

P2 – Premises Behind Purposes

Dear: With this “Part 3” of this book, my goal has been (and continues to be!) to try to explain what I mean by the second half of my summary statement: “Belief in god is bad science and even worse policy.” Stated more forcefully, my opinion is that belief in god is pathetic policy: sad personal policy and sick social policy. For the first few of these “P-chapters”, my goal is to try to show you not only the “sadness” of personal policies of religious people (derived from the immorality of their moral code, Obey!) but also some ingredients of “happier” personal policies of scientific humanists (derived from their moral code, Evaluate!). In subsequent P-chapters, I’ll move on from personal policies to social policies.

If you investigate policies from a “systems-analysis viewpoint”, Dear, you’ll relatively quickly see the cause of the sick policies in all religions. Thus, as I mentioned and used back near the beginning of this book (in Chapter B), the first principle of systems analysis is: “priorities for any system can’t be established until after the system’s objectives are known.” Stated more succinctly, the concept is: “first, purposes; then, policies.” Thereby, all religious policies (whether personal or social) encounter major problems: the system’s priorities can’t be established, because as I began to show you in Chapter O2, it’s impossible to know the objectives of any god.

In fact, a powerful argument can be made (as I tried to show you in O2) that the alleged omnipotent, omniscient, omni-whatever creator of the universe couldn’t possibly have any purpose, either for “himself” or for people, since having an objective would mean that he’s “wanting” – which isn’t a nice thing to say about such a god! Consequently and instead, the only purposes that religious people can know are purposes proposed in their “holy books” and promoted by their clerics. Meanwhile and in contrast, the prime purpose of all Humanists is simple and clear: to help humanity. As a result, humanist policies and their priorities follow relatively easily.

But with the above, I’m not suggesting that most religions don’t also promote some healthy policies. Yet, I want to try to make sure you appreciate the cause of the sicknesses of so many religious policies, e.g., dealing with abortion, birth control, child abuse, divorce, euthanasia, fornication, genitalia, homosexuality, intolerance, justice, kindness, love, morality, objectives, purposes, and so on, through the rest of the alphabet!

Further, as I'll be trying to show you, those religious policies that can be described as “more enlightened” are derived, not from “the gods”, but from “more enlightened” people, that is, from Humanists in their midst!

But setting that concept aside for a while, I'll soon start digging deeper to try to show you something even more important. Specifically, I hope to show you: there's more to the problem of identifying “healthy policies” than “just” identifying purposes. Thus, although the priorities for any system (including any human and any group of humans) are obviously first purposes, then policies, yet, whereas all purposes depend on some fundamental premisses, therefore for humans, the priorities really are: **first, premisses; then, purposes – and then, still later, policies.**

And if that sentence was a bit of “mind twister”, Dear, then don't worry about it, because my prime goal for this chapter is to start to try to show you that it's all “boringly obvious”! To begin, let me show you the rest of what I remind myself with the letter ‘P’ when I'm walking. In fact, immediately below, I'll put all of what I review with the letter ‘P’ when I'm walking (including what I started to try to explain in the previous chapter), so all of it will be in one location.

P: Pirate – pushing out.

Philosophy – the only serious philosophical question is how to stop laughing! We're just tubes... so many tied in knots... without a purpose other than reproduction, following people rather than a few simple principles. Instead, follow principles, not people. Also, try to repay the world's producers – aware that: “The only way to repay our debt to the past is to put the future in debt to ourselves.”

The priorities are, first, premisses; then, purposes – and then, principles, priorities, and policies – and finally, plans, procedures, and practices (with perseverance). In contrast to all religions (which posit seemingly endless speculations about “the supernatural”), the scientific method has been found to generate a substantial number of premisses (or “useful working hypotheses”), such as the premiss that the universe is entirely natural and that knowledge of it can be gained by the scientific method!

Consistent with such premisses, the primary purpose is to help humanity progress; to help humanity, a person normally needs to survive; of the many ways to help humanity, top priority is to help intelligence expand; other purposes, principles, and priorities then follow, plus policies, plans, procedures, and practices, with the top-priority practice being to always use your brain as best you can.

It'll take me quite a while to explain the additional ideas in the above. In this chapter, I'll start with:

The priorities are, first, premisses; then, purposes – and then, principles, priorities, and policies – and finally, plans, procedures, and practices (with perseverance).

To begin, consider 'premisses'. Now, of course it's correct that all of us adopt a huge number of premisses. Unfortunately for humanity, many people adopt premisses without much thought (e.g., *via* childhood indoctrination). In this book, in contrast, I've been urging you to think about your own premisses, to make sure (in the words of Arthur Jackson) that you "believe nothing with more conviction than the evidence warrants"; in a word, **Evaluate!**

PREMISSES ABOUT EXISTENCE

If you do begin to evaluate some of your basic assumptions or premisses, Dear, surely you'll find that many are quite secure. As I've suggested in earlier chapters, examples of such premisses include: 1) that your thoughts exist (at least as electro-chemical signals in your brain – not necessarily that what you're thinking about actually exists!), 2) that you exist, and 3) that external to your mind, there exists a reality with properties and processes about which objective observers tend to agree. In Chapter **ii** (entitled "Indoctrination in Ignorance"), I tried to show you that a huge amount of evidence supports those three premisses.

Yet, it may be that those premisses are wrong. Perhaps we're all just simulations in some humongous computer game. Perhaps some omniscient, omnipotent... god did create automatons (advanced "wind-up toys"!) that think they can think (!), that think they have "free will", but whose prime goal was programmed to be to praise, worship, love, and fear god. Thus, perhaps Moses and Muhammad were right: that all automatons (or 'automata') that don't worship God should be "turned off" or "terminated" (i.e., in their alleged words, "kill the infidels" or "kill the unbelievers"). But I doubt it. Thus, as I tried to show you in Chapter **ii**, evidence suggests that the probability that we don't exist, that it's all just a dream or simulation, is somewhere down near one part in 10^{25} . Stated differently, the probability that the three basic premisses are correct (about the existences of ourselves, our thoughts, and an objective reality) is $\sim 0.999999999999999999999999$.

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Given evidence that strongly supports premises that we, our thoughts, and an objective reality exist, then another fundamental assumption (which apparently we must make) addresses the question: how are information (i.e., data) and knowledge (i.e., understanding of the data) to be gained? For reasons that I'll try to show you, Dear, this is a critically important premiss – one that you must evaluate and choose for yourself.

PREMISS ABOUT THE NATURE OF REALITY

To begin to appreciate the importance of the premiss about how to gain information and knowledge, Dear, please first take a step backward and try to answer (for yourself) the following question. If you accept the premises that you and your thoughts exist and that a reality exists external to your mind, then: is this reality “natural” or does it contain “supernatural” properties and processes? Stated differently, Dear: for you, do ghosts and gods and goblins (and invisible flying pink elephants!) exist or not? You need to answer that question for yourself, Dear; no one else can do it for you. As I've written before (e.g., starting in Chapter **D**) and as Sartre emphasized: you can't avoid making decisions; even deciding to delay your decision is a decision.

If you've read this far in this book, you know how I've decided to answer the above question for myself: supernaturalism is silliness in the extreme! Yet, let me add (again) that I'm certainly not opposed to the existence of ghosts and gods and so on. In fact, if “truth be known”, I'm rather fond of at least the idea of invisible flying pink elephants!

