

Deaf Heaven: An East Texas Correspondence

By Ed Catlett & Christopher Winn

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[Disclosure: those messages which held no relevance to the main matter being discussed were redacted with mutual consent.]

Hey Christopher: I just got back to the library and finished reading the stuff you sent me-I found it very insightful and thought provoking. (I don't have internet access at home.) I admire your depth of thought but even more your ability to communicate it. I consider myself a reasonably Intelligent person but I do not yet possess the skill with which you express yourself. Reading your material is like a study course which I can use to become better. While reading your aphorisms--(The edible scroll) I found only two items with which I take minor issue) I believe most of us must, as a matter of trust, take advice from people with whom we wouldn't trade places if only because we're not privy to the pertinent issues of their existence. The physician which I see for my Hypertension is a young, female, recent med school graduate. I have no Idea what her life is like away from the office, it could be wonderful, or it could be a living hell. Same thing with my mechanic--I often (not always) take his advice - though I have no aspiration to live the live of a mechanic--although he, obviously, is much better off financially than I. Each of these folks are specialists with knowledge outside my area of expertise-whatever that my be-its not medicine or auto mechanics. Secondly, in your "strength enables kindness" statement I find some truth; (a third world country, for example, is not strong enough to give much foreign aid) but I have witnessed acts of kindness from four year olds--who are totally dependent on their adult caregivers cannot be said to have any real strengths at all.

P.S. Your Warhol Christian essay was brilliant! Sam Harris would have been proud---if he read it -he probably would have wished he had written it !

Ed,

I appreciate your taking the time to read it.

I agree concerning the two imperfect aphorisms. Their validity is at the mercy of contexts that I don't provide. Like you, I take plenty of advice from specialists whose lives I might not want to assume, and it is difficult indeed to find adults with comparable kindness to some children. The latter brings to mind, "...in weakness made perfect."

I'm glad you approve of Warhol. It would be interesting indeed to hear Sam's take on it. I know he has a soft-spot for no-frills Buddhism, but what of no-frills Christianity?

Regarding your thoughts on *Eros Fled*, we are of one accord—there are no breaks on the dehumanization train. I realized that more than ever when I recently read Toffler's *Future Shock* and came across this quotation:

"...if the last 50,000 years of man's existence were divided into lifetimes of approximately sixty-two years each, there have been about 800 such lifetimes. Of these 800, fully 650 were spent in caves. Only during the last seventy lifetimes has it been possible to communicate effectively from one lifetime to another—as writing made it possible to do. Only during the last six lifetimes did masses of men ever see a printed word. Only during the last four has it been possible to measure time with any precision. Only in the last two has anyone anywhere used an electric motor. And the overwhelming majority of all the material goods we use in daily life today have been developed with the present, the 800th, lifetime (p14)."

Our rate of change is an unstoppable force, and only God Himself could serve as an obstructing immovable object. Much of my writing is an attempt to grapple with uncertainty concerning whether this is good, bad, or neutral. No matter how much one falls in love with the romance of the Classical era, I doubt there are any sane people alive, myself included, who would wish us back to early graves from the common cold, lack of potable water, and degradation of the teeth. My personality is largely informed by the products of the printing press, and the tool of my trade is the machine with which I'm writing you now. So, if I am overly worrisome about where we are headed and how quickly we are

forgetting where we have been, it is largely hypocritical. The only excuse I can offer is a single morbid thought—the fact that basically every religion has prophecies or eschatology about an era reminiscent of the one we are currently entering into. The Sam Harris's of the world, as I understand it, disregard religion as being a product of wishful thinking. I have yet to understand why products of wishful thinking all predict a time when the tribal and/or nuclear family is destroyed and all believers in God are exterminated. If that was part of the fantasy cruise package, I do believe I'd shop around elsewhere...

I would enjoy continuing this conversation by phone as well. I'll do my best to call before the end of this work-week.

Respectfully,

Christopher Winn

Hey Christopher: I find it interesting that every religion predicts an end time-but not particularly compelling. Apparently, the early proponents of religion could not conceive of many options when it came to their particular mythology--and I'm not using that word in a particularly pejorative manner. It was not until I read Homer Smiths (yes, that is really his name) "Man And His Gods" that I found out that many of the concepts of the bible including the Sacred Ones 12 disciples, His martyrdom and resurrection, and many other aspects of Christianity appeared in many other, earlier religions. Could it be that bronze age man was just not very creative? Or is the fact that certain aspects of many religions coincide, indicative of a much older, truer religion from which all others descend? Part of me (the humancentric part) hopes that the latter is true,--but my brain tells me its most likely the former. I look forward to our phone conversation when you have the time.

Respectfully,

Ed Catlett

Ed,

It was a pleasure speaking with you last night. It's rare and refreshing to be able to broach such 'delicate' topics without fear of giving offense, be it from one political angle or another.

As I replayed our conversation in my memory, I thought it went quite well, but I did feel I failed to make a couple of relevant points. That failure was two-fold; first, I was enjoying the Objective emphasis of the conversation and felt wary to insert more Subjective views. And second, I consider myself to be a very good days-or-years mind, but a fairly mediocre seconds-to-minutes mind. That is why I confine myself to writing books rather than recording podcasts and the like.

