

Reflections in Practical Philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion

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By

Peter Loftson

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To one who graced a special morning, reminding me of love and touch;
and to one who graces all my memories everyday

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book written in retirement and also in the state of relative invalidity. It is based on years of teaching, writing on other themes, and reflection. Like most, or all philosophical books, it is meant to persuade and convince, chiefly the philosophical reader, and the general reader who has an interest in ethics, society, politics and fundamental questions concerned with how to live. I make reference from time to time to other philosophers whose work has influenced mine and sometimes with whom I disagree. The overall perspective is naturalist, liberal, modernist, and human centred. I also discuss some particular topics in the philosophy of religion, which have interested me and some of which have interested a great many others. The book is relatively short and most of the distinct chapters can be read and responded to on their own. I write within the framework of what it still seems useful to call, western civilization, which like others, I conceived to have begun within the epoch of Alexander the Great and which may be on the verge of coming to its conclusion. Although, it appears to still have at least a few quarter centuries of life left in it. I invite the reader to join with me in pondering and reflecting on the normative issues that follow.

The book that follows aims to address fundamental and central issues in moral philosophy, both theoretical and in some cases practical and applied. I will be setting out what I think is a unique and original ethical theory. Those who are well acquainted with contemporary work in ethics will recognize obvious similarities with positions both contemporary and historical. Historically, the closest relationships are broadly Epicurean, chiefly to Hume. Other ethical giants on whose shoulders I think I stand are Kant, Ross, and Moore; also, though in different respects, Plato and Aristotle. The broad stance is naturalistic of Epicurean stamp. Many particular issues are not addressed. On others I make dogmatic pronouncements which the reader is invited to share or dismiss according to taste.

CHAPTER ONE

REFLECTIONS ON THEISM, RELIGION, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Religion is certainly a great deal more difficult to identify than theism. Even if there may be all sorts of perplexities about what a god might be like, what kind and variety of nature and powers a deity might have, whether a deity would indeed need even to be a *person*, of any sort, and if so with what sorts of resemblances to human persons, still: theism is the view that there are gods, one or more. And presumably there is an actual fact of the matter. There are, or are not, such beings. Further, even if many of the world's cultures have been polytheistic, and some still are, multiple convergences of thought, and philosophical argumentation, make for a primary idea, for a serious modern intelligence contemplating the universe and its mysteries—and its patent certitudes as well—of a unique supreme power and supreme mind, a God—that is, whether that inquirer believes, disbelieves, or isn't sure. Clever arguments of Hume, and Russell, notwithstanding, polytheism can't hold a candle to monotheism. Interestingly, many polytheistic systems—the ancient Greek system among them—involve also the idea of a unique highest power, the 'lesser' gods being spirits with a variety of powers and roles, that explain something or other, or that one must propitiate, but all of whom give way to a central unique god. (Puzzlingly for readers of several of the ancient authors, the writer—sometimes a philosopher, sometimes not—often goes back and forth in his text between 'god' (or 'God') and gods, sometimes indeed in the same paragraph.)

But religion is, it seems, a more complex idea. Some of that complexity stems just from the item's being a cultural phenomenon, something people practice or engage in. There is usually something systematic, or institutional, about the matter. There is no religion, it seems, without religious practice—things people, in a cultural setting, in time, *do*. Religion seems always to involve both communities, and individuals within them. If someone could have a private religion, it would always be

able to be shared. And religion cannot be only a group phenomenon; it must, and means to, make claim on an individual. Religion also invariably, or essentially, involves reference to supposed realities (those realities involving *some* sort of intelligence or personhood) beyond a publicly experienced, observed world. This in turn means that there is no religion without some element of *faith*. If there were a God, or gods, and they were directly interacted with in an undisguised way on a daily basis, and their plans and intentions were disclosed immediately, upon request or unasked, it seems doubtful that there could be such a thing as religion in that setting. Perhaps in some truncated form there might be. But what we regularly conceive and take seriously, many of us, at least, is an idea of something that includes elements that matter to us, and for us, that are beyond any direct certain knowing, at least on the mundane plane. Both faith and its primary (religious) objects are actually very accurately, as well as poetically, conceptualized in a well-known Biblical assertion, which says that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11.1).

William James (and others) draw a distinction between religion as something personal, and inward, and a matter of private individual experience and commitment, and exterior practices that typically are ritualized and certainly involve groups, often, indeed, socially mandating enforcements. For James (and, again, many other thinkers, independently of him) this is a contrast between religion—the real thing, that is—and ‘church’, understood pejoratively. It is not my purpose in these pages to adopt or assume this contrast, certainly not prescriptively. I want to address the ‘religion side of life’, without requiring that those who want to consider that aspect or component of being human need to conceive, for those who adopt and affirm some variety of religious life, or allegiance, or for those who reject it, only, or even primarily, Jamesian ‘personal religion’ as their target of interest or attention. I think that it would be wrong to insist that there is no genuine, or valid, interest in art, music, literature, science, or any other significant component of culture, or experience, unless that interest is passionate, personal, and accorded life-primacy. Focus, and an angle of approach and concern, can legitimately be upon something that one sees that many others make much of, with a query as simple as: I want to know what these people are going on about, and whether I too should embrace it—or take a stance that is emphatically otherwise. And one does see, rather quickly and clearly, that religion is individual (and personal), and (James notwithstanding) communal, and that it involves ideas of realities not discernible or able to be clearly apprehended and validated in everyday life and experience, personal or

interpersonal. That somewhat diffuse or anodyne conception affirmed, I want to go on to argue that the 'religion side of life' idea is ineluctably tied up with another idea—a very personally self-interested idea—without which religion, and theism, cannot have significant or substantive claim on the earnest searcher.