But meanwhile, I'm afraid I'm too “stuck in my ways” to give up on my motto: “**Show me the data!**” Therefore, unless someone shows me some relevant data or unless someone shows me “the errors in my ways” (and it wouldn't be the first time that even a certain grandchild tried to do that!), then I plan to stick with the idea that one should hold one's beliefs only as strongly as relevant evidence warrants. Therefore, I dismiss all ideas about “the supernatural” (even ideas about those pretty but invisible flying pink elephants) as silly – even stupid.

In fact, even the idea of “supernatural” doesn't make sense to me: if it exists, then by definition it's natural; therefore, something “supernatural” can't exist. Of course, that argument can be countered with something similar to: “Well, okay, but with your definition, that means God is natural.”

“Fine”, I would respond, “then show me some data dealing with your ‘natural’ god.” If, someday, someone would provide me with some data about gods, holy spirits, life-after-death, invisible flying pink elephants, and so on, I’d be delighted to reconsider my position on the matter. In particular, I’d be more-than-willing to entertain the idea that I’d live forever. Shucks, I’d probably even claim that I deserve “eternal life” a helluva lot more than a whole lot of people whose names I could list!

But again, meanwhile there’s reality. And in this reality, Dear, it’s up to you to decide for yourself if you “believe” that anything “supernatural” exists. You know what I hope you’ll decide. And I hope you’ll decide that the idea of supernatural is silly not because I want “disciples”. [In fact, if “truth” were again revealed, I wouldn’t want any disciples: look how so many of them ruined the good reputations of “the Buddha” and of “the Christo” – if the latter ever existed!] Instead, I hope you’ll decide that the universe is entirely natural, not only because it seems to be so but also because of the opportunities that will then be available to you – a topic that I’ll get to.

HOW TO GAIN INFORMATION & KNOWLEDGE

So now, Dear, I want to return to the fundamental question mentioned above. In my view, the resulting premiss is THE fundamental premiss, even more important than the premisses that your thoughts exist, that you exist, and that reality is entirely natural – because it’s the premiss upon which you can test those premisses! The question can be formulated as: How can you gain information (data) and knowledge (understanding of the data) about the reality that exists external to your mind; that is, how can you learn about properties and processes that exist in reality?

If you decide that reality contains “supernatural stuff” (even though not a single shred of data supports such speculations), then options for learning about it include:

1. Use your emotions to guide you (e.g., as the Book of Mormon encourages readers, accept whatever you “**feel, in your heart, is true**” about that reality – and thereby, behave like any other animal),
2. Accept what various “prophets” state is the “nature of the supernatural” (in accordance with their claims that this nature was “revealed” to them by various gods and their “angelic agents”, and then recorded in various “holy books”), or

3. Accept what other people (e.g., parents, clerics...) say about that reality (e.g., which of the “holy men” are the “true prophets” and which of the “holy books” are truly “holy”).

The majority of the people in the world (somewhere in the range of between about 60 and 80% of all people, of course including all Christians, Muslims, and Mormons) use one or more of the above-listed methods to gain “knowledge” [cough, cough] about “the supernatural” [cough, cough].

If you’ve read to this point in this book, then you know my opinions about such nonsense; nonetheless, to remind you, let me return to the pervasive, pernicious, truly-horrible “proof-by-pleasure principle” that I addressed in Chapter **If**, which dealt with “Immortal Fallacies”. Thus, Dear, please be “scared as hell” of the proof-by-pleasure principle (or it’s complement, the proof-by-pain principle, e.g., “believing” in hell, because you’re scared of going there). Nietzsche [“Neecha”] said it well:

An agreeable opinion is accepted as true: this is the proof by pleasure (or, as the church says, the proof by strength), which all religions are so proud of, whereas they ought to be ashamed. If the belief did not make us happy, it would not be believed: how little must it then be worth!

As I mentioned before, a similar idea is contained in Alan Watts’ analysis of the word ‘belief’: ‘lief’ is a Anglo-Saxon root-word meaning ‘wish’; so, ‘be-lief’ means “wish to be”. Julius Caesar saw it too: “People believe what they want to believe.” But Dear: just because you want or wish something to be, doesn’t make it so! You may wish to go to heaven and avoid hell, but... You may wish that there were “liberty and justice for all”, but... You may wish that there were no wars, but... And so on.

How could anyone be so dumb? How could anyone “believe” that “if it feels good, it’s true; if it feels bad, it’s false”? If it feels good to eat chocolate bars, then it’s true that they’re good for you? If you have a cavity, if you have toothache, it feels bad; therefore, it’s not true that you have a cavity?! If it feels good to think that your “prophet” was “the one-and-only true prophet”, telling “the truth” that you’ll live forever in paradise if only you’d..., then...? As a certain grandchild would say: “Gimme a break!”

Yet, Dear, consider again what’s contained in the *Introduction* to the Book of Mormon:

We invite all men [and 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. Those who pursue this course and ask in faith will gain a testimony of its truth...

Therein, readers aren't encouraged to evaluate the original data, examine associated hypotheses, test the predictions of the hypotheses by obtaining more data, and so on, i.e., they're not encouraged to try to learn by applying the scientific method (to try to make sure that they're not fooling themselves). Instead, readers are asked to "ponder in their hearts", they're advised to let their emotions govern their decisions; they're encouraged to gain "knowledge" about "the truth" of the Book of Mormon by applying the proof-by-pleasure principle. That, Dear, is very bad personal policy.

Dear: Please evaluate your premiss about how knowledge about the universe is to be obtained. Further, and more to the point about there being any "supernatural stuff" [such as a loving god and his host of helpful, "guardian angels", plus "eternal rewards" for good people (such as the "believers", of course!) and "eternal punishment" for bad people (such as those who refuse to buy into either proof-by-pleasure or proof-by-pain arguments)], please be extremely careful. In particular, the above quotation from the Book of Mormon contains a grave error (the same grave error that's contained in Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and all organized religions) dealing with the fundamental premiss about how knowledge can be obtained, i.e., a grave epistemological error.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Let me remind you about the word 'epistemology'. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter and as is stated in the dictionary that comes with the operating system on this Macintosh computer, *epistemology* is

the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. Epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.

The word 'epistemology' comes from the Greek word for 'knowledge', *episteme*, plus the Greek suffix for 'theory' or 'study', *logy* or *ology*. And my point, Dear, is that a fundamental premiss that we all must make – in fact, I consider it to be THE fundamental premiss of everyone's life – is in answer to the basic epistemological question: How is knowledge gained?

Dear: you MUST answer that question for yourself. Once again, you're stuck with the "existential predicament" that you have no choice. Even if you decide that you won't decide, that's still your choice. If you decide you'll "just know" (e.g., by "listening to your heart"), then that's your choice. If you decide to let others decide, then that, too, is your choice. And I trust you know what I recommend: "Apply the scientific method, ya clown! Guess, test, and reassess. How else are you gonna make sure you're not foolin' yourself?"!

Now, Dear, of course I agree that each of us has substantial "instinctive" and "intuitive" (or "natural") knowledge. For example, I instinctively "know" that I should duck when a projectile is coming at my head, I instinctively "know" how to keep my heart beating, and I instinctively "know" the benefits to our survival that's available from kindness (with keenness) and love (within limits). Also, most of us have substantial knowledge that we've learned from our "nurture" (in our families and societies) – although as I tried to show you in **N**, it's sometimes wise to try to remove some of the resulting "masks" that we've been forced to wear but that "no longer fit". But meanwhile, Dear, I'm asking you to evaluate your premiss (or premisses) about how you plan to gain knowledge about the reality external to your own mind, where all "supernatural stuff" is alleged to exist.