So, on this Thanksgiving Day, I thought I might append the Subjective points that I am most thankful to have when grappling with such topics. This way, I can communicate in my preferred medium, and you can feel free to entertain or disregard them without the immediacy of a phone call.

I am in agreement with Hamlet that "there is more in Heaven and Earth than [we] have dreamt of." And I would apply this in both directions—I am distrustful of the Religious who are sure they have discerned the transcendent in its entirety, and the Materialist who are utterly confident that there is nothing truly transcendent. The first mustard seed of faith that I am confident in is merely the Objective existence of a Reason or Order behind existence that the Religious and Materialist alike depend upon. And while I see no need for a God-of-the-Gaps to keep all these plates spinning once they've been set in motion, I equally dislike the flippant suggestion that ordered complexity simply arises if it is given enough time to do so. Indeed, it seems to me that we continually reappraise and extend the age of the cosmos (at least partially because) with every new discovery we realize the distinct unlikelihood that our previous conceptual models

gave unordered atoms enough time to order themselves in these awesome combinations. This may also partially explain the recent popularity of the idea that the cosmos is a computer-esque “simulation”—that the libraries and assets of which all these objects are comprised much have been premade and merely coded in rather than created from scratch (given that any guess at the age of the cosmos does not appear to match its rate of development).

From this Socratic stance of Knowing That I Do Not Know, I find something oddly prescient about the common mythology or proto-philosophy of ancient man precisely because of their general ignorance. If it is merely a morass of superstitious wish fulfillment and guesses, then its accuracy in many matters almost equals the incredible organization of atoms. Eschatology, as I have said, may be the most pronounced example. If this were merely the end of the world then one could chalk it up to story structure: what has a beginning must have an end. But the common prophecies of familial and religious disintegration which we—for whatever reason and by whatever odds—have lived to see, push the bounds of credulity when it comes to discerning between a mere good guess and an actual, accurate prophecy. A few of my favorite lesser-known examples are Isaiah (many women will beg one man to marry them, saying they will provide for themselves if he merely does his Marital Duty), Nostradamus of the 1500s (trees of metal will cast men’s invisible voices from one side of the earth to another), and basically every ancient astrologer on the Age of Aquarius (wherein the Female and Hermaphroditic will triumph over the Patriarchal). The better-known example which I or at least my little brother will almost assuredly live to see is Revelation’s Mark of the Beast—most of the developed world compelled by social pressure and/or political necessity to take a permanent technology into their bodies (see Elon Musk’s Neuralink).

And even if one chooses to chalk all of that up to good guesses (even though, in the same breath, one condemns those ancients as unimaginative), one then has to confront the actual merits of the proto-philosophy as

applied to individual human lives (I would take Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces as the best summary). Here lies my second mustard seed of faith: inasmuch as one lives as though the Hero myth is true and attempts to emulate it, its potency proves undeniable. And inasmuch as one denies the truth of the Hero myth and refuses to emulate it, its absence is palpably disastrous.

Indeed, this is exactly how scholars like Campbell and the modern-day Jordan Peterson treat of the subject. For fear of subjectivity they simply cannot bring themselves to declare the Hero or any of his religious manifestations as objectively true, so they end up qualifying everything of substance they have to say with "it is as though..." I personally find this qualifier trite and ultimately pointless, for the reproducible efficacy of an idea (be it scientific or philosophical) earns my loyalty far more-so than any laboratory demonstrability. I think this is due to a certain feeling that has always pervaded my personality—a feeling that the bounds of reality are tenuous at best and, certainly on a historical level, subject to change. With the backdrop of such tenuousness, my eyes and heart naturally gravitate to those concepts which appear impervious to change, as they continue operating at maximum efficacy regardless of whether we believe in or are conscious of them.

That each human life seems destined to succeed or fail inasmuch as it aligns with or transgresses that proto-philosophy; that its Hero is reproducible across time and place and nigh-identical among non-intersecting cultures; and that he would inevitably reappear even if all human knowledge were snuffed out tomorrow—for me this constitutes nothing less than genuine transcendence. And it tries even my quite-advanced imagination to entertain that a bunch of ignorant, upright apes created or accidentally stumbled upon such a phenomenon without supernatural import being involved. The absolute best I can do to combat my own position is to posit that the ancients, without our distractions or conveniences, looked upon philosophy in a

plainer and clearer fashion, and discerned an “unwritten book of truth” concerning which sort of life it is best for men to live. As Nietzsche said, “consider how much they had to suffer to become so beautiful.” But even this, divested of any metaphysical terminology, still comes across as hauntingly metaphysical within a cosmos that ostensibly lacks a Creator or an inherent purpose.

I sum up the personal ramifications of these thoughts when I have Christ in *Wastrel* say, “But it’s impossible? Ask anyway.” This is my version, or perhaps corruption, of Pascal’s Wager. I conclude that one cannot prove that there is Meaning to life—and it seems to me that this realization may itself be the initiation into that Meaning. We are told we are products of, and adapted to, this world, yet we inherently yearn for a meaning that this world cannot provide. Is this not the very definition of transcendence—to discover definitively that the locus of Meaning lies elsewhere?

