

Can We Be Good Without God?

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Introduction: God and Morality

We live in a world of complex moral choices, difficult ethical dilemmas, and decisions that seem to grow ever harder to navigate. Technology, in particular, raises new moral questions with increasing frequency, as our power to do things outstrips our wisdom to reflect on our choices. At the same time, discussion of morality and ethics in the public square has become increasingly shrill—listen to any argument about abortion, homosexuality, the environment, you name it—and you’ll usually encounter people yelling at each other, or typing in capitals (which is how you shout on the Internet). Our culture has become increasingly “hollowed out” in its ethics, with little left beyond emotivism—where once we had “I think therefore I am”, now it is often “I feel therefore I shout”.¹

Nevertheless, questions about good and evil, right and wrong, what the good society, what the good life should look like confront us wherever we turn and thus the question that I believe each one of us face, no matter what we believe or don’t believe is this one: *how then should we live?* In a famous passage in the Gospels, Jesus was once asked that question:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”²

Love God, love neighbour. All morality, all ethics—everything—said Jesus, comes down to those two commandments. Of course we live in a culture in which many people suggest, especially our atheist and secular friends, that we can simply drop the first of Jesus’ two principles. We don’t need God, we just need to love each other. Indeed, more than that, it is suggested by some atheists that far from God being the peg on which ethics hangs, religion is actually a handicap to ethics.

The “New Atheism” as a Moral Movement

Shortly after I arrived in Canada back in 2010, a huge debate took place at the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto between one of the then leading atheists in the world, Christopher Hitchens, and the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Entitled “Is Religion a Force for Good in the World?”, the debate sold out weeks in advance, indeed tickets were being scalped for \$500.

¹ See the discussion in Chantal Delsol, *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World* (Wilmington, Del: ISI Books, 2003) 73-82.

² Matthew 22:34-40 (NIV).

Many people who attended thought that it wasn't just tickets that were scalped that night, but Tony Blair, as Christopher Hitchens executed a textbook display of rhetorical and debating skill. His approach was straightforward: he recited a litany of places around the world where religion has been a force for evil, everywhere from the Middle East, to Rwanda, to the Balkans, to Northern Ireland. The world would be better off without god, without religion, indeed, as Hitchens memorably put it: "Religion poisons everything".

Christopher Hitchens was, before his death in 2011, one of the so-called "New Atheists", a term coined back in 2006 in an article by Gary Wolf in *Wired* magazine to describe the media savvy secularists making headlines around the world—men like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. What's "new" about the "New Atheism"? Not so much its arguments, but its *approach*. It's advocates combine an enthusiastic, almost evangelistic zeal for atheism and a scathing attack not just on religion but on cultural respect for religion. Gary Wolf writes:

The New Atheists condemn not just belief in God but *respect* for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong: it's evil.³

Wolf's use of the word "evil" is fascinating, because there's certainly a *moral* character to the writings of the New Atheists. Whether it's Hitchens railing against religion poisoning everything, or Dawkins launching moral attacks on the character of God, like this:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.⁴

Did you notice something about this passage? It's a *moral* judgement. So that raises an important question: what moral Mount Sinai does Dawkins think he's standing on to issue such judgements? What tablets of stone is Hitchens reading from when he rails against religion? You see, many people would suggest that if one throws God out, with him goes the foundation for any kind of morality at all. This was perhaps most succinctly expressed by the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, has Ivan Karamazov say: "Without God, everything is permitted".⁵

³ Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers'. *Wired Magazine*, Nov 2006 (<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>, accessed 11 September 2013).

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld, 2006) 51.

⁵ See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1990) 63 (among other places).

Can We Be Good Without God?

Most atheists tend to bristle at any suggestion that one cannot be good without God. For example, Alom Shaha, former Muslim and author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook: Lessons for Living a Good Life Without God* puts it this way:

Despite not believing in God, and not believing in an afterlife where I might be rewarded or punished for my behaviour, I try to be a good person. That's the most any of us can do.⁶

The belief that human beings can be good without God lies at the heart of the philosophy of humanism. The Humanist Canada website explains humanism like this:

Humanism is a philosophy or life-stance based upon a profound respect for human dignity and the conviction that human beings are ultimately accountable to themselves and to society for their actions. It is a deity-free worldview that affirms our ability to lead ethical and meaningful lives without reliance upon a belief in the supernatural.⁷

I frequently encounter humanists when I speak on university campuses and whenever the question of morality comes up, they are always very quick to stress their belief that it's possible to be good without believing in God. As one popular humanist slogan puts it, parodying religious faith at the same time: "Humanists do good when nobody is watching".⁸ How should we respond?