Please, Dear – and solely for your own benefit – think about how you've gained "knowledge" about "things supernatural". Do you "believe" in the existence of such stuff because your parent told you so? Do you "believe" in such stuff because it gives you pleasure to do so? To be honest with yourself, surely you will demand more. Shall I remind a certain grandchild of her demand to me: "Show me the data!"

CHOOSING THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

But then, Dear, even if you dismiss all supernatural ideas as silly, without a shred of data to support them, then you'll still need to decide how you'll learn about the properties and processes of the reality external to your mind. The only option that I consider worthwhile mentioning is the following (which is in stark contrast to the options listed a few pages ago and used by all religious people):

Accept only what experience teaches you about the reality external to your mind (i.e., adopt the scientific method as your guide) plus, given that each of us has

limited time to explore many facets of that reality, tentatively accept a combination of your own experiences and the experiences of others – subject to the inflexible constraint of your being skeptical of assessments made by others, requiring that they demonstrate their commitment to the scientific method, that their credentials are appropriate, that their data and analyses are transparent, that predictions of their hypotheses have been rigorously, reliably, and reproducibly tested and well reported, and so on.

By now in this book, you know my strong recommendation that you should decide to adopt the method outlined immediately above, i.e., that you commit yourself to gaining knowledge about reality *via* the scientific method. Again, as Feynman said, the scientific method is just a way to try to make sure we're not fooling ourselves.

EPISTEMOLOGIES YIELD WORLDVIEWS

And yes, Dear, I agree that the premiss that knowledge of the reality external to your mind can be obtained *via* the scientific method leads to an outlook on life (a philosophy or a “worldview”) that’s not so pleasant as the worldview peddled by the clerics of the world (using their “proof-by-pleasure” arguments). In his book *River out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins described this less-pleasurable worldview well:

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good – nothing but blind pitiless indifference.

But, Dear, at least such a universe isn’t jealous or malicious (unlike various assumed “gods” that I could mention) and if you refuse to obey its dictates, it doesn’t threaten you with eternal torture (unlike so many crazed clerics of the world).

I should add, Dear, that besides being careful about the premisses or hypotheses that you choose to work with and/or live by (until better ones come along!), please be sure to routinely assess the consequences of your hypotheses. For example and as I mentioned to you in Chapter **ii**, I’ve found that my premiss (my “useful working hypothesis”) that “I exist” has caused me zero troubles. That is, not once, in all of my many days, have I ever had cause to stop and think: “Hmm, maybe the problem is that my hypothesis that I exist is wrong.”

In addition, Dear, never stop testing to determine if your premises are reliable. Hold to your “beliefs” with strengths warranted by relevant evidence. When you were a child, you firmly “believed” in Santa Claus, but when you found not only zero evidence to support the premiss but also evidence that conflicted with it, you abandoned your belief in the jolly old fellow in a red suit who allegedly brought you presents from the sky if only you’d be “good”.

Now, as you enter “the age of discrimination”, please ask yourself: What evidence supports the “belief” that some giant Jabberwock in the sky (“God”) controls the universe and will give you the greatest of all possible presents (i.e., eternal life in paradise) if only you’ll be “good”? Please dig into the huge amount of evidence that supports the idea that all “holy books” are simply the product of primitive scientists, lawyers, politicians – and con artists. And then, Dear, I hope you’ll start digging into the enormous amount of evidence that supports the idea that useful knowledge about reality has been gained (and can continue to be gained) *via* the scientific method.

PURPOSES CONSISTENT WITH YOUR PREMISES

After you’ve adopted premises about the nature of reality and how you’re to gain information and knowledge about it, the next critical step is to decide on your purposes (or objectives or goals). Undoubtedly you’ll choose purposes consistent with your premises.

And I used the word ‘undoubtedly’, Dear, because I expect that only a schizophrenic could do otherwise. Thus, on the one hand, if you’ve convinced yourself that some giant Jabberwock actually does rule this universe, I don’t know how you could do anything but adopt goals consistent with what you “thought” he (or she or it) wanted. And on the other hand, if you’re one of those “stuck-in-the-muds” who require ample, reliable, reproducible data, associated hypotheses with predictive power, and validated tests of the predictions, and from such requirements you conclude that supernaturalism is silly, I don’t know how you could chose goals aligned with such silliness.

In either case, though, choosing goals is critical: critical for each and every person, every group, every society, and for humanity as a whole, because (as I’ve repeatedly stated in earlier chapters and will return to, still again, in

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later chapters) “values” have meaning only relative to some objective. Consequently, our concepts about morality (good *versus* evil, and all shades in between), honor, virtue, justice, peace, and similar values, all follow from each of us answering the fundamental question: “Why am I here?” or “What’s my purpose?” or “What am I supposed to do?” or “What’s the purpose of life?”

In the previous chapter, entitled “The Purpose of Life”, I tried to show you that all such questions are circularly meaningless, because in reality, an absolutely mind-boggling amount of data screams the obvious answer: Life IS the purpose! That is, all data point to the obvious conclusion that the purpose of life is to continue. In contrast to such obviousness, people have driven themselves crazy asking: “What’s the purpose of the purpose?” They might as well have asked themselves “What’s the life of life?”

Further, though, a more sensible question for each person than “What’s the purpose of life?” would be to ask: “What’s the purpose (or objective – or objectives – or goals) of my life?” Once again, the answer to that question (defining one’s goals) depends on how you choose to answer questions about the nature of reality and how you’ll gain information and knowledge about it. Ayn Rand said it well:

Are you in a universe which is ruled by natural laws and, therefore, is stable, firm, absolute – and knowable? Or are you in an incomprehensible chaos, a realm of inexplicable miracles, an unpredictable, unknowable flux, which your mind is impotent to grasp? The nature of your actions – and of your ambition – will be different, according to which set of answers you come to accept [italics added].

Stated differently, your decisions (your fundamental premisses) about the nature of reality and how you can gain information and knowledge about it will define your worldview, and as far as I know, sane people are incapable of adopting purposes (or goals), principles (and associated values), policies, plans, procedures, and practices (and associated priorities) inconsistent with their worldviews.

GOALS PURSUED WITH DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS

Of course, people adopt and pursue a huge number of goals, but the important question (which I addressed way back in chapter **B**) is: What do people adopt as their prime goals (i.e., those goals for which any other goals, then secondary or lower-order goals, would be sacrificed)? And as you

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know (because I've stated the result so many times that you're probably about ready to "climb the wall"!), my analyses of all data of which I'm aware lead me to conclude that everyone adopts as their prime goal(s) an interconnected trio of survival (or even "thrival") goals: survival of oneself, one's extended family, and one's values.

Differences among people arise, however, from different ideas about each of these three prime goals, as I'll try to summarize with the following.

1. *Survival of Themselves*

Different people have different ideas about what 'survival' means; for example, a huge number of people (who adopt "beliefs" without regard to relevant evidence) "think" that they (and their families) can survive forever in an imagined "paradise".

