garden custom-made for us, its other occupants put there for us to use as we saw fit. There is a celebrated story in the Western tradition like this, except that not quite everything was there for us. There was one particular tree of which we were not to partake, a tree of knowledge. Knowledge and understanding and wisdom were forbidden to us in this story. We were starving for knowledge—created hungry, you might say. This was the origin of all our troubles. In particular, it is why we no longer live in a garden: We found out too much. So long as we were incurious and obedient, I imagine, we could console ourselves with our importance and centrality, and tell ourselves that we were the reason the Universe was made. As we began to indulge our curiosity, though, to explore, to learn how the Universe really is, we expelled ourselves from Eden. Angels with a flaming sword were set as sentries at the gates of Paradise to bar our return. The gardeners became exiles and wanderers. Occasionally we mourn that lost world, but that, it seems to me, is maudlin and sentimental. We could not happily have remained ignorant forever.[19]

With this, Sagan is basically translating the historical narrative of scientific culture into the poetic symbols of the *Genesis* myth. Thus, for Sagan, our desire for scientific knowledge slowly undermined the traditional fairy-tales, replacing the comfortable garden of tradition with the existentially uncomfortable truth of the abyss. As we saw in chapter three, this view is similar to the 'view from infinity' offered in *Ecclesiastes*, which this modern version interprets as an unprecedented possibility provided by modern astronomy. Richard Dawkins makes a similar move in the aptly titled *River out of Eden*: "nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither

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[19] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 56-57.

good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous—indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose."[20] By this interpretation, the tree of knowledge of good and evil would be revealing that good and evil do not *really* exist. Human life, meanwhile, would consist in a struggle not so much to return to a lost paradise as to persist in our courage to eat from the forbidden fruit.

By translating this approach to reality into the symbolic language of the *Genesis* myth, Sagan achieves a number of useful ends. First, he makes his position readily comprehensible to anyone already familiar with the story. At the same time, however, he also opens his view of reality to critique by way of counter-interpretations. The story, in other words, serves a role similar to the role played by definition in formal debate: it provides common ground, allowing different people to hold radically different positions and yet remain mutually comprehensible. As Dennett says *a propos* of his own definition of religion, "the definition is subject to revision, a place to start, not something carved in stone to be defended to the death."[21] In this way, we can understand any particular interpretation of a myth as a place to begin a conversation. Basically, instead of a battle between competing visions of the real *whatness* of the good, we translate our different viewpoints into the weirdly open symbolic language of the myth, and then conduct our conversation within the frame this language provides. The interpretation thereby comes to function something like a Rorschach test: by interpreting the inkblot of *Genesis*, we shed light on both the world and on ourselves, and by engaging with different interpretations, we can thereby help each other notice aspects of reality that might have previously escaped our notice.

In chapter five, I introduced Kant's interpretation of the same story, wherein the Fall is understood as the primordial fact that we *chose* to eat the fruit, thereby sundering ourselves from the rigidity of instinct. Newly aware of our freedom, a knowledge of good and evil became necessary in order to replace the lost certainty once provided by instinct. This knowledge of good and evil, therefore, would be the guidance of a finite *whatness*, a *technē*-like understanding that would help shelter us from the irrevocable *thatness* of our freedom. While this interpretation is certainly very different from Sagan's, it is also able to perform work for Kant, shedding light not only on the difficulties entailed by the condition of freedom, but also on his own larger view of reality. It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of their differing interpretations, both Kant

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[20] Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York, Basic Books, 1995), 95-6.
[21] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9.

and Sagan focus on our consumption of the forbidden fruit as the central detail of the story, the point around which both spin their own particular interpretations of the Fall. This, however, is actually an interpretive decision, one so prevalent in the religious culture of Western Christianity that it often appears essential to the story itself. In Eastern Christianity, however, interpretation often focuses not so much on the eating of the fruit as on the fact that Adam and Eve hid from God afterwards, including the ensuing series of actions whereby they try to evade responsibility for their deeds. On this interpretation, the Fall would be rooted not in the initial act of disobedience, but rather in the series of subsequent actions whereby Adam and Eve attempt to flee from responsibility for what they have done.

In *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Martin Buber presents an interpretation from the Hasidic tradition that focuses not this series of evasions, but on the redemptive moment when Adam recognizes that he has hidden himself. As the story goes, a certain Hasidic rabbi, having been denounced to the government by enemies of Hasidism, is languishing in prison. The rabbi's jailer, noticing that the old man is unusually calm for someone in such a position, decides to question him concerning his understanding of the Bible: "How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: 'Where art thou?'" The jailer is pointing to an apparent rational contradiction in the story: the fact that a supposedly omniscient being is depicted as not knowing some person's whereabouts. The rabbi replies that God is not asking on account of ignorance, but rather in order to prompt Adam to reflect upon his condition: "in every era, God calls to every man: 'Where are you in your world?'" The rabbi then poses this very question to his jailer: "how far have you gotten in your world?"[22] Buber's interpretation of this exchange is worth quoting in full:

> The rabbi's answer means, in effect: "You yourself are Adam, you are the man whom God asks: "Where art thou?" It would thus seem that the answer gives no explanation of the passage as such. In fact, however, it illuminates both the situation of the Biblical Adam and that of every man in every time and in every place. For as soon as the chief hears and understands that the Biblical question is addressed to him, he is bound to realize what it means when God asks: "Where art thou?" whether the question be addressed to Adam or to some other man. In so asking, God does not expect to learn something he does not know; what he wants is to produce an effect in man which can only be produced by just such a question, provided that it reaches man's heart—that man allows it to reach his heart.

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[22] Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Horizon Press, 1953), 130-31.

>Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. Every man hides for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for his life, he turns existence into a system of hideouts. And in thus hiding again and again "from the face of God," he enmeshes himself more and more deeply in perversity. A new situation thus arises, which becomes more and more questionable every day, with every new hideout. This situation can be precisely defined as follows: Man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from Him, he is hiding from himself. True, in him too there is something that seeks him, but he makes it harder and harder for that "something" to find him. This is the situation into which God's question falls. The question is designed to awaken man and destroy his system of hideouts; it is to show man to what pass he has come and to awake in him the great will to get out of it. … Adam faces the Voice, perceives his enmeshment, and avows: "I hid myself"; this is the beginning of man's way. The decisive heart-searching is the beginning of the way in man's life; it is, again and again, the beginning of a human way.[23]

Here, the Fall is not describing some impersonal event that happened in some archaic past, as though God's question were directed at the archetypal Adam, whose sin magically gets passed on to all of his descendants. On the contrary, God's question is now a pan-historical constant, directed to each of us, challenging us to reflect upon the state of our own life.[24] Similar to Sagan's interpretation, of course, we would have expelled ourselves from Eden. However, this state of exile is no longer a triumphant progress from comfortable illusion to difficult scientific truth. Instead, it is a dismal flight *into* comfortable illusion as a way to hide from the unbearable realization of our own responsibility. Shut within this comfortable hideaway, our world becomes smaller and more constricted: we must now avoid people and places that might unleash the emotional energy that we are unwilling to face. Engaging with the Hasidic story, meanwhile, can help dissolve these illusions by prompting reflection. For example, when the Rabbi poses God's simple question to his jailer, he thereby recapitulates for the jailer the existential situation of Adam within the myth—and so too for us, as the effect of this "story within a story" also mimics the relationship between the "real" world we inhabit, as readers, and the world disclosed by the text we are reading. In this way, we too are invited to ponder to what extent we have become like

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[23] Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 133-35.

[24] In *What is Ancient Philosophy*, Pierre Hadot describes a similar set of questions as the origins of the philosophical way of life in antiquity: "Porphyry was perfectly aware that [a philosophical] way of life was radically different from that of the rest of humanity. He is addressing, he says, not people "who practice manual trades or who are athletes, soldiers, sailors, orators, or politicians, … but people who have reflected on the questions, 'Who am I? Where do I come from? Where must I go?' and who, in their diet and in other areas, have established for themselves principles different from those which rule other ways of life." (Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 157-8; the quotation is from Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, I, 27, 1.).

jailers, posing inane rational conundrums to the wise rabbi we have imprisoned in our own hearts. And if, in response to this reflection, we too respond like Adam with the realization that we have hidden ourselves, we too might begin the "heart searching" that Buber describes as "again and again, the beginning of a human way."

Turning our attention back to Sagan, we might note that his interpretation essentially functions as a self-justification: for all his condemnations of the so-called religious pride in locating humanity at the center of the universe, Sagan has unambiguously located his own culture at the pinnacle of human achievement, as though scientific civilization represented the true *whatness* of the good against which all other ways of being human are to be measured. In a sense, the pride of the religious within a spatially conceived universe has simply been replaced by the pride of a historically minded consciousness within the flow of time. Now, one can certainly empathize with the historical roots of Sagan's confidence: modern science, the discoveries of Newton, Darwin, Einstein. It is easy to understand how the startling novelty of these insights might have filled their discoverers with an overwhelming sense of joy and hope at the promise of these new and unprecedented techniques. As pioneers at the edge of an as-yet undiscovered continent, these people would have had no way of knowing whether there were any legitimate limits to their new approach. As such, we can understand why they might have seen fit to reject all traditional modes of knowing, so as to freely explore just how far these new methods could be pushed. This is Sagan's interpretation of the eating of the fruit: as though the thought that this act constitutes a Fall from grace is itself the Fall, against which modern science presents itself as the decisive moment of liberation.[25] In the 21st century, however, it is possible for us to examine the results of