There is only one fundamental question in the philosophy of religion, I want even to go so far as to claim. All others, with whatever degree of interest, and significance, they may have, are very much secondary. So, at least, I will argue here. It is not the question whether there is a God, or what, if there were, His nature might most plausibly be held to be, or what destiny or plan or overall guiding purpose there might be for the universe. It is the question whether there is a life after death.

Human interest in, sometimes extreme preoccupation with, the idea and the possibility of an existence beyond this life has sometimes been positive and enthusiastic, sometimes fearful and apprehensive, and sometimes it has involved a glum anticipation of a dull shadowland, or a purgatory of mixed pains and pleasures. Quick reflection should make it clear that a formal conviction of the last of these, at least all by itself, would not be sufficient to ground religious commitments, or a serious life-modifying existential theism. Although some such notion as this seems to have been fundamental theology among the Homeric Greeks, it is difficult to see it as having stable or continuing purchase for a modern mind, or, perhaps, for any culture for very long (including the Homeric, which also involved belief in respective bliss and torments, at any rate for a few, then, in historical succession, more diffused models of what an afterlife would offer). Further, although very great, even obsessive, concern about horrors and punishments in an afterlife seems prominent very widely, even up to quite recent time, and undoubtedly continues for some religious believers—and is unquestionably a destiny fervently wished upon their enemies by very many more—it does not seem persuasive as something seriously to engage focused *inner* reflection, as what I should have care and concern for. Apart from whether it is a rationally tenable belief, conviction as to the reality of hell, as an enduring condition following death, for oneself, seems somehow, now, a *childish* stance, not something that can accompany maturity and adulthood. (By which I do not want in any way to minimize or deny the very real ethical and philosophical issues posed by the ideas of *evil*, and of *punishment*, and possibilities of redemption or atonement; even for them, conceptions of unending torture do not seem serious or plausible participants in the relevant debates and investigations.) It appears, at least to very many (and independently of

whether it is regarded as fact, or even as possibility), quite otherwise with respect to a positive afterlife of some sort. The fundamental question of theism, and religion—the one that is, by far, the one that really *matters* (if *any do*)—is whether there is a life after death, and one that would be of a certain minimum level of quality. Mere continued existence, minimally some very short time, after the individual's biological terminus, would not, it seems clear, do, in this regard. Whether literal immortality would be necessary—it may indeed not be altogether *coherent* a possibility for human individuals—or whether, if possible, it would be sufficient—for life after death, of whatever duration, could be vegetable-like, or involve subsistence in a supine fog of unknowing if not actual unpleasantness—some plausibly satisfactory condition of personal, self-preserving, post-mortem being is a *sine qua non* of any other theistic or religious question having genuinely deep weight or existential import.

This claim may seem at first selfish, egoist, speciesist, or individualist. Perhaps at some level it is some or all of these. That it nonetheless is the pre-eminent theistic question seems demonstrable. For if there is no afterlife—none at all—and the life that we each of us individually have is all that there is, for us, then the fact that there was a God, if there were one, would be essentially a fact about the origins and governance of the world, and have only such interest, and claim, as facts of physics, and metaphysics, may have for us. Only some of us care about such facts, and even for almost all who do, such facts have just a place, a component part, in the existential economy of our lives. To know that there was a God would be to know that the world was a sort of monarchy, rather than a sort of republic. It could also be, to be sure, with the right sort of theology, to know that the world was somehow a kinder (or a grimmer) place, that one had, or might have, a special sort of friend, or never-absent observer and judge of one's deeds and thoughts. It could also be that there are *spiritual realities*, which the right sorts of attitudes or dispositions, might make accessible, and these be capable of enriching the lives of those who attain them, and, anyway, be additional, and important, facts of the matter. It might also be that even if none of these were true—there was no God, nor anything other than natural facts—still, it might be that a most existentially rewarding or fulfilling life, even one with the maximal or optimal degree of inner knowledge, might be to be had within the framework of an ideology of religious commitment. Nonetheless, even if any of these alternatives were the case, and my life, your life, and each and all of our lives, was known to be precisely *this*—this span, on this terrestrial scene, thus and so and as we find it—the claims, and interest, of religion, religiosity, and theistic creed, would pale, and amount to something only

for those with a taste for it, the right temperament or inclination-set, and even then something with the ineliminable mantle of illusion. As Kant knew, something would inevitably ring false, ring hollow, for any religiosity without a sort of completion beyond this life.