Without going off on another tangent--one which is so subjective that it is effectively useless to others--I will confess that there was a time in my life when I found myself so tormented by these uncertainties that I resolved to do whatever might be necessary to rend this tenuous reality and find if there is anything at all that lies beneath it. To say that I was forever changed by this experimentation would be a dramatic understatement. I was left by it a Christian of the Doubting Thomas variety—a lesser disciple, in that where others had the strength to just believe, I had to know. And so, while I cannot in any wise prove to you that the hero Heracles which the people of Tarsus worshipped was totally unrelated from the Christ that Saul of Tarsus met on his way to Damascus, I can at least claim that it is no longer a mystery to me how such a visitation could make a man on his way to slay more Christians into one of them. And, though I have laid all my religious doubts and uncertainties quite bare in my writings, if it should come to pass that I am told to take some Mark or die, I will go very merrily to the guillotine. That, I think, is the best testimony I can currently

offer.

P.S. I have an order in for the two published booklets of mine that you don't have; I expect I can get them to you before Christmas. As for your very kind offers regarding my Donation or Tshirt links—I must confess I had forgotten about those and have since taken them down. I put those up when I was in a lesser financial situation; now that the situation has improved, I consider it payment enough to have anyone deem my writings worth the time to read.

Respectfully,

Christopher

Hello Christopher: Your writings are definitely worth the time to read. I understand where you're coming from even if i'm not in the same place. In considering mans relationship (or non-relationship as the case may be) with the Transcendent, I'm continually reminded of a cartoon that I saw years ago which perfectly (to me) encapsulates mans existential situation. Two goldfish are swimming in their bowl and one is saying to the other "Well, if there's no God, than where does the fish food come from?"-I believe mankind has about as much chance of truly apprehending the situation as the goldfish has of understanding the human condition.-Indeed, there may be as many layers of consciousness between man and God (if God exists and did not just set everything in motion and then retire) as there are between goldfish and man. This makes the age-old question--Does God exist--almost irrelevant---or as a Petersen type person might say--it is " as though" god does not exist. I can' t say I completely understand the assertion that the Hero Mythology would carry on "even if all human knowledge were erased"(to paraphrase the author) since I cant conceive of human knowledge outside of human existence. Indeed, it is the knowledge that humans possess that most make them human,(in my humble opinion.) If human knowledge (and therefore human existence) ceased to exist there would be no need for explanation of the Transcendent at all. Well, that's about all the time I can devote to my hunt and peck typing. I am enjoying our exchange of Ideas--lets continue doing it.

[Mailing address redacted]

Ed,

I'll let you know via email as soon as I receive your books, so that you'll know roughly when to expect them in the mail.

My statement that the Hero myth would continue without human knowledge (or existence) is effectively the same as saying, "if God exists, He existed before and would continue to exist without us." Which is rather harmonious with your statement that (forgive the paraphrase) the extent of God's transcendence renders Him effectively unknowable by us. I'm reminded of a powerful passage in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, in which a medieval apprentice-monk and a master-monk [William] have the following exchange:

"What difference is there, then, between God and primigenial chaos? Isn't affirming God's absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom with regard to His own choices tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?"

William looked at me without betraying any feeling in his features, and he said, "How could a learned man go on communicating his learning if he answered yes to your question?"

I did not understand the meaning of his words. "Do you mean," I asked, "that there would be no possible and communicable learning any more if the very criterion of truth were lacking, or do you mean you could no longer communicate what you know because others would not allow you to?"

-p493

This is why, though I very much like to share the Christian Good News when the opportunity presents itself, I can never be an Apologist in the usual sense. For if God exists, it does not seem that He deigns his existence to be objectively proven—which renders Him either a nonexistent or an intentional mystery. Which is why (it seems we both agree) that faith is the opposite of certainty.

The religious of today may find that problematic, but considering that all of their holy texts call for mankind to approach God with humility, it does not seem all that surprising to me that the Creation would be unable to definitively prove its Creator (or that the entity worshipped by the so-called 'mystery schools' would be inherently mysterious). And with Christianity in particular, where we are told that "God is Love," I do not see why the question of God should be approached all that differently from

the question of love. Their qualities at least in respect to how they exist (inferred yet unprovable) are identical. And their functions too, inasmuch as that when one lives as though they are real and powerful, actual transformational results are achieved therefrom that would not have occurred otherwise.

One can of course always dismiss the latter phenomenon as confirmation bias. But God and Love are rather odd among all possible cases of confirmation bias, in that their absence is as palpable as their presence. I.E., most human beings can choose to acknowledge that Bigfoot is probably not real—even if they wish he was—without catastrophic result. The same is obviously untrue of Love and/or God. Thus we arrive back at my idiosyncratic starting point, which is that if human beings are big-brained victors in the game of Evolutionary Adaptation, our fundamental desires ought all to be things which the environment we are adapted to provides. That the vast majority of us across all ages yearn for a Transcendent Meaning that the environment does not explicitly provide (although we are equipped to sate it implicitly) clearly indicates something. If the question of “Why do we exist?” or “Does God exist?” were really a gibberish question to which there is no answer (which is how Dawkins and Dennett have characterized it, from time to time), then I do not believe humanity on the whole would have bothered asking it for this long. Or I would at least expect to see other long-term, seemingly innate examples of our species yearning for and asking about things which are completely unreal. But that position does (one shivers to say it) require at least a little faith in humanity itself.