Well, certainly the first thing to say is that of course atheists can be good people. To deny this is demonstrably false as well as uncharitable. Indeed, it is sadly the case that many atheists often live more moral lives than many Christians. (Of course, the gospel is not about being more moral, more upright, or nicer than the person next to you. We need to be very careful that we do not give that impression in how we talk about faith in Christ).

But the second issue is a much bigger one. You see, the question is not "can you be good without God?" That's the *wrong* question. The *right* question is this one: do "good" and "evil" actually exist if God does not exist? In other words, if there is no God, if we live in a universe driven purely by the blind forces of time, plus matter, plus chance, what does it mean to even use words like "good" and "evil"?

⁶ Alom Shaha, *The Young Atheist's Handbook* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2012) 45.

⁷ Source: <http://humanistcanada.ca/content/all-about-humanism> (accessed 24 January 2014).

⁸ It's difficult to identify the original source of this humanist aphorism, but the British Humanist Association attributes it to New York humanist, Dick McMahan, in 2004 (source: <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/humanism-today/humanists-thinking/quotations/>, accessed 31 March 2014).

Smuggled Value Judgements

My parents live on the south-west coast of England and the folklore of the area is replete with tales of sixteenth and seventeenth-century smugglers. On moonless nights, sailing ships would quietly put to shore, then their cargo would be secretly hauled across the sands, carried through tunnels, or even manhandled up sheer cliff faces to a waiting line of locals who would spirit it away. Whole communities benefited from smuggling and the customs men, whose job it was to thwart the black market trade, were often foiled by a stone wall of silence. As the poet Rudyard Kipling, who grew up on the English coast and knew these stories well, wrote in his poem “A Smuggler’s Song”:

If you wake at midnight, and hear a horse’s feet,
Don’t go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street.
Them that ask no questions isn’t told a lie.
Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!
Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark —
Brandy for the Parson,
Tobacco for the Clerk;
Laces for a lady, letters for a spy,
And watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!⁹

When you heard the sound of horses or of crowds of men late at night, you were supposed to look the other way, ask no questions, watch the wall, as the contraband was smuggled past. I think that’s a very helpful metaphor for us to consider as we reflect on the question of goodness without God. Because there’s a tendency for atheist and humanist writings on this subject to smuggle in not tobacco or whisky, but value judgements.

Look again at that summary of humanist belief by the Humanist Canada website. We can find it loaded down with some pretty significant words: “dignity”, “ethical”, and “meaningful” to name but three. Where do those words come from, precisely? Or think back to Alom Shaha’s word “good”. Or even Christopher Hitchens’ railing that religion “poisons everything”? What’s wrong with poisoning everything? Perhaps I enjoy poisoning things. Who made Christopher Hitchens king and gave him the right to forbid and to make decrees? Where is he smuggling that right from?

Once you learn to start looking for it, you can see smuggled value judgements everywhere. The

⁹ Rudyard Kipling, ‘A Smuggler’s Song’ in *Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994) 696

moment somebody says that something is “good”, or “right”, or that something should or shouldn’t be, be ready to ask them where they’re deriving that value from. You see if God does not exist, there are some implications, as the nineteenth-century atheist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, pointed out:

When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one’s feet. This morality is by no means self-evident ... Christianity is a *system*, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one’s hands.¹⁰

Nietzsche here is pointing out that goodness, ethics and morality were traditionally grounded on God; if one rejects God, throws him out, then you break the whole system—and thus you need a new foundation on which to base your ethics.

The Is/Ought Dilemma

In particular atheists hit a problem that the skeptical eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, famously identified—what has come to be known as the is/ought dilemma.¹¹ In short, the problem is this: most human areas of study are about the way things *are*, whereas when it comes to morality, we’re dealing with how things *ought to be*.