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[25] For a far more virulent expression of the same idea, consider the following passage from Bakunin's *God and the State*: "Jehovah had just created Adam and Eve, to satisfy we know not what caprice; no doubt to while away his time, which must weigh heavy on his hands in his eternal egoistic solitude, or that he might have some new slaves. He generously placed at their disposal the whole earth, with all its fruits and animals, and set but a single limit to this complete enjoyment. He expressly forbade them from touching the fruit of the tree of knowledge. He wished, therefore, that man, destitute of all understanding of himself, should remain an eternal beast, ever on all-fours before the eternal God, his creator and master. But here steps in Satan, the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and emancipator of worlds. He makes man ashamed of his bestial ignorance and obedience; he emancipates him, stamps upon his brow the seal of liberty and humanity, in urging him to disobey and eat of the fruit of knowledge. We know what followed. The good God, whose foresight, which is one of the divine faculties, should have warned him of what would happen, flew into a terrible and ridiculous rage; he cursed Satan, man, and the world created by himself, … as children do when they get angry; and, not content with smiting our ancestors themselves, he cursed them in all the generations to come, innocent of the crime committed by their forefathers. Our Catholic and Protestant theologians look upon that as very profound and very just, precisely because it is monstrously iniquitous and unjust" (Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* 10-11). The point is that our belief in the taboo against eating from the tree of knowledge is the true fall, and we liberate ourselves from this fallen condition by breaching the religious

this initial exuberance, to reflect on where this project has succeeded and where it has failed. Basically, if there are any legitimate limits to the capacity of modern science to disclose truth, these limits could not possibly have been known by the first pioneers to adopt the method. We might agree, therefore, that the fall that comes from eating from the tree of knowledge is inevitable, because you cannot possibly know the limits of something until you have crossed them. However, the fall that comes from hiding from God afterwards is not inevitable, nor are we obliged to continue blindly down the course stamped out for us by the decisions of our ancestors. If, however, as members of the scientific culture, we refuse to reflect on how we might be refusing to answer God's question— "Where art thou" —and instead stubbornly insist on the old dichotomy that scientific culture initially posited between itself and religion, then we would be guilty of the Fall right now, and it would be neither maudlin nor sentimental to mourn it.[26]

3. Žižec's Interpretation of the Crucifixion and the Fall

In chapter one, I offered an interpretation of the crucifixion in terms of the rhetoric of suffering. In short, I argued that Jesus' crucifixion satisfies the rhetorical conditions necessary to persuasively argue that we should indeed turn the other cheek when we are struck. More precisely, by publically forgiving his torturers even as they torture him to death, Jesus becomes the best possible speaker of the same essential claim that Socrates lived and died upholding: that it is better to suffer than to inflict injustice, even unto the point of death. Following this, I

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taboos that constitute our bondage. This is effectively another version of the "all to nothing" transition implied by disenchantment. Against this, I argue that *some* of the taboos we inherited from our cultural habituation are indeed unjust, created by the ideological God of the powerful; however, *some* of the taboos are just and useful, as the simple moral goodness we should practice before descending into the abyss. I will argue that the third temptation of Christ is describing the existential choice that manifests itself when we become consciously aware of how power has *already* corrupted our habituated understanding of the *whatness* of the good: we must courageously reject this corruption in favor of a mysterious and undefined *thatness*.

[26] Here is another interesting interpretation of Genesis from the Hasidic masters: "Zusya once asked his brother, wise Rabbi Elimelekh: 'Dear brother, in the Scriptures we read that the souls of all men were comprised in Adam. So we too must have been present, when he ate the apple. I do not understand how I could have let him eat it! And how could you have let him eat it?' Elimelekh replied: 'We had to just as all had to. For had he not eaten, the poison of the snake would have remained within him in all eternity. He would always have thought: 'All I need do is eat of this tree and I shall be as God—all I need do is eat of this tree, and I shall be as God'" (Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, 243-44). I include this only to reiterate that the myth is meant to be polysemic: the purpose of our engagement with the myth is not to discover the one true meaning, but rather to provide us with a common language through which to communicate thoughts that might otherwise remain unspeakable.

suggested that, within the symbolic universe of the Bible, Jesus' death also satisfies the rhetorical conditions necessary for us suffering mortals to trust and accept God's vision of the world as we find it at the beginning of *Genesis*—that it is fundamentally good. I have described this fundamental goodness through a number of different vocabularies: as a *thatness* of the good that transcends our finite vision of its *whatness*, as a Radical Hope that still obtains when all our finite hopes have ceased to make sense, or as a choice to adhere to the ontology of mystery as opposed to the ontology of war.

In works like *The Monstrosity of Christ* and *God in Pain*, Slavoj Žižec offers an interpretation of the crucifixion in which he essentially translates his own philosophy into the symbolic language of Christianity. In short, Žižec argues that what dies on the cross is not God the Son but rather God the Father—that, with the crucifixion, we "lose the transcendent God guaranteeing the meaning of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings" and are thereby "left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of god himself."[27] As a concrete example of what he means, Žižec makes reference to the mental collapse that befell some members of the Communist party after Khrushchev's 1956 speech, in which the new leader of the Soviet Union denounced the crimes of Stalin:

> the moment cracks appear in their ideological protective shield, the weight of what they had done became unbearable to many individual Communists, since they had to confront their acts as their own, with no cover in a higher Reason of History. This is why, after Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's crimes, many cadres committed suicide: they had not learned anything new during that speech, all the facts were more or less known to them, they had just been deprived of the historical legitimization of their crimes by the Communist historical Absolute.[28]

In more general language, Žižec notes that most people require some kind of justificatory narrative before they become willing to kill: "it is difficult for the vast majority to overcome their revulsion at the torture and killing of another human being. The vast majority of people are spontaneously moral: torturing or killing another human being is deeply traumatic for them." In order to bring themselves to commit such acts, therefore, most people require "a larger 'sacred'

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[27] Žižec, "Fear of Four Words: A Modern Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity," in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009), 25.
[28] Žižec, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 46.

Cause … which makes petty individual concerns about killing seem trivial." Without this sacred

Cause, meanwhile, "we would have to feel all the burden of what we did, with no Absolute upon

whom to off-load our ultimate responsibility."[29] As such, when those Stalinist Communists who

killed in the name of their ideal were deprived of the psychological protection of their sacred

Cause, they were suddenly forced to bear the weight of everything they had done. Their

murderous deeds could no longer be justified as in the service of the glorious Cause, but stood

revealed as gratuitous and ultimately meaningless murder.

According to the Hasidic interpretation of *Genesis*, Žižec here provides a good example of what

can happen in the moment we realize that we have hidden from the face of God. In this case, the

sacred Cause (God the Father) would be the hideout, and coming out of this hideout (the

crucifixion) would mean coming to feel the weight of whatever crimes we may have committed

in the name of this Cause. On Žižec's account, of course, this loss of belief in the sacred Cause

represents the death of God the Father, such that Christianity becomes the paradoxical "atheist"

religion, the religion that thrusts its believers out of the shelter of a *technē*-like vision of the

whatness of the good, and into the unbearable abyss of freedom and absolute responsibility.

Essentially, Žižec's interpretation would be a translation of the disenchantment thesis into the

symbolism of the crucifixion—except that, unlike a naïve proponents of disenchantment like

Carl Sagan, Žižec is intimately aware that the dilemma of mutilation does not derive from

specifically *religious* versions of morality, but from morality *per se*. This is why Žižec is

unwilling to mitigate the void by means of new ideals like progress, technology, or the

colonization of space.

Žižec also offer an interpretation of the Fall that follows the lineaments of Kant's approach,

except that Žižec locates the disaster in a different place:

> when … we withdraw from the dizziness of freedom by seeking a firm support in
> the order of finitude, *this withdrawal itself is the true Fall*. More precisely: this
> withdrawal is the very withdrawal into the constraints of the externally imposed
> prohibitory Law, so that the freedom which then arises is freedom to violate the
> Law, freedom caught up in the vicious cycle of Law and its transgression, where
> Law engenders the desire to "free oneself" by violating it, and "sin" is the

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[29] Žižec, *God in Pain*, 45.

> temptation inherent to the Law—the ambiguity of attraction and repulsion which characterizes anxiety is now exerted not directly by freedom but by sin.[30]

Here, the Fall is no longer the initial free choice that exposes us to the abyss of freedom, but rather the subsequent imposition of a standard of good and evil onto the abyss, which then becomes the anchor for a lopsided spirituality from above—not just a sacred Cause for the sake of which we are willing to kill, but also a sacred Cause that ironically gives rise to its own opposite through the logic of the dilemma of mutilation, whereby the attempt to live up to an ideal of strict moral purity ironically only strengthens the shadow of repressed desire. For example, when Žižec turns his attention to the idea that we should love our neighbors, he understands it as a spirituality from above that tragically exacerbates the problem it is trying to solve, by strengthening the perverse desire to enact our freedom by torturing and killing our neighbors: "Is there anything more terrifying … than the 'law of love'? A law which enjoins me to love my neighbors? Will such a law, on account of its very form, not give rise to a desire to hate and hurt one's neighbors?"[31] The crucifixion, in this context, would be the shattering realization that destroys the Law, thereby destroying our capacity to believe in any kind of repressive moral system, and in this way thrusting us irrevocably back into the abyss of freedom. Again, this is the generic move of naturalist culture, which holds that spiritual Enlightenment consists in passing through a one-way-door from the realm of a traditionally proscribed *Proverbs* into the unpleasant truth of the abyss of *Ecclesiastes*—except that in Žižec's case, he refuses to mitigate this descent by means of some new ersatz version of *Proverbs*, like the myth of progress, because he knows that this will simply reproduce the same spiritual dynamic that the ideal of disenchantment was supposed to untangle. In this sense, Žižec is making moves within the same spiritual terrain that Nietzsche explored over a century previously, as the attempt to prompt naturalist culture to take its own ideal of disenchantment seriously. My critique of Žižec's approach would therefore echo my critique of Nietzsche. Basically, passing from a lop-sided spirituality from above to a lop-sided spirituality from below does not solve our problem, but instead simply alters the nature of our predicament: instead of morality and its concomitant dilemma of mutilation, we will now have to grapple with the problem of nihilism, the dyscatastrophe of philosophy that occurs when all belief in meaning, morality, and justice

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[30] Slavoj Žižec, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009), 89-90.
[31] Slavoj Žižec, "Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 282.

collapses within a practice of disenchantment that rejects both the *whatness* and the *thatness* of the good.