Such quandaries are why I actually admire the Christian insistence upon miracle. As Paul said, “If Christ did not rise, then is our preaching in vain.” While faith is their primary and prerequisite virtue, the historical Church is not adverse to the experience of miracle as evidence. This was either very poorly thought-out, if indeed the Church is some scam—or it is valid, in which case (to borrow some pre-Biblical terminology) evidence is provided to the initiate. If my textual analysis be not erroneous, that is the gist of the entire Old Testament: God challenges individuals to stay loyal to Him and witness the fulfilment of pre-negotiated promises, or break the compact and experience pre-negotiated consequences. If this really is God, the timeless creator of time, then it stands to reason that those promises and consequences ought to still be in effect and available for experimentation and verification. Malachi 3: “Test me in this, says the Lord...” I have, and have found it to be true. I cannot prove its possibility, but I have experienced its possibility. And that, at the end of the day, is the sole reason why I find this Good News so crucial to share that I would risk seeming foolish and naïve in its most difficult

defense.

-Christopher

Hey Christopher: You sometimes sound as if you are (or should be) a very astute seminary student--you have very well thought out explanations for your positions. In all probability, if we were to debate any philosophical issue you would win. I would, however, like to move away from the objective discussion for a moment and just explain my subjective feelings on some of the issues you raise. I can't agree that it is at all self evident that choosing to acknowledge that God, like Bigfoot, is probably not real, would necessarily have "catastrophic results". After all ,Christopher Hitchens spent his entire adult life doing exactly that and ,though hated by the religious, nonetheless, became widely respected as an intellectual and was very successful on the lecture circuit-- with a multi million dollar net worth upon his death. It is true that when one lives as though the unseen and untouchable are real, actual transformational results can obtain. Alas, the transformations are not always beneficial. Here in Jacksonville there is a man--few know his name-- known to most as "the walker" who can be seen often pausing to have a conversation-- sometimes a very heated argument- with an entity only he can see. Why this is known as insanity in this case but not if he had his hands clasped, head bowed, and eyes closed is beyond me. For many years,(though not as long as the chronically lonely "God Fearing People) the inhabitants of Ireland believed in Leprechauns and Fairies-(they still believe in fairies--just a different type) This is only two examples of yearning for and asking about things that are completely unreal. Similarly there are many older baby-boomers (especially older women) who swear Elvis is not dead---and cite numerous "sightings" as proof--and are transformed from grief-stricken baby-boomers to women with hope that they may yet consummate their love with "the King."-As for "pre-negotiated consequences"--I cry Foul -I resent even the State imposing consequences for certain behaviors which came about through negotiations in which I had no part. One would hope that an all -knowing, just God would be more fair.

Sincerely, Ed

Ed,

I appreciate your compliment. However, if I debate fervently it is not to 'win,' but either to find weaknesses in my own argument and/or show someone else theirs'. Indeed I have learned a great deal already from our exchange. I can often be quite idiot savant about what points seem persuasive or self-evident to me that are none of the above to anyone else--so I very much appreciate your candor and willingness to continue the conversation.

My characterization of God's absence from a human life as obviously "catastrophic" was one-such failure. It is painful indeed to step outside of my own bubble for a moment and see how patently absurd it must seem that I would appear to say that I [or any believer] have triumphed over myriad successful atheists and agnostics merely due to holding a belief. I could begin to clarify that the "catastrophe" I intended was an inwards one (that a believer would characterize as 'a Creation's yearning for its Creator'), but this is equally clumsy and perhaps even more ill-advised, since diagnosing such a state would be both presumptuous and possibly in violation of the Christian principle to 'judge not lest ye be judged.' For if I were to—using your example—attempt to probe Christopher Hitchens' life for evidence of this inner catastrophe, I might manage to sling a little mud at an undoubtably impressive man, but in doing so it would invite the same snooping upon myself. Such is a prime reason why I would be distinctly uncomfortable behind a pulpit—I would never be sure what words, against what sins, might stick in the throat, for even if I have avoided committing some of them, I have surely given serious consideration to almost all of them...

I would also, admittedly against my own argumentative best interests, agree with you that religion inhabits the same metaphysical minefield as fantasy and insanity. Though the modern religious are quite comfortable to categorize the activities of the sanitarium and the activities of the church as separate, when I read the Bible (and perhaps holy books in general), I simply do not find a genuine method to reliably distinguish the two. Social convention hardly suffices, given that we are ostensibly talking about things transcendent over our convention, rather than things created by it. Indeed, having had the pleasure of briefly living among fellow believers from third-world countries, I can confirm that they do not attempt the distinction at all. If a person is afflicted by an invisible voice or entity, they consider it demonic possession. Considering that Christ was a rather enthusiastic exorcist, I find the third-world church's approach more consistent. And as for Leprechauns, fairies, etc., the Bible gives even stranger

descriptions of “the other side’s” occupants. While it is patently true that a believer need not dwell upon such phantasmagoria (and the further from the third-world they are, the less they do), for minds that would rather address the whole of the religious mythos than cherry-pick its most palatable aspects, one must eventually accept or reject these things too. And though that is utterly shocking to our computer-using, jeans-wearing stock, we would all do well to remember that the Bible’s God acknowledges the existence of other false gods. The translation of “false” does not, as best I can tell, ever intend to suggest nonexistence, but rather malevolent existence. (Here at least, I am very-much aware of how this paragraph likely comes across—but I trust you will respect a full addressal of your point, more so than a faux-deflection or cop-out).