2. *Survival of Their Families*

Different people have different perceptions about the extent of their "extended family": some people recognize no family (only themselves), some people (e.g., in clans) recognize only their "immediate family" (which can include a substantial number of cousins and other "blood relatives"), some people (e.g., many Jews, most Muslims and Mormons, and members of groups such as the Mafia who have taken some type of "blood oath") recognize as family members all who profess membership in their respective groups, some people (such as essentially all Humanists) recognize all people as members of the same "human family", and still other people (some Humanists and Buddhists) recognize all life as members of the same "family of life".

3. *Survival of Their Values*

Different people adopt different sets of values – and this is where the analysis can become complicated (turning back on itself), because values have meaning only relative to some objective. But as I tried to begin to show you in earlier chapters, I'll try to show you in later chapters, and will briefly outline below, the objectives that different people adopt (and that provide the bases for their values) can be bizarre. Consequently, although it can be argued that all people pursue only their dual survival goals (of themselves and their families) and it's these dual survival goals that provide the bases for all their values, yet I choose to identify the listed trio of survival goals – and then leave it as another complicated step to try to understand the objectives that people actually pursue, while claiming that they pursue some value or set of values.

The following provides brief illustrations for different choices of values.

- For Humanists (in general), the "metric" for their values is easiest to comprehend (and to justify!): it's their dual survival goals [of themselves and their extended families, whatever extent they recognize for their "extended families", but for all Humanists (by definition!) it includes at least all humans].

- For religionists, in contrast, their values can be “all over the map”, depending on details of what their clerics dictate to be the purposes of the people (serving god, worshiping god, loving god, fearing god, whatever). Thus, as I began to show you in the “excursion” **Ix** and as I’ll try to show you in subsequent “excursions” (namely, **Qx** and **Yx**), for the ancient Mesopotamians (and consistently, most religious Jews), the ancient Greeks and Romans, and many “northern people”, their clerics claimed that the people’s prime goal was to serve/ worship/ fear god (or the gods). People no doubt adopted such goals for the “value” they expected to thereby gain from following orders, i.e., that the god or gods would assist the people in the pursuit of their dual survival goals – or at least, that the gods wouldn’t vent their wrath upon them! In contrast, for ancient Egyptians, Indians, Persians, plus other “southern people”, and subsequently (and consistently), Christians, Muslims, Mormons, and similar groups, their clerics claimed (and continue to claim) that the people’s prime goal was to assist/ love/ meld with their god (or gods), and again, people no doubt adopted such goals for the “values” they expected to thereby gain to their dual survival goals by following orders, i.e., to earn good “karma” for their next life, to gain eternal life in paradise, and so on.
- For other people, their values are measured relative to still other purposes. In much of Asia, at least since the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE), there’s been strong cultural promotion of “honor” and “duty”, especially to family (including to ancestors, whose “spirits” may or may not be assumed to continue to exist and if so, may or may not be “worshiped”). I’m sorry to report, however, that I have insufficient knowledge about their customs to know how their adhering to such values (of duty and honor) are imagined to promote their dual survival goals; perhaps, however, the Japanese kamikaze pilots, for example, were so brainwashed with the need for duty to their country, their ancestors, and their Emperor that their only options were to “do the honorable thing” (and commit suicide) – or to be put to death for their “cowardice”.
- For still other people, the purposes behind their values can be even more difficult to discern (e.g., people can adopt values of creating some “masterpiece”, excelling at some sport, breaking some record, discovering... whatever!). Also, in some cases, the propelling value can be “the thriving” of oneself, but for other cases, maybe some people identify the value to be “in and of itself”, e.g., in the creation of what they consider to be “beauty”.

In any event and in view of such complications, when trying to understand the objective(s) behind people’s values, perhaps you at least see, Dear, why I choose to identify a trio of survival (or “thrival”) goals – and leave the identification of details about the goal(s) behind the values as a separate and sometimes challenging step in the evaluation.

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOME HUMANIST VALUES

In my attempt to try to help you in your own challenging task of identifying goals that provide a “metric” for your own values, Dear, let me begin by briefly showing you what I consider to be particularly noteworthy values and associated goals (unrelated to any gods) that a few Humanists have adopted throughout history. I’ve already shown you some of this in earlier chapters; I’ll show you more details in the “excursion” **Yx**.

- Approximately 4,400 years ago in Egypt, Ptahhotpe made the “value judgment”: “**Be cheerful while you are alive.**” In addition, he provided some recommendations about how to be “cheerful” (which could be summarized by the Wisdom of the Seven Sages of Greece from ~2,600 years ago, “**Nothing too much**” or Terence’s, “**Moderation in all things**”). But maybe most important is Ptahhotpe’s simple message: “Be cheerful while you are alive.” It can be seen to be the recommended choice of the option now commonly described as “**Attitude is everything.**” That is, Dear, although we usually can’t control how our right-brain’s syntheses (our emotions) will respond to various stimulations, usually we can control our left-brain analyses of each stimulation (our attitudes) – and whereas the choice is ours and “Attitude is everything”, then the recommended choice is “Be cheerful while you’re alive.”
- As I reviewed in **Ix**, approximately 3,600 years ago in Babylonia, Shin-eqi-unninni (or Sîn-leqi-unninni) wrote his version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, about “Gilga the Hero”, who more than 1,000 years earlier was king of the city of Uruk (spelled Erech in the Old Testament). In the passage in the *Epic* in which the goddess/barmaid Sidur is speaking to Gilgamesh (who was in the process of searching for “the secret to eternal life”), the author conveys his philosophy by having her say to Gilgamesh:

...we frail humans die as you yourself must someday do. What is best for us to do is now to sing and dance; relish warm food and cool drinks; cherish children to whom your love gives life; bathe easily in sweet, refreshing waters; [and] play joyfully with your chosen wife. It is the will of the gods for you to smile on simple pleasures in the leisure time of your short days.

The message “to smile on simple pleasures” is as powerful today as it was 3,600 years ago. In addition, in the original version of “the Noah myth” (which was plagiarized by Ezra and co-authors when they concocted the Old Testament, approximately 1,000 years later), Shin-eqi-unninni has Ea (“the god of water and wisdom, protector of human beings”) give Utnapishtim (the Bible’s Noah) the following advice about how to live “the good life”:

Choose to live and choose to love; choose to rise above and give back what you yourself were given. Be moderate as you flee for survival in a boat that has no place for riches.

That message is echoed today in John Buchan's: [“We can only pay our debts to the past by putting the future in debt to ourselves.”](#)

- In ancient Greece, the three great philosophers Socrates (469–399 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and Epicurus (341–270 BCE) saw much about “the good”, but as I’ll now try to summarize, none saw what I consider to be the complete picture.

Socrates’ statement [“There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance”](#) is a brilliant summary of what people knew ever since they came down out of the trees, but obviously, he didn’t summarize all that people realized was “good” *versus* “evil”, and apparently he didn’t see why knowledge is good and ignorance is evil, i.e., as far as I’ve been able to determine, he didn’t see that values have meaning only relative to some objective. As for people realizing more, surely people have known “forever”, e.g., that “good health” is good and “bad health” is bad (even evil), that a “good day” is good and that a bad day isn’t, that “good fortune” (or “good luck”) is good and that “evil fortune” (or “bad luck”) isn’t, that “good people” are good (e.g., helpful) and that “evil people” aren’t, and so on, because such “goods” promote one’s dual survival goals.