As we have said, not just any life after death would suffice for the appropriate completion. It might or might not need literally to be unending. It would need to preserve the conscious identity of the survivor. It seems also evident that it would, in some manner, need to include a *coming to knowledge*, a lifting of veils or removal of scales from the eyes, whereby the survivor learned with some certitude that the world was the sort of place, with the sort of governance, spiritual content, and directedness, that it had.

But could not *that very knowledge*, could one but come to have it, in this life and this world, suffice to ground religion and theism, even if there was to be no after-life for any of us? Why might it not be—the spiritual quester might ask—that the world was a good place, God its maker, and He had seen fit not to accord any other life than this to us? And if that were so, though it might seem a hard fact, could we yet know that He was there, ruled, and cared, might that not be enough to ground and invest religion and theism seriously, for a serious person, one who would live meaningfully, deeply, and inwardly? Should we really believe—does this not become a *reductio* of our initial claim—that it is all about us, in the end; that it has got to involve an exchange, where I will get something good, something I want, for the whole matter to matter?

Again, Kant seems to be a sound and sure guide to the conclusion that we did not err. We might be a merely created and ruled category and constituency of being. But then we will not matter; our innerness would not matter, our conscious agency merely a fancy sort of superfluous machinery which the world, through whichever instrumentality, produced. We would be epiphenomenal in ways that would make the world absurd. If it is not absurd—and if there is a God it cannot be absurd—then we are persons, selves, members of the community of selves. And if we are members of that community, and that community has a prince, with powers sufficient to preserve us in being, and He were not to do so, then we have been betrayed. Then, too, would the world be unjust, and absurd.

Schopenhauer puts the general claim advanced here in a particularly forceful and emphatic way; rather more cynically, at any rate more darkly, than is urged in the present context. But, as always, his voice is worth

hearing, and heeding. He tells us (*The World as Will and Representation* (Payne trans.), vol. II, p. 161f.) “that the interest inspired by philosophical and also religious systems has its strongest and essential point absolutely in the dogma of some future existence after death. Although the latter systems seem to make the existence of their gods the main point, and to defend this most strenuously, at bottom this is only because they have tied up their teaching on immortality therewith, and regard the one as inseparable from the other; this alone is really of importance to them. For if we could guarantee their dogma of immortality to them in some other way, the lively ardour for their gods would at once cool; and it would make way for almost complete indifference if, conversely, the absolute impossibility of any immortality were demonstrated to them. For interest in the existence of the gods would vanish with the hope of a closer acquaintance with them, down to what residue might be bound up with their possible influence on the events of the present life. But if continued existence after death could also be proved to be incompatible with the existence of gods, because, let us say, it presupposed originality of mode of existence, they would soon sacrifice these gods to their own immortality, and be eager for atheism.”

Curiously, James makes essentially the same point, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “The difference in natural ‘fact’ which most of us would assign as the first difference which the existence of a God ought to make would, I imagine, be personal immortality. Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race *means* immortality, and nothing else. God is the producer of immortality; and whoever has doubts of immortality is written down as an atheist without farther trial...” (p. 406) This fact notwithstanding, James immediately goes on to say that “I have said nothing in my lectures about immortality or the belief therein, for to me it seems a secondary point”; secondary, that is to say, to the personal religion, and mystical experience, which is the central focus of James’s classic study. Our attention, here, is upon the ideas and concerns of what James acknowledges to be the great majority of us.

There are, to be sure, those who are content that this life be all that we would have, who see a certain logic or coherence in the rhythms of a well-lived human life, and who would shun, view as folly, having or aspiring to have more. Sometimes this is put, we may say, merely, in existentially applied form—Frank Sinatra is said to have said, “You only live once, and the way I live, once is enough”. It is expressed also more theoretically, or conceptually, for example with the more assertive, ball-to-the-other-court, Heideggerian conviction that a human life is not a serious, an authentic life

unless it, Viking-like, knows that it comes to an end, and finds identity and value in that knowledge. There are, then, conceptions, of our condition and estate, that see *what we are*, including necessary and just *telos*, for us, as of, in, and for, this earth, these bodies, this life, and naturally and appropriately coming to the terminus this involves. It is important that one distinguish between views of this kind and views which (merely) assert that one should accept what one cannot change, not merely desist from fighting or resisting, but accommodate oneself to what is inevitable, (even) if the universe has given one lemons make lemonade of it, etc. No doubt some version of the latter is wise counsel, indeed, in the condition, which we are actually in, either of not knowing whether there is more or other than this life or in fact knowing that there is no other, the beginning and the heart of what we should think and what we should do. This is not, though, the view assigned here to Sinatra or to Heidegger. For *that* view, the cup of immortality—or even of a few more millennia, or centuries—if it could be, and were, offered to us, would or should be disdained, as vain illusion, or denial of what it is to be *us*, in the universe. For this view, to accept such a cup, even to aspire to or wish for it, is to be *less* than we can be, and sometimes are.

