

## Ic – Constraining Ideas

Dear: When a certain four-year old asked me why I didn't believe in God, maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I should have guided the conversation to evolve roughly as follows:

“Grampa: how come you don't believe in God?”

“Which god, Sweetheart?”

“God... in heaven!”

“Oh, you mean the god described in the Bible and your Book of Mormon. I wasn't sure which one, Dear, because people have dreamt up thousands of different gods. Well, Dear, the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and all 'holy books' are just storybooks, and all gods are just storybook characters – like Santa Claus or Cinderella or Wonder Woman or Superman. Do you believe in Superman?”

“No – but Superman isn't God.”

“Well, Dear, in a way he is. God is a combination Superman and Santa Claus for big people! God, Superman, Santa Claus, Wonder Woman, and so on, are all just storybook characters. None of them is real.”

“Jesus is real.”

“Well, Dear, maybe there was a real person called Jesus, but I don't know, because even though you might think that I'm very, VERY old, even I wasn't around when Jesus was said to be alive.”

“Well, other people were alive then, and they said that Jesus was real.”

“Maybe, Dear: I'm not sure, 'cause I never talked to them. And even if I had talked to them, I'd need to try to determine if they were telling the truth. But even if there was a real person called Jesus, he's different from the Jesus described in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Those are just storybooks about God and Jesus, like your storybook about Cinderella: maybe there was a real Cinderella, but the Cinderella in the book (with

all the stuff about a fairy godmother, turning a pumpkin into a carriage, and so on) isn't real. Similarly, there's the story about William Tell – you know, about how he shot an arrow through an apple on top of his son's head – but it's just a story: there never was a real-life William Tell.”

“Well, I believe in Jesus.”

“Yes, Dear, it's what your parents want you to do, and you're a good girl for doing what your parents want. But when you're older, you can believe what you think is right. And now that I'm very, VERY old, I can believe what I think is right – and I've found that it's a lot more fun to believe in Super Boy and Wonder Girl.”

“You're silly Grampa.”

“Maybe – but you, Wonder Girl, are ticklish.”

“Grampa: stop! You know Gramma doesn't like that...!”

But although that imagined conversation might have adequately answered a certain four-year-old's question, it neither describes the nature and the resolution of the ontological problem of God's existence nor shows how silly the resulting word games are – and how serious have been their consequences. Therefore, I'll continue writing this book – especially because the imagined conversation never occurred, i.e., because (as is so common) what was imagined didn't really exist, except as fleeting neurons (or electrochemical signals) in my brain.

But I have other neurological connections in my brain, some providing me with recollections of what actually occurred. For example, I recall when you were about eight, and you and (as you described them!) “the kids” were staying with us for a week or so, just before you moved to Florida. Your parents had traveled to Florida to try to find a house. If you want to prod your own neurological connections, Dear, search through old photographs for the ones that show you and “the kids” painting boards leaning up against a chain-link fence.

I don't remember why the subject came up. Maybe it arose because we were talking about the possibility of your grandmother and I visiting you and “the

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kids” during “the winter festival” (inappropriately called “Christmas time”), to celebrate the rising sun! In any event, for reasons I can’t remember, you volunteered that you no longer believed in Santa Claus. I asked why. You replied that you had seen your mother wrapping presents during the previous Christmas Eve – that is, you acquired additional data.

Later that same day, I asked your nearest-age brother if he believed in Santa Claus. He responded with a definite “Uh huh.” I asked why. He confidently replied: “Because one time I saw Santa Claus in the sky, with his reindeer.” He then proceeded to describe details of what he had seen, and I watched your face as you watched him talk: I saw on your face some embarrassment, but kindness – you didn’t challenge his beliefs.

Next day, you and I went for a walk, and I still remember (with pain) that your shoes were hurting you as we walked – poor little sweetheart. Because I knew I wouldn’t be seeing you much anymore, because I had just finished writing in this book that God was just a storybook character (like Santa Claus or Superman), and because it was so amazing to me that then you brought up the subject of your belief in Santa Claus the day before, I decided to tell you that I was writing a book to you to answer the question that you had asked me when you were four, that is, to answer your question about why I didn’t believe in God.

As we walked, I said: “Sweetheart, my book to you will be a very long answer to your question, because there are other things I want to tell you. But my short answer to your question is this. I don’t believe in God, because God is just a Santa Claus for big people. Grownups no longer believe either in Santa Claus or God, but some big people still believe in God. And there’s usually no point in telling these big people that there is no God, just as you saw that there was no point in your telling your brother that there is no Santa Claus; usually people just have to learn these things by themselves.”

The look on your face told me that you didn’t believe me when I said there was no God, just as your brother wouldn’t have believed you if you had told him there was no Santa Claus, but maybe by the time you finish this book you’ll have no problem living with both realities: there ain’t no Santa Claus and there ain’t no God! And although my experience has taught me that, in general, if people are to learn that there are no gods, they must learn it by

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themselves, yet maybe I can help you see through the haze a little sooner, so you won't waste additional precious time on the silly idea of God.

The haze has been caused by your indoctrination into “believing in God”, undertaken by your parents, your friends, your church, and by much of our society. Your grandmother and I were subjected to similar indoctrination. Eventually, though, we saw through the haze of our indoctrinations. To help you see through yours, maybe it would help to mention the obvious: as someone else said, when you were born, you didn't believe in God. That is, belief in any god is a learned behavior – and with some thought and sometimes with much diligence, learned behavior that's faulty can be “unlearned”.

To decide about the existence of any god, we all have essentially the same data. We're all living on the same spinning ball, in the neighborhood of a bountiful energy source called the Sun, in turn located within an amazing scattering of stars. We all have similar experiences in life (including experiences of immense pleasure and sometimes excruciating pain), we're all faced with an uncertain future, and we all pursue our trio of survival goals. But, although there's general agreement about all such “data”, obviously there are enormous disagreements among their interpretations – and there are enormous differences in resulting decisions.

It's therefore obvious that everyone can't be right. It follows logically that a huge number of people must be wrong. That is, if we agree that conflicting “truths” can't both be correct (i.e., if we agree that there's no such thing as a paradox), then within the huge number of religions [including Buddhism (although it and Confucism and Taoism are more philosophy than religion), Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism...], at least some interpretations of the same data must be wrong. And if modern philosophers and scientists are right, then all organized religions are wrong.