Rather than focusing on the critique, however, I would instead like to focus on the benefits that come from the fact that Žižec translated his philosophy into the symbolic vocabulary of this particular mythic world. In short, this helps make his insights more readily accessible to others who are already familiar with this vocabulary. In particular, Žižec has a very useful understanding of the relationship between political violence and the hardening of a lopsided spirituality from above, which will form the basis of my own interpretation of the third temptation of Christ. Again, according to Žižec, once we have killed in the name of our ideals, it becomes very difficult psychologically to doubt these ideals, because doubt will now entail facing the uncomfortable emotions involved in the thought that we may have killed for nothing.[32] It is important to note, however, that these observations concerning individual psychology do not capture the full scope of the predicament—because we do not come up with our ideals and our visions of the good on our own, but rather receive our first understanding of these things from our community, our tribe, our culture. In short, we get our initial training in *Proverbs*, our initial induction into a system of spirituality from above, from our community, and this means that we also inherit the features of our community's understanding of morality that have been hardened by its history of political violence, its history of harnessing moral ideals to sacred Causes, which has allowed its members to justify the slaughter and depredation of others.

To be clear, this does not change the fact that the foundation of any coherent spirituality is akin to the kind we find in *Proverbs*, understood as the practice of moral purity, the cultivation of a habitual repression of our lawless desires. It rather points to a new way to understand the problem inherent in any attempt to view religion in terms of *Proverbs* alone. Simply put, these moral prescriptions will have been forged by two opposing principles: first, the legitimate spiritual end of helping us reign in our lawless desires; second, the illegitimate end of transforming our moral system into a sacred Cause that helps us repress our feelings of compassion and concern for the wellbeing of others, in order to justify their violent oppression.

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[32] This point resonates with Arendt's descriptions of how the Socratic moral thesis relates to the activity of thinking: "For the thinking ego and its experience, conscience that 'fills a man full of obstacles' is a side effect. No matter what thought-trains the thinking ego thinks through, the self that we all are must take care not to do anything that would make it impossible for the two-in-one to be friends and live in harmony. … Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home" (Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 191).

Alternatively, we might say that the interpretation of justice put forth by the ontology of war, whereby our sense of justice is ultimately seen as nothing more than a weapon that allows a band of thieves to cooperate so as to better inflict injustice on others, is indeed partially true: our culturally mediated training in the *whatness* of the good will always be partially corrupted by the history of violence that has formed our cultural world. In the final analysis, therefore, part of the purpose of spiritual religion would be to bring accordance between "normal" life and the ontology of mystery, by helping us discern how our own commitment to the *whatness* of the good has been hardened by such violence. Such discernment, I suggest, provides a key spiritual resource in our efforts to cease participating in the façade of justice that such violence has created—and which, by participating in, we cause harm not only to others but also to ourselves.

This last point brings this entire line of reflection back into the context of the Socratic moral thesis. In short, I will argue that we become unhappy not only on account of the injustices we ourselves have committed, but also on account of the injustices that we are unconsciously participating in by virtue of having been enculturated within a culture, riven by a history of violence. In order to become happy, therefore, we must figure out where this corruption has occurred, where our legitimate love of goodness has been harnessed into a sacred Cause—and we must then refuse this corruption. In the following two sections, I will interpret the third temptation of Christ along these lines, as describing the effort necessary to resist the seduction of participating in precisely this form of ongoing violence.

4. Interpreting the Third Temptation of Christ

Let us first recapitulate the interpretation of the first two temptations I provided in chapter three. To recall, in the first temptation (Matthew 4:1-4), a famished Jesus resists the tempter's directive to turn stones into bread by invoking the support of Scripture as a traditional authority. As such, Jesus' resistance to this first temptation entails commitment to a traditional approach to the *whatness* of morality as a way to help control his visceral desires. This commitment, however, immediately exposes Jesus to the danger of the second temptation (Matthew 4:5-7), in which the tempter himself invokes the authority of Scripture in order to entice Jesus to test God's promise

to keep him safe. Here, the tempter can be read as encouraging Jesus to bend the scriptural message to make it serve Jesus' own sacred Cause, a conversion which, as we have seen, can in the extreme even be used to justify murder. Jesus resists the second temptation by recognizing the ambiguity of the traditional authority, contesting the tempter's reading of Scripture by appealing to another part of it. In so doing, Jesus recognizes that the traditional authority cannot be read as a simple guide to the *whatness* of morality. Indeed, as we saw above, even an apparently obvious commandment like "Thou shalt not steal" is open to the serious play of interpretative transformation.

For an atheist philosopher like Grayling, this recognition of the essential ambiguity of tradition is understood as vaulting us into the void of atheism. Against this, I have argued that this recognition can instead be used to open up a distinction between the *thatness* and the *whatness* of the good, in which our acceptance of the *thatness* of the good provides a field of possibility within which we can knead our understanding of its *whatness*, and thereby allow those dark emotions that tend to calcify beneath inflexible interpretations to surface and dissolve. Again, the goal of this practice of open interpretation is not to uncover the one true interpretation, the correct understanding of the law that we could then simply follow and thus be assured of our holiness. On the contrary, the goal is to knead our understanding of the Sacred, so as to release these repressed emotions, and thereby make our understanding of the Sacred more porous to the actual Sacred, which, through this pedagogy, one will eventually come to find is everywhere.

In this context, I will now argue that the third temptation (Matthew 4:8-11) introduces a choice that will manifest for us each and every time we allow this hardness to soften:

> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.[33]

As I argued in the previous section, the spirituality of *Proverbs*, which gives us the power to resist lawless desire, is always already distorted by the history of political violence. In terms of the Hasidic interpretation of *Genesis*, this means that we are hiding from God not only for the

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[33] Matthew 4:8-11.

crimes we may have committed ourselves, but also for the crimes committed by our cultural forebears in the name of the ideals that we ourselves have inherited from our culture—ideals that we ourselves are attached to in both our emotions and our aspirations. By recognizing the ambiguity of the traditional authority—and thereby passing through the second temptation—we expose ourselves to the repressed emotional energy that history has lodged beneath our own ideals. This is what is being described in the third temptation of Christ: we first come to see how our understanding of the *whatness* of the good has been harnessed by greed for power and fear of death, and we then choose to allow this corrupted understanding to dissolve back into the infinite mystery of *thatness*. It is in this third temptation, in other words, that we must decide, in terms of concrete decisions concerning the way we live, whether we will adhere to the ontology of war or to the ontology of mystery—in the context of a concrete realization concerning the way our habits have been formed by a vision of the good that has been corrupted by flattery in the service of power.

Now, obviously, just as with the story of our exile from Eden and the story of the crucifixion, the third temptation can be interpreted in many different ways. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, we find the Grand Inquisitor's famous interpretation, whereby the three temptations represent successive ways that Jesus could have tried to bring salvation to the human race. The first temptation represents salvation through food, "the banner of earthly bread, which you rejected in the name of freedom"[34]; the second temptation represents salvation through miraculous protection, which Jesus also rejects in favor of "the free decision of the heart."[35] Finally, the third temptation represents the temptation of establishing a single world government to which all people could surrender their conscience: "By accepting that third counsel of the mighty spirit, you would have accomplished all that man seeks on earth, that is to say, whom to worship, to whom to entrust his conscience and how at last to unite all in a common, harmonious, and incontestable ant-hill, for the need of universal unity is the third and last torment of men. Mankind as a whole has always striven to organize itself into a world state."[36] Here, the third temptation appears as the offer of Jesus transforming himself into a sacred Cause to which individual humans could forever cede their individual responsibility. Then

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[34] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 298.
[35] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 300.
[36] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 302.

again, this interpretation might not be entirely trustworthy, as it is spoken by a character who explicitly states that he and his brethren have taken the devil up on his final offer: "we have taken the sword of Caesar and, having taken it, we of course rejected you and followed *him*."[37] We might therefore treat Dostoevsky's treatment of the three temptations here as a study of how the sequence would appear to someone who has decisively failed the third and final test.

In his book *Temptation*, Diogenes Allen interprets the three temptations as "the gateway we are to enter, if we are to begin to be religious"[38] —with the first temptation involving the renunciation of material goods, the second involving the renunciation of security, and the third as the renunciation of prestige and social standing. Thus, if the Grand Inquisitor views the three temptations as special problems that would only be faced by Jesus, the historically unique son of God, Allen views them as special problems that would be faced only by those who have begun their spiritual journey towards God. Against both these readings, my own interpretation would suggest that the three temptations represent three successive spiritual problems that everyone must face, regardless of whether or not they are religious: 1) Are we going to be slaves to our visceral desires? 2) Are we going to be slaves to an unquestioned tradition? and 3) Are we going to be slaves to political power? On my reading, these problems are not the exclusive domain of those who have embarked on the search for a mysterious and hidden God, nor are they the exclusive concern of Jesus. They are instead three existential tensions within which all of us will have to find our way—and the responses that Jesus gives to these tensions provide us with a riddle through which we might discern our own unique path through the labyrinth of human life.

Besides engaging with other interpretations of this story, we might also reflect on how the story of Jesus compares to other stories of temptation. In the stories of the Hasidic masters, for example, there are many descriptions of the temptations that accost those who walk the spiritual path. For example, it is said that "[w]hen the Evil Urge tries to tempt man to sin, it tempts him to become all too righteous"[39] —a warning that echoes my own interpretation of the second temptation. Another passage tells the story of a rabbi upbraiding one of his brethren for bragging about successfully refusing the temptation of a bribe: "God has mercy when he leads every man into the temptation befitting his inner level: the common man into petty, the superior man into

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[37] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 302.
[38] Diogenes Allen, *Temptation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1986), 14.
[39] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, 153.

grave, temptation. The fact that you were exposed to so slight a temptation is a sign that you have not yet reached one of the upper rungs to perfection. That is why I blessed you asking God to let you ascend to them and be found worthy of a greater test."[40] This answer functions as a warning against developing a sense of pride in one's own spiritual accomplishments. By this logic, the fact that Jesus is tempted by all the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor would be a sign that he had climbed to a very high rung of perfection indeed!