Further, as Richard Dawkins has recently emphasized (when acknowledging his own ignorance about many topics) “ignorance isn’t a crime”; so, by extension, ignorance needn’t be evil. Thus, undoubtedly many ignorant people (such as essentially all low-level clerics) attempt and sometimes manage to “do good”, and in contrast, many knowledgeable people have caused much harm (by participating in evil). In any event, if Socrates had examined the issue further, surely he would have seen that the objectives that all life has always been pursuing were the survival (or even the “thrival”) of themselves and “their families”, and it is against these dual survival goals that ranges of “good” and “evil” are judged, e.g., that knowledge is usually “good” and that ignorance is commonly “evil”. Thereby, perhaps Socrates would have accepted an alternative to his statement (especially for cases of personal morality), such as: [There is only one good, willingness to learn, and one evil, refusal.](#)

After Socrates, Aristotle saw that

[...no one chooses \[happiness\] for anything other than itself... Happiness... is something final and self sufficient, and is the end of action... Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account, of what it is, is still desired.](#)

Unfortunately, however, Aristotle didn’t provide this “clearer account”, instead concluding:

[That which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else *is* man. This life, therefore, is also the happiest.](#)

What he apparently didn't see is that happiness is “just” an emotion, informing us that we are making progress toward our goals – and that our prime goals are our trio of survival goals (making progress toward which provide us with “happiness signals”).

Agreeing with Aristotle that happiness (or pleasure) is “something final and self sufficient, and is the end of action”, Epicurus looked further and saw that the goal of happiness provided a measure for values:

For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear... And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling [of pleasure] as the standard by which we judge every good.

Unfortunately, however, Epicurus didn't examine sufficiently carefully why some activities give us feelings of pleasure and others, pain, namely, for their influences on our trio of survival goals – I assume because, similar to Aristotle, he led a life of relative ease (complete with slaves).

As far as I know, the Jewish philosopher (and “father of psychology”) Spinoza (1632–1677) was the first to see that “**pleasure and pain... are states or passions whereby every man's power or endeavor to persist in his being is increased or diminished, helped or hindered.**” If he had been a parent, surely he would have extended his definition of “pleasure and pain” to include “passions” associated with the survival (or “thrival”) of his children; then, maybe he would have included the survival of his “extended family” (possibly including all life forms); surely he also saw (even if he didn't articulate) both the pleasure and pain of trying to protect his values, especially when they were attacked by the clerics of his community.

PURSuing PLEASURE – WITH CARE!

Perhaps the above brief survey is sufficient to permit me to at least sketch some general ideas about “the purpose of life”, or more accurately, some general ideas about the goals that you might want to pursue. Toward that end, Dear, I want to caution you against using Epicurus' idea of “using the feeling [of pleasure] as the standard by which we judge every good.” My caution, however, isn't derived from the reasons that essentially all clerics have superficially and hypocritically attacked Epicurus for the past ~2300 years. Instead, I caution you for reasons that I tried to show you in earlier chapters (e.g., in **B**, dealing with “dancing as best you can”, in **G**, cautioning you against “partying till you drop”, and in **N**, dealing with “The ‘NO’ Pain and the ‘NO’ Gain”) and which I'll try to briefly summarize as follows:

* Go to other chapters *via*

- A major set of problems associated with pursuing any “pleasure principle” is that many of what we identify as (short-term) pleasures are antithetical to what, on reflection, we would identify as conducive to long-term pleasure. You are already aware of a huge number of examples – but why don’t you study, anyway, and after you’ve finished studying, even if you don’t want to, then get some exercise!
- Another major set of problems associated with measuring values relative to “the pleasure goal” arises from the fact that many of our “pleasure signals” are instinctive, developed eons ago and now inappropriate, because our social evolution has been so rapid compared with our biological evolution. You are already aware of a huge number of examples – and actually, Dear, you will be happier (in the long run) if you suppress your instincts and don’t eat that chocolate, don’t have sex with that good looking stranger, don’t...!
- And another major set of problems associated with pursuing pleasures (and using them to judge values) is that our “pleasure signals” are easily tricked. For example, from the little I’ve read about the psychology of pleasure, I gather that it’s induced in our brains by the chemical dopamine – which is also stimulated by various drugs (including nicotine, opium, and various other illegal drugs). And though I hope (and trust) that you’ll never be so foolish as to stimulate your “pleasure signals” using drugs, please take suitable precautions if you seek to stimulate them in other “thrill-seeking activities”, such as riding those crazy roller coasters, not to dwell on skiing, surfing, bungee jumping, and so on – and totally avoiding comments about motorcycle riding!
- And as if the above weren’t enough, still another major set of problems with pursuing pleasure is that many “pleasure signals” are transmissions garbled by the many “masks” that we’ve been forced to wear (by our parents, by other authorities, and by our societies). You are already aware of a huge number of examples, but a case in point that I hope you’ll evaluate can be seen by answering for yourself the question: How much of the “pleasure” you get from participating in your religion is actually derived from the approval that your mother and other “church goers” give you (i.e., that you’re “good” to be similar to them)? Also, how much “pleasure” is derived from the “emotional high” you get from hearing and in some ways “participating” in religious “love fests”? Even more, how much of your “religious experience” is “just” emotions?

Consequently, Dear, I hope you see that Epicurus’ idea of “using the feeling [of pleasure] as the standard by which we judge every good” can be dangerously inadequate – if we don’t question, evaluate, and understand the reasons why specific activities provide us with feelings of pleasure. Again, Dear, please be aware of the huge dangers of the proof-by-pleasure principle. My own summarizing mantra is “**Mind over molecule!**” In a word, **Evaluate!**

In fairness to Epicurus, though, almost certainly he saw as much of the above as was humanly possible ~2300 years ago. We can't be certain, because in subsequent centuries, the Christian clerics destroyed all but fragments of the (~300) "books" (or scrolls) he had written. Copies of some of his letters survived, however, and in them, you can see that the clerics' criticism of him as being a "hedonist" [i.e., devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure] was (and continues to be) not just wrong but maliciously so. For example, his letter to his former student Menoecus contains the following (to which I've added the italics and some bold type):¹

Epicurus to Menoecus, greetings:

...since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but will often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure. While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned. It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good.

Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win. *Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips.* To habituate one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune.²

*When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, **as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation.** By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken*

¹ The full letter is available at <http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoecus.html>.

² Compare this statement by Epicurus, Dear, with the fact that in a Thesaurus you can find the synonyms for the adjective "epicurean" to include "decadent, unrestrained, extravagant, intemperate, immoderate; gluttonous, gourmandizing"! This is one-more example by which clerics have perverted reality *via* words – promoted, in this case, in an amazing "ecumenical spirit" (of corruption) by ancient Greek and Jewish clerics as well as by "modern" Christian and Mormon clerics!

succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; *it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.*

Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is wisdom. Therefore wisdom is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.

From what I put in bold type, Dear, notice that Epicurus' ideas were already under attack in his day (by Greek and actually, also, by Jewish clerics), "through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation." From what Epicurus wrote, I trust you see why I say that the clerics' criticism was superficial.

Yet, some people saw through the superficiality of the clerics' attacks on Epicurus. Most famous among them was the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (99–55 BCE), who provided us the best record of the ideas espoused by Epicurus (whom Lucretius considered to be, in essence, a god). Somewhat similarly, Thomas Jefferson praised Epicurus immensely, writing (in a 1819 letter to William Short):

I... am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us...