So, Dear, please consider how various people have proceeded from the same data to reach such different conclusions about “God”. To begin this consideration, suppose that different people made their decisions about “God” based primarily on only one “decision process”, such as “reason”, “emotion”, “instinct”, or some “authority figure” (including “habit”). In reality, though, probably many people have used more than just one of these decision processes to reach their decision to “believe” in “God”.

For most people, their belief in their God probably arises mostly from habit – a habit started when they were young, when they were accustomed to obeying authorities, such as parents. Data supporting this expectation include that most “church goers” attend the church of their parents and that, commonly, whole nations of people predominantly profess a single religion (e.g., “Hindu nations”, “Muslim nations”, “Christian nations”). If, on the other hand, some religion was in possession of “the truth”, one might have expected that, after all these centuries, all peoples would have gravitated to the single “true religion”. In contrast, the world is now as badly divided on “religious truth” as it ever was – save that so many people, throughout the world (more than a billion of us!) have now rejected the “authority” of all organized religions and instead adopted the “authority” of science. In turn, the “authority” of science is reliable and reproducible data yielding testable hypotheses, whose tests provide estimates for the probability that the hypotheses are true (as I’ll describe in some detail in later chapters).

Some people decide to believe in “God” primarily based on reason (or logic or analysis), but as I’ll try to demonstrate to you in the next few chapters, all these “logical proofs” of “God’s existence” are fatally flawed. Essentially everyone who has recently and seriously looked at such “proofs” has come to the same conclusion (except such “dimwits” as Pope John Paul II); therefore, if they’ve wanted to continue to “believe” in God, they’ve decided [as did (Saint) Paul] that “belief” in God was a matter of “the heart” rather than of “the mind”. For example, French mathematical-physicist Pascal (1623–1662) wrote:

The metaphysical proofs of God are so remote from the reasoning of men, and so complicated, that they make little impression; and if they should be of service to some, it would be only during the moment that they see such demonstration; but an hour afterwards they fear they have been mistaken... It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.

Many of the world’s artists seem to have reached their decision about God based on “their hearts” or on “inspirations”. You can see the result in their painting or hear it in their poems, such as in Thomas Ken’s 1709 *Doxology*

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!  
Praise Him, all creatures here below!  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host!  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

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Similar appears in Joyce Kilmer's 1913 *Trees*

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.  
Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

Now, Dear, as I tried to demonstrate to you in an early chapter, usually it's difficult for one's left-brain to analyze even one's own right-brain emotions; it's even more difficult for one's left brain to analyze someone else's emotions! Therefore, I'll not try to understand such emotions for particular people, but only mention my expectation that the "inspirational" and "intuitive" appeal of God probably includes: desire for love and protection, awe of nature, fear of death, and fear of the unknown. Be that as it may, Dear, I encourage you to again ask yourself: "For all concepts about God, ranging from his existence to the idea that 'God is love' or that 'God is all', what data support such notions?"

As for an "intuitive idea" of God, one of the most startling examples I've ever encountered is on the first page of the *Introduction* to The Book of Mormon, the book in which you have been instructed since you were a baby. There it states: "We invite all men [and, presumably, also, all women!] everywhere to read the Book of Mormon, to ponder in their hearts the message it contains, and then to ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if the book is true." This *Introduction* then references *Moroni 10*, where the following can be found:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

In contrast, Dear, I encourage you never to seek confirmation of the existence (or other "truth") of anything by looking only within yourself; instead, seek confirmation with data from the external world. For example, if you seriously wonder about a tree's existence, don't ponder it, don't "ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ [that] he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost"; instead, try kicking it! The resulting data (from a sore foot or a dislocated hip!) will give you a much clearer information about the tree's alleged existence.

As for your “intuitions” or “instincts” telling you whether The Book of Mormon is “true” (or, for that matter, telling you whether any collection of words is “true”), Dear, as far as I can understand “instinct” (or Body), I guarantee you that it won’t – because as far as I (my left brain) can understand my instinct (or Body), it doesn’t “know” what words are! Yet, I do admit to the possibility that, if you keep asking yourself, long enough and intensely enough, whether or not something “exists”, or is “true”, or similar, then I wouldn’t be surprised that your brain (both left and right hemispheres) will finally give up “in disgust”, conveying a message something similar to: “Okay, okay, accept it if you must, but get on with it!”

On the other hand, if you will examine some of the data dealing with the “prophet” (or better, “profit”!) Joseph Smith and his Book of Mormon, all such data strongly suggest fraud. I’ll show you some of this in later chapters, but if you’d like to explore the matter now, by yourself, then in a good internet “search engine” (e.g., Google), type in “Mormon” plus “inconsistencies” or “fraud”. If you will dig into the results, you’ll uncover an enormous amount of data that conflicts with Smith’s claims (including the DNA characteristics of the original Americans, the roots of their language, and a huge body of archeological data, for example, dealing with animals, metals, monuments, cities, etc., that conflict with statements made in the Book of Mormon). Further, you can find a huge number of cases of plagiarism and errors in the Book of Mormon, erroneous prophecies by “the profits” Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and details of Joseph Smith’s experiences as a con artist, including his arrest and fine. And of course it’s correct, Dear, that sometimes data “lie” – but it’s much more common that people do.

Now, Dear, with the above, I wasn’t focusing on Mormonism for any reason other than your experiences. As I’ll be trying to show you in this book, the same failure to base decisions on reasonable interpretations of reliable data is common in all organized religions. More generally, there’s the question of how to assess reliabilities of any ideas gained by “intuition” and “inspiration”, to decide on the reliability of our resulting “beliefs” and “faiths”. But before addressing such assessments, let me quote and then comment upon my dictionary’s meanings for the word ‘intuition’ and ‘inspiration’. In later I-chapters, I’ll address and try to analyze the concepts of ‘belief’ and ‘faith’.

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**intuition:** the direct knowledge or learning of something without the conscious use of reasoning; immediate apprehension or understanding

**inspiration:** a thought or feeling aroused or produced, as in kindness can inspire love [and a “bump in the night” can inspire fear!]

From my own experience, I can attest to possessing “intuitive knowledge”, but I’ve also learned that most (if not all) of my “intuitive knowledge” (i.e., immediate apprehension or understanding, without conscious reasoning) arises because my consciousness can’t “keep up” with the rest of my brain! For example, we all have “intuitive knowledge” that when we drop something it falls, but surely that’s because not only our minds but possibly also our genes have “programmed” this information, no longer requiring conscious attention. But, Dear, relying on “intuitive knowledge” can at times be silly and at other times can be seriously misleading. As examples, if you’re ever on a spacecraft, your intuition about what happens when you drop something can lead to amusement, and when you’re on Earth, your intuition that “nice looking” people are “nice” can be downright dangerous.