Islam also contains stories of holy people being tempted by the devil. For example, in Maulana Aftab-ud-Din Ahmad's introductory comments on his own translation of 12th century Sufi mystic Al-Gilani's *Futuh al-Ghaib* ("The Revelation of the Unseen"), Ahmad describes the story of Al-Gilani's encounter with the devil:

> [O]ne day the Devil or Satan appeared before him, introduced himself as Gabriel and said that he had brought from Allah the *buraq* (that is, the lightning conveyance on which the Holy Prophet rode to the heavens on the night of his spiritual ascension called Mi-raj) as he had been invited by Him to be in his august Presence in the highest heaven. To this the Shaikh promptly replied that the speaker of these words before him could be no other than the devil because neither Gabriel nor the *buraq* would come to the world for any person other than the Holy Prophet Muhammad. Satan, however, had still another missile to throw. He said, "Well, Abdul Qadir, you have saved yourself by dint of your knowledge."
> "Be off, Satan," the Saint retorted, "do not tempt me any further; it is not through my knowledge but through the grace of Allah that I have escaped from your trap."[41]

The idea that the devil would appear as an angel recalls Luther's horrifying realization that the God he worshipped might be the devil in disguise. Both of these temptations, meanwhile, are appealing to Al-Gilani's pride—first, that he is a holy person of equal stature to Muhammed, and then that it is his own knowledge of spiritual reality that has enabled him to see through the devil's tricks. In the case of the temptations of Jesus, the first two could arguably be seen as appeals to his pride, as the devil opens his enticement here with the words "If you are the Son of God," as though this special status means that Jesus should be able to accomplish some special miracle. In the third temptation, meanwhile, the interpretation could go in two different directions: we could say that it is pride that the Devil is appealing to when he offers all the

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[40] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*, 111.
[41] Aftab-ud-Din Ahmad, "A Life-Sketch of Ghauth Al-Azam Mohy-ud-Din Sayyid Abdul Qadir Gilani," in *Revelations of the Unseen* (https://archive.org/stream/QadirRevelationsUnseen), 15-6.

kingdoms of the world and all their splendor; on the other hand, however, it cannot be pride that is at stake, given that both options involve worshipping something other than oneself—either the devil for power and glory, or else God for no reward at all.

My own interpretation of the three temptations develops from Origen's account of the division of spiritual life into three stages—*Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*—as a way to describe the relationship between morality, the abyss of ontological anxiety, and the abyss of ontological love. Origen insists that this triplex division is found in many places in the Bible; indeed, I have interpreted the three temptations as essentially another example of this same pattern, with a relatively fixed and simple understanding of morality giving way to an awareness of ambiguity of the traditional teaching, which in turn exposes us to a fundamental choice between serving Satan or serving God, the ontology of war or the ontology of mystery, as these two ontological options manifest in the myriad decisions that make up our everyday experience of life. Origen also suggests that the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, represent these same three stages: obedience, followed by natural science, followed by spiritual insight. According to this characterization, then, the story of Jacob would be another place to look for insight into the logic of the third stage of spiritual life.

Interestingly, the Bible contains two accounts of how Jacob received the name "Israel" from God. In the first account, Jacob has just wrestled with God alone all night on the far banks of the Jordan, having sent all his possessions, and all his family, across the river ahead of him, as gifts to assuage the potentially murderous wrath of his estranged brother Esau. In the morning, the man with whom he had wrestled gives him a new name: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed,"[42] to which Jacob replies: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The next day, when he meets his brother, the two men embrace, and Jacob remarks that seeing his brother's face "is like seeing the face of God."[43] Here, the name "Israel" is rooted in the reconciliation of the bond between the two brothers, the transformation of bonds of hatred into bonds of love, which appears to be somehow equivalent to healing the fractured relationship between humanity and God.

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[42] *Genesis*, 32:28.
[43] *Genesis*, 33:10.

The second renaming occurs shortly thereafter, following the first genocide of the Bible. Jacob's daughter Dinah has been raped by Shechem. The rapist, however, then falls in love with Dinah and decides that he wants to marry her. Shechem and his father go to Jacob and make a proposal: Shechem will marry Dinah, and the two peoples will then become one people. Jacob and his sons agree, but stipulate that for such a union to occur, the people of Shechem will have to be circumcised in accordance with the covenant of Abraham. An agreement is reached. All the males of Shechem's city are circumcised. Then, on "the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males." After this, "the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. … All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey."[44] The second account of Jacob's renaming occurs immediately after this slaughter. The entire family journeys to Bethel, and Jacob engages in a public religious ceremony, during which he has a vision in which God says to him: "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name."[45]

These two visions of the origin of the name "Israel" provide another way of understanding the choice that Jesus is offered in the third temptation. The traditional authority that binds us together as a single group, under the name "Israel," turns out to be undergirded by two utterly opposing spiritual principles: the practice whereby each of us wrestles with God, alone, on the far banks of the river, having temporarily given up all of our worldly possessions—and the practice whereby we justify acts of revenge and genocide by transforming them into a sacred Cause that binds a group together beneath a single unquestionable faith. In our own time, we might say that the meaning of the word "religion" is cut down the middle by these two utterly opposing origins, and that it is these two origins that come to light in the third temptation: between an authentic love of God, on the one hand, and a love of power that masquerades as a love of God in order to justify itself, on the other. The predicament of the third temptation involves seeing this conflict for what it is, and then choosing to follow the authentic love instead of its corrupted version.

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[44] *Genesis*, 34:25-29.
[45] *Genesis*, 35:10.

Now, in cultures in which "goodness" is defined in terms of words like "religion," "faith," and "God," those who wish to adopt the appearance of goodness in order to further their own nefarious intentions will, of necessity, adopt these terms as part of their disguise. However, in a culture in which "goodness" has come to be defined by a new set of terms—words like "science," "technology," and "progress," or else, in criticism of this set, by new words like "environmentalism," "ecological," and "green" —the same dynamic will begin to operate within the new vocabulary. In other words, just as the meaning of the name "Israel" is cut by a hidden battle between two opposing origins, so will the meaning of our new set of terms become the site of a battle between those who have a legitimate love of the good, people who are seriously striving to make the world a better place, and those who are pretending to do so in order to further their own selfish projects. Thus will the corporation that is really concerned only for its own profit justify its depredations in terms of the progress of science or harmony with the environment, just as similar institutions within religious cultures would have justified themselves with terms like "faith" and "God."

However, with regard to the traditional vocabulary, we have the benefit of people like Socrates, Jesus, and the Hasidic masters, whose message has been available for thousands of years, to help us see through this corruption by helping us understand the ambiguity and polysemy of these "words of power." These sages help us see that the ambiguous, polysemic, and mysterious quality of religious language, rather than providing evidence that religion is weak, primitive, and irrational, actually provide evidence that such religious vocabulary has *advanced*, allowing it to function as guidance for both the spirituality from above *and* the spirituality from below.[46] The ambiguity necessary to support both of these spiritual paths is part of this vocabulary's strength, as it is the interaction between these two sides of religious life, *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, the moral commandment and the mystery, which gives rise to the possibility of real virtue. I am speaking here about the possibility, in the context of the way we actually lead our lives, to opt for the ontology of mystery over the ontology of war, the possibility to renounce a corrupted vision of the *whatness* of morality while continuing to accept the *thatness* of the good. Ultimately, I am speaking about the faith that makes it possible to endure the storms of negative emotion that

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[46] The so-called "postmodern" turn, through which ideals like "science" and "progress" are made ambiguous and odd, could be read as a movement in the same direction. The postmodern philosopher encourages the same suspicion of the new naturalist ideals as the Hasidic masters—and Jesus—encouraged with respect to the old religious ideals.

might lurk beneath the corrupted moral vision, in order to receive grace from a goodness that always lies beyond it.

To be clear, if the dilemma of mutilation applies to the attempt to live up to moral ideals of selfless virtue, it would apply *even more* to the attempt to live up to moral ideals that have been hijacked by Sacred Causes in the service of power. In this latter case, the struggle to live up to our vision of morality would involve acting contrary to the mysterious *thatness* of the good, as the desire to become holy through our own effort ends up transforming us into demons. Perhaps the problem could be put as follows: to some degree, we all first gain the spiritual power to restrain our visceral desires by being habituated to a tradition that has already been corrupted by a 'devilish' interpretation (i.e. converted into a Sacred Cause); this means, therefore, that renouncing this interpretation will involve exposing ourselves to a storm of unrestrained desire. In the predicament of the third temptation, however, instead of reining these desires back under the control of a new moral ideal, we instead release them to the mysterious *thatness* of God. If we are successful in this practice, the devil of the shadow-side, as well as the devil of the corrupted moral ideal, will leave us and—as the story goes—be replaced by angels.

Finally, to return briefly to the terms of Žižec's interpretation of Christianity, my critique of this mimics a critique I leveled against Sagan's understanding of the void in chapter three: just as Sagan thinks that wisdom involves pulling the "I am but dust and ashes" card in all situations, and rejecting the "I am made in the image of God" card as an infantile absurdity, so is Žižec interpreting all religion in terms of the second origin story of "Israel," as a justification for genocide, and then rejecting religion itself on these grounds. With this move, however, Žižec also loses access to the spirituality described in the first origin story—which is basically describing the proper way to engage with the path downwards. Žižec is therefore left with an unnecessarily difficult existential situation: an irrevocable awareness of the essential immorality of morality (as he sees it), but without any idea whatsoever for how to solve this problem. Žižec thus ends up impaling himself on one horn of the dilemma that Charles Taylor indicates at the end of his paean for moral articulacy:

> if reconciliation is impossible, then articulacy will buy us much greater inner
> conflict. This might be thought a risk. But even in this case, we would have at

least put an end to the stifling of the spirit and so to the atrophy of so many of our spiritual sources which is the bane of modern naturalist culture.[47]

Žižec's articulacy has indeed purchased him "much greater inner conflict," and his philosophy amounts to a claim that we must bear this inner conflict as the price for a just and peaceful world. We thus end up with the same naturalist call for courage in the face of the abyss, except that Žižec is actually practicing what he preaches, actually standing in the abyss, enduring the storms of the infinite that arguably drove Nietzsche mad and that terrified poor Hume into seeking shelter within the common sense of an honest Scottish gentleman. However, because Žižec has translated his philosophy into the symbolic language of the Christian religion, he has thereby exposed himself to counter-interpretations of this same religious vocabulary. Thus, by way of practical advice to someone like Žižec, who one could argue has dipped too deeply into the practice of *Ecclesiastes*, spiritual health would seem to lie in the practice of *Proverbs*, a staid and simple moral goodness—not because doing so will save the world from the excesses of Capitalism, but because doing so will bring balance back to his own lopsided practice of the spirituality *from below*.