Still, though, the dialectic relentlessly continues, if these things were so, there will be no place, at any rate no important or significant place, for God. Dasein does not need deity. If something resembling this model were correct, there could even be a God; it would not matter. God would be the king, or the mayor, of the cosmic town where we lived, and, even if He saw all that I thought and did, and would be my friend if I would have Him, this would be wholly external to what I am and what seriously, inwardly engages me and gives me focus. It will remain true, then, that without some version of life beyond this life theism can have no important purchase for us. (If Heidegger, or a similar philosophy, were right, it will have no such purchase anyway. Immortality—or a suitable variant—is a necessary, though not a sufficient condition, of any part of a theistic package mattering for the serious inquirer.)

Yet, still, there is a response to the Kantian stance implicit in the (arguably) most philosophical version of our claim, which must be considered. To see it we will proceed by a somewhat roundabout route, addressing another theme which has sometimes entered explorations of the relations between God, if He exists, and humanity. It is sometimes argued by opponents of standard versions of theism that the model that theism incorporates for the intended and valorized relationship between God and humanity is actually rather close to the one found (sometimes valued,

sometimes scorned, in this case) between humanity and the dog. “Man’s best friend” is found to be, and sometimes is valued for being, loyal, faithful, trusting, and essentially servile. The dog does not know what “Master” knows and may have in store, but loves and obeys, without question, confident that Master will act for dog’s good, and licking the hand that sometimes wounds as well as feeds, that ignores as much as (typically, more than) it rewards. Proud freethinkers have viewed the proposed God-man relationship with contempt, as essentially that of man-dog, and unworthy of the allegiance of a human being (even, for some such rebels—admiring, as they sometimes have, Milton’s Lucifer—if there really were an omnipotent king of the universe).

Darwin, in fact, appears to see the dog/man relationship as not merely a suggestive analogy or model for the relationship conceived to hold between man and God, but as pointing to the origins of religion itself. “The feeling of religious devotion is a highly complex one, consisting of love, complete submission to an exalted and mysterious superior, a strong sense of dependence, fear, reverence, gratitude, hope for the future, and perhaps other elements. No being could experience so complex an emotion until advanced in his intellectual and moral faculties to at least a moderately high level. Nevertheless, we see some distant approach to this state of mind, in the deep love of a dog for his master, associated with complete submission, some fear, and perhaps other feelings.” (*The Descent of Man* (1871), p. 816.) Interestingly, or complicatingly, Darwin himself had a very great esteem for dogs, by no means merely that of the contented owner of a ‘slave’.

At any rate: surely, it may be argued, there is a *modus ponens* which may be turned into a *modus tollens* in this area, as with so many philosophical arguments which may at first seem so compelling. Is it self-evident that humans might not be at a *relatively* comparable degree of distance from comparable ‘higher powers’ than dogs are to humans, and that the mindset of such conceivable higher beings might not include not just faster computational skills, a greater degree of practical rationality more consistently applied, but also higher moral, affective, aesthetic, and inwardness quotients? Who says (i.e., with what defensible justification do Kant or others say) that we are members of a cosmic club of persons, whose president is (if He exists) God? (And is not the demand for or expectation of immortality (or its existential equivalent), in relation to a supposed deity who can confer it, rather like that of a petulant junior relative or scion awaiting an inheritance which might possibly be denied—“come on, would it cost You so much, I just want my modest little share of

what You have, do not be so stingy...”). An anticipation of a line of thought somewhat of this kind seems implicit in fact in the Biblical Book of Job.

Although humans have, quite often, deeply loved their dogs, and sometimes shed bitter tears when they have died, and mourned and missed them, it has only quite rarely, and never (it seems) with thinkers of philosophical discernment, seemed other than that the dog’s existence does or should coincide with its biological existence. Some sentimental songs imagine an afterlife for a favoured dog, and pagan kings and nobles had esteemed dogs killed and buried with them, to keep them company in the post-mortem world, but the usual view, even (perhaps especially) among those with a most deeply felt, internal, and sensitively imaginative conception of the dog and his/her condition, appears definitely to be that no wrong is done in or to the world, that there is nothing existentially problematic or challenging, with the idea or the reality of the individual dog’s death being also that being’s extinction. Rather, it seems, there is felt to be a fitness to things, even if a fitness partly or briefly hard to take, that the two should coincide. Why should it not also be so with humans, even if—in a sense, arguably, especially if—there is a master Huntsman, a keeper of the cosmic hearth, by whose side we may hope, while we live, to find our deepest fulfillment and our peace?