For example, science can tell you what the boiling point of water at sea level *is*. Mathematics can tell you that two plus two *is* four. But when it comes to a difficult ethical choice, what we need to know is not what *is*, but what we *ought* to do. It *is* the case that if I slip arsenic into the coffee supply, every coffee drinker here will be dead. That *is* the case. But *ought* I to poison the coffee? Here’s the thing, said Hume: you cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. No amount of physical facts will tell me how I ought to act. Between “ought” and “is” a chasm is fixed. How, then, without God, are we to derive morality? Well, many atheists are aware of this problem and a number of suggestions have been made.

Morality as a Product of Human Society

One suggestion that atheists have made is that ethics and morals are products of human society. There are various versions of this idea. For example, social contract theories say that morality is nothing more than a complex series of reciprocations between individuals and society. I don’t injure you, so you don’t injure me. I agree to abide by the laws of the government, in return the government offers me

¹⁰ Cited in Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (London: Rider, 2004) 132.

¹¹ The famous passage setting this out can be found in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1738]) 300.

protection. You get the basic idea. Over time, a kind of shared morality emerges—we generally agree that people should not be allowed to rape and murder at will, for example—and thus our moral code emerges.

It's a popular idea and there are clearly some elements of truth to it. But there are a huge number of problems, too. First, there is the problem that just because a value is shared, does not automatically make it good. Just consider the example of the Third Reich. Surely it doesn't matter that the majority of the German people at the time agreed with Hitler, he was still wrong. As C. S. Lewis remarked:

What was the sense in saying that the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practised?¹²

Indeed, during the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War, a common defence made by many former SS officers was that they were simply following the laws and customs of German society—and it is good and right to follow the laws and customs of your society. At one point, one of the judges threw his hands up in the air and exclaimed in frustration, “Is there not a law beyond the law?”

Nor does the problem necessarily go away if one could theoretically find laws that every society agreed upon. After all, for most of human history, most societies shared the belief that people could own other people. Slavery was common to most cultures. Did that shared approval make it moral?¹³ Furthermore, if morality comes from society's shared values, then presumably anybody who *challenges* those values is wrong. So what are we to make of someone like anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce, who fought a 45 year battle during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to see slavery entirely abolished from Britain and the major European powers?¹⁴ We celebrate Wilberforce today as a hero—but if morality simply means “the shared values of a culture”, he was a moral reprobate.

These and other problems reveal that society cannot be the source of morality, ethics and goodness. So what other sources have atheists and humanists suggested?

Morality from Science

Some atheists have suggested that science can be used to ground moral values. This is the approach

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1990) 17.

¹³ This point is well made by Abdu H. Murray, *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014) 75-76.

¹⁴ See e.g. Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) and Garth Lean, *God's Politician: William Wilberforce's Struggle to Abolish the Slave Trade and Reform the Morals of a Nation* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1987).

taken, for instance, by Sam Harris in his best-selling book, *The Moral Landscape*.¹⁵ He argues that questions about morality are actually questions about “human flourishing” and that in essence, what is “good” simply equates to what produces the greatest happiness, the greatest flourishing for the greatest number of human beings. Since science can answer questions about the kind of actions that help people live long, happy, healthy lives, science can therefore answer moral questions.

Now Harris’ argument is not particularly new. What he’s essentially advancing is a moral theory known as utilitarianism, that goes back to two English philosophers, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).¹⁶ Their approach says that morality is about maximising “utility”—which is usually defined as happiness. When you’re faced with a moral choice, you must pick that action which will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. And many atheists today, like Harris, think science can answer those kinds of questions very well.

So does it work? Not really. There are a number of major problems facing utilitarianism. For instance, here’s one smuggled value judgement: Why does everybody’s happiness carry the same value? Maybe *my* happiness is more important than yours? I certainly think so. Tough if you don’t. Why assume everybody has the same *right* to be happy?

Second, utilitarianism quickly leads to some curious problems. Suppose we have four people sitting in the front row: a professor of medicine who is working on a cure for cancer, a leading philanthropist who gives millions to charity, a world famous politician about to solve the Middle East crisis and finally, an unemployed layabout. The professor has a failing heart, the philanthropist two dodgy kidneys, and the politician’s liver is waving a white flag. The layabout is perfectly healthy. Could we therefore euthanize him (we would anaesthetize him first, so it’s painless) and use his parts to repair the other three? Wouldn’t that result in much greater happiness? Most people would balk at the suggestion.