That is, Dear, if the matter seems important, then don’t just “trust your intuition”; dig into relevant data. Intuitive ideas are still ideas, and if these ideas are important to you, then subject them to the same “filtering process” (*via* the scientific method) that you would for any other idea: does a specific intuitive idea succinctly summarize a substantial quantity of reliable data, does it conform to other ideas that you’ve found to be reliable, does it have predictive capabilities, and are the predictions validated by experimental tests? Thus, Dear, if a ball doesn’t drop when it’s released, if a “nice person” behaves terribly, if your parents’ advice seems dumb, if your grandfather’s suggestions seem silly, if... then I strongly recommend that you replace your “intuitive ideas” with ideas that are more reliable.

Similarly, Dear, please be careful with your “ideas” (or maybe better, your “feelings”) known as “inspirations”; they can easily “conspire” to lead you to where you wish you never went. You can see this happen, for example, at “rock concerts”, where the beat, the lyrics, the music, the enthusiasm, conspire to inspire (maybe even hypnotize) young people (maybe especially young girls) to engage in some crazy activities, including offering their bodies for use by the rock stars.

You can see similar behavior even in some “inspirational” religious activities, when (maybe especially women) behave as if they’re madly in

love with Jesus (or in some cases a cult leader, such as Joseph Smith). I recall Thomas Jefferson's report:<sup>1</sup>

In our Richmond there is much fanaticism, but chiefly among the women. They have their night meetings and praying parties, where (attended by their priests and sometimes by a henpecked husband) they pour forth the effusions of their love to Jesus in terms as amatory and carnal as their modesty would permit them to use to a mere earthly lover.

If you wonder “what’s the harm in that”, Dear, then I’d ask you to imagine some possibilities: think about what people can be led to do when they are “under the influence” of such “inspirations”, think of the strain on families caused when some members are “living in a dream world”, think of the strain on communities when some groups fanatically pursue their objectives – and think of some of the problems in the world caused by such “inspired people” tying explosives around their waists and blowing themselves and others up as part of their “jihad” (i.e., “holy war”).

Let me give you a personal example, which happened to a friend (whom I wish I could have helped more). Soon after his wife was converted to Christianity, she was inspired to become overwhelmingly “loving”. One of her husband’s male friends was having a lot of troubles, by chance he confided in her (her husband wasn’t home at the time), and when her husband came home, they were in bed together, where she was bestowing on his “friend” all the “love” of which she was capable. As you can well imagine, it devastated her husband: simultaneously he lost trust in both his friend and his wife.

As I’ll show you in later chapters, something similar apparently occurred in the early days of Christianity [as reported in (Saint) Paul’s letters in the Bible and as still occurs in many religious “cults”]. Apparently what happens is that (typically) lonely, frightened people become so inspired with the fellowship of a group (and in some cases with the “magnetism” of a cult leader) that their inhibitions disintegrate, and not only their ideas but also their behaviors become unconstrained. But let me set such “policy issues” aside until later chapters (where I’ll try to explain what I mean by saying that “Belief in god... is even worse policy”) and return to the attempt to show you that “Belief in god is bad science”.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Jefferson Himself* by Bernard Mayo (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1942, p. 323).

At the start of these I-chapters, I started to address “the theory of existence”, i.e., “ontology” (which, again, is from the Greek words *ontos*, meaning ‘being’ or ‘existence’, and *logos*, meaning ‘theory’ or ‘account’). I suggested that all ontology was silly, because the concept of “existence” is a hypothesis. Consequently, a hypothesis about the existence of anything (as with any hypothesis) should stand or fall depending on tests of predictions from the hypothesis. Therefore, ontology (the theory of existence) should be discarded in favor of experimental studies of existence, i.e., as a part of “phenomenology”, determining if data support predictions of hypotheses about various phenomena. [The word ‘phenomena’ (the plural of ‘phenomenon’) is from the Greek verb *phainesthai*, meaning “to appear”; thus, phenomenology is the study of what appears.] Of course, many people have claimed that various gods have appeared to them, but everyone who has seriously examined such claims has concluded that the people were lying, hallucinating, or mentally ill.

Anyway, Dear, I hope that you’re beginning to see something that I’ll be “harping on” throughout the book: in general, the need to evaluate your ideas, and in particular, the need to constrain ideas called ‘imagination’, ‘intuitions’, ‘inspirations’, and ‘instincts’ (or “instinctive ideas”). It’ll take me many chapters to describe “evaluating ideas”, Dear, because just trying to understand ideas, trying to “know what we know”, is a huge topic. As a branch of philosophy, trying to know what we know is called not ontology (the theory of existence) but epistemology (from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning ‘knowledge’, and again with *logos* meaning ‘theory’ or ‘account’).

According to my dictionary, epistemology is “the study or theory of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge.” Josh Billings summarized a dominant theme of epistemology well: “It’s better to know nothing than to know what ain’t so!” In an earlier chapter, I wrote that if I were asked to reduce this book to a single word, then my choice would be: **Evaluate!** What I mean by that, of course, is that I urge to you evaluate your ideas. The idea of evaluating ideas is to try to know what you know! And again, trying to understand knowledge is called epistemology.

In later chapters, I’ll show you a little epistemology. If nothing else, I hope you’ll be impressed with the efforts expended by some amazingly brilliant philosophers (including Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and many others) trying to understand ideas. In a way, however, much of their efforts was misdirected, because the study of

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knowledge, the study of our ideas, is more appropriately a study of our minds, and therefore is more profitably investigated not by philosophers but by psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurologists.

Thus, if one adds to epistemology (the theory of knowledge) the need and methods for constraining ideas, then the combination leads to the field of psychology. In psychology, too, however, there is a silliness: the word ‘psychology’ is derived from the Greek word for ‘soul’, *phycé*, but whereas essentially all psychologists no longer recognize the existence of “souls” (except figuratively), then as my dictionary states, psychology has become to mean “the science dealing with the mind and with mental and emotional processes.” Thus, psychology has become not the study of the soul, but the study of how we think, i.e., phenomenology of the mind.

But setting all those definitions aside for a while, now I’d ask you to do some thinking about thoughts and about thinking! I trust you agree that all of us have an astounding number of thoughts, and that, whenever we have an enormous collection of anything, our minds seem to seek some order, usually by organizing “the elements” into various “sets” and sometimes by mentally constructing some analogy. For example, an analogy for our thoughts is this: it’s as if all of us live in our own separate little houses in which we store and think about all our thoughts.