However: the issue at hand is, what does or should really matter to us, in the theism territory, specifically, what counts for most, what comes first, in this area? We are not assuming that theism, in any form, is true, not assuming, indeed, that there is the slightest good evidence or indication in its favour. We are (at least at this point) on the outside of evidentiary issues. As in ethics, the issue poses itself, even for Kant, why should I be moral? why should I care as to whether to consider a claim or case for morality—even if there were objective ethical facts? so we are seeking to identify the fundamental basis of what *makes for mattering* with regard to religious and theistic questions or dimensions to life. So, even if a God, like Job’s divine master, would owe nothing to its human creation, in the sustaining-in-being line, and a universe with its conscious bits in it is not amiss, absurd, or tragic, if significant clusters of those bits have their consciousness and their being permanently extinguished, still: were that our case, why should we, or indeed (if we knew that this was the fact of the matter) why would we care about, or have a deep interest in, whatever salient facts of origin and governance there may be (particularly when they are largely if not entirely beyond our ken anyway) for the world as a whole? There are wild dogs as well as domestic ones. Apart from some

case for a greater security, comfort, or prosperity—which might or might not be a fully convincing case—what will be an existentially compelling reason not to be a wild dog, to prefer domestication? (The relevant parallel is acute, and apt, particularly because we have to conceive a case for the wild dog’s preferring “domestication” with invisible humans, imagined as or believed by faith to be real, but not known to be so.)

“In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John xiv. 2-3) What can there be to religion, or a claim made by theism, that can (deserve to, or in psychological fact) catch our existential attention, much less our allegiance, if it does not offer at least the hope of some such thing as what Jesus here claims?

It is to be noted that the hope or faith in an afterlife need not be held or felt as completely certain and confident, in order to be able to ground religious life. The nineteenth-century painting of the young woman by the country-parish cemetery, with her meditative and by no means sure query “Can these dry bones live?” points to a very reasonable basis, or component, of what may be an arguably authentic version of a coherent existential theism. (The painting—“The Doubt: Can These Dry Bones Live?”—is by Henry Bowler, and hangs in the Tate Gallery, in London; the question posed is from Ezekiel xxxvii.2-3.) One does not know for sure, and may acknowledge that one does not, and sometimes indeed waver, and doubt; the matter may be felt as unclear, obscure, veiled. And indeed a genuine religiosity may be centrally focused, have its centre of gravity, on this, the terrestrial world, and conceptions of place, vocation, destiny, commitment, among one’s human community—the whole of humanity, or a more local and specific group—with somewhat muted attention to a supposed world to come. Some Christian conceptions of life in its most important and meaningful forms as *pilgrimage* give attractive expression to this idea. Yet, still, the larger imaginative picture must include the idea of a continuation and some species of fulfillment in a life beyond this one, if a theistic conception is to be both one that will make coherent existential sense and be one about which one can care.

Some will think of another possible claim of religious commitment to attention and concern, and this may be the juncture at which to address it. Humans have wanted other things from their God, or gods, besides a life that will continue after death. They have also wanted things in and for this life, which they have hoped that God might provide for them, or grant

them. They have hoped as well that God, or gods, would not visit calamities, or pains, upon them which they have felt sure He would be capable of inflicting. In many religions, and for many practitioners and believers to this day, a central part of religion has been entreaty, or prayer, that a wish might be granted, or a fear or pain be eliminated, or its object be prevented from coming to pass. These respective positive and negative facets have not been the only components of prayer. There has also been, for many, an idea of simple and direct communication, messages sent (typically, by being uttered aloud) to the deity without, necessarily, any favours being asked or sought.

In principle someone might believe that God exists, that there is no afterlife for humans, and that (nonetheless) God intervenes and obtrudes in human lives, sometimes invited and welcomed, in other circumstances unasked and even, perhaps, dreaded. Interestingly, sophisticated philosophical theology has almost invariably rejected any idea that so-called petitionary prayer is ever literally causally efficacious—i.e., that God had been going to do such-and-such, and He was deflected from doing so because of the character or earnestness of the praying individual, or the content of the prayer the individual produced. Part of the reason for such rejections has been that God, being omniscient, will know in advance what entreaties will be presented to Him, and know as well what action He will take regardless of what prayer may have been presented. His foreknowledge may include awareness that prayers are going to be presented, and that relevant action will be taken *because* those prayers, with their degree of seriousness and earnestness, will have been produced (and not otherwise).

Prayer as reflective meditation, or as a would-be component of conversation, may be given a reasonable, even a sensitive, and sympathetic, interpretation. Prayer intended to cause God to do otherwise than as He had wanted and planned (or would have wanted and planned) to do is conceptually problematic (as Kant, who viewed petitionary prayer with contempt, saw). As mentioned, most intelligently articulated versions of theism have sought to understand prayer otherwise than as prompted by desires to alter the intended course of action of the all-knowing and all-powerful ruler of the universe. Nonetheless, there might be identified, and defended, a theistic position which took seriously the idea of outcomes that were, not just in fact but in principle, not deterministic functions of immediately prior states—that is, which were such that even a Being possessed of all the knowledge that it is *possible* to have, wouldn't have. If some such cases involved determinations of outcomes producing pleasant or unpleasant, or at any rate, preferred or not preferred, developments for

human beings, we could possibly articulate a sort of “Epicurean” or “quantum” version of prayer, that would seek to cause a God to effect one outcome rather than another, which hadn’t (yet) been known even by Him, prior to His intervention (or non-intervention), and the outcome effected occurring possibly as a function of entreaty. At any rate, sophisticated rational theology need not be deterministic (or compatibilist).