Regarding pre-negotiated consequences, I think it behooves us to recognize that this is different from our conversation thus-far about God’s existence. When it comes to whether or not God is “just” or “fair,” that is a question about God’s nature. Now, I like that topic just as much or more than the first—but I want to be upfront that I doubt my ability to discuss both simultaneously. The Private Investigator might be able to verify the existence of John Doe, but comprehending the personality of John Doe is a separate, more intimate task. I find that when this distinction is not made, the conversation can devolve from “If and Who God Is” to “If I Like God and Want Him to Exist.” And while I can talk [actually--type] the ears off of anyone about God’s existence and nature, I have yet to figure out how to pitch God as though He is a used car.

With that being said, I will take a very generalized stab at the issue of God’s nature which you have raised, and you can then decide whether to continue pursuing that angle. As best I can tell, any system of order (for lack of a better term) involves a duality of results: if one dwells within or depends upon the system, one reaps reward for harmony with it and consequences for disharmony with it. In my opinion, the mark of a truly Good Order is that one would willingly harmonize with it even in the absence of reward and punishment—that is to say, these are ideally mere effects of the Order rather than its causality. It is of course one’s prerogative to appraise the Order and decide whether or not it is Good. However, in the case of Orders that we are born into, there is no volunteerism—only Submission or Rebellion. And that, I would submit to you, is exactly why Milton encapsulated Lucifer by having him proclaim “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” Lucifer is, in principle if not person, Resentment against God personified. He feels he knows better, and would prefer to be his own god. William Blake rightly noted that this quality is why, when one reads Milton, one will probably identify with his Lucifer

more than any other character. We all know what it feels like to believe that we know better when it comes to how things ought to be. It is the selfless submission to God's will that the angels and saints exhibit which is comparatively alien to us. If one is looking for the familiar or the comfortable, one is—at least proverbially—always going to side with Lucifer. It is a path fraught with difficulty indeed to reach the ability to say “Not My Will, but Thine [God's], Be Done.” By the time this point is reached, most every concern regarding whether God is ultimately Just or Fair will have evaporated. But if one insists upon a guarantee that God seem Just or Fair from the get-go, what one is really insisting upon is that God conform to our will, rather than the other way around. I can report definitively that He will not.

-Christopher

Ok Chris : while it is not my intention to devalue the Deity to the point of a used car, I feel that questions about the justice of any Deity is part and parcel of the discussion of His/Her existence/nonexistence. After all, when we speak of God we are normally speaking of a beneficent entity. The evil kind of entity (despite the ancient Egyptian postulation of an "evil God" in their group of gods known as Set) we normally refer to as Demons or Devils. So even if it is a fools errand to postulate about the Nature of an entity before actually coming to a conclusion about Its existence it behooves us to at least have some common assumptions as to what the word God means. As to your point about the conversation devolving from if and who God is-to I like God and I want him to exist ,well, in practical terms, I find it to be the same conversation. Most people,(agnostics and doubting Thomas' notwithstanding) if they're honest, will admit to leaning one way or the other. In other words, those "who like God and want Him to exist are unlikely to take the "God does not exist" position, while those who crave the unfettered free will of the atheist are unlikely to take the "God exists and can be pleased or displeased" position.

If one dwells within the system, one reaps rewards for harmony and consequences for disharmony--true enough-the choices as you say are rebellion or submission. Virtually every improvement in the human condition ever made came about through rebellion. If the abolitionists never rebelled against the institution of slavery we would still have it. If early man choose to live in harmony with the environment as a hunter -gatherer instead of trying to subdue it where would be now ? Could our nation have come into being without rebellion?-nope. Thank goodness for those of us who reject submission!

Not my will but Gods---well if God is truly God is'nt it going to be His way or the highway anyway--whether we say it or not?

And lastly-not trying to be mean here- but if as you say a truly good order would be one you would harmonize with regardless of reward or punishment (which is another way of saying its in harmony with MY will) and given the plethora of rewards and punishments in the Bible, does'nt Christianity fail the good order test?

Respectfully,

Ed

Ed,

Regarding your first paragraph—in ‘practical terms’ you are probably right. It is most certainly a teensy minority who would commit to exploring a subject and reaching a conclusion even, and perhaps especially if the conclusion is the opposite of their own preference. And even for those who would aspire to such intellectual heights, it seems basically impossible to prove that this is what one did. Even if one were to document an “unintentional conversion” as Lee Strobel did in *The Case for Christ*, there is ultimately no way to prove that some part of him did not want to reach the ultimate conclusion.