Notice Jefferson added the parenthetical remark "(not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus"; thereby, Jefferson took a swat at superficial criticism of Epicurus, especially by Christian hypocrites.

Yet, let me remind you, also, of inadequacies in Jefferson's promotion of "the pursuit of happiness". As I mentioned in an earlier chapter (**H**, dealing with Happiness), I expect he included this phrase in his Declaration of Independence (replacing Locke's idea of "life, liberty, and property" with "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness") as a result of influences from the ideas of both Locke and Epicurus. But as I tried to show you in **H**, there are many problems with adopting "the pursuit of happiness" as one's "purpose in life" (and thereby as a metric for assessing values). Some of the problems that I tried to show you include the following.

- Whereas happiness is only one side of a two-sided coin, it's unfortunately impossible to know happiness without experiencing unhappiness: you won't enjoy eating if you're not hungry, you won't enjoy success if failure wasn't possible, you won't enjoy security if you're not threatened by insecurity, and so on. Thereby, you're guaranteed to find unhappiness when you seek happiness.
- Most significantly, happiness isn't a valid goal, because it's "merely" your right brain's synthesis, informing you (rightly or wrongly) that your making progress toward some goal: if you "think" that you're making progress toward some goal (even the imaginary goal of "eternal life in paradise"!), you'll feel an associated sense of happiness; if you're not, then you'll feel unhappy; therefore, just as silly as asking what's the purpose of life (i.e., the purpose of the purpose!) is to choose happiness as one's goal (i.e., seeking happiness in happiness!).

Consequently, Dear, please be careful about adopting pleasure as your prime purpose; instead, if you'll just get busy making progress toward your goals, you'll find happiness (and unhappiness!) "coming along for the ride".

ADOPTING REALISTIC GOALS

Furthermore and again, Dear, please adopt realistic goals! Let me put it this way: what a boon to humanity it would be (and a bane to all clerics of the world) if everyone would adopt even as a fundamental premiss: *If it's impossible to make progress toward an imaginary goal, then it's impossible to make progress toward it!* And yes, Dear, of course the above is a tautology, but think of the billions of religious people in the world who find so much pleasure, who seem to be so happy, because they think they're making progress toward the imaginary goal of "eternal life in paradise". In reality, no data support their assumption that they're making progress, but in their imagination, they think they are. That is, humans are unfortunately easily tricked: simply thinking that they're making progress toward some goal makes them happy!

If I knew more about economics, I think I could make a good case for the proposition that religious people pursue crazy goals because they never learned how to appropriately discount (or inflate) the future. For an investor to appropriately discount (or even inflate) the future, estimates are needed not only for the rate at which any investment might grow but also for the rate of inflation (or deflation), to try to estimate how much in today's dollars one's current investment will be worth in the future. Maybe if you study more economics than I did, you could fill in the details. What I see, in outline, is the following.

At one extreme is “Joe (or Jane) six pack”. Such people live almost totally in the present, devouring any and all pleasures almost as soon as opportunities arise. In some cases, they behave as animals apparently do, with no thought about tomorrow – and apparently, most are usually quite happy doing so (until their mugs of pleasures run dry). In some cases, they’re similar to children, living in the present with only occasional thoughts about how many presents they’ll receive when Halloween, Christmas, and their birthdays roll around. Thereby, such “investors” essentially apply huge “discounts” to the future, deciding not to invest for the future, much preferring to spend what they now have, now.

At the other extreme are “religious kooks”, full of thoughts about the future (and of themselves). They scorn those who heavily discount the future in favor of enjoying the present. Instead, for such religious people, no amount of trial or tribulation (fatigue, flagellation, even martyrdom) is too much to endure in an attempt to achieve their imagined “eternal paradise” with their god. And it’s not just that they’re “starry eyed” by their imagined pleasures in paradise; instead, like deer on the highway, they’re blinded by the headlights of their oncoming death. That is, not only do such people not discount the future, they inflate it – in some cases to a ridiculous value, approaching infinity!

And though there’s great sadness in it all – and there have been (and continue to be) absolute horrors (e.g., the crashing of those loaded passenger planes into the World Trade Center and the subsequent wars) caused by people’s different decisions about how to discount (or inflate) the future – yet in some ways, it can be seen to be quite humorous. The religious deride the pleasure seekers, calling them “hedonists”. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! That is, such religious people seek solely their own pleasure (just as do “Joe and Jane six pack”), differing only in different decisions about how to discount (or inflate) the future!

And thereby, one can begin to see some of hypocrisy of the clerics’ criticism of Epicurus – and maybe even, as Epicurus wrote, their “willful misrepresentation” (i.e., lies) – because especially the Jewish Pharisees and then the Christian (and later Muslim and Mormon) clerics adopt the most blatant “pleasure principle” imaginable, i.e., belief in “eternal happiness in paradise”! This isn’t just a case of the pot calling the kettle black; it’s blatant ignorance calling knowledge evil.

In reality, almost certainly the reason why clerics attacked Epicurus was because he challenged their ideas of god (or the gods). In fact, his challenge remains unanswered to this day:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? [And if he is neither able nor willing, then why call him God?]

Epicurus adopted the only answer to such questions that was consistent with his ideas of the gods: he concluded (following Aristotle) that the gods were totally oblivious to humanity, totally content with their own existence. As far as I know, Epicurus unfortunately didn't elaborate on the more obvious answer: there are no gods, and there never were!

In addition, Christian (and Muslim and Mormon) clerics continued the superficial criticism of Epicurus almost certainly not only because he decided that the gods were indifferent to humanity and because he ridiculed the concept of life after death but also because he considered the speculation of life-after-death to be the cause of much misery in this life, derived from anxiety about "the next life". As a later Epicurean (Philodemus of Gadara) summarized Epicurus' "four-part cure" for such anxiety: "Don't fear god, don't worry about death, what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure."

Yet, Dear, as much as I would defend the brilliance of Epicurus against the ignorant clerics, I again caution you against adopting all his ideas (which you can find on the internet). My reason for advocating caution is that, although Epicurus was about 2,000 years "ahead of his time", that still leaves him about 300 years behind current times. As I already suggested, I suspect that he didn't see that pleasures were just signals telling him that he and his family were surviving, in part because (similar to Spinoza and Rand) he had no children and in part because he led a life of relative luxury. You, on the other hand, Dear, are destined to be one of the lucky ones: you'll need to struggle for your own and your family's survival (whatever extent of that "family" you decide to recognize).

Nonetheless, Dear, please consider carefully the wisdom in Epicurus' Principle Doctrines #39:

The man [or a better translation would be “the person” (and similar modifications to neutral gender throughout this quotation), because Epicurus welcomed women as fellow philosophers] who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he cannot, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.

From the above “Principle Doctrine”, with the hint that Epicurus considered all life to be a part of his “family”, similarities are suggested between Epicurus and the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, c. 563–479 BCE).

And actually, Dear, if you would study the doctrines of Epicurus, I expect that you’ll find many more such parallels between his ideas and the Buddha’s, especially if you consider Buddha’s idea that “Nirvana” [loosely translated as “heaven on Earth”] could be achieved by people while they were still alive:

When the fire of lust is extinct, that is Nirvana; when the fires of hatred and infatuation are extinct, that is Nirvana; when pride, false belief, and all other passions and torments are extinct, that is Nirvana.

Epicurus advocated similar, for example, his Principle Doctrine #1 is “A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness” and his Principle Doctrine #21 is “He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect.”