All of the preceding skeletal reflections noted, it seems nonetheless clear that it will not be a central or serious part of the inner life of a serious and authentically inward person to proceed as their life advances in a condition of hoping to secure goods or avoid ills through prayer, or otherwise to expend energies in an optative condition vis à vis the deity (or a deity). There is nearly overwhelmingly abundant evidence of a nomologically reliable and uniform world. Even if the believer might manage to believe that miraculous interventions might occur as cases of causal overdetermination, or in some other ways consonant with the ongoing continuity of a reliable causal order, there seems no place of secure purchase for a theology with God at hand to reward or thwart, but with no prospect whatever of a life beyond this life. I will take it a theology of such a sort may be discounted and ignored, as neither psychologically nor existentially credible options.

I pass on to considerations, challenges, questions of a different kind—metaphysical, and physical ones, but meant here primarily in respect of existential dimensions they present. Were there an afterlife, of whatever stamp and duration, it would have to be of me, continued from this life. There are, of course, conceptions which many regard as philosophically more arresting, even, some might say, more “mature”, according to which post-mortem existence is not individualistic; for models along these lines, Buddhist and other, self dissolves into something wider, I in some manner continue, but not as me. The best basis for evaluating the comparative claims of individualist and non-individualist survival is, I think, consideration of what one would prefer if one had the option of choosing between them. We need to note, before turning to that consideration, that “individualist” need by no means connote or imply narrowly (so-called) “atomic” individualist assumptions; maybe a self cannot exist except within a formative and sustaining context of other selves, a community, culture, etc. Considering, then, these alternatives: if you could choose, would you rather, at death, “flow into the ocean of being” (so to speak), or continue as a self, as *you*—where, perhaps, you might be able to find out what Byron had written in those memoirs before his supposed friends destroyed them, what the fundamental postulates of physics actually are,

or have youth restored, interesting sexual or other experiences which you may have cherished in this life? Not that an individualist option would necessarily include such components as those just named; but *some* developments that would realize hopes or goals from life on this side of the boundary would seem very plausibly attainable were there to be an individualist option. There might not of course be any such choice, and maybe, were that the case, flowing into the ocean of being might be an acceptable second best. But it is hard to believe that it really would be preferable, if one could have the option, to some imaginable forms of continuing as me.

If this is granted, we go on to need to acknowledge that, in actual fact, in the real world, later, above all latest stages, of, by no means all, but most lives are shrunken, diminished, typically pathetically lessened versions of what that life had once been. Enfeebled, perhaps long-drugged, demented, stupid, husks and shadows of—not one, but many earlier stages and phases—is it *this* life and this being who is to be continued? And if not, when does the clock stop, to what point on the life-dial does the revived self leap? Can it be other than capricious, too existentially leapfrogged, even for omniscience? That earlier self, before *those* brain cells had died, before I had realized *that*, is it that that I (must) return to? It is me, to be sure, just as an eleven-year-old of long years past is; yet also in some specially existential sense, not. So much is learned, so much forgotten, angles of launch and trajectory are so altered, as life races along and goes by. A common denominator of all these selves, then, divinely engineered, a selection of best and most, or peaks and valleys identifiable as typical? It *is* only metaphor that old age can be seen as an illness, which divine medicine can cure, or erase. The subject of that time also is *me*, navigating, coming to new gains and losses, with stumbles primarily but not only physiological. Can these be thought of as merely engineering conundra, safely and not unreasonably able to be left to divinity to solve? For what it may be worth, Aristotle argued that this *is* essentially an engineering issue; his case is worth considering: "...if [thought] could be destroyed at all, it would be under the blunting influence of old age. What really happens is, however, exactly parallel to what happens in the case of the sense organs; if the old man could recover the proper kind of eye, he would see just as well as the young man. The incapacity of old age is due to an affection not of the soul but of its vehicle, as occurs in drunkenness or disease. Thus, it is that thinking and reflecting decline through the decay of some other inward part and are themselves impassable." (*De Anima* bk. I) Even if entirely deterministically, what happens to us—more or less *whatever* does—is serendipitous, as undergone from within: it

arrives, a new bend in the river of our life. Presumably new bends could involve and disclose a shedding of states of decline, and recovered power and health. Perhaps Aristotle is right, in respect of our modal options, of what omnipotence could do.

At any rate a coherent afterlife, if such a thing can be conceived, will necessarily be a continuing from *here*, wherever here has gotten that self to—Alzheimered, comatose, injury-assailed and modified, whatever history has brought, and wrought; not a return to any status quo ante. From there, perhaps, a still flickering thread-ember of life if not consciousness could be conceived to continue, gradually to revive, resume, be healed, come to new occasions and experiences.

All of the foregoing noted, including Aristotle's not unreasonable analysis, the facts seem to be rather as Epicurus, and his follower Lucretius, affirmed. There is no serious good evidence for an afterlife; rather, indeed, the situation is very much the contrary. As asked by more than one musing inquirer, if we were to have an afterlife, why bother to have us die? Whence death? Further, our mental powers do seem to follow a trajectory that is in line with our bodily ones. Even if various processes could be revised or reversed, the profile of our respective bodily and mental enfeeblements are at least more or less in tandem. So it is indeed probable that when the one system breaks down and ceases, so too does the other. The matter is not decidable a priori. The supposedly sophisticated quasi- or explicitly verificationist thought experiments, and attendant conceptual rhetoric, notwithstanding, it would be possible (as Kant acutely, discerningly saw) for a divine engineer of sufficient power, through instrumentalities even if they were to be beyond our imagining or computing, to preserve us in being even where our bodies might have been destroyed. Only, there is not the slightest good reason to suppose that a divine engineer does do that; or for that matter to suppose that there is any such divine engineer.