Thus, some of our thoughts (those dealing with “the outside world”) come into our individual “houses of thought” through windows and doors that we open, and we store these thoughts in various places in various rooms in our house. Maybe we put our ideas about “how to live with other people” in drawers of tables in the living room, ideas about “what foods to eat” in kitchen cupboards, ideas about “how the world works” on bookshelves in the den, and so on. And I trust that you expect that I’ll be recommending (over and over again!) that all such ideas about “the outside world” should be constrained by the scientific method.

In addition, though, each of us has a huge number of “inside thoughts”: our goals, hopes, wants, wishes, “daydreams”, needs, instincts, and on and on. Each of us commonly group and store these “inside thoughts” in various places throughout our (imagined!) mental house. For example, people might keep their goals on the mantle piece in the living room (so they can be frequently seen and reconsidered!), their hopes near the front door, sexual instincts in a drawer on the bedside table, and most of us probably try to

store our fears and feelings of failure in closets or under the bed! How to constrain some of these “inside thoughts” can be a real challenge (which I’ll get to!); if we’re unable to constrain some of them by ourselves, we should get help from appropriately trained professionals, i.e., from psychologists or psychiatrists (the latter, being trained both as psychologists and medical doctors, are therefore permitted to prescribe medication).

Now, Dear, you might question the need to constrain some of your “inside thoughts”. You might think:

“They’re my ideas. Maybe some of them aren’t so good, but most of them are lots of fun! Either way, so long as they don’t hurt anyone else, then where’s the harm? Why don’t other people mind their own business – and their own thoughts!?”

I would generally agree with that idea, Dear, except that some of your “inside ideas” can harm you. And I for one (and of course there are others, including your parents, your other grandparents, and other members of your family and extended family) have a vested interest in your not hurting yourself.

You might also complain: “Well, okay, maybe I should constrain some of my hopes and dreams, but surely I don’t need to constrain my instincts!” I would generally agree with that idea, too, Dear. For example, if a missile of some sort (e.g., a rock) is headed for your head, then by all means follow your instincts: duck! But, Dear, sometimes even your instincts need to be constrained. For example, although generally it’s a good idea to follow your instincts to continue to breathe, if you’re under water without breathing apparatus, it’s a good idea to constrain your instinct even to breathe!

Similarly, Dear, it’s a good idea to constrain some of your other instincts, such as to gorge yourself on food, to have unconstrained sex, to commit to unrestrained loyalty to some “tribe”, and so on. The reason why such constraint is needed is simply because many of our instincts developed when we were wandering tribes of primates. Then, gorging ourselves on food after each hunt was appropriate (for otherwise the food would have spoiled), as was unconstrained sex (because extinction of the tribe was always a threat), and as was (generally) unrestrained loyalty to the “tribe” (so the tribe would survive the many threats). Now, though, such behavior can be highly inappropriate.

The root problem is that our environments (including our cultural environments) can change relatively rapidly (even during a single generation), while our instincts change only slowly, taking many generations (in some cases, hundreds or even thousands of generations). Therefore, to prosper in the current environment, it's appropriate to constrain those instincts that were appropriate for different environments. For example, there is nothing "sinful" (as the clerics suggest) about your instinctive desire to have sex with other partners, but you would be well advised to constrain this instinct, because it's a relic of a bygone era of human evolution. But meanwhile, some of your instincts are still appropriate; for example, if a missile is headed toward your head, don't constrain your instinct to duck, and in most cases, if you find someone in need, then generally follow your instinct to help – but do take care (which is a topic that I'll get to in a later chapter).

And thus, Dear, if you didn't already realize it, maybe you're beginning to appreciate the enormity of the tasks, not just to organize and try to understand all your ideas but also to identify those that you'd profit from constraining – and then to learn how to constrain them. Welcome to the worlds of epistemology and psychology! But if you want to explore these worlds, whereas I don't have sufficient knowledge to be your guide, I'd invite you to study them on your own, e.g., you could get your Ph.D. in either field – maybe even both! Here, let me mention just a couple of points, which I'll keep returning to later in this book and for which I'll keep requesting your patience.

First, Dear, I guarantee you that you'll gain substantially from constraining all the ideas "in your house" (in your mind) that deal with "the outside world" by using the scientific method: make sure any idea succinctly summarizes a substantial quantity of reliable data, make sure any idea is consistent with well-established ideas (such as those of logic and other basic principles), make sure the idea has predictive capability, and then make sure the idea's predictions pass as many experimental tests as you can safely subject them to. In the next few chapters, I'll illustrate how to use the scientific method to constrain, especially, "the god idea", but I encourage you, Dear, to use the same method to constrain all your ideas (not just ideas about gods and ghosts, "immortal souls", heaven and hell, and so on).

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Thus, Dear, if anyone tries to talk you into “buying ideas” about miracles, immortal souls, eternal bliss in paradise, miraculous devices, perpetual motion machines, and so on, then maybe placate them by saying “that’s an interesting idea”, but before you “buy into” any such idea, before you let such ideas in through your windows, front door, or even the back door, demand that the hypothesis pass the tests required of any hypothesis. In addition, Dear, especially because of your indoctrination with “the god idea”, I encourage you to do some “house cleaning”, to make sure you don’t have some stinking, moldy, or even flammable ideas that were slipped into your house when you weren’t paying attention or when you weren’t old enough to judge if you wanted them.

Second, Dear, for all ideas “in your house”, you can often profit from investigating the reliability of their source or sources. Is the idea derived from your imagination, intuition, inspiration, or instincts? Is the idea derived from your own observations or from someone else’s? If the idea is derived from data, are the data reliable? If the idea was communicated to you from other people, are they reliable? For example, Dear, if someone tells you that the world is going to end tomorrow, then you may want to check if the person was just released from a mental institution or if the person is the world’s most competent and trustworthy astronomer.

No matter the sources of your ideas, Dear, if the ideas are important to you, if you are considering acting on them, then you also have time to consider if they should be constrained. Of course, if a rock is coming at your head, then don’t pause to “consider” acting on your idea to duck! But if your instinctive reaction is to have sex with a stranger, then you’ll have time to consider if you really want to simultaneously have sex with all of the stranger’s sex partners: Is the idea logical? Is it consistent with other principles that you’ve adopted? Is it consistent with your trio of survival goals?