Thereby, one would not stray too far from reality by describing Epicurus as “the Western Buddha.” And thereby, when one reads in Smith (referenced below) that the Epicurean “Diogenes of Oinoanda [‘probably in about the first half of the second century’]... criticizes sculptors for portraying [the gods] as formidable and irascible: instead, he says, ‘We ought to make statues of the gods genial and smiling, so that we may smile back at them rather than be afraid of them’...”, then surely a modern reader thinks of statues of the smiling Buddha. And thereby, too, little wonder that the Christian clerics attacked Epicurus’ idea, since (as I’ll try to show you in the “excursion” Yx) the Christian clerics incorporated many of the Buddha’s ideas into their depiction of Jesus!

Consistently, the Christian clerics also attacked Epicurus' most famous "disciple", the Roman poet Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus), who wrote an enormous "six book" poem entitled *On the Nature of Things*, expounding Epicurus' philosophy. Lucretius lived from 99–55 BCE (i.e., more than 200 years after Epicurus) and Epicurus' philosophy continued as one of the dominant philosophies throughout the Mediterranean Basin for still another 300 years, at least among the intelligent and the educated. During that time period, religious cults (such as Mithraism and, later, Christianity) of course spread among the region's superstitious dolts. In support of that statement, consider Pliny the Younger's reported reaction to the spread of Christianity in Asia Minor, as recorded in his 111 CE letter to Emperor Trajan:

Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else [in Christianity] but depraved, excessive superstition. I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it.

At least, it seemed "possible to check and cure" Christian superstition until the Emperor Constantine (288–337 CE), "the butcher", found political reasons to spread Christianity with the sword (similar to how, three to four centuries later, the superstition now known as Islam spread throughout Asia Minor and beyond, i.e., by murdering opponents).

And I should add: of course it wasn't just the sword that spread Christianity and Islam. Even with the swords of their supporters, the "clerical authorities" wouldn't have been successful in eliminating the opposition, unless they had support among the superstitious masses. A relevant question is then: Why did "the masses" adopt such religious schemes? And the answer seems to be simply because the schemes are so simple. In contrast and in general, most religions and philosophies (such as those promoted by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans, and including Epicureanism) challenged the adherents' intellectual and moral integrity. Meanwhile, Christianity (and later, Islam) was intellectually shallow and morally simplistic (some variation of "just do as you're told"), for which the followers were promised enormous rewards (eternal life in paradise). Such schemes were the ultimate of the idea: give the customers what they want! And the same notion still sells like hotcakes to today's dolts.

In any event, one example of the attacks by Christians on Lucretius is described as follows by M.F. Smith in an article entitled *Introduction to Lucretius* (which you can find on the internet and which in turn is from a book with the same title):³

...Jerome, writing more than four hundred years after Lucretius's death makes the sensational statement that the poet went mad in consequence of drinking a love potion, wrote in the intervals of his insanity, and committed suicide. Since earlier writers show no knowledge of this story... it can confidently be dismissed as a fabrication, probably designed to undermine the credibility of the materialistic philosophy that Lucretius expounds.

Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things* (which you can find on the internet) provides us with the best record of Epicurus' ideas. The principal idea expounded in the poem is as described in Smith's article: "all the scientific information in his poem is presented with the aim of removing the disturbances, especially fear of death and fear of the gods, that prevent the attainment of tranquility of mind."

Which then leads me to the "finale" of what you may consider to be a "rambling chapter" – although, Dear, believe it or not, there is an important point that I want to make. In this finale, I want to comment upon the *Conclusion* of Italo Ronca's Inaugural Lecture entitled *Lucretius on Religion* (which you can find on the internet and which was presented on 22 March 1979 at the University of South Africa):

It is time to conclude. Lucretius' main aim was to indoctrinate man with the spirit of science as a means of understanding the universe and his own place in it. I cannot in conclusion help raising a question which I consider of paramount importance in our time of technical and scientific miracles: Can we contemplate with Lucretius the substitution of science for religion? In order to answer this question, we must first reply to another: which needs in man has religion so far attempted to satisfy?

The first that comes to mind is the unquenchable desire to discover the origin and function of the universe and of human life. Bertrand Russell in *Religion and Science* affirmed: "Whatever knowledge is attainable must be attainable by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know." Although this is an extremely dogmatic statement, it is true that... religious assertions on physical phenomena [that] cannot bear a sound scientific analysis will not stand the test of

³ Available at <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/introlucretius.html>.

time and credibility, and will finally be more damaging than advantageous to the religion concerned.

Again: can science offer an equally valid code of behavior as religions have either enforced upon or inspired into their followers? Science at its purest, in its investigation of man and the elements of his humanity can and will produce a moral code, a scale of values, perhaps with more precision and coherence with man's needs than many religions may attain, because it's formulated from an accurate evaluation of causes and effects. So far, then, we could say that the role of religion in the fields of philosophy and ethics could well be played by science.

We have not mentioned, though, another aspect of man's humanity, perhaps the most important, because the most basic: his emotions, his feelings. "The intellect by itself moves nothing" said Aristotle; "Gefühl ist alles" ["Feeling is everything"] said Goethe. And certainly this is one field where religion often becomes both the need and its satisfaction; the need of something higher than human, the urge to find it, the ecstasy of merging with it in a communion, which affords a joy unequalled perhaps by any other: religion as a personal emotional experience is not, in my opinion, easily replaceable even by the rarefied thrills of scientific discovery.

Of course I agree with the author (Ronca), or better, with Bertrand Russell, that the scientific method is the only sound way to learn about the nature of the universe and that religions that don't recognize science's authority in this regard (e.g., fundamentalist Christian and Muslim teachings about "creationism" and "intelligent design" as well as the silly Mormon teachings that the Americas were first populated by "the lost tribes of Israel") will thereby damage their own "authority". In addition, of course I agree with Ronca (or better, with E.O. Wilson and other behavioral scientists) that the science of ethics (e.g., scientific studies of "reciprocal altruism", even in "lower animals") will eventually replace the "moral authority" claimed by all religions, as I've tried to sketch in earlier chapters dealing with morality. Where I disagree with Ronca, strongly, is his assessment that "religion as a personal emotional experience is not... easily replaceable [by science]."

Epicurus, Lucretius, Spinoza, Einstein, Russell, as well as many others saw how to achieve such a "personal emotional experience" – but then, given the brilliance of such people, that fact, itself, might be used to bolster Ronca's argument that "religion as a personal emotional experience is not... easily replaceable [by science]" – except for exceptionally brilliant people. But, Dear, it just "ain't" so, as I'll try to show you below – and once again!

SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND EMOTIONAL FULFILLMENT

In the first chapter of this book (i.e., in **A**), I tried to show you how a realistic, scientifically-sound view of one's place in the universe can yield emotional fulfillment. Here, I'll simply paste what I wrote there:

The concept that each of us is the Universe "I'ing" is rather trivial to understand and has probably been known for as long as humans could think. The modern trick is only in how to re-introduce the idea. Alan Watts did it well; I'll roughly follow his method – that is, as I remember his method, without refreshing my memory by re-reading what he wrote, in whatever book of his it's in!