There are two other sorts of bases from which religion, or theism, has been argued to make serious existential claim, or to be something which deservedly commands reflective pause. The first is an idea that religion is a central and integral part of culture; that my culture's practices and institutions include religious ones, which are thereby, if I am integrated with, properly grounded in, my culture, are also mine. This idea can be expanded upon, and wrapped in a mantle of rhetorically appealing gauze, and argumentation. But there is no reason to bother. The idea can be seen, quickly and decisively, to be defective. It flies in the face of fact. Our own

culture is pluralist, and too significantly secular, for this notion to have genuine purchase. What is genuinely *there*, and *ours*, *mine*, in our culture, at any rate when it is viewed as a comprehensive whole, does not include (a) religion (just as it does not include irreligion, or secularism). Moreover, for cultures with a religious identity-component, that component is, all too frequently, oppression; at any rate, the serious individual must be able to stand apart from whatever religious constituent of their culture there may be, even if loving and drawn to it, with an individualist stance of brooding critique, battered by their god it may be. It cannot be a smooth and comfortable matter, relaxingly enveloping, mine because it is ours.

The second further alleged base for an existential claim for religion is that the latter is one of the fundamental and autonomous “islands” of human experience. One has left something out if there has not become a developed place in one’s life for ethical understanding, for sexuality, emotional intimacy, art, humour, hard analytical thought, participation in community, some form or other of athletic activity, and perhaps other spheres. And—this argument goes—religion, or religiosity, is another of these spheres or zones. Obviously enough, some people lack it altogether; in others it is present only in minimal or stunted form. But it is like that also with many or most of the others. Some people, it seems, are more or less humourless, or asexual, or almost completely without affective interconnection with others; some are tone deaf, with no interest in or response to great art, in any form, at all. What a pity—most of us will say. Some will view these sphere-deprived individuals as actually pathological. Others will view them merely as unfortunate (their misfortunes sometimes, alas, having harsh and undesirable consequences for others). In any case, most of us, whether or not we adhere to any theoretically developed teleological view of human well-being, will view many life-sectors as deeply important, and life sadly, axiologically incomplete if it lacks them. The point acknowledged in general, the question then becomes whether religion or religiosity are among these necessary components of a life that is worthwhile or complete.

The answer to this question seems on careful reflection to be negative. It may be acknowledged, affirmed emphatically, in fact, that a human life that can be complete, and existentially serious, will involve deep reflection on large issues of self, and world. This is the very impulse to philosophy, of course. The unexamined life is indeed not worth living, nor is life that doesn’t probe, and ponder, the largest and profoundest questions of origin, nature, and significance, of the world as a whole, to whatever extent these issues can be intelligibly pondered and probed. Further, it may reasonably

be held that more specific questions as to whether there might be larger or higher minds, and purposes, at work in the origin or sustaining of the world, will come to engage at some time or times the serious mind; and, arguably, at least, that that serious mind will arrive in due course at some measure of tranquility, and respect, with regard to ideas and positions that come to positive, affirming answers to these questions. If one ever was, one will not remain a “village atheist”; one may perhaps affirm, with G. A. Cohen, an “anti-antireligious” stance. (I note tangentially, and parenthetically, the sociological fact that it seems to be not rare for reflective engagement with life and world eventually, very widely, to arrive at just the sort of pondering I am here remarking on. According to some, this is very much something which aging male philosophers are particularly prone to. It will not take rocket science for the reader to connect this sociological fact with the motivations for and the occasion of the present body of reflections. Yet, even if each stage of life’s journey may have its distinctive preoccupations, they are not thereby rendered nugatory.)

Two ideas, which some will see as cognate, others not, will naturally present themselves along the pathway of this line of reflection. One is the idea of “the spiritual”, or of “spirituality”. This is a currently much favoured conception. It is exceedingly common, and exceedingly popular, now, in our culture, to affirm that one is not religious, but, rather, spiritual. But what exactly does this mean? That one feels attunement with a sunset, a summer’s day, a forest one walks in, the human family, or is conscious of feelings of broad connectedness occasioned by nature, art, or human relationships, specific or general, is no doubt a fine and good thing. One may find it meaningful, or useful, to call such attunements, or feelings, spiritual. It seems to be a mistake, though, an intellectual error, but one with existential import, to see such matters as these as other than rather distant cousins of religion, or religiosity. The latter *essentially* involves some sort of idea of a *veil*, with facts, realities, being, including some dimension or other of mind, and meaning, on the other side of that veil (*this* side containing the sunsets, forests, works of art, and human beings and other animals and bits of nature). Religion essentially involves some sort or other of metaphysics. It may be held to be metaphysics that is discernible reasonably clearly, and determinately, at least in outline, as in Thomistic theology, and other theistic theoretical schemes; or it may be held to be ineluctably beyond clear resolution or determinate grasping or accessing, even in part, by us. With convictions of the latter kind there may be some reluctance to call this a matter of *metaphysics*. This is not the context to argue, or even bother much, about a word. The idea of the veil, and realities, and being, on both sides of it, may possibly do, in this

setting; it does not seem that the ‘spirituality’ of at least very many of our current fellow-travelers accommodates or includes something like that.