For the case of “the god idea”, I’ll illustrate this method of “checking sources” in a set of chapters labeled with “**Ix**”, where the “x” stands for “excursion”. A major goal of those **Ix**-chapters is to address the question: “What’s the source of certain grandchild’s idea of Jesus?” In the course of trying to answer that question, I’ll also show you possible origins of all ideas about “gods”, “spirits”, “immortal souls”, “happy hunting grounds”, and similar. From those chapters, I trust you’ll see (as maybe you already

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suspect) that such ideas were conceived by prehistoric “savages” who understood less about this world than modern-age six-year olds.

As for all the other ideas “in your house” (your memories, goals, hopes, imaginations, intuitions, inspirations, instincts, and so on) be careful: memories can become distorted, hopes can be irrational, imaginations can “run wild”, intuitions can be no more than wishing to see patterns that aren’t really there, inspirations can be derived from long-held hopes, and I’ve already suggested that many instinctive ideas are probably derived from genetic “programming” whose appropriateness disappeared tens of thousands of years ago.

In later chapters, I’ll be encouraging you to constrain, when appropriate, some of your other ideas (such as your intuitions, inspirations, and instincts), but for the rest of this chapter, Dear, let me emphasize the need to constrain your imagination. I’ve chosen to emphasize imaginations, now, because I want to address still another reason why I reject “the god idea”, namely, because as with ideas about Superman, Santa Claus, and Wonder Women, all “beliefs” about all gods are simply “make believe”, i.e., wishful imagination. And as Daniel Boorstin said: “We suffer primarily not from our vices or our weaknesses, but from our illusions. We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in their place.”

Let me start my demonstration by describing what actually occurred while I was trying to write this chapter. While trying to develop a way to convey to you the need to constrain imagination, I “toyed with the idea” of adding another stanza to my “I poem”, which as I mentioned in **Ia**, is all that I review for “I” when I’m walking. Below is what I remember about this poem when I’m walking, plus the possible new stanza:

So what am I? Just one more tiny link  
In Nature’s chains of thought. I am, no less,  
A wave of thought, uniquely blown to think  
Upon this common sea of consciousness.

And if one wave should break out from the norm,  
Perhaps with ripples running out in rhyme,  
To help some “I” make waves of better form,  
Then “we” might know a little more, next time.

As for a possible additional stanza:

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So now, a ripple running out to you,  
A hopeful wave to help you on your way:  
Imagine what could be, and what to do,  
But base your choice on what the data say.

Or as another possible “final stanza”, I tried:

Another ripple... may a wave then grow  
To break the mystics’ claim that all is “His”  
And drown their images in depths below:  
Imagine what could be – but learn what is!

I also tried:

And last, a pebble – ripple – wave, I pray,  
A wave to impact all your future acts:  
The scientific method is the way  
To filter froths of fancy from the facts.

Which, more than anything, no doubt demonstrates my incompetence as a poet. Anyway, Dear, let me now try to explain my proposed “ripple”:  
*Imagine what could be – but learn what is.*

First, Dear, please think again about our amazing mental power that we call imagination. Unfortunately, though, here I won’t be able to guide your thoughts very well, because I haven’t yet studied what others have learned about imagination. Maybe you would study this and teach me! Yet, in spite of my incompetence (both as a poet and a psychologist), let me mention a few features of imagination that seem obvious.

No doubt our right brains become involved in many of our imaginations. For example, children can imagine monsters under their beds – and the pictures they imagine can be vivid. To calm a child who has imagined a monster under her bed, she must learn to distinguish the difference between *imagining what could be* from *learning what “really is”*. Usually this can be done simply by turning on the lights and showing her that, in reality, there is no monster under her bed, but I know a certain child who would then point out the obvious: “The monster’s there only when the lights go out!” It can be hard to argue with the logic and the imagination of some people – and especially those of a certain four-year old! One way to calm her is to

conform to her own reasoning: “Well, then, Dear, if the monster is there only when the lights go out, how about if I leave the light on?”

Further, besides our right brain’s participation in imagination, sometimes “body” (or instinct or “l’autre moi”) can be involved. What I’m wondering is: when a jackrabbit sees me in the desert, why does he dash away so fast, apparently so full of terror? Does he “imagine” his death? Further, I’m wondering why a substantial part of our imagination commonly deals with fear (and maybe more so for women than men); for example, consider a certain child’s fear about the monster under her bed. But whether or not the source of this part of our imagination is instinct, certainly our ability to imagine fear has been and still is of enormous value to our survival, for by *imagining what could be* real threats to our survival, we can then take appropriate action – in case *we learn what is* actually is the same as what we imagined.

But, although fear may be the most fundamental (and strongest?) stimulus of our imagination, certainly fear is not the only stimulus. Thus, sometimes we imagine peaceful places, happy times, trusted friends, loving companions, and so on. Further, although most of these “daydreams” seem to be stimulated by our right brain’s emotions, some may be stimulated by our animal instincts. What I’m thinking about is how my old German shepherd (“Zeus”) would seem to be so “happy” when he heard the gates open (on the truck and then in the fence), for *he had learned that what he imagined* (a walk in the desert) *would really be*.

As well, no doubt left brain’s analysis capabilities are involved in imagination, but to me, the degree of this involvement is unclear. Thus, if one’s left brain “supplies” words such as ‘living’ and ‘forever’, then clearly many people can imagine “living forever”, but then some of us have our left brain’s test the concept with: “Hey, wait a minute – does that make sense?” Maybe it’s that our right brain *imagines what could be*, but then it’s our left brain’s job to test and *learn what is* – but I’m not sure. What I’m thinking about is when I ask my new German shepherd (“Heidi”), “Does Heidi wanna go for a walk”, not only does she start jumping around, but she answers me “I wanna go for a walk.” (Kid, I kid you not; Heidi not only understands words, she uses them! I’ll show you when you next visit.)

Anyway, more generally (and as I’ve written before), it’s important to learn that attributes don’t imply existence. There’s no point in arguing with a

four-year old that one attribute of the monster (which resides under her bed when the light goes out) is that it goes “bump in the night”. That much she knows for certain! Therefore, first it’s necessary to show her that many things have the attribute that they go bump in the night (the cat jumping down from the table, the dog running in his dream, a car door that’s slammed, and so on). Then, it’s necessary to identify the actual cause of the bump that she heard – which, as with many scientific demonstrations, can be quite difficult!

It’s the same with “the god idea” – it can be extremely difficult to purge that imagination from some people’s minds. If attributes of God have been identified to be “love”, “the creator of the universe”, and so on, then given that love, the universe, and similar attributes “exist”, the vast majority of people conclude that God (like a monster under the child’s bed) obviously does exist. Their “logic” is: if it walks like a duck, squawks like a duck, and flies like a duck, then it’s a duck! The fallacy in that “logic” arises from an unconstrained flight of the imagination – and a lack of comprehension of the meaning of words.