5. The Third Temptation of Christ and the Moral Vocabulary of Naturalism

In the previous section, I introduced my own interpretation of the third temptation of Christ and set it into dialogue with a number of other interpretations, not only of the three temptations but of the concept of temptation in general. In this section, I will bring Plato's vocabulary from the *Gorgias* into dialogue with this interpretation, after which I will level my final critique of naturalism: in short, that since naturalism has now become relevant to political power, the naturalist understanding of reality is now subject to the same cut between appearance and reality that has always afflicted the vocabulary of religion.

In the *Gorgias*, Plato introduces a distinction between "oratory" and "politics." While "politics" refers to the care of the soul "with a view to what's best," "oratory" refers to that part of flattery

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[47] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 107.

that pretends to care for the soul, but which in fact only adopts the appearance of doing so in order to bend our love of justice toward some hidden, nefarious intent. Applying these concepts to the education in virtue we receive from our traditional culture, we might say that the culture that has shaped our desires and aspirations will itself have been shaped partly by "politics" (in Plato's sense) —that is, by people of good will who have some legitimately good ideas about how human beings should be shaped. However, any culture will also be partly shaped by the various possible manifestations of "oratory" —flattery that promotes ultimately vicious ends. On the one hand, this "oratory" could take shape in the efforts to well-intentioned people who have a self-confident belief in their own goodness, but who have fallen victim to a lopsided spirituality from above that hides its own darkness beneath the rigidity of a Sacred Cause. On the other hand, "oratory" could also take shape as the efforts of Machiavellian tricksters who consciously twist the beliefs and desires of their fellow human beings. In terms of this vocabulary, therefore, culture would consist in a perpetual battle between politics, as the good-willed pursuit of what is best, and the roiling hurricane of interests and institutions that struggle to define the *whatness* of the good according to their own benefit. Finally, insofar as our initial training in virtue comes to us through culture, each of us will inherit some version of this hidden battle—not only in our conceptual approach to moral goodness, but more importantly in the way we *feel* these things.

In chapter three, I described how modern naturalist culture strives to solve the predicament of the second temptation of Christ by refusing to acknowledge the authority of tradition, so as to avoid being deceived by some devilish intention masquerading in the clothes of justice. In chapter five, meanwhile, I touched upon Nietzsche's criticism of this vision for its self-performative incoherence: basically, the naturalist apotheosis of scientific truth is itself based on a strenuously defined vision of the *whatness* of morality, which means that this attempt to avoid the second temptation is actually already caught up in the logic of the problem. Now, in light of this distinction between politics and oratory, we can criticize this naturalist program from a more fundamental direction, pertaining not just to the specific ideals of naturalism but rather to the human condition in general: basically, insofar as our desires are shaped by a culture that is itself shaped by a battle between the mysterious reality of justice and its manifold contradictory appearances, we will have *already* been partially seduced by the devil's interpretation of justice, our love of justice will have *already* been partially skewed by nefarious intentions masquerading as the good—with the sacred Cause that justifies political murder as the most extreme

manifestation of this tendency. This means that we cannot avoid the predicament of the second temptation by simply refusing to pay heed to tradition. As humans, we have been born into this predicament, raised within it, educated by it—which means that our freedom does not lie in choosing whether or not we will be deceived by the devil, so to speak, but rather in choosing whether or not we will recognize *that* we have already been deceived, and then choosing whether or not we will do something about it—and if so, what.

For those who live within the *whatness* of the Christian tradition, it is not difficult to find examples of how Christianity was used as a sacred Cause to justify murder. Consider, for example, the 12th century text *In Praise of the New Chivalry*, in which Bernard of Clairvaux provides reasons for why the new martial orders of Christian monks should be ready, with a clear conscience, to battle to the death against the infidel:

> What in fact is there to fear for the man, whether he is living or dying, for whom to live is Christ and for whom it is a gain to die? … And so go forward in safety, knights, and with undaunted souls drive off the enemies of the cross of Christ, certain that neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ, repeating to yourselves in every peril, Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. How glorious are the victors who return from battle! how blessed are the martyrs who die in battle![48]

We might also consider an example from the biography of another crusader, St. Louis, who asserts that "a layman, as soon as he hears the Christian faith maligned should defend it by the sword, with a good thrust in the belly as far as the sword will go."[49] For those operating within a worldview in which words like "religion," "faith," and "holiness" are invested with the aura of goodness, the path downward of spiritual life will involve trying to discern how their understanding of the *whatness* of these terms has been hardened by the historical influence of people like Bernard and St. Louis. And to be perfectly clear, I am not claiming that a pure version of Christianity exists beneath the distortions imposed by a violent fanaticism, which we could define and then follow in uncomplicated obedience; my claim is rather the "religion," at least at this level, consists in a struggle against the violence of history—and that we only succeed in the struggle against such malevolent influences to the extent that we persist in the struggle. In

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[48] Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Chivalry*, quoted in Karen Armstrong, *Holy War*, 209-210.
[49] John of Joinville, *The Life of Saint Louis*, quoted by Karen Armstrong, *Holy War*, 440.

a sense, this is what it would mean for us to wrestle with the angel of God on the far banks of the river.

In this context, the difference between religious culture and scientific culture is nominal. In other words, for those whose culture invests words like "science," "technology," and "progress" with the aura of goodness, the same spiritual practice will involve figuring out how the meaning of these terms is being twisted by the exigencies of power. A good contemporary example of this can be found in Marie-Monique Robin's *The World According to Monsanto*. Robin writes about how Robert Shapiro, CEO of Monsanto from April 1995 until January of 2001, inspired his employees by talking about how Monsanto was "trying to invent some new businesses around the concept of environmental sustainability," about how biotechnology was an "information technology" that would allow us "to increase productivity without abusing nature," and about how "sustainability and development might be compatible" if we can "create value and satisfy people's needs by increasing the information components of what's produced and diminish the amount of stuff."[50] Robin then tells the story of young and idealistic Kirk Azevedo, who bought into this inspiring vision of the *whatness* of the good. In Monsanto, he thought, he had finally found a company that cared about more than mere profit, a company that was sincerely committed to creating a better world for everyone. Once he had been recruited, however, he soon realized that this idealistic rhetoric was actually just a façade used to sell the company to outsiders; within the company itself, Azevedo found the same old esoteric cynicism, the concern for profit above all else, the ontology of war as it manifests itself in the world of business. When Azevedo learned that this concern for profit trumped even the safety of the products he and his team were foisting on the world, he quit. As he put it, "I'm not going to be part of this disaster, from a moral perspective."[51]

With this decision, we can describe Azevedo as having passed the third temptation of Christ. He realized that particular course of action was unjust, and he refused to participate in it. In my language, Azevedo's commitment to the abstract *thatness* of goodness here successfully outstrips his investment in the particular vision (the *whatness*) in which he originally sought to realize it. The other option, in the face of the catastrophic realization that his desire to be good was actually

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[50] Marie-Monique Robin, *The World According to Monsanto* (New York: New Press, 2010),188.
[51] Jeffrey M. Smith, "Monsanto Whistleblower Says Genetically Engineered Crops May Cause Disease," (www.globalresearch.ca/monsanto-whistleblower-says-genetically-engineered-crops-may-cause-disease/3912)

serving a nefarious intent, would have been to abandon his original commitment to the *thatness* of the good, the honest desire to build a better world, in favor of crass selfishness, cynicism, or else the willful blindness that largely characterized those around him. On the terms of the Socratic moral thesis, meanwhile, we could say that Azevedo acted *rationally*: when faced with such a decision, the leap into the *thatness* of the good is the only way to maintain *real* happiness. More precisely, when happiness is understood not from the surface perspective of the idealized self-image, but from the larger perspective of the façade *and* its shadow, those who blind their moral conscience in order to avoid a catastrophic decision are, in reality, only increasing the power of the shadow that they are eventually going to have to confront. The trouble with naturalism, meanwhile, is that it cannot make sense of why someone like Azevedo should sacrifice his own personal wellbeing—and at the extreme, possibly even his life—when faced with this kind of moral dilemma.

With regard to the Socratic moral thesis, my point is that the injustice that makes us miserable lies not only in the conscious intention to cause harm or to profit at the expense of others, but also in the more subtle fact that we have inherited a corrupted understanding of justice from our enculturation within this or that historical tradition. This means that we have already failed to refuse the bribes of the (partially) corrupted institutions within which we have been raised—and indeed, given the cagey nature of bribes, we have probably failed to even realize that we have failed. From this perspective, the predicament of the second temptation would no longer be describing the danger of consciously committing to an ideal that might be disastrously mistaken. The predicament would now be describing the danger of being *unconsciously* oriented to a nexus of aspirations and ambitions that serve nefarious projects without our even realizing it, such that modes of life we take to be "natural" or "good," that appear so obvious that we do not even notice them, could be seen as constructs shaped by the exigencies of power and domination. In other words, even if we avoid the disaster of a passionate commitment to a mistaken ideal, we might very well be unconsciously perpetuating the injustices we have inherited from our culturally conditioned education—and these too would be contributing to our injustice, and hence to the misery of ourselves and of others.