A third question is why make happiness your target? Other atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, have argued passionately that we are not here to be happy, we are here to reproduce. Listen to these stark words from Dawkins’ book, *The Selfish Gene*:

We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. Our genes made us. We animals exist for their preservation and are nothing more than throwaway survival machines. The world of the selfish gene is one of savage

¹⁵ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

¹⁶ See the excellent overview in Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010) 31-57.

competition, ruthless exploitation, and deceit.¹⁷

If Dawkins is right, it would raise many profound questions. Earlier this year, I was involved in a dialogue event in Alberta with the head of a local humanist society. I mentioned Dawkins' statement and asked if she agreed. She accepted that on her atheism, yes, it followed that our purpose, if that word was the right one, was reproducing our DNA—continuing the human race. Given that her day job was a nurse, I asked her this question: “Tell me, if a young woman asked you for an abortion, would you advise against it, on the basis that she ought to be having as many fit and healthy descendants as possible?” There was a very awkward silence and she tried to change the subject.

There is one other problem with trying to use science to determine morality and it is best illustrated by the life of one of the most famous chemists of the twentieth century—his name was Louis Frederick Fieser.¹⁸ He was instrumental in developing the first artificial synthesis of vitamin K, necessary for blood coagulation, a discovery that has saved thousands of lives. But Fieser invented something else. In 1942, the US army asked him to develop a chemical weapon that could burn tracts of jungle and eliminate troops. Fieser and his team at Harvard invented Napalm, a gel that sticks to human bodies when it burns. On 9 March 1945, 1,700 tons were dropped on Tokyo, burning 100,000 civilians to death.

Perhaps you can justify Fieser's discovery in the wider context of the Second World War—although when you see how Napalm was used in Vietnam, it gets harder.¹⁹ Fieser's story is a salutary reminder that science can harm as well as hurt. Science can help us develop technology, but it cannot tell us whether it is right or wrong that a discovery is used in a particular way. Indeed, the more science we do, the more questions of ethics are raised—science actually generates moral questions; what it doesn't do is help to solve them.²⁰

Morality from Evolution

There is one last place that many of my atheist and humanist friends have gone looking for a godless foundation for morality, and that is to evolution. For those who subscribe to “evolutionary ethics”, they see morality as a biological adaptation. On the evolutionary story, every organism is engaged in a struggle to survive and those features that better enable an organism to survive and reproduce will be

¹⁷ Richard Dawkins, ‘Preface’, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁸ The following account is taken from Alister McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 88-89.

¹⁹ Fieser himself is reported to have said: “I have no right to judge the morality of Napalm just because I invented it.” (Source: *Time* magazine, January 5, 1968).

²⁰ See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), chapter 6, esp. 161-163.

selected for. Atheist Michael Ruse explains how he believes that this can produce morality, such as the idea that it is better to share and cooperate than to kill and harm:

Darwin himself recognised that although the struggle for existence can lead to open conflict, it does not necessarily do so. Often one can get more out of life by cooperating rather than by fighting. This is fairly obvious when we think about it. Suppose there is some desirable resource, let us say a freshly killed animal that is a major source of protein. Two rivals might do much better by deciding to share the booty rather than fighting over it.²¹

Ruse also appeals to evolutionary mechanisms like “kin selection” (whereby we help those to whom we are closely related, because we share the same genes, so if their DNA wins, so does ours by proxy) and “reciprocal altruism” (you scratch my back, I scratch yours).²² Put all this together and Ruse thinks morality can be explained purely in evolutionary terms: morality is good for our genes and so it was selected for.

So does evolutionary morality work? Can it provide morals, ethics, goodness without God? Well, there are a number of major problems with the idea. First, it’s questionable whether anything like “altruism” actually exists in nature—indeed, if as Michael Ruse himself suggests, we only help others because of what we get in return, that’s *not* altruism, that’s just a trade agreement.²³ Genuine altruism means helping those who cannot possibly help you in return, who could never repay you. Think, for example, of Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan.

There’s also the further problem that it’s questionable whether “evolutionary morality” is really morality at all—surely it’s just a description of behaviour. Nature has selected for “moral” behaviour in the same way it has selected for the lion’s teeth, the seagull’s wing, or the baboon’s bright red bottom. Of course if the evolutionary story is true, then it’s also selected for religion—something that Richard Dawkins and other atheist writers are keen to stress as an explanation for religion.²⁴ But if evolution has selected both morality and religion, on what basis can the atheist say that religion is “bad” and morality is “good”? Their source is the same: the endless onward march of the gene.²⁵

²¹ Michael Ruse, ‘Naturalist Moral Nonrealism’ in R. Keith Loftin, ed., *God & Morality: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012) 53-74, citing 58.