Dear, what are you? Or maybe start even more simply: from what are you made? Look at the fingernail on the smallest finger of your left hand. What's it made from? Some hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, a smattering of metals such as calcium, potassium... Where did they come from? Sure, some of the calcium came from milk and the metals from vegetables, but where did they come from? Sure, from the soil, but where did the Earth get them? Almost certainly, the metals are the remnants of a star that exploded, later collecting to form this and other planets. And the carbon in your fingernail was almost certainly made in a star as it consumed helium to produce starlight. Also, the hydrogen in your fingernail is almost certainly a remnant of the original creation of matter in this universe, which for want of a better hypothesis at the moment, we can call the Big Bang. So, Dear, your fingernail is a small part of this universe – and so, too, the rest of you.

And each moment, what are you doing, while you are thinking, breathing, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching? You're breathing in more of the universe's oxygen, exhaling the carbon that you ingested when you ate your food (from animals that got their hydrocarbons from eating other animals or plants, and in turn the plants made the hydrocarbons by converting the Sun's energy into carbohydrates, such as sugar, and then you used this Sun's energy to do such things as think, and breath, and...). With your eyes, you're intercepting electromagnetic waves emitted by other objects, which obtained their energy to emit radiation directly from the Sun or maybe from a light bulb (which got its energy from burning coal or falling water, i.e., from the Sun, or from "burning" nuclear fuel, which in turn is from uranium, a metal created in dying stars); and so on, for all the other things you are doing. So, what are you really doing? You (a part of the universe) are "simply" interacting with other parts of the Universe!

With his amazing skill with words (with whose enormous limitations he was painfully aware), Alan Watts said that you are the Universe "I'ing". That "I'ing" is a new word he created: "I'ing" is similar to "laughing", "crying", "living", "dying".... You're the Universe experiencing itself. Through you, the Universe is laughing, crying, seeing... In you – and in everyone – the Universe is "I'ing"! Without Watts' new word, "I'ing", we could say (quite accurately) that we are the Universe living; that is, we're the part of the Universe that's alive.

* Go to other chapters *via*

Rolf Edberg summarized similar thoughts in the following manner (and I will be forever grateful to a Swedish friend for reading my words praising Edberg at his funeral in Stockholm):

On a little speck in the universe, there is a species in which billions of years of evolution have led up to a mind through which the cosmos can experience itself, and nature can investigate her own nature.

What a wonderful statement! Please, Dear, read those words of Edberg again – which provides still another hint of what I mean by “Zen of Zero”. That is, I have no doubt that a “Zen master” would conclude that Rolf Edberg (and Alan Watts, similarly) had reached the ultimate “enlightenment” or “awakening” (or *satori*, in Japanese; *wu* in Chinese): not only to be able to eliminate division between oneself and some object, but to eliminate distinction between oneself and the entire universe!

Earlier, Einstein wrote something similar. I’ll quote it immediately below – except that I’ve taken the liberty to change a few words to make it more “politically correct” (i.e., I’ve changed “he” to “we”, and similar):

We humans are part of a whole, called by us the ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty... What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of ‘humility.’ This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (381–270 BCE) similarly saw this “genuinely religious feeling”, but clerics destroyed essentially all of his writings. His Roman disciple, Lucretius (99–55 BCE), however, almost certainly had access to Epicurus’ writings, and Lucretius’ summary is:⁴

...true piety (*vera pietas*) does not consist in the frequent and meticulous performance of superstitious rites, “but rather in the power to contemplate everything (*omnia*) with tranquil mind (*pacata mente*).”

I don’t know who first recognized this idea that each of us is the Universe’s “I’ing” – and it really doesn’t matter if the source isn’t known! Certainly there are hints of this

⁴ From the Inaugural Lecture entitled “Lucretius on Religion”, delivered by Prof. Italo Ronca on 22 March 1979 in the Senate Hall of the University of South Africa.

same idea in the writings of Watts, Edberg, Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Robert Ingersoll, and Spinoza, as well as some Ancient Roman and Greek authors, including Marcus Aurelius, Lucretius, Epicurus, and others. And actually, there are hints of the same idea even in the “religion” of the Native Americans, suggesting that the idea is essentially as old as humanity.

Dear: to ‘mature’ means many things, including gaining ever-widening discernment. An infant barely distinguishes himself (or herself) from his mother (or other primary care giver), a child barely distinguishes himself from his family, an adolescent barely distinguishes himself from his friends, a young adult barely distinguishes himself from his compatriots, more mature adults barely distinguishes themselves from the rest of humanity, and what I hope for you, my Dear, is that you’ll come to barely distinguish yourself from the rest of the universe – that you are the universe “I’ing”. When you feel it, Dear, I trust you’ll find that such a “personal emotional experience” surpasses anything that any organized religion can offer.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

But for present purposes, even more significant (than the above idea about your being the universe “I’ing”) is for you to see what Epicurus did. As far as I know, he was the first person (at least in Western civilization) who “put the pieces of the puzzle together properly.” The pieces were created by brilliant humans before him, including:

- Xenophanes (c.570 – c.475 BCE), who said: “**She that they call Iris {the goddess of the rainbow} is likewise a cloud**”, where the significance of ‘likewise’, according to the historian John Burnet – some of whose work you can find on the internet – was that Xenophanes had been listing other phenomena, pointing out that they are natural processes, having nothing to do with any gods.
- Anaxagoras, who in his c.475 BCE book entitled *On Nature* wrote: “**Everything has a natural explanation. The moon is not a god but a great rock, and the sun, a hot rock.**”
- Protagoras (c.481 – 411 BCE), who in his book *On the Gods*, wrote (for which he was sentenced to death by the Greek clerics): “**As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life**”, and

- Democritus (c.460 – c.370 BCE), who developed the atomic theory originated by his teacher Leucippus and who said: “by convention there is color, by convention sweetness, by convention bitterness, but in reality there are atoms and space.”

Incidentally, Dear, about Leucippus, Stefan Stenudd states:⁵

In the atomic cosmos of Leucippus there is neither room nor mission for any gods, to the extent that he not even would have needed to deny their existence. They are so far away from his great world-order, that they might as well belong to a completely different world, or for that matter, exist in the world of Leucippus, but isolated from the natural processes taking place in it.

Summarizing such ideas, Epicurus adopted the premisses that the gods were irrelevant, that the universe was entirely natural, that it could be understood by study, and that each of us could identify our purpose (or purposes) for ourselves. That is, again, his fundamental premiss was that the universe was natural – and consistently, the poem by his “disciple” Lucretius is entitled *On the Nature of Things*.

And thus, Dear, my hope for you is that you, too, will think about the matter deeply, to carefully evaluate your own premisses. Is this universe natural or not? Are there ghosts and gods and goblins (and invisible, flying pink elephants) or not? What is the method by which you think you can learn the answers to such questions: by wishing, by believing, by hoping, by listening to your heart, by... or by the scientific method? Again, Dear, you must make this fundamental epistemological decision for yourself; you have no choice; one way or another you will adopt the fundamental premiss about how you can gain knowledge about anything.

If you do adopt the epistemology of Humanists, that is, if you decide that knowledge of reality can best (and maybe “only”) be determined by using the scientific method, then you’ll find that it not only provides you with goals and associated values but also can provide you with a “religious” (or emotional) sense of awe – when you realize that you (and everyone else) is the Universe I’ing.

And by the way, kid: probably one of your premisses is that you’ll continue to be healthy, but for your body to accomplish that, it assumes that your brain has the smarts to stimulate the rest of you to get some exercise!

⁵ Copied from <http://www.stenudd.com/myth/greek/leucippus.htm>.