Coming out of this second, subtle kind of injustice would require two complementary commitments: first, a sustained practice of the spirituality from below, through which we

become aware of the places our desires and aspirations have been corrupted by oratory; this practice, however, would be spiritually disastrous if not accompanied by a complementary commitment to fixing the corruptions once we have discerned them. Without this latter commitment, the struggle to discern injustice could potentially give rise to a sense of powerless, despondent cynicism—or, even worse, to the active attempt to exploit these corruptions for our own supposed benefit. Viewed in this light, we would not simply understand the third temptation as describing one decisive choice away from the worship of power and towards the worship of God. Instead, we would come to understand that this part of the story describes the terms of a choice that we must all face again and again as we become aware of the emotions that lie beneath the frozen contours of our worldview, the naked crags of calcified decisions through which our everyday experience of the world constantly reconstitutes itself. In short, we fail to resist the third temptation each time we evade our responsibility and 'hide from the face of God' (to recall the previous insight from the Hasidic masters) —whether on account of our own actions or on account of the emotions we inherited from our upbringing. Alternatively, we would pass the temptation each time we realized our mistake, and made the leap of faith out of our hideout, into the abyss of freedom, without any foreknowledge of where we might land, guided only by radical hope in the *thatness* of the good.

Each time we encounter this predicament, the terms of the choice will be the same: in the face of a newfound recognition of the way in which our desires and aspirations have been forged by unjust, hidden intentions, we can either persist in this corruption or we can abandon it, even without necessarily knowing where we are going or how we will continue to live. In the language of the third temptation, if we choose the former path, we will be consciously bowing to a devil that we previously only followed unconsciously. If we choose the latter path, we will consciously choosing to worship the mysterious God and serve only him, without any sure knowledge of what this might mean. Passing this predicament, therefore, does not entail replacing one fixed vision of the *whatness* of the good with some other fixed vision. This would be the logic of the first temptation, a logic that, if taken to be absolute, would give rise to the kind of metaphysics that has been critiqued by people like Rorty. No—in the third temptation, we are allowing the recognition of a faulty understanding, a faulty practice of virtue, a compromised way of life, to dissolve us back into the mysterious *thatness* of the good, without knowing what will emerge on the other side of this dissolution. This is not a new concrete hope

against a compromised hope, but rather a compromised hope dissolving back into Jonathan Lear's "Radical Hope," the ontological belief that our own understanding of the goodness of reality does not encapsulate goodness itself, such that even as our old understanding begins to fall to pieces, we can yet believe in the possibility of a new goodness emerging from the rubble.

Interestingly enough, this means that the concrete advice given by the devil to Jesus in the second temptation—that he should jump off the tower because he knows that angels will catch him—has once more become good advice, as those who leap into the *thatness* of the good cannot know beforehand where they will land, but must rather trust that the angels will keep their feet from hitting the ground. Furthermore, passing through this third trial also entails the kind of spiritual courage that we will (hopefully) have cultivated in the first temptation, when we struggled to resist the allure of physical pleasure for the sake of some fixed understanding of the *whatness* of the good. Again, it is difficult enough to resist illicit pleasures and pains, the bribes and threats of corrupted and corrupting powers, when one is in possession of a traditionally inculcated moral code that explicitly defines what actions are acceptable and what actions are to be avoided. The third temptation, by contrast, entails resisting the bribe of kingship over the entire world *without* such a code, based on nothing more than a Radical Hope in the *thatness* of the good. In this way, the first two temptations would be akin to a training regimen that helps prepare us to face this third and most difficult trial of all.

Finally, these reflections also point to the great spiritual danger of the ontology of war. Basically, to the extent that we have adopted this ontology—even if only as an intellectual position that we mitigate through adherence to the various inverse theodicies—when we are confronted with this final temptation, the choice we are called upon to make will not make any rational sense. What, after all, is the sense of opting for justice, even in the face of a potentially painful death, if "justice" is really nothing more than a contingency of our upbringing, or (even worse) the nefarious will of a political elite? Won't I, in sacrificing my own pleasure or enduring pain for the sake of justice, not simply be foolishly working for the advantage of some other, more powerful devil? Alternatively, if goodness really is just a matter of perspective, why should I not just change my understanding when my old one now entails real pain and sacrifice? Again, the scientists, biologists, and general members of the naturalist culture who have adopted the ontology of war are still, for the most part, moral people. For the most part, their adherence to the

ontology of war would be an intellectual position, a conclusion that they think has been irrefutably proven by modern science—and even though this intellectual position *should* eradicate all belief in morality, as Nietzsche correctly understood, it is still generally possible to avoid this kind of total nihilistic implosion by means of various intellectual fudges: misology (the refusal to think seriously and consistently about one's own philosophical positions), combined with faith in an inverse theodicy, whereby one systematically delineates the positive moral benefits that accrue to those who do not believe in morality at all.

In "normal" peaceful life these inverse theodicies function as a kind of wall, protecting ontological nihilists from the existential corruption that their intellectual position might otherwise induce, the corrupting influence of the abyss that I described in chapter three. In this sense, therefore, these modes of thought would be real manifestations of the now repressed forces of goodness, helping to protect ontological nihilists from a spiritual crisis that, logically speaking, they cannot pass. The price of this protection, however, will be a gradual stiffening of their implicit moral system into a rigid spirituality from above—which, ironically enough, is the very spiritual problem that these ideals were originally promoted to solve. This, again, is what it means to fail in the second temptation of Christ, to avoid recognizing the ambiguity of all visions of the good and instead to blindly plow ahead with one's own culture's preconceived notions. The difference between the past and the present is simply that the repressed darkness now lodges beneath a secular language instead of a religious one.

It is as a preliminary solution to this problem that I offer this practice of spiritual hermeneutics that I have been defending throughout this dissertation. Indeed, for naturalists, who probably follow Hume in separating themselves from the vocabulary of a traditional religious culture, it might even be easier to engage in this hermeneutical use of traditional religious language than it would be for many religious adherents, insofar as naturalists have presumably not been inculcated by their culture into one rigid interpretation of the sacred text. This might make it easier for them to engage with the text in the mode of the first renaming of Jacob, as a wrestling match on the far banks of the river. Then, on the basis of whatever insights come from this practice, naturalists could re-engage with the terms that are actually sacred to their own community, terms like "science," "progress," and "environmentalism," in order to discern where these terms are being deployed by an actual love of goodness, and where they have been

corrupted by the selfish interests of an oppressive power. Finally, to be clear, I am in no way claiming that this process of sifting is not already well underway in naturalist culture. My claim is rather that the fluidity that has begun to assail these once fixed and steady ideas—a fluidity that is sometimes described under the broad heading "postmodernity" —is what *should* happen to a sacred vocabulary once it has become broadly accepted by a culture. In this context, meanwhile, my argument is that the religious traditions have useful insights concerning how anyone might pass from conceptual stability to conceptual fluidity in a safe and beneficial way. This is what I have been trying to describe in this chapter, and in my thesis as a whole.

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter was to bridge the gulf between the Socratic moral thesis and the peaceful life to which most of us aspire. In effect, I have argued that our personal pursuit of the Socratic moral thesis, through the curriculum of spiritual religion, and our pursuit of this just and peaceful world, are actually one and the same path. In other words, political peace will only emerge to the extent that we and our fellow citizens are able, first, to discern what actually counts as justice and injustice through the obfuscations and distortions of political power (spirituality from below), and second, to stand firm in the face of the temptation to commit injustice (spirituality from above), whether this take shape as the temptation of pleasure or the threat of pain.

In this context, I suggest that the most predominant spiritual danger for people who live within the peaceful part of the world lies in falling victim to the bribe of power, luxury, and wealth, in exchange for our complicity. The purpose of my argument in this chapter, therefore, was to provide those who live in such beneficial circumstances with a mode of spiritual practice through which to discern where their own felt commitment to goodness is grounded not in the reality of goodness, but rather in the pleasant feeling involved in thinking of ourselves as good. I argued that the third temptation of Christ is depicting the existential courage necessary to face such a realization, leading logically to the existential decision, in which we are called to leap out of our own defined vision of the *whatness* of the good, and into the abyss of its *thatness*. Finally, to

recapitulate my critique of naturalism, I argued that this leap makes no sense for those who adhere to the ontology of war, because those who refuse the bribe of power will very often then find themselves confronted by the threats of power, the threat of violence—and, as I argued in chapter two, those who think of morality as grounded in the rational projects of life and security will probably have a very difficult time standing firm in the face of the most extreme version of such a threat, the threat of a painful death.

In line with the spirit of this chapter, however, I will conclude these reflections with one final mythic reinterpretation, to link my interpretation of the third temptation of Christ to Origen's interpretation of the three books of Solomon. In short, I have, up to now, simply agreed with Origen's interpretation of the *Song of Songs* as a metaphorical account of the love of God, the third stage of spiritual life that emerges from the proper practice of morality and self-knowledge, *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. However, in light of my argument over the last two chapters, it seems possible to read this book more literally, as a phenomenological description of the experience of repressed sexual desire that will often assail us within the abyss of ego-dissolution. From here, however, if we then extend Origen's basic idea that the books of the Bible have been purposefully arranged in a particular order, then the ontological love of God would manifest not in the *Song of Songs*, but rather in the series of books that follow immediately after: namely, the Prophetical Books, as descriptions of how those who have passed through the proper spiritual training should then reengage with the political world after their return from the desert of solitude. This reading has the advantage of according with my interpretation of the third temptation, and it also allows us to deal with that common critique, whereby spiritual practice is seen as nothing more than a Pollyanna-esque retreat from the horror of reality. Simply put, the proper curriculum of spiritual religion does not involve a quiescent descent into the bliss of union with the divine, but rather a stolid engagement with the political world, the attempt to mitigate its horrors and bring justice into a realm of reality where injustice so often reigns.