The rebels most certainly cause the rising action of history’s story arc. The life of the submissive is usually too quiet and either content or resigned to merit third-party documentation. There are a few sages that reverse this trend—Diogenes of Sinope for one—but even his remembrance is due to interactions with more famous figures. As I said previously, if one is seeking what we have become accustomed to (of which ‘rebellious progress’ is most certainly a key feature), one will inevitably find Lucifer more sympathetic than Yahweh & His Son. This is to a certain extent the crux of my ‘Warhol and the Impersonation of Christ’ argument. The Biblical account of God’s nature is decided Luddite and insistent upon submission. Nor can one be surprised at how repulsive this has become to us, since all Christian eschatology predicts that would eventually be the case.

You are correct, the Creator’s will is of course ultimately going to trump the Creations’ whether we want it to or not. The Christian proposition is not that God needs our submission, but that He desires it.

Equating “I want to harmonize with this” with “This is my will” overlooks our often conflicted natures and the possibility of change. The Gospel is nothing if not transformative—Saul, on the road to kill more Christians, becoming Paul, the great evangelist. Perhaps even better examples would be direct quotations such as Mark 9’s “I believe; help me with my unbelief” and “Not My Will, But Thine Be Done” (which, evocatively, is Jesus saying to Yahweh that he would rather not take all sin upon Himself on the cross, but is willing to if God finds it necessary). A more mundane (and thus less-fitting) example would be the yearning for self-improvement—one can desire to be fit, but continue eating potato chips on the couch...or find they can incrementally achieve fitness while still combating the old unhealthy habits. Christianity’s call to redemption is precisely targeted at those imperfect Creations who wish to harmonize with their perfect Creator, but lack the power to do it without Christ as intermediary. This is

roughly what Christ meant when he said “I came for the sick, not the healthy.” Wanting to conform to God’s will, while being painfully aware of the fact that His will differs from our own default, is the Christian condition.

As for the ‘plethora of rewards and punishments,’ I would return to my statement that these are the effects rather than the causality. The causality of Christianity is Christ. That His teachings are greatly concerned with the positive and negative results of His proposition is not mysterious to me, any more than I find it mysterious that Alexander the Great told his army they would take Asia Minor. As it turns out, he was right—but none of them had any way of knowing that for certain. Thus, one can either argue that the potential prospect of Asia Minor’s riches was so great that they risked their lives for it—or one can argue that they decided Alexander was worth following regardless of the outcome. In practical terms it must have been some mixture of the two, but in paideia, the Hellenic ideal, it was unquestionably the latter.

Christianity is even starker for the following reasons. Yes, Heaven is a paradisiacal reward—insomuch as worshipping God and being in His presence is paradisiacal. Yes, Hell is a horrific punishment—but beyond the fire and brimstone, its truest horror is God’s absence. It is a little like proposing (if we can hypothetically agree that there is a “Right Way” to live), “Do you want to live in the Right Way?” Hopefully, one need not flourish the laundry-list of benefits for answering Yea, because however many benefits answering Yea may entail, the proposition is meritorious in-and-of-itself.

P.S. By the time you read this, your packet of books will be on the way to you in the mail.

-Christopher

Christopher: I can only agree that there are decisions in life that support humanities (and your own as a member thereof) well being and other decisions that are harmful to the well being of humanity as a whole and to the well being of certain humans in particular. I don't believe that ANY ancient text (or recent ones either) hold enough of the right answers to be a reliable guide to "The Right Way" to live--the right way being the sum of your day to day life -affirming or life destroying decisions. If it turns out that MOST (since we can't always tell the end results) of your decisions turn out to have been conducive to well being then it can be said that you have lived the Right Way. This pronouncement can only be made at the end of life and not at any particular point in life--since all humans make mistakes and many do deliberate evil, the entirety of your decisions must be taken into account. Another thought about the "Right Way". Consider a brutish dictator who exploits his subjects on a daily basis and takes many actions that are harmful to their well being--but near the end of his life makes one good decision that averts a nuclear holocaust and thereby saves the entire human race. Can it be said that he lived the "Wrong Way"? Would it really matter? What if, instead, he was benevolent and tried to do the "right thing" always but failed to make the world saving decision in the end---could we still praise him for living the "Right Way"? We must all just do the best we can using whatever faculties we can muster.

P.S. I received your books in the mail on Thursday (I sent you a text that day)--thank you so much! I was especially happy to see that you included the Harris book. I had received it from the inter library loan but was considering purchasing the book for my collection--now I don't have to. I'm still reading the other books that I got from the I L L. One in particular you might find interesting is Yuval Noah Harari's Homo Deus. His theory is that mankind is attempting to evolve into gods and in the future will be almost Immortal. Don't know that I can buy into that but a very interesting book nonetheless. Just skimmed the beginning of Sharp Medicine but will give you my impressions once I finish my I L L books and can read it in depth --Thanks again for your generosity!

Ed,

In context, my question concerning the “Right Way” was to illustrate that one might choose to be on the side of Objective Good regardless of, or in the absence of, any additional benefits. Whereas your most recent reply concerns subjective good (what we might discern in the absence of ‘a reliable guide’). I don’t object to the change of subject, but I wanted to recognize it as such.