Words are just symbols for reality, not reality. For example, Dear, consider what the word ‘duck’ means. It means a bird that looks like... walks like... squawks like... and flies like.... That is, for most of us, when we identify a bird with a certain set of attributes we say: “From now on, rather than listing all those attributes, let’s simplify by identifying them with the new word ‘duck’.” If someone should then ask “Does a duck exist?”, we can respond: “Well, if you mean are there birds with the listed attributes, then the answer is: I can supply an independent set of data that supports the hypotheses that those attributes do occur.”

Similarly, with the word ‘God’ and with the monster under a certain child’s bed. It’s one thing to adopt hypotheses that ‘love’, “the universe”, and so on, exist and that there really was a bump in the night, but it’s quite another to jump from those attributes to assuming the existence of a God in his heaven and a monster under your bed. That is, again, it can be a real challenge to distinguish between *imagining what could be* from *learning what “really” is*.

In a later chapters, I’ll show you some of the “monstrous” problems that arise whenever we try to extrapolate from the ‘is’ of attribution (or predication) to the ‘is’ of existence, no matter the number of attributes: if it

\* Go to other chapters *via*

squawks like a duck, walks like a duck, and flies like a duck, it can be a useful both to accept the definition ‘duck’ and to accept the working-hypothesis that the duck exists, but if squawks like a duck, walks like a rhino, and flies like a Boeing 747, then why call it God?! In a later chapter, I’ll also show you how to try to avoid such problems (through application of the scientific method, to constrain imagination), but here, let me just keep prodding away at the meaning, value, and danger of imaginations.

As for its value, notice that besides its value in trying to prepare for the future, imagination is critical in most “creative work”, not only in the arts (which may rely substantially on right-brain’s ability to imagine), but also in science (which is normally considered to be dominated by left-brain analyses). Thus, from personal experiences, I “know” both the value of imagination in understanding science (e.g., “imagine that the sum of the momenta before the collision was exactly zero; then...”) and in making scientific advances (“imagine a plume from a smoke stack; then what IS the dominant cause of the concentration fluctuations...”). That is, Dear, my experience has been that left-brain can be significantly involved in imaginations, but the details are far from clear to me.

As somewhat of an aside, maybe I should mention that sometimes there’s value (e.g., to someone’s survival) to spend time thinking about things and processes that neither exist nor have any reasonable possibility of ever existing. Such activity currently employs all the storytellers of the world! But even in this case, Dear, the “value” in any story is usually to convey some message about some thing or process that has a reasonably good potential to exist – assuming, as I do, that there’s no value in “just killing time”.

And though probably it’s clear to you that I don’t know enough about the details of how imagination works, there are two other features that are perfectly clear. One is its power over our actions (as can be attested by so many people who “achieve their dreams” by fixing their goals sufficiently firmly in their imagination), and the second is the power others gain over us if they control our imagination – which is what all “image makers” try to do.

In his recent book *The End of Faith*, which I encourage you to read, Sam Harris summarized well the importance of our imagination and associated “beliefs”:

A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life... Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings. If you doubt this, consider how your experience would suddenly change if you came to believe one of the following propositions:

1. You have only two weeks to live.
2. You've just won a lottery prize of one hundred million dollars.
3. Aliens have implanted a receiver in your skull and are manipulating your thoughts.

These are mere words – until you believe them. Once believed, they become part of the very apparatus of your mind, determining your desires, fears, expectations, and subsequent behavior.

As for the power that others can gain over you if they gain control of your imagination, consider the case of “Madison Avenue” image-makers. If they can get you to *imagine* how beautiful or handsome you'll be if you buy... then they've gained power over some of your money. Similarly, if political leaders (and their image makers) can have you *imagine* the bounties you'll receive if they gain power (and the troubles you'll experience if their opponents gain power), then they'll gain the power of your allegiance. In such cases, though, you'll *learn* that usually there's a disappointing difference between what you *imagined could be* and *what “really” is* – unless your left brain analyzed what these image makers were doing, that is, trying to gain power over your imagination.

Worst – by far – are the mystical image-makers, who have been practicing the art of manipulating imaginations for thousands of years. And yet, as Somerset Maugham said in another context, “Give the devil[s] their due”: surely an objective observer would give the clerics high praise at their skills in manipulating images and imaginations. And still today the clerics maintain that what they *imagine could be* actually is!

For example, there's the clerics' familiar chant (which in a later chapter I'll show you is actually of Egyptian origin) of *Psalms 23*, here from the King James Version of the Bible:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the

valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and they staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of me life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

And those people who haven't learned to distinguish between *what is* from what their imaginations suggest *could be*, proceed to recite "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..." and walk to be eaten by the lions or to be blown apart by the explosives they tied around their waists.

Yet, certainly it isn't just "religious extremists" walking to their imminent death who fail to distinguish between *what is* and what their imaginations suggest *could be*: the rest of the people who are "truly religious" move toward their death more slowly but in comparable stupor. Anyone who bought the clerics' image of God, or of heaven and hell, or of their immortal soul has let their *imagination of what could be* displace their ability to *learn what is*.

That is, Dear, I hope you see how extremely important it is for you to "imagine what could be – but learn what is." In contrast, all image makers, and especially the religious mystics, seek to have you "imagine what is" – with them in control of your imagination. Thus, as a summary of all religious instruction, its purpose is to teach followers to replace reality with the religious group's illusions and dogmas: you are taught to imagine and accept their illusions. And please remember, Dear, that all of this is "learned behavior" – in some cases literally beaten into a child's brain – for as someone else said: at birth, no one "believes" in any god.

As I also mentioned already, some people (including your other grandfather) argue that it's "useful" to guide the imaginations of children and of "simple folks" into "channels" that lead to fewer problems for the rest of us. Using images of "eternal souls" with "God in Heaven" and "Satan in Hell" (or using the images from some other story-book besides the Bible, e.g., with images created by the Walt Disney company), the "leaders" can then guide the people to act as the leaders desire. Don't buy it Dear! The leaders know the general principle: if you want to control people, then control their imaginations. And the result is not only that leaders gain too much power, but the process deflects humanity from what's real – a process from which no good can come.