²² *ibid.*, 58-59.

²³ See the comment in Malcolm Jeeves, *Minds, Brains, Souls and Gods: A Conversation on Faith, Psychology and Neuroscience* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013) 125 as well as the essays in David Stove, *Darwinian Fairytales: Selfish Genes, Errors of Heredity and Other Fables of Evolution* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007) 115-171, 198-247.

²⁴ See e.g. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 190-200.

²⁵ See also C. S. Lewis’s satirical ‘Hymn to Evolution’, cited in Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: The Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins, 2005) 177:

There are further problems, too. Attempts to explain morality by evolution tend to confuse “innate” and “authoritative”. In other words, just because I have an innate sense—of morality, of conscience, or whatever—how does that make that sense authoritative? Why *should* I obey my moral urges and *ignore* my other urges, such as my urge to steal somebody else’s donut when I feel hungry?

Evolutionary morality also leads to some other curious quirks, too. For example, it would render us unable to critique the past. Maybe slavery was the very best our ancestors could do, perhaps it was the highest morality they had evolved at that point—in which case, my critiquing them for slavery is on the same level as my critiquing my cat for its inability to open the cat food tin when it hasn’t yet evolved thumbs. That seems very counter-intuitive.

The Grand “Sez Who?” Problem

Despite the very best efforts of atheists and humanists, it really does seem to be the case that finding a foundation for morality outside of something transcendent, like God, is pretty much impossible. Indeed, more reflective atheist writers have acknowledged this.

One of my favourite skeptical writers of the last fifty years was the late Arthur Leff, of Yale University, who in 1979 wrote a hugely influential article called “Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law”. In that essay, he argues that all moral claims are basically authority claims—somebody is telling you that you *should* do this.

Now if you reject God (which as an atheist, he wishes to do) you are left with two choices. Either the individual becomes god—in which case everybody can make up good and evil for themselves. But how do you resolve the godlet conflicts—what happens if you say something should be X, and I say it should be Y? Or one turns the state into God and allows it to determine morality. But in either case, Leff says, you have the same problem. When anybody, either an individual or a group or your government, tells you “you should do X”, you can respond: “Sez who?” And without God, we cannot get past the “Grand Sez Who Problem.” Leff closes his essay with these words:

Nevertheless:

Napalming babies is bad.

Starving the poor is wicked.

*Lead us, evolution, lead us,
Up the future’s endless stair,
Chop us, change us, prod us, weed us,
For stagnation is despair!
Groping, guessing, yet progressing,
Lead us, nobody knows where.*

*Buying and selling each other is depraved.
Those who stood up to and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin,
and Pol Pot—and General Custer too—have earned salvation.
Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned.
There is in the world such a thing as evil.
[All together now:] Sez who?
God help us.²⁶*

The problem for the atheist is that if there is no God, all one really has left is personal preference. You may not like murder, but you cannot say that murder is wrong.²⁷ By all means, you can appeal to the majority—but history (and many unsavoury parts of the world today)—show us that the majority can easily be wrong. And appeal to the majority at best gives you “might makes right”; it certainly doesn’t make the preferences of the majority “good” or “evil”.

We are back to Nietzsche’s point. That when you lose God, you lose everything that goes with him. But Nietzsche said something else, too. In his famous ‘Parable of the Madman’, he wrote this:

“Whither is God? ... I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”²⁸

That’s powerful language and I think Nietzsche was onto something. You see at the heart of atheism, at the heart of most disbelief in God stands a moral rebellion—human beings want to be free, want to be autonomous, want to make up good and evil without God. This was the temptation, the sin in the garden of Eden at the very beginning and it lies at the heart of all human sinfulness ever since. And the only way to be a consistent rebel, to invent one’s own values, is to deny the transcendent, reject the divine, or as Nietzsche put it “kill God”. Contemporary atheist, Thomas Nagel, is very honest:

It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God ... it’s that I hope there isn’t a God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.²⁹

I respect Nagel’s honesty—that it’s not about arguments, or evidence, but it’s about autonomy. He doesn’t want there to be a God, because if there is, that will have some implications. And I think that’s where many people are at today—our culture has told us that the meaning of life is to be free,

²⁶ Arthur A. Leff, ‘Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law’, *Duke Law Journal* 6 (1979) 1229-1249, citing 1249. See also Michael J. Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷ The point is made nicely by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008) 153.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche: Selected and Translated with an Introduction, Prefaces and Notes by Walter Kaufmann* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982 [1954]) 95.