Now, of all the prophets, I find one short anecdote from the book of *Jonah* particularly relevant both to my own argument and to our current political predicament. As the story goes, God instructs his servant to go to the city of Nineveh and tell the people there to repent. Surprisingly, the people actually heed the prophet's warning, and so God decides to call off the coming cataclysm: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed

his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."[52] There is no need to read this as some absurd appeal to a vindictive omnipotence. This can be read instead as a perfectly rational description of what any culture must do in order to peacefully transform itself in the face of a crisis. In short, any peaceful cultural change will ultimately depend on individual people being willing to change—and our capacity to change depends on our willingness to allow the web of aspirations and ambitions, in light of which we currently live, to dissolve. As we have seen, however, such dissolution inevitably entails a painful encounter with the powerful emotional energy that tends to congeal beneath any fixed sense of the self, of purpose, of the *whatness* of the good. In this context, therefore, *Jonah* is describing two opposing ways to encounter this pain: we can either repent of the path we are walking, endure the pain of self-dissolution, and walk forward in light of the hope that something better is possible; or, alternatively, we can refuse to repent, refuse to change, in which case the suicidal logic, which the prophets come to warn us against, will simply play itself out in the maelstrom of cultural collapse.

My point is that change is coming, either way. The only question is how we choose to face it: either as a slow and safe spiritual practice, which will give us the emotional leeway to reimagine the world while struggling mightily to reform it; or else as a wild and dangerous maelstrom, the calamity of God, in which the restraints of morality and law fall away, and the wild energy of the abyss is simply set loose upon the world. There is no destiny at work, no intractable logic forcing us down the latter path. Whatever disaster is on the way, it is the result of greed, short-sightedness, moral cowardice, moral blindness, the choices that have been made in light of these emotions, and the way that these choices have calcified into institutions and patterns of behavior. However, as Frankl insists, we are free to decide how we respond to the world, not only in the existential hell of a death camp, but also in the normal, peaceful world that we would like to extend as broadly as possible both in time and space. The point of *Jonah*, of this chapter, and of my dissertation in general, is to insist as strenuously as possible on this point: we are free to choose. We are free to choose. However, the terms of our choice are not as Dennett and his naturalist companions describe it, between the irrationality of religion and the rationality of science, as a false vision of the *whatness* supposedly gets replaced by the true vision. Instead, the

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[52] *Jonah* 3:10, NRSV.

terms of the choice are the same as they have always been: whether or not we will repent, whether or not we have the courage to abandon our own unjust vision of the *whatness* of the good, and cleave to a more fundamental commitment to its *thatness*.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I argued for the truth of Socrates' claim that it is impossible for an unjust person to be happy. Rather than trying to produce a deductive argument for this moral claim, however, I instead argued that this truth can neither be seen nor lived without first embarking upon a particular form of spiritual practice. I introduced and articulated the contours of this practice in chapters one and two. The yield of these two chapters led me to argue in favour of a spiritual practice that continuously seeks to temper a stabilizing commitment to a traditional system of morality with a practice of critical, introspective self-awareness, which serves to soften and melt the rigidity of any such moral commitment. I argued that this spiritual path, trodden in some form by adepts of all the world's great spiritual traditions, leads to an existential state that allows the truth of the Socratic moral thesis to emerge as a simple phenomenological experience.

Over the course of chapters three to five, I introduced the relationship between the two sides of this spiritual practice—morality and self-awareness—through a variety of different vocabularies. In chapter three, I introduced the language of the spirituality from above and the spirituality from below, the first and second temptations of Christ, and the practice of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. In chapters four and five I applied the rubric of this spiritual curriculum to an interpretation of Hume and Rorty (chapter four), and then Plato and Nietzsche (chapter five). For Hume, the spirituality from below takes shape as a descent into pathological melancholy, from which he then defends himself by transforming the common sense of his own culture into an ersatz version of the spirituality from above. With regard to Rorty, I argued that his distinction between public liberalism and private irony can be read as another, albeit significantly different, version of this same relationship, wherein Rorty balances his commitment to a high liberal moral understanding by advocating an ironic stance with respect to any such inheritance. In chapter five, I compared the spiritual practice of Plato and Nietzsche in terms of the way they deal with the danger of abyssal pleasure, a potential result of practicing a lopsided spirituality from below that I had not yet discussed. In short, I argued that Plato is aware of this danger, and therefore offers practices oriented towards offsetting it, while Nietzsche was more or less swept away by it, as indicated in his dubbing of his philosophy as "Joyous Science." In this sense, I interpreted Nietzsche as a paradigmatic example of a pathologically lopsided spirituality from below, an example of what

can happen if we pursue self-knowledge while jettisoning, or striving to jettison, the impress of any prior apprenticeship to a system of traditional morality.

That being said, I also argued that Nietzsche's misguided approach to the spirituality from below stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of reality. In this sense, Nietzsche's philosophy can be understood as a particularly severe version of the problem with what I have described as the "ontology of war," the idea that our commitment to morality is grounded in an amoral struggle for survival and reproduction within an essentially meaningless abyss. In short, for those who inhabit a worldview informed by this ontology, not only does the Socratic moral thesis make no sense, but the spiritual curriculum I described as leading toward the experience of its truth would not work. Instead, with this ontology as its ground, the pursuit of self-awareness inevitably leads to the Nietzschean sense that human life is sundered between the illusion of morality and the honesty of disenchantment, between the art that brings life and the dangerous truth that destroys us. On account of this problem, prior to introducing the aforementioned spiritual curriculum, I first needed to produce an argument against the ontology of war and in favor of what I called the "ontology of mystery," the idea that there is a mysterious *thatness* to the good that exists beneath our culturally mediated visions or understandings of its *whatness*.

As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this conclusion, mounting this argument was my project in chapters one and two. In particular, I there argued that modern naturalists often think that the ontology of war has been proven true by modern scientific discoveries, and that moral philosophy must now take shape as the attempt to figure out what kind of morality makes sense from within the horizon of this unprecedented scientific perspective. Against this, in chapter one, I argued that the ontology of war is better understood as the inevitable result of the naturalist claim that science is the sole source of truth, because this stance cannot make room for a moral thesis whose credibility rests upon a tradition of "ancient witnesses" (Aristotle) who have merited "the victory of an unjust death" (Boethius). That is, the claim that it is better to suffer than to inflict injustice can only be credibly spoken through the medium of a tradition that many versions of modern naturalism simply reject as being incapable of bearing truth. I described naturalist attempts to retrofit a new moral philosophy within the confines of an implicit commitment to the ontology of war as "inverse theodicy," a belated attempt to appeal to the

continued existence of morality and goodness within a cosmos or ambient living world that one sees as ultimately indifferent or even hostile toward human flourishing.

Thus, in chapter two, drawing on Taylor's criticism of naturalism in *Sources of the Self*, I argued that the ontology of war *should* undermine all serious commitment to morality, *should* make us think of morality as nothing more than a pragmatically useful façade maintained simply in order to better pursue our own selfish intentions. However, naturalists almost invariably fudge this consequence in order to preserve their persistent moral conscience from the acid of their underlying ontological commitment. My argument against naturalism, therefore, consisted of a Socratic *elenchus* of two such inverse theodicies: Dennett's claim that we can derive a new moral philosophy from the rational projects of staying alive and staying secure; and Mackie's claim that the ontology of war will help disenchant religious morality, and thereby bring about a world in which otherwise intractable political problems can be solved by rational negotiation. My goal here was to expose these naturalist philosophers to the dichotomy between the ontology of war and morality *per se*, within the context of a larger and more important argument, which concludes that the naturalist commitment to morality—in spite of their commitment to the ontology of war—provides their own point of spiritual access to approaching the *thatness* of the good.

The path I trace through chapters one to five finally leads to my argument in chapter six, in which I described the relevance of the Socratic morality to everyday life. However, rather than simply summarizing my argument in chapter six here, I will instead redescribe it through yet another interpretation of the story of the Fall from Eden. In *Precarious Visions*, sociologist Peter Berger offers an interpretation that resonates with the Hasidic interpretation of the Fall that I explored previously:

> The confrontation with the living God … strips men of their alibis and disguises.
> The aprons of fig leaves spun with the lies of institutional ideologies cannot cover
> man's nakedness as God seeks him out of his hiding places. In this, indeed, all
> men are the children of Adam, who said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden,
> and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:10).… [God] has
> not recognized the sovereignty of our card-house institutions or the
> extraterritoriality of the moral hiding places which men have concocted among
> themselves. He steps into the palace of the king and the judge's chambers,
> ignoring the royal mantle and the judicial robes, and addresses the naked man

> underneath the costume as He addressed Adam: "But the Lord God called to man, and said to him, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). And as kings and judges renounce their human brotherhood with their victims, pointing to the immunity of their office, God will address them in words no different from those addressed to Cain: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10)."[1]

My thesis can be read as an extended argument for the phenomenological truth of the reality to which this interpretation points. Indeed, I suggest that the spiritual curriculum I explore and develop in these chapters, if taken to heart, should help us emerge from the moral "hiding places" described by Berger. Again, beneath the roles we play in society, the ideologies we construct to convince ourselves that we are good and noble human beings—beneath our own particular visions of the *whatness* of the good—there exists another kind of goodness that emerges from a counter-balancing pursuit of self-knowledge, a practice that strips away the "aprons of fig leaves" we spin to hide our nakedness. Finally, if we can overcome our fear and face the pain of responding ethically, in our everyday life, to the call of our brother's blood crying out to us from the ground, we will eventually return to the experience of ontological love described by Origen in his interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, and which I suggested might be better understood as emerging through the spiritual path of the prophets.

However, in introducing Berger' interpretation here, my purpose is not to offer yet another approach to the story. My interest in this interpretation stems rather from the fact that, just six years after the publication of *Precarious Visions*, Berger explicitly rejects the spiritual orientation implied by his previous reading of this myth. In *The Social Reality of Religion*, he argues instead that there is no real distinction between the way God appears from within these "card-house institutions" and the way God appears once we have stepped out of our hiding places. Using the term "religion" to describe the institutional god and the term "faith" to describe the hidden one, Berger argues that scientific disenchantment, the "vertigo of relativity" to which the science of sociology exposes us, reveals that the God of "faith" is just another incarnation of the God of "religion," entirely contingent on culture. In this way, while Berger effectively begins by taking the very position I have recommended, he eventually goes on to adopt the very

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[1] Peter Berger, *Precarious Visions: A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 192.

position I argue against. A brief exploration of Berger's path in this direction will help illuminate the final point I wish to explore in this conclusion.