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Let me show you an example (many more of which I'll show you in later chapters dealing with morality, justice, politics, and so on). This quote is from the book *Nationalism and Culture* (Chapter 2, Religion and Politics) by Rudolf Rocker (1873–1958):<sup>2</sup>

Napoleon I, who as a young artillery officer had called theology a “cesspool of every superstition and confusion” and had maintained that “the people should be given a handbook of geometry instead of a catechism”, radically changed his point of view after he had made himself Emperor of the French. Not only that; according to his own confession, he for a long time flirted with the idea of achieving world rulership with the aid of the Pope; he even raised the question whether a state could maintain itself without religion. And he himself gave the answer:

“Society cannot exist without inequality of property – and that inequality, without religion. A man who is dying of hunger, next to one who has too much, could not possibly reconcile himself to it if it were not for a power which says to him: ‘It is the will of God that here on Earth there must be rich and poor, but yonder, in eternity, it will be different’.”

The shameless frankness of this utterance comes all the more convincingly from a man who himself believed in nothing, but who was clever enough to recognize that no power can in the long run maintain itself if it is not capable of taking root in the religious consciousness of mankind...

I would suggest, however, that it would have been better to write the final clause of the above quotation to express the more general idea: “no power can in the long run maintain itself if it’s incapable of taking root in people’s imagination.”

And I should add, Dear, that I shudder not only at the images that your religion has poured into your mind but also at all the images to which you were exposed by watching so many Disney videos. From *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* have my granddaughters adopted the image that they must wait for some handsome prince to come and sweep them away? From *The Little Mermaid* have they adopted the image that the prime purpose of females is to marry? From *The Lion King* have all my grandchildren adopted the image that males are to dominate? What about the image that first they should get their Ph.D. in physics, then the image of their becoming astronauts, and then later (after they’ve taught political philosophy in an Ivy

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<sup>2</sup> The book was translated by Ray E. Chase and published by Michael E. Coughlin, St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978. You can find it on the internet at [www.anarchosyndicalism.org/rocker/nc](http://www.anarchosyndicalism.org/rocker/nc).

League college), what about the image of their becoming President, surpassing even Jefferson! That is, Dear, the “bright side” of the “imagination coin” can be absolutely wonderful: to imagine what *could be* – and then work to see that *it will be!*

Such is the beginning of most human accomplishments. As a wonderful example, consider the lyrics of John Lennon’s 1971 song *Imagine* (in case you don’t know it, little one, he was one of the Beatles – and don’t you dare ask who they were!):

Imagine there’s no heaven  
It’s easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today...

Imagine there’s no countries  
It isn’t hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace...

You may say I’m a dreamer  
But I’m not the only one  
I hope someday you’ll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world...

You may say I’m a dreamer  
But I’m not the only one  
I hope someday you’ll join us  
And the world will live as one

But the reality of it is that John Lennon was murdered for performing this song (probably co-written with his wife Yoko Ono); he was shot by some crazed religious fanatic who “imagined” that’s what his God wanted him to

do! And in this single instance, see the horror and the immorality that has harmed humanity for hundreds of centuries: to imprison and/or torture and/or kill people for what they imagine.

Of course I can ‘forgive’ or ‘overlook’ such errors in primitive people – and even in modern people whose minds don’t work very well. I expect that, just as modern children frequently experience the “dark side of imagination” (e.g., whenever their nightmare or some “bump in the night” convinces them that there “really is” a monster beneath their bed), primitive humans were probably almost overwhelmed by the “dark side” of their imagination, as their brains slowly developed, tens- or even hundreds-of-thousands of years ago. This “dark side” is the source of all myths. The error was to assume that what can be imagined (e.g., all the mythical gods) actually ‘existed’ – the same error made by all who now “believe” in the gods of their cultures.

Let me try to put it another way. Dear, we humans are the strangest beasts that have ever roamed this Earth; maybe even the strangest beasts in our galaxy. Relative to other beasts on Earth, we have this huge brain that’s able to imagine the future. This capability has enabled us to gain dominance over all other beasts – except ourselves – because uncertainties about the future are unconquerable beasts.

For example, with our ability to imagine the future, we humans can foresee our death, which is the pre-eminent, uncertain- and unconquerable-beast. Faced with this indomitable beast, the vast majority of people choose not to fight it: they use their amazing ability of imagination to imagine death isn’t real. Thereby, people invented various religions, adopting ideas of “eternal life” (via re-incarnation, resurrection, or whatever), attempting to overcome the “death beast”.

Thus, the central premiss of Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism (a premiss borrowed from Ancient Egypt, Persia, and India) is that humans have “immortal souls”, i.e., in essence, that people are gods (who, by definition, are immortal). This premiss (this “speculation”) obviously needs to be examined. The essence of the Ancient Egyptian religion, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, etc. is to define the fate of everyone’s assumed “soul”: if the person behaves in prescribed manners, then the person’s “immortal soul” finds “bliss” in “afterlife” in “heaven”; otherwise, hell.

The con-artist clerics get their power by defining the “prescribed manners” by which a person is to live – of course including paying the priests for the person’s privilege of playing the game. Over the years, the “prescribed manners” by which people are “permitted” to live have varied (but almost always the “permitted way” has been behind-the-times, i.e., behind the ways that most people wanted to live). Nowadays, few people pay much attention to the original priestly prescriptions of how to live, because so many of these original prescriptions are absurd. But still the clerics continue their con games, finding interpretations that they want in obscure writings, or in the case of the Mormon Church, having their “living prophet” (the leader of the Mormon Church) prescribe new rules, or in the case of the Catholic Church, having the “inerrant” Pope revise the errors of previous “inerrant” Popes.

But it’s all so absurd – so ludicrous – resting on such flimsy premisses! And what I want to show you in the next few chapters is that ideas of gods and “immortal souls” are supported by zero data, all are illogical, all are easily shaved with Ockham’s razor, none has any reasonable predictive power, and therefore all are just “speculations” containing no knowledge.

Anyway , Dear, and once again, please be careful: constrain your imagination, intuition, etc. with reality. As I already mentioned, one way to constrain our thoughts is with “a little logic”, the basis of which (as I tried to show you) is just some simple scientific principles that summarize some of our knowledge about reality – knowledge that even animals and babies know. But, Dear, an enormous amount of data is available to demonstrate that logic (or “logical reasoning”) is a woefully inadequate constraint on our thoughts – because it’s so astoundingly easy to make logical errors. In later chapters, I’ll show you some famous examples as well as some personal examples (of logical errors made by both me and your dad). Such errors become obvious when the conclusions are subjected to the best way to evaluate ideas: with data. In fact, Dear, that’s the essence of “the scientific method”: to constrain and evaluate our thoughts with data.