²⁹ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 130.

completely free, unrestrained by rules, religion, dogma, morals, or god—free to invent our own meaning.

The problem of what happens when you try this was illustrated by the French philosopher Albert Camus.³⁰ In his famous book the *Myth of Sisyphus*,³¹ Camus retells the legend from Greek mythology of Sisyphus, a king who was caught stealing secrets from the gods. The gods came up with a cruel punishment—Sisyphus was forced to roll a huge boulder up a hill in hell, and then every evening, just as he'd almost made it to the top, the rock would roll back down again and he'd have to start all over again.

Camus applies the myth of Sisyphus to the human condition. Modern people, says Camus, believe in total freedom, complete freedom. We have broken the shackles of religion, we have escaped the strictures of morality, and nothing binds us. But the price we pay for this is that this life is all there is and at the end you will die, your children will die, the human race will die, the earth will die, the universe will die. So it doesn't matter what you do—live a good life, sure. Live a bad life, why not. It makes absolutely no difference. As Tim Keller put it, if the Titanic is going down and everybody is going to drown, what does it matter if you hug the person next to you or steal their wallet. And so, says Camus, your life is meaningless. Utterly, entirely, cosmically irrelevant. All of us are Sisyphus. We may be free, but that freedom comes at the price of meaninglessness.

And if life is meaningless, then it has no purpose, but if it has no purpose, then there is no good or evil, because the moment we talk about good or evil we are talking about the way the world should or shouldn't be, and there is only a *should* if there a way the world *ought* to be, if the universe, the world, if human life have a purpose.³² The Jewish psychotherapist Victor Frankl wrote these powerful words in one of the best-selling books of the twentieth-century:

For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.³³

This is the question that I believe most people in our culture today are wrestling with: does life have meaning? And most people think that the meaning of life is to be happy and that goodness, at best, serves that. Be a good person, if you can, because it will make you happy. That's the view of most

³⁰ I owe this point to Tim Keller and his sermon/podcast, 'A Reason for Living'.

³¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [1955]).

³² This point is well made by Gregory E. Ganssle, 'Evil as Evidence For Christianity' in Chad Meister & James K. Dew Jr, eds., *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled With Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013) 214-223, citing 217-218.

³³ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978) 21.

religions, incidentally. Every other religion, from Islam to Buddhism, says that if you do the right thing, live the right way, a good life, you will achieve happiness, wisdom, heaven, nirvana—whatever it is you’re looking for.

That kind of religion can be poisonous, because it reverses God’s intended plan for true human flourishing—that goodness is not what we try to achieve in our own power and then bring our morality to God as a kind of trophy, but that goodness is the fruit of allowing God to work his power in us.

At the start of this talk, I read you that quotation by the late Christopher Hitchens: “Religion poisons everything”. I think Hitchens was onto something, but I think he didn’t go far enough. Religion can be poisonous. But so can politics. Politics poisons everything. So can business. Business poisons everything. So can money. Money poisons everything. So can sexuality, or science—indeed, I think everything that human beings lay hold of can be used to cause great good, or used to cause great evil. The problem is not out *there* somewhere, but much closer to home. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist and political activist, who, after years of imprisonment and torture deep in the Soviet gulags, reminds us:

The line between good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through the middle of every human heart and through all human hearts.³⁴

The challenge facing each one of us is what we do about that dividing line that runs through each of our hearts and manifests itself as brokenness, alienation and rebellion. You see the bad news is that each of us are worse sinners than we can possibly imagine—incapable, most times, of recognising the source of all goodness, let alone doing good. But the good news is that God loves us more than we can possibly imagine and, in Jesus Christ, has actually done something about the problem of good and evil and the human heart, offering us a chance to be forgiven and reconciled and remade in his image. Every other worldview that I know of, from atheism to Islam is a moral self-improvement plan. The gospel of Jesus Christ, by contrast, is a heart transformation plan. As the old African-American spiritual puts it:

There is balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole;
There’s power enough in heaven,
To cure a sin-sick soul.

³⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 75.

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