This deficiency does not seem to attach to the second of the two ideas we meet on the path signified above. This is the idea of *the sacred*. This idea finds effective, at any rate very vivid, expression in Kenneth Grahame’s very popular Edwardian children’s novel *The Wind in the Willows*, with one of its animal characters’ encounter with the great god Pan. It also appears to be at the heart of Heidegger’s later philosophy, and such claims as it may make for reflective allegiance. For some inquirers, and some in their personal lives and convictions, the very idea of religion is ineluctably bound up with the idea of the sacred—the idea, that is, of something veiled and opaque, but sensed powerfully as something important, and meaningful, involving mind, and purpose, before which the appropriate attitude is one of awe; usually, also, the sacred is sensed as involving beauty, and power. It will be clear that the idea of the sacred is an idea of an apprehended or apprehensible reality, an idea of something *known*, or knowable (by some minds or other, even if not necessarily by ours); not, that is to say, merely of a state in the subject with apprehension of that idea—although important dimensions of feeling will be involved too.

There are many dimensions, of course, to religion, religiosity, and theism, and many forms that cluster has taken, in the lives and belief systems of individuals and cultures. I think that there is no doubt that some element of an idea of the sacred is indeed an inseparable component of many of these dimensions. Religion could not consist just of *theology*, even with attention confined to its allegedly purely doxastic components. Another way to put this would be to say that if there were nothing missing in the full stock of answers to questions-as-to-divinity, there would be something missing. The sacred is in part that which one does not know. It is (a species of) mystery; mystery, indeed, that one (humans, anyway) cannot penetrate or decode. There can be mystery in an object of our attention. There can be mystery also in the attending. That is, there can be (are) areas of life and thought where *knowledge* is beyond us, where our best bet will be belief—or, if we refuse to believe (if we can), fence-sitting. If Kierkegaard, and some other religionists, are right, then the idea of the sacred attaches not just to objects of religious attention, but also to the attending as well. We do not have, for Kierkegaard, an existentially serious religious state of consciousness except where we are in rational or objective terms uncertain, more precisely, without even rationally probable locations and grounds of belief. This theme becomes philosophical in more directions than one: it becomes the territory of Locke and Clifford-

style ethics of belief, and Jamesian riposte; it leads also to explorations of the very idea of truth as subjectivity, in areas additional to the religious.

Our issue, though, is whether an existentially serious life will—must—have a sector in it for the sacred. For if it must, then, it seems, there can be authentic religion without immortality, without even a “faint hope” of immortality. It will be important to be clear that we mean to be referring to a concept of sacredness that will involve something like the “other side of the veil” notion, vague as it may be, discussed above. A mere valuing of, or reverence for, the world, life, or special places, objects, or moments, will not suffice. That re-affirmed, it does seem that some thinkers and others do have some such notion of the sacred. And, as we have noted, that some, even many, humans lack a fundamental existential component, does not suffice to preclude its being an essential part of authentic or serious life. However, there are, at least, “problematicities” with the idea of the sacred, and they will be enough to diminish if not cancel its claims to an ineliminable or basic place among human goods, or existential desiderata.

“To understand all is to forgive all,” Voltaire is said to have said (apparently, he didn’t, actually; Mme. de Staël said something close to the oft-cited aphorism). Whether or not *fully* understanding all of the facets, aspects, all of the etiology and content of something would lead to an inability not to forgive the something (whatever it might have been), there seems little doubt that that degree of understanding would make it very difficult, or impossible, at least for human beings, to *enjoy* many things that human beings enjoy, to feel and know them in their special experiential character. Humour, and eroticism, seem obvious candidates for these claims. Few, if any, humans, could sustain mirth, or arousal, were too full a floodlight of knowledge of every dimension of the intended object of humour or sexual desire, and of what was involved, general and particular, in the experiencing going on, on the individual occasion, to be present in the consciousness of the human subject concerned. Just as too much *memory* would render us incapable of action, we seem clearly to need to have the lights dimmed, so to speak, for many of the kinds of things which we do, including many that are enjoyable, or meaningful, or important for us, to be able to happen, and to be able to have the special savour, colour, and flavour by which we know and prize them. The same is no doubt true as well of thrills, and pangs, with experiences—like scary films, and stories—which only some of us enjoy. There are also somewhat “secular” versions of the sacred, which appear to invite the same variety of reflection. Bagehot, referring in the mid-Victorian era to the need to surround the British monarchy with trappings of ceremonial and mystery,