That’s fair enough, and for immediate practical purposes I’m sure that approach works. However, I believe these concepts that you and I take for granted, such as what constitutes “life-affirming” or “life-destroying,” are at risk of losing any and all agreed-upon meaning within the developed world of the near future. This concern in-and-of-itself cannot prove the validity of any one value system, of course. And so-long as we live we are each free to pontificate upon the merits or demerits of our fellow humans, including ourselves. But I must confess that I find something singularly morbid about the future we are constructing, wherein every man truly is an ‘intellectual island’ unto himself. It is very strange to me indeed that actual, practical truth (if indeed we dwell and always have dwelt in a godless universe) is the enemy of Idealistic Truth. I.E., that the grand punchline and finale of our species’ search for a conclusion to the mystery of existence—the question Why?—is totally abortive, and that our chief intellectual superiority over the ignorant ancients is merely to do away with collective cohesion (beyond whatever niceties become the new bare minimum of social interaction).

To bring what I am talking about a little closer to home, I would borrow your expression, “do the best we can using whatever faculties we can muster.” I submit to you that this (though perfectly reasonable sounding to me) is already almost of no avail in myriad other social contexts. I suspect, based on your appreciation for *Wastrel’s* American essay and *Against Democracy*, that you already know roughly where I am headed. If you or I would like to object to any criminal wrongdoing, soon hereafter we will have to overcome every “identity politic” hurdle imaginable. He/she was desperate; he/she was raised poorly; he/she is of an oppressed minority and so was probably entitled to some of our evil white male property as reparations anyway, et cetera and ad nauseum. Criminality is the most visceral and ham-fisted, but certainly not the only, example: are males, males and females, females? Do they have differences? Are they equal? What does equality mean? Is history the story of male-female collaboration or subjugation? The quest for truth is devolving to a circus wherein absolutely everything--from the dictionary definitions of words on--is open to idiosyncratic interpretation. This, I suppose, is a form of

freedom—but freedom to do what?

Thus, intimations like the ones Harris makes in *Letter to a Christian Nation* to the effect that biology will maintain a base-line morality even in the total absence of an agreed-upon Objective Good, seem to me almost as naïve as my religious beliefs seem to him. It is an easy win to say parents will continue loving their children regardless of any conceptual framework. But in the absence of all convention I submit that our institutions become dim mockeries of their former selves—houses built on sand. The snowballing of excessive technological conveniences, which reduces the necessity of cooperation, takes this from a vagary to a blatant reality. Providing specific examples again rather risks distracting from the big-picture point—that Mankind, submerged within the subjective vacuum, slowly has his vitality siphoned away as though some invisible vampire has latched upon his throat. That’s an overly poetic way of putting it, but it may solely be within the poetic that we might maintain those precious aspects of our being that the prose of the progressive world is gradually overwriting.

The answer to your question, from my point of view, is of course that only the Creator may efficiently judge the Creation—and indeed only the Creator may redeem the imperfect Creation. As for answering the question within a godless universe—it’s really just down to whether one ape likes another and if there are enough bananas to go around.

P.S. to your P.S.

My pleasure. I know Harari’s work fairly well. He is in agreement with Ray Kurzweil (Google’s Head of Engineering) that man shall “become as gods” (Genesis 3).

-Christopher

Chris: The question of whether a human lives on the side of "objective good" or "subjective good " can only make sense in terms of human experience and therefore is, in itself, subjective. Even if one decides to live according to precepts laid out in the Koran, the Bible or some more recent text, it must be because one finds some subjective advantage---either they feel it is a more reliable guide to the "good life" or it assuages their anxiety about possible punishment in the afterlife or they feel comfort in going along with the majority belief or whatever---they find some subjective comfort in their decision. This leads me to believe that whether one bases their actions on established religion or attempts to go it alone---or some hybrid system, in the end, there is ONLY subjective good. Even if one refrains from certain behaviors due to precepts in the "holy books" (in which they might otherwise engage) it can only be that subjectively, they feel that the reward (for not engaging in what they really want to do) or punishment for doing it outweighs their reasons for wanting to do it in the first place. So, whether one chooses to follow what has been referred to as "objective truth" or not, they're still just "doing the best they can do with whatever faculties they can muster."

Ed,

That was well-put, and I think it represents a very lofty impasse for us to have managed to reach.

For my part, I cannot conceive of any evidence, a priori or from the senses, which could dissuade one from the stance that there is only subjective good (which is the same as saying that there is no objective good). It seems to me that the voice of God could come to one like Saul on the Road to Damascus, and if one held this stance, they could very simply brush it off as the symptom of a bad last meal. Or the very events of the Second Coming could unfold—Christ returning in the heavens with an army of angels—and one could merely think that they need their eyes checked. Humorous examples perhaps, but not without a tinge of literalness.

Disbelief in objective good, upon the quite reasonable grounds that there is a lack of tangible evidence for it, is at least a subject that permits nuance. But to dismiss out-of-hand the possibility that mankind—however imperfect and highly subjective he may be—would be capable of ascertaining an objective good leaves little to discuss. If this is the actual case, then we have truly already “become as gods,” for we occupy a nominalistic cosmos wherein nothing can transcend us—and even if something did we would eternally remain unaware of it. In which case any debate or disagreement on the topic is just so much hot air, since disbelief in God is just as subjective as belief in God (all being subjective and based on idiosyncratic preferences and advantages).