And again, Dear, please think about how amazing are our minds. We can easily conceive things that don’t exist – and then engage in enormous activity thinking about them! For example, Dear: “Once upon a time, there was an invisible flying elephant that was pink. One day, this invisible pink elephant flew into a...” Hey, wait a minute: your thoughts are flying ahead of mine!

It's so easy for our thoughts to drift off in "flights of fancy" to "daydreaming". Thereby, maybe you can see one of the fundamental reasons why religions persist: many people choose to avoid the real world by living in a religious dream world. This choice is common for people who are oppressed – possibly explaining why women seem to have a propensity to "drift into their dreams" (e.g., into religion), in turn derived from their oppression by men.

But, Dear, although we all do it to some extent, please resist this tendency to drift off into dreams. As I mentioned before, a happy "middle ground" was described well by Rudyard Kipling in his poem *IF*: "If you can dream, but not let dreams become your master...". To constrain our tendency to drift off into "flights of fancy", Francis Bacon (one of the "fathers" of modern science) gave good advice, roughly 400 years ago: "We must not then add wings [to our flights of fancy] but rather lead and ballast..." And of course, the "lead and ballast" that we should use to constrain our fanciful thoughts (unless we're telling stories or writing novels!) are a little logic and a lot of data.

And still again, Dear, please consider various ideas (as I asked you to in **Ia**). First, I trust it's not much of "a shocker" to say that humans have many ideas, including ideas about ideas. Further, I trust that you agree (based on your own experience) that our minds seem to have the "natural tendency" to try to group things (including ideas) in various ways (e.g., seeking similarities, differences, linkages, etc.). In many cases, our minds apparently attempt to organize ideas into various "sets" (with each set having members or elements with some peculiar characteristic), then to organize each set into subsets, and so on. For example, for the set of all things called "ideas" or "thoughts", commonly recognized subsets are those dealing only with words or other symbols such as those used in mathematics (left-brain thinking), those dealing only with pictures or images (right-brain thinking), and those dealing only with emotions ("instinctive" or "body" thinking) – but actually, many of our thoughts seem to be a complicated mix of these different ways of thinking. For example, for many people, ideas about god can stimulate words, pictures, and emotions.

In addition, I trust you agree that our thoughts aren't constrained by the reality external to our minds. Thus, given that humans can so easily think about the future (using words or other symbols, images, emotions, or a mix of all these), then it follows that the set of all ideas that we can think about

(including, e.g., things in the future) is much larger than the set of all things that are known to exist in the external reality. Similarly, the set of all attributes or characteristics (or similar) that, in our imagination, we can ascribe to (or “predicate of”) any process or thing is very much larger than the attributes actually possessed (e.g., you may think that a certain person is cute and considerate and kind and... but in reality...). And I trust you agree that, because our thoughts are unconstrained by reality, we can get ourselves into some monstrous problems, dealing with various “monsters” (such as appear under a child’s bed and in various “holy books”) that have nothing to do with reality, merely being figments of our (or someone else’s) unconstrained imagination.

I trust that it’s similarly obvious that, in many instances (especially if we seek to understand or interact with nonhuman aspects of the reality external to our minds), it’s appropriate to use our minds to constrain some of our thoughts. Thus, given the huge set of ideas that the human brain is capable of creating, then (by definition) it’s an indication of some ‘wisdom’ to use our minds to constrain some of our thoughts.

For example, unless there are peculiar reasons for doing otherwise (e.g., to create art), then by definition it’s wise if we constrain visions (especially visions of possible future events) to those visions that experience has taught have at least some non-zero probability of actually occurring, e.g., it’s usually wise to constrain ideas about ghosts and gods and goblins, but sometimes, do investigate “things that go bump in the night”! In addition, sometimes it’s wise to constrain our ideas that arise as emotions (e.g., the wisdom to count to ten when you’re angry, and if you’re very angry, then count to a hundred). Similarly, for ideas formed in terms of words (or similar symbols), then unless there are peculiar reasons for doing otherwise (e.g., joking or similar), it’s wise to be careful with the definition of words (including to take appropriate care that some “base words”, such as ‘existence’, can’t be defined in terms of more basic words).

Again, given that our thoughts are unconstrained by reality, then in general it’s wise to try to constrain our ideas (whether in the form of images or feelings or words) to those that experience teaches are “reasonable”. Thereby, perhaps one can see why it’s especially children (and those with childish minds) who are most troubled by ghosts and gods and goblins, and who are most susceptible to indoctrinations by various organized religions: children don’t have sufficient experience to judge which ideas are

reasonable and which are just figments of unconstrained imaginations. A part of wisdom, then, is gained just by experiencing which ideas have nonnegligible probability of being realized. Another part of gaining wisdom, though, is to learn to constrain ideas that we form with words (or other symbols) so that, when assembled into concepts, the words obey some “rules” that nature dictates (i.e., so that the ideas conform to basic scientific principles such as  $A \equiv A$  and  $A \neq \neg A$ ).

Let me illustrate. You imagine that your partner feels similarly about you, you imagine your future together, and your imagination “carries you away” to indulge in unsafe sex. Your intuition “tells you” that you can trust your friend – and your friend introduces you to illegal drugs. You and your friends start “fooling around”, the group become more and more boisterous, and in the “inspiration of the moment”, you end up doing “stuff” that you later wish you hadn’t. Your instincts for companionship, your sexual instincts, and your tribal instincts “tell you” that it’s all “okay”. And if you think my illustration is “far fetched”, Dear, then think of some cases from reality: the pregnant drug addict in prison and the “suicide bomber” who imagined that he or she would go directly to paradise – both inadequately constrained their ideas.

To constrain our thoughts to those for which each idea corresponds to some thing (or process or similar) that exists external to our minds, then the most important step is to check if there’s any evidence or data supporting its existence. To search for such evidence of existence, then (as I’ve stated before) the best we can do is perform “operational tests”, e.g., kick a tree, hug a kid, and similar. From my experience, such tests rule out, for example, the existence of invisible pink elephants, both flying and nonflying. Such tests also rule out all gods: no data support the suggestion of their existence, substantial data support fundamental principles that conflict with the suggestion of their existence, and no data support the predictions based on the assumption of their existence. Therefore, Dear, for those of us still living on planet Earth, the only reasonable conclusion consistent with the data is: “Hey, all god ideas are just figments of unconstrained imaginations!” As Simon Ewins said: “God is a perfect example of the kind of aberration that can result from an untrained intellect combining with an unrestrained imagination.” But I’ll constrain myself from trying to show you that until after you get some exercise!