In *The Social Reality of Religion*, Berger characterizes his previous position in terms of an attempt to escape the flux of history, an attempt to respond to the vertigo of relativity by cutting God into two parts: the apparent God of religion, which is subject to historical change, and the real God of faith, which remains unchanging and eternal beyond the flow of time. He argues that such a distinction can "only be postulated as a theological *a priori*," an "epistemologically safe platform" that has already refused to engage with the acid of sociology. As such, Berger analyzes the transformation of his view from *A Precarious Vision* to *The Social Reality of Religion* in terms of allowing the "vertigo of relativity" to go all the way down, to recognize the cultural relativity of that vision of eternity that had previously persisted in his own view of reality. As he puts it, "I, for one, cannot get myself into a position from which I can launch theoretical *a prioris*."[2]

In light of Berger's concern about the inescapability of cultural relativity, my argument could be framed as follows: Berger's vertigo of relativity is also grounded in a theoretical *a priori*. In short, in opposition to the claim that there exists a hidden God beneath the defined God—a *thatness* to the good beneath its culturally prescribed *whatness*—Berger has simply posited a different relationship between what is hidden and what is defined: in this case, the vertigo of relativity as the eternal hidden truth that lies beneath the cultural constructs of religion. To make this point more crisp, I would say that the vertigo of relativity will come to appear true to the extent that we presuppose it, and the same goes for the *thatness* of the good. In other words, it is wrong to suggest, as Berger suggests, that presupposing the vertigo of relativity is somehow more rational than presupposing the *thatness* of the good. We simply have to pick one of these options—and the goal of the rhetoric of what I have called "spiritual religion" is to help inspire us to pick the latter over the former. I have argued that, to the extent that we presuppose this vision, and then practice the curriculum of spiritual religion under the aegis of this presupposition, this *thatness* will come to manifest for us as an experiential reality.

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[2] Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 186.

In *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Buber argues that the initial movement of any religion is always to establish a distinction between the sacred and the profane: "Everywhere the sacred is removed and set apart from the fullness of the things, properties, and actions belonging to the universal, and the sacred now forms in its totality a self-contained holiness outside of which the diffused profane must pitch its tent."[3] This initial cut, however, is only meant to serve the purposes of spiritual training or apprenticeship: as Buber puts it, this "separation between realms is only a provisional one," with the "sacred" being the word for that demarcated time and place "in which the preparation and education for every action's becoming holy takes place. In the messianic world all shall be holy."[4] The ultimate purpose of Hasidic religious practice, in other words, is to "overcome the fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane." Mindfulness meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh makes a similar point: "Every day and every hour, one should practice mindfulness. That's easy to say, but to carry it out in practice is not. That's why I suggest … that each person should try hard to reserve one day out of the week to devote entirely to their practice of mindfulness."[5] One day of the week, in other words, should be "Sabbath," devoted to the practice of cultivating a more responsible way of living. However, the purpose of marking off this sacred time is that, one day, we might reach the state in which we will be able to experience every day as Sabbath.

In this context, Berger's vertigo of relativity would consist in the claim that there is no "real" world above and beyond the world of our senses, no real "sacred" cut off and apart from the rest of reality—that such distinctions are entirely relative to culture. Buber, however, would agree entirely with this assessment. In reality, there is indeed no distinction between appearance and reality, phenomenon and noumenon, earth and heaven, sacred and profane. These distinctions are indeed culturally relative. However, I would argue that Berger moves from this realization in a problematic direction: he concludes that the ultimate dissolution of this distinction means that reality is entirely and uniformly profane and meaningless, and that religion is nothing more than a retreat from this unbearable truth. The truth, I would argue, is exactly otherwise: reality is entirely holy, *and religion is a retreat from this unbearable truth.*

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[3] Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 27.
[4] Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 29.
[5] Thick Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 27.

The reason we find the universal holiness of reality unbearable is because universal holiness entails infinite responsibility. Buber provides a good description of this sense of infinite responsibility in *Hasidism and Modern Man*:

> Each man has an infinite sphere of responsibility, responsibility before the infinite. He moves, he talks, he looks, and each of his movements, each of his words, each of his glances causes waves to surge in the happenings of the world: he cannot know how strong and how far-reaching. Each man with all his being and doing determines the fate of the world in a measure unknowable to him and to others; for the causality which we can perceive is indeed only a tiny segment of the inconceivable, manifold, invisible working of all upon all. Thus every human action is a vessel of infinite responsibility.[6]

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky puts this same position into the mouth of one of his characters, the monk Zossima, as he recollects the dying words of his older brother, who passed away when they both were children:

> "[L]et me tell you this, too, Mother: every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all." Mother could not help smiling at that. She wept and smiled at the same time. "How are you," she said, "most of all responsible for everyone? There are murderers and robbers in the world, and what terrible sin have you committed that you should accuse yourself before everyone else?" "Mother, my dearest heart," he said (he had begun using such caressing, such unexpected words just then), "my dearest heart, my joy, you must realize that everyone is really responsible for everyone and everything. I don't know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it hurts."[7]

To put the point logically, if we reject all attempts to make a distinction between a sacred and a profane on the grounds that all such cuts are arbitrary, then we will be obliged to make a much more fundamental choice: instead of the *some* implied by the distinction, we will have to say that either *all reality* is profane and meaningless, or else that *all reality* is sacred and meaningful. Modern secular culture tends to grasp the former horn, with the consequence that reality comes to appear fundamentally meaningless, and in this light religion comes to appear as a retreat into an impregnable fortress, a wall of doctrines and sacred Causes that must never be questioned lest the entire edifice collapse into the truth of nihilism. As for the person who tries to dive immediately into the claim that everything is sacred, this has the potential to produce a vicious version of what Taylor calls the dilemma of mutilation, the sense of being crushed by an

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[6] Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 68.
[7] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 339.

unbearable standard of perfection to which adherence is existentially impossible. Indeed, trying to live up to the standard of infinite responsibility, without the benefit of a provisional cut between a sacred inside and profane reality outside, could produce a different kind of sundering: between the projected façade of perfect goodness, and the hell of repressed negativity we are forced to push into the unconscious mind in order to maintain this façade of perfection.

In contrast to both these extremes, therefore, the path of spiritual religion begins with the provisional cut, the establishment of a "some" within the "all" or "nothing" described above. Within this "some," we are able to train, to practice, and to thereby slowly acclimatize ourselves to the infinite holiness of everything. That being said, the establishment of this sacred space within the ambient all/nothing does not simply solve our problem. Instead, it causes our problem to change shape—for now it will be a question of whether the walls of this sacred time and sacred space become porous to their outside, or whether these walls become hard and closed. In chapter six, I argued that the walls will become hard and closed to the extent that we, or the people in our culture who occupy the same sense of the sacred as we do, have committed crimes in the name of our understanding of the sacred; and, on the opposite side, the walls will become soft to the extent that we work to atone for the history of violence that we have inherited. Finally, to the extent that we succeed in this process of softening, our understanding will begin to manifest not as a fortress that we must establish and defend against the hostile outside, but rather as a house with windows and doors, or like a veil through which something hidden can yet become manifest—but only through the medium of such a veil. I would say that such edifying spiritual softening is possible within whatever understanding of the sacred we happen to have inherited from our traditional culture. In this sense, therefore, my thesis has been a concerted attempt to render the walls of the naturalist sense of the sacred, the naturalist vision of the good, porous to this outside—but again, in the context of a larger and more important argument, that the naturalist understanding of this outside, through the lens of the ontology of war, is an ontological presupposition that creates the conditions within which it comes to appear true.

That being said, let me conclude with a short anecdote from Frankl's autobiography, as a way to elucidate once more what is at stake in my disagreement with naturalism. In the following passage, Frankl is describing how he came to the decision to stay in Europe despite having been given a chance to flee:

> I had to wait for years until my quota number came up by which I would be permitted to emigrate to the United States. Finally, shortly before Pearl Harbor, I was asked to come to the American Consulate to pick up my visa. Then I hesitated. Should I leave my parents behind? I knew what their fate would be: deportation to a concentration camp. Should I say goodbye, and leave them to their fate? The visa applied to me alone.
>
> Undecided, I left home, took a walk, and had this thought: "Isn't this the kind of situation that requires some hint from heaven?" When I returned home, my eyes fell on a little piece of marble lying on the table.
>
> "What's this?" I asked my father.
>
> "This? Oh, I picked it out of the rubble of the synagogue they have burned down. It has on it part of the Ten Commandments. I can even tell you from which commandment it comes. There is only one commandment that uses the letter chiseled here."
>
> "And that is…?" I asked eagerly.
>
> Then father gave me this answer: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."
>
> Thus I stayed "upon the land" with my parents, and let the visa lapse.[8]

Many naturalists would claim that Frankl's clear implication—that this particular piece of rubble from the ruins of his destroyed synagogue was a hint from heaven as to how he should respond to the decision he faced—is nonsense. The typical naturalist will claim that Frankl is just projecting his own meaning onto an essentially meaningless cosmos. All I can say is that, if you have presupposed the vertigo of relativity, then this is how such things will inevitably appear to you. However, if you have presupposed the ontology of mystery, the *thatness* of the good, and if you have begun the work of softening the walls of your traditional understanding of its *whatness*, then the mystery will start to pop up in all manner of strange and unexpected places. Of course, the question of how to respond sensibly to these mysterious hints would require an entirely different analysis—for, as a naturalist will no doubt observe, it is easy to be led wildly astray by the idea that some mysterious hidden power is revealing the signs of a path. For the moment, however, let me simply say that the path of spiritual religion entails finding this trail of breadcrumbs through the haunted forest of this life, and following it into the "messianic world" where, as Buber puts it, "all shall be holy."[9]

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[8] Frankl, *Recollections: an Autobiography*, 82-3.
[9] Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 29.

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