This, as I understand it, is why Plato so staunchly insisted upon his Forms (for example, that inasmuch as sense objects conform to the metaphysical Form of Beauty, they are beautiful). Without the conceptual Objectivity of the Forms, he knew the Western mind would remain foundationless—your ugly is my beautiful, and vice versa. For utterly subjective beings are incapable of genuine consensus either amongst themselves or their environment (polluted as it is by their subjective gaze). Theirs are merely thoughts-in-vogue and thoughts-contrarian, both equally asinine—not unlike the vying of gene mutations for temporary preeminence, I suppose.

If you have appraised our situation aright, then I would compliment you for being one of few who could solve the enigma. If Truth with a capital T, as in objective Truth, is truly a red herring or a wild goose chase—which is sort of the same as saying “the truth is that there is no truth,” well, I cannot say that I

am at all surprised that so many, including myself, got it wrong. But, recalling that we dwell in total subjectivity, I see absolutely no reason (for I have no objective Reason) nor benefit (for my subjective benefit is truly all that I have) to joining you on the side of the Correct, for I am utterly powerless to alter the subjectivities which led me to Incorrectness, anymore than you are to alter the subjectivities which led you to Correctness. The best we could do would be to congratulate one another for “doing the best we could do with the faculties we could muster”—and perhaps marvel that in a subjective existence, we briefly managed to be at all comprehensible to one another, knowing that the subjective odds are always, obviously in favor of incomprehensibility.

P.S. Would you mind if I shared our correspondence, perhaps as a more easily-readable PDF form? I think a small audience would find it edifying that such spirited debates are still occurring in (almost) 2020. If not, I can either conceal your name or merely summarize/paraphrase/imply your messages—whichever you are most comfortable with. Also, I would obviously give you the last word in such an event should you want it.

-Christopher

Chris: You are welcome to share our conversation in PDF form. I would much prefer a word for word form than a summary or a paraphrase--that way any misunderstanding of my meaning would be due to the mis-reading of the consumer of our conversations- rather than from a mis- translation on your part. I would like to briefly respond to some issues raised in your missive of 7 dec which for lack of time I omitted in my 9 Dec response. First, I confess that I really cant conceive what an "Idealistic truth" is-- unless it is something that is HELD to be true without objective proof (i.e.faith) in which case the word "truth" is being misused. One can have faith that a particular idea is true -and whether that turns out to be the case or not, it is not the belief itself that makes it true --something is either true or it is not-- regardless of our beliefs. To speak of "idealistic truth" is to denigrate the very concept of truth. I'm NOT saying "that that the truth is ,there is no truth". The universe being as complex as it is, I think it is safe to say there are many facts (truths) about the universe that we don't know (and probably have no hope of ever knowing)--but this does not mean that we should postulate a theory about the essentially unknowable, hold it to be true without objective proof (i.e. have faith in it) and then call it truth. To do so is to abdicate our responsibility as reasonable, thinking human beings. Believing in things without proof has more dangerous consequences than just an honest admission that there are many things about which we just don't (and can't for the foreseeable future) know. This admission is about as far from humans "becoming as like gods" as I can conceive.I see it as a wholesome attitude that is neither as presumptuous as to think that the writers of the ancient texts had a monopoly on "The Truth, nor as self centered as those who say that modern man has All The Answers. I'm running out of time on the library computer but would like to address identity politic and criminality in a separate letter.

Respectfully,

Ed

Hey Christopher: In regards to criminality--as expressed in your message of 7 Dec you stated "if you or I wish to object to any criminal wrongdoing, soon we will have to overcome every "identity politic" hurdle imaginable,"(i.e. the subject was raised poorly, member of an oppressed minority, was desperate, etc.) Presumably this would be because the old Ideas of good and evil were being diluted by modern humanistic concerns about WHY a criminal becomes a criminal. I submit that the question of good or evil when objecting to "criminal wrongdoing" is beside the point and is usually just a distraction. To illustrate, consider the story(and this really happened) of two criminals who, during a home invasion burglary, tied the occupants to their beds and once finished with their work, set fire to the home--resulting in the deaths of the homeowners. When asked later, upon his apprehension, why he chose not to at least untie the people before setting the fire, one of the two replied, its not that I CHOSE not to untie them, its just that it never occurred to me. People whose sense of empathy and social responsibility are so stunted that they can do these sort of things are obviously suffering from some sort of developmental disorder-but it really doesn't matter.

Like a man-eating lion or grizzly bear they must be separated from the rest of society, not because they are "EVIL"(though this definitely falls into my life destroying category) but because we just can't have that sort of behavior in civil society. Many of the criminally insane also fall into this category, It is, for whatever reason, just in their nature to kill. It may be useful to study WHY people turn out as they did (if for no other reason than to identify things to be avoided in the upbringing of children),but no value judgement (other than that the well- being of society outweighs the criminals right to be free) is necessary.